Revenge thrillers are common enough in cinema, and that’s what *Faster* definitely is. When Driver (a stone-faced Dwayne Johnson) is released from prison after ten years, he wastes no time tracking down the men who killed his brother a decade earlier. Literally. He finds and shoots the first one within minutes. But what sets *Faster* apart is its characterization. Writers Tony and Joe Gayton obviously spent a lot of time thinking about what makes the people in the story tick, and it shows.

We can start with Driver himself. He may come across a ruthless avenger, but we learn he wasn’t always like that and what happened to turn him into a single-minded executioner. Johnson turns in one of the best performances of his career, and certainly the most nuanced, and makes Driver as interesting as he is dangerous.

Other characters are equally as engaging, and most of them are something other than what they seem. There’s Cop, played by Billy Bob Thornton, a drug-addled detective days away from retirement. He’s spacey and troubled on way too many levels, but Thornton never lets the character become a caricature. There’s also Killer (Oliver Jackson-Cohen), a professional assassin hired to get Driver before he gets to the last guy on his hit-list. Killer doesn’t need the money—he’s driven by childhood insecurity to always prove he’s the best. Even the supporting characters are great, like Cicero (Carla Gugino), Cop’s begrudging partner, and Lily (Maggie Grace), Killer’s new bride, who finds his dangerous profession much less of a turn-on now that they’re married and ready to start a family.

The script doesn’t ignore the consequences of its vengeance-driven plot, either. A recurring theme throughout the story is the darkness in which Driver and others like him live, a darkness of hatred and often evil which, it is correctly implied, is unnatural and self-destroying. Even as Driver hunts down one victim after another—some of them quite deserving of the swift justice Driver gives them—it’s apparent that each act of revenge takes its own toll on Driver’s psyche.

Ironically, *Faster* is actually a bit slow at times, and there’s not as much action as the previews suggest. But on the other hand there is a lot more characterization and story, and the end result is a surprisingly effective thriller blessed with a little bit of soul.