Monster

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WALTER DEAN MYERS

Walter Dean Myers was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia, in 1937. When his mother died when he was two years old, Myers went to live with Florence Dean, his biological father's first wife, and her husband Herbert Dean, who raised him in Harlem, New York City. Myers eventually changed his middle name from Milton to Dean to honor their parentage. His childhood was dominated by his church and his local neighborhood. Although he was an avid reader, Myers struggled both socially and academically, in part due to a speech impediment which made him a frequent target for bullies, which in turn earned Myers a reputation for frequently getting into fistfights. One of Myers high school teachers sensed that he would not graduate but knew that he was a gifted reader and writer, and encouraged him to continue writing no matter what he did or where he went. True to his teacher's prediction, Myers dropped out of high school as soon as he turned 17 and joined the army, serving for three years and exiting shortly before the start of the Vietnam War. Myers was an avid reader throughout, but bothered by the fact that all of his literary heroes were white people. However, after coming across the works of African-American author James Baldwin, Myers felt encouraged to write about the experience of being a black person in mid-20th century America. Remembering his teacher's words, Myers began spending his evening writing after finishing his day labor on construction sites. Myers's first published book was the children's book *Where Does the Day Go?* in 1968, which won a Council on Interracial Books for Children Award. Myers went on to spend the next 45 years writing books, publishing more than 100 children's books, young adult novels, and nonfiction books. He won the prestigious Coretta Scott King Award. recognizing African-American authors, five different times. His 1988 Vietnam War novel *Fallen Angels* is recognized by the American Library Association as one of the most frequently targeted books for censorship in America due to its unflinching depiction of the Vietnam War. After a lucrative writing career and seeing one of his sons, Christopher Myers, become an accomplished author and illustrator himself, Walter Dean Myers died after a short illness in a hospital in Manhattan at the age of 76.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Harlem has existed in various forms since the 17th century, when the Dutch used it as a trading post, and has been everything from a farming town to resort destination to ghetto to cultural center. However, the 20 years between 1970 to 1990 were considered by many to be the neighborhood's hardest. As crime rose and the local economy fell, those with the money to move out of Harlem mostly did so, leaving the poorest behind. Businesses and stores shuttered, housing fell into disrepair, and within a two-year period alone nearly a third of Harlem's total population left the neighborhood. Infant mortality was double that of the rest of New York City. In 1991, the New York Times reported, "Nearly two-thirds of the households have incomes below $10,000 a year. In a community with one of the highest crime rates in the city, garbage-strewn vacant lots and tumbledown tenements, many of them abandoned and sealed, contribute to the sense of danger and desolation that pervades much of the area." However, beginning in the late 1980s, city officials and generous individuals—including professional basketball player Magic Johnson—launched a series of initiatives and investments to begin restoring Harlem's central 125th street, repairing buildings, building supermarkets and convenience stores, and slowly reinvigorating the local economy. *Monster* takes place during the period of Harlem's revitalization, when it was much more dangerous than it is today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Monster primarily explores themes relating to incarceration, injustice, and being poor or black or both in America's inner-cities. Many of Myers's numerous other works explore similar topics, but perhaps the most striking, since it directly relays his own childhood experience, is his memoir *Bad Boy*, which recounts Myers' childhood in Harlem. In the same vein, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* tells the story of his similarly difficult childhood in Baltimore as he recounts the events of his life to his son and explains to him what it means to be a black man in America, particularly in light of the disadvantages and injustices he will face. Coates's memoir is widely considered to be a masterpiece, and as a result of his nonfiction mastery he is sometimes referred to as the modern-day James Baldwin. *Monster* also explores dynamics of prison life and what that does to a person's psyche, regardless of race. A useful addition to *Monster*'s exploration of the American justice system would be the highly-regarded *In the Belly of the Beast*, a book composed of letters written by longtime-convict Jack Abbott to the journalist and author Norman Mailer, which describes Abbott's experience and analysis of what he regarded as a brutal and utterly unjust prison system, much like Steve Harmon recognizes in Myers's novel.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Monster

- **When Written:** 1998
- **Where Written:** Jersey City, New Jersey
- **When Published:** April 21, 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Fiction
- **Setting:** Harlem, New York City
- **Climax:** Steve Harmon is declared not guilty of felony murder
- **Antagonist:** Sandra Petrocelli
- **Point of View:** Split between first-person narration (by Steve Harmon) and dramatic point of view (through the screenplay he writes)

EXTRA CREDIT

Composite Character. Although Steve Harmon is not a real person, Myers stated that he knew many young men just like him and in his same predicament; Steve is thus a "composite character" built from all of them.

Catharsis. Myers has admitted in interviews that when he writes characters like Steve Harmon, he is writing to calm the memory of the troubled young man he once was as a teenager, and feels as if he is writing to reach out and comfort his younger self.

PLOT SUMMARY

Sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon recounts his and James King's trial for the killing of Mr. Nesbitt, a drugstore owner, in a botched robbery in Harlem six months prior. Through personal notes and a screenplay he writes in his notebook, Steve recounts the 11 days between the start of the case and the jury's verdict. He names the screenplay "**Monster**" after what the state prosecutor Sandra Petrocelli called him in court.

On the first day of the trial, Monday, Steve sits with his attorney Kathy O'Brien and listens to Petrocelli make her opening remarks: according to the state, late last December, James King and Richard "Bobo" Evans entered a drugstore, tried to rob Mr. Nesbitt, and accidentally shot the man with his own handgun. According to the prosecution, Steve Harmon and 14-year-old Osvaldo Cruz both acted as lookouts during the robbery, and are thus legally culpable for the man's murder, as well. Nobody actually witnessed the murder, but Petrocelli presents her first key witness, a man who claims to have information that connects King and Bobo Evans with the murder. The man himself is a convict who testifies so that his own prison sentence will be reduced. King's attorney Asa Briggs challenges the witness's ability to be objective since he is benefiting personally from testifying at the trial. Steve's mind wanders back to violent scenes from his childhood growing up in Harlem, even though he himself never sought out violence.

On Tuesday, Steve writes about how much he hates jail and how afraid he is—everyone there is violent and only talks about hurting each other. They attack people for no reason, and one of them carries a knife. In court, Petrocelli produces another witness, also a criminal who tells the same story as the first, in exchange for a reduced sentence. Once again, Briggs challenges the witness's objectivity and moral character, and the judge adjourns the hearing for the day when Briggs starts to get heated. That evening, Steve lies in bed listening to two men beat and rape another inmate. He thinks about his younger brother Jerry and how much he misses him.

On Wednesday, Steve wakes up thinking about how in jail, they take people's shoelaces and belts so inmates can't kill themselves. Steve can't help but think of himself as a monster, just as Petrocelli branded him. O'Brien told him that her job was to make the jury see Steve as a human being instead, and Steve understands why. In court, Petrocelli brings Detective Karyl in to testify, who (supposedly) investigated the murder and made the arrests, even though he never found any actual evidence at the crime scene. Steve recalls the night Karyl and his partner first questioned him. Karyl automatically assumed he was guilty and said he hoped Steve would get the death penalty, even though he's just a kid. Back in the courtroom, Briggs accuses Karyl of not actually investigating at all, but just finding a few convicts who'd testify for him instead. O'Brien worries that none of this makes Steve look any more innocent, since half the jury will automatically think he's guilty just because he's a young black male. Osvaldo Cruz, a 14-year-old kid whom Steve had to be careful not to offend in Harlem, since he is part of a dangerous gang, testifies that he was pressured into participating in the robbery against his will by Bobo, who threatened him.

On Thursday, Steve writes about his relationship with O'Brien. He can tell O'Brien wants to know who he truly is, and Steve wants her to know that he's a good person, but he doesn't know how to make her see that. In the courtroom, Osvaldo continues his testimony against King, Bobo, and Steve, which he is giving in exchange for an acquittal, since he is young and claims he was coerced into participating. However, Briggs and O'Brien cross-examine Osvaldo and force him to reveal that not only is he a gang member with a violent history, but he has also at least once committed savage violence against strangers without reason, which ruins the credibility of his claim that he was afraid of Bobo. Later, Steve meets with his father Mr. Harmon, but realizes that their father-son relationship has broken. He thinks that his dad now sees a monster where his son should be. Steve also recalls watching the murder reported on the news and being arrested by the detectives two weeks later.

On Friday, four minor witnesses testify while Steve thinks about Mr. Nesbitt, lying on the floor, knowing he is about to die. Through the medical examiner's testimony, Steve learns that

Mr. Nesbitt was shot through the lung and died after drowning in his own blood. He is horrified.

On Saturday, Steve thinks about how horrible it would be to spend the next two decades of his life in prison, which seems the most likely outcome. He knows O'Brien privately thinks that he's guilty, even though she'll still defend him. Mrs. Harmon visits Steve in jail, but he knows it's too painful for her to see her son as a prisoner. At night, as Steve lies in bed, he questions his own innocence and recalls King telling him that he was going to rob a place and asking Steve if he wanted to be in on it.

On Sunday, Steve attends a church service in the jail until a fight breaks out and everyone is put on lockdown for the morning. He thinks about how nothing feels real anymore outside of jail, not his memories of his old life or the baseball game on TV. Steve's parents walk Jerry past the window so Steve can see him, though Jerry is not allowed in the jail because he is a child. If he wasn't an inmate, Steve wouldn't be allowed in either. His parents visit briefly, and Steve worries about Monday, which will be a critical day for the prosecution.

On Monday, a woman testifies that she was in the drugstore shortly before the murder and saw King and one other man enter, though she admits she had difficulty identifying King. Once she saw the two men fighting with Mr. Nesbitt, she fled the store. Bobo Evans testifies next, also in exchange for a reduced sentence. From what King told him, Bobo understood that Steve was supposed to be their lookout, and he saw Steve enter and exit the drugstore and walk away. After that, he and King entered and fought with Mr. Nesbitt. When Mr. Nesbitt took out a handgun, King wrestled it from him and shot the man, stole cash and cigarettes, and then both of them went to a fast-food restaurant to buy some food and lay low. Briggs and O'Brien cross-examine Bobo, forcing him to admit that Bobo never actually spoke to Steve himself, nor did he ever threaten Osvaldo to help them with the robbery; Osvaldo wanted to be in on the heist. Petrocelli announces that the prosecution has concluded.

On Tuesday, O'Brien admits that it doesn't look good for Steve. Bobo's testimony was damning and Briggs is going to try to associate King with Steve, since it will make King look better, as Steve is obviously a decent kid. King's cousin testifies and gives a weak alibi for King on the day of the murder. O'Brien wants Steve to testify and present himself to the jury as a good kid. She coaches him on what sort of answers to give and Steve realizes that the truth is less important than making the right case.

On the stand, Steve testifies that he was nowhere near the drugstore on the day of the murder (though he's privately admitted that he was) because he was working on a film project all week. He also testifies that his relationship with King is minimal; he's just some guy he saw at the playground occasionally when people were playing ball. When Steve is finished, his film teacher Mr. Sawicki provides a character witness and testifies that Steve is an honest, sensitive kid who makes uplifting films about his neighborhood. Briggs makes his closing remarks, claiming that his client King has no connection with Bobo Evans and did not participate in the robbery in any way. O'Brien claims the same for Steve in her own closing remarks, and adds that there is not enough evidence against Steve to lock up a young kid for the rest of his life. The jury leaves to make their decision and Steve and King are taken back to jail.

That Friday, Steve and King are brought back to the courthouse to hear the jury's verdict. King is found guilty and duly sentenced for a felony murder charge. Steve is found not guilty. He spreads his arms to hug O'Brien, but she turns stiffly away. He remains with his arms outstretched as the image blurs and fades until Steve's silhouette looks like "some strange beast, a monster."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Steve Harmon – Steve Harmon is the narrator and protagonist of the story. Steve is a 16-year-old black kid from Harlem charged with felony murder for his involvement in a botched robbery that ended in Mr. Nesbitt's death. Contrasting with the other three people implicated in the robbery, Steve has no criminal history and is a decent and sensitive kid. He describes his court case—in which his co-defendant is a man he knows from his neighborhood, James King—through personal notes and a screenplay he writes in his journal as the events happen. Although Steve's actual guilt or innocence is never explicitly revealed, his inner narrative and framing of events suggests that he did participate in the robbery in a minimal way, simply walking into the drugstore and back out of it to check for cops, and leaving before King and Bobo Evans went in to commit the actual robbery. Steve's probable guilt is reinforced by the fact that the state prosecutor labels him a "**monster**" in her opening remarks, and this becomes the way that Steve sees himself throughout the novel, dehumanizing himself. In spite of his potential guilt, Steve's youth and minimal involvement (he was passively roped into it by King) suggest that a felony murder charge is legally sanctioned but entirely unjust. If anything, Steve seems a victim of Harlem's violent environment and the story demonstrates the manner in which that endemic violence drags down well-meaning young men like himself, and then turns them into actually violent people through the horrible environment in prison. Despite the prosecutor Petrocelli's aggressive prosecution and active dehumanization of Steve, through the efforts of Steve's defense attorney Kathy O'Brien, the jury finds Steve not guilty. However, when he tries to hug O'Brien, she turns stiffly away, suggesting that she does not truly believe in his innocence and leaving Steve feeling like a monster.

James King – James King is man in his mid-20s, charged with the same felony murder as Steve over the death of Mr. Nesbitt. King's attorney Asa Briggs knows that if King is allowed to testify in court, he will immediately incriminate himself, and thus King speaks very little throughout the story. However, through Steve's recollection and Bobo Evans' testimony, the narrative suggests that King formulated the plan to rob Mr. Nesbitt's drugstore, drew Steve into being an accomplice by checking the store for cops, attempted to rob the place with Bobo, and then accidentally shot Mr. Nesbitt with his own handgun when there was a struggle. After King is arrested, he tells the police about Steve's involvement, leading to Steve's arrest as well. Although King once seemed tough and untouchable to Steve, and was thus someone he looked up to, Steve realizes that King is actually just a fool, trying to act tough and powerful even when he is in handcuffs and at the mercy of the justice system. King is ultimately deemed guilty of felony murder for Mr. Nesbitt's death.

