SUPERSUMMARY™

IN-DEPTH STUDY GUIDE

BAD BOY: A MEMOIR

WALTER DEAN MYERS

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Mary Dolly Green

PLOT OVERVIEW

Bad Boy is a 2001 memoir spanning roughly the first seventeen years of YA writer Walter Dean Myers's life. In it, Myers explores how the time he spent growing up in a mixed-race, working-class family in 1940s-and-50s Harlem impacted his eventual career as a writer.

To do so, Myers first explains his complicated family history: Myers's biological parents were both black, but he was adopted at a very young age by his father's first wife, Florence—a half-German, half-Native American woman who later remarried a black man named Herbert Dean. Myers adored his adoptive parents, and fondly recalls how his mother instilled an early love of language in him by reading aloud to him in their "sun-drenched Harlem kitchen" (14).

Despite his strong reading skills, Myers initially had trouble in school, largely thanks to a speech impediment that made him the target of bullying. In turn, Myers would lash out at his attackers and get into trouble himself. As he moved through elementary school, however, teachers began to recognize his potential and take steps to help him succeed by providing him with books to read, enrolling him in speech-therapy classes, and eventually moving him to an accelerated class that would allow him to graduate early. Myers also benefited from the friendships he was forming, not only with the local boys he played basketball with, but also with fellow students of different races and backgrounds.

When Myers entered high school, however, his life slowly began to unravel. For one, Myers's increasingly intellectual interests distanced him from his parents; Herbert couldn't read, and Florence didn't read the sorts of literature Myers was now enjoying or, increasingly, emulating in his own writing. At the same time, Myers felt out of place at Stuyvesant High because of the emphasis it placed on sending its students on to college; although Myers himself desperately wanted to continue his education, his family's financial situation was deteriorating, and he realized that he would likely not be able to do so. Most of all, Myers was increasingly aware of how being black limited his options in life. In fact, he was so used to a school curriculum centered on white authors that he came to see his own blackness as an obstacle to his dreams of becoming a writer himself.

As a result of all this, Myers grew deeply depressed and reverted to his earlier "bad boy" habits; he skipped school frequently, got into neighborhood fights, and cut himself off from virtually all his friends. The exception was Frank—a man with a

history of blacking out and killing people. Although “mild-mannered” when in his right senses, Frank led a dangerous life, picking up odd jobs delivering drugs (158). He was eventually forced to flee the city for his own safety, and Myers—who had accompanied him on several jobs—realized that he was in danger as well. Shortly after high school graduation (an event Myers missed entirely), Myers enlisted in the Army.

Bad Boy doesn’t describe Myers’s adult life in detail, instead skimming over the years Myers spent in the military and in working various blue-collar jobs. Myers explains, however, that the unthinking life he was living eventually became intolerable, and that he turned back to writing as a result. Slowly, he began to see some of his work published—particularly once he realized his experiences as a black man were a potential source of creativity, not a roadblock to it. Myers eventually became a full-time writer and made his peace with his childhood, which he now considers “marvelous” (205). He writes that while his parents still don’t fully understand his career, they largely support him in it. Above all, Myers expresses his gratitude for the “world” he now inhabits, which he says is full of “book lovers and people eager to rise to the music of language and ideas” (206).

CHAPTER SUMMARIES AND ANALYSES

Chapters 1-3

Chapter 1 Summary: "Roots"

Myers begins his memoir with an account of the world (and family) he was born into, explaining that this backstory cannot be separated from his own experiences: "While we live our own individual lives, what has gone before us, our history, always has some effect on us" (1). In Myers's case, this history can be traced back to the era of slavery; his great-great-uncle, Lucas D. Dennis, worked on a plantation in what would later become West Virginia. After the Civil War, Dennis moved to Martinsburg, West Virginia, where his family "merged" with another family—the Greens—ultimately leading to the birth of Myers's mother, Mary Dolly Green (3).

Molly, however, died while Myers himself was too young to remember her. What's more, his family life was complicated by the fact that Molly was his father's, George Myers's, second wife. George's first wife, Florence, was the woman who actually raised Myers. Myers therefore details Florence's background as well, explaining that her mother was a German immigrant who married a Native American man. However, while Florence herself was biracial, her family didn't approve of her marriage to George Myers, which ended in divorce after the couple had two daughters, Geraldine and Viola.

Florence eventually remarried, this time to the man—Herbert Dean—who would become Myers's adoptive father. Herbert had declined to go into his own father's hauling business—and later left his hometown of Baltimore—to marry Florence: "The woman [...] was white, and that posed a problem in Baltimore. Perhaps, Herbert thought, it would be less of a problem in New York" (5). The couple therefore settled in Harlem, where they eventually brought Florence's daughters, Geraldine and Viola, to live with them. When they did, they also met the five children George Myers had had with Mary, and soon adopted the youngest son—Myers himself—as well.

Chapter 2 Summary: "Harlem"

The first home Myers remembers clearly is Harlem, which he describes as a "magical place, alive with music that spilled onto the busy streets from tenement windows and full of colors and smells that filled [his] senses" (7). In fact, some of his

earliest memories involve dancing in the street to music playing on radios; people would toss pennies to him, and he used these, as well as the account Florence opened for him at the local grocery, to buy treats like chocolate and ice pops. He would also spend time following Florence around the house as she did chores.

Initially, Florence sometimes took work outside the home as a maid, but after Myers got into a series of accidents—overindulging on popsicles; falling off a set of climbing bars at his babysitter's home—she decided to stay home and devote more attention to her son. This pleased Myers, who was somewhat spoiled; on one occasion, for example, he deliberately broke a watch his parents had given his sister, Geraldine ("Gerry"). Florence responded by spanking him, and then began sending him to her sister-in-law, Nancy, during the work week.

Although Nancy lived in a neighborhood with few other black people, Myers says that he was too young to be bothered by this at the time. However, the area was home to many Jewish families, and some of the boys who hung around his aunt’s bakery persuaded Myers to join them in fights with the local Jewish boys.

Although Myers generally liked Nancy’s neighborhood, his favorite memories are of the time he spent with his mother, whether walking around town shopping or simply listening to her read aloud from magazines: "The sound of Mama's voice in our sun-drenched Harlem kitchen was like a special kind of music, meant only for me" (14). Myers says he believes his mother was more open with him than with others, recalling how she would sometimes yodel for him. In turn, Myers was eager to impress Florence by learning to speak well and to read: "I liked words and talking, and wanted to be able to look at the magazines and tell her the stories as she did for me" (16).

Chapter 3 Summary: "Let's Hear It for the First Grade!"

When Myers was ready to begin school, a problem arose: his reading skills were equivalent to a second-grader's, but he had a speech impediment, so his teacher recommended that he not skip a grade. Still, Myers liked school on the whole, and only got in trouble once his first year (for dumping glue on a boy’s lap).

Things changed in second grade, when students began to make fun of the way Myers talked. Myers—who until then hadn’t really noticed his speech problems—eventually snapped and punched one of his bullies, but being sent to the principal didn't make much of an impression on him. His punishment—writing lines—also

didn't have the intended effect: "I took a ruler and made a straight line down the left-hand side of each page. That straight line was going to be my 'I' for each of the five hundred times. But when I wrote out the first 'I will never, never...' I learned that I couldn't fit the sentence on one line. Life was not fair" (20).

Around this time, Myers explains, his family moved to a new apartment on Morningside Avenue—a "wide and beautiful" street (20). Although initially designed as a one-bedroom apartment, the new home seemed large and luxurious to the Deans. Much to Myers's delight, his mother entrusted him with a key to the new apartment so that he could let himself in after school (Herbert had been drafted into the Navy when the U.S. entered World War II, and Florence and Myers's sisters were working outside the home). Unbeknownst to Florence, Myers used his key to sneak comic books discarded by a next-door neighbor into his bedroom.

Despite Myers's love of reading, things were not going well in school or speech therapy: "The trouble was that to me, the words seemed clear. I found it frustrating when a teacher would ask me to repeat a phrase over and over, or when a teacher said that I did not know a word because I did not pronounce it correctly" (25). Myers's sensitivity over his speech contributed to his conduct problems, which eventually caused his third-grade teacher to fail him in most subjects. He was allowed to proceed to fourth grade, but Florence spanked him and told him he would need to study over the summer.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

One of the most prominent themes in *Bad Boy* is the relationship between individuals and the communities they belong (or wish to belong) to. Although some of these communities are chosen freely, others (like one's racial or class group) are not, and as *Bad Boy* progresses, it becomes clear that Myers struggled with this realization quite a bit as a young man. As a narrator, however, he not only accepts it but suggests that individual people can only be understood within the context of these larger forces: *Bad Boy* is a personal memoir, but Myers begins not with himself but instead with his family and his ancestors, including many who died long before his own birth. What's more, he explicitly calls attention to this fact in the opening lines of the book, explaining that he must "consider the events and people who came before [him]" in order to make sense of his own experiences and identity (1).

The fact that Myers traces his ancestry all the way back to the Civil War is a hint that race and racism will also loom large in the book. Herbert and Florence—Myers's parents, as well as an interracial couple—move to Harlem in the hopes of escaping prejudice, and in some respects succeed; as a young boy, Myers isn't "really aware of racial differences," and is perfectly comfortable visiting the predominantly white neighborhood where his aunt lives (humorously, he is more bothered by the fact that his aunt makes him take naps than anything else) (12). As Myers grows older, however, he begins to realize that racial inequality does in fact exist in New York, and that while it may take less immediately obvious forms in the North than it does in the South, it can still dramatically impact his life and the choices that are available to him.

Finally, the first chapters of *Bad Boy* establish Myers's love of language. His initial desire to learn to read, however, stems not from the stories Florence reads to him, but from a wish to be more like his mother. This suggests that Myers in some sense views language both as a way of defining who he is and of establishing or cementing his relationships to others. For the moment, these two impulses align with one another; Myers wants both to resemble and feel close to Florence. As time goes on, though, the two desires begin to clash with one another—something Myers hints at when he says, "Years later, when I had learned to use words better, I lost my ability to speak so freely with Mama" (15).

The role and purpose of language are also at the heart of Myers's struggles at school. Despite his skills as a reader (and, as will later become clear, a writer), Myers has trouble expressing himself thanks to a speech impediment. This is no doubt frustrating in and of itself, but it is also a blow to Myers's self-image; he notes, for instance, that teachers often assume his difficulty speaking means that he is unintelligent or ignorant. It also leads to bullying, which in turn causes Myers to lash out at his attackers. Myers's speech impediment is therefore symbolic of the broader problems he will have articulating and defending his identity as he grows older, with his childhood misbehavior serving as a warning about the violence that can erupt when people feel that they have no voice.

Chapters 4-6

Chapter 4 Summary: "Arithmetic Summer"

Myers began taking math lessons with his sister Viola's husband. He hated the rote learning involved in these tutoring sessions, but the trade-off was that he was

allowed to keep going to Bible school, which he genuinely enjoyed. In fact, it was partly a religious feeling that inspired Myers to turn over a new leaf at school the coming year: "I wanted to be good and do God's will, as I was being taught in church" (28).

The school year started off well, with Myers befriending a white boy named Eric Leonhardt; the two served as "cookie monitors," fetching treats and milk for the class from a local bakery. However, Myers's teacher was strict and warned Myers early in the year that she wouldn't tolerate misbehavior—something Myers was able to avoid until spring, when he got into a fight with another boy. As Mrs. Parker told Myers off in front of the class, he picked up a book and threw it: "I meant to throw it into the corner to show how mad I was. [Mrs. Parker] saw me getting ready to throw the book and jumped to one side. The book hit her on the shoulder, and she screamed" (31).

Mrs. Parker threatened to send for the police and put Myers in reform school. Before she could even inform Myers's mother, however, an emergency arose: the fight had caused Myers's stomach to start cramping, and when Florence took him to the hospital, he had to have his appendix removed.

The school principal brought Myers two books to read while he recovered from surgery, but by the time he was discharged from the hospital, he was beginning to grow bored: "I always had to be doing something. I had a very hard time sitting still and doing nothing. I would fill any space with some kind of physical activity" (33). He therefore went for a bike ride against his doctor's orders, reopening his stitches and returning to the hospital for a night. Afterwards, Florence quit her job at a button factory to look after Myers, and Myers was promoted to fifth grade without actually finishing out the school year.

Chapter 5 Summary: "Bad Boy"

In retrospect, Myers says, the summer of 1947 was pivotal for black Americans, thanks to efforts to desegregate professional sports and the U.S. military. At the time, however, Myers was "not aware of a race 'problem' other than what I heard from older black people and an occasional news story" (36). Nevertheless, he was interested in sports, and would occasionally see famous black athletes like Joe Louis in Harlem.

Meanwhile, Myers's biological father had moved to Harlem, and Myers met both him and several brothers and sisters that summer. Myers was curious about his

biological family and struck up a friendship with his brother Mickey. Nevertheless, he continued to feel that the Deans were his true family, and even met Herbert Dean's brother, Lee, who had recently been released from jail.

Because he was still recovering from surgery, Myers largely stayed out of trouble that summer. The exception occurred when he and some other boys—having read about a lynching—decided to "hang" another boy. A minister caught them, and the boys' parents forced them to whitewash a fence. This was a relatively lenient punishment, however, since beatings were an accepted practice in the neighborhood: "Beatings were not considered abuse. Black families, often working very hard to make ends meet, wanted to clearly define which behavior was acceptable and which was not" (40).

