

# Monster

by Walter Dean Meyers

As he awaits trial for felony murder, sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon writes a screenplay about his life, showing the drama of the courtroom, the sordid detention center, the robbery murder he's accused of, and his loving home life—hoping to better understand what is happening to him.

## THEMES

crime, justice, problem-solving, family, responsibility, guilt or innocence

## I. PRE-TEACHING

### A. These terms should be defined and discussed:

suppress, admissible, infringing, conspiracy, impede, redress, grandiose, ashy, pertinent, reconvene, affidavit, informants, pessimist, lethal, grimaces, hostile, ruffled, hexagon, cacophony, ghetto, grisly, culprits, glowers, sullen, perimeter, traversed, trauma, mosaic, prejudices, subdued, significance, infer, surly, riffling, emphatically, compassionate, vouch, implicates, taint, consigning, indulgence, awesome, content, brutally, gullible, molested, verified, causative, bravado, pensive

### B. Consider the following questions:

1. Do you know anyone who has been arrested? What must it feel like to be arrested?
2. Have you ever seen a movie or read a book about being in prison? What are some of the terrible things that happen in prison?
3. Have you ever seen a trial? Are the verdicts always fair? Why or why not?

## II. PRESENTATION

### A. Understanding the Story:

1. Begin with Author's Note (on tape only) - page 88: Where did Walter Dean Meyers get the idea for *Monster*? Why does Steve Harmon find it hard to get used to jail? How does he feel most of the time? What does his lawyer Kathy O'Brien advise him? What had Wendell Bolden told Zinzi? What does Steve dream that night? How were Bobo Evans and James King caught? Why does O'Brien think the jury isn't on their side? How does Osvaldo talk to Steve on the street? Why did Osvaldo say he participated in the robbery?
2. Advance to pages 89 - 200: What does Steve think about that night in his cell? How does Osvaldo skirt the truth? What is required to join the Diablos? How does Steve feel when he sees his father crying? What is the "cheap trick" Petrocelli is pulling? Why does Steve think Miss O'Brien thinks he's guilty? Why does he think the prisoners fight so much? What does Bobo Evans confess to?

3. Complete the story with pages 201 - 281: In what ways does Bobo Evans's testimony hurt Steve's case? What is the prosecutor's strongest point against Steve? Why does Miss O'Brien think Steve should take the stand? What questions is he asked? How does he answer? What does the jury decide about Evans and King? What do they decide about Steve? How does Miss O'Brien act when Steve tries to hug her? Why is Steve take pictures of himself? What does he hope to see?

### B. For Discussion:

1. According to the author, Walter Dean Meyers, how do minor infractions eventually lead to major crimes?
2. Why does Steve Harmon want to make the movie? How does it help him deal with being in jail? Why does he call his movie "Monster"? What is the movie *really* about?
3. Why does Steve include flashbacks in his film? What do the scenes in the neighborhood show? What do the scenes outside of court—in jail or among people waiting for the trial to begin—show? Why does he use the *Star Wars* titles at the opening and closing?
4. Do you feel O'Brien believes in Steve's innocence? Why or why not? Do you believe in Steve's innocence? Give examples from the story to support your answer.
5. What does Steve mean in the titles at the end of the film when he says, "It was not an episode that he expected. It was not the life or activity that he thought would fill every bit of his soul or change what life meant to him." How has the experience changed Steve's life? How has it changed his relationship with his parents?

## III. EXTENDING THE LESSON

Give students the opportunity to work with partners, groups, the whole class, or alone.

### INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS:

#### A. Language Arts:

1. Have students write a screen play. Encourage them to draw on their own experience rather than copying what they see on TV or in the movies.

2. Kathy O'Brien asks Steve to list all the people he loves or admires and all the people who love and admire him. Have students do the same and then write about one of the people on the list.
3. Have students listen to the slang used by some of the witnesses like "rag, getover, copped, went down," and discuss what these mean. Have students compare this language with the language used by the prosecutor and others in court.
4. Have students compare listening to *Monster* to reading it. Did they enjoy listening to the story rather than reading it? What would be added if it were made into a movie?

### B. Art and Music:

1. Have students make a bulletin board about the story. They could show the courtroom, the detention center, the street where the crime takes place, cut out newspaper headlines about crimes, add a gavel and other items found in court.
2. Have students pretend to be courtroom artists assigned to the trial and draw pastel portraits of each witness and others at the trial.
3. Show students the opening scenes in one of Alfred Hitchcock's films and have them observe how the great director used the camera, music, and sound effects to build suspense. Have them then study the description of camera movements and sound effects in Steve's film.
4. Have students draw the cartoon city and figure that Steve imagines calling out, "The people rest."

### C. Social Studies:

1. Have students listen to how Steve feels about crying and why he feels he has to hide it. Do they have to hide their tears? Have them write about a time when they cried or when they felt like crying and kept themselves from doing it. Discuss: Do we make it harder for boys to show their emotions than we do for girls?
2. Have students read about famous trials of the past or of recent times, like the Sacco-Vanzetti trial, the Scopes "Monkey" trial or the murder trial of O. J. Simpson.

3. Have students find out about what happens to people when they go to prison. Why is it so terrible? What could be done about the problems there? What might be alternatives to prisons?
4. Have a group of students pretend to be the jury in Steve's case. Have them weigh the evidence they hear and come up with a verdict.
5. Have students learn about the jury system and its merits and its drawbacks.
6. Have students research and hold a debate about gun control. Does someone have a right to have a gun to defend himself? Had the owner of the drugstore not had a gun, how might the robbery have turned out different?
7. Have students discuss what is meant by "reasonable doubt." Have them discuss why it's important that the jury be impartial and the accused be "innocent until proven guilty." Can this be achieved? Why or why not?

### D. Science and Math:

1. Have students find out what it costs to maintain a prisoner and multiply it by the number of prisoners and the times they are serving.
2. Have students learn more about crime scene investigation. How do the police find fingerprints? How do they identify them?
3. Have students learn about forensic science. How is the cause of death determined?

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