Richard "Bobo" Evans – Bobo Evans is a criminal witness in Steve and King's court case and an accomplice to Mr. Nesbitt's felony murder. Bobo has a long and violent criminal history—even so, he testifies against King and Steve in exchange for a reduced prison sentence, which thus makes him an arguably unreliable witness (since he has a personal motive to help prosecutors put Steve and King behind bars). According to Bobo, Steve acted as their lookout to check the store for cops before he and King entered Mr. Nesbitt's store to rob him, when King took the man's gun and shot him to death. He and King reportedly then left Mr. Nesbitt dying on the floor and went to a restaurant to have a meal and lie low. Bobo's testimony is slightly weak, since he acknowledges that he does not actually know Steve, nor did he receive any sort of signal from him. Bob's ultimate fate is unknown, though by the time the cops got wind of his involvement in Mr. Nesbitt's murder, Bobo was already in prison for attempting to sell drugs to an undercover cop.

Osvaldo Cruz – Osvaldo is a 14-year-old kid from Harlem and an admitted accomplice in the robbery that resulted in Mr. Nesbitt's felony murder. Osvaldo testifies in King and Steve's trial in exchange for a full acquittal, since Osvaldo is so young and he claims that Bobo coerced him into helping with the robbery by threatening to hurt him. Osvaldo claims that he was afraid of all three of the other participants since they were all older than him, even though Steve can personally recall being afraid of Osvaldo since he is a member of the notorious gang The Diablos. Under Briggs and O'Brien's cross-examination, Osvaldo is forced to admit his status as a gang member and that he is currently in jail for beating up his girlfriend, and that in the past he slashed a stranger's face with a knife to earn his place amongst the Diablos. This basically discredits Osvaldo's whole testimony, since such a person is unlikely to be coerced into committing a crime by fear, and it demonstrates the manner in which criminal witnesses often lie in court cases for their own personal gain.

Kathy O'Brien – Kathy O'Brien is Steve's defense attorney. O'Brien is fairly humorless, but Steve feels as if she is the only person involved in the trial who actually wants to understand who Steve is as a person. Although O'Brien feels that their chances of winning the case are slim, she makes a genuine effort to defend Steve and display his good character, telling him that their main goal is to make Steve seem different from the other three obvious criminals involved in Mr. Nesbitt's murder. O'Brien tells Steve that purely because he is a young black male, half the jury will already assume he is guilty from the moment they see him. Although O'Brien wants to defend Steve and understand who he is as a person, Steve senses that O'Brien does not truly believe he is innocent. Before Steve gives his own testimony, she coaches him on how to distance himself from King as much as possible and falsely deny that he was in the drugstore on the day Mr. Nesbitt was killed. O'Brien's doubt about Steve's actual innocence is confirmed when, after they win the case and Steve is found not guilty, she stiffly refuses his attempt to hug her in gratitude and happiness, suggesting that even though she defended his innocence and genuinely did her best to understand him, she does not regard him well.

Sandra Petrocelli – Sandra Petrocelli is the prosecutor in King and Steve's felony murder trial. Although Petrocelli claims to be working on behalf of truth and justice and American ideals, she immediately labels the defendants as "**monsters**," prejudicing herself and the jury against them, and she often asks witnesses leading questions to manipulate their answers, which is constantly rebuked by both the defense attorneys and the judge. Nearly all of Petrocelli's witnesses are criminals themselves and seem to be lying under oath about various aspects of the crime. However, Petrocelli seems completely unbothered by this or by the fact that her prosecution is trying to lock up Steve, a teenage kid, for at least the next several decades of his life, even though his alleged involvement in the crime was very minimal and he has no prior history of crime or violence. Petrocelli's questionable conduct suggests she is far more interested in winning the court case and bolstering her own career than she is in uncovering the truth of what happened with Mr. Nesbitt's murder, further suggesting that the justice system propagates lies and injustice.

Asa Briggs – Asa Briggs is James King's defense attorney. Briggs is an older man who often looks tired and seems to know that he is in a doomed position—King is obviously a criminal figure and nearly impossible to defend, especially since he is almost certainly guilty of Mr. Nesbitt's murder. Briggs won't even let King speak for himself, because he knows he would incriminate himself immediately. However, Briggs still makes his attempt to defend King and is often antagonistic to Petrocelli's leading questions, pointing out that they are

fundamentally unjust. In his closing statement, Briggs argues that King is not guilty of the murder, even though he obviously is, thus demonstrating that court trials are not so much a pursuit of the truth as a contest between lawyers over who can argue and manipulate evidence the best.

The Judge – The judge presiding over Steve's case is given little characterization beyond being a man in his mid-60s. The judge rules fairly impartially throughout the case, reining in Petrocelli when she overreaches, but he appears bored from the start of the case to its conclusion, suggesting that such cases are merely a process for him, and they no longer feel like significant events that will decide a human being's future.

Alguinaldo Nesbitt – Alguinaldo Nesbitt was the owner of a Harlem drugstore who was murdered during an attempted robbery, allegedly by Bobo Evans and James King. Mr. Nesbitt was an immigrant from St. Kitts who was respected by his community. King targeted Mr. Nesbitt for robbery because he believed that, as an immigrant, Mr. Nesbitt was unlikely to report the robbery to the police.

Salvatore Zinzi – Zinzi is a current convict who testifies in Steve and King's trial. Zinzi wants to get out of prison because he is afraid of being gang-raped, so he steals his cell-mate Bolden's information about Mr. Nesbitt and reports it to a detective, using it to secure a deal for a lessened sentence before Bolden has the chance to do the same.

Wendell Bolden – Bolden is a current convict who testifies in Steve and King's trial. Bolden reportedly bought stolen cigarettes from Bobo Evans, who let slip that he stole them from a drugstore. Bolden knows that a man was killed in that robbery, so after he is arrested for drug possession, he decides to trade what he knows for a lighter sentence. Zinzi beats him to it.

Lorelle Henry – Ms. Henry is a retired school librarian who testifies that she was in the drugstore when Bobo and King entered and began fighting with Mr. Nesbitt. However, Ms. Henry struggled to identify King and reports that, as a black woman, she was initially hesitant to testify against a black man.

Mr. Harmon – Mr. Harmon is Steve's father. Mr. Harmon states that he never imagined his own son would be involved in a murder or wind up in jail, and he tells Steve that when Steve was a baby, Mr. Harmon dreamed about him growing up and playing college football, attending Morehouse university just like his father did. Although Steve claims to be innocent, Mr. Harmon is unsure if he believes him, and Steve realizes that their relationship as father and son has broken, reflecting that it seems as if his dad sees a **monster** in place of where his son should be.

Mrs. Harmon – Mrs. Harmon is Steve's mother. Although she believes he is innocent—even when Steve doubts it himself—Mrs. Harmon rarely visits Steve in prison because it is too emotionally painful to see her own son in such an environment. When she does visit, she gives him a Bible and cries the whole time, and Steve regrets how much pain this episode has caused to his family.

Jerry Harmon – Jerry is Steve's younger brother. Steve loves Jerry very much and misses him while he is in jail, but Jerry is not allowed to visit the jail since he is not an adult. This points out the painful irony of Steve being an inmate, since he is not an adult himself.

Detective Karyl – Detective Karyl investigates the crime scene with his partner Detective Williams and arrests Steve after King claims that Steve shot the handgun that killed Mr. Nesbitt. Although Williams claims they don't need to bother with Steve, since they already have King and Bobo and Steve doesn't seem to be a criminal, Karyl automatically assumes that King's story is true and says that he hopes Steve will get the death penalty, even though he's only 16. This demonstrates the injustice of many of the justice system's operators and the manner in which they dehumanize kids like Steve.

MINOR CHARACTERS

José Delgado – José is Mr. Nesbitt's former employee who found his body in the drugstore after he was murdered. The murder took place while José was away on his lunch break, likely because José is known in his community as a competitive martial artist.

Detective Williams – Detective Williams is Detective Karyl's partner, who tries to convince Karyl to let Steve go and leave him alone after they arrest him, since Steve is obviously not a career criminal and they've already caught King and Bobo.

Tony – A childhood friend of Steve.

Mr. Sawicki Steve's film teacher. Steve particularly admires Mr. Sawicki.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DEHUMANIZATION AND RACISM

Monster depicts the murder trial of Steve Harmon, a 16-year-old black kid from Harlem. Steve is accused of being an accomplice to the murder of an immigrant shopkeeper named Mr. Nesbitt, the result of a botched robbery. Even though Steve's alleged role in the murder is minimal, the prosecutor sees Steve only as a "**monster**," completely disregarding the rest of his life and identity. In a similar fashion, Steve finds during his weeks in

prison that he is still not recognized as a person unto himself, but instead seen as merely an inmate. By depicting the legal system's dehumanization of Steve and the way that this causes him to also dehumanize himself, *Monster* suggests that both the court and the prison system do not treat people accused of crimes as full human beings, but rather as moral degenerates who deserve to be deprived of all rights and humanity.

Although Steve is a sensitive and creative individual, the state prosecutor sees him as a monster and a criminal rather than a human being. Though only 16, Steve is a filmmaker at heart. He depicts all of the courtroom scenes and much of his time in prison through a screenplay he is writing, and Steve's film teacher, Mr. Sawicki, testifies that Steve's films are optimistic and honest, highlighting the best aspects of his violent neighborhood. Steve's own artistic interpretation of events and Mr. Sawicki's character witness establish that Steve is a sensitive and dynamic human being. However, in her opening remarks, state prosecutor Sandra Petrocelli labels anyone tangentially related to the murder, including Steve, as a monster who does not value other people's right to live. Petrocelli wants Steve and James King (another man charged in relation to the crime) to be convicted of felony murder, and by labeling them all as irredeemable, inhuman monsters, she hopes to immediately sway the jury towards seeking as harsh a punishment as possible. Petrocelli dehumanizes Steve in order to accomplish her goal as a prosecutor, which suggests that prosecutors do not view their defendants as human beings, but simply as targets to take down. Furthermore, Steve's defense attorney Kathy O'Brien warns him that, since he is a black teenage boy, half of the jury will believe he is guilty as soon as they see him, suggesting that on top of Petrocelli's dehumanizing remarks, the jurors' racial prejudice also dehumanizes Steve and other people in his position. Racism makes it more likely that the jury will view black defendants not as complex, individual human beings, but merely as stereotypes.

The prison system in *Monster* is also depicted as dehumanizing, refusing to acknowledge that inmates are also complex and emotion-driven human beings. Although Steve is only 16, he is placed in a prison for adults. When his younger brother Jerry is not allowed to visit Steve because he is a child and the prison is a dangerous place, Steve realizes that if he himself were a visitor, rather than an inmate, he would not be allowed in the prison, either. This irony suggests that Steve's status as a prisoner removes any rights or protections he should be entitled as a human being and a legal child. Furthermore, Steve observes that all that inmates talk about is fighting, sex, or appealing their convictions, suggesting that prison dehumanizes people by narrowing the sphere of things they're able to care about. Even Steve finds it difficult to think about his family or friends, since he is consumed by fear about his court case. Prison, it seems, is such an intensely confining space that it reduces human beings to mere shells of what they might have been, forcing them to think only of survival in their narrow world at the expense of all other interests or relationships that once made them who they are. Finally, the guards add to the prisoners' dehumanization. As Steve faces the horrifying prospect of spending most of his life in jail, the guards mockingly place bets on whether Steve will get a full life sentence or not and ask him to put money into the pool, as well. The guards' complete disregard for Steve's mental wellbeing further suggests that the operators of the prison do not regard their subjects as human beings with hopes, fears, and the right to be respected, but merely as pieces in a machine.

Steve and his father Mr. Harmon both come to internalize this dehumanized vision of Steve, which tragically suggests that when the courts and prisons view a person only as a monster or a criminal, that person will come to believe it. After hearing Petrocelli call him a monster and seeing the jurors' disdain for him, Steve begins to think of himself as a monster as well, referring to himself as a monster in his personal notes. Tragically, Mr. Harmon struggles not to see his son that way, even though he doesn't know if Steve is guilty or innocent. When he visits Steve in prison, Steve realizes that their father-son relationship has been broken, noting, "It's like a man looking down to see his son and seeing a monster instead." Both Steve and Mr. Harmon's struggle to not view Steve as a monster suggests that when the courts and the prison system so swiftly dehumanize defendants, the consequences are personal and far-reaching.

LIES AND SELF-INTEREST

Steve Harmon's trial involves numerous witnesses, most of whom are themselves either convicted or alleged criminals. Although the purpose of the court case is presumably to uncover the truth about the murder, every witness tells a different story, and each lawyer is angling for a different outcome that will benefit their career. In light of all of these half-truths and selfish motivations, Steve's account of his trial suggests that the manner in which the court system operates incentivizes people to lie, and thus the courtroom does a very poor job of uncovering the truth.

During Steve's trial, witnesses testify in exchange for reduced sentencing for their own crimes or to present a narrative beneficial to themselves. They are often caught in lies on the stand, suggesting that the personal motivation that each witness has for testifying presses them to lie rather than tell the truth. Two prisoners, Bolden and Zinzi, have no connection to Steve's case, but they testify as witnesses with second- and third-hand information, explicitly admitting that they're cooperating in hopes of reducing their own (unrelated) prison sentences. Whether or not their information is true, the fact that these witnesses are hoping to cut a deal for personal gain suggests that neither of their testimonies can possibly be

objective or unbiased, since they each want their contribution to the court case to seem important enough to merit a reward. Furthermore, Osvaldo Cruz, a 14-year-old gang member implicated in the murder (though already jailed for other crimes), also testifies, trying to make his role in the botched robbery seem as minor as possible. His testimony is predictably unreliable, suggesting that the testimonies of defendants are less likely to be true, since they do not want to incriminate themselves further. Even Mr. Sawicki, Steve's character witness, likes Steve and has a vested interest in seeing him go free. Though the narrative does not explicitly say so, it seems likely that even Mr. Sawicki's testimony may not be entirely accurate, since even civilian witnesses are often hoping for a particular outcome in a court case. All of the testimonies Steve recounts, then, are motivated by factors other than seeking the truth.

Beyond the unreliability of witness testimony, all of the lawyers involved in Steve's court case seem more interested in winning the case than in ascertaining the truth. Petrocelli, the state prosecutor, wants King and Steve to be found guilty of felony murder; King's attorney Asa Briggs wants King to go free, even though King is obviously guilty; Steve's attorney, O'Brien, cares only about ensuring that he is exonerated (though she seems doubtful of his innocence as well). The fact that all three attorneys seek different outcomes—regardless of their opinion of the truth—suggests that they are more concerned with winning a professional victory than securing justice for the victim or the defendants. Sometimes, the attorneys mislead by minimizing or omitting facts, but other times they outright lie. For instance, O'Brien coaches Steve to testify that he was nowhere near the store on the day of the robbery (even though Steve admits that he was) in order to minimize his association with Bobo or King. Once again, this suggests that the truth is less important to each attorney than strategic advantage.

