Cannibalism In *In The Heart of the Sea*

Allensia Sarah Levira  
English Department, Faculty of Languages and Literature, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA  
E-mail: m11415022@john.petra.ac.id; allennia296@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT**  
This study examine the causes and the after effects of cannibalism that the survivors of *Essex* commit in Ron Howard’s *In The Heart of the Sea*. The main theory for this study is the theory of human’s life and death instinct by Sigmund Freud and also the theory of survival cannibalism. In collecting the materials of the analysis, the researcher examine the details of the films multiple times to get the footage which later used as proofs to reveals the causes and effects of cannibalism. The findings showed that the unfulfilled basic needs and anxiety are the major causes of cannibalism and also that the guilty feeling and fear of people are the aftermath effects of cannibalism. This shows that the act of consuming human flesh affects their lives throughout their lives until they died of old age. As a result, cannibalism had a big impact, both negative and positive, on the survivors’ lives.

Keywords: Cannibalism, Human Instinct, Survival, Anxiety

**INTRODUCTION**

Hollywood film industry has a lot of genres, such as drama, action, fantasy, superhero, historical, and science-fiction. Among these genres, historical film is one of Hollywood’s largest and most enduring genre (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012). *A Dictionary of Film Studies* defines historical film as “a fiction film that shows past events of set within a historical period” (Kuhn and Westwell, 2012). It tend to focus their story and plot on a famous individual who is able to shape the historical event by a force of will. Historical films played a powerful role in shaping how people understand historical events. It brought the world of the past, which had been buried deep in the history book and had been forgotten by people, to return trough big screen to be acknowledge by a lot of people.

I decided to write about historical film because it has its own powerful ability to reenact a real historical event (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 7). Its’ reenacting ability gives the audiences an experience to witness again the historical event that they never knew before. The ability is not just re-living the events but it also engages the audiences to rethink and immerse themselves to imagine the real historical event so that they can fully understand about the matter (Burgoyne, 2008, p. 7-8). It also has been known for its emotional connection to the real event that can evoke the sense of nationality of their audiences. Historical film also is a good medium for people to learn about culture and history as it somehow make people portray and remember about the event that happen in the past by relating them to the historical film.

Ronald William Howard is known as an art director whose work mostly in historical film. In making historical films, he tries to retell historical events that had happened during his life time. He uses his own perspective of the events so that it will be more realistic for the audience and to help his audience in witnessing the events since they may not have been alive at that time (Perno, 2013). He also often uses significant element to portray important messages in his films. The element that he often use is water. In his film, *In The Heart of the Sea*, he use water, in which portrayed by the ocean, to represent life in the ocean of a whale hunter.
In The Heart of the Sea portrays the story of a misfortune voyage of whale-ship named Essex in 1820. Essex was sunk by an angry giant sperm whale that they hunt. When Essex sank, the remaining crew fly out into three whaling boats, which eventually only two boats could go back to Nantucket. First mate Owen Chase and Captain George Pollard Junior lead the boats to sail in the open sea, seeking a way back to Nantucket and to survive. The despair of not being able to survive leads the survivor to choose the only survival action to keep them alive, that is, cannibalism. In the end, only eight out of 21 whalers survive. Their comeback to Nantucket was very attention drawing at that time since it left questions on how they survive in the ocean for months before they were rescued. Furthermore, Essex’s ship-owner company tried to cover the fact that a giant sperm whale had sunk the ship and also denied that cannibalism ever happened. Moreover, the survivors are not legally punished for the extreme and brutal cannibalism that they committed to survive.

