

## **The Descent: How Horror Uses Character to Push Forward the Narrative**

*Featured in 'The Big Lads Film Zine: HALLOWEEN Edition'*

Get your pickaxes, big ol' backpacks and complicated friendships - we're going caving! And not just into an unexplored caving system, full of kinda-human, seemingly feral creatures. No, no, no. We're diving into what many believe to be the most important aspect of film: character. Horror, as a genre, often gets a bit of a reputation for its mishandling of character, specifically its use of tropes and stock characters, sometimes lacking depth and complexity. I think that's an unfair judgement, and believe that some of the best characters in film history come from the genre - Reagan ('The Exorcist'), Annie (Hereditary), Art the bloody Clown ('Terrifier'), to name just a few. This slight is especially untrue when it comes to Neil Marshall's 2005 caving-catastrophe film, 'The Descent'.

The way in which 'The Descent' uses its characters - six women, all with their own lil' quirks and differing relationships to one another - is fucking brilliant. It handles its fairly large group of primary characters so well, establishing not only the leading women, but also giving its side characters enough depth/distinctive features to aid the narrative, without making it feel bogged down or bloated. By the time all the cave-monster killings start, you, as the spectator, have at least a minor connection with each of the film's characters (whether that is positive or negative; I personally found the lesbian-coded, spiky-haired Holly (Nora-Jane Noone) to be a pain in the arse and was slightly thankful when she was turned into a 3-course meal by the cave monsters, sorry, Holly).

The film achieves this establishment of its core group quickly; it dedicates just enough time in its fairly short hour-and-a-half run-time to setting up the group lore and dynamics. When Sarah (Shauna Macdonald), a woman who, just a year prior, lost both her (twat of a) husband and daughter in a very gruesome car accident, and Beth (Alex Reid), Sarah's bestie, arrive at the cabin they are staying in before their big caving adventure, they are greeted by the rest of the group, including the misunderstood menace that is Juno (Natalie Mendoza). We watch the women get pissed, share seemingly mundane details of their lives and joke around with each other in a relaxed and comfortable way. However, there is a flaring tension underneath this happy gathering: we, as the spectator, know, or at least presume, that Juno was having an affair with Sarah's now dead husband (established very well in the first scene, in which these two rascals are a lil' too touchy with each other in apparent view of Sarah and Beth). This tension isn't overstated, just lingers in the background of the quieter moments of bonding between the women.

This cabin sequence is the key to us having empathy and understanding of the characters during the later murder mayhem. The cave creatures don't even show up until around an hour into the film's run-time, with the group of women carrying the film with their complicated relationships and moments of jovial banter.

By the time those lil' bald menaces come-a-climbing, we care about each character's well-being (to different degrees, sorry again, Holly) and have enough of an understanding of their place within the team to see how their individual demise will affect the group as a whole. By dedicating a chunk of the narrative to building up and solidifying these roles and character traits (the distrust between Beth and Juno, the practicality of Sam and Rebecca, the carelessness of Holly, to name a few stand-outs), the film's scares and deaths are much more impactful. Though it may seem counter-intuitive to introduce the big-bald-baddies so late into the runtime, the film's handling of its characters makes it feel like a breeze to get through. The narrative, through its foundation of the six women and their relationships to each other, is able to push on, never dragging or wasting time, building up to its bloody and gory climax.

Additionally, by leaning into the characters and dedicating time to each woman, there is a level of empathy created, even with Juno, who kinda-sorta-unintentionally led to the death of Sarah's family. She's not evil, just driven and often misguided in this drive. By contrasting her with Sarah - a character we obviously have a bias towards, given what she's been through and her role as the film's protagonist - we are able to see them more objectively than they see themselves. We can see why Sarah ends up causing Juno's death (I know in the sequel, Juno's death is retconned, but that film is such a slight on the genius of its predecessor that I am completely ignoring it), understanding her rage and hatred of the woman who played a part in her losing everything. But, after seeing Sarah kill one of the baby baldy monsters in the scene prior, which results in the creature's mother looking around for its child frantically, clearly in distress and pain, there is a suggestion that no one in this film is truly the villain. In the same way that Sarah is 'protecting her home' by (kinda) killing Juno, the cave creatures are doing just the same by attacking the women who are intruding upon their habitat. Though there is an obvious positioning of Juno as the film's antagonist, we, as the spectator, have a deeper and more objective view to the fact that this is only superficial. Each side has its own justifiable reasons for their actions (maybe not having an affair with your bestie's husband, but hey ho); no character is without fault or flaw.

Overall, the way in which 'The Descent' handles its characters - their introductions, developments, subtle personality traits - and their relationships with each other, allows the narrative to both push forward at a consistent pace, and allow varied interpretations on who's 'right' and who's 'wrong' (if these distinctions are even applicable). It's a brilliant, underrated bit of horror, and shows that this genre can create and sustain both its main and side characters, and use them to make their being ripped apart by cave creatures that much more effective.