That fall, Myers entered a new school and quickly got in trouble: his teacher, Mrs. Conway, required him to read aloud, and Myers threw a book at a student who began laughing at his pronunciation. Myers continued to struggle throughout the year, eventually punching a classmate. In response, Mrs. Conway sent Myers to the back of the classroom, telling him he was a "bad boy" (45). However, she also gave him a book of fairy tales to read, which Myers ended up enjoying so much that Mrs. Conway gave him permission to read each day during class. Myers says this is when he began to understand his love of reading: "Reading a book was not so much like entering a different world—it was like discovering a different language" (46). Over time, Myers's relationship with his teacher improved; he earned good marks at the end of the year, and the school magazine even published a poem of his entitled "My Mother."

Chapter 6 Summary: "Mr. Irwin Lasher"

Myers describes the sights and sounds of Harlem in the summer of 1948: "It [was] common to hear loudspeakers in the music stores fill the area with the sounds of jazz and to see strollers adjust their rhythms to the beat set down by Count Basie" (48). Myers focuses in particular on 125th Street, explaining that when black workers convinced shop-owners there to begin hiring them, the area became more diverse and busy, complete with movie theaters and arcades.

Around this time, Myers decided he wanted to be an athlete: it was a field open to black Americans, and he spent a lot of time playing basketball with friends. He also continued to read voraciously, but hid this "secret vice" from boys who would tease him for it: "[T]hough by now I was fighting older boys and didn't mind that one bit,

for some reason I didn't want to fight about books. Books were special and said something about me that I didn't want to reveal" (52).

Myers, in other words, had realized that reading wasn't "what boys did" (52). For similar reasons, Myers initially joined his friends in mocking a group of girls dancing in the gym, despite actually enjoying dancing himself. Ultimately, however, Myers ignored his friends' and his father's disapproval and took part in the performance the girls were practicing. Myers was simultaneously becoming more interested in girls and sex, thanks in part to the information (and misinformation) his friend Eric shared with him. He also began to earn a bit of money for himself by carrying packages.

The first time Myers acted out in sixth grade—accidentally kicking his teacher, Mr. Lasher, in the process—Lasher spoke to Myers's mother: "'We need more smart Negro boys,' he said. 'We don't need tough Negro boys'" (57–58). From that point on, Lasher went out of his way to help Myers, placing him in day-long speech therapy sessions, encouraging him to tutor other students, and recommending him for an accelerated class the following year. Myers's newfound sense of being "special" improved both his grades and his behavior, with one notable exception: he blamed Florence for injuries he'd actually gotten trying to hitch a ride on the bumper of a car (58). His false claim that Florence had beaten him stunned and hurt her, and caused strain between her and her husband. Myers consequently believed it was "God's revenge" when he later injured both feet jumping off a roof (58).

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

As Myers approaches adolescence, questions of personal identity become more pressing. It's around this time that Myers learns to love reading on its own terms (rather than as a way to feel close to his mother), and he soon begins thinking of himself as a reader. The appeal of books lies partly in what he calls the "clarity" of the language compared to his own; implicitly, Myers is drawn to the written word because he has so much trouble speaking aloud. Books, however, also appeal to something even more fundamental in him: "The 'me' who read the books, who followed the adventures, seemed more the real me than the 'me' who played ball in the streets" (46). Myers, in other words, finds that books speak to a part of his personality that is largely separate from the community and environment he has grown up in.

To be sure, Myers also sees his love of reading as a potential way of bonding with others; he talks, for instance, about feeling a “connection" with the other children he sees at the local library (52). Already, however, Myers recognizes a tension between his growing identification as a reader and his desire to fit in with those around him. This is especially clear in the realm of gender. Myers grows up in a community with relatively traditional views toward gender roles, and although Myers easily conforms in some ways (he enjoys sports and, to some extent, even fighting), his interest in the arts is conventionally associated with sensitivity and therefore femininity. As a result, Myers hides his interest in reading from most of his friends, which ultimately contributes to a growing divide between his sense of himself as a reader and his place in the Harlem community.

Race also begins to play a larger role in these chapters, though not necessarily in young Myers’s mind; as he says, he was still mostly oblivious to racism at the time—so much so, in fact, that he participates in a mock lynching without understanding the implications of what he’s doing. On some level, however, he has already begun to absorb the lessons of a racist society. His desire to become an athlete, for instance, stems partly from the fact that it is one of the few areas he sees black people represented: “What I knew about black people—or Negroes, which was the preferred term at that time—was primarily what I saw on 125th Street, in the newspapers, and in church. Blacks were entertainers, or churchgoers, or athletes” (50). Furthermore, those around him are aware of the existence of racial inequality, including white teachers like Mr. Lasher, who see in Myers part of the solution to the problem.

Chapters 7-9

Chapter 7 Summary: "I Am Not the Center of the Universe"

Viola and Geraldine left home in 1949, leaving Myers with more time to think about how to navigate life and put the values he was learning into practice: "But there was something else going on, and that was the idea that while I wanted to be good—and my idea of being good was a very tolerant one—I also wanted to be like other kids so I would have friends" (66). By this point, however, both Myers’s athletic ability and his reading skills had outstripped those of other children his age, causing him to feel increasingly isolated.

Nevertheless, Myers was looking forward to his twelfth birthday; Florence had forgiven him for lying about the beating, and had promised him a party, a glove,

and a bat as rewards for his success in school. The day of his birthday, however, Myers learned that his uncle, Lee, had been mugged and killed the previous night. Both the funeral and the drive home were strange experiences for Myers, who saw his adult relatives crying and then watched passers-by going about their daily life, unaware of Lee's death.

Lee's death deeply affected Herbert; he returned from the morgue "wild-eyed and nearly incoherent" and, in the weeks and months that followed, sunk into a state of depression (70). He became detached from his family and the outside world, delving deeper into religion and spending hours listening to church programs on the radio.

Herbert remained in this state for roughly a year, exacerbating the growing sense of isolation Myers was experiencing not only at home but at school. On Mr. Lasher's recommendation, Myers and his friend, Eric, had joined an accelerated class to complete the seventh and eighth grades in one year. Myers enjoyed being around other gifted students, but his race sometimes placed him in uncomfortable positions, particularly during discussions of slavery (75).

Nevertheless, Myers excelled at school and spent increasing amounts of time reading and writing while at home. The flip side of this, however, was that he spent less time talking to his mother, who was also suffering as a result of her husband's depression; among other things, Florence began playing the lottery frequently.

Chapter 8 Summary: "A Writer Observes"

Myers began taking walks around Harlem, attempting to describe his hometown the way he imagined a writer would. Harlem had a rich history, Myers explains, having first been built as an elite neighborhood for wealthy white residents before becoming the center of New York's black community. Myers, however, still struggled to write about Harlem in a way he found satisfying, in part because the neighborhood was so familiar to him: "I had brought romantic images of Mark Twain's Mississippi River with me when I went to the Hudson, but it wasn't to be. There were a few old boats moored on the next pier, one that looked like a coal scow, but nothing even vaguely romantic" (79).

Myers also tried to write about his neighbors: the Dodsons (including Mrs. Dodson, whom Myers resented for trying to stop him from reading comics); Melba Vale (a moderately famous flamenco dancer some disliked for "trying to be 'not just

another Negro'"); and Bodie Jones (a boy whose "dad or uncle played in Count Basie's band") (83, 84).

Partly thanks to his observations, Myers was becoming increasingly aware of race as a major factor in American life; Myers would watch, for instance, as Harlem's largely black population boarded the train each morning for "jobs as laborers, cleaning people, messengers" (85). Despite this, Myers resisted strongly identifying with the black community, wanting instead to emulate the writers he loved rather than to achieve "something that was commendable only as a Negro accomplishment" (85). Eventually, however, his frustration with his lack of progress led him to temporarily give up writing.

Meanwhile, Myers's relationships with his peers were evolving. He had become good friends with his brother, Mickey, but occasionally grew frustrated with Mickey's "laid-back, almost passive" demeanor and reluctance to fight (84). These kinds of gender norms, as well as racial prejudice, were also beginning to shape Myers's friendships with his fellow students: at one point, he and several other male classmates got in trouble for attempting to drive a bus to prove themselves "macho," and a boy named Eddie stopped Myers's friend Eric from bringing him to a party simply because Myers was black (86).

Chapter 9 Summary: "Sonnets from the Portuguese"

By the summer after the seventh and eighth grades, Myers's educational and athletic achievements had caused him to grow even more isolated; he continued to play and enjoy basketball, for instance, but had a hard time relating to the older boys he matched in skill. Myers's determination not to end up in a blue-collar, low-wage "'Negro' job" also set him apart from his teammates (92). The result, Myers explains, was that he lived a kind of double life, hiding his literary interests behind a masculine and "fairly rough" demeanor (92).

Once back in school, Myers joined his fellow students in making life difficult for their ninth-grade teacher, Mrs. Finley: he and his male classmates chewed tobacco in class and routinely started spitball fights. Myers did, however, appreciate some of the literature Mrs. Finley asked them to read, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning's emotional sonnets and Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

> [It] did not have the elegance of any of the sonnets we had read, nor did it have the soaring language of a poem by Shelley or Byron. It was poetry designed to

> tell a tale [...] It had a symbolism that wasn't in the other poems, and it also involved the poet's ideas about the moral responsibility of the mariner (99).

Other writers gave Myers more difficulty, and he sometimes struggled to see himself in the British authors the class studied:

> The prints we saw of Shelley and Byron were of ethereal young white men with flowing hair. Mrs. Finley made them sound as if they were naturally brilliant, and I studied the images, trying to discern who they were. It was clear they were like no one I had ever known (97).

Despite living in Harlem, Myers explains, he was unaware of the work of black writers like Langston Hughes.

Myers and his classmates never settled down, and at the end of the year Mrs. Finley scolded them for wasting their talents. This itself made an impression on the students, however, and Myers and his classmates left Mrs. Finley's class with confidence in themselves and their abilities. For Myers, however, academic success meant drifting further away from his parents; Herbert, for instance, never commented on Myers's poems, which he later learned was because his father couldn't read.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

Bad Boy is a coming-of-age story, and Lee's death marks a major turning point in Myers's growth. As the title of the chapter ("I Am Not the Center of the Universe") suggests, the event shatters Myers's childish self-centeredness. His previous certainty that his parents' lives revolved around his own hopes and desires is common in young children, but obviously mistaken; Lee's death disrupts a day that was "supposed" to belong to Myers, and then throws his father into a profound depression that prevents him from fully attending to Myers's (or Florence's) needs. At the time, Myers struggles to cope with this shift in family dynamics, which makes the fact that *Bad Boy* is a memoir especially significant. In retrospect, Myers is able to see Herbert less emotionally and more clearly: as a man, with human strengths and weaknesses, rather than simply as Myers's father.

In some ways, Myers's recognition that his parents have lives and concerns beyond him goes hand in hand with another dawning realization—namely, that society at large doesn't necessarily care about his own hopes and dreams. Although he

sometimes lashes out in frustration, Myers is by and large a "good" boy, in the sense that he wants to lead a life consistent with the values he has learned. He also initially believes that leading this kind of life will pave the way for him to achieve his goals: "I believed in a certain fairness. Over the long haul things would have a way of working themselves out toward an essentially good position [...] By accepting [my school's] values, I imagined, I would move into a society that would find me as wonderful as I found it" (66). Increasingly, however, it seems that this may not be the case. Although Myers adores much of what he reads in school, he is also slowly becoming troubled by the fact that virtually all of his role models are white, since this raises the question of whether there is room for him in the world of literature he wants to join.

Of course, there is a long history of black literature in the United States—including in Myers's own neighborhood. At the time Myers was attending school, however, the work of these writers hadn't yet become part of the curriculum. Instead, the work of white (and predominantly male) writers was taught on the assumption that it embodied universal artistic standards. To be sure, Myers finds many things to admire and draw on in the literature he studies, including some elements he can relate to his own experience; he enjoys and imitates Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, because her work focuses on the writer's subjective thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, the exclusive focus on white authors leads Myers to unconsciously adopt some of the values of a racist society—including, most obviously, a hatred of his own blackness. He admits, for instance, that he "secretly [...] wanted to be an English poet" (97). This desire contributes to Myers's growing struggles as a writer; he finds himself unable to write about the things he has direct knowledge and experience of (for instance, life in Harlem) because he is trying to see it the way writers like "Byron and Shelley" would (80). Myers's growing immersion in the literature he studies also cuts him off from his community in other, more concrete ways—for instance, by distancing him from working-class men like his father, who never learned to read.

Chapters 10-12

Chapter 10 Summary: "Heady Days at Stuyvesant High"

Up until 1951, Myers explains, his family had been working-class but not poor: they had never lacked food or basic comforts, they could always find ways to pay rent, and they could splurge a bit for Christmas. That summer, however, money became tight, even with Myers himself working odd jobs; Herbert's father, William, had

moved in with the Deans after his eyesight deteriorated too much for him to live alone, but his presence caused both financial and emotional tension in the household. William had old-fashioned habits and opinions, particularly regarding women, and tended to treat Florence as a servant. In retrospect, Myers regrets not being more of an "ally" to his mother during this period: "I had already grown apart from her in so many ways that our conversations, instead of deepening, had become more and more guarded" (105).

Myers was also preoccupied with his own problems: his relationship with God, for instance, had become "tenuous," and William's strict religiosity made him nervous (105). What's more, he was struggling to fit in at Stuyvesant; its heavy emphasis on the sciences proved unexpectedly challenging, and its hours prevented him from socializing with his friends back in Harlem. Although he continued to spend time with Eric (mostly doing homework), Myers felt increasingly lonely and longed for a friend who would truly understand him.

Things grew worse as time went on: Myers's grades suffered, and he spent more and more time reading, as well as following the "romp of the Brooklyn Dodgers through the National League" (108). Myers describes himself as a highly competitive person, and the eventual loss of the Dodgers at a time when he was investing so many of his hopes in them left him "devastated" (109). Although Myers continued to enjoy English class (particularly creative writing), he began to skip speech therapy.

