

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Monster**

by Walter Dean Myers

written by Sally Wein

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# Monster

## Notes

Walter Dean Myers grew up in Harlem, where he was raised in a foster family. He left school at 16 and joined the U.S. Army. After a succession of jobs, he began writing and has had a distinguished career as an author. Focusing on young people, Myers writes fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. His work is carefully structured and lively; it has received wide literary acclaim, including the Margaret A. Edwards Award.

Myers has won the Coretta Scott King award for five of his books, including *Monster*. *Monster* also received the American Library Association's Michael L. Printz Award and was a finalist for a National Book Award. His other works include *Slam!*, *Fallen Angels*, and two Newbery Honor Books, *Scorpions* and *Somewhere in the Darkness*. *Monster* is illustrated by Myers' son, Christopher Myers.

*Monster* is set in Harlem, with its ethnically mixed population; in a New York State correctional facility; and in a courtroom. Some of the scenes include discussion of male rape in a jail setting; others allude to drug use and street crime. The Medical Examiner gives clinical details of a murder victim's wounds, but the material is factual rather than exploitative. In addition, characters use both mild and strong vulgarity as well as insulting, derogatory epithets. Overall, the book is most appropriate for older teens.

*Monster* is written in two forms: journal entries and a screenplay. The book is not divided into formal chapters or scenes. This teaching unit is structured into sections that include both journal entries and dramatic scenes.

All references come from the Harper Tempest edition of *Monster*, published in 1999.

# Monster

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the purpose of using two main formats in *Monster* (journal entries and a film script).
2. use inference to determine additional information about a character or incident.
3. evaluate Myers style and the methods he uses to make this story realistic, and discuss whether all the information on jail life, especially sexual predators, is necessary to this story.
4. discuss the legal procedures and the roles people play in a criminal trial that goes before a jury.
5. define and provide examples of the following in *Monster*: autobiography, flashback, realism, stream of consciousness, confessional literature, foreshadowing, and soliloquy.
6. discuss the importance of race, racism, and sexism in *Monster*, as evidenced in conversations between people in Harlem, comments about the victim of the crime, the roles of the different people in the courtroom, and other interactions.
7. evaluate how Steve's jail time affects his emotions during the trial and his development as a character.
8. examine the differences between being innocent and being found "not guilty," especially in relation to Steve Harmon.
9. discuss the difference between legal guilt and moral guilt, noting especially the actions of Osvaldo Cruz, James King, and Richard "Bobo" Evans.
10. identify and analyze the important points in the relationship between Steve Harmon and Kathy O'Brien.
11. recognize and discuss the uses of foreshadowing in *Monster* and discuss whether the ending is predictable.
12. evaluate the importance of male role models in Steve Harmon's life, considering especially Steve's relationship with his father and his relationship with his teacher, Mr. Sawicki.

# Monster

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the themes of guilt, innocence, justice, and ambiguity as they are developed in *Monster*, and cite examples to illustrate these themes.
2. Analyze the development of Steve Harmon's character, including his strengths and weaknesses. Focus on the degree of involvement (if any) he had in the robbery.
3. Chart and evaluate the plan Kathy O'Brien develops for defending Steve Harmon, including her management of the fact that he had been in Mr. Nesbitt's drugstore.
4. What does the author tell you about Steve as a member of the Harmon family? Explain your concept of the family's dynamics.
5. Envision yourself as a member of the jury in this case. How would you evaluate the evidence and arguments, and what would you say to the other jurors to convince them to agree with your point of view?
6. Discuss the importance of the film class in Steve's life.
7. This novel includes characters from several different racial backgrounds. Evaluate and discuss the importance of how the author treats race in the story.
8. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the community of Harlem as it is portrayed in *Monster*.
9. Discuss the treatment of women in *Monster*.
10. Based on what you have read in *Monster*, what do you think is the biggest problem in the jail system? What do you think is the biggest problem in the court system? Cite examples to support your choices.
11. Analyze the purposes and success of using two formats (diary and drama) to tell the story.
12. What kind of future do you think Steve Harmon has? Give examples to support your opinion.
13. Discuss the function of the illustrations in the novel. Do they, in your opinion, add to or distract one from the text? Why?

# Monster

## Pages 1-58

### VOCABULARY

**prosecutor** – lawyer presenting the court case for the government  
**motions** – arguments or proposals for action by a judge in a trial  
**juried** – a contest or set of submissions evaluated by a jury  
**predictable** – expected  
**felony** – a serious crime that can be punishable by jail time  
**infringing** – moving in on someone's space or rights  
**redress** – remedy or compensation for a loss or crime  
**flawed** – mistaken; faulty  
**grandiose** – fancy or overly important  
**accomplice** – helper in a crime or attempted crime  
**sexually harassing** – bothering or threatening in a sexual way  
**objection** – an appeal by one lawyer to a judge to stop certain questions or proceedings in court  
**admissible** – evidence or testimony that is allowed in court  
**defendant** – in a court proceeding, the person charged with a crime

1. The book begins with text that looks like someone's hand printing, and the words describe someone crying at night before revealing that the writer is in jail. Why would Myers, the author, open the book in such an unusual way?

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2. Why, according to the narrator, is it best to cry at night when someone is being beaten up?

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**Pages 127-205**

## VOCABULARY

**montage** – in a film, pictures that are laid over one another in a rapid sequence

**traversed** – traveled or moved through

**esophagus** – the muscular tube that connects the lower throat and the upper stomach

**trapezius** – a large muscle group in the upper back

**respective** – separate or individual

**diminutive** – very small or petite

**sidebar** – an off-the-record conversation

**concentric** – having the same center

1. Kathy O'Brien says the prosecutor was playing a "cheap trick." What was this trick?

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2. How does Dr. Moody say that Mr. Nesbitt died?

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3. After the prisoner, Sunset, receives a guilty verdict in his trial, Steve writes about his own fears. What were Steve's initial fears in jail, and what is he worried about now?

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4. In his journal, what does Steve say he did in the drugstore?

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5. What does Mrs. Harmon give to Steve when she visits him in jail?

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