

Character Analysis in *Bad Boy*

SUGGESTED LEARNING STRATEGIES: Graphic Organizer, Marking the Text, Oral Reading, Quickwrite, Think-Pair-Share, Role Play, Word Map

My Notes

Memoir

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Walter Dean Myers has been writing since he was a child. He published his first book, *Where Does the Day Go?*, in 1969. He has since written many books for children and young adults, two of which—*Scorpions* and *Somewhere in the Darkness*—have received Newbery Honors. His stories focus on the challenges and triumphs of growing up in a difficult environment. His memoir, *Bad Boy*, reveals how he overcame racial challenges and his own shortcomings to become a very successful author.

From **Bad Boy** by Walter Dean Myers

- By September and the opening of school I was deep into sports and became a baseball fanatic. Along with the pleasure of playing baseball there was the joy of identifying with the ballplayers. I loved the Dodgers. Maybe it was because Mama loved the Dodgers and especially Jackie Robinson. All summer long, kids playing punchball—hitting a pink “Spaldeen” ball with your fist and then running bases drawn in chalk on the streets—had tried to steal home to copy Robinson. We even changed the rules of stoop ball, of which I was the absolute King of the World, to include bases when more than one kid played. You played stoop ball by throwing the ball against the steps of a brownstone. The ball coming off the steps had to clear the sidewalk and land in the street. If it landed before being caught, you could run the bases. My speed and ability to judge distances made me an excellent fielder. We did occasionally play actual baseball, but not enough kids had gloves to make a good game.
- My new school was Public School 43 on 128th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, across from the Transit Authority bus terminal. Mrs. Conway was my teacher, and it took me one day to get into trouble with her.

WORD CONNECTIONS

The word *fanatic* comes from the Latin word for temple. A fanatic was someone “in the temple” or “inspired by divinity.” The root *-fan-* is also found in *profane*; someone who is profane is “outside the temple,” or unholy or sacrilegious.

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- 10 The other thing that got me in trouble was my speech. I couldn't hear that I was speaking badly, and I wasn't sure that the other kids did, but I knew they often laughed when it was my turn to speak. After a while I would tense up anytime Mrs. Conway called on me. I threw my books across that classroom enough times for Mrs. Conway to stop my reading once and for all.
- 11 But when the class was given the assignment to write a poem, she did read mine. She said that she liked it very much.
- 12 "I don't think he wrote that poem," Sidney Aronofsky volunteered.
- 13 I gave Sidney Aronofsky the biggest punch he ever had in the back of his big head and was sent to the closet. After the incident with Sidney, Mrs. Conway said that she had had quite enough of me and that I would not be allowed to participate in any class activity until I brought my mother to school. I knew that meant a beating. That evening I thought about telling Mama that the teacher wanted to see her, but I didn't get up the nerve. I didn't get it up the next day, either. In the meantime I had to sit in the back of the room, and no kid was allowed to sit near me. I brought some comic books to school and read them under my desk.
- 14 Mrs. Conway was an enormously hippy woman. She moved slowly and always had a scowl on her face. She reminded me of a great white turtle with just a dash of rouge and a touch of eye shadow. It was not a pretty sight. But somehow she made it all the way from the front of the room to the back, where I sat reading a comic, without my hearing her. She snatched the comic from me and tore it up. She dropped all the pieces on my desk, then made me pick them up and take them to the garbage can while the class laughed.
- 15 Then she went to her closet, snatched out a book, and put it in front of me.
- 16 "You are," she sputtered, "a bad boy. A very bad boy. You cannot join the rest of the class until your mother comes in." She was furious, and I was embarrassed.
- 17 "And if you're going to sit back here and read, you might as well read something worthwhile," she snapped.

I didn't touch the book in front of me until she had made her way back to the front of the class and was going on about something in long division. The title of the book was *East o' the Sun and the West o' the Moon*. It was a collection of Norwegian fairy tales, and I read the first one. At the end of the day, I asked Mrs. Conway if I could take the book home.

She looked at me a long time and then said no, I couldn't. But I could read it every day in class if I behaved myself. I promised I would. For the rest of the week I read that book. It was the best book I had ever read. When I told Mrs. Conway I had finished, she asked me what I liked about the book, and I told her. The stories were full of magic events and interesting people and witches and strange places. It differed from *Mystery Rides the Rails*, the Bobbsey Twins, and a few Honeybunch books I had come across.

I realized I liked books, and I liked reading. Reading a book was not so much like entering a different world— it was like discovering a different language. It was a language clearer than the one I spoke, and clearer than the one I heard around me. What the books said was, as in the case of *East o' the Sun*, interesting, but the idea that I could enter this world at any time I chose was even more attractive. The “me” who read the books, who followed the adventures, seemed more the real me than the “me” who played ball in the streets.

Mrs. Conway gave me another book to read in class and, because it was the weekend, allowed me to take it home to read. From that day on I liked Mrs. Conway.

