



## **Reading Characters, Reading Ourselves: Reflecting with Monster's Steve Harmon**

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In Walter Dean Myers' young adult novel, *Monster*, sixteen year old Steve Harmon, imprisoned for allegedly being involved in a robbery and murder, contemplates his place in the world after a fellow inmates asserts that everyone in the prison is just a criminal trying "to act good." Steve, who has suddenly found himself in a setting very unlike the one he is used to comments on the thought:

In a way he was right, at least about me. 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 as being different. (62)

Steve, like so many of my students, is trying to find a way to allow his better self, his characteristics that make him an individual, show in a world where others look and act the same. In fact, although Myers' novel serves as a sort of timeline of Steve's experience throughout his trial, *Monster* really is about the young protagonist's plight to break free from stereotypes and allow his true self to emerge. As I read *Monster*, I wondered how many of my students find themselves in the same sort of struggle that Steve finds himself in.

Literature always serves as a means for readers to read themselves, making us think and feel, making us human as we see in the fictional, in the created, a glimmer of ourselves, a glimmer of our own struggles. Personally, it took me years really to understand that literature was calling to me, reaching out to me as artists work through their characters and their stories, the idiosyncrasies of life that we all encounter on a daily basis. An author of literature becomes a sort of big brother or big sister to his or her audience, offering suggestions, raising questions, helping us to grow and understand ourselves and others. Through their writing, authors hold our hands, offer us advice and guidance, and challenge us to face difficult things and make hard choices. Whitman sings a "Song to Myself," which actually turns out to be a song of ourselves as the author uses his verse to explore who we are and what our place is in this complicated world. Holden Caulfield struggles to fit in or not fit in, fumbling his way through the streets of New York, looking for answers, holding

us close by his side. Langston Hughes struggles to find his America in a land where many felt betrayed. The narrator of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* takes us with him as he runs to survive, runs to escape, runs because he has to. Over and over in countless stories and stanzas, we the audience, the struggling masses, are invited to take the journey with one who we hope can lead us to learn more about ourselves, more about life as he or she lives out his or her own struggles in the pages before us.

One of the reasons that I believe arts magnet schools are so effective in our public school system is that it takes a village to raise a child, and in an arts magnet school the authors and artists introduced to students become teachers once again. Students need a vehicle to help them maneuver through the adolescent years. While some students turn to sports or music literature is also a means to help our children to navigate the rough seas. Students only need to read the first lines of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself," to find a hint as to the power of the reading and writing of literature as a support and as a guiding light. At my school, Betsy Ross Arts Magnet School, artists and academic teachers work side by side to provide students with all the tools available in order to help students find their way to their own identities.

Middle school years are the years when students make discoveries about themselves. In what is often both a confusing and a painful time of life, students find themselves challenging all their learned and taught beliefs. Middle school students need help in sorting out their beliefs, ideas, and preconceived notions. Students need to use all means available to them in order to make fair judgments about themselves and others. Literature will be one of the vehicles that students can use in order to find themselves. Every time I prepare a unit for my seventh and eighth grade language arts classes, I keep the dilemma of this age in mind. I believe, and I think that most middle school teachers will agree, that just as important as teaching the reading and writing and arithmetic, is the teaching of life skills: the teaching of communication, the teaching of cooperation, the teaching of manners, the teaching of tolerance, the teaching of reflection, and the teaching of dealing with confusion and change.

In creating this unit, *Reading Characters, Reading Ourselves*, I will utilize seminar material not only to help students make discoveries during these difficult years, but also to provide a fun and educational way for students to prepare themselves for real learning through literature. Through journal writing, writing workshop, and techniques such as "beat the author," students will make connections to the literature and bring the richness of literature into their own lives. The unit will give not only give students another way to assess and explore literature, but will also serve as a tool to their own self discovery, while challenging the stereotypes and beliefs that they too often take as truths.

## Purpose

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Focusing on Walter Dean Myers' novel *Monster* and several poems that will accompany the novel, this unit will attempt to help students uncover things about themselves as they make discoveries about Myers' protagonist, Steve Harmon. I hope that students will see the parallels between life and literature as we move between the characters of *Monster* and the students' lives.