The attorneys' indifference to truth is clearest when Petrocelli, Briggs, and O'Brien make their closing arguments. Addressing all the testimonies and evidence presented, they each present an entirely different explanation of the day of the murder. Briggs presents the most blatant lie, arguing that his client King had nothing to do with the murder, even though it seems it was King who shot the handgun that killed Mr. Nesbitt. Petrocelli argues that all the men are monstrous criminals, while O'Brien argues that Steve was wrongly accused simply for having a casual association with King. The fact that each lawyer presents an entirely different view of one event further suggests that the courtroom does little to uncover the truth of an event or a crime.

The court system seems engineered to encourage participants to lie and then passes off the decision of guilt or innocence to a jury, whose members likely have their own prejudices or preconceptions. All of this indicates that the justice system is a very poor system for ascertaining the truth of an event or establishing a person's actual guilt or innocence. Although the novel does not recommend any solutions for this problem, it certainly demonstrates the futility of the justice system.

ENDEMIC VIOLENCE

Although Steve is a sensitive person with seemingly no inclination to violence, he is being tried for a violent crime, and he's placed in a violent prison to await his sentencing. Non-violent Steve is thus thrust into violent environments and scenarios, demonstrating the manner in which Harlem's violence absorbs even those who have no wish to participate in it. The novel's depiction of both the streets of Harlem and the prison suggests that violence in inner city communities in the 1990s is an epidemic that's seemingly unavoidable, even for well-meaning kids such as Steve.

Witness testimonies and Steve's memories of his neighborhood depict an environment where violence is commonplace. Fourteen-year-old Osvaldo admits on the stand to being a member of the violent Diablos gang, which only lets members join after they've fought at least one member of the gang and slashed a random stranger's face with a knife. This suggests that, in Harlem, kids are often pulled into violence at a very young age. It also that that endemic violence affects people who have no wish to be involved, such as the strangers who get their faces cut. Even for young kids not involved in gangs, violence seems unavoidable and a normal response to being hurt. When Steve and his friend Tony are twelve, for instance, Steve is practicing throwing rocks at a lamppost when he accidentally strikes a young woman. It doesn't seriously injure her, but her adult boyfriend comes over and beats up Tony, who he thinks threw the rock. After the man leaves, Tony tells Steve he wants to "get [...] an Uzi and blow his brains out." Steve's descriptions of Harlem are full of these casual threats and violent acts, suggesting that violence is common and unavoidable where Steve lives.

Steve's observations of his brief time in prison suggest that it is an even more violent place than Harlem. At night, he can hear other prisoners being beaten and gang-raped. Just before lunch one day he sees one prisoner stab another one in the eye and keep beating him, even after the man is on the ground screaming. Far from being a place where violent criminals are rehabilitated to become better citizens, Steve's experience of prison suggests that it actually makes men more fearful and violent than they once were. In his notes, Steve reflects, "Violence in [prison] is always happening or just about ready to happen. I think these guys like it—they want it to be normal because that's what they're used to dealing with." This hints at the cycle of violence that encompasses the prison and Harlem alike: violent communities make violence seem normal, which leads people to criminal acts for which they're imprisoned, and then they perpetuate violence in prison so that prison feels more like home, which means that they return home even *more*

violent than they were—and the cycle repeats.

Steve's fear and the passive manner in which he is implicated in Bobo and King's violent crime suggests that even good kids like Steve often get sucked into the cycles of epidemic violence that plagued Harlem in the 1990s. During his court case, Steve privately recounts how he once looked up to King because he seemed tough and untouchable (or safe from the violence around him), suggesting that Steve's own fear of violence caused him to admire a violent person. Although Steve never explicitly confirms his role in the robbery—and is acquitted of the murder charge—his inner narrative implies that he did check the store for cops before Bobo and King went in. However, his recollection of King's enlisting him in the scheme depicts Steve himself as a passive participant, inadvertently roped into the plan by the much older King. By Steve's recollection, he never wanted to take part in a robbery and only participated in the most passive way possible, simply walking into the store, looking around, and walking back out. Steve's fear of violence leads to his respect for King, who ultimately implicates him in a violent act. The fact that Steve is only a teenager and never himself commits nor desires to commit a violent action, yet still is drawn into Harlem's epidemic of violence, demonstrates how many young people in such inner-city neighborhoods are drawn into their community's violence simply by being present.

INJUSTICE

The story of Steve's arrest, imprisonment, and court case suggests that absurdity, malpractice, and general apathy are pervasive in the justice system. In part because he is a young black man, Steve feels rushed through the system by people who do not actually care whether he is guilty or innocent, but simply assume his guilt and want a maximum punishment. Steve's narrative ultimately depicts a broken justice system in which injustice is the most likely outcome of a case.

Most people involved in Steve's case seem uninterested and eager to get it over with, even though its outcome will have a monumental impact on Steve's life. One of the prison guards at the courtroom calls Steve's case a "motion case. They go through the motions; then they lock them up." When Detective Karyl and Detective Williams initially arrest Steve after King tells them Steve shot Mr. Nesbitt, Williams also remarks that the court will simply run Steve's case through the motions to resolve it quickly and save time and money. One of the court lawyers also accuses the detectives of skipping the investigation entirely, relying only on King's accusation. The general disregard for Steve's actual guilt or innocence—since even the detectives don't bother investigating—suggests that his trial is viewed only as a process to go through, not an execution of justice. During the closing arguments from all three lawyers, Steve notes in his screenplay that the courtroom is nearly empty, and even the courtroom guards, clerks, and administrators are bored, falling asleep, or distracted with other tasks like sorting mail. This description further suggests that although Steve's future hangs in the balance, for the people who work in the justice system, the trial seems like only a rote process that they have repeated countless times.

In addition, the court tries to dole out punishments that seem entirely disproportionate to the crimes they're supposed to punish. Although Steve's narrative never explicitly affirms that he was the lookout for Bobo and King, it implies that he did check the store for them before their botched robbery. However, Steve did nothing more than enter and exit the store, and he was long gone by the time the murder occurred; he never spoke to Bobo or King again. Despite the minimal connection that Steve has to the crime, the state prosecutor wants to see him given the maximum sentence for felony murder—which is death—regardless of the fact that he did nothing himself and that he is only a teenager. Steve sees this as entirely disproportionate. He asks himself, "What did I do? I walked into a drugstore to look for some mints, and then I walked out. What was wrong with that?" Even if prosecutor Petrocelli is right that Steve was involved in the crime and is technically legally culpable for the murder, throwing away a young kid's life—especially when he has no prior criminal history—seems entirely unjust. Petrocelli's insistence on harsh punishment suggests that the prosecution cares more about meting out as much retribution as possible than it does about real justice.

The sense that the justice system is overly punitive is also reinforced by Detective Karyl when he arrests Steve. Although Detective Williams (who is black) argues that they don't need Steve since he obviously isn't important to the case, Karyl (who is presumably white) automatically assumes that Steve is guilty without any proof, and states that he hopes Steve will get the death penalty, even though he's just a 16-year-old kid. Karyl obviously cares less about justice then about seeing a black kid receive the maximum punishment possible. While he is in prison, Steve overhears another inmate (who is white) explain that he attempted a robbery by holding his hand in his pocket (to insinuate that he had a weapon, when he actually did not have a weapon), and then peacefully turned himself in to the police when this failed. The courts charged him with "armed robbery" and "possession of a deadly weapon," even though he did *not* possess a deadly weapon. Nonetheless, he was sentenced as though he did. This suggests that the disproportionately severe punishment Steve faces is typical in the justice system.

Steve is ultimately exonerated after he claims that he was nowhere near the store on the day the shopkeeper was murdered. Although his inner narrative implies that this was a lie, the disproportionate punishment the state sought and the general disregard for his life that most members of the justice

system demonstrated seems to suggest that, in his case, declaring him innocent and allowing him to live his life as a free man is more just than convicting him for a murder in which he was barely involved. If the justice system is so unjust as to steal Steve's future over a crime he was only tangentially involved in, his exoneration even on a fraudulent claim of total innocence seems ultimately more just. The novel's sense that there is a binary choice between cruelly severe punishment and total exoneration (and not an option to punish Steve only for his actual wrongs) suggests that the justice system is fundamentally broken and does not function in the pursuit of justice.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MONSTER

When state prosecutor Sandra Petrocelli labels Steve (and alleged criminals like him) a "monster," Steve starts obsessing over the word, wondering whether it applies to him. This label comes to represent Steve's dehumanization during his criminal trial. For Steve, the label reflects the prejudice and rejection he feels from the prosecutor and the jury, who assume he is an evil, violent figure without actually trying to know him—thus dehumanizing him. As the trials goes on, Steve continues to internalize the image of himself as a monster, and even his own father struggles not to attribute it to him. After Mr. Harmon visits Steve and expresses his heartache and disappointment that this is what his son has made of his life, Steve realizes that their relationship is broken: instead of a father-son relationshisp, Mr. Harmon seems to wonder if it is a father-monster relationship. Even his attorney Kathy O'Brien, who makes the greatest attempts of any character to recognize and understand Steve as a human being, ultimately contributes to Steve's self-conception as a monster. Although O'Brien defends Steve in court and wins his freedom for him, when he tries to embrace her at the end of the novel, she stiffly refuses and walks away, signaling that—although she has defended his innocence—she does not truly believe he is innocent and does not think well of him, just as the jury and the prosecutor did not. Steve is left standing alone with his arms outstretched, while his image blurs until it forms the silhouette of a "strange beast, like a monster," suggesting that O'Brien's rejection confirmed Steve's image of himself as a monster in his own mind.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Monster* published in 1999.

Prologue Quotes

The best time to cry is at night, when the lights are out and someone is being beaten up and screaming for help. That way if you sniffle a little they won't hear you. If anybody knows that you are crying, they'll start talking about it and soon it'll be your turn to get beat up when the lights go out.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This is Steve Harmon's opening line, his introduction to his life in jail. By opening the novel this way, Myers immediately establishes that ruthless and disturbing violence (someone screaming for help suggests that it is one person methodically hurting another, rather than a reciprocal fight) and internal pain coexist in Steve's world. The manner in which Steve uses another person's pain to protect himself and cover the sound of his own pain reflects the manner in which people in Steve's world often inflict violence on others to protect themselves or cover for their own weakness. Additionally, Steve's fear that he could be beaten up just for crying and seeming weak establishes jail as an inherently dangerous place, especially for someone like Steve, who is only 16 and is thus likely the youngest person there. All of this together introduces Steve's account as one of violence, fear, and emotional pain.

Monday, July 6th Quotes

STENOGRAPHER: I hope this case lasts two weeks. I can sure use the money.

GUARD1: Six days—maybe seven. It's a motion case. They go through the motions; then they lock them up.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

As Steve waits to be led into the courtroom to begin his trial, the court stenographer and a guard talk about how long the case will last. This brief exchange reveals that even

employed individuals in the Harlem area financially struggle, which sheds some light on the desperation that Steve and the people in his neighborhood feel and the high levels of crime and violence that result. More importantly, however, the guard's admission that the court will simply run Steve through the motions and then lock him up suggests that even before his trial begins, his guilt is a foregone conclusion for many of the justice system's administrators. This suggests that many in the court are immediately prejudiced against people like Steve—young black kids—and that his trial, which will dictate the course of the rest of his life, is being treated more as a rote process than an actual investigation of his guilt or innocence. This suggests that Steve, at the mercy of the American justice system, suffers a great injustice from an institution that was meant to protect him.

❝ Most people in our community are decent, hardworking citizens who pursue their own interests legally and without infringing on the rights of others. But there are also monsters in our communities—people who are willing to steal and to kill, people who disregard the rights of others.

Related Characters: Sandra Petrocelli (speaker), James King, Steve Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In her opening remarks against Steve and James King, state prosecutor Sandra Petrocelli argues that there are effectively two types of people: hardworking law-abiding citizens, and criminal monsters. Petrocelli's labeling of Steve as a monster will define the way that he sees himself throughout the story, establishing the image of a monster as a symbolic reflection of Steve's guilt, shame, regret, and even self-contempt brought on by his involvement in the trial. Even though the novel ultimately implies that Steve is guilty of being involved in King's crime, Petrocelli's categorization of people is certainly dehumanizing towards Steve and ignores any sort of nuance or variation between people. Petrocelli's argument that someone is either a perfect upstanding citizen or a moral monster does not fit Steve's own character, since he is presented as a good and decent kid who made the mistake of being minimally involved with a simple robbery, which led to a felony murder. Additionally, Petrocelli and the jury are both described as being dismissive of Steve and assuming his guilt on account of him being young, black, and male, demonstrating that even if they are technically law-abiding, they are hateful and prejudiced in their own way.

❝ [Steve] is writing the word *Monster* over and over again. A white hand (O'BRIEN's) takes the pencil from his hand and crosses out all the *Monsters*.

Related Characters: Kathy O'Brien, Steve Harmon, Sandra Petrocelli

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

After Petrocelli calls Steve a monster, he starts scribbling it across his notebook over and over until O'Brien stops him. Steve's obsession with the idea of a monster and the manner in which he constantly labels himself with it suggest that he internalizes Petrocelli's dehumanizing label of him, demonstrating the tragic manner in which dehumanized people often take a sub-human identity onto themselves to agree with what the rest of the world tells them. The concept of a monster, in this case, works as a symbolic reflection of Steve's guilt and regret over his alleged participation in a crime, as well as the derision he feels from the people around him who now see him not as a teenage kid or a creative filmmaker, but only as a dangerous criminal. The monster thus reflects Steve's low view of himself, which has been established and reinforced by society's low view of him.

