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# *Monster*

by

**Walter Dean Myers**

**1999**



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Diane Clapsaddle

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The story takes place in Manhattan and Harlem, New York City, mostly in a city lockup, but sometimes in the neighborhood where Steve Harmon lives.

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Steve Harmon** - He is a sixteen year old young Black man who has been arrested for acting as the look-out in robbery that goes bad and ends in a murder. He is the narrator for the story, writing it in the form of a screenplay interspersed with his journal entries.

**Kathy O'Brien** - She is Steve's defense attorney who uses his character traits before the crime and makes sure she distances him from the other defendants as way of getting a not guilty verdict.

**Sandra Petrocelli** - She is the Assistant District Attorney who prosecutes the case against Steve and James King. She labels them "monsters."

**James King** - A black man who is also young, but older than Steve, he encourages Steve to be a part of his "crew" which will rob the drugstore. He is accused of being in the drugstore, wrestling Mr. Nesbitt for the gun, and ultimately shooting the older man to death.....

Many additional major and minor characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

#### Protagonist

The protagonist is Steve Harmon, a sixteen-year-old black youth who is on trial for his life.

#### Antagonists

The antagonists include the justice system of our country, the neighborhood which impacts young men like Steve, the .....

#### Climax

The climax of the story occurs when Steve is found not guilty of the murder.

#### Outcome

Steve is allowed to go home with his parents, but his "imprisonment" continues as he tries to make sense of who he is and the decisions he made. His final thought concerns what his.....

### SHORT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

A sixteen year old boy named Steve Harmon finds himself on trial for murder after he is accused as acting as a lookout for the young men who actually commit a robbery at a Harlem drugstore and kill the store owner. The story is presented predominantly from his own viewpoint in the form of a screenplay.....

### THEMES

The theme of **introspection** is one of the most prevalent themes. Steve must come to terms with who he really is and so his screenplay and his journal entries are a way to try to make sense of what he has done or hasn't done in his life, and what has brought him to the point of prison. By the end of the story, his doubts and his fears about who he really is have not yet been completely resolved.

Another theme is **peer pressure**. This is especially seen in how Steve associates with young men he's.....

Additional themes are discussed in the complete study guide.

## MOOD

The mood is very dark and filled with despair as we see Steve learn to cope with what may be the outcome of this trial. The mood doesn't even change in the end, although he is acquitted, because he.....

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION-BIOGRAPHY - Walter Dean Myers

Walter Dean Myers was born on August 12, 1937 in Martinsburg, West Virginia. When he was a baby, his mother died and his father, who was extremely poor, felt it was best to give him to a foster family (The Deans) in New York (Harlem) that could care for him. As a child, Walter developed a great love for literature and poetry. He found reading books to be a way to escape to foreign lands and adventures outside of his own life. He loved the public library and spent much of his time there.

Walter had a speech problem, and though he was a good student, he dealt with this issue by.....

## HONORS AND AWARDS FOR MONSTER

Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature

Coretta Scott King Award

National Book Award Finalist

## CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND ANALYSIS

### Journal Entry #1

#### Summary

The first journal entry is an introduction to a young man who is in prison for the very first time and is frightened out of his life. He begins by explaining that the best time to cry in prison is at night when someone is being beaten up and screaming for help to cover up the noise of the tears. Then, you can't be beaten up later for being weak. He wonders when he looks into the scratched mirror whether he will look like himself when the trial is over. He describes an incident at breakfast when inmate is hit in the face with a metal cafeteria tray. He comments that "they" say you get used to being in jail, but he doesn't see how.

All of these inmates are strangers, but they still find reasons to hurt each other. He feels like he's walked into a strange movie with no plot and no beginning. It's in black and white and it's grainy like an old film. He realizes that it's not a movie about bars and locked doors. Rather, it's about "being alone when you are not really alone and about being scared all the time." However, for the most part, he just can't make sense of it, so he decides to make his own movie of this experience and he'll title it what the prosecutor called him – Monster.

#### Notes

This opening journal entry is significant in that the writer has not yet introduced himself, but we learn a great deal more about him than just his name could reveal. He is young and alone in prison for some reason. He is frightened and he is trying desperately to make sense of what has happened to him. He turns to writing down his experiences in the form of a journal and a screenplay to try to document what is happening to him. He is already labeling himself for the reader by giving the play a title – Monster.