Students' comfort with sharing and writing will increase as we explore several types of writing in the unit. As is always the case in my classes, journal writing will provide an important writing connection to the novel and to ourselves. Students will also explore poetry writing, memoir, letter, and essay writing. Students will become

more comfortable with class discussions and sharing as we go through the unit, emphasizing the importance of respecting each other's ideas.

Finally, my hopes are that the understanding and analysis that students put into literary characters can be applied to their own lives and displayed in an artistic format. Through the series of writing exercises mentioned above, students will apply the lessons learned through literature to their own lives and ultimately express their understanding through artwork as they create three dimensional self- portraits that reveal more than a simple surface depiction of themselves.

## **A New Curriculum for the City of New Haven**

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Recently the city of New Haven adopted a new performance-based English Language Arts curriculum which was the result of a two-year effort of approximately two dozen district teachers, supervisors, and advisors. This massive document was designed to provide the district with a reading and writing based curriculum that provides teachers with a curriculum which is both flexible and practical.

Each grade level is divided into four quarters in which various genre are the focus of the curriculum, guided by enduring understandings (for example, "students become better writers when exposed to a variety of literature") and guiding questions. The curriculum is proving to be a effective tool in our attempt to provide students with real learning. Through a variety of genre, vocabulary, and literacy performance tasks, students are given the opportunity to develop as readers, writers, and critical thinkers.

For years before the new curriculum came out (pilot year, 2009-10), New Haven teachers were headed in the direction on which this curriculum focuses. The Connecticut Writing Project came to New Haven over five years ago and began training teachers starting with journal writing, and then moving into reading strategies and writer workshop. While the curriculum is completely new this year, the methods utilized are not new to the teachers of New Haven, who have been gradually over the years trained to teach in a manner that puts students at the center of their own learning. In writer workshop, students take a seed from their journal, see it through several drafts, through peer editing and revision, and finally to a polished copy that reflects a vast array of learning that takes place during the writing process.

The time, effort, dedication, and training that have gone into developing the teaching of Language Arts in New Haven have made their way through the system, into teachers' lesson plans, into students' knowledge, and finally onto these pages. Reading workshop, journal writing, writer workshop, and performance based assessment are at the heart of all of my classes. Everything I teach, everything I plan, and all of my units are anchored in these principles of education that have become the backbone of the New Haven Public School Language Arts curriculum.

The city has taken a bold step forward at a time when teaching to the test has become the norm across the nation. By adopting this new teacher-produced, Language Arts curriculum, the city is in effect saying we will not spend our year teaching to the test. Instead we will teach to the students and this will lead to real improvements in student learning which will translate into all aspects of student performance and assessment.

## Journal Writing

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As mentioned above, Journal writing is an important part of student learning in the New Haven 6-8 Language Arts curriculum. One of the most important items on the student supply list is their journals. I ask students to pick up the black and white, hardcover composition books that are available everywhere at the beginning of the school year. I keep their journals in my classroom in milk crates labeled for each class period. We begin journal writing right at the beginning of the year and by the end of the year students have gathered some of the most exciting and creative writing that is really their own. The emphasis with journal writing is on creativity and fluidity. Students are never penalized for spelling or grammar mistakes. Their journals become more of a personal, diary-like collection of reflections, thoughts, and ideas. I want students to feel free to express themselves in their writing. I want them to enjoy their ideas and allow themselves the freedom not to worry about form, structure, grammar, and the elements that examine during Writing Workshop. Entries that are too personal for my eyes are folded as a signal to me as I go through their journals to make comments on students' writing.

Students' journals can be set up in a number of ways. There are several sources listed at the end of the unit that focus on journal writing and offer great ideas for setting them up. I use sticky tabs to separate sections of the journal. The first section is called "Seeds." This is where students brainstorm ideas and develop the seeds that will lead to longer writing in other parts of the journal or outside of the journal. The second section of the journal is the "Nurturing" section. We nurture our seeds in this section of the book. The third section for my students is "Response to Literature." This is where students go to reflect on their reading. Finally, the last section of the journal is the section entitled "Craft." Students use the back of the journals for their note taking on literary terminology or important points. For example, in the back of their journals students will add definitions of literary terms and put in some examples. The back of the student journal becomes a small reference book to which students can turn to find definitions, plot diagrams, freewriting rules, and other information that they can refer to throughout the year.