Wednesday, July 8 Quotes

❝ Miss O'Brien says that Petrocelli is using Bolden's testimony as part of a trail that will lead to me and James King. I think she is wrong. I think they are bringing out all of these people and letting them look terrible on the stand and sound terrible and then reminding the the jury that they don't look any different from me and King.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker), James King,

Wendell Bolden, Sandra Petrocelli, Kathy O'Brien

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In his notes, Steve reflects that Petrocelli's strategy seems more reliant on making Steve appear to be a terrible person in poor company, rather than building an actual case out of evidence against him. By adopting this strategy rather than building a straightforward, strictly evidence-based case, Petrocelli denies Steve the chance to be his own person and present himself as he truly is, rather than as one of many criminals paraded before the jury. This not only represents yet another injustice on the part of the justice system, but also another method of dehumanization, since it takes away Steve's personhood by eliminating any personality or individual character from the jury's sight. By lumping Steve in with a bunch of convicted criminals, Petrocelli makes Steve just one piece of a monolithic group, playing on the jury's potential bias and the presence of other career criminals to pointedly ignore the fact that Steve is an individual, a person, and a decent kid.

I want to look like a good person. I want to feel like I'm a good person because I believe I am. But being in here with these guys makes it hard to think about yourself being different. We look about the same, and though I'm younger than they are, it's hard not to notice that we are all pretty young.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

A preacher visits the inmates in jail offering to speak or pray one-on-one with anyone who wants to. Several people do, including Steve, but an inmate starts yelling and cursing that the other inmates shouldn't pretend to be holy; it's too late for them. This scene suggests that, although Steve has taken the symbolic identity of being a monster onto himself, some part of him still fights to see himself as a good man, and speaking to the preacher would perhaps reinforce that for him. The irate inmate's cursing and yelling about how they're all just criminals suggests that Steve's environment in jail actively reinforces the part of himself that views himself as a monster, which is then in tension with the part of himself that sees himself as innocent and with potential for the future. The fact that other inmates wanted to speak to the preacher as well suggests that Steve is not alone in his inner battle to not accept the demeaning label that society has pinned him with; other inmates are fighting to maintain and recognize their own humanity as well.

STEVE: I thought you're supposed to be innocent until proven guilty?

O'BRIEN: That's true, but in reality it depends on how the jury sees the case. If they see it as a contest between the defense and the prosecution as to who's lying, they'll vote for the prosecution. The prosecutor walks around looking very important. No one is accusing her of being a bad person. They're accusing you of being a monster.

Related Characters: Kathy O'Brien, Steve Harmon (speaker), Sandra Petrocelli

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien counsels Steve that more than just not seeming guilty, he'll have to proactively prove his own innocence, since the jury will naturally give the prosecutor the benefit of the doubt. Although in such a criminal trial, either the defense or the prosecution (or both) is effectively lying, O'Brien's statement that they have to tiptoe and only argue that Petrocelli made an honest mistake suggests that, in the American judicial system, despite its lofty ideals, the defendant is always at a significant disadvantage. The simple fact that an individual is charged with a crime suggests to the jury that they must obviously be guilty, since for those who are uneducated on the justice system's workings or who have not had experiences like Steve's, the prevailing assumption is that only guilty people are charged with crimes. Guilty or not, the overwhelming disadvantage that Steve faces, even in the absence of substantial evidence, simply because he is sitting in the defendant's chair suggests that such an individual is not truly innocent until proven guilty, but rather assumed to be guilty until

proven innocent.

Thursday, July 9th Quotes

Miss O'Brien looked at me—I didn't see her looking at me but I knew she was. She wanted to know who I was. Who was Steve Harmon? I wanted to open my shirt and tell her to look into my heart and see who I really was, who the real Steve Harmon was.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker), Alguinaldo Nesbitt, Kathy O'Brien

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

O'Brien lets Steve see photos of the crime scene with Mr. Nesbitt's dead body lying on the ground, in part to gauge his reaction to the violence herself. Outside of Steve's parents and his film teacher, O'Brien is the only character in the entire story who makes a sincere effort to know who Steve is and understand his character. Contrasting with the dehumanization that Steve experience both in court and in jail, O'Brien's sincere interest is a light in an otherwise dismal time for Steve, someone who helps him remember that he is Steve Harmon, a person and not a monster. This scene establishes the relationship between them and suggests that it is critically important to be known by someone, particularly by O'Brien, since she is responsible for defending his humanity in court, which will thus add to the pain Steve feels of her eventual rejection after their case is won.

King curled his lip and narrowed his eyes. What was he going to do, scare me? All of a sudden he looked funny. All the times I had looked at him and wanted to be tough like him, and now I saw him sitting in handcuffs and trying to scare me. How could he scare me? I go to bed every night terrified out of my mind.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker), James King

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

Before their hearing, King and Steve are together in the same holding cell and King tries to intimidate Steve out of testifying against him or cutting a plea deal with the judge. Steve's reflection on this interaction suggests several important things. First, it suggests that Steve used to look up to King as a tough and untouchable figure, presumably because that offered power and safety amidst the violence of their neighborhood. Second and more significant, Steve's recognition that King has no real power, especially not in jail, suggests that this experience has completely shifted Steve's paradigm about his life and the world. Although King may have once seemed powerful compared to Steve, now that King's power has been stripped by the judicial system, Steve is able to see that men like King who live violent and criminal lifestyles in order to feel a sense of power do not truly have any power against the government or the American system—they are as helpless as Steve is. Although the novel ends when Steve is exonerated, this particular realization suggests that he will not be compelled or even tempted to violence or crime ever again, since he now realizes that crime is only foolishness and the illusion of power.

Seeing my dad cry like that was just so terrible. What was going on between us, me being his son and him being my dad, is pushed down and something else is moving up in its place. It's like a man looking down to see his son and seeing a monster instead.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker), Mr. Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

Steve's father visits him in a private meeting room and expresses his grief that his son has gotten involved in such a mess—it was not what Mr. Harmon had dreamed his son's future would be. Steve's feels that their father-son relationship is broken, replaced by a relationship between a father and a monster. This seems in part a reflection of Steve's own internalized dehumanization. Since he is a subjective, unreliable narrator, it is possible that he is blowing events out of proportion, but Mr. Harmon is

genuinely crushed that his son is now in a criminal trial, and it is most likely that Steve's perception of their broken relationship is true. The loss Steve experiences in the way that his father perceives him suggests that not only has Steve internalized the label of monster and the dehumanization he's received from the court and the jury, but also that Mr. Harmon has internalized it. This demonstrates yet another tragic cost of such dehumanization, since not only is Steve's self-perception warped, but so is his family's perception of him, and his relationship with them suffers as a result.

Friday, July 10th Quotes

I remembered Miss O'Brien saying that it was her job to make me different in the eyes of the jury, different from Bobo and Osvaldo and King. It was me, I thought as I tried not to throw up, that had wanted to be tough like them.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker), James King, Osvaldo Cruz, Richard "Bobo" Evans, Kathy O'Brien

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

Steve reflects that O'Brien's main goal is to differentiate him from the other three alleged participants in the robbery, even though Steve had once wanted to be like them. There is an ironic parallel in the way that both the courtroom and Steve's neighborhood are both dominated by the need to be perceived in a certain way. In the courtroom, Steve's guilt or innocence seems entirely based on whether the jury perceives him as a good-natured kid wrongly implicated in a criminal act or as a criminal himself like all the rest. In Steve's neighborhood, his safety seems largely tied to whether or not the people around him perceive him as tough or dangerous, which is demonstrated by the manner in which Steve knows he can't touch Osvaldo, even though Osvaldo is younger and smaller and constantly insults him. In this manner, both the courtroom and Steve's neighborhood care more about how a person presents themselves they who they truly are, ironically depicting them as not entirely different environments after all.

Saturday, July 11th Quotes

He said he wasn't guilty because he hadn't taken anything out of the store. He didn't even have a gun, just had his hand in his pocket like he had a gun.

"What they charging you with?" somebody asked.

"Armed robbery, unlawful detention, possession of a deadly weapon, assault, and menacing."

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

While Steve is thinking about what it means to be truly guilty of a crime, he recalls a white guy who attempted a failed robbery and eventually called the police himself, after he trapped himself in the store, but was charged with several maximum penalties just the same. Although this person arguably did commit a crime by even attempting to rob the store—and locking the shopkeepers in a back room—it is undeniably absurd to charge him with assault and possession of a deadly weapon if the man was not carrying any weapon at all and didn't touch anyone. Just as Steve's potential punishment seems completely disproportionate to his alleged crime, this instance suggests that rather than a just punishment, the justice system and the people who operate it often simply try to punish people they deem to be criminals with as much force as they possibly can, perhaps out of some desire to see others suffer. Although Steve often recognizes that this happens disproportionately to black men, he explicitly notes that this particular man is white, suggesting that such injustice is not purely the result of racial prejudice.

There was a fight just before lunch and a guy was stabbed in the eye. The guy who was stabbed was screaming, but that didn't stop the other guy from hitting him more. Violence here is always happening or just about ready to happen. I think these guys like it—they want it to be normal because that's what they're used to dealing with.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Steve's notes about life in jail are interwoven with brief episodes of violence, such as this one, inserted between Steve's reflection on the meaning of guilt and a visit from his family. Steve's narration about violence seems both horrifying in its cruelty and yet mundane because of the small amount of thought that he gives to it, suggesting that witnessing such violence is becoming a common occurrence for him. His observation that inmates fight to make life seem normal, combined with the sheer amount of violence that Steve records, suggests that jail does nothing to rehabilitate inmates out of their violent behavior that landed them in jail in the first place. If anything, the confined environment of prison seems to amplify that violence. This suggests that prison tends to make individuals more criminal than less, which raises the question of why the courts should lock away individuals is in the first place if they do not become better citizens as a result, but instead emerge just as violent as they were when they entered, if not more so.

Sunday, July 12th Quotes

I think I finally understand why there are so many fights. In here all you have going for you is the little surface stuff, how people look at you and what they say. And if that's all you have, then you have to protect that. Maybe that's right.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 154-155

Explanation and Analysis

Steve speculates on why the inmates fight so often. His reflection is sympathetic and sensitive, demonstrating an ability to look past his own aversion to such violence and see the inmates not as monsters but as people with complex motivations and emotions, even if not admirable ones. Like in the courtroom, in jail the manner in which one is received by the people around them seems critically important, and if being regarded as weak threatens one's future safety, it's understandable that inmates would fight savagely to protect their tough reputation. At the same time, Steve's understanding of such violence could also be viewed as the first step towards participating in that violence himself, which would suggest that his time in jail is having the same effect on him as it does everyone else. In this light, Steve's need to be exonerated and released from prison is even more desperate for the sake of preserving his moral character.

Tuesday, July 14th Quotes

[O'Brien] said that Bobo's testimony hurt us a lot and that she had to find a way to separate me from King, but King's lawyer wanted to make sure the jury connected us because I looked like a pretty decent guy.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon (speaker), James King, Asa Briggs, Richard "Bobo" Evans, Kathy O'Brien

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

After Bobo's testimony, O'Brien is worried that Briggs will try to tie King and Steve's fates together to increase King's chances of being exonerated, even though he is clearly guilty. The manner in which Briggs is willing to risk Steve's fate, even though he is possibly innocent, in order to increase his meager chance of defending King, who is clearly guilty, suggests that Steve is little more than a pawn being shifted around between attorneys, each angling for their own strategic advantage that will provide the most benefit to their own careers. The fact that Steve's well-being as an individual person is not taken into account by anyone but O'Brien again suggests that the justice system dehumanizes its defendants, and the operators of the justice system view trials less as events that will have tremendous implications on individual lives, and more like a tactical contest between lawyers. In such a system, the odds of learning the truth of the actual crime seem very slim, and the process as a whole seems woefully unjust, since Steve is not being examined as a human being, but only as a pawn.

There are a lot of things you can do with film, but you don't have unlimited access to your audience. In other words, keep it simple. You tell the story; you don't look for the camera technician to tell the story for you. When you see a filmmaker getting too fancy, you can bet he's worried either about his story or about his ability to tell it.

Related Characters: Mr. Sawicki (speaker), James King, Asa Briggs, Steve Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

While Briggs makes his defense for James King with flimsy and convoluted arguments, Steve recalls a lesson Mr. Sawicki gave about clean storytelling and the mark of someone unconfident in the strength of their story or argument. Though not stated explicitly, Mr. Sawicki's lesson obviously applies to Briggs's defense of King—if Briggs truly believed that King was innocent, he would be able to make clean, straightforward cases for King's non-involvement in the crime. His meandering arguments strongly suggest that Briggs has no confidence in the arguments he is making. However, Sawicki's lesson also pertains to the style of the novel as a whole. Just as the film teacher argues for clean and simple storytelling, the author chooses to keep the story as minimal as possible, including neither the events before the trial nor the events after. In this way, the focus of the novel is impossible to miss, since there are no extraneous details to get lost in.

If you don't testify, you'll just make the tie between you and King stronger in the mind of the jury. I think you have to testify. And the way you spend the rest of your youth might well depend on how much the jury believes you.

Related Characters: Kathy O'Brien (speaker), James King, Asa Briggs, Steve Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

After Briggs makes his weak defense for James King, O'Brien tells Steve that he needs to testify in order to change the jury's opinion of who he is as a person, and his success will have life-affecting consequences. The amount of pressure suddenly placed on 16-year-old Steve is overwhelming, particularly since he is still just a kid. (This implicitly criticizes the practice of sentencing children as adults.) What is more significant, however, is the manner in which Steve's guilt or innocence is hinged only on the jury's perception of him as a person, not of whether he is truly guilty of felony murder—the novel has implied that he was involved in the robbery, but never confirms it. The fact that the difference between Steve winning his freedom or a death sentence is dependent entirely on changing the subjective—and likely prejudiced—opinions of a jury again highlights the point that criminal trials and court cases do not uncover the truth so much as they test a person's ability to manipulate evidence and convince other people of what the truth ought to be.

The prosecutor said I was lying. I wanted to ask her what she expected me to do when telling the truth was going to get me 10 years [...]. You get up on the witness stand and the prosecutor talks about looking for truth when they really mean they looking for a way to stick you under the jail.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220-222

Explanation and Analysis

As Steve prepares to testify, he recalls a conversation he overheard between two inmates about truth and lies. Steve tries to interject that truth is what is true, but one inmate argues that truth doesn't matter in the courtroom. The inmate's argument that even the prosecutor is not trying to establish the truth, but rather trying to convince the jury that the defendant is guilty enough to throw in prison, again suggests that criminal trials are a poor method for establishing the truth of an event, and instead operate as a contest to see who can lie, convince, and manipulate most effectively. Although the novel never recommends a better alternative for discovering the truth regarding a crime or prosecuting criminal acts—and perhaps no better alternative exists—it does argue that such a situation is unjust. This is particularly evident in Steve's case, where his guilt or innocence is based entirely on his ability to change the jury's mind and preconceived notions about his character.

