Here in Harlem Study Guide

Here in Harlem by Walted Dean Myers

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Walter Dean Myers is an accomplished and prolific writer of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction for young adults. Most of his prize-winning works explore the experiences of urban youth. Myers often turns to Harlem, his hometown, as a source of inspiration and as a setting for his novels and his poetry. In 1997, he published *Harlem*, a picture book of poetry illustrated by his son Christopher. The book focused on the representative historical journey of many African Americans from Africa to the southern United States, and then north to Harlem.

Here in Harlem: A Poem in Many Voices was published in 2004. It is a collection of fifty-four poems written from the different perspectives of various Harlem residents, each identified by name, age, and occupation. The characters include teachers, ministers, soldiers, students, and an undertaker. Each poem is a snapshot of a particular character's life, told in that character's distinctive voice. Together, the voices reflect the community of Harlem, which in the 1930s and 1940s was the epicenter of African American culture. References to historical figures, such as singer Billie Holliday, writer Langston Hughes, and boxer Joe Louis, appear throughout the poems of *Here in Harlem*. The poems are illustrated with snapshots from Myers's personal collection of over 10,000 antique photographs and other historical documents.

In the introduction of *Here in Harlem*, Myers credits the 1915 book *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters as his inspiration. In Masters's collection of some 200 poems, the characters are ghosts who deliver poetic monologues in a fictional Midwestern cemetery. Masters's book became an international popular and critical success. By using the same multi-voiced storytelling technique in *Here in Harlem*, Myers pays homage to an American classic while recounting the history and culture of his own community.

Author Biography

Walter Dean Myers, a prolific author of books for children and young adults, was born Walter Milton Myers on August 12, 1937, in Martinsburg, West Virginia. As a toddler, he was informally adopted by Florence and Herbert Dean and moved to Harlem. Later, he would take Dean as his middle name in their honor. Growing up in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s, Myers was influenced by the thriving African American community around him. He has set many of his award-winning books in Harlem, including *Here in Harlem: A Poem in Many Voices*, published in 2004.

The Harlem of Myers's childhood and adolescence was a vibrant community and a melting pot. His foster mother, also his father's first wife, was the daughter of a German immigrant and a Native American. His best friend was the son of German immigrants who owned a bakery in Harlem. But when Myers reached adolescence, he realized racism would limit his opportunities. He was torn between his life on the street and playing basketball, and his love of poetry and literature. He did not consider writing a viable career, and imagined he might end up a laborer like the other men in his family, not to mention most of the African American men he knew. Although Myers was encouraged early on by teachers to write as a way of surmounting his speech problems, he continued to have trouble in school and attended infrequently, never graduating from high school. To avoid gang involvement, he enrolled in the U.S. Army. Following a three-year stint in the military, Myers held several jobs, including mail clerk at the post office and construction worker. Disappointed with the life he was leading, he turned again to writing and began publishing in magazines. In 1968, he won a contest sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children for his first picture book, *Where Does the Day Go?*, which launched his writing career.

After working seven years as a book editor at the publisher Bobbs-Merrill, Myers was laid off, and only then did he turn to writing full-time. He eventually returned to school in his mid-forties to earn his degree from Empire State College. Although he has produced a wide range of books, including picture books, science fiction, fantasy, non-fiction, and mystery-adventure stories, he is best known for his portrayal of African American teenagers in urban settings, particularly Harlem. Many of Myers's award-winning books confront important issues such as suicide, bullying, drug use, gun violence, teen pregnancy, adoption and foster care, and parental neglect. Myers has won dozens of awards for his writing, including multiple Coretta Scott King Awards and the American Library Association's Newbery Honor Book designation, *Boston Globe/Horn* Book Awards, the Margaret A. Edwards Award, the Alan Award, and the Virginia Hamilton Literary Award. *Here in Harlem* is a recipient of the 2004 Bank Street College of Education Claudia Lewis Award for poetry.

Plot Summary

After Ambrose's poem and Myers's introduction, the first section of *Here in Harlem* is "Clara Brown's Testimony." Her words are largely in italics, unlike most of the poems by other characters. She also differs from the other characters because she is not given an age when she is first introduced. She addresses the reader in an intimate tone and explains she always talks about Harlem because Harlem is "like an old friend." This section functions as a prologue to the rest of the book, introducing the character, Clara Brown, as the book's unofficial narrator. She presents six testimonies throughout the collection.

Although *Here in Harlem* is not divided into chapters, Clara Brown's testimonies are each numbered with Roman numerals, like chapters, and mark the passing of time in her life. The other poems in between her testimonies are each introduced with the name of a character, the character's age, and the character's profession. In a sense, each character, like Brown, offers his or her own testimony in the form of a poem. In fiction, plot is often described as a series of events connected through cause and effect. Most poetry, however, tells a story without relying very much on plot. *Here in Harlem* has an "episodic plot," where each character is represented by his or her own poem, and in fact, some stories are linked across poems. These kinds of connections occur throughout the book, serving to emphasize particularly important sections.

Characters

"mali Evans, 12, Student"

This short, simple poem follows "Clara Brown's Testimony" and describes how the young character wants to be like the elderly Mrs. Purvis when she herself is an old woman, with "her gray / Hair like a halo around her black face / She says it's her crown, her tiara." This image of the dignified queen in her kingdom is juxtaposed—or placed in such a way for the purpose of creating comparison—with the "winos" who "smile and bow / Or raise their hands in greeting." Mali, whose name recalls both the ancient African kingdom and the modern African nation, says she would like to be "an ancient lady / Tree-tough and deep-rooted / In the rich soil of my dark / Foreverness / And the only thing white I would wear / Is the crown about my / Sweet black face." Opposite the poem is a turn-of-the-century photograph of a girl, dressed all in white with a white bow in her hair, demurely holding a bouquet of flowers. She appears dressed for a special occasion, perhaps for church, though even in her formal clothing, there is a gleam of playfulness in her eyes.

"macon R. Allen, 38, Deacon"

The deacon proclaims how much he loves "a shouting church," which are the same words of the elderly man Myers describes in his introduction. He speaks the words Myers had heard as a boy from the elderly man, but the deacon is younger and more agitated, as if he himself is testifying in the church and trying to "wake up" the congregation. The photograph opposite this poem depicts Winnie Mandela holding up her fist in a Black Power salute at a podium decorated with photographs of Nelson Mandela; a crucifix towers in shadows behind her.

"henry Johnson, 39, Mail Carrier"

Johnson speaks while sitting inside Ray's Barbershop and watching the street outside. He sees "A little black man / Sweat staining his underarms / Glistening on his brow / Fists pumping up the fire / Of the noontime air." Johnson thinks the man could be Marcus, referring to Marcus Garvey, an early twentieth-century black nationalist leader. Another man in the barbershop says it could be Martin Luther King Jr., and a third man says it could be Malcolm X. The names of those three political leaders act as the refrain to this poem: "Could be Marcus, I said / Could be Martin, came a voice from down / the way / Sounds like Malcolm, rang from the shadows."