I also keep a journal at my desk and whenever I ask students to partake in journal writing, I join them. The teacher joining the students in writing not only sets a good example for students to follow, but it also helps to create a community of writers within the classroom that will be respected throughout the year. Similarly, we share our writing with the class or one-on-one with other students whenever we have a chance. This is an equally important part of journal writing. Students need to feel comfortable sharing their work with each other in order for the journal writing to be utilized correctly. It is a good idea to share journals early in the year, to get that level of comfort secure.

Journal writing combined with the reading of literature is meant to lead students to the type of higher-order thinking that the latest changes in educational curriculum (including New Haven's) aim to enhance. Students make connections, compare/contrast, make predictions, take critical stances, and are taught to think beyond the literal interpretation of the text.

As you can see, journal writing plays a key role in my class every year and will be especially important in this unit as well. I always ask students to share what they have written with classmates when they are done writing. It is not mandatory to share, but it is encouraged. I find that most students enjoy reading their work out loud. The more they share, the more they enjoy the writing. In this unit journal writing will help to extend the conversation that we have about the novel, *Monster*, and make connections with the poetry that we will be using. Some possible journal topics that may be included in this unit are:

- Write a quick write on everything you know about Harlem
- Make a timeline of the important events in your life
- Create a Venn Diagram comparing characters in Monster
- Write about a time you got advice from someone
- Write about something that scares you
- Write a poem about issues faced by teens today
- Write about your favorite place to go to think or write
- Analyze an aspect of a poem (mood, form, rhythm, etc.)
- Describe Steve's prison cell
- Describe a time you made a bad decision
- Write about family
- Draw a character from Monster
- Write about how you have changed since last year
- Write or expand on a journal entry from Monster

## Writing Workshop

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The writing workshop is also an essential part of the new New Haven, 6-8 curriculum. Writing workshop is a way of teaching writing that emphasizes revision based on mini lessons, and revision and is another aspect of my class which, much like the journal writing mentioned above, has its roots in the New Haven teaching community and the Connecticut Writing Project. In order to run the writers' workshop in the classroom, teachers need to be flexible in their instruction as well as trusting in their students. The tight grip we often associate with classroom management a must be loosened a bit when implementing writing workshop in the classroom. The reason for this is the same reason that the writing workshop really works for children; it allows and encourages students to work at their own pace and to progress at a rate that is comfortable for them. Not all students will be on the second draft at the same time because not all of the students will finish their first draft and move on at the same time. The writing workshop can be intimidating for teachers for this very reason. A classroom of twenty five middle school students all working on some different aspect or phase of their writing can look like a class out of control. Some students may be on the computer typing, some may be involved in conversation around peer editing, some may be getting up to gather supplies for another draft, and some may be working in their journal, or conferencing with the teacher. Sounds like chaos, but it doesn't have to be if students are taught early in the year how the writing workshop works.

At the beginning of every writing workshop session I review the basic steps that students will be going through in order to complete a writing task; brainstorming topics is usually first, followed by first draft, peer conference, second draft, teacher conference, and finally a final draft. Students need to be taught how to make their way through these six steps in order for the workshop to run smoothly. And key to a teacher keeping his or her sanity during the writing workshop is turning much of the responsibility of the progression back to the students. Students must understand that they are responsible for keeping track of the writing process that is going on in their workshop. If a teacher is able, early on, to emphasize students being responsible for keeping track of their place in the process, everything will work smoothly during this process.

Having students keep track of their own progress is key to the success of a writing workshop. Last year I implemented a bulletin board on which students could keep track of their own progress as they went through the process. Each student was assigned a popsicle stick to write his or her name on. The stick had a Velcro backing so that the students can move their names across a felt board that is labeled with their class period and the several steps of the writing process. We all begin on brainstorming or seeds, but like a pack of runners in a marathon, the field quickly thins as each writer finds his or her own pace and goes through the steps. Other teachers have used paint stirrers for name labels and cans for the writing steps. Students simply move their paint stirrer along as they make their way through the writing process. Others have used magnets, pencils, and numerous other objects with varied labeled containers. The important thing to do here is set up a system through which students are responsible for monitoring their own progress.

