Michala Day

ENGL 381

Dr. Miskec

26 November 2018

Rising Above Adversity in Walter Dean Myers’s Novels

In Walter Dean Myers’s novels, he focuses mainly on black male adolescents struggling to survive in a society that breaks them down and labels them as “rebels.” In Myers’s novels, his main characters fight against the system to prove that they are not what society claims them to be. Moreover, they are diligently working to become something greater than themselves in a society that is pressuring them to be oppressed and follow the rules set. Latham quotes Rudine Sims Bishop saying, “Myers’s books both ‘offer a mirror in which Black readers can see themselves and their lives accurately reflected’ and at the same time ‘appeal to young adults from many cultural groups’” (73). In Myers’s novels, *Bad Boy: A Memoir*, *It Ain’t All for Nothin’*, *Monster*, and *Lockdown* the main characters, who are black male adolescents, have been surrounded by people in a world that thrive off conditioning and forcing the oppressed to follow the rules and regulations set by society much like the panoptical society Foucault discusses.

Myers’s memoir, *Bad Boy*, is the framework for many of his novels such as, *It Ain’t All for Nothin’*, *Monster*, and *Lockdown* and that Myers is calling attention to how, specifically, black, male adolescents are judged and ridiculed by society and the implications behind these actions.

In Myers’s memoir, *Bad Boy*, he recounts his upbringing and reflects on what experiences made him the man he is today. Upon beginning the novel, Myers states, “Each of us is born with a history already in place…While we live our own individual lives, what has gone before us, our history, always has some effect on us” (1). Myers addresses that although the past is in the past, it affects our future because inevitably it is a part of who we are as individuals. Myers uses this memoir to retell the stories of growing up as a child in Harlem, New York, and the experiences he dealt with attending public school and being a member of a low socio-economic family. According to Latham, “As such, *Bad Boy* offers not only a record of how Myers became who he is but also, at least implicitly, a commentary on how other boys in similar situations might negotiate their own identity development” (72). He discusses the atmosphere he had to battle with in school, as well as, in his own neighborhood. Teachers in Myers school based his grades off his conduct grade which was bad because of kids bullying him and his inability to stay focused. Becoming a latch-key kid at the age of eight, Myers was given a freedom that empowered him, but also made life a little rougher for him. According to Myers because he was a youngster from the north he, “was not aware of a race “problem” other than what I heard from older black people and an occasional news story (36). Latham asserts that Myers had to battle with the, “conflict between his developing identity as a reader and writer and the expectations imposed on him as both an African American and a male” (72) thus giving him the focal point for his other novels.

In his novel, *It Ain’t All for Nothin’*, readers encounter Tippy, the main character. Much like Myers, Tippy grew up not knowing his biological mother and was raised by immediate family members. Tippy struggles between following in the ways his grandmother has taught him and conforming to the life his father is teaching him. According to DeLuca, Tippy’s father is, “harboring a deep grudge against the society that seems every day to take his ‘manhood’ away from him” (131). Tippy’s father feels the societal pressure to be made normal, according to society’s standards, and is internalizes the idea that he can be nothing more than a criminal causing him to conform to the standard that society places upon him. In the novel, Tippy witnesses that his dad had been stealing. He states, “Maybe they belonged to Bubba, I thought, or even Stone. I thought a lot of things, but deep down I was thinking that somebody stole that stuff” (54). This is the first instance of Tippy’s innocence being stripped away and the overwhelming feeling of having to follow into the path set for him by society. Tippy visits a Catholic church in order to confess the sins that were baring on him after he aided in a robbery with his dad. After telling the Father what occurred, immediately the Father called the police telling them what he had heard. Before even realizing it, Tippy has become a criminal against his own will because of who he associates himself with and the acts he takes place in. Tippy’s constant battle between doing right from wrong showcases how society has structured individuals to succumb to the pressures and follow along whatever path that is given to them. Tippy wanted nothing more than to be accepted by his father without having to fall into the patterns assigned. By the end of the novel, Tippy has realized what he must do and results to turning in his dad and companions. Tippy states,

I didn't want Bubba to die. If he died because nobody helped him, then I would be one of the ones that didn’t help him. And I would almost be the main one because I knew I was not supposed to be this way (Myers 205)

DeLuca poses, “It is this absolute sense of right and wrong that saves him, coupled with an intuitive feeling that if he stands up to his father, his father will let him pass” (133). Much like Myers, Tippy has grown up with a replacement mother figure who has groomed him to know right from wrong, but still he is in this fight with society to prove he can be something other than just the stereotype.

