Travel as Hell: Exploring the Katabatic Structure of Travel Fiction

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Abstract
positive and negative sense. Many novels depict travel in terms of ‘hell,’ depicting journeys that are exhausting, dangerous, and nightmarish. This narrative can be explored using the concept of the katabasis. Drawn from Ancient Greek mythology, it literally means ‘the descent,’ and more generally a journey to hell and back. The underworld is a ‘realm of death,’ where sacrifices are often demanded and the ‘other’ is encountered. Where the traveller returns, they are usually irrevocably changed by the experience. Erling Holtsmark observes that the central motif of these sojourns is identity: “The journey is in some central, irreducible way a journey of self-discovery, a quest for a lost self.” Through suffering, the traveller learns what they are capable of and understands themselves more deeply. The reader also absorbs the lesson that while travel is not necessarily straight-forward or enjoyable, the difficult passages and twists are intrinsically rewarding and enlightening. The mythic concept of the katabasis has been applied more broadly to cover fictional journeys drawn from many cultures and across different forms of media, including books and film. It also appears to apply across genres, including the Western, science-fiction, and crime fiction. It has been argued that the katabatic structure provides these fictional or cinematic journeys with resonance and power, and makes them compelling for an audience.

Full Text:

The traveller shook his head tiredly, grimacing at the sight. This was not how he remembered his land, everything seemed decrepit, old, dead. Even the Sun could not reach through to caress his face with her rays; bleak clouds blotted out any trace of her, hanging gloomily in the skies like a black omen. That chessboard-like field and its ghastly watcher was forgotten though, as the final smattering of hillsides presented him with the largest living thing he’d yet to see on his journey back. All that greeted his occasional cries was a cold katabatic gale that tore through the city, riding down from the hills and through the gaping gates. It was in the town-square, the village green as it had once been called, that he came upon a bizarre sight.