### Monday, July 6<sup>th</sup>

#### Summary

The young man uses all of the correct stage directions and abbreviations for camera movements. This day begins in the Manhattan Detention Center where the voices are clearly Black or Hispanic. We finally learn this character's name and age – Steve Harmon, 16 – and see him sitting on a cot with a suit and tie next to him.

Around him are the realities of prison life – screams, cursing, and men sitting on toilets in front of everyone around them. He tries to hide his head under a blanket, but is cautioned by a Voice Over that he can't hide under it, because this is reality. The voice continues explaining the realities of this Detention Center while the credits begin rolling from the bottom of the screen and shrinking at the top like Star wars. The title is *Monster! The Story of My Miserable Life* and he is the star, the producer, and the director. The credit calls it an “incredible story about how one guy’s life was turned around by a few events and how he might spend the rest of his life behind bars.” The other individuals who take part in the trial are introduced under the “Featuring . . .” part of the credits.

The Voice Over and a prisoner named Sunset help to show the irony of life in the Manhattan Detention Center: Steve is new to this, so he refuses food, but the other more experienced prisoners eat with gusto, even finishing his food; and other people are outside going about the everyday patterns of their lives while he is handcuffed and finally wearing his suit for court.

Steve meets with his lawyer, Kathy O’Brien who is all business. She explains that he is on trial for felony murder along with a guy named King and that the prosecutor is good at what she does. She wants the death penalty for both of them. Steve asks her if she thinks they’re going to win and she replies that it depends on what Steve means by “wins.”

In the holding room, the reader is introduced to 23-year-old James King, the other man on trial. He gives Steve a hard look. The stenographer and the guards discuss the case as a motion case: they go through the motions and they lock them up! The fear is evident on Steve’s face. Once in the courtroom, O’Brien tells him he should be scared and that it’s her job to make him a human being in the eyes of the jury. The trial then begins after the judge and the lawyers comment on their Fourth of July weekends.

The scene switches to a flashback sequence in which Steve remembers a class with Mr. Sawicki, his film club mentor. The teacher explains “if you make your film predictable, the audience will make up its minds about it long before it’s over.”

Then, reality returns with the entrance of the jury. Steve asks if they look alright, but O’Brien’s comment is just as realistic. They are what they have for a jury and they have to deal with. This is followed by Prosecutor Petrocelli’s opening statement. Her words are even more realistic than the jury coming into the room. She refers to the two accused men as the “monsters in our community.” She unfolds the events from the viewpoint of the prosecution, pointing out that James King and another man named Richard “Bobo” Evans entered the drugstore, fought Mr. Nesbitt, the victim, for his gun, shot him, stole money and cigarettes, and fled the store. She insists there was a premeditated plan to commit the crime that included another conspirator who was expected to enter the store in advance and check it out for police and yet another whose job was to impede anyone who might chase the robbers. She points out Steve as being the lookout.

Steve, in the meantime, is systematically writing the word *monster* all over his notebook. His attorney takes the pencil from him and just as systematically crosses out all the words. She tells him, “You have to believe in yourself.” Petrocelli ends her opening statement by saying that James King and Steven Harmon were all part of the robbery that caused the death of Alguinado Nesbitt.

O’Brien also gives her opening statement in which she emphasizes that the American Justice System also protects the rights of the accused. As such, it allows her to prove that the evidence presented by the prosecution is seriously flawed, and that there is overwhelming doubt that Steve Harmon has committed any crime at all. She reminds the jury that by law, they are required not to prejudge him. Her opening statement is followed by that of Asa Briggs who is the defense attorney for James King. He emphasizes that the witnesses for the

prosecution are the most self-serving, heartless people imaginable, and that the jury must judge their testimony carefully.

These statements are followed by the first witness – José Delgado – who testifies that as an employee of the drugstore, he had gone out for Chinese food around 4:35 in the afternoon, and everything was fine when he left. When he returned, he discovered Mr. Nesbitt on the floor with blood everywhere, the cash register opened, and a lot of cigarettes missing. It is established by the prosecution that the robbery took place, because everyone in the neighborhood knew that José had a black belt in karate. When cross-examined by Mr. Briggs, José is forced to admit that he has no medical skills, even though he determined immediately that Mr. Nesbitt was dead. He also makes the witness admit that he took the time to check the inventory before calling the police.