The use of cannibalism in In The Heart of the Sea attract my interested in choosing cannibalism as the topic of this research. People sees cannibalism as a horrible, dangerous, and horror stigma because popular literature and cultures construct the idea of eating other human flesh is done by psychopath. Cannibalism is seen as an unethical and inhuman because the idea of eating human flesh is disgusting and barbaric. Society rejects cannibalism because it destroys the widely accepted eating practices (Brown, 2013, p. 4). People’s mind is shaped with the obsession of hygiene eating practices. Hence, eating human flesh is against the widely accepted eating practices as it is not hygiene. Moreover, human body is seen as sacred thing that cannot be categorized into something that can be consumed in some religion (Brown, 2013, p. 5). According to Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology, cannibalism can be defined as ‘the acts of eating the flesh of other people, relatives or enemy’ (Seymour-smith, 1986, p. 30). Through the tales of Essex, I want to understand how the survivors commit cannibalism, that is considered as taboo and an abomination for the society, in a desperate condition. I am also interested in analyzing why the remaining survivors are not punished for the brutal survival action that they did. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was common for survivors of a shipwreck to commit cannibalism. It was considered as a matter of thing that was ‘regretted but practically unavoidable’ (qtd in Brown, 2013, p. 221). Hence, the remaining survivors cannot avoid committing cannibalism since it was the only choice that they have to survive.

From the narrative of the film, it can be seen that In The Heart of the Sea expose controversial issues to the audiences. All this time, cannibalism is considered as an inhuman and thing to do because the society states something as unethical when it does not meet with the society’s expectation. However, cannibalism cannot be judge as an unethical action since, in an effort where people need to survive, it becomes the only choice that they can take in order to survive. People who commit cannibalism in order to survive only think for their condition at that time, they will do anything, as long as they can survive. In order to shed light on the issue of cannibalism, I examine the reason why the survivors of Essex commit cannibalism and also the after effect of cannibalism in their lives. Throughout this research, I found out that unfulfilled basic need for food and drink and also the survivors’ psychological condition affects the decision to commit cannibalism. I also found out that the guilty feeling and fear of other people becomes the aftermath of the life full of suffering that the survivors have to lived for the rest of their lives.

In order to understand and to answer the question that I have in the statement of the problem, I will use the theory of human survival instinct by Sigmund Freud as my main theory. Life (Eros) and death (Thanatos) instinct, according to Freud, are the instincts that human need to balance their lives. Human body knows how to preserve themselves using Eros, yet the body also knows when is the time human will die using Thanatos (Miller, 1999, p. 12-13). Eros deals the instinct
to reproduce and instinct to survive. In order to survive, life instinct seeks for anything that can satisfy their basic need such as hunger, thirst, and pain-avoidance (Cherry, 2018). Life instinct works as the motivation to procreate new life and also works to protect the body from external damage and threat (Miller, 1999, p. 19). It seeks a way to preserve life as long as possible so that the body will die at the right time when nature claimed the life, not to die in a threatening circumstances. It makes some kind of protection that makes the individual to adapt to any kind of circumstances (Miller, 1999, p. 26). The protection is used when human’s life is threatened so that the body will not die. The act of protection resulted in human to do anything to fulfill their basic need so that they can preserve their lives. Thanatos refers to human instinct of destruction, violence and death. Human tries to search for peace and comeback to the previous state of life in which there are no tension in their life. It leads them to the goal of death, as the previous state of life is not exist (Ejupi, 2014, p. 308). There are 2 channel for Thanatos; inward and outward. When it channeled inward to themselves, it produces self-destructive behavior that can lead into self-harm or suicide (Miller, 1999, p. 21). The one that can trigger Thanatos inward is stress of external pressure. When Thanatos channeled outward to other people, it results to an aggressive behavior such as violence and aggression. The one that can trigger Thanatos outward is depression, feeling hopeless or suicidal thoughts. According to Freud, both instincts are not completely opposing each other, rather, it works hand in hand, completing each other to preserve life and protect the body from external forces that threaten life until natural death claimed the life (Miller, 1999, p. 17). These instincts work in both psychological and biological level (Miller, 1999, p. 23). In the psychological, these two deal with human’s mind. In the biological, they can oppose each other or unite with each other. Likewise, according to Freud, as Miller writes that; “the act of eating is a destruction of the object with the final aim of incorporating it, and the sexual act is an act of aggression with the purpose of the most intimate union. This concurrent and mutually opposing action of the two basic instincts gives rise to the whole variegation of life” (1999, p. 23)

Thus, the unity of life and death instinct is the impulse for life in biological and psychological level. I will use this theory to analyze the causes that leads to decision to commit cannibalism as the only survival tools and how fear and guilty feeling affects their lives after they commit cannibalism, rescued, and came back to Nantucket.

