

The Curse of the Werewolf

UK | 1961 | 91 minutes

Credits

Director	Terence Fisher
Screenplay	Guy Endore (novel) Anthony Hinds (screenplay)
Photography	Arthur Grant
Music	Benjamin Frankel

Cast

Don Alfredo Corledo	Clifford Evans
Leon Corledo	Oliver Reed
Servant Girl	Yvonne Romain
Cristina Fernando	Catherine Feller

In Brief

Cast out, the girl finds sanctuary with Don Alfredo Corledo and his servant Teresa who nurse her through her pregnancy and deliver the child which arrives with a rather bizarre noise from outside and, when he is baptised, the font begins behaving rather strangely with a face appearing in the water prior to the priest completing the baptism. The child, Leon, is raised as Don Alfredo's own but seems to have a bizarre longing for blood after having drunk from a squirrel that Don Alfredo's groundsman shot. Leon's behaviour becomes increasingly strange as he grows up, especially when the moon is full and the hair that was on the palms of his hands when he was a child becomes increasingly evident.

Using Iberian sets left from an abortive film about the Spanish Inquisition, this 1961 Hammer adaptation of Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris* showcases the talents of then-rising star Oliver Reed and director Terence Fisher, here demonstrating his mastery of the Gothic form. Warren Mitchell co-stars as the peasant sheep-herder Pepe.

Despite being formed in 1935 it would not be until the latter end of the fifties that Britain's legendary Hammer Film Productions would rise to global prominence on the back of their wildly successful trio of gothic horror films – *The Curse Of Frankenstein* (1957), *Horror Of Dracula* (1958) and *The Mummy* (1959) all directed by the great Terence Fisher and starring the incomparable duo of Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee. Beneath their glorious Technicolor, Hammer's *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *Mummy* pictures essentially constituted vibrant, unique revisions of the classic Universal horror pictures of the thirties. Bearing this in mind it is therefore perhaps logical that as the fifties passed into the sixties and Hammer embarked on their second wave of gothic horror pictures, they would seek to complete their revisionist tour of the classic Universal monsters.

This would be duly achieved in 1961 and 1962 when Hammer unleashed both their largely forgotten adaptation of *The Phantom Of The Opera* and of course *Curse Of The Werewolf* both of which were scripted by Anthony Hinds (under his famed John Elder pseudonym) and directed by the great Terence Fisher. In the eyes of many *Curse Of The Werewolf* constituted Hammer's own answer to the Universal horror classic *The Wolf Man* (1941) starring Lon Chaney Jr. Unlike the other Universal horrors, putting their own unique gothic spin on *The Wolf Man* presented a problem for Hammer due to the fact that unlike the other Universal horror pictures it was based upon an original screenplay and not adapted from a literary source which Hammer could simply purchase the rights for. Therefore Hammer instead produced their own classic addition to the cinematic lycanthropy cycle, based rather loosely upon Guy Endore's novel *The Werewolf Of Paris*. Despite being (some would say rather surprisingly) Hammer's singular werewolf effort, *The Curse Of The Werewolf* is widely regarded as one of the classics from the studios second wave of gothic horror films and would arguably propel its young star Oliver Reed onto the road to international stardom.

Set in the 18th century, *Curse Of The Werewolf* takes place in the Spanish town of Santa Vera where a travelling beggar prevails upon the court of the towns wicked Marques for their charity and is duly humiliated hen left to rot in the dungeons. Years later a mute serving wench (Romain) also falls foul of the Marques and is also thrown into the dungeon where the now crazed beggar savagely rapes her. Some time later the servant girl, now pregnant following her ordeal, is found wandering in the forest by kind-hearted nobleman Don Alfredo who takes her into his care.

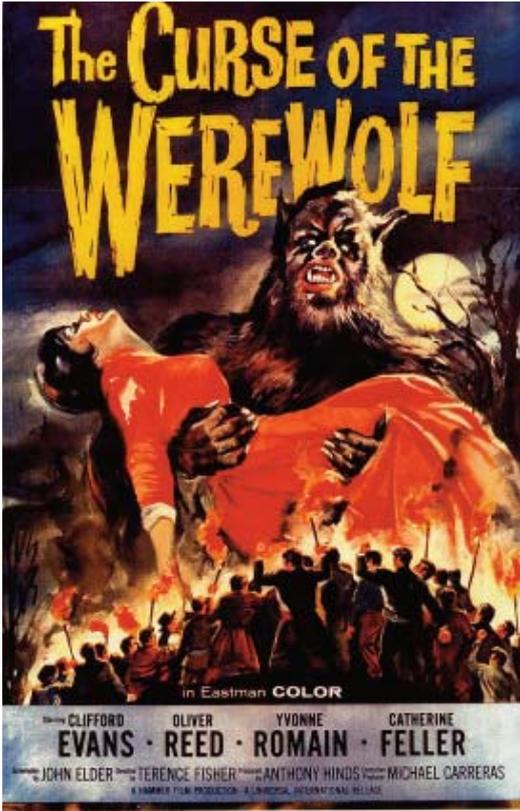
The girl eventually gives birth to a son of Christmas Day which according to ancient beliefs is considered to be an affront to God, the child is christened with the name Leon. Don Alfredo brings up Leon as his own son and is both amazed and horrified to discover that on every night of the full moon Leon transforms into a wolf-like monster and is responsible for the killings of local farmers livestock. Fortunately the local priest (Gabriel) is something of an expert on the subject of werewolves and advises Don Alfredo that Leon's bestial alter ego can be kept at bay by feelings of comfort and love, whilst by contrast feelings of hatred, anger and greed will bring his animalistic instincts to the fore.

