

Broken spirits

by [Peter T. Chattaway](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

When we first see him, Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton) is a spiritually comatose corrections officer who seems to have inherited his bigotry, like his line of work, from his father, Buck (Peter Boyle). A housebound invalid, Buck gripes bitterly when he sees a couple of black children stroll across the lawn to pay a visit to Hank's son Sonny (Heath Ledger), and grumbles that there once was a time when colored people "knew their place." Hank compliantly scares the children off with a rifle.

But away from home, Hank's actions are governed by a code of decency that doesn't recognize racial boundaries. The first act of *Monster's Ball* follows Hank and his colleagues as they prepare for the execution of Lawrence Musgrove (Sean Combs), a convicted cop killer who has run out of appeals. Hank does all he can to ensure that this black man can face his death with dignity.

The exact nature of Lawrence's crime is never spelled out. All we know about him is that he has a young son, Tyrell (Coronji Calhoun), who has inherited his father's love of drawing, and a wife, Leticia (Halle Berry), who wants nothing to do with him. Leticia's life is a mess. Her landlord has posted an eviction notice to her door, her car breaks down, and her boss fires her for being late for work.

To make matters worse, she takes out her feelings of shame on her overweight son, and she beats him for eating too much candy. By the time she gets a new job waitressing at Hank's favorite diner, she's a nervous wreck, spilling coffee on Hank's lap and fumbling helplessly with the cash register.

Hank and Leticia would appear to have nothing in common, but when both of their lives are struck by tragedy--and when Hank, by coincidence, finds himself in a position where he can help Leticia--it triggers a spiritual transformation for both of them, but especially for Hank.

As sometimes happens at the movies, this change reaches its pivotal moment when the two characters have sex, though they don't come together out of love so much as out of a desperate need to do something that will help them forget their grief, at

least for a little while. Their first sexual encounter is longer and more graphic than most such scenes, but it isn't gratuitous by any means; it follows a definite arc, as Hank surrenders the dominant, impersonal position we have seen him use earlier with a local prostitute, and finds himself lying on the floor, looking up at Leticia. In a world where men, especially white men, expect to be on top in every sense of the word, this role reversal is no small matter.

Weakness and shame are recurring themes in the film, and they are often expressed in terms of gender. When Hank leaves his job at the prison in the hope of starting a new life for himself, Buck accuses him of being a quitter, just like his suicidal mother. Buck also moans that he's too weak to chase women with the frequency or success he says he used to have. Women are belittled so often in this film that it comes as a small but potent sign of change on Hank's part when he admits to Leticia that Sonny bears a closer resemblance to his deceased mother than he does to Hank; for once, it sounds like Hank can accept that this might be a good thing.

But if *Monster's Ball* allows Hank to rethink his ideas of strength and frailty, it doesn't exactly allow Leticia to become an empowered woman. Indeed, it might not be going too far to say that the film represents a white man's fantasy, as Hank takes Leticia under his wing and provides her with a vehicle and a place to stay. "I want to take care of you," Hank tells her. "Good," she replies, "because I really need to be taken care of."

Directed by Marc Foster from a script by Milo Addica and Will Rokos, *Monster's Ball* benefits from superb performances by its leads and from a confidently understated style that teases the imagination and invites us to figure out for ourselves why the characters do what they do.

But some of the symbolism seems glib. The first time Leticia serves Hank at the diner, he orders black coffee and chocolate ice cream. And the script cheats by giving the most odious lines to Hank's father, Buck, and making him such a two-dimensional figure. For Hank, overcoming his racism turns out to be about as simple as sending his bigoted father, whom he never loved anyway, to a nursing home. *Monster's Ball* doesn't really try to illuminate the social issues it touches upon, but it is a haunting look at how brokenness can lead to healing.