Another key element in writer workshop is the mini lesson. When working on writing workshop, teachers need to prepare short lessons to introduce to students as they make their way through the writing process. Teachers decide what a specific class is weak in and create a mini-lesson for students to focus on. For example if a class is weak in punctuating quotations, a teacher will spend ten to twenty minutes on a lesson on the use of quotations and commas in dialogue. Once students go through the mini lesson, they return to writing workshop. The material from the mini lessons becomes the focus of peer or group editing. This is really a departure from past practice because in the past peer edit meant a student looked at another student's work and corrected everything from punctuation to spelling to format, to dialogue and leads. This practice is unrealistic. Students cannot be expected to be experts on every aspect of editing a paper; instead, the two or three mini lesson topics introduced during the workshop are the focus. Students understand the topic, they have practiced it, and they should be expected to be on target with that topic in this writing workshop. I keep the mini lessons, post them near the felt board and, of course change them with each new writing workshop piece. Students do not get overwhelmed with the material and actually know how to help each other during the peer editing section of their writing.

The writer workshop takes a lot of up front preparation and organization, but when it becomes routine to both teacher and students, the process is extremely rewarding and can make a huge difference in the progress that students make in their writing.

## Art

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As our school is an arts magnet school, when I do an extended unit I try to incorporate art into the unit wherever possible. In an arts magnet school the arts and academics are linked in a way that promotes learning that is often overlooked in a regular school setting. In our school, students study math, social studies, science, and languages, but are also invited to explore the arts for half of their day. The students study drawing and painting, photography, video, dance, pottery, drama, sculpture, and music. It is through this vehicle, this arts magnet atmosphere, that students are allowed to explore and find their strengths and weaknesses. Virtually every student in the school finds his or her creative niche, his or her interest, and his or her means to succeed in an arts magnet school. In an arts magnet school students use the arts as a way to further explore and understand the academics.

Unfortunately all middle schools are not arts magnet schools. I personally think they should be, but I am only one teacher. The reality is that the arts are constantly under attack in our public schools where budget

crunchers are constantly on the lookout for easy answers as to what can be cut and what cannot be cut. I realize that students in my school may see art in a way that is more refined or mature than many other middle school students because arts have been an important part of their education for four years (grades five through eight). Does this mean that this unit cannot be utilized in a school district where the arts may be almost non-existent? No, but I believe it needs to be considered. I think that all students have an art that interests them, and while my school may have students divided into art emphases or specialties, which I can utilize like a roster, teachers without this information may spend a day or two talking to students about what interests them. It could be in the form of an arts survey or a writing exercise, but I think it worthwhile to see what interests the children and gauge how important the arts are to them.

## The Unit

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The unit I am designing is meant to be used with my eighth grade students, but as with many teaching units, it can be adapted to match any grade level by simply shifting the curriculum being used in various spots. The eighth grade students in New Haven partake in a wide variety of learning activities throughout the year that begins with a focus on fiction, the short story, and the novel.

This focus at the beginning of the year is the perfect place to start my unit- a unit that will seek to utilize the lessons learned in fiction to lessons learned in real life. Students will be expected to keep, share, and display the materials they create in this unit in their writing journals, their "All about Me" folders and, eventually in their artistic self-portraits that become a sort of climax to the learning in the unit.