A refrain is a phrase repeated at intervals throughout the poem. In the second stanza, Johnson sits inside Sylvia's, a celebrated Harlem restaurant mentioned in Myers's glossary of "Some People, Places, and Terms" at the back of the book. A stanza is the grouping of lines in a poem, much like the grouping of prose into paragraphs. In the restaurant, Johnson sees a second black man "[s]inging about revolution." Marcus,

Martin, and Malcolm are again invoked. In the final stanza, Henry sits inside the Victory Temple Church of God in Christ, which is perhaps the "shouting church" described in the previous poem by Deacon Allen. Henry sees a third black man "Preaching and teaching / Calling for the congregation / To bring forth a mighty nation." The poem ends with the refrain that mentions the three famous leaders.

"willie Arnold, 30, Alto Sax Player" and "terry Smith, 24, Unemployed"

Arnold's poem mirrors the fractured rhythm of bebop, a type of jazz music that gained in popularity during Myers's childhood. A cut-out of a record label, rather than a photograph, illustrates his poem. Following Arnold, Terry Smith's poem evokes an entirely different mood. It is the Christmas season, and he is unemployed with a sick child by his side. His feelings of despair are clear in the poem's final lines as hope passes him by: "Breathe deeply, child / The Magi have gone another way."

Clara Brown's Testimony: Part Ii

After Arnold's poetic testimony, Clara Brown reappears to tell the story of how her heart was broken when the Cotton Club, a famous Harlem nightclub, refused to hire her. After auditioning to become a dancer at the Club, she was told she was a good dancer, but they would not hire her because "they only hire light-skinned girls to dance here." Brown's skin color was too dark for the exclusive club. Brown ends this section, which resembles a journal entry more than a poem, with the words, "That was the day I learned that being black wasn't no simple thing, even in Harlem."

"christopher Lomax, 60, Retired" and "junice Lomax, 23, Unemployed"

These two poems are more explicitly connected than others have been. Christopher Lomax watches his daughter from his window as she suffers from the effects of drug abuse on the street below. That daughter, Junice, speaks in the next poem, closing with a description of the emotional ties and the seemingly insurmountable distance between them: "We are chasmed by the blurring crowd / I hear him calling from below / As I race recklessly across / A thousand frantic highs." There is no photograph illustrating these poems.

"hosea Liburd, 25, Laborer"

Hosea Liburd describes how he must leave both his manhood and his identity behind when he goes downtown in search of work. The poem is paired with a photograph of a city street and men looking into the camera, "their fear-wide eyes ablaze / With quiet cautions."

"william Riley Pitts, 42, Jazz Artist" and "j. Milton Brooks, 41, Undertaker"

William Riley Pitts speaks about his son's tragic accident, wondering "[w]hat the boy could have been." The photo accompanying the poem is of a young boy, dressed in a turn-of-the-century sailor's outfit. His poem is clearly connected to the one by undertaker J. Milton Brooks. Brooks's words reflect the essence of the boy's death: "But there comes a time when I have to weep / It's when we lay some teenage boy so deep / I close my eyes and pray the Lord to save / Me from watching old men shuffling children to the grave."

"john Reese, 70, Ballplayer, Janitor"

John Reese once played ball in the Negro Leagues. He now works as a janitor, but he describes his past and his feelings about Jackie Robinson's achievements in ending the segregation of American baseball in 1946. Although Jackie is a hero, Reese's feelings are bittersweet: with the end of the Negro Leagues, he and his teammates are no longer "monarchs ruling a joyful world." The poem ends with an image of the empty stadium because the Negro Leagues no longer exist.

"eleanor Hayden, 51, Nanny"

Eleanor Hayden's poem is both humorous and caustic because she is taken for granted by her employer, despite her hard work. The accompanying photo shows a stern-looking woman sitting on a park bench with her arms folded, and a baby carriage parked in front of her. She appears to be the baby's nurse or caretaker.

"tom Fisher, 38, Blues Singer, Livery Cabbie"

Tom Fisher appropriately offers a poem that resembles the lyrics of a blues song in style—complete with repetition, like the chorus of a song—and a love letter in sentiment. His "Sweet Martha" is always there to support him: "I wandered up to Paris, made my way to Rome / Ran out of money, Martha said, 'C'mon home.'"

"dennis Chapman, 40, Laborer"

In one of the longest poems in the book, Chapman recounts his past, how he left behind his family and his farm in Alabama to live in Harlem. In this poem, Harlem is compared to a tempting seductress who lures a man away from his home. Chapman writes a letter to the woman he left behind, pleading with her to join him, with this text in italics. The poem closes on an ambivalent note, with the woman arriving at the Greyhound station, telling Chapman their crops have died, though there is the chance of "new growth in the spring." The crops are a symbol of what they once shared and worked for together,

perhaps even a symbol of their love. At the end of the poem, the woman's eyes are already looking beyond Chapman, on the same "far horizon" that once enthralled him so much.

"c. C. Castell, 49, on Disability," "reuben Mills, 34, Artist," "jimmy Wall, 14, Boy Evangelist," and "john Lee Graham, 49, Street Historian"

C. C. Castell describes the bustle of Harlem. Originally from Mississippi, he comments on the arrogant, narrow-minded, ambitious youth who hurry past him on the stoop. Castell's quiet rumination is followed by the vivid colors of Reuben Mills, who sees the rich beauty even in dangerous, tragic things, for example, "Orange reflections on a switchblade knife." Fourteen-year old evangelist, Jimmy Wall, borrows theme and line from Victorian poet Arthur Hugh Clough, "through a glass darkly," to express his solid faith "and hope for God." John Lee Graham contemplates Harlem's African roots, drawing on African cultural references such as the Igbo, the Bantu, the Kalahari, Kikuyu, Songhai, Niger, and Timbuktu. These and other references to African culture reappear throughout the book.

"willie Schockley, 23, Street Vendor, Guitar Player," "etta Peabody, 60, Insurance Adjuster," and "delia Pierce, 32, Hairdresser"

Willie Schockley sings "those lay-down Harlem blues." Like the bebop style of Willie Arnold's poem, Myers uses music to express his character's thoughts and emotions. Etta Peabody speaks about "Nigger Heaven," the ironically-named area reserved for African Americans in the highest balcony of a theater. Delia Pierce delivers a gossip-filled monologue that is humorous for her insistence that "I'm not the kind to talk behind nobody's back."

Clara Brown's Testimony: Part Iii

Delia Pierce's poem is followed by more of Clara Brown's testimony. Her words call to mind those from janitor and former ballplayer John Reese. Clara says she is so happy about the "colored baseball player" playing for the Dodgers. When Jackie Robinson began playing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, he broke the color line in professional baseball and paved the way for the entry of black players into all professional sports.

