

Response #3/MONSTER  
Dan Baker  
Adolescent Lit./Nash

Walter Dean Myers' *Monster* is a compelling, often disturbing young adult novel that focuses on Steve Harmon, a 16 year-old African American teenager on trial for murder. Throughout the story, not only does Myers challenge readers to ponder Harmon's guilt or innocence, but he also asks that readers consider social issues connected to the case including violence, race, truth, and justice in America. Of these issues, Myers makes his boldest statement about justice, specifically about how America's legal system perpetuates inequality, injustice, and prejudice.

Without question, there are more young African American males serving time in America's prisons and jails than white males. The question is, why? According to Myer's character Steve, perhaps part of the answer has to do with the "lie" (203) enveloping America's legal system. In the story, Steve implies that African Americans are lying to themselves about the people responsible for overseeing, providing, and maintaining justice in this country; to him, African Americans caught up in the system try to convince themselves that "everything will be all right" (203), and that cops, courts, lawyers, judges, and juries give a damn about equity and truth. Regrettably, Steve seems to be on to something. Frankly, justice has never been the goal of America's legal system. From the start, this country's legal system has been about reaffirming inequality and racism, and about protecting the racial, monetary, religious, and cultural interests of rich, white men. As proof, just ask American Indians about the Indian removal Act of 1830; ask Asian Americans about naturalization laws and court rulings during World War II; ask any

suffragist arrested during Wilson's administration. The real "lie" is that prejudice *doesn't* shape the thinking and conduct of those responsible for operating America's legal system. Meaningfully, as one inmate in *Monster* puts it, the legal system appears to be interested in fairness for African Americans and "looking for the truth," but all it really cares about is finding ways to stick black men "under the jail" (222). Ultimately, Steve is correct: the idea of justice and equality for all is a sham. The machinations of the American justice system are designed to perpetuate injustice and racism, especially when it comes to African Americans and other minorities.

To illustrate this point further, consider some of Steve's observations of the legal system and how it operates. Throughout his trial, Steve says that he is never really "involved in the case" (59). In his journal he writes, "It's like the lawyers and the judge and everybody are doing a job that involves me, but I don't have a role" (59). To Steve, people running the legal system are more concerned with doing a job and less concerned with providing justice. His comments on the legal haggling, negotiating, and manipulating done by the attorneys during the trial support this notion. For instance, Steve says, "I think they (the prosecutors) are bringing out all of these people and letting them look terrible on the stand and sound terrible and then reminding the jury that they don't look any different from me" (60). This is a key point. It shows how little truth or justice ultimately has to do with deciding guilt or innocence during Steve's trial. As is often the case, the outcome of his trial depends on how well or how poorly attorneys on both sides stage-manage truth, guilt, legal precedents, witnesses, juries, and judges.

Most importantly, the outcome of Steve's trial also depends on how well attorneys

handle racial and cultural stereotypes concerning African Americans. As evidence, consider how Petrocelli, the prosecutor, uses Richard “Bobo” Evans as a witness to smear Steve’s character. When he is called to the stand, Bobo - a “big,” “heavy,” and “ugly” man with messy hair (172) – strolls into the courtroom wearing an orange prison jumpsuit. Despite objections from Steve’s lawyer, O’Brien (she feels that allowing Bobo to wear “prison gear” in court prejudices her client (172)), the judge replies, “I don’t think it’s going to make that much of a difference. The guy looks like a basket case and he’s going to act like one. I don’t want to hold up the case while you convince this guy to wear a suit” (173). By using Bobo and other smarmy characters such as Jose, Zinzi, and Bolden, Petrocelli is plainly playing the “guilt by association” card: she is exploiting negative societal stereotypes about black men to convince the jury that Steve is just like Bobo: a big, ugly, malicious, villainous black guy. Of course, Petrocelli’s job is to prosecute alleged murderers; her job is to connect Steve with some of the most “self-serving, heartless people imaginable”: people who have “committed crimes, who have lied and stolen, and in at least one instance has been an admitted . . . accomplice to murder” (27). However, it is a safe bet that if Steve were some rich, white boy from the suburbs, things would be different in that courtroom. Ultimately, it is obvious that the judge and Petrocelli have nothing invested in the trial. To them, the trial just some societal chore, and if part of the doing the job calls for manipulating racial stereotypes, hey, no problem; if part of the job means allowing the prosecution to use dubious witnesses to queer the jury’s judgment of Steve, so be it. As long as the trial ends quickly so that the court can clear its distended docket and save the taxpayers some money, neither seems to care about truth or justice.

As for Steve's attorney, to say that O'Brien is interested in truth, justice, or what happens to Steve would also be a fib. Many of her actions before, during, and after the trial suggest that she - like Petrocelli and the judge - is only there to do her job. Like Petrocelli, O'Brien knows that race, not guilt or innocence, will play a significant role in determining Steve's fate. So, her legal strategy is to make Steve look like a "human being in the eyes of the jury" (16). For example, she passionately begs the jury to "look at Steve Harmon now and remember that at this moment the American system of justice demands that you consider him innocent . . . innocent until proven guilty" (26-27), even though she knows that "Half of the jurors" believed that Steve was guilty the "moment they laid eyes" on him (78-79). Why does the jury feel this way? Again, it comes down to guilt by association. Clearly, this jury buys into negative societal stereotypes about young, African American males - that they are all evil wrongdoers. According to O'Brien, jurors assume Steve is guilty because he is "young," Black, and "on trial" (79). Obviously, before this trial began, most of the jurors felt that being black means being wicked; to these bigots, being black is enough to determine whether Steve is guilty or innocent. Honestly, the same could also be said for O'Brien. Disappointingly, Steve senses that even O'Brien doubts his innocence. He writes, "She thinks I am guilty. I know she thinks I am guilty. I can feel it when we sit together on the bench they have assigned for us" (138). As a whole, there is nothing to indicate that O'Brien is really any different than the judge, jury, or Petrocelli. Sure, she successfully defends Steve and he is found not guilty. However, nothing that O'Brien says or does indicates that she really cares about what happens to Like everyone else, she is doing a job; like everyone else, she feels that Steve was, is, and always will be a

black “monster” (79), plain and simple.

After reading *Monster*, I was reminded of some song lyrics from the rap group Public Enemy. Regarding the legal system’s treatment of young black men, they write, “That’s fucked up, the way they play dirty/Lock em up in jail until he’s past thirty/They don’t give a fuck about you/They don’t give a fuck about me/I’m past thirty three.”

Clearly, these lyrics indicate Public Enemy’s scepticism of the justice system in America. So does Myers’ book. In the end, *Monster* helps draw more attention to the fact that America’s legal system is dirty and fucked up: that it is racially prejudiced and panders to a white cultural frame of reference; that it is filled with too many people who could care less about ending injustice and inequity.