

Judging the Self: Narratives, Teenage Identity and Psychological Anxiety in Walter Dean Myers *Monster*

Author: Sasirekha M

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English (SF)

PSG College of Arts & Science

Coimbatore.

Email Id: sasirekhamoorthy11@gmail.com

Co-Author: Dr. S. Shanthi M.A., M.Ed., Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

Department of English (SF)

PSG College of Arts & Science

Coimbatore.

Abstract:

Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* (1999) is about the life of Steve Harmon, a Black teenage boy whose identity move in legal, social, and psychological judgment charged with murder. The paper *Judging the Self: Narratives, Teenage Identity, and Psychological Anxiety in Walter Dean Myers's Monster* examines how Steve's oneness is represented in narrative form, which takes the form of diary entries and screenplay structure. The paper examines the structural influence that affect Steve's experiences in a racially distorted justice system based on Critical Race Theory. Labeling theory, in the novel the protagonist is referred as *Monster* encourages internalized disgrace and identity distortion. The layers of fear, shame, and self-estrangement underlying Steve's psychological conflict are unmasked by psychoanalytic theory. Together, these perspectives explain the connection between racial inequality, adolescent identity formation, and psychological distress, revealing how Myers's novel shows both as a psychological case study and a law study.

Keywords: *Monster*, Teenage Identity, Psychological Anxiety, Critical Race Theory and Labeling Theory.

Introduction:

Young adult literature has been deeply influenced by the writings of African American writer Walter Dean Myers, who is renowned for his descriptions of inner self living and marginalized children. His novels address themes of race, identity, and systemic injustice. *Monster* (1999), one of his most recognized works, stands out as being both a trial drama and a psychological portrait. The novel is about sixteen-year-old young director to be Steve Harmon, accused of murder after having been identified as a so-called fatal heist. The novel engages readers into Steve's chaotic perceptions by switching between the objectivity of his internal conflict and the subjectivity of documented events by using a blended narrative that alternates diary like personal entries with screenplay form.

Identity formation and destruction among teens under high societal pressure are analyzed in Walter Dean Myers's *Monster*. Critical Race Theory analysis, how racial bias fills the trial of Steve and influences popular opinion. Labeling Theory, it examines how Steve's self-concept is developed through the prosecution's labeling him as a *Monster*. The analysis brings out Steve's unconscious fears, guilt, and identity crisis as he navigates the court of law and his own self-reflection using psychoanalytic theory.

This paper tries to demonstrate how Myers's narrative not only illustrates a story of judicial accusation but also of the struggle of a young boy to define himself in the middle of prejudice and uncertainty by merging literary analysis with sociological and psychological perspectives.

Identity and Surveillance:

In *Monster*, Walter Dean Myers depicts Steve Harmon in an ever-present world of observation, that constructs his sense of self. From the time of his arrest through the final arguments at his trial, Steve is subjected to the watchful eyes of various "gazes" the court, the prosecution, the jury, the prison authorities, and even his own lawyer. This monitoring becomes an internalized force, compelling him to deal between presentation of self and internal self. The courtroom, with its ritualized performances and predetermined hierarchies, is a place where Steve's every utterance, movement, and facial expression is being measured as proof of innocence or guilt. Surveillance in this case is not simply physical observation it involves the interpretive lens that others use to read his identity.

From a Critical Race Theory perspective, this observation can be framed as a racialized observation wherein Steve's Blackness intersects with legal suspicion. He is not just a defendant he is a young Black boy accused in a historically racialized system of justice. This look raises the stakes of his presentation of self and heightens his anxiety.

The Labeling Theory structure demonstrates that surveillance fully engages in constructing identity. Being observed is linked with being judged, and constant exposure to others suspicion can result in internalized suspicion. For Steve, the fact that the courtroom can already view him as a *Monster* acts as a source of his inner turmoil whether or not to challenge this assigned identity or unknowingly conform to it through self-doubt.

By this description, Myers shows how adolescence, already a stage of life naturally widespread with questions of belonging and self-definition, becomes even riskier when experienced under racialized scrutiny. Identity in Steve's universe is never in private it is a performed one subject to watchful, frequently biased eyes.

Anxiety and Selfhood:

Steve Harmon in a situation that shows psychological anxiety to near continual status, Walter Dean Myers in *Monster* illustrates the fragile construction of self in adolescence. Steve deal with the legal consequences of his claimed offense along with the fundamental question of who he is throughout the murder trial, which is a crucible. His identity is a changing mixture of his self-concept, social categorization, and apprehension about the future. Steve's discomfort depicts psychoanalytic theory, is due to a struggle between his ego and the forced identities.