"lois Smith, 12, Student," "jesse Craig, 38, Salesman," and "richmond Leake, 53, Newsstand Dealer"

Lois Smith wishes she could be so famous that a school would be named after her, so "young kids would want to grow up to be like me." Her poem is accompanied by a photograph of a young girl wrapped in a fancy coat and hat, smiling charmingly at the camera. Jesse Craig describes seeing Langston Hughes, one of the writers Myers included in his introduction. In tight couplets—two lines of poetry with the same rhyme and rhythm, often expressing a complete thought—the poem pays homage to Hughes, saying Langston was "no Keats / No fair Shelley"—nineteenth-century British poets—but instead "Negro Quintessential" and "poet Black." Richmond Leake's poem recounts his dissatisfying experiences in school and the compromises he has made to earn his living.

"helen Sweetland, 27, Party Girl," "joshua De Grosse, 19, Student, City College," "betty Pointing, 64, Clerk," "jonathan Smalls, 29, Urban Planner," and "adam Croons, 24, Furniture Mover"

Helen Sweetland recalls a time of "taffeta and dreams" and punctuates her poem with the rhythm and lyrics of swing music. Joshua De Grosse describes the poet's struggle to create beauty. In contrast, happily married Betty Pointing offers a poem more like prose, without any rhymes or line breaks. Jonathan Smalls celebrates "the crazy quilt patterns of the city," while Adam Crooms unabashedly delights in the music he hears at a rent party. Rent parties, where food and drink were sold for a fee to raise money for the host's rent, were popular in Harlem.

Clara Brown's Testimony: Part Iv

This part of Clara Brown's testimony is a humorous story about a mouse that, apparently, will only appear when it hears the music of Duke Ellington. On the facing page, a dust jacket from a recording called "I Can't Give You Anything But Love (Baby)" by Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of 1928 compliments Clara's "shake-your-booty" musical reference.

"malcolm James, 16, Student" and "gerry Jones, 14, Student"

Malcolm James, when asked what he is going to do with his life, expresses anger and bitterness at the constraints of racism and limited opportunities. On the other hand,

Gerry Jones watches life on the street "whirl and swirl" from her "fire escape tower," while reading a book of poems.

"mary Ann Robinson, 30, Nurse," "ann Carter, 32, Switchboard Operator/benjamin Bailey, 38, Building Maintenance"

Mary Ann Robinson works at Harlem Hospital and describes the scenes of suffering and death she encounters every day on her job. The next poem is a conversation between Ann Carter and Benjamin Bailey. The switchboard operator says she has seen Jesus on the streets of Harlem and proceeds to describe what Jesus wore and what he said. When Carter says she has also seen Moses, Bailey ends the conversation. The dialogue is written in rhyming couplets and has the brisk pace and the exaggerated expressions and punctuation of a comedy routine. Implied beneath the humor is a serious question about what these religious figures would make of life in Harlem.

"ernest Scott, 26, Poet"

This poem recalls the creative yearning of nineteen-year-old Joshua De Grosse. Ernest Scott makes numerous references to Harlem's rich literary legacy, including the writers Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston. He also mentions James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and W. E. B. DuBois, all of whom were important influences on Myers's writing. Scott celebrates the poetic voice of all life, good and bad, in Harlem.

"caroline Fleming, 42, Live-in Maid"

Caroline Fleming's words echo the resentment of Eleanor Hayden, the nanny, but there is also an undeniable sense of longing. She spends the day "smiling too hard" for people who are not her own. In "[a]rranging someone else's / Tattered life," she feels like she is far from a life she knows.

"effie Black, 58, Church Organist" and "marcia Williams, 17, High School Senior"

Effie Black considers how the chords played on the organ reveal something larger, "how all those perfect harmonies / Echo the sweet voice of a living God." Marcia Williams lyrically describes falling in love as being like a "sea creature" caught in a fisherman's net, far "from love's dark / Uncertain shore."

"harland Keith, 33, Reporter," "lawrence Hamm, 19, Student Athlete," and "sam Dupree, 28, Hustler"

Reporter Harland Keith also writes poetry but puts "aside his gentle verses" and his "haunted dreams," and learns "to love the darkness." The expression of Lawrence Hamm, who enjoys basketball, is similar to the joy experienced by former baseball player John Reese. But Lawrence has not yet experienced the disappointment that John has, and his poem is full of power, hope, and anticipation. Sam Dupree is a "stone-cold hustler," whose smooth words are full of strutting confidence. The accompanying photograph of a charming young man in a suit reinforces this image.

Clara Brown's Testimony: Part V

In this section of Clara Brown's testimony, the reader senses that time has passed. Brown is now an elderly woman being interviewed by a young college graduate who has heard that Brown is giving away black history books. They sit face to face yet find they are not really communicating: "We was just two black women, but life had shined her all up and given her a real pert outside, while it had made me strong inside. She was talking to me like she couldn't see any of that."

"didi Taylor, 14, Student," "dana Greene, 18, Education Major, City College," "bill Cash, 30, Boxer," "william Dandridge, 67, Mechanic," "charles Biner, 57, Composer, X-ray Technician," and "john Brambles, 55, Numbers Runner"

Didi Taylor describes the Harlem made famous by photographer James Van Der Zee, while Dana Greene lyrically describes her love for Harlem. Boxer Bill Cash lies awake in bed with a woman named Letha, thinking about a fight he should have won. William Dandridge thinks about the friends he has lost to death and also mentions Ray's barbershop, which made an appearance earlier in Henry Johnson's poem. Charles Biner once dreamed of being a classical composer, which is now a dream he keeps as his "black secret." John Brambles, in a taut few lines, claims he does not sell dreams, only "noise, a static buzz / That shuts out the whisper of despair…. I sell a way for people / To lie to themselves." His poem is illustrated with the cover of the "Black Cat Lucky Number Dream Book," which gamblers used to pick their lucky numbers.

"homer Grimes, 83, Blind Veteran," "frank Griffin, 82, Veteran," and "lemuel Burr, 81, Veteran "

The next three poems form the climax of the collection. The first poem is from Homer Grimes, rattling his cup, begging for spare change on the street. This is the same blind veteran mentioned by Myers in his introduction. An unidentified man who claims to be an old friend approaches Grimes, but Grimes does not remember his name. Then the unnamed man asks Grimes whether he is bitter. "What is past bitter?" Grimes replies. In the poem that follows, Frank Griffin describes being part of the 369th Infantry, also known as the Harlem Infantry, during World War II. He describes how Grimes saved the lives of fellow soldiers and was "the greatest soldier I had ever hoped to see." Yet he says Grimes was never properly honored for his courage. Lemuel Burr describes the day that he, Grimes, and Griffin were ready to board a bus to leave Camp Polk in Louisiana. A white woman kissed Homer and Burr worried because "she was white, and he was black / And when that bus sat there I knew / There was trouble coming." What happens next comes as even more of a shock because of the apparently upbeat rhyming verses of the poem: "We had saved the world from Hitler / But on that dark road they snatched our prize / They pounded away Griff's courage / And they tore out poor Homer's eyes." A verse is a single line of a poem, arranged rhythmically. Like Homer, the blind poet of antiquity, Grimes is given another kind of sight: "'What can you see?' the Negro doctor / Asked as he tried to ease the pain / Homer said he'd been away awhile / Now he saw he was home again." Accompanying the poems is a clip from a newspaper that testifies to the reality of racism and injustice black veterans faced. In it, a blind veteran is pictured next to an article that explains how he lost his sight after being beaten by South Carolina police officers.