Race and racism were also becoming more prominent forces in Myers's life; Myers knew, for instance, that his friend Eric could go to parties that he himself couldn't. Although both Florence and Herbert had tried to talk to Myers about race, their own experiences hadn't equipped them to prepare Myers for his own. As a result, Myers increasingly struggled with the realization that most of the authors and figures he admired were white, and questioned how he could "fit in to a society that basically didn't like [him]" (113).

Chapter 11 Summary: "The Garment Center"

As Myers began his junior year, he was more cut off than ever. Myers's classmates shared their school's assumption that they would go on to attend college and pursue prestigious careers. Myers, however, had fewer options; many schools rejected black students, and Myers didn't like the idea of "voluntary segregation" at a historically black university (119). Compounding the problem, he had few ideas

about what he would like to do, and he feared that his speech impediment would close many career paths off to him regardless. And while Myers's difficulty speaking had drawn him to writing, "the idea that creative writing could be anyone's *job* never entered [his] mind" (121).

Financial difficulties also loomed large as Myers looked forwards. Myers initially resisted an offer from his cousin to help him get hired at a clothing factory; although he knew many people (including his mother) who had worked at the "garment center," he resented the idea of taking a job at a place that largely employed black and immigrant workers. However, when he failed to find work elsewhere, Myers relented. To his frustration, he was soon transferred to an "outside" job, where the majority of the center's black employees worked "hustling through the streets with huge racks of dresses, or pushing hand trucks taller than they were" (116).

Even with Myers working, however, money remained tight; Myers wasn't able to afford the clothing necessary to join Stuyvesant's track team, much less go to college, and he feared that he would end up "join[ing] the army of black laborers sweating and grunting their way through midtown New York" (122).

In the midst of these difficulties, Myers took solace in reading: "Books are often touted by librarians as vehicles to carry you far away. I most often saw them as a way of hiding one self inside the other" (126). He also continued writing, hoping to buy a typewriter with the money he was saving up from work. He entrusted this money to his mother, however, who eventually lost Myers's savings playing the lottery. Herbert attempted to make things up to Myers by buying him an old typewriter from a pawnshop, but Myers remained dissatisfied. Increasingly depressed, Myers began to skip school, "writing excuses on the unwanted typewriter and signing [his] mother's name to them" (129).

Chapter 12 Summary: "God and Dylan Thomas"

A few weeks after he began skipping school, Myers met with Stuyvesant's guidance counselor. He said little to the counselor about why he was skipping school or what he was doing instead (reading or going to the movies), but denied wanting to transfer and resolved to do better the following year.

That summer, Myers spent a lot of time playing basketball in the hopes of earning a scholarship; he even qualified for a tournament, although he quickly realized that most of the players were "a whole level better than [him]" (133). Nevertheless,

Myers continued to practice, and on his way to the playground one morning he saw a man struggling with three teenage boys. Myers fought the boys off, and the man—Frank Hall—explained that they had begun to beat him up when they learned he had no money. The experience left Myers slightly more hopeful: "When I was fighting, I stopped feeling the sense of helplessness that seemed to be overtaking me" (135).

When Myers arrived home that day, Florence was drinking with two friends, one of whom had a granddaughter approximately Myers's age. Once inside his room, Myers began to think about both girls and his fears that he was somehow effeminate: "I didn't like [the granddaughter], but she was a girl, and girls interested me. When I heard older guys talk about girls and sex, I was more taken with the way they talked about it than with what they said [...] Logically, I knew that loving books and writing did not make me homosexual, but more and more I hid those interests" (136-37).

Gender wasn't the only thing troubling Myers at this time; he was also questioning why the values he had learned in church weren't translating into real-world success, and his pastor couldn't explain this to Myers's satisfaction. He also continued to grapple with race. Myers had few black role models, and when he stumbled across an interview with Langston Hughes, he was disappointed: "There was nothing extraordinary about him, nothing that lifted him out of the ordinary [...] When I pictured the idea of 'writer' in my mind, pictures from my schoolbooks came to mind, and Hughes did not fit that picture" (139). Myers instead admired Dylan Thomas—particularly after he went to a bar to hear him read, only to learn that Thomas had been carried out drunk.

Chapters 10-12 Analysis

Being accepted to a rigorous school like Stuyvesant is a significant achievement, but it also, ironically, marks the beginning of Myers's downward spiral. Although this is partly the result of a mismatch between the school and the student—Myers is not especially interested in or good at the science and math courses Stuyvesant prioritizes—it's also because the new environment makes the gap between Myers's dreams and his reality unmistakable. Surrounded by students who take it for granted that they will go on to elite universities, Myers feels the limitations of race and class more acutely.

Tellingly, in his growing despair, Myers once again resorts to the kinds of misbehavior that characterized his early childhood—particularly fighting. In this case, however, Myers's outbursts are caused not by his physical difficulties speaking, but rather by a more symbolic form of voicelessness: Myers increasingly identifies with a society that can't (and to some extent doesn't want to) understand where he is coming from. This is why Myers remains silent in all his meetings with the guidance counselor; the counselor assumes Myers's poor attendance at Stuyvesant is a sign of contempt, when in fact, Myers says, he "didn't want to be defiant. [He] wanted to be in the system that [he] was walking away from, but [he] didn't know how to get in" (132).

Another way of putting this is that Myers is torn between his sense of himself as an aspiring intellectual and his knowledge of working-class black life. Although Myers's life in Harlem is "filled with the cultural substance of blackness," he has difficulty reconciling this with his literary interests; when Myers finally encounters a famous black author (Langston Hughes), he can't appreciate him, because he has learned to measure all writers and writing against standards set by white (and mostly British) men (126). More and more, Myers's "solution" to this tension is to distance himself from his own blackness, but this causes problems as well. For one, Myers can't control the way others respond to his race: "[Some people] were satisfied to label me as a black person and attach to the label any definition they might have as to what that meant" (126). Perhaps even more to the point, Myers's distancing himself from his race means cutting himself off from many things he loves—for instance, his father, who doesn't share Myers's hopes of assimilating into a white world, and can't give him advice on how to do so. As Myers puts it, "I don't think that [...] he ever imagined I would need to learn interaction with whites, or to deal with being black in any but a defensive manner" (112).

Myers's relationship with his parents is also suffering for other reasons. While Myers has been preoccupied trying to discover who he is and what he wants, his mother, Florence, has been struggling with things like her father-in-law's misogyny and, of course, the family's financial problems. In much the same way that Myers isolates himself with his reading, Florence turns to gambling and drinking, ultimately deepening the division between herself and her son when she loses the money he had saved for a typewriter. Although Myers doesn't sugarcoat his parents' flaws, it's clear that in retrospect he feels some responsibility as well for the tension within the family at this time; he remarks, for instance, that Florence was probably more distraught over the incident with the typewriter than he himself was, though he couldn't appreciate this at the time. All in all, Myers depicts himself

and his parents as people who have become so absorbed in their own misery that they no longer know how to communicate with one another.

Chapters 13-16

Chapter 13 Summary: "Marks on Paper"

Myers continued to struggle academically during his senior year, and was as unable as ever to explain the sources of his problems to the school. Nevertheless, he took some solace in English; Myers's new teacher provided her students with customized reading lists to help them develop as writers, which encouraged Myers to "fully ma[ke] the connection between [his] reading and the writing process" (144). Since Myers hadn't previously read in any sort of systematic way, encountering the different kinds of narratives his teacher assigned was an eye-opening experience; his teacher urged him to view each work as having something to offer, in spite of any weaknesses it might have.

On his teacher's recommendation, Myers read *Penguin Island*, *Buddenbrooks* and *Père Goriot*. The idea of Balzac's Goriot "toiling away just beyond the edges of a world he could not enter" was a particularly striking (and familiar) idea to Myers, and inspired him to model himself on Balzac at a time when his faith in his own voice was faltering; Myers had only a vague sense of the kind of stories he wanted to write ("stories with secret meanings that would relate to people like [him], no matter their color or position in life"), and he felt that his work was becoming "incomprehensible" (149, 148).

Meanwhile, Myers was struggling in other subjects, and particularly French, where his speech impediment caused difficulties. He continued to skip school frequently, instead spending his time reading in Central Park: "[The books] shut out the rattling noise that filled my head with warnings and admonishments—all in the voice of a guidance counselor—about where I was headed" (151). He also grew closer to Fred, who, despite Florence's disapproval of him, had become Myers's only real friend.

Myers got away with skipping school for several weeks by forging Florence's signature. Eventually, however, she began to suspect something was going on and insisted on accompanying Myers to school, where she met privately with the guidance counselor. By bringing up a childhood bout of scarlet fever that had left Myers with symptoms of anxiety, Florence was able to persuade Stuyvesant not to

expel him. In exchange, however, he was placed under the supervision of a city agency and became “officially disturbed” (154).

Chapter 14 Summary: “The Stranger”

During his interview with the city agency, Myers was again cautioned about the possible consequences of skipping school (among other things, he could be put in a juvenile facility). The interviewer interpreted Myers’s reluctance to respond as sullenness, when in fact it was a sign of Myers’s despair: “What we never discussed was how desperately I wanted to hide my feelings from him, or how ashamed I was of my predicament” (156).

After the interview, Myers sought out Frank, whom he now knew a little more about. Frank’s father had been a successful vaudeville performer, so Frank grew up in an elite and largely white neighborhood. When his father died, however, the neighbors became less friendly, and events came to a head when a bus driver tried to throw Frank and his mother off a bus: Frank blacked out and woke up later in a mental hospital, where he learned that he had killed the driver and two passengers with a knife. Although his mother eventually secured his release, a similar incident landed him back in an institution for three years, after which he ended up in Myers’s neighborhood, estranged from his mother and drinking heavily in an attempt to forget his problems (158).

After hearing Myers’s story, Frank suggested that they find their own apartment together. He also told Myers about a job he’d landed that involved delivering a package downtown. Myers decided to come with him, and the two went to an apartment to pick up the package; the people there were shooting heroin, and the man who gave them the package warned them they would be in “big trouble” if they didn’t deliver it correctly (161).

Despite this incident, Myers’s disillusionment with his life caused him to take Frank’s offer about an apartment seriously. On his English teacher’s recommendation, Myers had recently read Camus’s *The Stranger,* and had grown interested in the main character’s detachment from society. When Myers was referred to a hospital for testing and then sent to a psychologist named Dr. Holiday, he tried to capture his feelings about the experience in writing: “But as I dealt with what was happening to me by becoming more and more the detached observer, I was becoming Mersault, the character, and not Camus, the author” (164).

Chapter 15 Summary: "Dr. Holiday"

Myers began attending school again, but struggled to focus on his homework, preferring to write. He therefore returned to cutting classes, feeling guilty about his poor performance but "relieved" to no longer be spending time with students planning for their futures: "In a way I was mourning for the self I thought I had been, and at the same time I was becoming absorbed in the self I had become. Mine was the humiliated consciousness, ashamed of its every face, its every nuance" (166).

Myers went back to spending his days reading. He especially enjoyed Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, because it spoke to Myers's own troubled relationship with his mother; Myers and Florence had drifted apart as Florence became less and less able to understand the "intellectually sophisticated" self that Myers was trying to craft for himself (168). Looking back on that period in his life, Myers mourns how little he really knew about his mother; he recalls a picture he once saw of her as a young woman "in a shimmering blue dress, her dark hair framing her face," and wishes that he could have spoken to her then about her hopes and dreams (167).

Around this time, Myers had his first appointment with Dr. Holiday, a "beautiful black woman" who praised Meyer's intelligence and tried to get him to open up about the sources of his delinquency (170). Myers, for his part, said little and "tried [his] best to be as smart as she wanted [him] to be" (170). He was also largely silent when Florence asked how the appointment had gone, instead shutting himself in his room and trying unsuccessfully to read *Ulysses*.

In the time leading up to his next appointment with Dr. Holiday, Myers brooded over his coming graduation—which he imagined as a kind of "execution"—and got into a fight with the boys who had tried to beat up Frank: "I didn't mind at all hurting people [...] But that wasn't the life I wanted to lead. It was no better than being condemned to the garment-center labor force" (172). Finally, his next appointment came, and as he prepared to leave Dr. Holiday's office afterwards, she asked Myers whether he "like[d] being black" (173).

Chapter 16 Summary: "Being Black"

Dr. Holiday's question startled Myers, but he replied that he did like being black. In reality, however, Myers "really did not know what being 'black' meant" (174). He explains that he was more used to thinking about his identity in terms of the job he

would eventually hold: not being an adult, he didn't know what he would like to do once he was grown up, and the tension between his family's and Stuyvesant's ideas about "good" jobs further complicated the issue. Myers had also spent a lot of time thinking about gender, and the way definitions of masculinity differed from place to place: "I understood being a man as having some kind of power. In Harlem that power was expressed in muscle, in being someone who wouldn't take any nonsense or who was good at athletics [...] I did [not] see anybody defining a real man as somebody who paid a lot of attention to books" (176).

By probing his ideas about career and masculinity in this way, Myers came to see them as "subdivisions of the larger idea of race" (176). Race, however, was also a problematic issue in Myers's eyes:

> I wasn't born with a hyphen linking me to Africa, any more than I was born with a desire to dribble a basketball or to write. These were interests that I worked on developing. These were activities I chose. Being Afro-American, or black, was being imposed on me by people who had their own ideas of what those terms meant (177).

Myers's history further complicated his sense of himself as black: he grew up in a multiracial household that, amidst the patriotism of WWII, considered itself American first and foremost. As a result, Myers didn't think much about his own race until he began to experience the disadvantages of being black: the parties he wasn't allowed to go to, the colleges that wouldn't admit him. Myers, in other words, began to "think about race in purely negative terms," and to do everything he could to identify as something other than black—for instance, as "an intellectual" (178). Now, however, that identity no longer seemed available to him.

