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Monster

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Monster

Abstract

This is a review of *Monster* (2003).

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It would be easy to make a simple film about Aileen Wuornos. As a lesbian and prostitute convicted of killing six men, she could be portrayed as the monstrous embodiment of man-hating rage. As a woman whose life was characterized by physical and sexual abuse, family dysfunction, alcoholism and poverty, she could be portrayed as a perpetual and passive. As a criminal defendant who emphatically insisted that all of her killings were acts of self-defense and who used her celebrity to criticize the systems that circumscribed her life chances, she could be portrayed as a proto-feminist heroine. The genius of writer/director Patty Jenkins' first feature-length film, *Monster*, is that it treats Aileen Wuornos as a complex, multi-faceted human being who is unlikable, pitiable, sympathetic, heroic, admirable, and revolting all at the same time. Assisted by Charlize Theron's searing, emotionally rich, fully embodied portrayal of Wuornos, Jenkins' screenplay is an interrogation of the nature and power of love.

One of the most painful sequences in the film depicts Wuornos' attempt to find legitimate employment. The collision between Wuornos' optimism and determination to make a change and the harsh reality of the professional world is emotionally devastating both to her and for the viewer. When she realizes that she will never be able to find legitimate employment, she also realizes that she is trapped and states, "Who am I kidding? I'm a hooker." The essentializing character of this statement, and its heart of self-indictment and self-disappointment, crashes

down on the viewer. From this sequence, as well as the other information about Wuornos' history which Jenkins' sprinkles throughout the film, the viewer comes to understand that Wuornos' life is seriously circumscribed by institutional realities and that her life of prostitution and crime were not merely the choices of a monstrous personality.

Another difficult sequence in the film is, of course, the scene depicting Wuornos' rape and her first murder. Although the scene is graphic, terrifying and remarkably unsettling, the depiction of the rape allows the viewer to understand why Wuornos would kill this john as well as why her perception of men through the remainder of the film might be colored and/or distorted. When Wuornos is interacting with her next john, his sexual demands are similar to the ones of the man who tried to rape her and Jenkins shows us - through camera work and music-how Wuornos' psyche has been damaged.

Jenkins is also careful to show us that Wuornos is not without a moral compass or the ability to make distinctions. When in the car with another john, Wuornos is clearly asking him prompting questions that will allow her to justify executing him. He does not give the right answers and then finally, through broken speech, declares that this is his first time doing anything like this. Recognizing his embarrassment and his desperation - very similar to her own - Wuornos gives him a quick handjob to which he responds with a very quiet "thank you." These gestures,

on her part and his, point to the fragility and desperation of the human condition portrayed throughout the film. Jenkins also gives Wuornos the opportunity to defend her actions and offer her critique of the world in a moving and insightful speech that indicates that Wuornos is "good with the Lord."

This brings us to the scene which was, for me, the most difficult to watch. At the end of the film, after Wuornos has done everything in her power to care for her lover, Selby (Christina Ricci), Selby attempts to have Wuornos implicate herself in the murders during a telephone conversation on which the police are eavesdropping. As the conversation progresses, Wuornos, who has been cautious from the beginning, catches on to what is happening. When Wuornos realizes that Selby is attempting to trap her to save her own skin, Wuornos quickly confesses and takes sole responsibility for the crimes. At the beginning of the film, Wuornos identifies Selby as a person sent by God whose presence and love has saved her from suicide. Throughout the film, Wuornos' acts are motivated by her desire to care for Selby - her attempt to find legitimate employment and her willingness to re-enter the life of prostitution. The film closes, then, with Wuornos' act of extreme self-sacrifice and her willingness to accept full responsibility to save Selby, a woman who is clearly unworthy of such profound love and affection.

I can imagine certain critics identifying Wuornos as a Christ figure based on this act of self-sacrificial love which leads to her death. I am reluctant to do so.

Partly because the narrative and iconographic details of the film do not merit such an appellation, partly because the category of the Christ figure is so over-used that it is no longer analytically useful, but primarily because such a simple categorization would not do justice to the complexity and profundity of the love, loyalty, hope and drive that Jenkins has ascribed to Wuornos.

Monster is a difficult film with no easy sense of identification and no easy judgment about the character of Wuornos. *Monster* tells the story of a woman who loved deeply and powerfully, but who was constantly betrayed by those who should love her and unable to accept love from those who extended it. *Monster* is, therefore, a profoundly theological film in its interrogation of the power of love and its presence in the most unlikely of places.