Monster on Netflix: A “good kid” accused of murder

Carlos Delgado
11 June 2021

Directed by Anthony Mandler; based on the novel by Walter Dean Myers

Monster is a courtroom drama film currently streaming on Netflix. The film is based on the 1999 award-winning, young adult novel of the same title by American author Walter Dean Myers.

Steve Harmon (Kelvin Harrison Jr.) is a 17-year-old African American honor student attending a prestigious New York City high school. He aspires to become a filmmaker and spends his time making short, abstract films with friends and acquaintances in his Harlem neighborhood. His life is shattered when police show up at his home and charge him with felony murder, claiming he played a part in a robbery-gone-wrong that led to the shooting death of a bodega [convenience store] owner.

The film jumps between time periods in disjointed fashion. We see scenes of Steve’s imprisonment, his trial and flashbacks to the events that led to the robbery. We see him spending time with small-time criminal James King (Rakim Mayers, aka rapper A$AP Rocky), who later becomes a defendant in the same murder case.

According to the prosecution’s narrative of events, King and his accomplice Bobo (John David Washington) used Steve to scout out the store before the robbery. The defense maintains that Steve had nothing to do with the robbery and had entered the store for an unrelated reason. It is unclear until the very end of the film which version is true.

From the start, the odds are stacked against Steve. His lawyer, Maureen O’Brien (Jennifer Ehle), a businesslike but sympathetic public defender, informs him that the prosecution will attempt to paint him as a “monster,” and that it is her job to make the jury see him as a human being. Meanwhile, prosecutor Anthony Petrocelli (Paul Ben-Victor) encourages O’Brien to take a plea deal. Petrocelli insists that Steve will be convicted because, as he says (with racist implications), “He looks the part to me.”

Scenes of happier times are intercut with the trial and the dehumanizing conditions of prison life. Steve’s parents (Jeffrey Wright and Jennifer Hudson, both giving sensitive, understated performances) attempt to provide Steve support while struggling with their own painful emotions. Steve’s teacher, Leroy Sawicki (Tim Blake Nelson), delivers an impassioned defense of the young man’s character at the trial, in the face of Petrocelli’s bullying.

In the end, Steve must wait for an uncertain jury verdict to decide his fate.

Monster is competently put together. The performances are well crafted. Insofar as the film aspires to humanize the countless young men brutalized by the US “justice” system, it has some value.

And yet, the end result is something unsatisfying and more than a little dull. There is a certain predictability here, an over-reliance on familiar courtroom drama tropes and stock characters: the overworked-yet-sincere public defender, the aggressive (and racist) state prosecutor, the quietly suffering parents, etc. One can anticipate the shape of the drama from its opening scenes, and the film lacks either spontaneity or urgency in its storytelling. There is a feeling that everyone involved—including the viewer—is simply going through the motions.

Part of the problem is the character of Steve himself. Despite Harrison’s efforts, Steve isn’t an especially intriguing protagonist. The filmmakers have put too much effort into making him a “model” student, beloved by all. While this creates a contrast between Steve’s persona and the “monster” that the prosecution

© World Socialist Web Site

seeks to present him as, the larger effect is that Steve is stripped of any complexities or rough edges that might have allowed the viewer to form a connection with him and his plight.

Additionally, by very clearly setting Steve apart from the more overtly "criminal" types such as King and Bobo, the filmmakers seem to be implying, intentionally or not, that certain layers of the population "deserve" the brutality of the criminal justice system, while others, like Steve, do not. Steve is a "good kid," we are told repeatedly, in what essentially amounts to a euphemism for "middle class." Characters insist that he doesn't "belong" in the savage and inhuman prison system. One might respond: who in god's name does?

While *Monster* comments several times on how Steve's skin color makes him more likely to be convicted in a jury trial, the story carries another implication that the filmmakers largely ignore: that Steve's middle-class background gives him a better chance at avoiding prison time than the other defendants. King, for example, isn't likely to have teachers from an elite high school coming to testify on his behalf. When King is convicted, moments before the jury gives its verdict on Steve, the film shows little concern for the fact that he will be spending decades of his life behind bars.

A more probing film would perhaps have focused on humanizing an individual like King, yet that would have required a much more clearly worked out social perspective that the filmmakers here lack.

The filmmaking style, with its disjointed imagery and nonlinear narrative, doesn't help matters. Director Anthony Mandler, whose career before this has consisted largely of directing music videos, cuts and jumps in time so frequently that the events are prevented from landing with any great emotional weight. Too often the film cuts away just when a scene is beginning to have an effect. Emotional punches are softened into glancing blows. A number of issues, including the barbarism of the prisons, the decay of constitutional protections for the accused and the impact of racism in the justice system, are only touched on without truly being brought home.

Monster, while perhaps well-intentioned, lacks both profound social insight and emotional heft. For a stronger exploration of similar themes, we encourage readers to view HBO's excellent miniseries *The Night Of*.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site