

“Crimson Peak” – Transgressing the Familiar (review)

“It is not a ghost story, but a story with the ghosts in it”, helpfully explains Edith (Mia Wasikowska), an aspiring young writer in the 19th Century USA, while trying to pitch her newest book; “the ghosts are the metaphor for the past.” A little bit on the nose, right? Obviously, explanation is primarily addressed not to her cliché Victorian era compatriots, but to us, the viewers. “Crimson Peak”, a film full of creepy, creaking hallways, dark, imposing mansions and the actual – well – *ghosts* is definitely not a ghost story. Contrary to what its promotional campaign lets one believe it is not even a straightforward horror flick; it is a love story. A what? Yes, that is correct. A love story, a very typical one at that; “Crimson Peak” is a cliché-ridden, hyperbolized, unbelievable romance, every twist and turn of which is as obvious and as on-the-nose as Edith’s meta-commentary about the movie. Yet despite it all (or more precisely, because of it all) the film absolutely triumphs in what it actually tries to achieve – marry the well-known tropes of the 19th Century adultery novels to the plot structure of the classic and influential fairy tale (of all things) to subvert them all in the end and deliver a surprisingly poignant message about intimacy and understanding.

The film’s story centers on the aforementioned writer Edith and her love affair with exotic English nobleman Thomas (Tom Hiddleston). Edith is a woman as typical as the 19th Century narrative female protagonist can be – a smart introvert, a dreamer ahead of her own time. The character type is reinforced by the actress playing a role – Mia Wasikowska in the period clothes looks as comfortable as usual (keywords: “as usual”); the allusions to her roles in “Jane Eyre” and similar period dramas are as inescapable as (undoubtedly) intentional. Edith clearly does not fit in her environment – idyllic and dreamy version of the industrial United States, beautifully shot and drenched in earthly colours to invoke that fuzzy, nostalgic feeling one experiences while looking at old photos. Therefore, when the secretive and

mysterious siblings – Sir Thomas and Lady Lucile Sharpe (Jessica Chastain) – arrive in town to discuss business with her industrious father, Edith is almost immediately attracted to them, particularly to Sir Thomas. Oh, and she also sees ghosts, by the way. Ghosts, who spend quite a few spooky scenes warning the young writer of the danger she must beware of. Edith's father and a doctor friend warn her of the danger as well, thankfully being less cryptic than the ghostly apparitions and specifically pointing towards the Sharpe siblings, who appear to be so suspicious and shady that everyone should realize they are up to no good. Everyone except Edith of course – either out of her naiveté or the attraction to the dark mystery surrounding Sir Thomas she willingly finds herself romantically involved with the nobleman like an innocent butterfly, braving the nest of predatory moths; another obvious allegory, reinforced many times throughout the film.

If the plot sounds familiar it's because it is; the entire story is a rendition of classic, though often (unjustly) forgotten "Bluebeard" fairy tale. The French folk-tale, recorded by famous Charles Perrault, has been often excluded from the fairy tale collections, as the bloodshed and sexuality, so prevalent in the earlier versions of most of the western folklore, could not be edited out of the tale; the puritanical censors of the 19th century were appalled after realizing, that the brutality and the sexual undertones were absolutely intrinsic to the story's plot. Nevertheless, "Bluebeard" was as influential as any other classic folktale (if not even more so): its traces could be found in numerous modern films, from "Shining" to "Secret Window." This underrated fairy tale follows the fate of a curious lady, who finds herself engaged to the mysterious, exotic gentlemen. The gentleman in question is an odd one – there is something wrong with him, a certain dark secret, the existence of which is as obvious to the lady's family as the unnatural blue colour of the titular man's beard... However, the protagonist of the tale chooses to marry Bluebeard despite all the ominous

signs. Furthermore, while transgressing the rules set by her newlywed spouse, she dares to unearth his dark secret, which is as terrible as one can imagine.