The next witness is Sal Zinzi, a young man who had been imprisoned on Rikers Island at the time of the crime. He was in there for accepting stolen property. Sal testifies that he had spoken with another prisoner named Wendell Bolden who told him that he knew about a drugstore holdup where a man had been killed. Bolden was thinking of turning in the guy who committed the crime in the hopes of shortening his own sentence. Instead, Zinzi got to the police first so as to shorten his own time in prison. He also testified that Bolden knew about the crime, because he had gotten some cigarettes from the guy involved with the holdup.

When Mr. Briggs cross-examines Zinzi, it comes out that the prisoner wanted out early even though he only had two months to go, because he was being sexually harassed. Briggs emphasizes through his questions that Zinzi is willing to lie to avoid being gang-raped and that he had pre-empted Bolden by cutting a deal with the District Attorney. O'Brien follows this up by emphasizing that Zinzi was desperate to get out even though Petrocelli has him insist that he wouldn't lie.

The chapter ends with another flashback, this time to four years before when, at the age of 12, Steve and his friend Tony were throwing rocks. Steve accidentally hits a young woman walking with a tough guy. When the tough guy threatens them, Steve yells at Tony to run which makes Tony the object of the tough guy's punches. The couple eventually walks away, and Tony questions Steve for telling him to run. Steve insists he didn't say that Tony had thrown the rock. He had just told him to run.

## Notes

This chapter is all about reality – the disgusting part of the Manhattan Detention Center, the types of witnesses and how they're willing to say anything to get out of prison early, and Steve's awareness that everyone thinks he's a monster. It's also about whether Steve also believes he's a monster and how he must come to believe in himself.

It's also interesting to note one of his flashbacks – throwing rocks with Tony. He had willingly given up Tony as the thrower of the rocks by yelling run when the tough guy came after them. He is comparable to the witnesses who are all willing to lie to avoid punishment also.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Steve Harmon** - Steve is a young, Black male living in the inner city who can't help but be exposed to bad elements in his neighborhood. The lifestyle in these neighborhoods can often overcome all the good things parents, even in a tough neighborhood, teach their children. Steve is no different. He's exposed to people to whom he's attracted, because they seem strong and tough. They are men to him, and he's at an age where he sorely wants to be recognized as a man.

Unfortunately, he's not old enough to understand that these guys are not role models for a good, decent life. He respects his film class teacher, but he doesn't emulate him. He respects his father, but he doesn't emulate him.

He respects a man like Mr. Nesbitt, but he doesn't emulate him. Instead, he emulates young men who are on the path to nowhere, and that has the biggest impact of all on Steve.

The ultimate reality is that he's only sixteen, but he's old enough to make choices that impact not only on him, but on those he loves and on innocent people like Mr. Nesbitt. He goes through every stage of trying to justify the decisions he made, but in the end, he must live with them whether he's found not guilty or guilty. He was part of the crime, but the only time he ends up doing is in his own heart and mind.

In the end, the reader is left wondering if the choices he made that have changed his life so much will lead to a better citizen or to one who gives in to becoming the monster the Prosecutor thought he was all along.

**Kathy O'Brien** - As his defense attorney, Kathy stands by Steve and defends him to the best of.....

Additional major characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

## PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The structure of this novel is two-fold: Steve expresses his thoughts in the format of a journal and in the screenplay he writes. It is interesting that he begins and ends his screenplay like the movie *Star Wars*, because that movie is one that presents heroes saving the universe, and Steve is anything but a.....

## THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

**Introspection or the self-examination of your own thoughts and feelings** - The theme of introspection is the most relevant of the novel. It refers to how the entire novel is not just Steve's re-telling of the events he must endure after the murder of Mr. Nesbitt, but also how he works through each step of the road he took when he associated himself with people like Bobo, James, and Osvaldo.

Sometimes, he believes that he's done nothing wrong while at other times, at least in his heart, he knows what he did was wrong. This introspection begins at the beginning of the screenplay, but doesn't stop when the screenplay ends. That's because Steve still doesn't know who he is, and it's obvious that he's in a crisis of some kind, trying to find out the truth. He can't forget the revulsion on Miss O'Brien's face, and so the introspection has a long way to go.

**Peer Pressure** - Another theme is peer pressure. This is another important idea presented to the young people who might read this novel. It presents the reality of the world, that there are people who....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

## AUTHOR'S STYLE

The author's style is obviously serious, but it is also social commentary. He wants to show through Steve's example that young men like him who might read this book need to think seriously about the decisions they might make, and that there's more than committing a crime as a way to prove their manhood. This.....

