

An Everyday Hell: Examining the Influence of the *Katabasis* on Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

Over the past 20 years, a significant amount of scholarly work has been done examining the reception of the *katabasis*, or underworld journey, within contemporary literature. Notable among this work includes Rachel Falconer's 2005 monograph, which describes a "katabatic imagination" wherein contemporary authors and readers have internalized the classical trope as a common metaphor for an exploration into the self. Additional articles have been published focusing on the *katabasis* as it is received in cinema, ranging from surveys (Holtmark 2001) to case studies (Stevens 2020). What all of this scholarship is overlooking, however, is the role of the horror genre in using and adapting the *katabasis* trope to unique effect. To that end, I will present a case study analyzing Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. In particular, I will examine the scene where the film's hero, Nancy Thompson, descends into her basement and receives a revelation of the history of her town.

Many of the tropes associated with the *katabasis* neatly map onto this particular scene in *Nightmare*. Nancy, as the film's hero, takes the role of the *katabant*. Nancy's mother serves as the *psychopomp*, leading her daughter into the depths. Much like the descents of Odysseus and Aeneas, Nancy's *katabasis* results in a revelation, but hers is of a much different nature than the revelations received by these epic heroes. While Odysseus and Aeneas are given prescriptive revelations on how to proceed with their journeys, Nancy is given a horrific truth of her community's past, that the supernatural threat assailing her is the result of an extrajudicial murder which her mother participated in. The horrific nature of this revelation is key to the unique role that the horror genre plays in reception of the *katabasis*. In horror films, the

katabasis uniquely serves as a source of horror in the revelation it imparts – a revelation which often presents the status quo itself as something horrific.

Works Cited

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