I still didn't get to read aloud in class, but when we had a class assignment to write a poem, she would read mine. At the end of the year I got my best report card ever, including a glorious Needs Improvement in conduct.

It was also the golden anniversary of the school, and the school magazine used one of my poems. It was on the first page of the Jubilee Issue, and it was called “My Mother.” When I saw it, I ran all the way home to show Mama.

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Mr. Irwin Lasher

- 1 My new school, the new P.S. 125, was quite close to my house. It was located on 123rd Street, right across from Morningside Park between Morningside and Amsterdam Avenues. The school was ultramodern for the day, with table and chairs that could be arranged any way the teacher wanted instead of the rigid desks nailed to the floor we had been used to having. I was in class 6-2 and had my first male teacher, Mr. Irwin Lasher.
- 2 “You’re in my class for a reason,” he said as I sat at the side of his desk. “Do you know what the reason is?”
- 3 “Because I was promoted to the sixth grade?” I asked.
- 4 “Because you have a history of fighting your teachers,” he said. “And I’m telling you right now, I won’t tolerate any fighting in my class for any reason. Do you understand that?”
- 5 “Yes.”
- 6 “You’re a bright boy, and that’s what you’re going to be in this class.”
- 7 My fight with Mr. Lasher didn’t happen until the third day, and in a way it wasn’t really my fault. We were going up the stairs, and I decided that, when his back was turned, I would pretend that I was trying to kick him. All right, he paused on the staircase landing before leading us to our floor and the kick that was supposed to delight my classmates by just missing the teacher hit him squarely in the backside. He turned quickly and started toward me. Before I realized it, I was swinging at him wildly.
- 8 Mr. Lasher had been in World War II and had fought in the Battle of the Bulge. He didn’t have much trouble handling me. He sat me in a corner of the classroom and said that he would see me after class. I imagined he would send a note home, and that my mother would have to come to school. I was already practicing what I would say to her when I gave her the note. But instead of sending a note home, he came home with me! Down the street we came, my white teacher and me, with all my friends looking at me and a few asking if it meant I was going to get a beating. I thought it probably would, but I didn’t give them the satisfaction of an answer. Mama was sitting on the park bench across from our house when I came down the street with Mr. Lasher firmly holding my hand.

“Mrs. Myers, I had a little problem with Walter today that I think you should know about,” he said, sitting next to her on the bench.

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He called Mama by my last name, not knowing that I was an informal adoptee. Her last name was Dean, of course, but she didn’t go into it. 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.

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“We need more smart Negro boys,” he said. “We don’t need tough Negro boys.”

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Mr. Lasher did two important things that year. The first was that he took me out of class one day per week and put me in speech therapy for the entire day. The second thing he did was to convince me that my good reading ability and good test scores made me special.

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He put me in charge of anything that needed a leader and made me coach the slower kids in reading. At the end of the year I was the one student in his class whom he recommended for placement in a rapid advancement class in junior high school.

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With Mr. Lasher my grades improved significantly. I was either first or second in every subject, and he even gave me a Satisfactory in conduct. As the tallest boy in the sixth grade, I was on the honor guard and was scheduled to carry the flag at the graduation exercises, an honor I almost missed because of God’s revenge....

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1. Using the highlighting, marking, and discussing you did while reading about Walter in Mrs. Conway’s and Mr. Lasher’s classes, fill in the chart below. Include quotations from the text and the number of the paragraph for each quotation. The first example is done for you.

Actions That Get Walter in Trouble	Why Walter Acts That Way	Adjectives to Describe Walter
Throws book across the room “I threw the book sidearm and watched it hit his desk and bounce across the room.” (¶ 5)		

2. **Topic sentence:** Write a sentence stating the changes that occurred in Walter’s attitude and behavior from the beginning of fifth grade to the end of sixth grade.

3. Look back at the excerpts from *Flipped* that you read in Activity 2.9. Remember that the character’s **perspective** or point of view affects the readers’ understanding of the story. If you were reading *Bad Boy* from the perspective of Walter’s teachers, you might have a very different understanding of the situation and of Walter.

Pretend you are Walter’s teachers. In the graphic organizer below, explore how Walter’s teachers would view him. Use the Word Wall and your Vocabulary Notebook to find precise adjectives. Carefully consider the teacher’s **diction**, or choice of words.

LITERARY TERMS

A character’s **perspective** is his or her view of a situation or of other characters.

GRAMMAR & USAGE

An **action verb** is a verb that expresses physical or mental action.

Mrs. Conway	Mr. Irwin Lasher
What adjectives would she use to describe Walter?	What adjectives would he use to describe Walter?
Why? How has Walter behaved in her class? Use action verbs.	Why? How has Walter behaved in his class? Use action verbs.
What advice about Walter would she give to the next teacher?	What advice about Walter would he give to the next teacher?

