

Night of the Demon

UK | 1958 | 95 minutes

Credits

Director	Jacques Tourneur
Screenplay	Charles Bennett/Hal E. Chester (based on a story by M.R. James)
Photography	Edward Scaife
Music	Clifton Parker

Cast

Dr. John Holden	Dana Andrews
Joanna Harrington	Peggy Cummins
Dr. Julian Karswell	Niall MacGinnis
Henry Harrington	Maurice Denham
Mrs Karswell	Athene Seyler

In Brief

Night of the Demon is a horror picture based on a story by that master of understated horror, M.R. James. James' story Casting The Runes concerns a mild-mannered man who incurs the wrath of a magician and is passed a slip of paper with runic symbols. If these are destroyed, or are still on his person seven days later, he will die. Taking these bare bones, Chester and co-writer Charles Bennett take the late Victorian setting of the original and make it contemporary. To establish Dr. Holden's presence in the UK, he becomes a psychology professor attending a conference on witchcraft, at which he intends to expose the sect headed by Dr. Karswell as a fraud. However, the co-presenter of the paper, Professor Harrington, meets a sticky end just before Holden arrives and it is up to Harrington's niece, Joanna, to persuade Holden that something is going on.

Director Jacques Tourneur turns in one of his best pieces of work: the atmosphere is always on the edge of fear; every scene is loaded with tension, the latent fear of the unknown bubbling below the everyday surface. This is achieved by the performances, and also by Scaife's photography complementing Tourneur perfectly. The secret of the film's success lies in the way that Tourneur and the scriptwriters keep to the spirit of James' original understatement. Fine support to Andrews, MacGinnis and Cummins comes from Athene Seyler as Karswell's dotting mother and Liam Redmond as a colleague of Andrews' who is not so keen to dismiss witchcraft out of hand.

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The black and white Curse of the Demon made its American debut in 1958 as the bottom half of a double bill with the Hammer sequel Revenge of Frankenstein. 96 minutes long in its initial British release the year before, it had been cut by 14 minutes and retitled (it was originally called Night of the Demon). Not an auspicious beginning for a classic. Curse of the Demon deserves the accolades it eventually received; it's a gem, though not a flawless one.

The hero of Curse of the Demon is Dr. John Holden (Dana Andrews), an American psychologist visiting England. He's attending a scientific symposium investigating "international reports of paranormal psychology." More specifically he's bent on exposing the "fraudulent" satanic cult led by one Julian Karswell, a wealthy local landowner. Shortly before Holden's arrival his partner in the investigation, Dr. Henry Harrington, is killed, supposedly electrocuted by falling power lines after his car crashes into a pole. This explains his death, but not the horrible mutilation of his body. His pretty niece, schoolteacher Joanna Harrington (Peggy Cummins), thinks it was foul play, and warns Holden that he may be in danger. Karswell echoes Joanna's warning with a threat – he tells Holden that if he doesn't halt his investigation, he'll die in three days. Sceptic Holden dismisses this notion – but begins to experience blurred vision and chills, hear strange sounds, and he feels he's being followed. He and Joanna discover that Karswell has passed him a slip of paper with runic inscriptions written on it, just as the occultist did to her late uncle. The runes are meant to attract a homicidal monster. As the three days pass, the curse's symptoms and signs grow more overt and menacing.

Curse of the Demon is based on the short story "Casting The Runes" by British college provost M.R. James (1862-1936). James based Karswell on Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), a well-known occultist notorious for his then shocking hedonism and public blasphemy. James's Karswell casts his hex when a psychic research association declines to read his paper on alchemy at their forthcoming meeting. As James describes Karswell, "he had invented a new religion for himself... he was very easily offended, and never forgave anybody... whatever influence he did exert was mischievous." Crowley did invent the religion Thelema, an imaginative eclectic mishmash of the Cabala, I Ching, Freemasonry and other influences. Though not a Satanist, he scandalized England by calling himself "The Beast," as if he were the Antichrist. Though he was serious about his ideas, many of his more lurid shenanigans were calculated to attract public attention. James's Karswell shows magic lantern slides at a party for the village children intended to frighten them, depicting a boy followed by "a horrible hopping creature in white dodging about among the trees."

The movie's Karswell is actually quite likable, which makes him a disarming and unique villain. Holden and Joanna find Karswell entertaining delighted children at Halloween in clown makeup and a top hat, from which he pulls puppies. This Karswell wants to be left alone; when Prof. Harrington offers him a newspaper retraction, he refuses, wanting only privacy for himself and his followers. He's witty and charming, well versed in his "field," more than a match verbally for the endlessly earnest scientists who seem slow compared to him. As Karswell, the short, balding Niall MacGinnis easily steals almost every scene he's in.