### Walter Dean Myers and Harlem

One of the core novels that students are required to read in eighth grade is *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers. Walter Dean Myers is a very popular writer who grew up in Harlem and writes urban fiction that involves the coming of age struggles of today's youth. Myers' novels such as *Scorpions*, *Fallen Angels*, *The Dream Bearer*, and *The Glory Field* focus on teenagers trying to fit in and find their place in a harsh, confusing, and fast-paced world. In *Monster*, Myers' protagonist, Steve Harmon, tries to escape his world (the book's setting switches between prison walls, the streets of Harlem, and a courtroom) by writing a screenplay, the text of which makes up much of the novel. Using a variety of fonts and writing styles, Myers explores identity, truth and, fiction as the accused accomplice in a robbery/murder struggles in prison after being caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. What Myers is exploring in his book *Monster* is really what our seminar is attempting to examine: how do we see ourselves, and how does that differ from how others see us? In this unit I will try to lead students to see characters and themselves from a different perspective and ultimately to share, either consciously or unconsciously, through writing and art- through reflective, direct formulation and the process of creative expression-their newfound point of view.

I start out the unit with an exploration of Myers, Harlem, and the notion of belonging. I talk a little about Myers and his background by using the internet to spend a day searching images of Harlem and explore the author's background before reading. (see sources for web site ideas) Working in pairs, students will sometimes receive instructions as simple as "find three facts on Harlem." Students search the internet, find interesting facts, and then share their findings with the whole class. Once students have some background knowledge I introduce the poem, *Harlem*, written by Walter Dean Myers. An award winning poem, illustrated by the author's son (as

is *Monster*), Harlem is a poem I like to use with students every year. Scholastic puts out a paperback version with a recorded reading by Sean Combs. Students of all ages love to listen to it and I have a student turn the pages on the oversized book to share with students the incredible artwork, reminiscent of Jacob Lawrence's work, which accompanies the book. After listening to the poem I have students write their own "Hometown Poem" that will be their first piece in their "All About Me" folders.

How much a teacher decides to ask students to revise this piece or any other pieces that the students work on is up to that teacher. The Writing Workshop explanation discussed earlier in the unit can be applied to any of the students' writing. All of the writing in this unit can be taken to whatever degree of writing workshop that teachers are comfortable with. On the other hand, everything written here does not have to be a polished piece of writing. What we are really trying to do is use the writing as a vehicle to get to the end product (autobiographical artwork) as well as make some real realizations as well.

That being said, I think the hometown poem is a great piece to run through writing workshop, especially early in the year. It will be easier for students to grasp and serve as a sort of workshop on writer workshopping. I remind students that images are a big part of what makes some poetry work and point out some images in the Myers poem. Students highlight and circle the images in the poem on copies of the pages. Next, I ask students to think about their own hometowns. What sorts of images come to mind when they think of their hometown, their neighborhood, their street, their yard? Students brainstorm in their journals, and then I ask them to link the images in a rough first draft of their hometown poem. As is customary with writing workshop, I give students a mini lesson on what their goal should be during the peer edit session that will follow the completion of a first draft. In other words, we don't just exchange poems and say, "check your partner's work for mistakes," but rather we try to pinpoint the focus of the peer edit session; have students look at form, or sensory images or, use of literary devices in the poem. In this particular case, since we started looking at Walter Dean Myers' work as images, I will have students look in each others work for sensory images. Of course before they do that it is important that classes go over what a sensory image is in class: how do they work? What senses do they appeal to? How do students know? Once again, it is up to teachers what mini-lesson is used to focus the students' peer edit session. Once students have given each other feedback on their first draft and have written their second draft, a teacher-student conference helps students polish up the poem before he or she starts to type the final draft.

At this point teachers can still branch off to a variety of activities just focused on the hometown poem; students can illustrate their own or each other's poems; students can use the poems for a class anthology on what home means to them; students can read the poems out loud or memorize them in a performance opportunity. In this unit I will ask students to share and then keep the poems in their "All About Me" folders.

### *Monster*

The book *Monster*, which will provide a sort of anchor as I navigate through this unit, is a coming of age novel in which a young man, Steve Harmon, is accused of being involved in a robbery in which the owner of a small store is murdered. The novel provides teachers with several opportunities to explore inner conflict and the search for identity which is really at the center of this unit. The book is written as a screen play and a journal; a screenplay because, first, Steve is interested in screenwriting, and second and most importantly for this unit, it provides a sort of escape for Steve. He is writing his own story in order to escape the pressure and discomfort he is feeling being locked up in prison during the trial. The other part of *Monster* that really fits into my teaching methods is the fact that much of the novel is written as Steve's journal entry. So here is Steve, a young teen in a very difficult and scary situation, at a very difficult and scary part of his life, trying to make



sense of everything with two voices: his screenwriting voice, complete with voice over and camera angles, and his journal voice, clear and honest as a journal entry or diary should be. The opening lines of *Monster*, written as a journal, provide students with a place to start exploring their own fears in their journals:

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 even 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. (1)

### **Working in the journals**

Steve is clearly scared. Have a discussion about fear and loneliness before asking students to go into the seed section of the journals and brainstorm about what scares them. Give them about four to five minutes to make a bulleted list and then have the class share their ideas. Remind students to feel free to add to their own list if they hear something that scares someone else that they had forgotten scares them. Finally ask students to circle, star, or highlight one of the topics, turn to their nurturing section and do a quick write on the topic. Ask students to turn and share with a partner and if anyone would like to share with the class encourage that. It is important early on in the use of journals that students feel comfortable sharing, allowing others to hear their deepest thoughts and feelings. A class must be taught early that it is important to respect others sharing; otherwise the class will shut down with few willing to go out on a limb and share.

As I go through *Monster* I take advantages of the numerous opportunities students will have to expand on Steve's journal writing. On page forty-five Steve talks about how much he hates the prison. Using the same technique as mentioned earlier (seeds to nurture) I have students share what they hate. On page sixty three Steve comments on a dream he had and how he hoped that others didn't hear him screaming. Again, I have students share their dreams, and nightmares. During the early trial sections of the book students stop reading and write a journal entry for Steve. What would he be thinking about a certain testimony or another character's actions in the courtroom? What would you be thinking if you were in the courtroom? The journals will quickly become filled with thoughts and feelings that intertwine and parallel Steve's.

### **Letter writing**

There are many opportunities here for students to write letters to and from characters that will deepen their understanding of the novel and themselves. One activity that I enjoy doing with students is exchanging letters written from characters' point of views. Students choose a character from the book (Bobo Evans, Steve's mom, Prosecutor Pettricelli, a Jury member) and comment on the case in a letter to another member of the courtroom. It might be wise to preface this exercise with a lesson on courtroom etiquette and how jury members are not allowed to speak to each other, etc. but in fiction it is all right to bend the rules. Once students have written to a character, I have them exchange letters and take some time to write back as a character writing to a character. This piece can also go into the "All About Me" folder.

Another letter writing activity students can partake in is writing a letter to Steve. I take a break in the reading

of *Monster* to read two classic advice poems: "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes and "Speech to the Young" by Gwendolyn Brooks. Students read the poems in class, discuss the extended metaphor in "Mother to Son" and the images in "Speech to the Young" and then go over the messages being sent. What is the advice being given in these two short poems? How does the advice seem similar or different? Next, students write their own advice poems. They can start out by determining what sort of message they want to impart in their seeds section and then expand into a writer workshop with their advice poems. Finally, students write to Steve to impart some advice to him.

## **Memoir**

As we continue reading *Monster* I have a discussion with students about why the story is worth telling. What is the "so what" that writer/educator Nancie Atwell asserts is so important to telling a story? Why is Steve's story movie material? I ask students to return to their journals and create a time line of the most important events in their lives thus far. Students come up with at least six or seven important events that had some impact on them, that helped shape who they are today.

Next, students determine which story they would like to tell and I allow them to spend a bit of time writing about that event. Students will be asked to write short memoirs, and I encourage the more adventurous ones to turn their memoir into a screenplay. This writing piece should also follow the writing workshop format and teachers may decide to do a unit on memoir writing before coming to this point in this unit. Students share what they wrote as a class. Finished pieces go into the "All About Me" folders.