Chapters 13-16 Analysis

Myers's identity crisis reaches a head in these chapters, thanks to the disarming question Dr. Holiday poses. As Myers notes, he hadn't thought much about what it meant to be black prior to that therapy session, but not because race wasn't an important factor in his life; rather, race had been *so* influential that it had shaped his attitude towards other aspects of his identity (e.g. gender) without him consciously realizing it. Myers says, for example, that he associated the "major careers" with whiteness and simply took it for granted that black people worked blue-collar jobs. In asking Myers to think about race directly, Dr. Holiday forces him to confront his negative (and previously unchallenged) assumptions about blackness.

Of course, it's undeniably the case that being black in America carried many disadvantages with it at the time when Myers was growing up. As Myers puts it, "Blacks were the ones who were lynched, blacks were the ones who were barred from hotels, who had to drink from dirty fountains, who had to look for signs that told them if their race was welcome" (178-79). Dr. Holiday's point, however, isn't to disregard the real obstacles black Americans faced, but rather to prompt Myers to challenge his own acceptance of these limitations. Although Myers has certainly aspired to a life beyond what most people he knows are facing, he has done so by attempting to, in his words, "reject [his] identity as a black and take another identity"—most obviously, by modeling his own writing on that of various white authors (179). Ultimately, however, these efforts prove pointless, because—as Myers himself recognizes—identity isn't just a matter of personal choice: "Being Afro-American, or black, was being imposed on me by people who had their own ideas of what those terms meant" (177). In other words, part of personal identity stems from the perceptions of others, as well as from social context more broadly. That being the case, Myers can't simply refuse to be black, but he can find ways of thinking about that identity positively.

At this point in his life, however, Myers isn't able to think of his race in these terms. Instead, he attempts to embrace an identity as an outcast who doesn't truly fit into either black or white society. This is in large part why Frank's friendship appeals to Myers; Frank is also an outsider, not only by virtue of his criminal record, but also (having grown up in a white neighborhood) in racial terms. However, Myers's connection to Frank ultimately leads him into trouble, and it's unclear in any case whether it's truly possible to base a sense of community solely on shared social isolation; as Myers admits, "Frank didn't read, and we didn't have a lot to talk about except what was bothering us" (161). Myers's attempts to identify with literary outsiders are similarly unproductive. After reading *The Stranger*, for instance, Myers tries to imitate Camus by describing his experiences from a detached and clinical perspective, but ultimately finds himself resembling the character more than the writer. Embracing his outsider status, in other words, does not give Myers the feeling of control over his life that he currently lacks.

With all that said, this period of Myers's life isn't a complete waste. Although Myers suffers the effects of having few writers like himself to look up to, the works he does read prompt him to think about his writing in new ways. *Penguin Island*, for instance, teaches Myers that a novel can be "less about what [Myers] considered to be the classic story form—the interplay between characters at a point of crisis—than [...]about a broad presentation of the author's point of view" (145). On an even more basic level, the personalized reading lists Myers's teachers provide him with

encourage him to think about the relationship between what he reads and what he writes, which serves him well when he finally reads Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." Finally, his teacher's encouraging words themselves play a pivotal role in inspiring Myers to once again take up writing after previously abandoning it.

Chapters 17-19

Chapter 17 Summary: "1954"

In January of his senior year, Myers was "still hoping for a miracle" (180). Once again, he turned to the Dodgers for consolation, although he didn't truly believe they would win: "Baseball teams will allow you to love them and to show emotion when people turn away from you. And when the team wins, when the team gets the needed hits and the runs flood across home plate, the love is returned, and there is satisfaction" (181). He also continued to spend time with Frank, whom he saw as a fellow "alien" (181). Although Myers was still seeing Dr. Holiday, he dismissed her attempts to "help [him] see [his] strengths," believing that he "knew [his] strengths well, and they were killing [him]" (182).

Meanwhile, Myers continued to read obsessively—particularly the poetry of Siegfried Sassoon, which allowed him to "imagine [himself] lying in the trenches, weighing [his] words against the pain of dying, thinking that death could be a satisfactory answer to failed promise" (183). Myers wrote as well, but his work had become "removed from the logic that had once made [his] stories and poems easily accessible" (184). On one occasion, he got into a fight with the gang he'd fought before, taking pleasure in getting back at some of the "idiots intruding on [his] life" (185).

Just as the national prospects for African-American education seemed to be improving—*Brown vs. Board of Education* overturned "separate but equal" that spring—Myers's situation seemed increasingly hopeless. Fearing he wouldn't be able to hide his truancy from his family forever, Myers eventually returned to school, only to find the doors locked. A man outside asked Myers what he was doing and when Myers replied, the man told him that the school had closed for the summer. Myers returned home crying.

Chapter 18 Summary: "Sweet Sixteen"

After learning that he had missed graduation, Myers's depression deepened; he stopped reading and writing, and isolated himself from his friends and family. He particularly feared that Herbert was disappointed in him, though in retrospect he realizes that his father simply didn't understand him anymore.

Myers agreed to help Frank deliver another package, waiting outside as Frank met with the recipient in a subway bathroom. When Frank didn't emerge quickly, however, Myers went to check on him and found the two men fighting; Myers intervened, but he and Frank barely escaped, since the other man chased after them with a gun. Once they were safe, Frank threatened to kill the man who had arranged the deal. He also asked whether Myers had enjoyed the fight, which Myers had no clear response to: "There was a danger, I instantly knew, that the feeling of power, even temporary, could possibly draw me in, could trap me the way that the temporary relief of drugs trapped people" (193).

Myers attempted to make sense of the incident by writing about it and then by mentioning it to Dr. Holiday, who in turn (he suspects) told Florence. Only a week later, however, Frank was beaten up, apparently by men associated with the drug trade. Despite the legal risks involved, Frank decided to seek safety in Philadelphia. Myers—devastated by his friend's departure, and worried about the enemies he had made helping Frank—stopped at an Army recruiting stand on his way home from seeing Frank off. Claiming his parents were dead, Myers arranged to enlist on his seventeenth birthday.

Florence was upset when she learned of Myers's plans, and Myers found himself unable to explain the sense of shame and despair that had led him to enlist. Herbert, however, approved: "I heard him say to Mama that it would make a man out of me. He wanted me to hear him say that, and I don't think he meant it in a bad way. He wanted to somehow reassure me" (197).

On the day Myers left, Herbert gave him the Bible that he himself had carried in the Navy, while Florence watched in silence. Myers boarded the train and began writing. This, he says, marked the end of "the first part of [his] life (198).

Chapter 19 Summary: "The Typist"

Although the idea of writing professionally didn't occur to Myers when he was young, he regards his career, in retrospect, as "amazingly logical" (199). For one thing, he says, he learned to read and appreciate literature young: "All those conversations with Mama in that sunny Harlem apartment, conversations meaningless to anyone but us, prepared me to use language in special ways, making it my own" (199–200). He also credits his success to the quality of the works he read and the ideas they exposed him to, although he admits luck played a role as well; he could easily have been killed or jailed as a teenager.

Myers describes his years in the Army as "numbing" and "non-thinking," and was relieved when his service ended (200). Afterwards, Myers took jobs in factories, and mailrooms, continuing to read in his free time but no longer writing. He was finally forced to acknowledge his dissatisfaction with his life when a fellow construction worker catcalled a passing woman. As a result, Myers began to write again, "just [...] to be able to think of [himself] as a person with a brain as well as a body" (202).

Myers found writing "refreshing" and eventually started sending his work away for consideration (203). He mostly encountered rejection, but he wrote more and more regardless and occasionally began to see his poems and short stories in print. What truly encouraged Myers, however, was reading James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues": from that point on, Myers felt free to draw on his experiences of race when writing—something he thanked Baldwin for when he later met him. Myers was finally able to transition into writing full-time in 1968, when a young adult book he had written won a contest and was published.

Myers explains that writing his memoir has caused him to appreciate his childhood more deeply; it was his family's and community's support, he says, that allowed him to grow past the challenges he sometimes encountered as a child and teen. He concludes with an anecdote about visiting his parents as an adult. Over breakfast, Myers says, Florence asked him about his job, and when Myers explained that he wrote children's books, Herbert remarked that Myers "wrote stories when [he was] a boy," but that he was now "a man" (205–06). Myers, however, does not hold this against his father, saying that writing has allowed him to "return to that period of innocence in [his] life," while also ensuring that "the skills [he has] are respected for themselves" (206).

Chapters 17-19 Analysis

Myers's account of his childhood ends on an uncertain note, with him all but abandoning two of the most important guiding forces in his life up until that point: his family and literature. Ultimately, however, Myers frames this as a necessary part of his growth, saying, for example, that he "needed to be strong enough to walk away, to invent a new life for [himself] without [his mother]" (197). Myers, of course, had already drifted away from Florence during his teenage years, but in many ways he was still defining himself in relation to her; he loved *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for example, because it spoke to his own concerns about his relationship with his mother. In order to truly appreciate his family (and in some sense to rejoin it), Myers first needs to experience life as an independent adult. Doing so gives him the perspective he needs in order to appreciate Florence and Herbert not only as parents, but also as full human beings. Once Myers is secure in his own identity, he can, for instance, take his father's views of his profession in stride rather than as a threat to his masculinity; he even finds a worthwhile moral in Herbert's words. Although Myers can never return to the childhood relationship he had with his parents—as he puts it, he has "grow[n] beyond the point at which [his] relationship with them was easily managed"—he can and does love them for who they are, and for the opportunities they have given him (204-05).

Myers's break from writing is equally important. Although he quickly grows tired of life in the army, he notes that the "atmosphere of non-thinking had been a godsend when it allowed [him] to forget [his] own failures as a teenager" (201). Myers, in other words, needs to distance himself from his disappointment over relinquishing his dreams of going to college and moving in elite intellectual circles. Of course, Myers does ultimately become a writer and join just this kind of community, but not in a way his teenage self would likely have envisioned. This is because, as an adolescent, Myers saw his identity as a writer as incompatible with his identity as a black man; the idea that he could write specifically from a black perspective simply didn't occur to him, in part because he saw little to nothing positive about being black. For that reason, Baldwin's short story comes as a revelation to Myers; as he puts it, "Baldwin, in writing and publishing that story, gave me permission to write about my own experiences" (203). Although Myers doesn't say so explicitly, it seems likely that this in and of itself helps transform Myers's attitude towards his own race. Much of what Myers had previously resented about being black was the feeling that it was an identity largely determined for him by others (his ancestors, as well as everyone who harbored prejudices or preconceptions about the black community). In writing about his experiences as a black man, however, Myers is

able to take charge of that aspect of his identity and determine its meaning for himself.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Walter Dean Myers

Although *Bad Boy* is the story of Walter Dean Myers's own life, the Myers who narrates the book is not the same, temperamentally, as the Myers who is the book's main character. This largely reflects the fact that *Bad Boy* is a coming-of-age story—and, more specifically, one that is very interested in how children and adolescents adopt new identities and transform their old ones as they grow up. In Myers's case, his identity is inseparable from his experiences as a black man who grew up in a mixed-race and working-class household in 1940s and 50s Harlem. As a child and young man, these experiences were often a source of confusion and frustration for him; Myers had always been an intelligent and creative child, and both his mother and his teachers encouraged him to approach his future with optimism and confidence. As he grew older, however, Myers was increasingly forced to reckon with the fact that his race and his family's finances limited his options for higher education. As a result, Myers came to feel he had been cheated out of a life he had been promised, which helps explain why he so often acts impulsively (e.g. jumping off roofs), recklessly (e.g. skipping school), or angrily (e.g. getting into fights).

By contrast, the Myers who narrates *Bad Boy* is a measured and reflective man; he freely admits his past mistakes, and expresses remorse over the pain he sometimes caused his adoptive parents (intentionally or otherwise). What ties this Myers to his childhood self is his creativity—in particular, his lifelong love of reading and writing. In fact, Myers implies that it is largely *because* he was able to find his voice as a writer that he was able to overcome the resentment and depression that plagued him as a young man; although Myers was always sensitive to the possibilities of language, it was not until he began to read the work of other black writers that he could reconcile that sensitivity with his own particular experiences.

Florence Dean ("Mama")

Florence Dean is Myers's adoptive mother. She had at one point been married to Myers's biological father, George Myers, but divorced him long before Myers himself was born (to George's second wife, Mary Dolly Green). Florence later married Herbert Dean, and the couple adopted Myers when they took custody of Florence's two daughters by George, Geraldine and Viola.

Florence's life is difficult in many ways, both before and after her marriage to Herbert. She was born the daughter of a working-class German immigrant and a Native American man, but despite the fact that she herself was mixed race, her family didn't approve of her marriage to George, who was black. Later on, the strain of her husband Herbert's depression and the growing financial burden on the family lead Florence to drink heavily and play the lottery recklessly. In some ways, Myers hints, Florence was a disappointed woman whose life had not lived up to her dreams:

> The one picture I had seen of her as a young woman showed her in a shimmering blue dress, her dark hair framing her face, a fragile grace holding her in the studio photographer's chair. I would have liked to have talked with her after she had had her picture taken [...] What had she expected of life? (168).

Nevertheless, Myers depicts Florence as a loving and devoted mother. In fact, he credits her with sparking his interest in reading and writing (as well as language in general); Myers was the baby of the family, and when he was very young, Florence kept him close to her while she listened to soap operas on the radio or read romance stories aloud. Florence continues to support Myers's interest in language even after his education and skills outstrip her own; he remembers, for instance, once hearing her "proudly explaining to a friend on the phone that her son 'types stories for a living'" (206).