CANNIBALISM IN “IN THE HEART OF THE SEA”

The remaining survivors have to consume human flesh in order to survive. The uncertainty of being rescued and of coming back to Nantucket and also the situation in which they cannot fulfill the basic need of food and drink requires them to consume their friend’s flesh as the only resort of survival in the sea. However, even though they survive and comeback to Nantucket, they still have to face the judgment from people for committing cannibalism. They also have to bear the guilt for the rest of their life as the result of their survival action, that is, consuming human flesh.

2.1. The Causes of the Decision to Commit Cannibalism.

In this analysis, I found two causes of cannibalism that the survivors committed. The first one is that the survivors cannot fulfill their basic needs for food that can ease their hunger. This has caused them to consume human flesh as the only food source around them at that time. The second one is that they become more anxious and pessimistic with their chance to survive as there are not ships that can rescue them. The survivors doubt their chance of surviving because they had not enough food supply for all of the survivors. They also have to spend their food
wisely so that they will have enough food for all of them until they are rescued. The condition that they had to live in leads to starvation since they only eat little amount of food that cannot satisfy their appetite. When they run out of food and still in the middle of nowhere, the only resort that allow them to survive is by consuming human flesh. The survivors did cannibalism for the sake of their survival. They do not have other choices expect consuming human flesh because it was the only food source nearby. In other words, cannibalism is the effort to satisfy the survivors’ basic needs. If they do not consume human flesh, they would die or be killed only to be eaten by their friends.

2.1.1. The Unfulfilled Basic Needs as the Causes of Cannibalism.

The cannibalism that Essex’s survivors committed deals with how they accept cannibalism as the only survival tool during an extreme situation that they face. Starvation becomes the cause of cannibalism because they cannot fulfill the basic need of food that they had to eat.

Cap, what about our provision?
Two ounces of hardtack a day per man and half a cup of water
We can’t live on that (In The Heart of the Sea, 2015, 1:07:11-1:07:31)

It can be seen that the amount of food that they can save from Essex and to eat a day, two ounces of crackers and half cup of water, are not enough for all of them. The lack of basic need of food leads them to the condition of starvation. This condition continues for days until starvation threatens their lives. The amount of food that they consume each day cannot fulfill the basic need that each person need to fulfill in order to preserve their lives. They have to find other food source that can be used to fulfill their basic need. The condition of starvation urged the survivors to choose the best option that they can do to survive. They are left with no choices, except consuming their dead friend’s flesh, or to die of starvation and then being eaten after they died.

No right minded sailor discard what might yet save him (In The Heart of the Sea, 2015, 1:27:09-1:27:13)

It can be seen that Owen Chase portrays the dead body as the only thing that can save them. He knows that the only thing matters for them is eating something in order to fulfill the lack of basic needs. In here, human flesh is not only seen as merely meat that they can consume, but also seen as a survival tools that can save them from dying of starvation. Cannibalism becomes the only option that the survivors can choose at that time. They commit cannibalism because human flesh can be use as a substitute for food that they can find near them when they run out of food.

So it was decided. We prepare the body. We remove the organs. Separating his limbs from his body. And cut all of the flesh from the bones... We eat the heart first (In The Heart of the Sea, 2015, 1:28:01-1:28:46)

The survivors commit cannibalism as they thought that human body is merely meat that they can consume. When they eat the heart first, it indicates that the body has change its purposes into an object that can be consumed. They are aware that the body is merely meat that can be consumed once the person is dead. When they cut the meat from bones and remove the organs from the body also implies that the body is seen as a product that can be used as a substitute of daily food to fulfill their basic need. It is because human flesh is the only edible substitute for food around them.
All of the findings above represent how life and death instinct works together by completing each other to preserve the survivors’ lives, as Miller writes that, “death and life instinct work hand in hand to keep the individual alive” (Miller, 1999, p. 17). The survivors’ life instinct can be seen through their effort to satisfy their unfulfilled basic need of food for survival. Yet, they are unable to fulfill their basic need because they do not have any food supplies. The inability to fulfill their basic need leads them to starvation. In other words, they can die of starvation at any moment because they are unable to satisfy their basic need. During a condition in which starvation threatened their lives, their life instinct is replaced by death instinct. Death instinct takes the action of aggression towards other people, in this case consuming their dead friend’s flesh, as an act to preserve their own life. This action was taken in order to protect themselves from hunger that can leads to death. In this case, life instinct and death instinct are completing each other to preserve their lives (Miller, 1999, p. 23). The unity of life and death instinct is seen as the form of protection for their lives towards the ultimate death.

