

## Reading Homework

### Internal Contradictions in *Curse of the Werewolf* and a Few Thoughts About Criticism

*Curse of the Werewolf* is an exceptional horror film for the clarity and honesty with which it attacks the feudal social system that privileged the nobility and oppressed working people, supported arranged marriages like that of the Marquis to his unfortunate bride while preventing true lovers like Leon and Christina from having any hope of marriage. In this, it is a far more socially progressive film than the earlier *The Wolf Man* in which Larry's father, Sir John, reminded him, "You are Lawrence Talbot. This is Talbot Castle. Do you *really* think those men could come in here and take you out?" That might just be bravado from Sir John because if the police had definite proof that Larry was a murderer they would certainly be able to do just that because England in the early twentieth century was a nation of laws that technically applied to everyone, commoners and nobility alike. But Sir John is reminding Larry that as the heir to Talbot Castle he is no ordinary man in the village. Of course, it isn't just the noble title that protects some men from paying for their crimes. Money and power help are the real ways they can "get away with murder" sometimes. It is a sad truth that in the real world, i.e., not the movies, the rich and powerful often get away with crimes the rest of us would be arrested and prosecuted for.

As I write this lecture in December of the year 2020, it is an open question whether the outgoing president of the United States, Donald Trump, the most powerful man in the world while he still holds that office, will be subject to arrest and prosecution for the many crimes he probably committed while in office (and before). This will be the ultimate test of the

American ideal that “no one, no matter how powerful, is above the law”. We will just have to see if that is true or not.

But horror films are also full of those who escape justice and are above the law. The real Dracula was the ruler of his country at one time and killed thousands of his own people and in the fictional telling of his story in *Dracula* (1931), none of the local people dare approach his castle out of sheer terror. That terror is physical. But Henry Frankenstein, the son of Baron Frankenstein in *Frankenstein* (1931), and then himself the Baron Frankenstein in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), is connoted by Dr. Pretorius who reminds him, “It is you who is responsible for all those murders” (even if the monster did the actual killings in self-defense or by accident). Pretorius implies that he will go to the authorities about this, but Frankenstein gamely replies, “Are you trying to blackmail me?” It doesn’t work. Frankenstein isn’t afraid of the authorities. In the end, it isn’t the threat of any legal action that forces Frankenstein to help Pretorius create the female monster, it is the kidnapping of Elizabeth by the monster.

All of this is by way of criticizing the social systems we see in these films which permit such injustices as the young woman being forced to marry the Marquis Di Siniestro whose mistreatment eventually causes her early death, and the inability of two people who are genuinely in love, Leon and Christina, being free to choose to marry each other. These are unjust and unfair societies by our standards today.

However, *Curse of the Werewolf* is also concerned with a hereditary “curse”, which has come down to Leon from his father, the beggar. This isn’t the same thing as Sir John observing in *The Wolf Man* that “all of us carry inside us the capacity to be good or evil”. In *Curse of the Werewolf*, Leon’s birth is his *destiny* and that is not at all a progressive idea, but rather quite a reactionary one.

How do we reconcile the progressive with the reactionary elements in *Curse of the Werewolf*; the progressive cry for social justice on the one hand, and the reactionary idea of inherited evil on the other?

The notion that one is born into one's "rightful" place in the world and should not expect to rise to anything greater is a reactionary one. The idea that if you were *born* a poor peasant you should expect to *stay* a poor peasant your whole life and so should your children and your children's children is a very convenient way for the rich and powerful to convince the poor and oppressed that trying to change the order of things is hopeless. Yet, *Curse of the Werewolf* so obviously condemns the feudal system of the time while making Leon's fate predestined by his "accident of birth".

To "solve" this contradiction implies that there is an actual *problem* that can and should be "solved" like a math equation. But it seems there really is no solution, no possible reconciliation between these two very different philosophical positions in the film. Perhaps the best I can do is to offer a joke. Yes, a joke. What is this film about, anyway? It is the story of a *werewolf*, and a werewolf is a man with two parts of himself that *cannot be reconciled*...just like the contradictory idea in the film itself.

Having contradictory elements does not necessarily diminish the film, it simply means we have to think about those contradictions...and that can be interesting. The source of the contradictions would be the screenwriter Anthony Hinds. Perhaps he was doing so many things at once in the film that he didn't notice the contradictions he was introducing. After all, Hinds wrote the script in less than a month, (while I have been studying the film for over twenty years and have had ample time to notice the contradictions). They were probably an accident or oversight that Hinds never even noticed. This is a fairly common occurrence among creative people. They often

miss things in their own work that critics (like me) later notice. More broadly, it is probably true to say that a painter, writer, director, composer, or *whoever* creates something is probably *not* the best critic of the thing they have created. Criticism is a different skill set than being creative. Critics don't have to be creative, they just have to either understand creativity or the thing that has been created

There is an old saying among artists: "*everyone* thinks they are a critic"...but the truth is everyone *is* a critic. Criticism is really a very democratic thing. By being in this class and watching these films, *you* are as much film critics as I am. I am not joking about this, either. There is an entire theory of criticism called "Reception Theory", which argues that the audience is the most important group of people involved in giving "meaning" to a creative work whether it is a novel, a film a painting, or anything else.

What it takes — all it takes — is a *willingness* to read, to watch, to listen *carefully*, and then think about them and then talk about them.

We are quickly approaching our last class and I am hoping that the one thing you will take away from this class more than anything else is the very simple idea that reading, watching and listening carefully and then thinking about it can be a lot of fun!