Justice in *Monster*

Walter Dean Myers’ novel *Monster* explores what it means to not only be a black teenager in the U.S., but also, more specifically, what it means to be a black teenager in the U.S. who is on trial for murder. Through the sincere introspection of the novel’s protagonist, Steve Harmon, the reader is confronted with the practical consequences of racial prejudice and is forced to consider how often black Americans are put “on trial” every day – and not just in the courtroom.

A primary and readily accepted tenant of the American judicial system is that the accused are considered innocent until proven guilty. However, in Steve Harmon’s case, the accountability is placed on Steve and his defense fighting to prove his innocence – a direct inversion of the intended process that no one involved (with the exception of Steve) challenges or even denies. Steve’s lawyer, Kathy O’Brien, goes so far as to confirm this inversion without criticism when she claims that “nothing is happening that speaks to [Steve] being innocent.” She then says to Steve, in a way that is business-like to the point of being callous, “Half of those jurors, no matter what they said when we questioned them when we picked the jury, believed you were guilty the moment they laid eyes on you. You’re young, you’re Black, and you’re on trial. What else do they need to know” (78)?

O’Brien is not alone in her indifference. Repeatedly, those who are not directly affected by the case’s outcome refer to the proceedings in a way that is, at best, detached and, at worst, hostile. A guard in the courtroom refers to the trial as a “motion case” (14). Detective Karyl reminds his colleague to “hope for the best” when told the death penalty will not be used on someone so young (73). Guards at the prison even have “a pool going” and place bets on how long Steve’s assumed prison sentence will be (266).
All of these individuals are able to speak from a place of privilege that is borne from their distance from the case. As evidenced by the feelings they express toward the trial, this distance and the subsequent privilege it endows is a petri dish for apathy. Because Steve’s life has no direct impact on their own lives and because Steve, due to his race or his background, is not a person with whom they can relate, they do not feel compelled to extend their empathy to him. To the comfortable, often older, white outsiders, Steve becomes an idea rather than a human – an idea that is subject to dissection and cruelty.

This failure on the part of those surrounding the trial to see Steve Harmon as a human carries with it major implications. Their mean-spiritedness indicates that they more than projected a guilty verdict onto Steve when he was accused of murder. It indicates that they projected a guilty verdict onto him long before he was even on trial.

Since, in the eyes of these “outsiders,” Steve exists as more of an idea than a human, he is, to them, worth no more than the sum of his parts. He is a teenager; he is black; he is associated with convicted criminals. He is a mere concoction of the things white American culture has bred them to hate. His trial is their opportunity to unload all of the opinions that they hold in secret – opinions they would be condemned for expressing under any other circumstances. As a human, Steve would demand their attention, their dignified consideration, and their respect. But as an idea – as a monster – Steve can serve as an outlet for their suppressed vitriol. And so they elect to see him as the latter.

In truth, regardless of his guilt or his innocence, Steve is a human being and is inherently worth more than just the sum of his parts. However, what is not worth more than the sum of its parts is the American justice system. As a device intended to facilitate justice and ensure the safety of the American people, a faulty “part” automatically equals a faulty system. Considering
the American justice system is comprised of individuals, those individuals’ personal ideologies as well as the overarching political atmosphere intersect and influence how – and how effectively – justice is delivered through the justice system. It follows that a country wherein internalized racial prejudice is the norm is not a country whose justice system can be expected to serve all of its citizens equally.

Individuals are an integral part of the judiciary. There is no way to remove them from the process of determining the guilt or innocence of the accused while maintaining the necessary nuance and subjective eye the court system demands. Therefore, apathy can never be an option for America’s citizenry. The personal is truly political, and “outsiders” are an illusion. As demonstrated by Myers, everyone has an obligation to be informed and aware.

Monster may be a work of fiction, but the themes it addresses are real. Steve Harmon may not exist, but teenagers like Steve do. They have every right to a justice system that works for them. We have every reason to help provide one.
Works Cited