2.1.2. The Feeling of Anxiety as the Cause of Cannibalism.

The cannibalism that Essex’s survivors commit deals with the survivors’ feeling of anxiety. The complex condition of not knowing where to go, long-lasting starvation and the fear of not surviving provokes the survivors’ anxiety that leads them in consuming human flesh. The survivors already know that they only have small chances of survival after Essex sank. They are afraid that there will be no other ship that comes to rescue them and they will ended up dying in the ocean. In other words, the feeling of anxiety strikes them when their life is threatened by the uncertain condition of surviving.

You don't fool me, Mr. Chase. You put us here, you know you out us here. Say you're scared. You know what happens when the food and water runs out (In The Heart of the Sea, 1:08:00-1:08:19)

Owen Coffin points a loaded gun to Owen Chase. He shows his fear upon their survival by pointing the gun to the later. He also shows his frustration upon Owen Chase and Captain George Pollard Junior’s decision to keep sailing to hunt the sperm whale despite of people’s warning of the big sperm whale. The survivors know that the amount of food supplies that they save are not enough to fulfill their basic need for the rest of their journey back to Nantucket. The survivors feel anxious on how they can fulfill their basic need when they are running out of food supplies. They are scared that they have to face starvation that will lead to their death. In other words, anxiety strikes them when they face long-lasting starvation and death threaten their lives. When they run out of food supplies, the fear of death that threatens their lives leads to the feeling of anxiety. In the situation of a shipwreck, their food supplies becomes the only hope that they use in order to preserve their lives. In this case, the threat of not surviving triggers their death instinct to takes control of the survivors mind as a form of protection to preserve their lives, as Miller writes that:

“As human beings aspire to and live life through engaging it, there is always the fear and reality of loss, rejection, and failure. The breaking apart of hope in life and the return to a state of numbness is the manifestation of the death instinct” (1999, p. 26).

Hence, the piled up fear of starvation and death that haunts the survivors forces them to choose only choice so that they can survive, that is, cannibalism. The fear of breaking apart of hope in life creates an anxiety that triggers the survivors to consume human flesh.
Owen Coffin choose to kill himself because of the feeling of anxiety. The feeling of fear that he will be killed to be eaten triggers him to kill himself before the other survivors killed him. In the situation of a shipwreck, the captain or people with higher status is the one who will survive since the target from lots drawing is being determined by status and power, as Brown writes that, “the drawing of lots was often rigged to target the weak, poor, or black” (2013, p. 222). The feeling of fear that they will be killed to satisfy the unfulfilled basic need of the other survivors builds up into the feeling of anxiety that triggers their death instinct to take the action to kill themselves. When they are running out of food supplies, they decide to draw lots to see who will be killed to be eaten. The fear and stress that Owen Coffin will be the target since he is the weakest among others forms into the feeling of anxiety. In this case, the feeling of anxiety and stress triggers his death instinct to takes control of his mind to eliminate the tension of fear and stress, as Miller writes that “The death instinct seeks a return to the inorganic state, the one true state that seeks the elimination of all stimulation, death” (1999, p. 14). Thus, the tension in which fear and stress that he will be killed next becomes the cause in which death instinct takes over the mind to seek a way to eliminate the tension, that is, suicide.

2.2. The After Effects of the Decision to Commit Cannibalism.

In this analysis, I found that the cannibalism that the survivors commit affects their lives not only when they are still in the ocean, but also throughout their lives until they died of old age. The effects can be seen in the circumstances in which they live their lives. The first one is that they are haunted by the guilty feeling of the cannibalism for the rest of their lives. It has cause them to start a new life and they also torture themselves in order to ease the guilt. The second one is that they are haunted by the feeling of fear towards people’s reaction of their survival action. They shut themselves from telling people the details of their survival action because they are afraid of the reaction that people will give.