O'BRIEN: One last question. Were you in any way involved with the crime that we are discussing here? To make it clear—were you, in any way, involved with the holdup and murder that occurred on the 22nd of December?

STEVE: No, I was not.

Related Characters: Steve Harmon, Kathy O'Brien (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224

Explanation and Analysis

After much coaching from O'Brien, and despite privately admitting to being in the drugstore on the day of the murder and at least knowing about the plan, Steve testifies under oath that he had absolutely no involvement in the murder or the robbery whatsoever. Seemingly like all the other witnesses on the stand, Steve lies to save himself, which on its own suggests that he is truly not so much better than the people he is trying to distance himself from, adding complexity to the reader's perception of everyone involved. Although it would be easy to morally condemn Steve's lie, it is worth considering that if he tells the truth and admits that he was very minimally involved in the robbery—walking into and out of the drugstore, and nothing more—which led to the murder, he would be punished with the same sentence as the person who pulled the trigger and actually committed the murder. Although this may be technically the law, a life sentence or a death penalty for such a minor action hardly seems like justice, and one could argue that Steve's lie and exoneration are a more just outcome than if he were punished to the fullest extent of the law.

> I think [Steve's] an outstanding young man. He is talented, bright, and compassionate. He's very much involved with depicting his neighborhood and environment in a positive manner.

Related Characters: Mr. Sawicki (speaker), Steve Harmon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 235

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Steve lies on the witness stand and claims he was not in the drugstore on the day of the murder, Mr. Sawicki testifies as a character witness for Steve, describing him as sensitive, intelligent, and a benefit to his community. Sawicki's testimony is important to re-establishing that, even though the reader knows that Steve just lied under oath, he is a good kid at heart caught in a terrible and compromising situation. The good that Mr. Sawicki sees in Steve, especially in the way that he wants to portray his notorious neighborhood in a more positive light, suggests that Steve has much to offer to his community and to the world. Locking Steve away in prison for the rest of his life, despite this being an isolated criminal act that could arguably be attributed to a lapse in judgment, thus seems a waste of such potential and a net loss for Steve's community. If the reader is willing to cede this argument, it follows then that the number of people in America unjustly incarcerated or stuck with disproportionate sentences is a great loss to their communities and their country as well.

Friday afternoon, July 17th Quotes

> [O'BRIEN's] lips tense; she is pensive. She gathers her papers and moves away as STEVE, arms still outstretched, turns toward the camera. His image is in black and white, and the grain is nearly broken. It looks like one of the pictures they use for psychological testing, or some strange beast, a monster.

Related Characters: Kathy O'Brien, Steve Harmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

In the last moment of the novel, after the jury declares Steve innocent, Steve reaches to hug O'Brien in gratitude and relief and she refuses him, leaving him feeling like a monster. Steve's ending is both happy and tragic. On the one hand, he is exonerated of a crime that he arguably did play a part in, which seems the best ending that he could have hoped for. On the other hand, O'Brien, the single person involved in his trial that recognized him as a human being and sought to understand who Steve Harmon truly is, rebuffs his attempt to hug her, which suggests that although she has successfully defended him and respects his rights as a human being, she does not herself believe in his innocence or admire him as a person. O'Brien's rejection of Steve's personhood, especially after she has made the effort to know him as well as she could, seems especially wounding, and the imagery of a monster that Steve uses to fade out his screenplay suggests that her rejection has made him feel just as monstrous and ashamed of himself for what he participated in. For Steve and his battle to recognize his own humanity, this ending is a tragedy.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Steve reflects that the most opportune time to cry is at night, while the lights are out, when the sound of someone "being beaten up and screaming for help" can mask the sound of one's own sniffling, so the others won't know that they're weak and try to beat them up too. Steve's room has a mirror in it, but when he sees himself it does not look like him. Nothing in jail seems real. One lives and sleeps with strangers who don't know each other but "still find reasons to hurt each other."

This opening scene immediately establishes both violence (through the beating) and dehumanization (through Steve's feeling that he no longer recognizes himself in the mirror) as primary themes. Steve's feeling that he does not look like himself suggests that he is beginning to dissociate, to lose his own concept of who he is.

The unreality of it all feels like a movie to Steve, but a movie with no real story, not like the prison movies he's seen before. It's a movie "about being alone when you're not really alone and being scared all the time." This gives Steve the idea of making a movie out of what he sees—not his actual life, just the feelings of prison. He will write it out in his notebook and set it up like he learned to do in school. He gives it the name that the prosecutor gave to him: **Monster**.

Steve's screenplay operates as both a cathartic device and a way to set up an unreliable narrator, since Steve will both record events as they happen and also envision how he wished they'd happened. This adds to the novel's shaky and uncertain exploration of truth and lies, beginning with the redefinition of himself from boy to monster.

MONDAY, JULY 6TH

Steve describes the events as a screenplay, notating the camera angles and transitions. The camera pans over a cell block in the Manhattan Detention Center. Black and Hispanic voices shout obscenities through the bars. 16-year-old Steve sits on his metal cot, head in his hands. He pulls a blanket over his head while a voiceover tells him that he can't hide from this; "the Detention Center is the real thing." The title card rolls: "**Monster**! The Story of My Miserable Life," with acting and directing credits.

Steve hiding his head under a blanket summons the image of a young child hiding under a blanket from nighttime monsters or the dark, reiterating the fact that, although Steve is in an adult jail and faces an adult charge, in many ways he is still just a child who's been thrust into chaotic swirl of events. The fact that most of the men in the prison are black and Hispanic suggests that the narrative will explore issues of race.

The film cuts to the Manhattan Detention Center, where Steve has no appetite for breakfast and one of his fellow inmates remarks that his trial begins today. A prison van drives Steve to the courthouse, where he meets his attorney Kathy O'Brien. O'Brien explains that both Steve and James King are on trial for felony murder, and that the prosecutor Sandra Petrocelli is talented and aggressive. She's trying to get Steve and King sentenced with the death penalty, so the jury will view life in prison as a merciful sentence. Steve needs to take the trial extremely seriously and communicate to the jury that he takes it seriously. Steve asks O'Brien if she thinks they'll win the case, but O'Brien answers that it depends on what Steve thinks of as winning.

Although the details of the murder have not been revealed yet, the idea that a prosecutor should aim for the death penalty for a 16-year-old kid seems absurd, suggesting that either Steve's actions were so heinous and revolting to have merited such antagonism, or more likely, there is a certain level of injustice within the legal system. Petrocelli already does not seem to be angling for a fair punishment, but rather for the maximum punishment she can muster, even if that means killing a 16-year-old child who has not even had the chance to live as an adult yet.

Steve and King sit handcuffed in the holding room with a guard and the stenographer. King is 23, but looks much older. The stenographer hopes that the case will run for two weeks because she needs the money, but the guard thinks the court will just run the case through the motions and close it out. The guard brings Steve into the courtroom and seats him next to O'Brien. Steve tells her he's scared, and that he's writing this all down in his notebook as a movie. The judge enters, a 60-year-old man who already looks bored. King and his attorney Asa Briggs are seated at the other defendant's table, and Petrocelli is ready to begin. The judge chats with the attorneys about their weekend before ordering that the jury be brought in.

The guard's assumption that the case will simply be put through the motions and the fact that the judge looks bored from the beginning suggest that many of the people involved in operating the trial are not seeing it as a significant moment in Steve's life with potentially life or death stakes, but rather handling it like a rote process they've all been through before. If the judge simply is handling it as a rote procedure, it seems unlikely that he will do a fair or adequate job.

The book briefly cuts to a flashback of Steve's high school film club. Mr. Sawicki, their film teacher, talks about how a film's ending needs to be unpredictable enough to keep the audience engaged. If they can see where a film is going too early, they'll make their mind up about what they think of it long before it's over.

Sawicki's note about unpredictability is a direct nod to the novel's own unreliable narrator and the author's reason for keeping the reader in the dark about both the verdict and Steve's innocence for as long as possible.

In the courtroom, the jury enters and Petrocelli makes her opening remarks. She says that they are here to dispense justice—although most people are honest citizens, some people—such as the defendants—are "**monsters**" who kill and steal. In December of last year, two men entered a Harlem drugstore intending to rob the place, and the state believes they were Richard "Bobo" Evans and James King. The shopkeeper, Alguinaldo Nesbitt, produced his legally-owned handgun, there was a struggle, and Mr. Nesbitt was shot dead. One young man was supposed to wait outside the store, and another, Steve, was supposed to enter the store ahead of time to check for police.

Petrocelli's labeling of Steve and King as "monsters" immediately dehumanizes them, denying them the right to be seen as human beings by the jury. The jury will not be prone to view such monsters as individual people with their own personality, interests, and loved ones, but simply as bad actors who threaten the well-being of the "proper" human beings, those who are not monsters.

On his notepad, Steve writes "**monster**" over and over again, until O'Brien takes the pencil from him and crosses each "monster" out and tells him to believe in himself so the jury can, too. Petrocelli closes her remarks by stating that both King and Steve are implicated in the murder of Mr. Nesbitt. Then O'Brien makes her opening remarks, stating that the law protects young men like Steve until they are proven guilty, and she will argue that Petrocelli's argument is deeply flawed and does not implicate Steve in any crime at all. Briggs makes his opening remarks, arguing that the witnesses Petrocelli will build her case on are deeply flawed and self-serving.

Steve's obsession with the word "monster" suggests that he has immediately internalized Petrocelli's condemnation of his character, demonstrating the manner in which a dehumanized person may tragically view themselves in that way, as well. However, Steve's immediate acceptance of himself as the monster also suggests that he is weighed down by guilt and regret, possibly over the death of Mr. Nesbitt

José Delgado, Mr. Nesbitt's employee, is the first to take the stand. Under Petrocelli's questioning, Delgado recounts that he left the store at 4:30 in the afternoon to go buy some dinner before finishing his night shift. When he returned, he found Mr. Nesbitt dead on the floor and five cartons of cigarettes missing. Petrocelli notes that Delgado is a competitive martial artist, well-known in his neighborhood. Briggs challenges Delgado's medical expertise to so quickly know that Nesbitt was dead, but O'Brien makes no follow-up.

The fact that the murderers entered the store only when Delgado was away suggests that the assailants feared his skill as a fighter and did not bring a weapon of their own, since if they had brought a weapon, the presence of a martial artist would be much less a threat. Briggs's weak challenge to Delgado's medical expertise suggests that he does not believe he has a strong case, and so he will nitpick the prosecutor's evidence to look for weaknesses.

Salvatore Zinzi takes the stand next. Questioned by Petrocelli—whom Briggs accuses of asking leading questions—Zinzi states that he is an inmate at Riker's Island, serving a sentence for buying stolen merchandise. Wendell Bolden, another inmate, told Zinzi that he'd bought stolen cigarettes from someone he knew was involved with a robbery. Zinzi then called a detective he knew with the information. When Briggs and O'Brien question Zinzi, he admits that he stole the information from Bolden, who wanted to strike a deal with the district attorney to get an early release. Zinzi used the stolen information to strike his own deal because he was afraid of being gang-raped in prison. Briggs points out that Zinzi's testimony is flagrantly self-serving and could be a lie.

Zinzi and Bolden, testifying with second- and third-hand information, both have an obvious self-interest, which strongly suggests that they cannot be objective or unbiased witnesses. This demonstrates not only the manner in which the trial swirls with lies, half-truths, and compromised witnesses (making it a poor tool for unveiling the truth of Mr. Nesbitt's murder), but also suggests that the trial may be based on potentially faulty information, which would lead to an utterly unjust outcome for Steve.

Steve flashes back to when he was 12 years old. He and his friend Tony are throwing rocks at a lamppost when he misses and strikes a young woman in the distance instead. The woman's boyfriend comes over to them and demands to know who threw the rock. Steve tells Tony to run, but the man punches Tony, knocking him to the ground. The young woman pulls her boyfriend away, and after they leave Tony angrily says, "I'll get me an Uzi and blow his brains out."

Steve's memory of Tony being beaten up as a young child is framed as an everyday occurrence, suggesting that such senseless and random violence (even towards children) is commonplace in Harlem. Likewise, Tony's reaction suggests that even young people eventually internalize that violence and desire to use it themselves

TUESDAY, JULY 7TH

In his notes, Steve writes about how much he hates jail. The movie helps him to not go crazy, but it's hard to think about. All the other inmates talk about is hurting each other. They'll beat someone up for looking at them, for making a weird noise, for anything. One of them has a makeshift knife: "a blade glued onto a toothbrush handle." Steve hates jail more than anything.

Steve's observation about the unnecessary violence of jail, directly following the unnecessary violence inflicted against Tony, suggests that jail does not rehabilitate men out of their violent demeanors, but amplifies violence by placing many violent and frightened people within a contained environment.

The screenplay resumes in the courtroom. Bolden is on the stand, questioned by Petrocelli. Bolden testifies that he's been arrested in the past for breaking and entering, assault, and drug dealing. Before he'd been arrested for the assault charge, which was eventually dropped, Bolden had bought cigarettes from Bobo Evans, who told him that they'd come from a robbery. Bolden knew someone was killed in that robbery, and intended to call up a detective he knew to tell him about it until Zinzi did so first.

Bobo's admission that he'd gotten the cigarettes from a robbery (which was apparently known to have gone bad and resulted in a murder) suggests that he is not a terribly clever figure. However, the fact that Bolden only decided to report his knowledge to the police after he was arrested suggests that he has no concern for justice or the truth, only for personal benefit and reducing his sentence.

The screenplay cuts briefly to a trash-filled Harlem street. A woman, a man, King, and Steve are sitting on the step. King complains about not having money, and says that, with the right crew, he could get paid. The woman and the man discuss whether it is better to rob banks, which have more money, or immigrants, who are unlikely to report the theft. King asks Steve what he thinks of all this, but Steve has no answer.

Once again, the casual discussion of robbery and violence suggests that such violence and criminality are common occurrences in Steve's Harlem neighborhood. In light of this, it is no surprise that Steve is somehow drawn into or implicated in such a crime, even if he himself does not behave in such a manner.