Herbert Dean ("Dad")

Herbert Dean is Myers's adoptive father; he took Myers into his home (along with Myers's half-sisters Geraldine and Viola) after marrying Florence. As a young man, he had refused to carry on with his own father's hauling business on the grounds that it was becoming an obsolete line of work. Although he toyed with the idea of becoming a musician, he eventually settled into work as a janitor, occasionally seeking out extra work at the docks.

The fact that Herbert never learned to read causes some strain in his relationship with his son, as do his fairly traditional views on masculinity. Herbert served in the Navy during World War II, and consequently approves of Myers's decision to join the Army at age 17. Furthermore, though he is certainly aware of the prevalence of racism in American society, Herbert urges Myers to overcomes his obstacles through old-fashioned perseverance: "My dad's advice on race was very simple. 'The white man won't give you anything, and the black man doesn't have anything to give you. If you want anything out of life, you have to get it for yourself'" (112). For

all of these reasons, Herbert doesn't seem fully able to understand the depths of Myers's despair as a teenager, which stems from his son's intellectual ambitions and his deep resistance to leading the same working-class life that Herbert has.

With all that said, Herbert is not a harsh or uncaring father. For instance, he goes out of his way to find a typewriter for his son after Florence spends the money Myers had planned on using to buy one. While Myers was disappointed in the quality of the typewriter, it seems likely that Myers simply couldn't appreciate the gesture for what it was as an adolescent. Like his relationship with Florence, Meyer's relationship with Herbert is often a source of regret to the more mature and thoughtful Myers who narrates *Bad Boy*; for instance, while Myers felt the strain of Herbert's depression keenly in the months following Lee's death, he admits in his memoir, "Looking back, I think that it might have been I who had become distant as well" (72).

Frank Hall

Frank is a local man Myers first meets when he is 15; while practicing basketball in the hopes of earning a scholarship, Myers sees a group of boys harassing and ultimately attacking a man with "light, mottled skin and sandy brown hair with a streak of even lighter hair near the front" (135). Myers helps him fight the boys off, and the man tells him his name is Frank. Eventually, Myers learns more about Frank's backstory—in particular, the fact that he has twice attacked and killed people while in a dissociative state, and that he is currently in the keeping of a local priest.

None of this deters Myers from making friends with Frank, despite his mother's disapproval. For one, Frank is "mild-mannered" and even somewhat timid when he's in his right mind (158). More importantly, though, Myers is increasingly depressed about his future and estranged from old school friends like Eric; as a result, he spends more and more time talking and drinking with Frank, whom he sees as a social outcast and therefore a kindred spirit. Eventually, Myers even helps Frank with the odd jobs the latter picks up delivering packages (presumably containing drugs). Eventually, one of these deals goes wrong, forcing Frank and then Myers to leave New York City to escape the drug dealers.

Eric Leonhardt

Eric is perhaps Myers's closest childhood friend. Like Myers, Eric has a mischievous side; in fourth grade, the two boys meet while serving as "cookie monitors," licking the cream from cookies they were supposed to be delivering back to the classroom (29). As the boys grow older, Eric proves eager to share with Myers the (mostly incorrect) information he has learned about girls and sex. Eric is also Myers's academic equal, participating in an accelerated program with him and accompanying him to Stuyvesant High.

Unlike Myers, however, Eric is white, and the boys' different experiences of race begin to cause tension as they enter high school. Eric is able to attend parties and events that Myers is not, which means that his social experience of school is very different from his friend's (although Myers, in fairness to Eric, notes that his friend railed against this racism). Myers also implies that Eric's family is at least slightly more financially secure than his own, so when Myers—realizing he will likely be unable to afford college—begins cutting classes in despair, Eric continues to study diligently. Ultimately, the two boys drift apart, with Myers repeatedly rejecting Eric's offers to spend time together.

Dr. Holiday

Dr. Holiday is the psychologist Myers is sent to after Stuyvesant concludes that Myers is "disturbed" (154). In many ways, Myers's sessions with her are no more successful than his conversations with the school guidance counselor; he dodges Dr. Holiday's attempts to learn more about what he is truly feeling, and silently judges her for getting his name wrong (she calls him "Walter Dean" rather than "Walter Myers"). Nevertheless, she is not as clueless as Myers at first assumes; at the end of their second session together, Dr. Holiday—who is black herself—asks Myers whether he "likes being black." Although Myers replies that he does, it's clear that much of his frustration stems from his troubled relationship with his own blackness; he has accepted the ideas and assumptions underlying the white history and literature he has studied in school, and consequently can't imagine a way to embrace his racial identity while also pursuing his interest in language and writing. In other words, Dr. Holiday correctly identifies a major source of Myers's self-destructive behavior, although he himself doesn't fully realize it at the time.

English and Writing Teacher

Although Myers never mentions her name, the English teacher he has during his senior year at Stuyvesant plays a pivotal role in his development as a writer. She gets to know each of her writing students personally, and tailors reading recommendations to each one. This benefits Myers in several ways, including by encouraging him to draw a connection between his reading and writing habits, and by exposing him to new styles and genres of literature. He learns, for instance, to distinguish between the styles and themes that preoccupy different writers: "Where Anatole France's work had been about ideas and wit, and Thomas Mann had been about precision and the ordering of character and plot, Honoré de Balzac, to me, was all about character" (148). Myers's teacher also takes the time to go over each work with her students, which leads to additional insights: "When I handed in my report about *Penguin Island*, my teacher gave me back a report pointing out all the weaknesses of the work and reminding me that I did not have to love every word in a book to appreciate it" (145). Finally, but perhaps most importantly, it is this teacher who, when she sees Myers sitting outside the guidance counselor's office, encourages him not to stop writing "whatever happens" (153). It is these words, and his teacher's faith in his abilities, that encourage Myers to once again begin writing many years later.

Mr. Lasher

Mr. Lasher is Myers's sixth-grade teacher. Like several other instructors Myers has, Mr. Lasher plays a crucial role in his education and consequently his development as a writer. On the very first day of class, Lasher warns Myers that he won't tolerate Meyers's misbehavior, but it soon becomes clear that in spite of the sternness of this warning, Lasher really has Myers's best interests in mind; when he accompanies Myers home to speak to Florence after their first altercation, he explains that Myers is gifted, and that society "need[s] more smart Negro boys" (57). Myers's relationship with his teacher turns around after this and, bolstered by Mr. Lasher's confidence in him, Myers begins to do very well in school. Lasher is also the teacher who recommends that Myers be put in an accelerated program, giving him further opportunities to learn and grow.

Mrs. Finley

Mrs. Finley is Myers's English and homeroom teacher in ninth grade. Her relationship with her students gets off to a rocky start, when the boys in her class

decide to try chewing tobacco and begin throwing up in class. Although Myers and his classmates continue to act out for the rest of the school year, he feels sympathy and gratitude for Mrs. Finley in retrospect. In part, this is because she introduced him to new forms of writing, including the confessional poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and narrative poems like Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." However, Mrs. Finley also viewed her students as aspiring scholars, and Myers suggests that her faith in them made an impression despite all their misbehavior: "I [...] think that all the kids in that SP class took away something very special, the notion that each of us had intellectual gifts to spend as we chose" (100).

Mrs. Conway

Mrs. Conway is Myers's fifth-grade teacher. The two get off to a bad start when Myers throws a book at a student laughing at his speech impediment, and things worsen as Myers continues to misbehave. Their relationship shifts, however, when Mrs. Conway gives Myers a book of Norwegian fairy tales to read while Myers is sitting at the back of the class as punishment. Myers enjoys the book, so Mrs. Conway gives him permission to read it in class every day, and then discusses the stories with him when he finishes. She then gives Myers another book to read, and begins to read his poetry aloud in class, laying the groundwork for Myers's later growth as a reader and writer.

William Dean ("Pap")

William Dean is Herbert Dean's father and Myers's grandfather. He is old-fashioned and set in his ways; when cars began to replace horses, William consistently refused to change the way his hauling business operated, causing his two sons to strike out on their own, rather than take over the family business. William is also deeply religious and openly scornful of women who don't (in his mind) know their place. All of this causes friction when William moves in with his son's family; "Pap" uses a slop bucket rather than a toilet, refuses to eat anything with cheese (which he says is "for poor white trash"), and generally makes Florence's life miserable (107). His presence also places an additional financial burden on the family, contributing to Myers's growing despair over his future educational prospects.

Leroy Dean ("Uncle Lee")

Lee is Herbert's brother who, like Herbert, left home rather than take over their father's hauling business. Unlike Herbert, however, Lee ended up in jail before

Myers was even born, and is not released until the summer before Myers enters fifth grade. Just two years later, and on the night before Myers's twelfth birthday, Lee is killed by muggers. The loss devastates Herbert, who withdraws from his family and becomes deeply religious during a year-long bout with depression. The incident is also Myers's first real experience with death and grief, and alters the way he thinks about both himself and others.

George Myers Jr. ("Mickey")

Mickey is Myers's older brother. Though the two boys are full siblings, they don't truly meet until Myers is roughly 10, when George Myers moves to Harlem with Mickey and several of his other children. Myers considers the Deans his real family, but is interested in Mickey nevertheless—the two boys closely resemble one another—and strikes up a friendship with him. The two share an interest in sports, but Myers is "laid-back, almost passive" and reluctant to join Myers in fights (84). When Myers enters the elite Stuyvesant High, he begins to drift apart from his brother.

Geraldine ("Gerry") and Viola

Gerry and Viola are the daughters of Florence and her first husband, George Myers, making them Myers's half-sisters. The girls are adopted by Florence and Herbert Dean at roughly the same time Myers himself is, but are already in their teens by the time Myers is old enough to remember much; they marry and move out by the time Myers is 12.

Mrs. Dodson and Dorothy Dodson

Mrs. Dodson is a neighbor of the Deans in Harlem, and when Myers is young, he refers to her as the "Wicked Witch of the West." His animosity stems from the fact that she discouraged Florence from allowing Myers to read comic books and play with toy guns. Later on, however, Mrs. Dodson approaches a depressed, teenage Myers when he is sitting on a park bench and tries to get him to talk to her. Myers insists that he's fine, but realizes that Mrs. Dodson is "just being kind" and begins to think better of her (159).

Mrs. Dodson's daughter Dorothy, meanwhile, shares Myers's interest in reading and is eventually placed in an accelerated school program alongside him. She

doesn't like Myers, but Myers himself grows mildly curious about her as he enters adolescence and begins to think about girls and relationships.

Nancy Dean (Aunt Nancy)

Nancy is Herbert Dean's sister and Myers's aunt; Myers describes her as a kind woman, "as fat as she was tall" (12). When Myers was very young, Nancy owned a bakery and would sometimes care for Myers on days Florence was working. In practice, this meant allowing Myers to play in front of the bakery, where he would sometimes get into tussles with other boys. Later on, Nancy establishes a marriage brokerage business that "brought immigrant women together with American men and helped them marry" (117).

Imogene Myers ("Jean")

Imogene is Myers's younger sister (the youngest child of his biological parents, George Myers and Mary Dolly Green). Although she doesn't initially move to New York when her father does, she joins him when Myers himself is roughly 12. Myers meets and likes her—he describes her as "bright, beautiful, and feisty" and thinks she is "a lot like [him]"—but doesn't grow to know her well because her father restricts her and her siblings' freedom to wander the city (91).

George Myers

George Myers is Myers's biological father, as well as the father of Myers's full siblings (Mickey, Imogene, Gertrude, and Ethel) and his half-sisters (Geraldine and Viola). Myers, however, only truly meets his father in the summer after fourth grade, at which point he describes him as a "smallish, brown-skinned man" who "greets[s] [Myers] formally" (37). Myers doesn't say much else about George, though he does note that his biological father gives his children less leeway to explore New York City than the Deans give Myers himself.

Mary Dolly Green

Mary Green is Myers's biological mother. She died shortly after the birth of his younger sister, Imogene, so Myers himself never knew her. Early in *Bad Boy*, however, he explains that she was the great-niece of a former slave named Lucas D. Dennis, who moved to Martinsburg, West Virginia after the Civil War.

THEMES

The Nature of Personal Identity

Among other things, *Bad Boy* is a coming-of-age story. It traces and explains the process by which Myers became the man that he was when he wrote it, describing how, for instance, the sound of his mother reading to him as a young boy lays the groundwork for his eventual sense of himself as a reader and writer. In fact, as he grows older, Myers's sense of himself evolves not only to accommodate his interest in literature, but also to accommodate the particular ideas and values at play in the works he reads; he adopts, for example, the interests of the predominantly white writers he studies, wondering, "If an Englishman could appreciate beauty, why couldn't I? If Shakespeare could write about love and jealousy and hatreds, why couldn't I?" (86). For Myers, this interplay between what he reads and who he is is an active process: "[Books] spoke to me, and I responded, not in words but in appreciation and consideration of their thoughts. More and more, I would respond with my own writing" (127). In fact, it is partly *because* this is an active process that it appeals to him; Myers, as a young man, fiercely resents the efforts of others to categorize him, and hopes that by writing and reading he can construct a unique and wholly personal identity for himself as an "intellectual" (179).

This, however, proves to be impossible. Although Myers does ultimately fulfill his childhood dream of becoming a writer, he isn't free to simply invent, adopt, or discard any identity he chooses. This is because, as Myers notes in the book's opening pages, "While we live our own individual lives, what has gone before us, our history, always has some effect on us" (1). Identity, in other words, isn't simply a matter of personal choice, but also of how a person is situated in the world—for instance, the attitudes surrounding a person's race, or the financial circumstances they are born into. This is a truth that Myers struggles bitterly with for much of *Bad Boy*; he resents having any identity "imposed on [him]" by the outside world, particularly when—as in the case of his blackness—the stereotypes and associations conveyed by that identity are so negative to a large segment of the population (177). When he is unable to attend college, however, Myers is forced to admit that external factors *do* affect who he is as a person, and many years later, he realizes that this isn't a uniformly bad thing: Myers hates racism, but he values the "cultural substance of blackness," including the experience of having grown up in Harlem (126).