Clara Brown's Testimony: Part Vi

After the veterans' powerful story, Clara Brown talks about being one of the "old folks," and she tells her long-time doctor not to worry about Harlem, which has seen better and worse days. The memories of the elderly are juxtaposed to the yearnings of the young in the poems that follow.

"lydia Cruz, 15, Student," "kevin Broderick, 20, Pre-law, City College, "and "earl Prentiss, 39, Motorman"

Lydia Cruz's poem is about the attention from young boys she is receiving. Kevin Broderick recalls the yearning and love for Harlem of the earlier poem by Dana Greene. The penultimate poem is by Earl Prentiss, who links Harlem to its African roots through survival of the Middle Passage. This sense of a circular African American journey is suggested in the arrangement of the poems: from Mali Evans, who wished to walk like a queen in her kingdom of Harlem, to John Lee Graham's view of the African roots in Harlem's history, to the African connections drawn by Prentiss.

"clara Brown, 87, Retired"

The book closes with a poem by Brown. Her age, 87, is finally given to the reader. She has seen a lot of change in her lifetime, but Harlem remains the same to her: "a pile of years / Keeps sighing and signifying / In my ear like an old friend / About my Harlem / About my Harlem / And it's all mine, you know." She has born witness to all the lives of Harlem, a poem in many voices.

Themes

African American Life and Thought

Here in Harlem is largely devoted to the African American community of Harlem, although other ethnic groups, such as Italians, Jews, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans have also made Harlem their home. Except for the poem of Lydia Cruz, their voices are absent from this book. Myers appears more interested in recreating the texture and diversity of the African American voices from his childhood and youth. By providing historical and cultural references throughout his book, he also encourages readers who are unfamiliar with these references to learn more about African American history. Readers can turn to the back of the book for an abbreviated glossary of people, places, and terms. In this way, the poems also serve as an introduction to some important highlights of African American culture and history. Like an anthropologist intent on documenting the life of a community through the diversity of its individuals, Myers includes a variety of historical figures from a broad spectrum of achievement. They include writers Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, James Baldwin; the photographer James Van Der Zee; the jazz bebop musician Charlie "Bird" Parker and the stride pianist James P. Johnson. Paul Laurence Dunbar makes an appearance through the allusions to Dunbar's "Sympathy" that Joshua De Grosse makes. Places and objects are just as important, such as the Apollo Theater and the Cotton Club, 125th Street and the A Train. Athletes are also featured, specifically Jackie Robinson. His integration of professional baseball in 1946 made him a hero in Harlem, and he is compared to the Greek hero Ajax in John Reese's poem. Intellectual and political leaders are also referenced, including African American leaders W. E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

In addition to African American history, Myers scatters references to Africa throughout his book, particularly to African kingdoms, peoples, and places. In street historian John Lee Graham's poem, an explicit connection is made between the Harlem streets and their roots in Africa. Graham has "captured the moment" of an Igbo child playing on the banks of the Ogun river, Bantu herdsmen squatting in the steamy Kalahari, Kikuyu women contemplating Mount Kenya, and Songhai warriors celebrating by the Niger River. Graham has captured all this, it is strongly implied, without his ever having left the streets of Harlem. The penultimate stanza of the poem brings the African past and Harlem together with an image of birds in flight: "I have captured the moment / When the scholars of Timbuktu / And the sages of Harlem flew together / In lazy circles over the broad Atlantic."

The poem from Earl Prentiss also clearly connects Harlem to its African heritage. Prentiss begins his poem with the words, "My village, my village," and goes on to link Africa with Harlem through "the same scorch of sun." Though the African languages of their ancestors are no longer spoken by African Americans, the influence of Africa is still felt: "The language their ancestors dreamed / An eternity before / They dance the dance

of the Congo / To a scale that has / Survived the foam and fleck / Of the Middle Passage."

Myers's desire to explore the influence of African heritage on African American culture reflects his own intellectual interests and research. A recent and specific example of this interest is in his 2003 award-winning book of poetry, *Blues Journey*, which was illustrated by his son Christopher Myers. The book opens by briefly tracing the development of the blues from its roots in Africa. Myers explains that the five-tone, or pentatonic scale, is very common in Africa, and it forms the basis for the blues. African musical and storytelling traditions also contributed the call and response pattern, in which a lead singer makes a statement, or "call," and the chorus responds. This call and response pattern is also evident in many congregations of African American churches, such as the "shouting church" described by Myers in his poem about Deacon Allen, in which he ends his poem by calling out "Can I get an A-men?." In some ways, *Here in Harlem* mirrors this pattern of call and response, with Clara Brown acting as the leader to her congregation of Harlem voices. In Myers's book, Harlem becomes more than an actual place, it is also witness to the living history of a momentous journey from Africa through slavery to freedom.

Limitations and Opportunities

Myers has often written of his commitment to writing for people who have suffered from limited opportunities. In a 2005 newspaper article in the *Post-Standard* of Syracuse, New York, Myers told Laura T. Ryan, "I've got fan clubs in prisons. I've got fan clubs in juvenile detention centers…. These are the people that read my books, identify with them." At one time, Harlem offered a vast range of opportunities for African Americans that were unavailable anywhere else in the United States. This was one reason for the flood of new arrivals during the Great Migration, a period referring to the movement of African Americans from rural communities in the South to cities in the North. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the majority of African Americans lived in the South. From 1916 to 1970, an estimated six million African Americans relocated from the South to the urban areas of the North and West. Most were in search of economic opportunities and freedom from the repressive racial discrimination, segregation, and violence they encountered in the South. Myers dramatizes the story of this migration in the poem about Dennis Chapman, who "drunk with bright / light dreams" leaves behind his land and his love, in search of more opportunities in Harlem, and he must face the consequences of his decision.

Segregation and racial discrimination, both of the legal kind prevalent in the South and the socially-sanctioned variety more common in the North, meant that African Americans were forced to invent and sustain their own institutions and businesses. Ironically, this permitted certain African American institutions to flourish because the choices for full participation in American society did not exist. With the advent of integration, these institutions were no longer supported and some went into decline or simply disappeared altogether. An example of this appears in the story of John Reese. Before he was a janitor, Reese was a ballplayer in the Negro Leagues, which included

teams like the New York Black Yankees and the Brooklyn Royal Giants. After Jackie Robinson integrated baseball, other professional sports followed, and African American athletes began to be recruited for these leagues and teams. Without the participation of the best athletes and the patronage of fans, and with competition from the Major Leagues, the Negro Leagues lost their ability to support their teams.

This is just one of the ironies of the African American struggle for civil rights; in some cases, with greater rights and equal access came the decline of African American institutions and the erosion of some African American communities. This does not mean these opportunities for advancement were not welcome or deserved. However, in examining the history of a community like Harlem, Myers shows the complex effects of integration on this community. While segregation and racism clearly denied countless opportunities to African Americans, they also indirectly helped sustain the vibrant cultural life of a community like Harlem. This was especially true while Myers was growing up.