Back in the courtroom, Briggs questions Bolden, pointing out that it seems strange that Bobo Evans would just admit to being part of a botched robbery that ended in a murder. He also points out that Bolden appears to simply have been trying to avoid a heavy jail sentence. Bolden claims he was only trying to be a good citizen, but Briggs angrily finds this absurd, given all of his past arrests. The judge decides that things are getting too heated and decides they will adjourn until tomorrow so that he can get some paperwork done.

Again, Briggs's accusation suggests that Bolden's testimony, being obviously self-serving and only made for a reward, is thus subjective and completely unreliable. This again points to the fact that, in a trial such as this, most participants have some sort of outcome they are aiming for beyond just uncovering the truth, whether it be personal freedom, reward, or career victory.

The screenplay cuts to the detention center that evening. The lights are out and Steve lies in his cot, listening to two men "methodically" beating a third. After some time, the sounds of punching become the sounds of a gang-rape, and Steve closes his eyes and the scene fades, giving way to a flashback of Steve sitting at home with his younger brother Jerry. Jerry says he wishes Steve were Batman so he could be Robin. Steve wishes that, too, so he could fight back whenever someone messed with him.

The sounds that Steve hears as he tries to sleep depict jail as a nightmarish place to be, especially for a young kid like Steve. It's worth noting that Steve tells Jerry he'd like to be a superhero so he could protect himself, not so that he could fight bad guys or save people, which suggests that in his violent neighborhood, Steve often feels powerless and under threat.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 8

In his notes, Steve writes that the guards take inmates' shoelaces and belts away so that they can't kill themselves, since "making you live is part of the punishment." He feels like he has no part to play in his court case; it is only something that is happening to him, rather than something he participates in. O'Brien says that Petrocelli is bringing out her witnesses to build a connection between Steve and King, but Steve thinks that Petrocelli is just showcasing all these terrible people and "reminding the jury that they don't look any different from me and King." That's why Steve likes the scene he wrote with himself and Jerry—it makes him seem a real human being. Steve's cellmate likes the screenplay and says he'll tattoo "monster" on his forehead when he gets out. Steve feels like he already has that tattoo.

It is ironic that Steve is not allowed to kill himself in jail, even though Petrocelli wants to give him a death sentence, highlighting the absurdity of the justice system. Steve's desire to portray himself as a real person—a human being—suggests that he feels dehumanized by Petrocelli's remarks and her strategy of lumping Steve in with all sorts of career criminals. Steve's sense of dehumanization is confirmed by his feeling that he has "monster" tattooed across his forehead, suggesting that it has become his new identity.

A preacher comes into the recreation room and some of the inmates want to talk to him, but one of them starts swearing and shouting that it's too late for any of them to convince themselves they're good people. Steve agrees, in a way—he wants to feel like a good person, to convince himself that he is. Steve notices that although he's the youngest, every man in the jail is fairly young. He understands why O'Brien is trying to make the jury see Steve as a real person. That night he'd had a dream that he was in the courtroom, "trying to ask questions" but nobody could hear his voice.

Steve's hope that he can convince himself that he is a good person demonstrates the manner in which the trial and his time in jail are changing his conception of himself, while also hinting that he has something to feel guilty or ashamed of. Steve's dream of being unheard suggests that he feels powerless in the courtroom, having no say in what his own fate will be, since it is now being decided by strangers.

The screenplay resumes in the courthouse. Steve and King are handcuffed to the bench. The attorneys, the judge, and one of the guards stands around the bench, chatting about termites and one of the detectives' hemorrhoid problems, which is preventing him from testifying.

Again, the courtroom officials' casual conversation suggests that they only view the proceeding as a rote process they've performed hundreds of times, not a life-and-death decision over an individual's fate.

Petrocelli questions Detective Karyl on the stand, who investigated Mr. Nesbitt's murder. He describes the murder scene as gruesome. Aside from the opened cash register, he didn't find any clues at the crime scene. He questioned a few people he thought might know something until Zinzi called him and told him about Bolden, who told him about King and Bobo Evans. The screenplay cuts to a precinct where Detective Karyl, who is white, and his black partner Detective Williams question Steve, having just arrested him. King told them that Steve fired the gun. Williams insists that they don't need Steve for the case, but Karyl assumes Steve is guilty and says he hopes the they give Steve the death penalty. Steve envisions himself strapped to a table while a man prepares to give him a lethal injection.

Detective Karyl's claim that he followed due process during his investigation and didn't cut corners conflicts with Steve's memory of Karyl's conduct during his arrest. Karyl's automatic assumption of Steve's guilt and stated hope that they execute him displays gross dehumanization and injustice, suggesting that such operators of the justice system only want to inflict a maximum punishment rather than pursue justice or the truth. It's implied that Karyl is white, which suggests that Karyl's unjust treatment of Steve is at least partially motivated by racial prejudice.

In the courtroom, Briggs presses Karyl on why they couldn't find any fingerprints or actual clues. Karyl insists that they did their work carefully, but the technicians couldn't find anything. Briggs accuses Karyl of skipping the investigation altogether and just finding someone in prison who'd testify for him. Cut to Steve's jail cell: Steve says he's innocent and he wants to live, but an older prisoner says it doesn't matter much—somebody died, so somebody else will go to jail.

Although Briggs himself is not an objective party either, his accusation that Karyl did not do his job properly seems to hold up and suggests that the justice system is committing a great injustice by relying on such people. If the investigators who testify did not even perform a full investigation, Steve's case should rightfully be thrown out.

Steve meets privately with O'Brien in a waiting room. O'Brien says the court case isn't going well, since nothing is making Steve look particularly innocent. Steve remarks that he ought to be innocent until proven guilty, but O'Brien says that although that should be the case, since he's a young black male, half the jury automatically assumes he's guilty of anything. The prosecutor will get the benefit of the doubt, and Steve will automatically be assumed to be a monster. O'Brien's role is to argue that the prosecutor simply made a mistake.

O'Brien's admission that the jury will automatically assume Steve's guilt because he is a black male suggests that the American ideals of liberty and justice for all are thwarted by racial prejudice and the malpractice apparently common within the justice system. In this way, the justice system seems to inflict injustice on young men such as Steve as often as not.

O'Brien mentions that, later in the day, Osvaldo Cruz will testify. The screenplay cuts to a Harlem street corner, where Steve sits with 14-year-old Osvaldo and another kid. Osvaldo repeatedly insults Steve, and Steve weakly says he could beat Osvaldo up, but they all know that Osvaldo is backed by his gang the Diablos, and they'd thrash Steve if he did. Back in the courtroom, Osvaldo "timidly" testifies that Bobo threatened to hurt him unless he helped with the robbery and that he was terrified of Bobo, who has a violent reputation. Petrocelli keeps asking leading questions, which both the judge and Briggs criticize. Osvaldo continues that he was afraid of Steve and King, as well. When Briggs and Petrocelli start to become more hostile towards each other, the judge declares that they'll adjourn for the day.

Once again, Steve's memories of Osvaldo and his character completely contradict the image of himself that Osvaldo tries to present on the stand, suggesting that he is lying to avoid his own sentencing in the murder. This demonstrates yet again the lies and false statements used to advance the court case. Petrocelli's constant leading questions—which is an illegal practice in a trial—suggests that she is trying to manipulate witness testimonies and that she is more interested in winning the case than in operating by fair rules or uncovering the truth of Mr. Nesbitt's death.

THURSDAY, JULY 9TH

One of the inmates in the detention center will get his verdict this morning for robbing a check-cashing center and shooting the guard. He'd just been desperate for money; he'd meant to pay it back someday. The man cries with anxiety, and Steve wants to cry with him. O'Brien told him that if the judge sentences him to 25 years, he'll have to serve at least 21 and three months, which seems unimaginable. Steve thinks about his mom fretting over him, and about Mr. Nesbitt and the crime scene photos O'Brien showed him. O'Brien tried to hide it, but Steve knew she was watching him to see how he'd react, to see who Steve Harmon truly is; "I wanted to open my shirt and tell her to look into my heart to see who I really was."

Although the man Steve wants to cry with is guilty of taking a life, which is certainly a terrible criminal act, his claim that it was only done out of desperation nods to the fact that poverty and desperation often motivate such crimes; they are not done purely out of malicious intent or an evil desire to hurt or rob someone else. O'Brien's desire to see how Steve will react to the photos makes her the only person in the story thus far that recognizes Steve as a human being and desires to understand him as a person.

In his heart, Steve knows he's a good person. Before he'd left the courthouse yesterday he'd asked O'Brien about her own life, and she told him about her university education and her law career, though she didn't sound very interested by it. It sounded like a good life to Steve, though. In the holding pen, where Steve waits to be brought into the courtroom, the guards talk about their own lives: one about how much his kids' dental work costs him, the others about how the Yankees are playing.

Steve returns O'Brien's legitimate interest in his life with a legitimate interest in hers, as well, demonstrating the manner in which a mutual recognition of each other's humanity can build trust and connection. The guards' conversations about their own lives suggests that, on some level, every person simply wants to be known and understood, to share themselves with others.

While Steve is waiting, someone brings King in and handcuffs him to the bench next to Steve. King asks Steve if Steve is trying to cut a deal, and he sneers, trying to scare Steve. Steve thinks he looks like a fool. He'd once looked up to King, wishing he were tough and untouchable like him, but now after being terrified out of his wits every night in jail, King isn't scary anymore. He can't do anything to Steve here. When an officer brings them into the courtroom, Steve sees that a middle school class is sitting in the observation area, there to see a trial on a school trip. They are afraid to make eye contact with Steve, and Steve can imagine that he is in their place, "looking at the back of the prisoner."

Although King once seemed like a tough and imposing figure, even admirable in a way for his strength, the fact that he now appears foolish to Steve suggests that jail has fundamentally changed Steve's perspective—people like King who once appeared powerful within the limited realm of Harlem now appear to be powerless before the government and the justice system, and the crime and violence people like King practice to earn their reputation have no actual function at all.


Back to the screenplay: A pretty juror sits, smiling. Steve smiles at her and she looks away and stops smiling. He puts his head down on the table, and when O'Brien tells him to sit up, there are tears in his eyes.

The juror's rejection of Steve signals that she sees him not as just a 16-year-old kid, but a convict, a monster, demonstrating the stigma and dehumanization associated with being a criminal defendant.

Petrocelli continues questioning Osvaldo, who claims he participated in the robbery (his job was to stop anyone who came out of the store from chasing King and Bobo) simply because he was scared of Bobo. The government is cutting him a deal in exchange for his testimony. Briggs takes his turn, insinuating that Osvaldo is lying under oath, testifying so the district attorney will keep him out of jail. O'Brien starts questioning Osvaldo, pointing out that he was arrested again for beating up his girlfriend. When O'Brien asks if Osvaldo is in a gang, he lies and says he isn't until O'Brien forces him to acknowledge that he's in the Diablos, and that to join up he had to fight another Diablo and then slash a stranger's face with a knife. O'Brien points out that it seems unlikely that Osvaldo was afraid of Bobo.

Once again, despite the image of himself that Osvaldo tries to project, which serves the prosecution's case by establishing him as a legitimate and sympathetic witness, Briggs and O'Brien both easily reveal him as a selfish individual with a history of committing violence against strangers, making him far more of a criminal figure than Steve. This again demonstrates the manner in which the courtroom does less to seek out the actual truth than it does to test whose side can lie the most convincingly, which naturally results in an unjust system.



In a visiting room, Steve's father Mr. Harmon visits him. Mr. Harmon says O'Brien isn't sounding very positive about the case so far, but it will be good when Steve has the chance to tell his own side of things. Mr. Harmon tells Steve this was never what he thought Steve's path would be. When Steve was a baby, Mr. Harmon dreamed he'd go to university like his father did and play football, not wind up in jail. As Mr. Harmon leaves, he reaches to touch Steve's hand but a guard blocks the contact. As the scene fades, Steve hears his father sobbing.

Mr. Harmon's pain at his son's trial and possible incarceration suggests that Steve's involvement in the case does not only hurt Steve, but his family as well, since it hurts them to see him suffer and disappoints the expectations and hopes that his father had for Steve's life. The guard blocking human contact between father and son represents another form of dehumanization, denying Steve the ability to be comforted by his dad.

In his notes, Steve writes that he's never seen his father cry before. Steve doesn't even know what he's guilty of—all he did was walk into the drugstore and back out of it. He didn't steal anything; he didn't touch Nesbitt. But his whole family feels the pain of it, and Steve feels like his relationship with his dad has broken. He thinks his dad sees him as a **monster** now too, just like the jury.

Steve's private admission that he walked into the drugstore and out of it confirms that he was at the drugstore on the day of the murder, which is important to note, since he will later deny it during his defense. Mr. Harmon's viewing of his son as a monster suggests that not only does Steve internalize the prosecution's view of him, but his father does as well.

Cut to Steve's neighborhood. Two women stand together, talking about a recent murder in the drugstore. Steve is within earshot, playing basketball, but as they talk he takes off running. Then Steve is at home, watching a newscaster on the TV report the murder. The newscaster asks a local resident if he is "shocked" by it, and the man says it's a bad thing, but it's nothing new; a little girl was killed sitting on her porch a couple months ago. Steve watches in shock, his mouth open, but Jerry thinks nothing of it and changes the channel.

Both Jerry and the resident interviewed on TV are apparently indifferent to a local murder, which suggests that such violence is tragically common in Steve's neighborhood. Meanwhile, Steve's shocked and fearful reaction to the news, contrasting with Jerry's indifference, suggests that he does have some sort of personal connection with the murder.

Two weeks later, Steve's mother Mrs. Harmon tells him that they caught the two murderers from the drugstore. Steve watches on the news as a newscaster announces Bobo and King's arrest, showing footage of them being handcuffed. Mayor Rudy Giuliani appears in a press conference, talking about fighting crime in all parts of the city, not just the white parts. That evening, Detectives Williams and Karyl arrive and announce that they're taking Steve to the precinct for questioning. Mrs. Harmon panics as they handcuff her son, but Steve tries to reassure her it's all "routine." After they leave, Mrs. Harmon runs out into the street, but realizes that she doesn't even know where the police took Steve.

The detectives even dehumanize Mrs. Harmon when they take Steve away, not paying heed to her concern as a mother or respecting her need to know what is happening to her son, who is still just a child. The image of Mrs. Harmon frantically running out in the street to follow after her son but not knowing where he's been taken not only demonstrates her love for Steve, but also reflects the way that Steve is removed from her care and protection when he's thrown in jail.