In the end, then, Myers suggests that personal identity is a balance between external forces and internal choice, and in that sense, it *is* something that we construct for ourselves. Although Myers can't choose his race, he can to some extent choose what his race means to him—for instance, by learning to see his blackness not as something that bars him from leading the life of an intellectual, but as something he can draw on to make his writing all the more personal.

The Desire for Community

Over the course of *Bad Boy*, Myers encounters several different kinds of communities—his family, his church, his schools, and Harlem at-large among them. For various reasons, however, Myers struggles (at one point or another) with his relationship to each of these groups. In part, this is because certain kinds of community membership seem, to the teenage Myers, to threaten his own unique identity; he remarks, for instance, that he "wasn't born with a hyphen linking [him] to Africa," and consequently resents the idea that he should feel a sense of automatic kinship with people of the same race (177).

Nevertheless, Myers consistently expresses a desire to feel connected to others and to be a part of something larger than himself. As a young boy, Myers feels at home with his family and his church community, although even these group memberships are not entirely straightforward. Myers is adopted, and while he considers his adoptive parents his true family, he is also "curious" about his biological family and seemingly eager to understand his place in it; when he meets his brother Mickey, he takes note of the "light" skin and "reddish hair" that resemble his own features (37). Myers also experiences some difficulty fitting in at school on account of his speech impediment, but is nevertheless able to make a few close friends—most notably Eric.

As Myers grows older, however, his connection to those around him disintegrates. In some ways, Myers suggests, this is an inevitable part of growing up; he writes, for instance, that he failed to be Florence's "ally" in her fights with her father-in-law because he "was fully absorbed in discovering who [he] was" (105). Myers's isolation, however, is also the result of tension between the groups Myers identifies with; his growing intellectualism distances him from his parents, but his family's relative poverty is a reminder that he doesn't truly fit in with his college-bound classmates at Stuyvesant either. Eventually, Myers's disillusionment causes him to voluntarily sever ties with former friends like Eric, and to reject offers of help from neighbors like Mrs. Dodson. By the time he is a senior in high school, his only real

friend is Frank Hall, and their relationship hinges not so much on a sense of belonging, but rather on the knowledge that they are both outcasts: “He was an alien on this planet, and I was drawn to him for that reason” (181).

Eventually, Myers does find a comfortable place for himself in “a world of book lovers and people eager to rise to the music of language and ideas” (206). Myers is only able to get to this point, however, after reconciling the tensions within himself—most obviously, by finding a way to identify as both black and as a writer. This suggests that Myers’s early attempts to fit in fail in part because he is seeking a group that will provide him with an external source of identity; he talks, for instance, about wanting to have “a school sweater, a school jacket, the symbols of belonging” (107). The communities Myers eventually claims a place in are, by contrast, reflections of his inner sense of himself.

Being Black in Mid-20th-Century America

Myers grew up on the cusp of the Civil Rights movement, which took place roughly between the mid 1950s and the late 1960s. In fact, *Bad Boy* mentions some of the major victories leading up to the movement, including the desegregation of major league baseball (1947), the desegregation of the armed forces (1948), and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which overturned “separate but equal” and desegregated public schools. The tone of *Bad Boy*, however, doesn’t follow this hopeful upward trend. At the same time that the country is moving closer to racial equality, Myers himself is becoming more and more disillusioned about his prospects as a young black man.

Myers’s upbringing in Harlem—a northern and predominantly black community—shields him from the more obvious (and often legalized) forms of racism that existed in 1940s and 50s America. Myers also belongs to a mixed-race family, and encounters white people every day at school and at church, all of which initially suggests to him that racism is predominantly a problem somewhere else:

> Like many black youngsters raised in northern cities, I was not aware of a race ‘problem’ other than what I heard from older black people and occasional news story. In sports, the area in which I was most interested, there seemed to be a good representation of blacks (36).

As Myers grows older, however, his interests shift, which in turn causes him to become more aware of structural and implicit racism (i.e. racism that is unspoken,

or that is maintained less by individuals and more by institutions). The curriculum in the schools Myers attends, for instance, is almost entirely silent on black history and culture, except in its discussions of slavery. As a result, even the well-meaning teachers who encourage Myers to pursue his love of reading and writing are implicitly asking him to choose between his race and his ambitions: with only white authors to look up to as role models, Myers begins to "accept [...] the idea that whites were more valuable than blacks" (85-86). What's more, this idea seems borne out in the world around him; Myers wants to be a writer, but the black community he grows up in is almost entirely working-class. Even as a teenager, Myers understands that this economic gap between white and black people is itself a form of racism; when he is moved to an "outside job" at the garment center, for instance, he describes feeling that his boss "saw [him] as just another one of the hundreds of blacks who were fit only for manual labor" (124-25). Increasingly, however, Myers feels that there is nothing he can do about this kind of structural inequality, since attending college is a financial impossibility for his family.

Myers never completely buys into racist beliefs himself; it's the very fact that he knows his own talents that fuels his resentment of his lot in life. With that said, he *does* arrive at the conclusion that there is "no advantage in being black," and therefore learns to hate the fact that he is black (179). Over time, however, Myers slowly rediscovers the positive aspects of his racial experience. As a boy, for instance, he loved Harlem, and as an adult, he celebrates the culture of the neighborhood in *Bad Boy*:

> Black businessmen walked side by side with black orthodox Jews. Uniformed members of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association could be seen outside Micheaux's bookstore. White-dressed women, followers of the charismatic religious leader Father Divine, might be giving out leaflets (49).

Perhaps even more importantly, Myers learns as an adult about the African-American literary tradition, which enables him to reframe his love of language as an outgrowth rather than a rejection of his heritage. Although Myers never glosses over the impact of racism on his life, he ultimately implies that his experience of being black has been a positive one.

The Relationship Between Parents and Children

Other than Myers himself, Florence and Herbert Dean are by far the most prominent characters in *Bad Boy*. Although Myers isn't biologically related to either

of his parents, he shares a closer relationship with them than many children do with their blood relatives; because his sisters Geraldine and Viola are years older, Myers is in many ways raised as a single child, enjoying virtually exclusive attention as a young boy—or, as he puts it, "I claimed Mama for my own and was jealous of any attention she paid to her daughters" (10). As this quote suggests, Myers's relationship with Florence is particularly all-consuming; the two spend so much time together and share so many secrets with one another that Viola jokingly suggests they get married.

As Myers grows older, however, his relationship with his parents changes, which in some ways is an inevitable part of becoming an adult. When Myers begins to go to school, for instance, he establishes ties and connections to people outside his family. On the flip side, the death of his uncle Lee (and his father's ensuing depression) leads Myers to the realization that, as he puts it, he isn't "the center of the universe"; his parents also have lives outside their relationship to him (65). As he enters adolescence, Myers is also, like most teenagers, increasingly preoccupied with finding and asserting his identity as an individual, which to some extent means distancing himself from his parents.

Other sources of tension, however, are more specific to Myers's circumstances. In particular, the love of language that his mother helped inspire (and that initially drew the pair closer together) becomes a wedge between Myers and his parents. Myers's level of education quickly surpasses that of his parents, which impedes their ability to understand one another; although Florence in particular continues to do what she can to support her son—she even cooks him separate meals when he decides that eating meat is unethical—Myers realizes that she is "puzzled" by the issues that now dominate his life (168). Herbert, meanwhile, cannot read at all, and views his son's interest in literature with some level of suspicion. As Myers puts it, "The printed words were a code that forever separated us" (190).

Myers depicts his decision to enter the military as a decisive break with his parents, explaining that he "needed to be strong enough to walk away, to invent a new life for [himself] without [Florence]" (197). As an adult, however, Myers appears to be on good terms with his parents, visiting them and showing them his work. Although Florence and Herbert are still not able to relate to every aspect of the man their son has become, their love for their son is as strong as ever, and in some ways leads them to a deeper understanding of him. For instance, Myers describes a visit to his elderly and hospitalized father as follows: "I brought him the only gift that had meaning to me, a book I had written. He looked at it and put it down on the white hospital table next to the bed and smiled" (189).

The Power and Limitations of Language

Myers is a writer, and *Bad Boy* in particular is an account of how and why he came to love language. As a very young boy, Myers sees language primarily as a way of feeling close to his mother; he notes, for example, that he "didn't want to learn to read so much as [he] wanted to be like Mama" (15–16). Language, in other words, is a way of affirming relationships—something that is particularly important for a childlike Myers, who is adopted: in "learning to call [Florence] Mama," Myers is in some sense making her his mother (8). Significantly, the first poem Myers writes for a school publication is about his mother.

This idea of language as a way of connecting with others does not disappear as Myers grows older; at one point, for instance, he talks about wanting to "write stories with secret meanings that would relate to people like [him]" (148). This remark, however, also reflects a desire for self-expression, and as Myers grows older, the idea of language as a way of establishing one's own identity begins to take precedence. He's drawn to the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, because it talks about "intensely personal" emotions (96).

Unfortunately for Myers, widespread racism complicates his teenage attempts to craft an identity he can take pride in. Perhaps as a result of this self-hatred, Myers's ability to use language as a vehicle for self-expression and self-assertion deteriorates. In his final year of high school, Myers "ha[s] difficulty understanding material [he] had written only days before," and begins to feel less like the author of his work and more like a character subject to the author's whims: "As I dealt with what was happening to me by becoming more and more the detached observer, I was becoming Mersault, the character, and not Camus, the author" (184). At the same time, and for similar reasons, Myers is losing faith in his ability to connect with others through his words. During his meetings with guidance counselors and therapists, Myers dodges questions about how he is feeling and why he is struggling, assuming (probably correctly in some cases) that the very fact that they need to ask proves that they don't understand the obstacles he is facing: "*Can't you see that I don't like myself, and for all the reasons you are saying? Can't you see that I am more disappointed with my life than you could ever be? Can't you see that this school is only interested in what it sees as its successes and I know that I'm not one of them?*" (142-43).

There are very real consequences to Myers's growing inability to communicate. More than once, for instance, Myers links his difficulty speaking (whether physically or emotionally) to his tendency to fight; he describes his "early years," for example

as a time of “halted speech in which fists flew faster than words” (205). The implication is that people—not just Myers, but also the gangs he encounters in Harlem—resort to violence when they feel voiceless. It’s therefore ominous that, as Myers prepares to leave home at 17, his faith in his ability to express himself breaks down completely:

> Mama cried and asked me why. I didn’t know what to say to her. I hadn’t yet sorted out the shame I felt for having squandered my life, which, at seventeen, I thought was nearly over anyway. Nor was I, with all my reading and writing skills, articulate enough to express my sense of being lost (196).

Bad Boy, of course, is itself an articulation of Myers’s feelings as a teenager, but it is one that only becomes possible after Myers comes to grips with his identity as a black man and his place in the black community.

SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

Books and Writing

Books are without question the most important motif in *Bad Boy*. This makes sense, given that Myers's memoir traces the process through which he grew into an author himself. The books Myers reads inspire him to try his hand at writing, and also provide him with new perspectives on how writing can be used; after reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, Myers wants "to sit by [his] window, [his] small dog on [his] lap, and write this intensely personal poetry" (96).

However, while they ultimately help Myers establish himself as a writer, the books he reads in childhood and adolescence also shed light on his struggles to find an identity and a community he is comfortable with. As Myers becomes more disillusioned and isolated, he is drawn to literature that seems to reflect that experience of the world; he becomes particularly obsessed with the detachment of Mersault in Camus's *The Stranger*, and attempts to write about his own experiences as an outsider from a clinical and emotionless perspective. In some ways, however, Myers's estrangement from his friends and family is actually a product of the books he is reading. The writers Myers reads are almost entirely white, which to Myers suggests that being black is incompatible with being a great writer. He therefore concludes that his race is a liability and increasingly distances himself from those who share it.

Myers's dreams of using his own writing to connect with like-minded individuals are therefore doomed from the start, because he is determined not to write about anything unique to himself or his own experiences. As he puts it: "What I was trying [to do with his poems] was not to do anything. What I was trying was to be somebody I could recognize as having the values and interests that I had learned were good" (141). It is only when Myers begins to read works by authors with backgrounds similar to his own that he realizes he doesn't have to choose between being part of the black community and being part of a writerly community.

Myers's Speech Impediment

Myers's speech impediment serves as a symbol for his figurative struggles to find his voice as he grows older. Myers lingers on both the shame his impediment causes him and his own inability to hear himself misspeaking, describing his first meetings with a speech therapist as follows: "The therapist kept trying to get me to

pronounce my words clearly, but apparently I did not. The trouble was that to me, the words seemed clear [...] I would become very angry if kids laughed at my speech, or even if I thought they were laughing. My first instinct would be to yell at them, quickly followed by punching them" (25).

This difficulty with oral communication is part of what first sparks Myers's interest in writing: "If I couldn't speak well, I could still communicate by writing. If the words didn't come easily from my mouth, they would, I hoped, eventually come from my writing" (120). Ironically, however, Myers's childhood and adolescent efforts to become a writer are also shaped by blindness and self-doubt. The authors Myers studies and grows to love are uniformly white, and without a black writer to look up to, Myers attempts to copy the style and interests of the works he reads in school. However, these works are detached from Myers's experiences of life in Harlem, and as time goes on, his love of reading and writing leads him to reject his racial identity more and more. It isn't until Myers begins to read works by writers like James Baldwin that he is able to find a way of writing that reflects both his love of language and his lived experience.

