

Crimson Peak



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Guillermo Del Toro. Produced by Guillermo Del Toro, Thomas Tull, Callum Greene and Jon Tashi. Executive Producers: Jillian Share & Maguy R. Cohen. Production Design by Thomas E. Saunders. Screenplay by Guillermo Del Toro & Mathew Robbins. Photography by Dan Laustsen. Editing by Bernat Vilplana. Music by Fernando Velázquez. A Universal Pictures Production. Original Release: October 2015. MA rating. Length: 119 minutes. Rating 85%

All pictures are taken from the public domain or Wikimedia

Cast

Edith Cushing: Mia Wasikowska

Lucille Sharpe: Jessica Chastain

Thomas Sharpe: Tom Hiddleston

Doctor Alan McMichael: Charlie Hunnam

Carter Cushing: Jim Beaver

Ogilvie: Jonathan Hyde

Mrs McMichael: Leslie Hope

Ferguson: Bruce Clay

Eunice: Emily Coutts

Young Edith: Sofia Wells

Finlay: Alec Stockwell

Coroner: Bill Lake

Reverend: Sean Hewitt

Review

Crimson Peak is a superior horror film; more of a chiller than a thriller - until the last thirty minutes, then it unleashes thrills and horrors galore. Those last thirty minutes are made all the more effective by the suspenseful build-up. Until then the narrative segments the chilling suspense with brief moments of horror. These not only warn; they tantalise about the mystery on the way to the revealing climax.

Almost any viewer will either work out what that mystery, or at the least, aspects of it, long before the naïve heroine Edith Cushing does. Originality is not the film's strength. Naïve, isolated, inexperienced, young women have been going to dark sinister, isolated, aristocratic houses (and staying there!) since at least 1847, when *Jane Eyre* was published. They do this with great frequency, meeting enigmatic, obviously sinister men of extremely dubious worth who they either marry or are attracted to. The reasons for this attraction for creeps are beyond this male reviewer's comprehension. These heroines usually soon find themselves menaced by some sinister force after the creeps give them the great revelation. The genre continued in film, coming in strong in British and Hollywood films of the 1930s into the 1950s with *The Old Dark House*, *The Cat and the Canary*, *Jamaica Inn*, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Rebecca*, *Suspicion*, *House of the Seven Gables*, *Dragonwyck*, *My Cousin Rachel* and *Under Capricorn*. Leaving aside B grade imitations and made for tv movies, still later films of moderate to high quality to consider emerge with frequency. Remakes of some of these 1930s to 1950s films and other later films such as *Psycho* (1960), *The Fall of the House of Usher*, (1960), *The Innocents* (1961), *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967) *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Nightcomers* (1971), *The Sentinel* (1977), *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *The Changeling* (1980), *The Shining* (1980), *Misery* (1990), *Dracula* (1992), *Dolores Claiborne* (1994), *What Lies Beneath* (2000), *Premonition* (2007) and *The Ghost Writer* (2010) were essentially in the genre, albeit with some changes. Usually these changes involved using modern settings or gender reversal roles. Some elements remain. The newcomer arriving at a sinister setting, an undisclosed mystery and the battle with evil were always consistently used. Actually when this extensive list gains consideration overused would be a better description.

By 1974 the genre was being parodied in *Young Frankenstein* and the ever popular *Rocky Horror Show*. Even before then virtually every aspect of the genre was being used for Halloween and self-written plays by primary school students.

So why over forty years after the genre has become a cliché, make another film in the genre?

Well first, film themes are always new to a new generation.

Second, each generation interprets old stories through new perceptions.

The passive heroines of the old Hollywood who try to calmly reason with evil, then fatalistically await their fate, are gone. Instead we have ferociously ruthless women

who battle each other with kitchen implements. Also gone from the screen are the code heroes and villains who respectively embody simplistic ideas of good and evil. Equally dead and gone are the old censorship codes. What could only be carefully hinted at can now be explicit.

Third, technology has improved. Thundering if tinny soundtracks and pitiful special effects are also mercifully gone. New computer technology makes effects much more – well effective.

Points two and three show that old stories are being recreated in new ways.

Fourth, the conscientious filmmaking skill and the imagination shown by /director/co-producer/ co-writer Guillermo Del Toro makes this a superior production in every technical field.

Fifth, this story is not so old or so derivative. Despite similarities to *Dragonwick* in particular, much appears new and more sophisticated than many of the previously mentioned efforts. Like the novel *Dragonwick*, Toro's film starts in upstate New York. Both works have city scenes where a concerned and protective if coarse father worries about an unfolding romance with an aristocrat. He distrusts the intended for reasons he cannot explain. In both *Dragonwick* and *Crimson Peak* the heroine has a similarly presented love interest who also distrusts the husband. In both he appears as a good if bland young doctor who does not push his romantic suite hard enough.