When other opportunities for social mobility through employment and housing became available to more African Americans, many of Harlem's cultural leaders and more prosperous residents moved away from the community and no longer contributed to its well-being. Discrimination also existed among African Americans, as Clara Brown describes when she is rejected as a dancer at the Cotton Club because her skin is too dark. In many ways, limitations and opportunities played a complex role in the history of Harlem, and Myers explores this theme through the voices of characters like John Reese, Clara Brown, and Dennis Chapman. Throughout *Here in Harlem*, Myers tells the story of Harlem and its residents in an authentic and nuanced way, never avoiding the paradoxes of this special community.

Style

Multiple Voices

Though all of the poems in *Here in Harlem* are written by Walter Dean Myers, they are each written in a different voice from the perspective of individuals in the community. By presenting the poems in this manner, the reader not only gains Myers's insight and reflections about his neighborhood, but also those of the diverse characters who voice each poem. Myers explores the streets, homes, jobs, memories, and lives of the young and old, male and female, that make-up Harlem's African American community. The individual voices in the poems reinforce the idea that a generalized description or label of a neighborhood cannot accurately capture the various and unique realities of the people living there.

Diction

Diction is the selection and arrangement of words. Myers uses a range of diction to portray the characters of *Here in Harlem*. Myers's poems all use first person or personal point of view, which tells a story from the perspective of a single character. By creating many different characters that use the first person point of view, he must create distinctive voices for each character. The young students do not sound like the older veterans, and the hustler does not sound like the deacon.

Diction can be formal, informal, colloquial, or slang. All of these styles are found throughout *Here in Harlem*. The lofty writing in the poem by Joshua De Grosse is an example of formal diction: "I cannot write of beauty with this blind pen / These gnarled fingers are useless things / Scratchy useless syllables again and again / Cairo cries; the raged word sings." Myers reinforces the formal diction of the poem in its refrain of "Cairo cries; the raged word sings." This refrain is an allusion to the celebrated poem "Sympathy," by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), whose final quatrain is punctuated by the refrain, "I know why the caged bird sings!." In De Grosse's poem and in others, Myers uses a quatrain, which is a stanza of four lines. In De Grosse's poem, the first and the third lines rhyme, along with the second and fourth lines. This kind of rhyme is common in poetry.

In many of his poems, Myers uses informal diction, commonly found in relaxed but educated conversation. Colloquial diction is the kind of language used in everyday speech. An example of colloquial diction is when Delia Peirce says: "But I'm not the kind to talk behind nobody's back." Slang includes the latest phrases and terms not used in formal diction. The hustler Sam DuPree says "If I ain't getting over, it must mean I died." Myers alters the rhythms and line breaks of his poetry as well. Frequent line breaks and staccato rhythms are typical of the poems by musicians, while many of the students' poems include lyrical language, simple words, and longer sentences. By varying the

diction and forms of his poems, Myers can effectively represent the diverse backgrounds of Harlem's residents, along with the breadth of depth of his community.

Historical Context

Harlem's Roots

Here in Harlem includes characters that make many references to Harlem's long and distinguished history. Although the district of Harlem occupies a large part of the northern island of Manhattan in New York City, it has no fixed boundaries as a neighborhood. It may generally be said to lie between 155th Street on the north, the East and Harlem rivers on the east, 96th Street (east of Central Park), 110th Street, and Cathedral Parkway (north and west of Central Park) on the south, and Amsterdam Avenue on the west. Harlem played such a prominent role in African American history and culture that it is easy to forget its origins. In 1658, the Dutch governor of New Netherland established a settlement named after the town of Haarlem in his native land. The site of a famous battle of the Revolutionary War, Harlem remained largely an agricultural area through the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, fashionable houses were built as summer retreats. It was during the financial crisis of 1893 that property owners began renting to African Americans.

With the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the South, many African Americans arrived in Harlem and other Northern urban centers in search of a better life and freedom from segregation, discrimination, and racial violence. The First World War also opened up some factory jobs for African Americans, who flocked to the cities of the North. With this first wave of the Great Migration, Harlem became a center for political activism, as well as a wellspring of economic opportunity. The Black Swan Phonograph Corporation, for example, was a successful record company that issued records by African American performers. Myers included one of its labels as an illustration to the poem by saxophonist Willie Arnold. Madame C. J. Walker, who made her fortune from hair care products, made Harlem her home, and her daughter later hosted a literary salon in her Harlem townhouse.

A Political and Cultural Mecca

In 1917, Harlem was the site of a silent protest of 8,000 people marching down Fifth Avenue to decry the race riots of East St. Louis, which occurred when whites became angry over African American employment at a factory, and to protest the continued lynching of thousands of African Americans across the nation. Despite the marchers' direct appeals to President Woodrow Wilson, lynching was never declared a felony in the American judicial system. During the summer of 1919, increasing competition for jobs and housing helped contribute to bloody race riots that spread across the nation.

In Harlem, the Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey founded his Universal Negro Improvement Association, which emphasized pride in Black African heritage and the establishment of an independent Black nation. By 1919, the Association was the largest mass movement of African Americans in U.S. history, with a membership of several

hundred thousand. The Jamaican-born Garvey was eventually deported for tax evasion in 1925.

Other political movements also sought a home in Harlem. The N.A.A.C.P published a monthly magazine, *Crisis*, with W. E. B. DuBois as its editor. *Crisis* published the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Along with other publications like *Opportunity* and the *Amsterdam News*, these publications provided analysis of the important issues of the day and chronicled the achievements of African Americans, who were largely ignored by the mainstream press. With its critical mass of African Americans, and its influential intellectuals and artists, Harlem would attract leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Malcolm X who sought to share their political ideas.

Besides serving as a hub of political activism, Harlem was also an internationally-renowned center for the arts. After the First World War, Harlem hosted a thriving creative movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Artists and thinkers such as Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay were among its leaders. Hughes was particularly important to Myers's writing. He was considered the poet laureate of Harlem, and he was known for his poetry based on jazz and blues rhythms and on the lives of everyday people. Music, dance, theater, and the visual arts also played an important role in Harlem's cultural life, with jazz in particular finding a home in Harlem venues.

Harlem in the 1940s

During the Second World War, there was again a mass migration of African Americans from the rural South. Some 1.5 million African Americans left the South during the 1940s. Harlem faced yet another series of housing shortages, job competition, and racial tension. However, Harlem continued to attract new residents with its promise of opportunity and relative social mobility, especially compared to the vicious system of Jim Crow segregation in the South. In his memoir, *Bad Boy*, Myers describes his Harlem, a melting pot and potent symbol of the American dream:

Harlem … is an experience that will always live with me…. In Harlem the precise accents of northern-born blacks mixed with the slow drawls of recent southern immigrants and the lilting accents from the islands…. Black businessmen walked side by side with black orthodox Jews…. Even the white people who came to Harlem were colorful. In Smilen Brothers a bearded white man bent nails with his teeth and talked about the poisons in our foods. White nuns from St. Joseph's jostled with fat black women in Blumstein's for bargains, and the butchers in Raphael's meat market pushed slices of cold cuts across the counter for black children to nibble on while their mamas shopped.