The Typewriter

The typewriter Myers's father buys for him is a symbol of Myers's growing disillusionment with his future. By the time Myers begins saving up to buy himself a typewriter, he is uncomfortably aware that he likely won't be continuing his education. Having a typewriter, however, would give him the means to continue writing regardless. Myers is therefore devastated when his mother spends the money he has saved up, and not at all consoled by the used typewriter his father buys for him instead: "It had glass sides and looked as if it might have been used to write memos during the Civil War [...] It was not the machine I imagined, or the machine I had worked so hard for" (128). These words apply almost equally well to the future Myers was facing at the time; a life of blue-collar work and financial insecurity was not, in Myers's mind, what he had worked to achieve in school.

The Garment Center

The garment center is a group of factories on New York City's Seventh Avenue, which Myers describes as producing and shipping much of America's clothing. Over the course of *Bad Boy*, the garment center provides off-and-on employment to Florence, Myers's sisters, and eventually Myers himself. However, because the garment center largely employs immigrants and African-Americans, it is linked in

Myers's mind to the working-class black life he wants to escape; he initially avoids seeking work there and, after taking a job there, bitterly resents being transferred to one of the "outdoor jobs" held mostly by black workers (115). Perhaps most tellingly, Myers comes to associate the garment center with other fixtures of life for many working-class black men:

> The garment center and fighting were connected in my mind, and I couldn't sort them out. I hadn't been nervous in the bathroom [when Myers saved Frank from being beaten up during a drug deal]. I wasn't nervous until I got home that evening. I wrote down what happened, making it seem more an intellectual exercise than it was [...] I was not walking down a beach and encountering a stranger. This was a possible reality, a kind of life that existed all around me (192-93).

The Brooklyn Dodgers

As a young boy, Myers dreams of becoming an athlete, which he knows even at age 10 to be one of the few avenues in which a black man could achieve fame success: "Blacks were entertainers, or churchgoers, or athletes" (50). As Myers grows older, he largely gives up his hopes of becoming a professional athlete, but still hopes to secure a basketball scholarship so that he can go to college. The Brooklyn Dodgers are therefore a symbol of hope for the future, and one that speaks specifically to Myers's experiences as a young black man; Myers grows up just as Major League Baseball is becoming racially integrated, and the Dodgers are the first team to sign on a black player (Jackie Robinson). As time goes on, the Dodgers continue to be the most racially-diverse team, and Myers invests much of his hope for his own future in their success. As a result, he is heartbroken when the Dodgers lose to the Giants in 1951—the same year that Myers is struggling through his first terms at Stuyvesant and beginning to fear for his future amid his family's financial difficulties. In other words, Myers ends up seeing the fate of the Dodgers as paralleling his own downward spiral; as time goes on, he continues to follow the Dodgers faithfully, but he "[loses] faith in the Dodgers' ability to win a World Series" (132).

IMPORTANT QUOTES

1. "Each of us is born with a history already in place. There are physical aspects that make us brown-eyed or blue-eyed, that make us tall or not so tall, or give us curly or straight hair. Our parents might be rich or poor. We could be born in a crowded, bustling city or in a rural area. While we live our own individual lives, what has gone before us, our history, always has some effect on us." (Chapter 1, Page 1)

   Throughout Bad Boy*, Myers struggles to strike a balance between his desire to belong to a community and his fear of being defined by that community. As a teenager in particular, Myers hopes to use his writing and reading as a way to distance himself from his blackness; although he appreciates many things about the black community, he sees it as incompatible with the kind of intellectual life he wants to lead, and is afraid of becoming an anonymous part of the "army of black laborers sweating and grunting their way through midtown New York" (122). Eventually, however, Myers comes to realize that his basic assumptions were misguided; after reading works by writers like James Baldwin, Myers realizes that he can exist both as a writer and as a black man. This in turn makes it easier for him to accept something that he fought against as a teenager—namely, that while his race doesn't entirely define him, being born black in America does come with a particular "history" that has shaped him.*

2. "Years later, when I had learned to use words better, I lost my ability to speak so freely with Mama." (Chapter 2, Page 15)

   As a young boy, Myers is very close to his mother, who not only sparks his interest in language, but also talks to him about things that, Myers believes, she didn't discuss with others. He remarks, for instance, that Florence told him she liked to yodel, and even showed off her talent for him—something she wouldn't even do for her husband. In this way, Florence and Myers come to share a kind of "secret language" private to their own relationship (14). It's ironic, then, that the very love of language Myers learns from Florence eventually causes them to drift apart; Florence never had the educational opportunities Myers does, and as time goes on, she no longer knows how to speak to the issues that concern him. This in turn prevents Myers from speaking "freely" with his mother; late in the book, for instance, he imagines trying to explain his depression to Florence, saying, "If I had told her that I

had pain, she would have held me in her arms and comforted me. But to tell her that it pained me to question the meaning of morality would have, I think, puzzled her" (168).

3. "The summer of 1947 was one of eager anticipation for black people across the country. Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby, two black players from the all-black Negro Leagues, had finally been accepted into major-league baseball. Joe Louis was heavyweight champion of the world, and 'Sugar' Ray Robinson was the welterweight champion. The president, Harry S. Truman, was negotiating with black leaders to integrate the armed forces. The *New York Amsterdam News*, our local weekly Negro newspaper, suggested that the United States was now going to treat Negroes as equals for the first time.

   "Most of my life revolved around school and church. The schools I went to were integrated, and the church always had whites involved in some capacity. Like many black youngsters raised in northern cities, I was not aware of a race 'problem' other than what I heard from older black people and an occasional news story." (Chapter 5, Pages 35-36)

   As a coming-of-age story, Bad Boy *not only traces Myers's development as a writer, but also his growing awareness of himself as a black man in America. As he says in this passage, Myers didn't initially consider race (or racism) particularly important factors in his life, and the historical events he cites here seem to justify this optimism; as he says, they suggest that society is on the brink of "treat[ing] Negroes as equals for the first time." However, by placing his own childhood understanding of race within the context of U.S. race relations more generally, Myers implicitly makes it clear that individuals can't escape or opt out of the legacy of racial inequality—something that Myers himself begins to realize as a teenager.*

4. "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. Downtown, white people wore suits and white shirts to jobs in offices and stores. In Harlem, where the laborers lived, people wore bright colors deemed inappropriate for offices." (Chapter 6, Page 48)

   As a teenager, Myers comes to resent aspects of his life in Harlem, largely because he views it as standing in the way of his dreams of becoming a writer. As an adult, however, Myers learns to appreciate the unique cultural experience of growing up in Harlem, as well as his experience of blackness

more generally. Here, for instance, he depicts Harlem as a vibrant and diverse neighborhood that makes other parts of the city look drab and boring. Even more significantly, he draws attention to the many accents and voices of Harlem, all stemming in one way or another from black culture and communities. This observation both indicates the young Myers's growing appreciation for language, and hints at the way in which, as an adult, he will rediscover his own voice by drawing on his experiences as a black man.

5. "I read the poem I had published over and over. It was the first time I had seen my name in print, and it made me feel important." (Chapter 6, Page 54)

   From a very young age, Myers sees reading and writing as ways of establishing and affirming his identity; in this passage, for instance, the mere fact of seeing his name in print causes him to take pride in himself. The identity Myers forges for himself as a writer isn't entirely without problems—looking back, he realizes that reading and imitating the works of almost exclusively white authors contributed to his sense of self-loathing as an adolescent—but it is one that he ultimately embraces once he finds a way to reconcile it with his racial identity.

6. "Mr. Lasher quietly explained to my mother that all the tests I had taken indicated that I was quite smart, but that I was going to throw it all away because of my behavior.

   "'We need more smart Negro boys,' he said. 'We don't need tough Negro boys.'" (Chapter 6, Page 58)

   Having Mr. Lasher as a teacher is a turning point for Myers, who was previously a bit of a delinquent. It's Mr. Lasher's faith in Myers that inspires him to do better by improving his grades and behaving in class. In this passage, Mr. Lasher spells out his reasons for wanting to help Myers; although Lasher himself is white, he recognizes the need for greater diversity in the educated, professional classes. His words also introduce an idea that becomes increasingly clear over the course of the book—namely, that cultural standards of masculinity differ for white men (who are expected to wield social and economic power) and black men (who are expected to wield physical power). However, while Mr. Lasher and the other teachers who encourage Myers are well-meaning, they don't seem to fully appreciate how difficult it will be for Myers to gain access to the predominantly white professional world.

7. “The next two days I couldn’t go to school. Mama brought me food and put in on a chair near my bed. She didn’t say anything to me, just looked at me as if she had never seen me before.” (Chapter 6, Page 62)

   Towards the end of sixth grade, Myers seriously injures himself trying to jump onto a passing cab’s bumper. When his father asks what happened, however, Myers panics and claims that Florence beat him, causing Herbert to become very angry at his wife. Florence is understandably deeply hurt by Myers’s lie, and although she quickly forgives him, the incident contributes to a rift between mother and son that only grows wider as Myers’s interests become further and further removed from Florence’s experiences. In this passage describing Florence caring for Myers after his injury, it’s particularly significant that she “look[s] at [Myers] as if she had never seen [him] before”; Myers is in some ways becoming a stranger to his family.

8. “Dad’s grief for his brother was as real as if it were a stranger who lived with us, a stranger who had taken my place in the center of the universe.” (Chapter 7, Page 72)

   For Myers, part of growing up means coming to see his parents in new and more complex ways. Although Myers was never as close to Herbert as he was to Florence, the realization that his father has relationships, experiences, and emotions that don’t revolve around Myers himself still comes as a shock (all the more because Lee dies on the eve of Myers’s twelfth birthday—a day Myers expected would be all about him). Implicitly, Myers is also coming to understand that his parents are fallible, since Herbert’s depression after his brother’s death causes considerable strain on the family. Myers, however, isn’t fully able to cope with these realizations at the time, which exacerbates the tension within the household and gives his memories of Herbert and Florence a regretful tone.

9. “The black kids in the class wanted to identify with the values we were being taught, and the concept of being slaves was a clear deflection of those values. The teachers didn’t seem to notice that the black kids weren’t comfortable with the textbook. They also didn’t seem to notice anything wrong in our music class when we sang ‘My Old Kentucky Home,’ the version with the ‘darkies’ being gay.” (Chapter 7, Page 75)

   The above passage introduces a tension that becomes clearer and clearer over the course of Bad Boy*: Myers’s intelligence gives him access to*

educational opportunities that hold out the promise of a better life; in practice, however, that promise is still rarely extended equally to people of color. As a preteen, Myers still largely accepts the "values" he is learning in school—most notably, the idea that hard work and talent inevitably lead to success. Here, however, he is beginning to see the ways in which these values are contradicted by ongoing, unacknowledged racism in both the curriculum and society at large.

10. "'By this time there were two very distinct voices going on in my head, and I moved easily between them. One had to do with sports, street life, and establishing myself as a male. It was a fairly rough voice, the kind of in-your-face tone that said I wouldn't stand for too much nonsense either on the basketball courts or in the streets. The other voice, the one I hid from my street friends and teammates, was increasingly dealing with the vocabulary of literature." (Chapter 9, Page 92)

    As Myers approaches adolescence and begins thinking about what it means to be a man, he becomes increasingly aware of being pulled in two different directions. As he puts it later in the book, a certain form of black and/or working-class masculinity is "expressed in muscle, in being someone who wouldn't take any nonsense" (176). The problem is that while Myers doesn't entirely dislike this view of masculinity (he enjoys and is good at sports, for instance), he isn't comfortable with some of its implications—specifically, that an interest in language and ideas is feminine. On the flip side, the "vocabulary of literature" doesn't seem compatible at this point with what Myers values about his life in Harlem. Although Myers says in this passage that he could "move easily" between these two "voices," one of the main struggles of his life is to find a way to actually merge them by writing about his experiences as a black man.

11. "Things were seriously beginning to fall apart at home. Looking back, I can see that we were all trapped in our own unhappy circumstances. Pap didn't like living in his son's house. My father didn't want the burden that it placed on his relationship with Mama, and Mama just hated that it seemed as if her life was being put on hold while Dad dealt badly with the economics of survival [...] I feel rotten for having blamed him for being poor, and even more rotten for not realizing that I was doing it." (Chapter 10, Page 106)

    The above passage gets to the heart of the Dean family's problems during Myers's high school years; each member of the family has become so

wrapped up in their own private frustrations that they're no longer attuned to what those around them are going through, and are increasingly unable even to talk to one another. The fact that Myers doesn't exclude himself from this speaks to the ways in which his perspective on his parents has shifted over time. To some extent, Myers suggests, his teenage self still viewed his parents as existing solely to serve his needs, so he blamed his father for his own increasingly gloomy future prospects. It isn't until many years later that Myers is able to recognize how unfair this was to Herbert.

12. "I would dream of meeting someone, a boy or girl who would be a secret reader as I was, who would feel the same sense of being alone as I did, who would want to meet me and be my friend. Together we would not be ashamed of being bright or liking poetry. The kids at Stuyvesant were all bright, among the brightest in the city, but my growing shyness made it hard for me to make connections. I longed to have a school sweater, a school jacket, the symbols of belonging. They were out of the question as we struggled just to make ends meet." (Chapter 10, Page 107)

    Although a rigorous school like Stuyvesant should, in theory, be the kind of place where Myers could thrive, going there proves to be a disastrous decision. In part, this is because the school's emphasis on math and science doesn't correspond to either Myers's talents, or his interests. On a deeper level, however, entering a school full of "bright" students does nothing to assuage Myers's growing loneliness. In fact, it exacerbates it, because while Myers shares his classmates' intelligence, he doesn't share their financial security. The assumption at Stuyvesant is that most students will go on to attend college, but Myers quickly realizes that this is unlikely for him. As a result, he feels like an outcast, unable to even afford a sweater or jacket that might help him feel as though he "belongs."