2.2.1. The Guilty Feeling that Haunts the Remaining Crew’s Life.

The survivors try free themselves from the feeling of guilt and remorse of committing cannibalism by starting a new life and tormenting themselves. Owen Chase tries to ease the guilt of the cannibalism that he committed by starting a new life in different town with his family.

Then he packed up his family and moved to New Bedford to start over in a merchant, sailing his own terms. (In The Heart of the Sea, 2015, 1:49:30-1:49:43)

He moves to New Bedford (a whaling city located in Massachusetts, America) to start a new life so that he will never have any connection to the whaling company in Nantucket. He also changes his profession from a first mate to a merchant who can sails on his own terms. By becoming a merchant he can work for himself, not bound to the whaling company’s slave contract. He changes his profession and starts a new life in new city so that he can leave and bury the guiltiness behind in Nantucket. If he keeps his life in there, he will be haunted by the guilt throughout his life. According to Wiramihardja, the action of self-adjustment that they take
Levira: Cannibalism In *In The Heart of the Sea*

is the individual’s own initiative and that the attempt of adjustment that they make is related to their community (2004, p. 19). Starting a new life is Owen Chase’s attempt to re-adjust to the community. If he does not make the attempt of re-adjustment to the community, they will shun him away because of the stigma in there that cannibalism is done by a savage and monstrous psychopath. The older Thomas Nickerson life in a torment. Even though he looks like he can move on with his life after being rescued by owning a bar and getting married, he still lives in a torment of being haunted by the guiltiness and fear.

You listen well! Who holds this place together while you drink yourself to death? You will talk with this man as much as is necessary to keep the money you know our circumstances, Tom. (In The Heart of the Sea, 5:23-5:39)

For the rest of his life, Thomas Nickerson spent most of his time getting drunk in the attic for days and nights, leaving the bar to be managed by his wife. He torment himself by shutting himself from getting any contact of people, locking himself in his bar’s attic and getting drunk for days and nights. He torments his life to forget the burden and regret and guiltiness for what he had done in the past to survive. Thomas Nickerson torturing himself as a form of the action of self-adjustment to the community that he have to do after he is rescued. After he is rescued and come back to Nantucket, he is aware that cannibalism is seen as a taboo thing in the community, as Brown writes that, “As soon as they were rescued and ate ‘normal’ food that initial revulsion resurfaced, as if in the eyes of society the learned taboo reminded them of the moral crime they had committed” (223). Hence, torturing his own life becomes the form of self-adjustment to cope with his new life and community because he is aware of how the community sees cannibalism as a taboo thing. Even though cannibalism is a common thing in *Nantucket* in the eighties, the community still shuns him for what he had done. Cannibalism, even if survival is the reason behind it, is seen as an immoral and an abomination to human being. Thus, the pressure of fear that the community will shun him for committing cannibalism triggers his mind to torment himself.

2.2.2. The Feeling of Fear that Haunts the Remaining Survivors’ Life.

The remaining survivors are haunted by the feeling of fear and remorse for the rest of their lives. Even after they survive and come back to Nantucket, they do not have a happy life. They are haunted by the feeling of fear that people will reject them if they know the cannibalism that they committed. They also fears that people will see them as a disgusting monstrous human being if they tell them the details of their survival. The older Thomas Nickerson is living his life in remorse and fear of the reaction that people might give him. He never confess the survival cannibalism that he commit to other people because he is scared of the rejection that he will get if people know he committed cannibalism to survive.

You judge me?
No... You never told anyone?
No
Not even your wife?
You think she could ever love me if she knew the abomination I have committed? (In The Heart of the Sea, 1:28:55-1:29:33)

Thomas Nickerson fears his wife’s reaction if he tells her about the cannibalism that he committed back them. He is afraid that she will rejected him if she knows that he consume human flesh in order to survive. Even more, he is afraid that she will be disgusted with him if she knows the story of cannibalism that he committed. The feeling of fear haunts his life, he does not want to tell the stories of his survival to other people because he is afraid of their rejection. It is because cannibalism is considered as an abomination to human being, as Gardner
writes that, “Cannibalism... has been stigmatized with an association to the primitive, savage, insane, criminal and prehistoric” (2008, p. 117). He never tells the details of the incident because he is afraid that he will be rejected by everyone including their own families, as “they will be judge for their actions by their friends and family members who are influenced by the same social constructs that make actions like cannibalism taboo” (Gardner, 2008, p. 16). The survivors do not tell the details of the cannibalism that they committed is because they are afraid of the reaction that people will give when they tell them the details of the story. When the survivors arrive at the port of Nantucket, people already seen them as a strange things with disgust and they make a way for the survivors, as if they shun them away.