His own sense of self is subvert as the courtroom presentation of him as a *Monster* intrudes upon his psyche. One can explain his emotionally detached screenplay style narration as a defense mechanism and an attempt to structure chaos and distance himself from pain. vulnerability surfaces in his private journaling, revealing the psychological impact of persistent stress.

Adolescence involves a desire for identity and belonging, but the specter of conviction distorts Steve's stage of development. Labeling theory shows that he is concerned with the permanence of the label that has been applied to him along with the result of the trial. Steve's case is employed by Myers to show how anxiety can fragment identity and make it unclear and replaceable. Steve is reconceive who he is at each testimony and each glance in the courtroom. Because of this, adolescence is characterized as an affective conflict intensified by fear, judgment, and institutionalized discrimination, where one is forced to negotiate the person one wishes to be with the one others demand to see.

Trial and Truth:

In *Monster*, Walter Dean Myers presents the courtroom as a war zone and a theater in which truth is construct, not a given. For Steve Harmon, the trial is allegedly aimed at determining guilt or innocence, but soon enough it becomes clear that the truth on trial is filtered through the strategies of the lawyers, the credibility of witnesses, and the biases of authority figures. The representation of the legal system in the novel is more that of a performance whereby narratives are inscribed to convince and not to uncover objective truth, rather than an objective search for facts.

Critical Race Theory, structural injustices affect the trial's accuracy. Cultural assumptions and Steve's status as a young Black boy work together to give the jury its perception of him and the prosecution its view of his role. Racialized expectations charged against him are made evident by the objections of his defense attorney regarding appropriate courtroom behavior truth must not only be spoken but presented in a manner acceptable to the predominantly white judicial audience.

The *Monster* label by the prosecution is applied again and reinforced, influencing opinions regardless of evidence, is where the Labeling Theory aspect is made manifest. Steve tells the truth in his testimony is nonetheless understood through a preexisting narrative of criminality linked to age and color.

For Steve, the trial becomes both a process of law and an intrapsychic judgement. He questions in his journal whether charges against him can ever be separated from the fact of who he is. Thus, Myers illustrates how truth is fragile in a racially prejudiced legal system, open to being warped by bias, legal melodrama, and the political dynamics of the courtroom.

The White Gaze:

Walter Dean Myers effectively and indirectly illustrates in *Monster* the ways in which Steve Harmon's perception of himself and his experience are formed through the white gaze. "White gaze", a term that has its beginning in postcolonial and racial theory, refers to the dominant cultural perspective that makes whiteness normative and views minorities as lower, suspect, or other. For the judge Steve, the prosecution, and the predominantly white jury, they all embody this stare in court. Each glance, each pause, and each interpretation is filtered through a social narrative that often presumes Black boys are violent before any evidence to support it is even considered.

Critical Race Theory, the white gaze in *Monster* is institutional and embedded in the basic structure of the court system, and not restricted to individual prejudice. Steve is aware that a standard which is other than his own is always being imposed on his speech, behavior, and appearance. His defense attorney's relentless insistence on his good behavior avoidance of certain facial expressions, calmness demonstrates the necessity for presenting an image of acceptable Blackness to expand racially suspicious.

Conclusion:

Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* is far more than a courtroom drama it examines how a teenager's self is constructed by both personal and public narratives under conditions of extremity. The novel shows the insecurity of self in the presence of institutionalized prejudice, constant monitoring, and the social stigma of labels through the hybrid narrative of Steve Harmon. The tension between Steve's inner processing of his experiences and his persona in the courtroom is embedded in the diary and screenplay forms, which are parallel mirrors.

The Critical Race Theory framed analyses demonstrate the ways in which racial prejudice infuses the legal system, projecting the reality as having been analyzed through centuries old assumptions

regarding young Black males. The long term consequences of being labeled a *Monster*, a label Steve must battle legally and psychologically, are depicted by labeling theory. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Myers's description of Steve's inner turmoil does a good job of capturing the deep emotional impact of persistent anxiety, such as confusion, self-doubt, and the search for authentic self-definition.

Ultimately, *Monster* forces readers to confront the disturbing reality that bias might still infect justice and that institutional injustice can irreversibly rearrange adolescence, an already tenuous period for identity creation. The life of Steve revolves around the fierce battle between invented stories and imposed identities as a reminder that truth tends not to be absolute under these circumstances instead, it is often twisted, staged, and disputed. Not only does Myers leave his readers in suspense regarding the verdict of the trial, but he also asks questions regarding the objectivity of the systems that pass such judgments. Through it, he crafts a work that is both an intensely personal reflection of an adolescent struggling to hold on to his identity and a commentary on institutional authority.

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