FRIDAY, JULY 10TH

In his notes, Steve records that O'Brien is angry today because Petrocelli is intentionally manipulating the jury, showing them the grisly photos of the crime scene again and then sending them home so they'll stew on the photos all weekend. Steve thinks about the photos a lot too, and they scare him. He wonders what it was like for Mr. Nesbitt, lying there, knowing that he was dying. Steve wonders if there was a lot of pain. He thinks about how stupid it was that he once wanted to be tough like King, Bobo, and Osvaldo. In the detention center, while Steve is assigned to mop a hall with four other inmates, he realizes that all five of them must all look exactly the same, and the realization makes him want to throw up.

Petrocelli's manipulation of the jury again suggests that she cares more about winning the case and tallying another victory for her career than she cares about offering King and Steve a fair trial. Steve's pain and sadness at thinking of Mr. Nesbitt dying alone in the drugstore suggests that he has far more compassion and empathy than Bobo, King, or Osvaldo, and is not a naturally violent person. Lastly, Steve's realization and horror that the five inmates must look identical suggests that his identity as an inmate seems to be wiping away his own personhood.

Back in the screenplay, four witnesses testify on the stand while Petrocelli questions them. One testifies that the gun that killed Mr. Nesbitt legally belonged to Nesbitt. Detective Williams describes his entrance onto the scene, how he saw the body and the gun on the floor and the cash missing from the till, how they drew the chalk outline around the body and handed it off to the medical examiners. Williams and Karyl eventually got a call from Zinzi in Riker's Island, which led them to Bobo Evans.

The fact that it was Mr. Nesbitt's gun that killed him suggests that his assailants were unarmed, since they would have likely used their own weapons instead, which further suggests that they did not have any intention of actually murdering Mr. Nesbitt. This establishes the murder as a violent accident rather than a premeditated act.

The medical examiner testifies that the bullet struck Mr. Nesbitt from his left side and tore through his lungs, causing heavy internal bleeding. As his lungs filled with bled, Nesbitt drowned in his own blood. Steve gasps, while King looks bored.

Steve's horror, which suggests empathy, contrasts with King's utter indifference to Mr. Nesbitt's suffering. This suggests that Steve is nothing like the other men charged, even though Petrocelli wants the jury to see them as all the same.

SATURDAY, JULY 11TH

In his notes, Steve remembers that O'Brien warned him not write anything in his notebook that he wouldn't want the prosecutor to see. When Steve asked her what she'll do to enjoy the weekend, she smiled at him, which meant a tremendous amount to Steve. But Steve knows that O'Brien thinks he's guilty. He can feel it. When Steve thinks about spending 20 or 25 years in prison, he can't take it; that seems like his entire life. It consumes his thoughts. He still fears "being hit or raped" too. All that the inmates talk about is "sex or hurting somebody or what they're in for." All Steve did was enter a drugstore, look at the mints, and exit again, but he certainly didn't kill Nesbitt.

The fact that a simple smile means so much to Steve suggests that he has been so dehumanized, so bereft of human kindness or affection, that even the smallest gesture feels substantial. Although Steve seems to suffer from this too, his observation that all the inmates think about is sex, violence, or their court case suggests that the intensity and confined atmosphere of prison strips away the inmates' former personalities, interests, relationships, and so on, making them into mere shells of the people they once were, thus dehumanizing them.

Steve wonders what it means to be guilty. Guys in prison often talk about their court cases and how they should argue them. A white inmate tried to stick up a jewelry store and locked the shopkeepers in a back room. However, the store had a security lock on the door, and after he couldn't figure out how to get out for two hours, he called the cops himself. He'd had his hand in his pocket like he might've had a gun, but he didn't, and he didn't touch anyone. They charged him with "armed robbery, unlawful detention, possession of a deadly weapon, assault, and menacing," but he feels like he's not guilty. Steve realizes that in 20 years he'll be 36, but he wonders if he'd kill himself before then.

Ernie's conviction and sentencing seem completely disproportionate to his actual crime, and thus suggest that the justice system is often less concerned with actual justice than simply dispensing the maximum punishment possibly to people it considers criminal. Although Steve's narrative is often cognitive of race and racial prejudice, the fact that Ernie is white and still suffers injustice from the justice system suggests that such injustice is not exclusively the result of racial bias.

Mrs. Harmon visits Steve in jail. She tries to explain why she hasn't visited him sooner, but when he sees the tears running down her face, he understands—it's just to painful for her to see him in here. The crowded visiting room is so loud they can barely hear each other. Steve asks after Jerry and Mrs. Harmon says he's doing fine; she'll bring him by so Steve can see him through the window tomorrow. She gives Steve a Bible and reads some verses from it to him, but it's not a great comfort. Mrs. Harmon forces herself to smile for her son and touches his hand briefly. She assures him that she knows he's innocent, no matter what anyone says. As Steve lies on his cot that night, he wonders if it's true.

Once again, Mrs. Harmon's apparent pain at seeing her son in prison suggests that the consequences of Steve's involvement with King affect not only him, but his family as well, and they distort his relationship with his mother much like his relationship with his father. Once again, Steve's questioning of his own innocence, even though he'll defend it in court, implies that he is guilty or at least connected to Mr. Nesbitt's death in some way.

Through the screenplay, Steve recalls sitting with King in a park. King tells Steve he's found a place to rob, that Bobo's got it set up. Steve interacts with King, but never expresses any interest in the robbery. King tells them they just need someone to check the store for them, make sure there are no police in there. King asks if Steve's in for the plan, and his voice repeats the question as the scene fades to black.

Although this memory implies that Steve did participate, it is worth noting that Steve occupies an almost entirely passive role throughout, demonstrating the manner in which even well-meaning young kids like Steve may be swept up in the violence and criminality of their environment.

SUNDAY, JULY 12TH

Steve eats breakfast on Sunday morning and then attends the church service until a bad fight breaks out and the minister calls the guards. The guards put all the inmates on lock-down until visitations start in the afternoon, and in Steve's cell two more guys nearly wind up in a fight over nothing. Steve realizes that these guys fight so much to defend their reputation because in jail, it's all they have. After lockdown ends, Steve and other inmates sit in the recreation area. Someone watches a baseball game on the TV, but it looks to Steve like people from another world. Everything from his old life seems another world—his teachers, his friends, everything.

Steve's reflection that inmates fight to uphold their own reputation, which is their only possession, again suggests that jail and prison do not rehabilitate men from their former violence but instead make them more violent within such a confined and tense space. Additionally, Steve's feeling that the world is unreal suggests that he is further disassociating from his own self, not experiencing life as Steve Harmon, but as a passive observer trapped in an unjust system.

Through the window, Steve can see Jerry and his parents crossing the street. Jerry looks tiny amidst the world. Steve waves to him, even though he knows Jerry can't see him. He wishes he could tell him that he loves him and that he's struggling in jail. Steve's parents visit one at a time and act cheerful for him, though Steve senses that Mrs. Harmon is "mourning me as if I were dead." After they leave, there is too much time left in the day. Steve looks over his movie and wishes that this life were only a movie. O'Brien told him that Monday is important, the day that the prosecution will use its key witnesses.

Steve's recognition that Jerry looks tiny compared to the wide world around him parallels his reflection that King looks foolish and powerless against the weight of the justice system, both of which suggest that Steve's time in jail is forcibly changing and widening his perspective beyond the small confines of his neighborhood. While this is beneficial in some ways, it also seems to increase Steve's sense of powerlessness.

MONDAY, JULY 13TH

Steve resumes his screenplay. In the courthouse, O'Brien and Petrocelli chat briefly with the judge before Petrocelli calls Lorelle Henry to the stage, a 58-year-old school librarian. Petrocelli questions Henry, who testifies that she was in the drugstore when King, whom she identifies, and another man entered the store and started arguing with Mr. Nesbitt and grabbed him by the collar. Henry left as quickly as she could, seeing that there was about to be violence.

The fact that King grabbed Mr. Nesbitt by the collar and started arguing with him again suggests that the murder was not a premeditated action but the accidental result of a struggle, which thus suggests that if Steve is guilty by association, it was never his intention to take part in something that would cost a man his life.

After Petrocelli is through, Briggs questions Henry, stating that she was given around 20 photographs of different people from which to identify King. Henry admits that at first she had trouble identifying him; he looks different in person than he did in the photographs, but now she feels confident that it's him. She also admits that she had "trouble testifying against a black man," but now feels she is doing the right thing. Henry later identified King in a lineup as well, but Briggs points out that there were only six people in that lineup. Briggs steps down, and O'Brien has no further questions.

Briggs's challenge to Henry's memory and ability to identify King raises the possibility that King has been misidentified, even though Henry seems to be a key witness. This again suggests the possibility of malpractice on the part of the justice system. Henry's hesitation to aid in the prosecution of a black man suggests that she recognizes that the justice system often treats black men unjustly, issuing prejudiced verdicts.

Petrocelli brings Bobo Evans in as a witness. Bobo is large, unkempt, and wearing a wrinkled orange jumpsuit. Briggs calls a sidebar to ask why Bobo wasn't given a suit to wear, since his appearance will prejudice the jury against him, but Petrocelli says that they offered Bobo a suit and he refused to put it on. The case resumes and Petrocelli questions Bobo on the stand. Bobo testifies that he's currently in prison for selling drugs, but he's been arrested numerous times before for thefts and even manslaughter. Bobo states that he's known King his whole life and met Steve just before the robbery took place.

Bobo's purposefully unkempt appearance and long criminal history suggests not only that he is violent and abrasive—a starkly different sort of individual than Steve, despite Petrocelli's desire to lump them all together—but also suggests that his testimony will be unreliable, since he presents himself as a fundamentally untrustworthy person.

Bobo continues to testify that he and King robbed the drugstore. He claims that first, Steve went into to see if there were cops while he and King waited outside. When Steve came out and gave the signal, King smoked a little bit of meth and they went inside. Mr. Nesbitt pulled a gun from behind the counter and King tried to wrestle it from him, and soon Bobo heard a gunshot and saw Nesbitt fall down. They took the cash and some cigarettes and left the drugstore, going to a fast-food place to buy some food.

Bobo's testimony that after they accidentally murdered Mr. Nesbitt, they simply went to a restaurant to buy a meal suggests that both men are utterly indifferent to Mr. Nesbitt's death at their own hands—they both lack any empathy whatsoever or remorse for their crime. This again characterizes them as habitually violent people, completely different from Steve.

Bobo says they were eventually supposed to split the money with Osvaldo and Steve. Petrocelli asks what signal Steve gave when he came out of the store, but Bobo only says that Steve didn't say anything at all, so he and King assumed they were good to go. Bobo believes the shooting was accidental. The police came for Bobo after he sold cigarettes to Bolden who told someone else who ratted them out, although Bobo was already under arrest for trying to sell drugs to an undercover cop. The state promised Bobo a reduced sentence for his part in the murder if he testified against his accomplices. Petrocelli takes her seat.

The fact that Bobo, who admits to participating directly in the murder and has a long criminal history, is being offered a reduced sentence while Petrocelli is seeking the worst punishment possible for Steve again suggests that the justice system's punishments are often wholly disproportionate to a person's alleged crime, and are therefore unjust. Even if Bobo's testimony is true, Steve's involvement in the crime is once again passive and minimal.

Briggs questions Bobo, pointing out that so far, he's the only person who has admitted to being in the drugstore when a felony murder occurred. Briggs insinuates that Bobo would need someone else to pin the murder on if he ever wanted to be a free man again, and notes that Bobo is obviously unaffected by killing someone if he could go buy himself a meal directly after. Bobo still claims that King shot Nesbitt, most likely because he was high, and then tells Briggs that he's done talking to him. Briggs sits.

Briggs's challenging of Bobo's testimony and unreliable character again highlights the manner in which court cases rely on subjective witnesses who are potentially lying and have motivation to lie. Although the novel never posits a better method, it does suggest that under such conditions, a criminal trial is a poor tool for revealing the truth of a situation.

O'Brien begins her questioning. When pressed, Bobo admits that he never talked to Steve himself and doesn't know what signal Steve was supposed to give, nor did he ever see any particular signal. Although Osvaldo testified that he participated in the robbery because Bobo threatened him, Bobo reports that Osvaldo wanted to be in on it; Bobo would never work with someone who didn't want to be there. Bobo testifies that he didn't know there was a woman in the store, and that they didn't split the money up as planned after he and King heard Nesbitt died. O'Brien sits.

Again, Bobo's connection to Steve and Steve's involvement in the crime seem minimal at best, which thus makes it absurd that the prosecution should try to pin Steve (who at most walked into and out of the store) with a more severe sentence than Bobo (who admits to participating in the murder himself). This once again highlights the disproportionate sentencing and apparent injustice propagated by the justice system.

Petrocelli stands to confirm that Bobo saw Steve come out of the drugstore immediately before the robbery. In response, O'Brien confirms that Bobo himself never spoke to Steve or saw him again, nor does he know that King ever contacted Steve again. Petrocelli announces, "The people rest," which Steve envisions through his screenplay as a cartoon city suddenly falling asleep. The judge announces they'll adjourn for the day and the defense can make its case in the morning. Mrs. Harmon talks to O'Brien and a guard stands next to Steve as the jury files out.

Steve's envisioning of a cartoon city not only reminds the reader that he is still just a kid, but also nods to the subjective nature of the narration and all of the events and testimonies taking place. In this way, Steve's potentially unreliable narration reflects the subjectivity and unreliability of the criminal testimonies being used to prosecute him.

TUESDAY, JULY 14TH

In his notes, Steve recounts that O'Brien is worried about their defense; she says that Bobo's testimony looks bad for Steve, and Briggs is going to try to attach King to Steve because Steve looks like a decent guy. When Steve asks O'Brien if they're going to lose his case, she says no, but he doesn't believe her. It all seems overwhelming to Steve, like the problem continually grows and swells. Steve realizes he's just like all the other prisoners, lying to themselves that everything will turn out alright. He wonders if lying to themselves landed them in jail in the first place. Steve thinks about the life he is losing, about Jerry, and understands why the guards take the inmates' shoelaces and belts. O'Brien advises Steve to make a list of everyone he loves and admires and who loves him back. He writes down Mr. Sawicki two times.

The fact that Briggs will try to attach Steve to his own client King, since the association will benefit King though it will certainly hurt Steve, suggests that Steve is again not being treated as a human being but merely as a pawn between lawyers in which they each try to use him to increase their own strategic advantage. This is again dehumanizing to Steve, since he loses the right and power to be a person unto himself with his own personality and agency, and instead becomes nothing more than a tool. Steve's understanding of why inmates are not allowed to keep their belts suggests that he is feeling so hopeless as to be potentially suicidal.

