

# A Study of Human Nature in Film *The Descent*

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**Abstract**—*The Descent* is known as a horror movie. It is about six friends who make a descent into a deep cave. But a collapse traps them in it. With limited food supply, they struggled to survive each other and some unknown blood thirst creatures. Through this film, the director Neil Marshall reveals the dark side of human nature. The wild cave, the predators and the darkness are symbolic of the evil of human nature. Juno led the other five explorers to their doom, because the sin and fear is not from the outside but in their inner heart. Early in Romanticism, man is optimistic about human nature while modern irrationality, comparatively speaking, is more pessimistic towards human nature. According to Kant, man's first choice intends to be evil, because once man chooses evil, he gets self-knowledge through this fall. It is a paradox of human nature. Through revealing of human evil nature, this film made people realize that human beings are no longer the master of his fortune. Man should be aware of the evil side in human nature and in awe of nature and the unknown power. Although human nature is an evil tendency upon free will, it is an indispensable force for man to grow from innocence to maturity.

**Keywords**—*The Descent*; evil; human nature; paradox

## I. INTRODUCTION

Film *The Descent* was directed by influential British filmmaker Neil Marshall in 2005. It was awarded "British Independent Film Awards" in 2005 and "Best Horror Film" by Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films, U.S.A. in 2007. Unlike most horror films which mainly focus on audio-visual stimulation by presenting bloody crime or violent scenes, *The Descent* makes an attempt to disclose the dark side of human nature, which makes this movie remarkable. This essay aims to discuss the human evil revealed through the film.

*The Descent* as a horror film, describes a horrible caving expedition over which six female explorers ultimately lost control and went to their doom. Sarah's husband and her small daughter were killed in a car accident on their way back to hotel. Although she survived in this disaster, she was haunted by the nightmare. In order to cure the trauma, her friend Juno invited her and the other six female friends to explore an Appalachian cavern. To make this adventure more "exciting", Reckless Juno lied to them and led them to a wild monstrous cave. With the collapse of a tunnel in the cave, six women were trapped in the cave with limited battery power for the lights and food support. Even worse, they soon found that they were not alone in the dark cave, there were some unknown predators waiting for them. Under

such a hopeless circumstance, most of them died one after another. They may be eaten by predators or killed by other team members. The film leaves an open end to the audience: Sarah finally crawled out of the cave and desperately ran through the forest. Then the movie scene shifts back to the dark cave again: What happened just now was just Sarah's dream. Such a hopeless ending makes the whole movie permeated with despair, which deeply shocks the audience. The director's video camera is like a mirror, he puts man in a closed space where human nature is revealed clearly. All bloody and violent descriptions in the cave prove an ugly truth: human nature is evil.

## II. THE THEME OF HUMAN NATURE IN LITERARY OR ARTISTIC WORK OF DIFFERENT PERIODS

Clearly enough, people tend to advocate justice, kindness and beauty in many artistic works. The leading role in the movie or novels, after going through pains or tough times, fights against evil force or difficulties, in the end he or she usually win the victory or make the dream come true. The happy ending is what the audience like to see. However, through this movie, Neil Marshall reveals the spiritual crises of human beings in modern society, which is also the main characteristic of modern literary works.

Discussing good or evil of human nature is the main theme of many artistic works and literary works. Early from Romanticism, artists have already begun to focus on man's inner heart. Firstly, Romanticism believes the perfection of human nature and goodness of human being. For example, Shelley's work in fact commends "the ideal of a beautiful human morality" which is ultimately based on "deep inside the mind" (Martin, 103). Romanticism celebrated the limitless possibilities of the human mind, and explored the means of penetrating down to subconscious levels: dreams, drugs, madness, and hypnosis. People also stress "the self in terms of psychological depth" (Henderson, 1). "Romanticism was the essential form of modernity". For "the expression of a division between self and society, and often within the self (body and soul)" in Romanticism is much similar to the features of modernism (id. 9). Modernist artists' attention diverts from the outside world to man's inner world. Modernist writers stress the dark side or spontaneity in human mind. Actually, modernist artists are more pessimistic comparing with Romanticism.

Secondly, Romanticism honored the hermit and nature. For instance, nature to Wordsworth was "a source of mental cleanliness and spiritual understanding. It was a teacher; it

was the stepping stone between Man and God" (Robert, 87). Hence, the noble savage is the typical character in Romantic period. Unlike Romanticism, modern man destroys nature; he does not think that nature could purify man's soul. Everything outside human mind is illusive. Therefore, modern people regard nature as a hostile force. Men degenerated into predators, changed from noble savage to fallen modern savage. People realize the overwhelming malignant power in human nature. Modernism believes that human's instincts are malignant.

