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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | Kristen Morley  is a law student at the University of Alberta   |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0340855/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:287615)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback.htm) |       Rather than fighting against one specific instance of rape, she is fighting against a society that has allowed her to suffer a lifetime of sexual victimization | |  | | --- | | **Sympathy for the Devil: The victimization of a serial killer in *Monster***  By Kristen Morley  Prior to seeing the film *Monster*, I knew very little about the film. After watching *Monster*, I found it difficult to forget. *Monster* is based upon the true story of Aileen Wournos, a highway hooker and America's first female serial-killer, who was put to death in 1992 for murdering seven men. Aileen's killing spree began when she shot and killed a John after being brutally raped. The sense of empowerment she derived from killing the John who raped her, and a desperate desire to provide for her girlfriend Shelby, drove Aileen to kill 6 more victims before she was apprehended by police.  Initially, I attributed the title of the movie *Monster* as referring to Aileen Wournos. She was a serial killer who took the lives of seven men, how could she be anything but a monster? However, by the end of the movie, I could not identify Aileen with that label. Aileen Wournos is portrayed as a very sorrowful character. Rather, it was the Johns who took advantage of Aileen and the men who had victimized her all her life that became the monster to me. When Aileen killed them, I felt "schadenfreude": a degree of satisfaction in their deaths. Recognizing my own reaction to this movie caused me to question my values: had I simply been manipulated by the movie's sympathetic portrayal of Aileen Wournos, or do I really believe that sexual victimization justifies murder?  *Monster* fills in some of the gaps left by the movie *Dead Man Walking*. Critics of *Dead Man Walking* thought the film lacked social consciousness by failing to show the disadvantaged background of most inmates on death row. Those who have worked with death row inmates attest to the impact that childhood physical and emotional abuse has in creating a criminal. Through the characterization of Aileen Wournos, *Monster* subtly and effectively reveals how Aileen's childhood abuse contributed to her criminalization. Aileen's life is a tale of abuse and abandonment. At age 8 she was repeatedly sexually abused by her father's friend, and when her father found out, he beat her. She gave up a baby for adoption at age 13. By the time she was a teenager, she was homeless and forced to become a hooker to survive. Where the movie picks up her life, Aileen is 28-years-old and contemplating suicide. As a viewer, it is difficult not to assess her later actions in the context of her personal history. The magnitude of abuse she had suffered inspired in me a righteous anger at those who contributed to the victimization, and the social system that allowed it to happen.  *Monster* can be characterized as a revenge film. As defined by William Miller in his article *Clint Eastwood and Equity: Popular Culture's Theory of Revenge*, a revenge narrative, "takes us from indignation and outrage at a wrong, via fear and loathing of the wrongdoer, to a sense of satisfaction of having righted on the body of the wrongdoer." The initial wrong perceived in *Monster* that inspires our fear and outrage is the rape of Aileen. When she kills the John, we feel satisfaction that he got what he deserved. However, the later murders committed by Aileen were not in response to the same circumstances that occurred in the first instance. Whereas the first murder could be construed as self-defence, the later murders were much more predatory. With the exception of her final victim, Aileen killed Johns simply because they were Johns. Yet, her murders still find some legitimacy under the revenge model. Even though she is not directly under attack, she is still the victim of men degrading her for sexual gratification. Rather than fighting against one specific instance of rape, she is fighting against a society that has allowed her to suffer a lifetime of sexual victimization. The wrong that inspires the revenge is still there, but the dimension that changes in the subsequent murders is the audience's lack of fear and loathing of the Johns.  Miller posits that the audience acts as the judge in determining when an avenger crosses the line and becomes a villain. The legitimacy of an avenger is dependant upon whether their response is proportional to the wrong committed. A case can be made that after committing the first murder, Aileen became a villain rather than an avenger, particularly as her victims became less culpable. It may be legitimate to fear and loath a rapist and feel some satisfaction in his death, yet it is difficult to argue that a man who visits a prostitute because his wife is in a wheelchair should be killed for his indiscretions. Aileen's final victim was a kindly older man who picked her up not realizing she was a prostitute. Upon seeing that she was in a desperate state, he offered her money and a place to stay with him and his wife. Aileen did not want to kill him, and was visibly distraught as she agonized over what to do. However, in the end, she did kill him, afraid that if she didn't he would blow her cover. With this murder, that had no legitimacy or revenge motive, Aileen seemed to have firmly crossed the line from avenger to villain.  Although the audience may not find objective legitimacy for Aileen's actions, she strived psychologically to legitimate her own actions. During her killing spree, Aileen tried to justify her actions by casting all her potential victims as violent abusers. In light of her history of being exploited by men, it is plausible to believe that in her mind all men were in fact violent abusers. In one instance, Aileen attempted to vilify a John she was planning to murder, only to find he was painfully shy with a stuttering problem and had never picked up a hooker before. This discovery gave her pause and she did not kill him. This shows that Aileen does not fit the mould of a typical serial killer: she is not killing indiscriminately but rather acting out against the very class of people who had victimized her. Perhaps it is because Aileen herself is a victim that it is difficult to characterize her wholly as a villain.  Aileen Wournos is a character for whom I felt an immense amount of sympathy. This sympathy was based not only on Aileen's sexual victimization, but also on the corresponding betrayal she suffered from everyone in the movie who could have been in a position to "save" her. Authority figures not only failed to protect her, but contributed to her victimization. As a child, Aileen's father punished her for being the object of molestation. As an adult, Aileen was twice picked up by a police officer and forced to perform oral sex on him. Aileen's efforts to rehabilitate herself were frustrated by lack of support. After being raped by the John, Aileen wanted to stop hooking and tried to secure a legitimate job. She was humiliated and rejected at every place she applied, and ultimately returned to hooking, partially motivated by a desire to provide for Shelby. Even Shelby betrays Aileen out of self-interest. In the final scenes of the movie, Shelby testifies against Aileen at her criminal trial, as part of a plea to exculpate her own knowledge of and complicity in the murders. At the end of the movie, I almost felt more animosity towards Shelby than I did toward Aileen: a completely inappropriate response given the relative weight of their crimes.  *Monster* ends with Aileen being lead away from the courtroom and a post-script informs the audience that she was executed after spending 12 years on death row. Though Aileen's execution was off-screen, I was left with the feeling that it was unjust for her to be put to death. My reaction to *Monster* stands in direct contrast to my reaction to *Dead Man Walking*. At the end of *Dead Man Walking* I felt that justice was served by putting Mathew Ponselet to death. My reaction was certainly not premised upon the relative severity of their crimes: Ponselet being guilty of an isolated incident of rape and murder, and Aileen being guilty of seven murders over a period of time. Objectively, Aileen is more deserving of the death penalty. However there are two striking differences that effect my assessment of the culpability of these two characters. First, Aileen was not just the perpetrator of crimes, she was very much a victim herself and had been victimized her entire life. Her crimes were not random; rather, they were the direct result of acting out against the emotional abuse she had suffered through her own victimization. Second, Aileen was a victim of sexual exploitation and degradation, whereas Ponselet was the perpetrator of these crimes. Though I am arguable displaying a gender bias in this assessment, I have a disproportionate amount of sympathy for victims of sexual exploitation and a disproportionate level of condemnation for sexual aggressors.  The story of Aileen Wornous is a tragedy. She was a victim, turned victimizer. At the end of Monster, I felt an injustice had been committed. There is more than one monster in this film, yet Aileen Wornous was the only one held accountable for her crimes. A society that allows women to be sexually victimized is also monstrous and this is the monster that should be put to death.  Posted November 11, 2005 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? 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