## **The "Who Am I?" Art Project**

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At the end of *Monster* Steve comments in his journal on what life is like back at home. He has grown distant from his father and his commentary indicates that he feels a gap with his mother as well. He still looks to film for answers as he comments:

I have been taking movies of myself. In the movies I talk and tell the camera who I am and what I think I am about. Sometimes I set the camera up outside and walk up to it from different angles. Sometimes I set the camera up in front of a mirror and film myself as a reflection. I wear different clothes and sometimes try to change my voice. (279-80)

This section of *Monster* really goes to the heart of what this unit is all about. Steve is still trying to find himself and is consciously and subconsciously going through the motions to find who he is after going through this difficult experience. His "Who Am I?" art project involves film, mirrors, costumes, voice changes. This very

brief, yet interesting scene at the end of *Monster* is telling. Steve is trying to see himself in a different light, to see what makes him special and unique. He is struggling with his own identity just as many of our students are.

How many of our students really know who they are? How many of our students can honestly portray themselves in some type of media as Steve is trying to do? I lead students in a discussion of what is going on at the end of the story and try to help them to predict what is going on in Steve's mind by asking them to write a final journal entry from Steve's point of view. We share the journals out loud.

Next, I ask students to take out their "All About Me" folders. They take about fifteen minutes to review what they have written during the reading of *Monster*. I also participate by going through what I have been writing during this time period. At this point I ask students to write a brief cover sheet for the folder. What did they find in the folder? What were they reminded about themselves, their feelings, their memories?

The "Who Am I?" art project score sheet (see Appendix) will provide students with some ideas of how to get going on their project. Ideally teachers provide a model to show students. If you have created the same project that you are asking students to create, they will have a good model to base their projects on.

I ask students to write an art proposal to me in which they outline what sort of art project they will produce for the "Who Am I?" art project. This helps students think through the project a bit and gives me a chance to know where they are with the project. Once they have completed their proposal, I meet with them individually and talk about the project, discussing what materials they will be using and how they will be portraying their autobiographical material from their folder into the artwork itself. I set aside several days for students to work on the projects in class. As with writers in a writing workshop, the artists in this art project will have differing needs as they work their way through the projects. Being flexible, patient and helpful as a teacher at this point will make all the difference in the world.

## Lesson Plans

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The following sample lesson plans are provided for key moments in this unit. I have provided a sample with a journal entry, a sample from writer workshop, and finally a sample from the art section of the project.

### **Sample Lesson Plan One- Journal writing**

#### *Objectives*

- Students will discuss Steve Harmon's feelings at the beginning of *Monster*
- Students will brainstorm fears in the seeds section of journal
- Students will write about fears in journal entry
- Students will empathize with feelings of others

#### *Materials*

- Student journals

- copy of *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers

### *Initiation*

Ask for a volunteer to read Steve Harmon's journal entry that begins *Monster*. Ask the student to read it as if he were Steve. Ask other students to try. See if some of your students reveal the fear that must be coming from Steve's voice. Ask students what they hear in the reading and have a brief discussion on Steve's scary situation.

### *Procedure*

After your discussion ask students to turn to their seeds section of their journals. They should head the page "Things that scare me" and make sure (as always) that they put a date on the page. Give students about five or six minutes to brainstorm the things that scare them.

After students have had a chance to brainstorm, ask volunteers to read their list out loud. Remind students that they should feel free to add any scary things to their list that they did not think of before when other students share. Once students lists are complete they should go back and "star" the scariest things in their list. Having done this, ask students to go back to their journals and write a journal entry about the thing that scares them most.

As sharing is an essential part of journal writing, ask students to either share in pairs, in small groups, or as a class. Those not willing to read their entries should at least share the topic matter with their partners, but try to get everyone to participate.

### *Closure*

Bring the class back together, ask if anyone would like to share with the entire class and then bring Steve's journal entry back into focus. Have a brief discussion with students about their fears in comparison with Steve's. How do they compare? Ask students to write a brief letter to either Steve or one of their classmates advising them on how to deal with their fears.

## **Sample Lesson Plan Two-Writer Workshop Mini Lesson**

### *Objectives*

- Students will understand different types of leads
- Students will revise leads on memoir piece
- Students will continue with writer workshop on memoir

### *Materials*

- Writing workshop pieces
- Narrative leads handout or notes for journals

### *Initiation*

Have students reread the first paragraph of *Monster*, or another novel or short story. Ask students to point out what about the beginning of the story catches the reader. Point out this is the lead and how important a lead

is in hooking the reader.