We also like Karswell's batty but kind spiritualist mother (Athene Seyler), who stages a séance to try to dissuade Holden from his



Happy Hallowe'en

Night of the Demon



investigation. The séance starts off amusingly, with medium Mr. Meek (Reginald Beckwith) speaking in the voices of his various “spirit guides,” including a garrulous Scotsman named MacGregor and a whiny little girl with a doll named Federica. The ceremony becomes scary when Meek speaks in the voice of Joanna’s late uncle, blurting out, “It’s in the trees – it’s coming!” Joanna trusts Mrs. Karswell and believes it really is her uncle’s voice. But Holden is openly rude to the séance participants and storms out before it’s over, breaking the circle.

The Holden character is entirely an invention of the film – he doesn’t appear in James’s story. He replaces James’s Edward Dunning, who rejects Karswell’s manuscript in the story. Holden is not a very likeable innovation. He is not only skeptical but smug; he flirts persistently with Joanna while she is clearly trying desperately to save his life. At one point he tells her, “I have an imagination like anyone else,” but he keeps blaming his less and less explainable traumas on theatrical trickery. He angrily tells Joanna about how

he deliberately walked under ladders as a kid “to prove I’m not a superstitious sucker like 90% of humanity.” Of all the symposium scientists, he alone completely dismisses the possibility of the supernatural. If Andrews were less handsome and Holden were not in such palpable danger, our sympathies might not lie with him at all. In the story, Karswell’s brother, not his niece, comes to Dunning’s rescue; Joanna is also a cinematic invention, inserted for the sake of the required love interest. All the faults that lessen our ability to identify with Holden exist only to stimulate fireworks between them. Their relationship can develop slowly, building another tension, because they quarrel frequently.

Another area where the film and story differ concerns Karswell’s wealth. James presents Karswell’s income as a mystery to his neighbors (Crowley came from an affluent family but ultimately squandered his resources). In the film, Karswell says his wealth comes from his followers – and he has a huge, opulent mansion surrounded by extensive grounds. When the usually unimpressed Holden first visits the house he exclaims that he’d like to know what Karswell’s “racket” is. However, Karswell’s handful of followers are depicted as dirt poor farmers. It would take thousands of them to support him in such grand style, making him a satanic Pat Robertson. This is amplified in the original *Night of the Demon*. The only substantial scene missing from *Curse of the Demon* is Holden’s visit to the weed-overgrown Hobart family farm. Hobart (Brian Wilde) is a Karswell follower, now catatonic, who Holden interrogates under hypnosis at the symposium. Beforehand Holden goes to the farm to obtain permission from Hobart’s family – a spooky bunch. The scene is unnerving, but it makes Karswell’s riches implausible. I can see the wisdom of cutting it.

One final difference between the film and story deserves mention. A minor character invented for the film who works perfectly is Professor Kumar (Peter Elliott), a Hindu psychologist at the symposium who only appears briefly a couple of times. His sole purpose seems to be to say clever things about the devil – such as “he is at his most dangerous when he’s being pleasant” – smiling brightly all the while. His presence adds a great deal of atmosphere. He remains in both versions of the film.

A major conflict between director Jacques Tourneur and producer Hal E. Chester marks *Curse of the Demon*. Chester wanted to show the demon clearly and more often; Tourneur, veteran director of such subtle horror classics as *Cat People* and *I Walked with a Zombie*, and protégé of tasteful producer Val Lewton, wanted it glimpsed for only four frames at the climax. Comparing Tourneur’s and Chester’s visions is similar to comparing the story and the film. We never see the demon at all in James’s story – all the violence happens offstage, related later by characters who didn’t witness it directly. Tourneur stuck to his guns, but later Chester added footage showing the demon. Tourneur said in a 1973 interview that Chester’s changes “cheapened it.” Many fans who found scenes of the demon mesmerizingly eerie would disagree. The demon’s appearances to Holden unfold in a gradual process. It slowly manifests itself a bit more clearly, and comes a bit closer, each time. A billowing cloud which may have flames inside it pursues Holden through Karswell’s woods, changing shape and surging forward until Holden falls and rolls around to face it – and then recedes, since his “time allowed” is not up. Each appearance is accompanied by maddening twittering and rustling sounds, continually getting louder, that seem to come not from the demon but the atmosphere it creates to materialize in. This clearly evokes the sense that this creature is entering our world from another hidden, inner one. There is a significant gaffe in that we first see the demon too early, soon after the opening credits, but overall, the demon sequences hold up well even now, despite their dated use of puppets.

Like the films Tourneur made for Val Lewton, *Curse of the Demon* has aged well. The cast is dead-on perfect; director Jacques Tourneur achieves a suspenseful pace; exquisite cinematography by Ted Saife and a compelling symphonic score by Clifton Parker don’t hurt either. Despite some flaws in Charles Bennett’s mostly involving script and some controversial meddling after initial shooting, *Curse of the Demon* remains one of the eeriest and most haunting films of the fifties – a decade that gave us so many horror classics.

- Jack Veasey, www.classic-horror.com

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