## RISING ACTION

The rising action begins with Steve in jail and beginning his screenplay in the midst of....

## FALLING ACTION

The falling action occurs five months after the trial when Steve reveals the sentences that the.....

## POINT OF VIEW

This novel is written in first person perspective from Steve's viewpoint. He presents himself through his journal entries and a screenplay.

## FORESHADOWING

There are several other literary devices that pop up at various times in the story. One of the most prevalent ones is foreshadowing, which frequently presents clues of something that will happen later in the novel. Some examples of foreshadowing in this novel include:

- 1.) When Steve says that prison is "being alone when you are not really alone and about being scared all the time" at the beginning of the story, it foreshadows the horrible emotional state he will live through both during the trial and even after it's over.
- 2.) Steve says that his screenplay is an "incredible story about how one guy's life was turned around by a few events and how he might spend the rest of his life behind bars." This foreshadows the.....

Additional examples are detailed in the complete study guide.

## IRONY

Another element that is important to note is irony – when something happens, or is seen, or is heard that we may know, but the characters do not, or that appears opposite of what is expected. Some examples of irony in this novel include:

- 1.) There is great irony in life in the Manhattan Detention Center: Steve is new to this, so he refuses food, but the other more experienced prisoners eat with gusto, even finishing his food; and other people are outside going about the everyday patterns of their lives while he is handcuffed and finally wearing his suit for court.
- 2.) It is ironic that the trial only begins after the judge and the lawyers comment on their Fourth of July weekends. .....

Additional examples are detailed in the complete study guide.

## MOTIFS

Another literary device used by the author is a motif. This device allows the author to run an important idea throughout the story by using images to create the thought for the reader. There is one motif used in *Monster*:

- 1.) The motif of this novel is that it is told in the form of a journal and.....

## IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

The following quotations are important at various points in the story:(Harper Tempest, an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1999):

- 1.) ***"It is about being alone when you are not really alone and about being scared all the time."*** (pg. 4 – This is Steve's first commentary as he opens his journal in jail.)
- 2.) ***"The incredible story of how one guy's life was turned around by a few events and how might spend the rest of his life behind bars. Told as it actually happened!"*** (pg. 9 – Here is Steve presenting his opening credits in the format of the heroic presentation of *Star Wars*)......

Additional quotations are listed and analyzed in the complete study guide.

## SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / METAPHORS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

Other elements that are present in this novel are **symbols and metaphors**. Symbols are the use of some unrelated idea to represent something else. Metaphors are direct comparisons made between characters and ideas. There are many symbols and metaphors used by the author such as:

- 1.) Steve tries to hide his head under a blanket to avoid going to the first day of trial. The blanket symbolizes comfort and safety.
- 2.) Steve systematically writes the word *monster* all over his notebook. His attorney takes the pencil from him and just as systematically crosses out all the words. She tells him, "You have to believe in yourself." The word monster becomes a symbol of who Steve believes he is.

Additional examples are detailed in the complete study guide.

## IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

**Title:** *Monster*

**Author:** Walter Dean Myers

**Date Published:** 1999

**Meaning of the Title:** It refers on a surface level to the name the prosecutor uses to label the two young men on trial. On a deeper level, it's the label Steve applies to himself.

**Genre:** Juvenile Fiction

**Setting:** Harlem, New York City, present day.....

## STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

- 1.) Steve reveals his innermost thoughts through the medium of
  - a.) a journal.
  - b.) a screenplay.
  - c.) a novel.
- 2.) Steve hates the Detention Center, because
  - a.) he has to share a cell with James King.
  - b.) he has to lie motionless on his cot while another inmate is raped.
  - c.) he has to share his cell with so many inmates they have to sleep on the floor.....

## ANSWER KEY

- 1.) a 2.) b 3.) a 4.) c 5.) b 6.) a 7.) b 8.) c 9.) a 10.) a 11.) b 12.) c 13.) b 14.) a 15.) c

## ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

- 1.) Steve Harmon's defense attorney says she wants to make her client to look like "a human being in the eyes of the jury" in contrast to the "monsters" the prosecuting attorney speaks of. Why do you think the author named his novel *Monsters*?
- 2.) Can you name a few of the novel's scenes with Steve's family and friends that show him as more human than monster? How does that affect your opinion of his guilt or innocence?.....

Additional examples are detailed in the complete study guide.

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