### III. THE EVIL NATURE OF HUMAN BEINGS IN *THE DESCENT*

In Bible, men are born with original sin. According to Christianity, there are seven sins in human beings. Human nature is evil. In *The Descent*, Juno is Sarah's best friend; the other four girls know each other. Before entering into the cave, they are kind and friendly to each other. In the cabin, six girls chat happily like family members, the film presents harmonious and peaceful atmosphere. But when six girls are trapped in the cave, they begin to have some dispute; then one die after another; and even in the end Sarah and Juno fight and kill each other in order to survive. The title of the film "*The Descent*" means sudden attack, and it also indicates "deterioration". The nightmare-like scene in the cave is the director's anatomy of human evil nature.

#### A. *The Symbols of Human's Evil Nature in "The Descent"*

In the film, there are such symbols signifying the evil in human nature as the wild cave, the predators and the darkness in the cave. Six girls are trapped in the cave. It is dark, because no sunlight can penetrate into it. The cave is like mother's womb. Six girls are overwhelmed by unknown fear hidden in the dark, anger, suspicion and betrayal. There is no way to escape. The longer these girls are trapped in the cave, the more brutal and desperate they become. The predators are human-like but eat human flesh, which indicate when human beings are away from civilization, they are merely just evil cannibals. Dark, dark red and purple are the main colors in the movie; darkness in the cave symbolizes the dark side of human nature.

#### B. *Analysis of Sarah and Juno in the Movie*

Juno and Sarah are the two main characters in *The Descent*. Juno is energetic, brave but bold enough. She had love affair with Sarah's husband even know Sarah was her best friend. Without careful planning, Juno underestimated the risk of exploring an unknown wild cave, her recklessness made the whole team fall into danger. Juno was brave, and she struggled against predators in order to protect other team members, while others were only forced to fight in order to defend themselves. But she is too proud. Juno has no feeling of awe in front of the hostile nature and human nature. Juno committed the sin of pride in seven deadly sins, which was one facet of human evil nature. She is too proud to respect the nature and face the ugly truth of human nature.

When Sarah knew that Juno had an affair with her husband and cheated her, she killed Juno, and became the

last survivor in the cave. She fought against Juno. After Juno died, Sarah hid herself in the dark blood pool. At that moment, the expression in her eyes shows that she had turned into one of the cannibals in the cave and became one of the predators in the wild cave. Sarah's alienation is inevitable. She is a Dionysus heroine. Dionysus means an irrational state. In Nietzsche's eye, Dionysus is the symbol of man's primordial impulse. "In a state of intoxication, an individual loses himself. This is the state of Dionysiac experience"(Silk, 64). Dionysiac state is the internal insane state in which agony and exultation coexist. Under the influence of Dionysus, people comforted each other to escape from the cold and hopeless reality. Thus individual agony disappears, life becomes somewhat meaningful.

### IV. HUMAN EVIL NATURE — A PARADOX OF MODERNISM

As exemplified in the film, the evil forces which lead to all the girls' death exist in the wild cave and in man's heart as well. In the movie, man's evil nature is in conflict with civilization and the exterior environment. To the director, human's evil nature is impulsive and irrational. Some think that evil should be suppressed by knowledge and reason. With the over-development of science and technology, man becomes machines of modern civilization. Serious spiritual crises make modernists divert their attention from the exterior world to man's interior world. They revert to the dark aspect in human nature.

According to Kant, the world consists of two parts: the phenomenon and noumenon. In his philosophical system, noumenon equals "thing-it-self" which is not knowable by man's reason. Kant's division also leaves room for the flourishing of irrationality. Kant's free will is tinted with irrational element which is also the dark side in the human nature. Free will is similar to thing-it-self; it is transcendental and could not be perceived by man's reason. The freedom of will is the basis of morality. Kant thinks man's free will makes him superior to the animal. Besides, man's first moral choice based on free will tends to be evil, because as what Kant thinks, man could elicit good from evil. Through the fall, people wake up from ignorance and realize the truth and cruelty of life.

### V. CONCLUSION

*The Descent* is more than a horror movie. Besides the bloody fight and killing, Neil Marshall probes into human weakness and the spiritual crisis in human existence. When trapped in such a primitive cave, the girls gradually lost their reason; man's evil nature is roused. It is Juno who leads them to such a wild cave. Juno does so out of man's free will, which also indicates that man is helpless confronting his destiny. Their friendship deteriorated in the disaster. The real fear is not from the unknown predators but from each other.

The director is pessimistic about human nature. The dark side in human nature is always there no matter how highly developed our human society is. Six girls in the movie represent every ordinary man in the society. The end of the movie doesn't tell the audience if Sarah finally found the

access tunnel and escaped, it may be a warning to us that there is still a long way to go for people from happiness. Through the reveling of human nature, people realize that human beings are no longer the master of his fortune. Man should be aware of the evil in human nature and in awe of nature, the unknown power. Although human nature is an evil tendency upon free will, it is an indispensable force for man to grow from innocence to maturity.

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