It looked like the whole island turned out to see us return. But, there were no cheers only silence. They looked at us like we were apparitions, phantoms. We'd said nothing of the details of our survival to anyone. But, I wondered if they somehow knew of our privations. Maybe they were just curious. (In The Heart of the Sea, 1:41:00-1:41:29)

Upon seeing those reactions, the survivors are just afraid that people will be disgusted. They are also afraid that people will not accept them back to the society if they tell the details of the cannibalism that they committed. The feeling of fear that the survivors felt is the form of self-control that is created by the prejudice of cannibalism from the community. The prejudice becomes the reason why they are afraid of telling about the details of their survival to anyone. The survivors never tell the details of the cannibalism that they had done because they are afraid of people’s rejection. They are afraid that the society will not re-accept them because the cannibalism that they had done are considered as a taboo things, that is, the consumption of human flesh. They suffer the fear of the reaction that people will give them, whether it is rejection or acceptance. The quotation below shows how the survivors stay silent upon the facts that they committed cannibalism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a normal person can commit cannibalism when they have to face a dangerous experience in which their life is at risk. When people is in the condition in which they cannot fulfill their basic needs, they will find a way, even the most irrational one to fulfill it. In facing the uncertain condition of survival, the feeling of fear and worry becomes the feeling of anxiety, in which it take the most irrational action as a self-protection from death. Cannibalism becomes their last effort to fulfill their basic need because they have no other choices that allow them to survive. The only resort to survive is by consuming human flesh. The aftermath of cannibalism that the survivors commit also has a big impact for both the community and the survivors. Even after they survived, they do not have a happy life, despite of surviving and being alive. They live their lives with the burden of guilt because they consume their friends’ flesh to survive. They also live their lives in constant fear because of the stigma of cannibalism in the society, that people will shunned them if they know the survival action that they commit. Everything that they did after they return to Nantucket becomes their attempt to be re-accepted in the community because they want to be seen as a good and normal human being, bot as a savage and monstrous cannibals. This proves that cannibalism should not be judge only by the society’s norm, that cannibalism is a taboo thing and the one committed it is psychopath and monstrous being. Rather than rejecting and degrading people who committed it for the sake of their survival, cannibalism, especially survival cannibalism, should be accepted since it is the only option that the survivors have to survive a condition where starvation threatened their lives and to be alive.
REFERENCES

Brown, Jennifer. (2013). *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Burgoyne, Robert. (2008). *The Hollywood Historical Film*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Cherry, Kendra. (2018, November 30). *Freud's Life and Death Instincts Opposing Urges to Procreate or Die*. Retrieved from https://www.verywellmind.com/life-and-death-instincts-2795847

Ejupi, Vlera. Siljanovska, Liljana. Iseni, Arburim. (2014). *The Struggle Of Eros Against Thanatos In The Novel "Lady Chatterley’s Lover" By D.H.Lawrence*, 308.

Gardner, Nicholas M. (2008). *Cannibals in the Community: The Saga of the Whaleship Essex and Related Accounts*. Undergraduate Thesis from Franklin and Marshall College. https://dspace.fandm.edu/handle/11016/5294

Kuhn, A. & Westwell G. (2012). *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press. Ebook.

Miller, Ryan D. (1999). *Thanatos-Eros, Being-Non Being: Psychoanalytic-Existential Connection*. Student Work. 66. University of Nebraska at Omaha

Perno, G.S. (2013, September 22). *Directors’ Trademarks: Ron Howard*. Retrieved from https://www.cinelinx.com/movie-stuff/item/4661-directors-trademarks-ron-howard.html

Seymour-smith, Charlotte. (1986). *Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology*. London: The Macmillan Press, LTD.

Wiramihardja, Sutardjo A. (2004). *Pengantar Psikologi Klinis*. Bandung: PT. Refika Aditama.