The screenplay resumes inside the courtroom. King's cousin is on the stand. Briggs questions her, and she testifies that King was at her house on the afternoon of the murder, giving her a lamp he'd bought for her. However, when Petrocelli cross-examines her, King's cousin admits that she no longer has the lamp, does not know how much it cost, and does not know where King would have gotten the money to pay for it, since he didn't have a job.

King's cousin's inability to recall specific details suggests that she is lying to provide King with an alibi and absolve him of the murder. This again demonstrates the unreliability of witness testimony in court and the manner in which cases built on potential lies cannot possibly reveal the truth of an incident.

Briggs brings another witness to testify that King is left-handed and Mr. Nesbitt was shot from an angle that suggests a right-handed shooter, but the questioning is brief and O'Brien tells Steve that it's a weak argument. Steve recalls Mr. Sawicki telling his film students that if a director is using too many flourishes or extraneous details, it means he's afraid of the story's weakness.

Steve's memory of his lesson in film theory directly applies to Briggs's weak line of questioning, suggesting that Briggs knows that there is no good way to defend King, who certainly seems guilty. The fact that Briggs must defend him anyway again suggests that lies and deceit are simply a part of the courtroom's functioning.

In a separate meeting room, O'Brien counsels Steve that he needs to testify to present himself to the jury as a good, innocent kid. He also needs to break his association with King as much as possible, since that is Petrocelli's strongest argument for Steve's supposed guilt. O'Brien is confident that Briggs won't let King testify, because King blatantly lied in his statement to the police when he was arrested, and he's trying to look tough and surly, which already moves the jury against him. King's cousin's testimony won't hold water either way.

O'Brien's counsel that Steve needs to shift the jury's perception of him from a monster or King's associate to a regular, decent kid suggests that in a criminal trial, perception is everything. This again suggests that criminal trials are not fact-based pursuits of truth but subjective affairs based on lies, half-truths, or the jury's perception of each defendant.

O'Brien sits at the table across from Steve with a paper cup and explains that she is going to coach him by playing a game. She'll ask questions like a prosecutor. If Steve gives a good answer, she'll turn the cup facing up. If he gives a bad answer, she'll turn the cup upside down until Steve figures out what was wrong with his answer. As she asks Steve practice questions about his association with King and when he last spoke to him, angling for vague answers, the scene fades away.

Without explicitly saying so, O'Brien is teaching Steve how to doctor his answers, or how to lie. Although it would be easy to simply call such behavior wrong, this coaching is in service of protecting Steve from an arguably unjust prosecution and completely disproportionate criminal sentence. This gives nuance to the role of lying in court, demonstrating that lies can be used for an arguably just cause, as well.

In his cell at night, Steve overhears two inmates talking about how they can't tell the truth while they testify or they'll be locked up longer. One of them says that truth doesn't exist anymore, that "the prosecutor talks about looking for the truth when they really mean a way to stick you under the jail."

Once again, the role of truth in the legal system becomes nuanced and complicated by the fact that even the prosecutor is not looking for truth, but only the means to win the case and earn the conviction.

The scene cuts back to the courtroom. Steve is on the witness stand while O'Brien questions him. O'Brien asks several questions about whether Steve has any connection at all to the crime, the drugstore, or if he was there on the day of the robbery. Steve states that he was not present or involved in any way, nor did he ever agree to be. O'Brien sits and Petrocelli takes her place. She begins questioning Steve about his relationship with King, and Steve responds that he only knows him because King hangs around the playground where the neighborhood kids play ball. He didn't see him at any point in December. Steve admits that he knows Osvaldo, but denies that he knows Bobo.

Steve's earlier private admissions in his narrative heavily suggest that he was in the drugstore on the day of the murder and imply that he did cooperate with King. If this is true, then Steve undeniably lies on the witness stand, under oath. However, Steve's lies, which seem unjust on their own, are made for the sake of avoiding an unjust sentence and losing his future and potential as a human being to a long and useless prison sentence. This makes Steve's position both nuanced and morally ambiguous.

Petrocelli tries to insinuate that Steve was at the drugstore on the day of the robbery, recalling Bobo and Cruz's testimonies, but Steve continually denies it, stating that he was scouting locations for a film about his neighborhood every day of Christmas break. Multiple times, Petrocelli asks illegitimate leading questions, prompting rebuke from Briggs, O'Brien, and the judge who warns her to stop. Petrocelli ends her questioning, "satisfied." Steve returns nervously to his seat. His parents nod encouragingly. O'Brien writes a note for him to "take deep breaths."

Steve's apparent lies and Petrocelli's obvious manipulations and illegal leading questions demonstrate that neither the prosecution nor the defense are above moral reproach. This complicates the perception of truth and lies under oath while also demonstrating the general injustice of the justice system and its inability to unveil the actual truth of an event or find true justice for Mr. Nesbitt's death.

O'Brien calls Mr. Sawicki to testify to Steve's character. Mr. Sawicki describes Steve as an honest, upstanding young man whom he admires very much. Petrocelli cross-examines Mr. Sawicki and argues that since the teacher only sees Steve at school, he could not know how Steve acts at home in his own neighborhood. Mr. Sawicki disagrees, however, and states that Steve makes very honest films that show a deep sense of humanity and that look for the most positive elements of his neighborhood. The screenplay briefly cuts to a shot of Steve, lying in his cell bed, "soaked with sweat" and breathing hard.

Mr. Sawicki's testimony importantly disrupts Steve's fraudulent testimony to remind the reader that although Steve seems to have just lied under oath, he is fundamentally a kind and sensitive young man. Mr. Sawicki's character witness thus highlights Steve's humanity, which again morally complicates the concept of him lying to protect himself from a disproportionate and arguably unjust sentence.

Back in the courtroom, Briggs makes his closing argument for the defense of James King. Briggs argues that Petrocelli's prosecution does not have a single witness to the actual murder and relies entirely on testimony from admitted criminals Bobo and Osvaldo, both of whom are obviously trying to minimize their own roles in the murder. Ms. Henry did see two men enter the store, it's true, but did not immediately recognize King.

Although King certainly seems guilty of Mr. Nesbitt's murder, Briggs's point that the prosecution relies entirely on subjective witness testimonies rightly suggests that the trial has little basis in the truth, but is rather constituted by a bunch of subjective, self-interested, potentially fraudulent accounts of a single event.

Briggs thus argues that King did not enter the store with Bobo; Osvaldo did. One of them shot Mr. Nesbitt. When he was arrested, Bobo needed someone to rat on to earn a lenient sentence for himself, so he picked King at random from his known associates. All evidence that Petrocelli produced is subject to reasonable doubt, and thus the jury cannot justifiably convict King of the murder. While Briggs speaks, the people in the courtroom look bored.

After pointing out the fact that the trial has little truth to actually rest on, it is ironic that Briggs then flatly lies, claiming that King is innocent when even Briggs appears to know King is guilty. Once again, this demonstrates that even attorneys habitually lie and everyone involved in the trial is more concerned with personal gain than the truth.

O'Brien then summarizes her defense of Steve Harmon. She argues that even the prosecution was only able to establish a minimal connection between Steve and the robbery, based entirely on unreliable testimonies and the fact that Steve had once seen Bobo Evans. If Steve did exit the drugstore on that day, he apparently gave no signal, and the most reliable witness testimony (Ms. Henry's) confirms Steve's own account that he was not in the drugstore at all, since she did not see him.

Again, the fact that Petrocelli sought either a major prison sentence or even the death penalty for Steve, despite being able to only establish a minimal connection between him and Mr. Nesbitt's death, suggests that the justice system and its methods of sentencing are themselves unjust, especially when targeting young black kids like Steve.

O'Brien argues that even Bobo's testimony suggests that only he and King had any contact with each other after the murder, again removing Steve from the plot. Both Osvaldo and Bobo's plea deals are dependent on other people being prosecuted, meaning they have a vested interest in framing Steve, and their testimonies are thus unreliable. Bobo is using and discarding Steve's life just like he murdered Mr. Nesbitt and left him on the floor. Thus far, Steve is the only witness charged with a crime whose character seems legitimately defensible and admirable. In light of all these things, O'Brien believes that Steve's guilt has not been credibly proven and the jury must judge him not guilty.

O'Brien's closing argument effectively sums up all of the novel's described abuses by the justice system: dehumanization, since Steve is assumed to be exactly the same sort of person as Osvaldo, Bobo, and King; fraudulent testimonies, since the prosecution's case is established on self-interested, unreliable witnesses; and injustice, since the prosecution is bent on convicting Steve despite a general lack of evidence that connects him with the murder and demonstrates his responsibility for it.

Petrocelli takes her turn for closing remarks, arguing that the defense is trying to focus the jury on the admittedly poor character of criminal witnesses rather than the fact that Mr. Nesbitt was murdered and deserves justice. Ms. Henry and José Delgado have no ulterior motives in testifying, and although Bobo and Osvaldo obviously do, their testimonies corroborate each other. Three witnesses testify that King entered the drugstore at the time of the robbery. Bobo testifies that Steve was the lookout.

Although Petrocelli argues that she is trying to get justice for Mr. Nesbitt's death, convicting and locking away a young kid like Steve based on flimsy evidence for the mere crime of walking into and out of a store do not seem like justice but injustice, and Petrocelli thus seems less interested in justice than in attaining a professional win.

Petrocelli argues that the only possible version of events that fits all available evidence is the state's accusation, and King and Steve Harmon are thus both fully culpable for Mr. Nesbitt's death. They each played their part and made their contribution. King is obviously closely associated with Bobo Evans, so there is little doubt as to his guilt. Steve Harmon can try to distance himself from the murder or rationalize it, but he made the "moral decision" to participate in a robbery with the hope of a payoff. Nobody can bring Mr. Nesbitt back, but the jury can bring his murderers to justice.

Despite Petrocelli's character flaws, manipulation, and self-interest, her claim that Steve made a "moral decision" does make a critical point: regardless of whether the reader feels that Steve does or does not deserve the sentence Petrocelli is trying to pin him with, he did make the decision to go along with King, and thus should bear the burden of conscience for Mr. Nesbitt's death to some degree, even if it is not truly his fault. Even if he is not guilty of what the prosecution says he is, neither does he seem totally innocent.

The jurors convene and speak with the judge, who states that if they believe either King or Steve were involved in the robbery that led to Mr. Nesbitt's death, regardless of whether they themselves fired the gun, the jury must give a guilty verdict of felony murder. As the judge speaks, the camera cuts to various American symbols throughout the courtroom: the flag, a mural of George Washington, and so on.

The judge's statement that Steve must be fully culpable for Mr. Nesbitt's death if he had any involvement in the attempted robbery whatsoever may be technically true, according to law, but it certainly seems unjust in itself, since Steve committed no violence and meant no harm himself.

Steve sits in a holding cell with King. Steve admits that he's scared, but King seems unbothered, and states that "if the man wants you, he got you. Ain't nothing to it." A smirking guard tells Steve and King that they've started a betting pool on how much prison time they'll get. The other guys are betting they get 25 years to life. The guard asks if Steve or King want to bet. Steve puts his head in his hands, but the guard asks again. The camera cuts to Steve in the jail's cafeteria, trying to avoid looking at King. A fight breaks out near him. The camera cuts to Steve in his cell, and then to a group of inmates playing a friendly game of dominoes as if they weren't in jail.

The guard's callousness towards Steve, who is visibly shaken, is shocking. Betting on whether or not Steve will get a life sentence completely ignores the fact that for Steve, the outcome of this trial will dictate the course of the rest of his life. Once again, the guard's callousness demonstrates how both the court system and the prison system dehumanize individuals such as Steve on every level, treating their own emotional pain and duress as a flippant joke.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON, JULY 17TH

Steve was afraid to sleep the night before, as if he'd die in his sleep. His case consumes him, but he knows there is nothing left to do. He used to feel sorry for his mother, who was crying in desperation as Steve was led out of the courtroom yesterday, but now all he can think of is his appeal, just like all the other guys in jail. Steve thinks about Petrocelli's claim that he made a "moral decision" and he wonders what decision he made that day, or didn't make. The world feels unreal to Steve, except for his sense of "panic" and the movie he keeps rewriting and re-editing in his mind. In the movie, he proudly tells King that he doesn't do robberies, that he knows what is right and true. He sets the scene to music.

Steve's inability to even think of his mother's pain anymore since his case consumes all of his mental energy again points to the dehumanizing effect of being in jail, since the people and relationships that once mattered to Steve are being pushed out of his mind as he is consumed by his fate. However, in rewriting the scene in his movie so that he nobly rejects King's offer to participate in the robbery, Steve is attempting to rewrite his own view of himself in his mind and reassert his humanity.

At the courthouse, in the screenplay, a guard tells Steve that the jury has reached a verdict. Steve asks O'Brien if it will be a good one, and she says she doesn't know, but if not they'll appeal the case and keep fighting. They enter the courtroom, and as the judge orders the jury to enter, a title card rolls over the screen: "This is the true story of Steve Harmon. This is the story of his life and trial." The jury sits as the title card states that the trial changes Steve's view of the meaning of life.

O'Brien's affirmation that even if they lose the case, they can appeal together and keep fighting for Steve's innocence suggests that she still values him as a person and wants to give him his future, even if she does not necessarily believe in his innocence. This once again creates a complex relationship between truth and justice, since uncovering the truth will not necessarily lead to the most just outcome.

The head juror reads his verdict for King and a guard puts handcuffs on him and leads him out of the courtroom: guilty. The juror reads his verdict for Steve. Mrs. Harmon listens with clasped hands before she throws them in the air and closes her eyes. Steve is found not guilty. He spreads his arms to hug O'Brien, but she turns away stiffly to collect her papers. She moves away while Steve still has his arms stretched out, and he turns towards the camera as the image turns to black and white, grainy, and blurs until Steve's silhouette looks like "some strange beast, a **monster**."

Although O'Brien arguably still values Steve as a human being, her stiffness towards his suggests that she does not think he is completely innocent nor does she respect him. Steve's frozen position, with his arms outstretched in an unrequited show of human affection as his silhouette takes a monstrous shape, suggests that this rejection from O'Brien is also a rejection of him as a person now that their case is over, which makes him feel like a monster.

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