Despite the way that both heroines are naïve, differences, even opposites emerge. *Dragonwyck's* heroine is a happy, well-adjusted, if uncultured farm-girl. Edith Cushing first appears as a stunned survivor of some trauma, staring at the screen with a slashed face as she solemnly tells us that ghosts are real. From there she narrates her mother's funeral, while that is depicted on screen. Although Toro depicts that event with restraint, he also captures the Victorian attitude to death and in those first scenes a sense of something sinister and unnatural emerges.

Edith as she appears in the film's first scenes.



Her mother's funeral

Edith then narrates that her mother's ghost comes to her and this depiction is truly scary, yet the ghost warns her "to beware of the Crimson Peak." No further explanation develops. The next scene shows her as a young adult, trying to be a published writer of novels concerned with ghosts – and being told she should be writing love stories. Her interests (and lack of them in marriage) and independent spirit make her seem an outsider in the upper class society of Buffalo New York in 1901. Although it is not quite spelt out, she seems to be tolerated rather than accepted because of her father's wealth and prominence in Buffalo's business world.



Buffalo in 1901. This still shows the care and detail lavished on the sets.

Using Canadian settings Toro skilfully sets the first 1901 scenes in this world. He does not linger too long over what must have been extravagantly expensive, time devouring sets. In both the exterior and interior shots he creates a sense of New World vigour and prosperity which sometimes go into opulence, clutter and bustle. All five of these characteristics are personified by her father. Both Buffalo and her straightforward, energetic father provide a welcome contrast to the exact opposites in the film's second half.

While working in her father's office she meets a polite and seemingly innocuous handsome young visitor Thomas Sharpe, who immediately appears as obviously attracted to her. His manner becomes a little flustered, when he unexpectedly finds out that her father Carter Cushing turns out to be the man he came to persuade to invest in his clay extraction machine. When he finishes demonstrating his model, Carter not only rejects his appeal for funding but lambasts him as a lazy aristocrat who knows nothing, while he worked his way up from labouring in a steel mill. This loud, cranky and extremely hostile abuse seems initially unjustified. Initially, but as Thomas courts Edith, doing everything so correctly, this reviewer also develops a sense of unease about the polite, restrained visionary Thomas. When Carter says that he does not know why he is uneasy with him and then puts detectives on Thomas and his sister Lucille, he was a few scenes behind this reviewer thinking of what he would do if Edith was his daughter.



Sharpe's sister Lucille seems more enigmatic. Beautiful, immaculately dressed, coiffured and poised, an accomplished pianist, she plays slow, subtle, delicate melodies, while oblivious to applause. Something about her expressionless calmness rings very loud warning bells for viewers, if not for the cast.



The beautiful if enigmatic Lucille Sharpe. Even in the grimy kitchen at her ancestral home at Allerdale Hall she wears her best

Those bells should ring loudly when in her softly spoken calm and laconic style, she describes for Edith how the moths in the park only live for a little while, but they live on butterflies. She then throws a moth on her dress into an ant's nest while it still lives and briefly watches what happens, dispassionately.

More mental warning bells should ring when the newly-weds arrive at Sharpe's ancestral mansion and the site of his clay mining. In the history of the genre does any exterior shot show a more sinister setting? Edith would be well justified in jumping out of the carriage and drudging across the moors to the nearest help. If the exteriors are creepy, the interiors are magnificently sinister. They do not quite ooze blood from the floors, merely red clay that looks like blood. The shots below only give some idea of the mansion's sense of menace.



The exterior of Allerdale Hall





The interiors



If anything *Allerdale Hall* is just too well done: anyone with the slightest sense of self-preservation would have fled from there after a few seconds, but Edith stays. This lapse in credibility deepens as the evidence for what really has gone on comes into her life, a little at a time. It is a weakness in the genre.



Another weakness has to be the presentation of the ghosts. In a generally restrained film, too many of the spectres go against that subtle mood. The film loses some

credibility and the spectres lose their sense of mystery and therefore their power when they are shown in close up. This applies particularly to the shot when one has a meat cleaver in her head, not exactly Hollywood's most subtle touch.

When in Allerdale Hall the film gives a feeling of doom. As the evidence of danger mounts, we do not know what will happen to Edith. Only Polanski and Hitchcock come to mind for working so well at combining chills and suspense to create a mood that mixes danger and uncertainty. The remarkable use of sets and locales finds a match in the performances. The entire cast are extraordinarily effective, making the unbelievable creditable. They manage to do this without an obviously strained effort in a story in which suspending belief becomes difficult due to the ghosts. All the performers bring subtle complexities to their roles. Jessica Chastain is outstanding. With her delight in her chilly, factually clear explanations and her methodical preparations before her savage fury, she comes as close to explicable evil as any performer can get.

Crimson Peak comes close to being as good as a gothic horror film gets.

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