### *Procedure*

Ask students to look back at their own leads. On their own or with a partner students should talk about what a good lead is, if they are hooked, or if the lead doesn't work well. Have students share strong leads. Introduce the various types of narrative leads to the students. You might make a handout that students can stick in the craft section of their notebooks, or simply list the types of leads on the board or overhead and have students take notes on them.

The types of leads that I introduce to students are shock leads, humorous leads, quotation leads, question leads, and statistical or factual leads. After discussing the types of leads, ask students to go back to their mini-memoirs, which they should have started by now, and rewrite their leads in two different styles or types of leads.

### *Closure*

Have students share the original lead and two new ones in small groups. Group members should vote on which lead they like the most. Students should then return to writers workshop, and be prepared during peer editing to make sure their partners have strong leads.

## **Sample Lesson Plan Three- Getting started with art**

### *Objectives*

- Students will review significance of final pages of *Monster*
- Students will write proposal for "All About Me" art project
- Students will review "All About Me" art project score sheet

### *Materials*

- *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers
- All About Me art project score sheet
- Journals

### *Initiation*

Ask students to re-read pages 280-281 in Walter Dean Myers' book, *Monster*. In their journals, ask students to jot down what exactly is going on with Steve in this part of the book. They can write in the third person or the first person.

### *Procedure*

Students will begin the art project section of the unit doing two things: recognizing that Steve is trying to find

himself and planning their own project which parallels Steve's "project" at the end of the story.

Lead a discussion on Steve's actions at the end of the book. Next tell the students that the end of the unit project will involve a similar project and go through the score sheet with students. Give students their folders and journals and ask them to take ten minutes to quietly review the materials which they have amassed.

Finally, ask students to write a proposal to you in which they lay out their plans for their project.

### *Closure*

Ask students to share their project ideas. Again remind them that it is ok to borrow ideas from their classmates in the planning of their projects.

## **Bibliography**

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### **Students' sources**

Myers, Walter Dean. *Harlem*. New York: Scholastic Books, 1997. This award winning picture book/poem is composed of a great number of images of Harlem. The book is illustrated by the author's son and comes with a cassette in which the poem is read by Sean Combs.

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### Teachers' Sources

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writing. There are lots of good practical ideas for writing as well as advice on life. A must read for all writers.

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Oliver, Mary. *A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, 1994. This book is a must have for teachers who need to review poetry before beginning to teach it to students.

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## Appendix A: Who Am I? Art Project Score Sheet

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Use the following score sheet to score your project before handing it in:

	Student	Teacher
1. Art Project is 3-dimensional (20)	_____	_____
2. Some aspect of hometown poem is apparent (10)	_____	_____
3. Some aspect of memoir is apparent (10)	_____	_____
4. Some aspect of journal writing is apparent (10)	_____	_____
5. Completed "Who Am I?" essay (20)	_____	_____
6. At least one art genre utilized (10)	_____	_____
7. Project is neat and organized (10)	_____	_____
8. Student introduces project in share day (10)	_____	_____
	TOTAL _____	_____

## Appendix B: Implementing District Standards

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### Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Program Goals

Having completed this unit, students will have achieved the following Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Program Goals for Language Arts:

Create works using the language arts in visual, oral and written texts;

- Read, write, speak, listen and view to construct meaning of written, visual and oral texts;
- Choose and apply strategies that enhance the fluent and proficient use of the language arts; (brainstorming, use of graphic organizers)
- Read with understanding and respond thoughtfully to a variety of texts

When done with this unit, students will have achieved the following Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Program Goals for the arts;

- Create (imagine, experiment, plan, make, evaluate, refine and present/exhibit) art works that express concepts, ideas and feelings in each art form
- Respond (select, experience, describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate) with understanding to diverse art works and performances in each art form
- Understand the connections among the arts, other disciplines and daily life.

### **New Haven Public Schools Academic Performance Standards**

Students will also achieve the following goals from the New Haven Public Schools Academic Performance standards for eighth grade Language Arts;

- Students will demonstrate strategic reading skills before, during and after reading
- Students will demonstrate strategic writing behaviors
- Students will participate in a wide variety of writing experiences

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