In time and with his adoptive father's kindly guiding hand, Leon (played by Oliver Reed) grows into a fine young man and soon leaves home in order to seek his fortune. Leon eventually finds himself working in the vineyards of wealthy aristocrat Don Fernando (Solon) and soon falls in love with his employers beautiful daughter Cristina (Feller). While Cristina reciprocates Leon's love, unfortunately she is already betrothed to another. Leon's frustration eventually ;leads to anger causing him to transform into his werewolf alter ego and embark of a brutal killing spree. As the net closes in on Leon a distraught Don Alfredo realise that there may be only one way to cure his adopted son of this dreadful affliction.



The Werewolf

The Curse of the Werewolf



Less a straightforward horror film than it is a lavish period tragedy with horrific underpinnings, *The Curse Of The Werewolf* sees Hammer adhere to several established clichés of the werewolf picture whilst also rather deftly establishing one or two new ones of its own. In a rather groundbreaking twist on the standard formula lycanthropy is presented not as a disease but as an accursed birthright, Leon's werewolf alter ego is also treated differently in itself in that far from being inescapable his bestial instincts can be suppressed by the feelings of inner peace and comfort bought about by love, whilst the directly contrasting emotions of anger, rage and frustration have precisely the opposite effect. In this respect *The Curse Of The Werewolf* is unique for its era in that Leon is largely, albeit subconsciously in control of his own fate, his transformation into the werewolf dependent not just on the occurrence of a full moon but also upon Leon's inner emotional state at the time. Personally speaking I have little hesitation in heralding these highly effective and ingenious innovations to cinematic werewolf lore as one of screenwriter Anthony Hinds singular greatest achievements.

Stylistically speaking *The Curse Of The Werewolf* is nothing short of a triumph. While the film's British origins shine through blatantly, Hammer's legendary Bray Studio's stomping ground doubles up superbly as period Spain with Fisher's direction, top notch costume design and the sterling work of veteran cinematographer Arthur Grant's combining to create a visually splendid continental tinted take on Hammer's trademark gothic style. Additionally *The Curse Of The Werewolf* easily ranks as one of the most brutal of Hammer's early gothic horror pictures and would fall afoul of the British censors who would insist on heavy cuts totalling several minutes. Unfortunately *The Curse Of The Werewolf* would languish in this heavily censored state for many years until a 1994 BBC television airing finally restored all of the material initially cut back in the sixties, most notably the gory detail of Leon's surprisingly brutal werewolf attacks.

Yet for all its dark gothic trappings and (for the time) shockingly overt brutality, *The Curse Of The Werewolf* is ultimately a tragedy at heart with Leon registering as an accursed and ultimately sympathetic figure. For this to work in practise obviously requires a strong central performance and fortunately a young Oliver Reed, in one of his first significant roles, delivers just that. Although not introduced until the halfway point Reed does a great job of painting Leon not as a villain, but as a personable, good natured young man who is ultimately condemned to a second existence of bloodlust and bestial violence by a tragic combination of horrific birthright and unfortunate circumstance. While Reed was evidently not the finished article at this point in his career his excellent portrayal of Leon certainly confirmed him as a commanding screen presence capable of conveying both pathos and menace with equally satisfying effect. Yet even Reed is outdone by his veteran co-star Clifford Evans who gives a touching and wonderfully subtle performance as Leon's adoptive father who finds himself emotionally distraught yet steeled in his resolve that in order to end his sons misery he must forego parental love and kill him.

Unfortunately *The Curse Of The Werewolf* while highly effective is sadly a deeply flawed film. Despite being beautifully crafted and powerfully performed *The Curse Of The Werewolf* is sadly impeded by its leisurely and often completely tepid pacing. The blame for this principally lies at the door of Hinds' excessively rambling screenplay but Terence Fisher must also shoulder some of the blame. While Fisher was arguably the greatest of all British horror filmmakers, when it came to pacing his films appropriately he could sometimes be inconsistent and *The Curse Of The Werewolf* suffers more in that respect than most with Fisher displaying little of the directorial fire that characterised his best Hammer work such as *Dracula: Prince Of Darkness* (1966) and *The Devil Rides Out* (1968). While the two aforementioned Fisher/Hammer efforts swept along, in contrast *The Curse Of The Werewolf* moves at what could most kindly be described as a canter with Reed not even appearing until roughly the halfway mark after over forty minutes of sluggish (if mostly engaging) narrative exposition and character establishment. The extended prologue detailing Leon's lurid conception is a particularly guilty offender. While the whole sequence indisputably drips with that heady Hammer atmosphere it simply goes on far, far too long. Given the quality of Reed and Evans' central performances plus the deft realisation of both the horror and affecting tragedy at the stories heart, it really is a crying shame that much more screen time could not have been dedicated to the adult Leon and the gradual emergence of his inner werewolf persona.

