

Monster: The Retelling of the Aileen Wuornos Story

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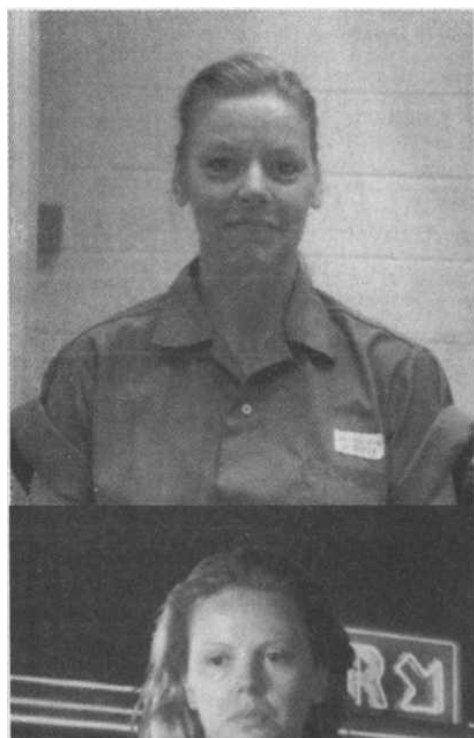
The movie *Monster* is based on the story of Aileen Wuornos, a woman who was executed two years ago in Florida for killing seven men. I left the movie in shock, partly because of the movie's violence, but mostly because the portrayal of Aileen's life in *Monster*, no matter how much it was fictionalized, revealed a greater truth about what it's like to live under patriarchy. This was not the story of a psychopath but a survivor, not a monster, but woman struggling to be recognized as a human being, worthy of love, respect, and dignity.

The movie begins with a grown-up Aileen sitting under a busy highway overpass, replaying the story of her life in her head. Ever since she was a little girl, she says, she wanted to be like Marilyn Monroe. She wanted to be the center of attention. And every time she went down on some guy for a few bucks, she thought, "This will be the guy that discovers me. This is the guy that will make me rich and famous." Later, a grown-up Aileen enters a bar with \$5 she just earned from a john. She's decided to kill herself, but has to spend the money first. If she doesn't spend it, she explains, that would be like she did it for free—and she has more respect for herself than that.

When a young woman named Selby approaches and tries to buy her a beer, Aileen lashes out, accusing Selby of trying to "fuck her for a beer." Selby, angry and hurt, tells Aileen she just wanted someone to talk to her before she has to go back into her closet. Aileen doesn't push Selby away. She apologizes and does her best to comfort Selby. Soon, they recognize their common loneliness and fall in love. Aileen becomes Selby's escape from compulsory heterosexuality. Selby's love becomes the most important part of Aileen's life, and Aileen is determined to take care of Selby, no matter what the cost.

From this point on, the story follows Aileen's struggle to support herself, to make Selby happy, and to hold on to her dignity. This is not easy. The only way Aileen knows to make money is through prostitution. She has no other marketable skills, no job history. She has nothing else that men are willing to pay her for. When she tries to get a job as a secretary, the boss ridicules her for wasting his time. She's ignored by a woman in an employment office. Practically everyone she comes into contact with (including Selby) thinks that there's no way Aileen can support herself, other than through prostitution.

In this context, Aileen's murders do not seem evil; they appear to be rational, even moral decisions, when made in the context of gross gender and class oppression. The first man she murders is a john who raped and tried to kill her. She easily makes the case that this man deserved to die. As for the rest of the johns she murdered, Aileen explains—quite convincingly—that there is no difference between a rapist and a john. In one scene, she tells a john that she has been raped and abused ever since she was a child. He says that's too bad, but it has nothing to do with him or his



agreement to pay her for sex. Aileen didn't wait to think about whether he was right, to figure out if she was just "projecting" her anger at other men onto an "innocent" man, or to explain the logical connection between incest and prostitution to this John. She killed him and took his wallet. And when Selby confronts her about the murders, Aileen says she's doing good deeds, getting rid of rapists, and perhaps saving a few women.

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In another scene, Aileen smiles and waves at Selby as Selby flirts with another woman. We hear Aileen's thoughts (which I am paraphrasing): "People look at my life and think I must be really reckless and impulsive. If they only realized how much restraint it takes . . ." When I look at statistics on how many women (and especially prostitutes) are raped, abused, and murdered by men, I too marvel at the level of our restraint and our capacity to hold in so much justified rage.

Aileen and Selby—like most women—struggled to make ethical decisions, find solidarity, and survive in a world based on the "ethics" of rugged individualism and survival of the richest. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Selby "chose" to betray another woman in order to win her own freedom. And yes, Aileen chose to become a prostitute and chose to kill Johns. But part of what makes *Monster* so honest and relevant to feminists is that it recognizes the patriarchal conditions—such as incest, rape, and poverty—that frame and constrain women's choices.

Monster vividly recalls some of the most horrific consequences of male domination on women's lives. For some viewers, this may be overwhelming. Please be warned that this movie will be painful to watch.

The Ted K Archive

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