13. "Getting and doing for oneself was [Herbert's] advice on everything. He talked constantly about having two lists. One list consisted of things you wanted, the other of things you were willing to work for. I don't think that, having been raised in a segregated Baltimore, he ever imagined I would need to learn interaction with whites, or to deal with being black in any but a defensive manner." (Chapter 10, Page 112)

    Although Herbert and Florence certainly aren't unaware of how widespread racism is—in fact, they moved to New York partly in an attempt to escape it—they aren't equipped to help Myers navigate the particular challenges

he's encountering in his life as a student. Herbert, for instance, largely embraces a very American ideal of individualism; he believes that it is each person's responsibility to carve out for themselves the life they want, and within his own community this belief works, up until a point. Myers, however, is not only interacting with white society but learning to aspire to that society's values, and Herbert's advice has less relevance when it comes to addressing the racial and economic roadblocks standing between Myers and the life he wants to live.

14. "The idea that creative writing could be anyone's *job* never entered my mind [...] I didn't know of any living person who made money as a writer. The few articles I had read dealing with writers spoke about how they had conceived their ideas, or what they were currently writing, never about money." (Chapter 11, Page 121)

    Although Myers knows from a relatively young age that he wants to write, he doesn't consider pursuing it as a career until much later. This speaks in part to Myers's working-class background; he notes, for instance, that his father would talk about "'good' jobs in the post office or on the police force"—the implication being that these are the most prestigious jobs someone in their position can reasonably aspire to (116). It's also significant, however, that Myers never hears any teacher or author talk about writing as a way to earn a living (and therefore as a career that Myers himself might be able to pursue). The underlying assumption is that art exists and deals with a world totally detached from economic concerns. Myers largely accepts this idea as a teenager, but pushes back against it as an adult, using his writing as a way of talking about issues like poverty and race.

15. "People wanted to look at me and make a quick and simple decision as to who I was. I was big and I played ball and I fought, and those qualities meant, to a lot of people, that I must have a very limited intellectual life. Others were satisfied to label me as a black person and attach to the label any definition they might have as to what that meant. There were those who accepted me as a reader but then would separate me, in their thinking, from anything they accepted as black. But my life was filled with the cultural substance of blackness." (Chapter 11, Page 126)

    As Myers struggles to define his identity as a teenager, he constantly runs up against the assumptions of those around him—for instance, the dismissal of those who see him in purely racial (and often racist) terms, or the

assumption by his teachers that his interests somehow mean he isn't "really" black. Myers understandably resents these kinds of snap judgments, particularly because they reinforce a divide he already senses growing between his blackness and his growing intellectualism. However, Myers's solution—to simply distance himself from his race—doesn't work; he can't escape the assumptions of others, and even if he could, cutting himself off from the "cultural substance of blackness" would only deepen his social isolation.

16. "When [Herbert] brought [the used typewriter] home and put it on the kitchen table, I wouldn't touch it. It was not the machine I had imagined, or the machine I had worked so hard for. For the next months I hardly spoke to Mama, or she to me. I think that her hurting me made her feel worse than I felt. She began drinking even more." (Chapter 11, Page 128)

    As Myers's despair about his future deepens, his relationship with his parents deteriorates. Florence—who is preoccupied with her own problems, including the presence of Herbert's misogynistic father—begins drinking and gambling to cope, eventually spending the money Myers had saved up for a typewriter. Myers is furious, as well as disappointed by the old-fashioned typewriter his father purchases for him instead. In retrospect, Myers clearly regrets the way he behaved; he realizes, for instance, how terrible his mother felt about what she did, and presumably also sees Herbert's gift for what it was—a loving gesture made even more meaningful by the fact that he doesn't really understand why writing is important to his son. At the time, however, the family seems to be falling apart under the weight of different pressures; although each member of the family clearly still loves the others, their preoccupation with their own concerns has made them unable to communicate with one another.

17. "I didn't like fighting [...] but something inside me was happy about being in the fight [...] It was more a feeling that, when I was fighting, I stopped feeling the sense of helplessness that seemed to be overtaking me. I had hoped to become part of a special way of life. That life would have had to do with ideas and people who took those ideas and shaped them into a kind of power. But that life seemed, in my growing isolation, ever more remote." (Chapter 12, Pages 135-36)
    When Myers intervenes to prevent Frank from being beaten up, Frank asks him whether he likes fighting. The conflicted feelings Myers expresses in the above passage explain why he doesn't answer directly. Although Myers

doesn't particularly enjoy fighting, it's one of the few remaining areas of his life where he seems to have any control. What's more, it's a response to what Myers sees as a broken promise on the part of society; Myers once believed that if he acted in all the right ways, he could enter "a special way of life," but it's now becoming clear to him that that isn't true. As a result, he sees no reason not to revert to former bad habits like fighting. Implicitly, this passage is also a commentary on the rates of violence in some poor communities and communities of color; as Myers says a few pages later, the desperation and loneliness he feels is "the same reasoning that some friends of [his] used when they joined gangs" (138).

18. "At sixteen I wasn't always sure what I meant. I also did not know who my audience would be. Would I write for black people like the guys I played ball with? I didn't think so. Would I write for a white world that I thought might exist but had never really experienced? And if I did, would my writing be accepted?

    "In the fall of 1953 I wanted to write stories with secret meaning that would relate to people like me, no matter their color or position in life [...] I also wanted to put down on paper the labyrinth of my own fears as well as a safe path through that labyrinth.

    "During this period my writings from day to day were nearly incomprehensible even hours after I had finished them. All the pieces were there, but the puzzle of fitting them together was escaping me. I sensed I was losing control of my writing." (Chapter 13, Page 148)

    The above passage captures the problem at the heart of Myers's early struggles as a writer. In effect, Myers has accepted the idea that the values and norms of white society are universal, and that writing about black experience would therefore make him a niche writer. However, this leaves him with nowhere to go in his own writing; he can't write for or about a world that he has "never really experienced," but he resists writing about his own experiences for fear that he would be producing something "commendable only as a Negro accomplishment" (85). As a result, Myers's writing becomes more and more "incomprehensible," which is particularly ironic given that he began writing in part because he felt it allowed him to express himself more clearly than he could in speech.

19. “Sometimes Frank Hall would come to my apartment. He told me how great it was. I found out he was sleeping in hallways or in Morningside Park. Mama took an instant dislike to him, I think because of his eyes. They were always wide, red rimmed, and staring. His sandy hair was discolored in patches to a grayish blond. He looked black and yet nonblack, calm yet on the edge of turmoil, vaguely dangerous.” (Chapter 13, Page 150)

    As Myers drifts away from the rest of his friends and family, he grows closer to Frank. His reasons for doing so become clear in this passage, where he describes Frank as a person who doesn’t quite fit into any group; he is homeless, and his mental illness keeps him on the edges of society. Perhaps most importantly, at least from Myers’s point of view, Frank looks racially ambiguous, which jibes well with Myers’s internal conflict surrounding his blackness and his aspirations in life; as he puts it later, “Frank looked the way I felt” (181).

20. “I knew that if I had not scored so highly on the I.Q. tests, I would have been considered just bad, or rebellious. But I was certifiably bright and, therefore, disturbed.” (Chapter 15, Page 169)

    Despite Myers’s frustrations with his life, he recognizes that he has been lucky compared to some of his peers. As Myers learned all the way back in fourth grade, students (particularly students of color) who act out can be sent to reform school or potentially even prison. Myers’s “certifiable” intelligence, however, has caused multiple teachers to take an interest in him, and ultimately leads to more lenient treatment when he begins cutting classes; instead of being expelled from Stuyvesant, Myers is sent to see a psychologist.

21. “My next session with Dr. Holiday went well. She asked me about my family life and asked me if I had ever had sex with a girl. I answered that I had. I knew the answer that I was supposed to give. I was black and sixteen. If what I had heard from other kids my age was true, they were all having sex. Then, just before I left, she asked a final question.

    “‘Do you like being black?’” (Chapter 15, Page 173)

    Myers frequently expresses frustration with the expectations others have of him; he comes to resent being black, in part, because the assumptions and stereotypes associated with blackness seem to deny him the opportunity to

craft his own unique identity. Nevertheless, Myers often caters to those assumptions, probably because he has lost faith in his ability to convince people to see him in any other way, and simply wants things to go as smoothly as possible. Here, for instance, he provides Dr. Holiday with the answer he assumes he is "supposed to give"—that is, the answer she already expects is true. This is one reason why Dr. Holiday's follow-up question is such a pivotal step in Myers's development. In asking Myers whether he likes being black, Dr. Holiday is prompting him to think not just about the negative associations he has with blackness, but about what being black could and does mean to him. In other words, she opens up the possibility of thinking of race not exclusively as something forced on a person, but as an identity that can be personal in the same way that Myers's identity as a writer is. Eventually, this will allow Myers to realize that he doesn't need to reject his racial identity in order to be his own person.

22. "But it seemed to me that both of these concepts, career and maleness, were only subdivisions of the larger idea of race. When I thought of the major careers, I thought of whites, not blacks. When I thought of maleness, I thought of whites with political or economic power and blacks with muscle. My definition of a black man was, except for the rare instance, a man without an outstanding career, and a man who had to define his maleness by how muscular he was." (Chapter 16, Pages 176-77)

    Although Myers admits that he had never thought much about what being black meant before Dr. Holiday asked him, he quickly realizes that he has definite ideas about it, and that these ideas actually take precedence over other identities he's spent more time consciously considering. This speaks to how pervasive Myers's experience of racial inequality has been, and it also helps explain his troubled relationship to his own racial identity; because he essentially can't imagine a black man living the kind of life he values (i.e. working as a writer), Myers tries to distance himself from being black. It is also worth noting that the common thread linking Myers's descriptions of white and black masculinity is power; the implication is that in the absence of political and economic power, black men turn to physical power as a way of fulfilling gender norms.

23. "I had never sat down and said, 'Let me think about being black.' But somehow all the language of race, the history of what it meant to be black in America, all the 'niggers' and all the images of slaves, and all the stories about my people being lynched and beaten, and having to sit in the backs of

buses, had piled up in the corners of my soul like so much debris that I had to carry around with me. Being black had become, at best, the absence of being white. The clearest thing I knew was that there was no advantage in being black." (Chapter 16, Page 179)

Despite not having consciously thought about being black, Myers has grown up in a society where it is all but impossible not to absorb others' ideas about race. Although Myers himself doesn't necessarily buy into bigoted stereotypes, he can see for himself that being black carries with it real-world disadvantages, so it's not surprising that his overall impression of blackness as a teenager is negative. It is particularly significant that Myers describes being black as an "absence" (in this case, of the positive experiences and values Myers associates with whiteness). Because Myers has had few black role models in the areas of life that most interest him, his ability to imagine positive ways of being black is limited.

24. "It was years before I discovered the shame that hid [Herbert] from me. My father couldn't read. He had no idea how to reach the person I had become and was too embarrassed to let me know." (Chapter 18, Page 189)

The distance Myers's interest in literature causes between him and his mother is nothing compared to its effects on his relationship with his father. At the time, Myers likely assumed that Herbert viewed his interests as effeminate; he had, for instance, refused to come see his son years earlier in a recital because he "didn't think young boys should be dancing around a stage in skimpy outfits" (55). In retrospect, however, Myers suggests that it was at least as much shame as disapproval that prevented his father from reaching out to him. The passage, in other words, is another reminder of both the power and the limitations of language; the problem isn't simply that Herbert can't read, but rather that he and his son can't find a way to communicate across their differences.

25. "I found, stumbled upon, was led to, or was given great literature. Reading this literature, these books, led me to the canvas of my own humanity. Along the way I encountered values that I accepted, primarily those that reinforced my early religious and community mores. My reading ability led me to books, which led me to ideas, which led to more books and more ideas. The slow dance through the ideas led to writing." (Chapter 19, Page 200)

Although Myers doesn't truly understand his own relationship to literature

until he reads the work of authors with backgrounds similar to his own, it's significant that he still views his early reading as worthwhile. For one thing, he says, some of the ideas and values he found in those books did reflect the "mores" of his own upbringing. Perhaps even more importantly, however, reading literature was what prompted Myers to think not only about what his own "humanity" entailed, but of how he himself could mold and shape it; his remark about humanity being a "canvas" speaks to the ways in which literature, for Myers, is a way of inventing a personal identity for oneself.

ESSAY TOPICS

1. Reread the following passage: “I didn’t want to be defiant. I wanted to be in the system that I was walking away from, but I didn’t know how to get in” (132). What makes Myers a “bad boy”? In what ways is his “badness” a reflection of the society he grows up in?

2. How does Myers form his views on race as a boy? How do these views change over time?

3. What attracts Myers to reading and writing? How does each impact the way he views himself?

4. As a young man, Myers spends a lot of time thinking about masculinity, and how factors like race and class affect it. What does *Bad Boy* ultimately suggest about what it means to “be a man”?

5. Choose one of the works Myers describes reading as a boy and describe how it might have influenced the topic, tone, or themes of *Bad Boy*.

6. How does Myers characterize Harlem? What role does Harlem play in Myers’s development?

7. Discuss the role the Dodgers play in *Bad Boy*. How does Myers use the team to underscore themes, plot points, etc.?

8. Describe Florence Dean. What makes her so central to Myers’s story?

9. Compare and contrast Myers’s voice as a narrator with his words and actions as a child and teenager. What is Myers’s attitude towards his younger self?

10. Why do you think *Bad Boy* more or less ends with Myers leaving for the Army, only briefly touching on his years as an adult?