When you stop to consider that Hammer sustained their *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* cycles across a long-running series of hit and miss sequels, it is perhaps surprising that they would only produce the one, singular werewolf movie. Indeed werewolves found themselves somewhat short-changed during the British horror genres "golden age" with the only other true British lycanthrope horror efforts of the period being Amicus' fitfully entertaining werewolf whodunit *The Beast Must Die* and Tyburn's *Legend Of The Werewolf* (1975) which also based itself loosely upon Guy Endore's *The Werewolf Of Paris*. Therefore in the absence of much competition *The Curse Of The Werewolf* stands as easily the most accomplished British werewolf film of its period. Yet at the same time Fisher's film is only a semi-classic, its excellence in terms of style and performance often unfortunately counteracted by the narrative's tendency to take an inordinate amount of time to go nowhere in particular.

However, if one can forgive the inarguably sluggish pacing *The Curse Of The Werewolf* remains easily one of the most thoroughly absorbing and worthy additions to Hammer's second wave of period gothic horror films. Stylistically speaking the film is beautifully

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crafted and thanks in no small part to the Reed's brooding intensity the inherent sense of tragedy at the heart of Leon's lycanthropic plight is realised in a simultaneously horrific yet genuinely affecting way, lending a welcome touch of pathos to an otherwise dark and often brutal tale. It is therefore no small shame that the singular lack of urgency that afflicts both the screenplay and Fisher's direction ultimately sees *The Curse Of The Werewolf* wind up as just a reasonably impressive film as opposed to a truly classic one. Yet while the lethargic pace ultimately precludes *The Curse Of The Werewolf* from inclusion amongst the cream of the Hammer crop, in many respects the studio's sole foray into werewolf country remains a rich, vibrant and essential addition to that particular subgenre of horror cinema, offering much in the way of both innovation and entertainment value.

Jack Smith - The Celluloid Tomb

A Brief History of Hammer Films

Hammer Film Productions was founded in 1934 by William Hinds and his partners. Over the years of production, they made comedies, dramas and television series but the studio's most famous mark on film-making and Hollywood has been the "Hammer Horror" films. These particular films broke boundaries in what could be conveyed in the horror film genre which had not been before and that was about sex, violence, blood and gore amongst other things.

Interestingly enough, one of their first produced films, "The Mystery of Marie Celeste" (1935), featured none other than Bela Lugosi. Based on the history of the real ship called "Mary Celeste," the film depicts a fictional story of what may have happened on board the ship before it was found in Portugal without a crew. Contrary to the assumption that Lugosi would reprise his vampyric role of "Dracula," Lugosi plays a mere mortal crew member in this film. But is he the cause of the mysterious murders and disappearance happening on board?



Although Hammer Productions produced four films, the other three being of other film genres, "The Mystery of Marie Celeste" gave an idea to what the studio would produce best. For a short time, Hammer Film Productions went bankrupt. But when they returned to making films, their surprise big hit was a sci-fi horror film titled "The Quatermass Xperiment" (1955) that, by law, nobody under the age of sixteen was permitted to see because it was rated "X" for its adult themes. It was followed by a sequel in 1957 titled, "Quatermass 2" which was released the same year as Hammer's "The Curse of Frankenstein." In 1959, Hammer Films featured a six-part series of Frankenstein films, which included actor Peter Cushing as "Baron Frankenstein."

But the most internationally famous Hammer films are the ones starring then unknown British actor Christopher Lee. Lee was made into a sensation when he appeared in a few titles as "Dracula." As Lee desired to do other projects and found the Hammer Films to be less and less concerned with the actors' performances, Lee grew farther apart from Hammer. Lee's last Hammer film as "Dracula" was "The Satanic Rites of Dracula" (1973).

Sexuality was explored throughout the Hammer films – in "The Vampire Lovers" (1970), lesbianism is the main focus of the story. Nudity was also featured when necessary in a few of the films including "Lust for a Vampire" (1971) where it was mostly female nudity shown but tastefully done.

The iconic gory-sexual style of the "Hammer Horror" films have also inspired other filmmakers. It is said that Robert Englund, famous for "Freddie" in "Nightmare on Elm Street" (1984), and director Dwight H. Little wanted to generate the feeling of the Hammer films in their 1989 adaptation of Gaston Leroux's "The Phantom of the Opera." Above the hauntingly romantic setting of the Englund/Little adaptation is the signature Hammer gore with a closet full of dead rats erupting from La Carlotta's closet and a brutally heinous and blood-dripping murder of Joseph Buquet, amongst the film's other violent sequences.

Today, Hammer Films still produces films that thrill and scare audiences around the world. Their most recent titles include, "The Resident" (2007) with Christopher Lee, "Let Me In" (2010) - the remake of the Swedish horror classic "Let the Right One In" (2008), and "The Woman in Black" (2011).

Amber Grey

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The Werewolf