In *Monster*, Steve Harmon has been marked as a criminal and faces charges for robbery and murder. Targeted because he is a black male, Steve suffers through a long trial of whether or not he is guilty or not knowing he did nothing wrong. Engles and Kory asserts that *Monster* “offers an insightful depiction of the effects of a hegemonic white gaze on young black men” (49). Steve, being a young black male, already faces so many hardships in society like discrimination, prejudice, and lesser opportunities. Being blamed for a task he did not complete further complicates his view of himself as a person. He states, “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” (Myers 62). Because society teaches Steve to believe that he is similar to every other black male, he automatically conditions himself to believe that it is true. Steve has a white lawyer who only is in this because it is her job. Throughout the novel, she keeps insisting that they have to make Steve look as if he is innocent. Pondering to himself, Steve knows he is innocent. Engles and Kory state,

Steve’s burden, then, as his white lawyer Kathy O’Brien repeatedly reminds him, is to present a version of himself that lays to rest that “unconscious racial feeling,” a burden not carried, or carried to lesser degrees, by young male suspects who are perceived racially as something other than black (50).

Realizing what society has named him as and attempting to relieve that stigma placed upon young black males, Engles and Kory pose, “Steve comes to understand that he is being read through a raced, classed, gendered, and age-related lens, which inserts him into the role of dehumanized “monster” (50) thus calling attention to how society behaves towards those that are minorities. In relation to *It Ain’t All for Nothin’*, both characters, Tippy and Steve, have been categorized as these criminals before they even have a chance to explain themselves. Both characters suffer from the “white gaze”, as termed by Engles and Kory, because of the color of their skin and their gender. In regard to *Bad Boy: A Memoir*, much like Myers himself, Tippy and Steve come from a low socio-economic household and have encountered people whose only purpose was to structure the main characters into how society portrays them. Not given a chance to explain or construct their own identity, they were cast into this archetype thus viewed as this whole instead of their differences.

In *Lockdown*, the main character, Maurice aka Reese, is in Progress, a jail for juveniles. Reese is taking part in a work program to lessen his sentence in Progress. While in Progress, Maurice deals with various people who test him while he is attempting to make himself better and get out of this lifestyle. While working at Evergreen, Reese is aware that people will look at him as a criminal because he is forced to wear the orange jumpsuit and be shackled in chains. Reese states, “I hoped it didn't rain on the days I was coming to Evergreen, because I didn't want them seeing me in my orange rain hood” (Myers 7). Being self-conscious of how people viewed him, Reese knew society saw him as a criminal because of his attire. Throughout the novel, Maurice is posed with questions and antics that classify him as a criminal and more so a black male only capable of being a criminal. He meets a man in Evergreen who asks him, “’You murdered somebody?’ he asked me. ‘No, sir,’ I said. ‘I didn't murder anybody.’ ‘White or black person?’ he asked” (58). Being already categorized as a murderer because of his skin tone, Reese is furthermore being placed into this group society has made. Much like Tippy, Steve, and even Myers, himself, Reese has dealt with oppression and racial remarks due to his skin color and gender and has been stereotyped as being a criminal or less than by the majority.

Looking at these novels, it is easy to see how Myers’s memoir is the framework for his stories. Growing up in a poor neighborhood and having to deal with oppression most of his life, Myers has created novels that focus on calling attention to the way society treats young black males as a whole instead of seeing them for their true selves. It is hard to cope with the idea that this is how society views these individuals, but through Myers’s novels he is teaching teens how to avoid falling into those stereotypes and how to overcome the adversity and the paths that society sets out.

Works Cited

DeLuca, Geraldine. "Taking True Risks: Controversial Issues in New Young Adult Novels." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 3 no. 2, 1979, pp. 125-148. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/uni.0.0379](http://doi.org/10.1353/uni.0.0379)

Engles, Tim & Kory, Fern. "“What did she see?”: The White Gaze and Postmodern Triple Consciousness in Walter Dean Myers’s *Monster*." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 39, 2014, pp. 49-67. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/chq.2014.0017](http://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2014.0017)

Latham, Don. "The Reader in the Closet: Literacy and Masculinity in Walter Dean Myers's *Bad Boy: A Memoir*." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 35 no. 1, 2010, pp. 72-86. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/chq.0.1949](http://doi.org/10.1353/chq.0.1949)

Myers, Walter Dean. *Lockdown*. New York, HarperCollins, 2010.

Myers, Walter Dean. *Monster*. New York, HarperCollins, 2015.

Myers, Walter Dean. *It Ain’t All for Nothin’*. New York, The Viking Press, 1978.