The Harlem of Myers's youth was also a time when African American soldiers served overseas in segregated units. The 369th Infantry, also known as the Harlem Hellfighters, was one of these units, and the powerful story of three of its veterans comprises the climax of Myers's book. Myers makes some reference to later cultural figures in Harlem,

but the inspiration for *Here in Harlem*, as he describes in his introduction, is the street corner he imagined as a child, the Harlem in the 1940s.

Critical Overview

Here in Harlem is one of Myers's many books to be set in Harlem. Like his collection of short stories, *145th Street*, it focuses on the residents of Harlem to tell the story of a diverse community without resorting to stereotypes of urban blight, but also without ignoring real and pressing social problems. The characters telling their stories represent a broad spectrum of Harlem society, from those who lived on Sugar Hill, an affluent area of Harlem, to those who lived on the streets.

In the *School Library Journal Review*, Nina Lindsay praises Myers's skill as a storyteller in *Here in Harlem*: "Myers's skill with characterization and voice are apparent…. A complexity of experiences comes through vividly in the varying poetic styles…. The rich and exciting text gives readers the flavor of Harlem histories and peoples." A review in *Publisher's Weekly* is also positive about Myers's ability to take "readers [on] a tour of Harlem's past and present, its hopes and fears, through the voices of narrators young and old…. Harlem is indeed home, to all of the people who give voice to its pains and pleasures."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Nadine Pineède has a Ph.D. in history, philosophy, and policy studies in education, specializing in philosophy of education and philanthropic studies, from Indiana University. She is a freelance writer and instructor in history, education, and creative writing. In the following essay, Pineède considers the importance of Harlem in Myers's Here in Harlem *and throughout his prolific career as a writer of books for young adults and children*.

Here in Harlem is Walter Dean Myers's eightieth book. His work has spanned the range of realistic fiction, biography, adventure, science fiction, historical fiction, and poetry. Since the publication of his first picture book for children in 1968, Myers has continued to expand his readership, and he is one of the first African American male authors to achieve success in the field of children's and young adult literature. Myers has gained praise—and some condemnation—for his often gritty depictions of Black urban life and of the struggles of young African American men. His characters struggle with violence, self-doubt, crime, and corruption, and their dialogue often reflects the urban vernacular. At the same time, Myers's sense of humor often offsets the grimmer aspects of his urban settings.

Myers's use of the vernacular has been one reason detractors criticize his work. However, as author Rudine Bishop notes in *Presenting Walter Dean Myers*, "His characters reflect the full range of Black urban speech, both female and male, from street corner rapping to formal standard English." This is particularly true in *Here in Harlem*. Each poem is a snapshot of a particular character's background and perspective presented through his or her use of words. Each poem is written with distinctive diction, reflecting the uniqueness of the individual character. From maids to street vendors, deacons to hustlers, readers can learn about the wide range of people who made and make Harlem their home. As Myers states in his introduction, he wanted to create a cast of living characters and pay homage to a place he loves.

Growing up in Harlem, Myers was not always so keen to portray the richness of his community through his writing. He describes his failure to appreciate Harlem as a source of inspiration in his memoir *Bad Boy*: "Harlem was not exotic, or special. Harlem was just home." He was even disappointed when he saw the renowned Black poet Langston Hughes selling his books on the street, because Hughes looked like an ordinary man and not like the image of what young Myers thought a poet should be. Hughes did not resemble the Romantic poets Percy Shelley, John Keats, and Lord Byron that Myers was studying in school. The poetry of the Harlem Renaissance movement was not taught in the schools Myers attended. It was not until years later that Myers discovered the voices of Hughes, James Baldwin, and other African American writers, and only then did Myers realize that their depictions of Harlem could help inspire his own. In an interview with Barbara Hoffman in the *New York Post*, Myers says that the writing of James Baldwin "gave [him] permission, so to speak, to write about African American life, Harlem, and the experiences of the poor."

Among the many important contributions Myers has made to the field of children's and young adult literature is his use of urban settings, particularly in his depictions of Harlem. For many young readers unfamiliar with Harlem, the word itself may bring to mind all sorts of images. Unfortunately, most of them might be the negative images often disseminated by the mass media: crime, urban decay, drugs, and gangs. By providing a multifaceted portrayal of life in an urban African American community, Myers has helped provide a balance to the stereotypes of Harlem.

Myers has often said that in writing about Harlem, he wants to be of service to his community. In some sense, Myers's collection of poetry can be seen as a testament to the life experiences of Harlem's citizens. The word "testimony" is usually associated with a court of law, and as a verb it means to provide evidence or to bear witness. But testimony has its roots in religion, with the law in question being the divine law. In a religious context, to testify means to profess one's religious belief. Both senses of the word testimony are evident in Clara Brown, the character whose life provides a frame for the book. In each of the six sections of "Clara Brown's Testimony," Brown bears witness to eighty-seven years of Harlem life experience; as she says, a long life in Harlem "made me strong inside."

Furthermore, the many voices of young people in *Here in Harlem* reflect Myers's own experiences growing up in this dynamic com munity. By including a character like Lydia Cruz, Myers also seeks to reflect the changing population of Harlem and the diversity of its newer residents, many of whom are Spanish speaking immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. These residents have added a new cultural dimension to an already diverse community. Myers's focus, however, is on Harlem's special role in African American history and culture, which is evident throughout *Here in Harlem* and is emphasized by references to the artists, athletes, and politicians who made Harlem their home. Yet it is Harlem's ordinary people who are most cherished by Myers, whether they are shown congregating in church, chatting in barbershops and beauty salons, or mourning the loss of family. Myers is an inspired choirmaster, creating harmony from the many voices of *Here in Harlem* to portray a complex community replete with paradox, much like America itself.

However, his portraits are not completely romanticized versions of Harlem life. Myers does not avoid showing how Harlem can exert a dangerous power. For Dennis Chapman, who was part of the Great Migration north, Harlem is personified as a lover and seductress who saps the life from him with her glittering but essentially empty promises.

> Harlem blared a welcome—flashed its smile
> Rolled its city eyes, blew out its dark city breath
> Nibbled hungrily at my liver as I
> Lived it up and boogied down
> Ran it up, and spun it around
> Harlem eased me, calmed me, rubbed my chest
> Held me close on restless nights

Whispered in my ear that the blues loved only me
And that it was joy, not despair, that spread
Like sunrise
On the far horizon.

Although Harlem holds seemingly limitless excitement, Dennis Chapman never fully realizes the promises Harlem holds for him, as is evident by that fact that the fun and gaiety leave "the prison of [his] skin … cold, and damp." Yet, Myers portrays Chapman and Chapman's decision to migrate north with the compassion and respect such a decision deserves.

