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The Grey

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Grey* (2011), directed by Joe Carnahan.

Claiming to be molded from Ian MacKenzie Jeffers' short story *Ghost Walker* and directed by the steady hand of Joe Carnahan (*Narc*, *The A-Team*), *The Grey* offers its viewers a rare combination of compelling characters, surprising emotional depth, and philosophically religious dialogue - all wrapped into an adventurous tale of 'man' versus nature. While the premise of the film may be misleading, manipulating potential spectators into thinking of it solely as a story about a group of men battling nature's unrelenting elements, the plot of the film relies more heavily on the inescapable portrayal of death.

The story centers on Ottway (Liam Neeson), a hired gun for an Alaskan petroleum company, whose job it is to protect the other workers from the vicious and brazen wildlife in the surrounding terrain. It becomes apparent rather quickly, both through Ottway's words and his actions, that he is a broken man searching for a way out of his constant anguish. The reason for this pain stems from the loss of a loved one; without her, life has become devoid of purpose. "I move like I imagine the damned do," he reflects in the film's opening sequence, "Cursed." This reference to an incessant purgatory adequately summarizes his state of despair and helplessness.

This particular despair is prolonged however when he is involved in a plane crash, stranding him and his fellow co-workers in the barren Alaskan wilderness. Fighting against hunger and the cold, the seven survivors attempt to navigate the land, in hope of rescue. Coupled with the harsh, blinding snow and a pack of extremely volatile wolves, their odds of survival decrease monumentally as their journey continues. While on the surface, this is extent of the plot, there is much more to be said about the religiously motivated dialogue and themes that can be found throughout the film.

Throughout their arduous journey, the survivors frequently re-visit the question of God's role in their current situation. Some believe they have survived the crash for a reason, while others merely consider it luck. These two groups represent the prototypical debate that so often occupies conceptions of fate/God in movies nowadays, such as in *Signs* or *The Adjustment Bureau*. However, unlike most of these other films, there is no real effort in *The Grey* to demonstrate God's providence or interaction with this world. If anything, one could argue that the film deliberately sides with luck and disregards any notion of a deity's immanence. In one of the closing sequences, Ottway shouts to the heavens, "Do something! Prove it...show me something real...show me something now and I'll believe in you until the day I die. I'm calling on you!" The silence that answers him is eerily haunting and Ottway turns his back on the skies.

The religious dialogue in the film is motivated primarily by the imminent nature of death which surrounds and occupies the survivors' thoughts. The men are forced, on more than one occasion, to contend with questions about the afterlife. Is there one? If so, what is it like? What does dying mean? The film's treatment of death is sincere, heartfelt, and touching. It acutely identifies the value of each person's life and displays it proudly, regardless of the character's deficiencies and past mistakes. It is also through these encounters with death that Ottway is again pushed into an encounter with God. After his unanswered cries to the heavens, as he reminisces over his fallen comrades and his own life lies in peril, his hands still manage to find themselves together in prayer. It is here in the very immediate reality of death – the ending of this life - that Ottway is forced to confront his deeply rooted fear, not of death itself, but of the unknown that is inextricably linked with death. With a renewed calmness and the final words from his lost love – "Don't be afraid" - echoing in his mind, Ottway embraces the unknown of death in a last stand

against the wolves. To this extent, *The Grey* depicts how death, and the uncertainty that it carries with it, can propel and motivate religious tendencies, even when faith in God is shattered.

The wolves in this film are just one particular manifestation of the savageness of death. The film's use of the characters' backgrounds remind us that everyone, not just those stranded in a barren wilderness, must at some point confront and fight the inescapability of the conclusion of life. The simple poem that continually arises throughout the film, penned by Ottway's father, is a reminder that even in the common ordeals of life, dying is a constant reality which must be battled and negotiated. The poem's words, so integral to the film's narrative and its larger message, close the final scene with a touching reminder to the viewer about the importance of death and its religious motivations:

“Once more into the fray.

Into the last good fight I'll ever know.

Live and die on this day.

Live and die on this day.”