Myers's Harlem is not simply multifaceted in its populations, but also in its generations and their experiences. Some readers may be confused by how the book does not seem to be taking place in the current day, but rather moves back and forth in time. The cultural references to Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Van Der Zee all draw on the Harlem Renaissance. When Didi Taylor, a fourteen-year-old student, says she would love to be photographed by Van Der Zee, and talk to Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., it seems as if she is a contemporary of these early twentieth-century men. This movement between the Harlem of the past—of the years of Myers's childhood—to its present, adds to the book's sense of timelessness. In Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, the characters are ghosts. Some of the characters in *Here in Harlem* also seem to be speaking from beyond, offering their voices as a testimony about Harlem's past.

In the end, *Here in Harlem* is a nuanced testament to an ever-changing community. When Myers writes about Harlem, he is writing out of personal commitment to that community specifically, but also to a universal human ideal. From his writing, it is clear that he believes that the writer reaches the universal through the particular. In an autobiographical sketch reprinted on the Educational Paperback Association's website, Myers explains that the Harlem he knew as a child was not the Harlem he encountered in books. Through his writing, Myers has been faithful to the Harlem he knew.

The people I knew as a child were not the kind that were being written about. What I wanted to do was to portray this vital community as one that is very special to a lot of people. I wanted to show the people I knew as being as richly endowed with those universal traits of love, humor, and ambition as any in the world. This, I hope, is what my books do. That space of earth was no ghetto, it was home. Those were not exotic stereotypes, those were my people. And I love them.

As both a writer and a person, Myers has fully evolved, from not appreciating Harlem because it was not exotic enough, to appreciating it for its universal humanity. *Here in Harlem* is a loving testament to a community, honoring its past, its present, and its possibilities for the future. In Myers's deft poems, Harlem is a community that has both exhausted and exhilarated its inhabitants, all the while sustaining the promise of the American dream.

Source: Nadine Pineède, Critical Essay on "Here in Harlem," *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay by McGeee, Myers talks about his relationship with Harlem, past and present.

[Text Not Available]

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[Text Not Available]

Source: Celia McGee, "Harlem Comes Verse with Him," in *New York Daily News*, November 3, 2004, p. 52.

Critical Essay #3

In the following interview with Williams, Myers discusses the origins of Here in Harlem.

Walter Dean Myers has written plenty of books. His latest one takes a poetic look at his life and memories of Harlem.

Classroom Extra: What inspired you to use this unique method of writing about Harlem?

Walter Dean Myers: I read *Spoon River Anthology*, by Edgar Lee Masters. He takes a mythical town of Spoon River and writes poems about the people buried there. I read it again as an adult but didn't like it as much. It was interesting at first, but as an adult, I realized that he didn't really like the people of Spoon River. When I thought about Harlem, I loved the people.

CE: How did you choose the people to write about?

WDM: These were people that I encountered, and sometimes they were stories that I remembered as a kid. I remember being in Washington and getting into a cab. I asked the old cabdriver why he looked so tired. The driver said that he was a deacon in his church and he had just buried a young person and he was so tired of doing that.

I later met a nurse who was very excited about going to work, not because she enjoyed it but because she was useful.

All the poems come from somewhere. I wanted to give a voice to the people in my memories.

I express these memories through poetry. When you do a picture of an entire community, you need may voices, and poetry works.

CE: How do you get others excited about your approach?

WDM: Once, I brought in photos to a group of students and asked them to write poems about them, and what their lives would be like.

I like to give kids subjects to write about. With Harlem, I could write about a place that I loved, but every child can write about their own community. They can write about the things that they see. Make a list of people in your neighborhood and create a poem about how they were feeling that day, or about a particular event.

One of the things I do is challenge them to write a certain amount of lines about a particular subject. Write a poem with rhymes in the middle of the sentence instead of the end. This changes the way they approach language. I heard a rapper do that.

CE: What's your advice on how to get kids excited about reading and poetry?

WDM: I tell parents to spend an hour a day reading with your children. My whole family would read the same book. If the children were assigned a book in school, I read it, too. I started off reading the *Reader's Digest* and poetry with them. I realized that there weren't any black stories, so I started writing them myself

Walter Dean Myers has written more than 85 books, most geared to children. His three adult children are Michael Dean, Karen Elaine and Christopher.

Source: Jasmin K. Williams, "A Poetic Look at Harlem," in *New York Post online edition*, February 16, 2005, p. 1.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt from Writers for Young Adults, *the author explores Harlem's influence on Myers and Myers's influence on Harlem, poetry, and African-American culture*.

The Harlem where Myers grew up, the one he remembers and portrays affectionately in his early novels, was a gentler, happier place than the Harlem generally portrayed in contemporary media. Four of those early novels—*Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff* (1975), *Mojo and the Russians* (1977), *The Young Landlords* (1979), and *Won't Know Till I Get There* (1982)—are humorous accounts of the escapades of groups of young people who get themselves in and out of trouble, support each other when the going is rough, and generally try to do the right thing.

Myers' talent was recognized early in his career. *Fast Sam*, his first novel, was cited as an American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults, as was *The Young Landlords*. Critical response to his early novels pointed to what would become accepted as among Myers' greatest strengths as a writer: his ear for dialogue, his ability to create likable and sympathetic characters, and his ability to write humorously. Many of the themes that recur in his work are evident in these early works as well: African Americans helping each other, the relationships of fathers and sons, the importance of friendship, and the peer group as a small supportive community.

These characteristics are notable in *The Mouse Rap* (1990). The Mouse is fourteen-year-old Frederick Douglas, who lives in Harlem and loves basketball. He and several of his friends become involved in the search for the loot from a 1930s bank heist, rumored to have been left in an abandoned building. Meanwhile, his father, who is separated from his mother, is doing his best to work his way back into the family.

Each chapter begins with a rap, such as this one, which opens the book:

Ka-phoomp! Ka-phoomp! Da Doom Da Doom!

…

You can call me Mouse, 'cause that's my tag
I'm into it all, everything's my bag
You know I can run, you know I can hoop
I can do it alone, or in a group.

One of Myers' most notable skills is his knack for capturing the way urban African American teenagers, especially boys, often talk to each other. Even if the specific expressions threaten to become outdated, the flavor of their talking—the bragging, exaggerating, and image making—does not. These kinds of oral expressions come out of traditional African American discourse styles. Myers often uses this style in the voices

of both his narrators and his other characters. This is particularly true when the narrator is the main character, as in *The Mouse Rap*. Here is Mouse introducing himself to the reader:

Me, I can hoop. I can definitely hoop. I ain't jamming but I'm scamming. You may look great but you will look late. You got the ball against me and you blink and all you got left is the stink because I got the ball and gone. I played one on one with my shadow and my shadow couldn't keep up.

It is easy to undervalue this kind of language, partly because what is current changes so quickly. But this language is the reflection of an important aspect of African American culture, and for young urban African American men, one of the ways they establish themselves among their peers.

Typical of Myers' early humorous novels, *The Mouse Rap* includes a cast of characters that represents a mix of ages (teenagers, their parents, and their grandparents) and of sociocultural groups (African American, white, and Mexican American). Equally typical, Myers treats his characters with sympathy and affection.

It is possible to criticize *The Mouse Rap* and Myers' other humorous novel as lacking credibility, but Myers has a good sense of drama, knows how to keep a story moving, and in spite of some serious underlying themes, is playing strictly for laughs. These books are farcical, full of exaggerated comedy, and meant to be enjoyed.

Critical Essay #5

Myers has a strong interest in African American history and culture, and he has produced a number of books, fiction and nonfiction, reflecting that interest. *Now Is Your Time! The African American Struggle for Freedom* (1991) is a nonfiction work that combines history, biography, and a bit of Myers' own genealogy to tell the story of African Americans from Africa to the present. *The Glory Field* (1994) is a novel that follows one African American family for 250 years, from the Middle Passage (the forced voyage of enslaved Africans to America) to the present. *Brown Angels: An Album of Pictures and Verse* (1993) features old photographs of African American children, accompanied by original verses. It marks Myers' return to publishing poetry.

Myers' interests and writings continue to deepen and expand. The father of three grown children, Myers is also a grandfather. He lives in Jersey City, New Jersey, where he writes full-time. He considers that if he can produce ten pages a day, he has done a good day's work. His major contribution to literature for young adults has been to illuminate the lives and history of African Americans and to do so with humor and affection as well as with seriousness and great skill. In the process, he offers to readers of any social group insight into the human experiences and emotions that connect us all.

Source: Charles Scribner's Sons, "The Scribners Writers Series: Walter Dean Myers," in *Writers for Young Adults*, 1997, p. 1.

Adaptations

- *Bad Boy: A Memoir* was released by HarperChildrensAudio in 2001. It is narrated by Joe Morton. It was also released in 2005 in an unabridged version as a downloadable e-audio by Harper Audio. It is available from PerfectBound, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers.
- *Fallen Angels* was released as an audiocassette by Recorded Books in 2004. It was also released in an unabridged version as a Book on CD by Recorded Books in 2004, narrated by J. D. Jackson.
- *A Handbook for Boys* was released as an audiocassette by HarperChildrensAudio in 2002, narrated by Peter Francis James.
- *Monster* was released in an unabridged version on audiocassette by Listening Library in 2000. This version is a full-cast dramatization. It was also released on audiocassette by Recorded Books in 2000, narrated by Peter Francis James.
- *Scorpions* was released as a Book on CD in 1997 by Recorded Books, narrated by Peter Francis James.
- *Shooter* was released in an unabridged version as a Book on CD by HarperChildrensAudio in 2004. It is performed by Chad Coleman, Bernie McInerney, and Michelle Santopietro. It is also available as an unabridged downloadable audio from PerfectBound, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, released in 2005. It is performed by Chad Coleman, Bernie McInerney, and Michelle Santopietro.

Topics for Further Study

- Research at least three of the historical figures mentioned in *Here in Harlem*. Choose one artist, one athlete, and one politician. After your initial research, write a short two-paragraph biography on each. Why do you think Myers included each figure in his book? Choose one of the figures and write a ten-line rhyming poem about him or her.
- Research two of the African references in *Here in Harlem*. Who or what are they and why do you think Myers included them in his book? What role does Africa play in Myers's poems? Write a one-page essay presenting your research and opinion. Be sure to include quotes from the poems.
- In a group, each person should choose their favorite poem from *Here in Harlem* and stage a performance of it for the others. Write your own four-line stanza for this poem in the voice of the character. In a one paragraph explanation below the poem, explain why you choose that particular character. What more would you like to know about his or her life?
- Read or watch a video version of *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters. Choose one character from *Spoon River Anthology* and one from *Here in Harlem*. Write a one-page letter to the Masters character from the point of view of the Myers character. What has changed in the United States since the time of *Spoon River Anthology*? How would the character you chose from *Here in Harlem* describe these changes? Have these changes made life his or her life better? What does your character think the future will bring?

What Do I Read Next?

- *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981), by David Lewis, is an excellent introduction to the cultural period known as the Harlem Renaissance. Lewis's history of Harlem from 1905 to 1935 is an indispensable guide to understanding the importance of Harlem in American history and to the work of Myers.
- *The Stranger* (1946), by the French author Albert Camus, remains one of the most widely-read novels of all time. It is a classic of existentialism, a philosophy that questions how people find meaning in their lives. The story centers on an apparently amoral young man who commits a senseless murder and his subsequent trial. Myers recounts the influence of *The Stranger* in his memoir, *Bad Boy*.
- Ann Petry's novel *The Street* (1946) is set in the Harlem of Myers's youth. It is a story of an African American woman separated from her husband and struggling to raise her eight-year-old son as well as to overcome the violence and racial conflict of Harlem's streets. Petry received a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship for her realistic novel, considered a classic of African American literature.
- *A Langston Hughes Encyclopedia* (2001), a reference work written by Hans Ostrom and published by Greenwood Press, provides a comprehensive resource for the celebrated African American writer who made Harlem his home. Langston Hughes was a leader of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as a source of inspiration for the poetry of Myers.
- Myers's *Fallen Angels* (1988) is a prize-winning novel about seventeen-year-old Richie Perry. Perry, just out of his Harlem high school, enlists in the Army and spends a devastating year on active duty in Vietnam.
- Myers's novel *Monster* (1999) is illustrated by his son, Christopher Myers, and by Catherine M. Tamblyn. A Harlem drugstore owner is shot and killed in his store, and sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon is arrested as the lookout. An amateur filmmaker, Steve transcribes his trial into a movie script, showing scene by scene how his life is unfolding. The novel was a 1999 National Book Award Finalist.

Further Study

Bishop, Rudine, *Presenting Walter Dean Myers*, Twayne Publishers, 1990.

Bishop's book is a combination of literary criticism and biography that places Myers's work in its historical and cultural context. It provides an excellent introduction to the wide range of Myers's writing.

Masters, Edgar Lee, *Spoon River Anthology*, Signet Classics Paperback, reprint 1992.

Myers gives credit to Masters's book in helping inspire his own, and it is worth revisiting this classic of American literature to discover the voices of the 244 characters who speak about their lives as well as the social reform movements of their time.

Myers, Walter Dean, *Bad Boy: A Memoir*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

Bad Boy is a memoir of Myers's Harlem childhood in the 1940s and 1950s. It explores the conflicts between Myers's home life with his adopted parents, his life in school and his love of books, and his life in his neighborhood, all set against his struggle for self-realization as a writer.

Myers, Walter Dean, *Now Is Your Time! The African American Struggle for Freedom*, HarperCollins, 1991.

Myers provides a combination of biographical vignettes and narrative history to recount the story of the African American experience through the voices of various characters, including a freed slave, investigative reporter Ida B. Wells, artist Meta Warrick Fuller, inventor George Latimore, and Dred Scott.

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Review of *Here in Harlem: Poems in Many Voices*, in *Publishers Weekly*, November 15, 2004, p. 61.

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Review of *Here in Harlem: Poems in Many Voices*, in *Publishers Weekly*, November 15, 2004, p. 61.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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