As you can see, “Crimson Peak” follows the story beats of “Bluebeard” almost to a letter. The secretive suitor, his house with certain forbidden chambers, the curious protagonist, her transgressions against the warnings and the horrific consequences are all present in this newest film by Guillermo Del Toro – the same director, who made “Pan’s Labyrinth”: arguably the greatest fairy-tale movie of all time. Suddenly the cliché characters and the telegraphed plot development make perfect sense: the folktale heroes are often one-dimensional, as they are hyperbolized character *types*, serving the message of the story, rather than other way around. Moreover, the obviousness of darkness surrounding the Sharpe siblings is essential for Edith to commit transgressions, intrinsic to the “Bluebeard” narrative – she must choose to brave this darkness on her own free will, otherwise the forbidden boundaries would not be crossed. No wonder Del Toro himself was dismayed by the misleading marketing campaign – various trailers of “Crimson Peak” all seem to suggest a horror mystery, with many scares and unpredictable story, while the film actually has neither. The ghost encounters serve either as warnings of the different sort of horrors (as director himself unsubtly hinted, the true monsters of “Crimson Peak” are people) or the simplistic metaphors for the past one can never fully escape from. As for the mystery, there is none – all cards are revealed from the get-go, the main crux of the story being fairy-tale-like didactic morality play rather than truly engaging quest for answers.

Influences from the 19th Century romance novels are also numerous; surprisingly, they fit very well together with “Bluebeard” plot structure. As stated before, Mia Wasikowska’s Edith feels like a character straight from the pages of “Jane Eyre” or “Anna Karenina” (albeit considerably more simplistic); her father, the Sharpes, even too-modern looking doctor McMichael (played by miscast Charlie Hunnam – in the movie where

everyone is type casted, “Sons of Anarchy” alumni certainly does not look the part) all seem to be lifted from the century old literary pages. Perhaps it is no so surprising after all:

“Bluebeard” is a tale about loss of innocence (something that is shown very straightforward in the film; Tom Hiddlestone’s admirers should be happy with they’ll see, if you know what I mean), the hardships of married life and the secrets people keep from one another. The said character types, adulterous plots and love triangles, typical for the popular novels of 19th Century, fit well when expanding mainly expository fairy tale’s plot into a full length movie. Del Toro calls this sort of hybrid a “gothic romance”, a riff of the gothic fiction, in which love and death, historical setting and the folklore influences go hand in hand. It is all well and good, but if all “Crimson Peak” does is emulate the well-known tropes, how can it be even remotely noteworthy?

This is where the larger, more essential question of originality comes into play. How does one deem anything original if not by comparison? Let’s put it this way – if any work of art that is truly and fully unique could be created, its audiences would most likely fail to even comprehend it at first. What we actually call “originality” are differences from what is familiar to us. Thus, in a way, familiarity is necessary to appreciate the deviations from it, the inventiveness. This is where “Crimson Peak’s” formulaic plot truly shines – block by block it builds up the all-too-familiar structure, a story so basic, it originates from one of the essential western folktales, while sprinkling it with the clichés of the well-known literary genre at the same time. The structure is build up only for the tropes to be subverted, however – and the act of subversion would not be possible without the classic tropes being introduced beforehand. “Crimson Peak” follows the plot beats of “Bluebeard” faithfully, yet where the fairy tale suggests, that some secrets should be left alone, the film leans towards the notion that understanding loved one’s dark side is the only way to reach true intimacy. In “Bluebeard” main character’s transgression is punished but in “Peak” it is rewarded: by opening both

literal and metaphorical versions of forbidden doors characters of Edith and Thomas are granted personal growth, emotional maturity. No wonder that the scenes in America are shot to convey a sense of safe, ethereal, childlike state, while the titular Crimson Peak is much darker and more foreboding, yet vivid, colorful and full of life at the same time. Finally, the film's treatment of villains is completely different; "Bluebeard" ends with violent confrontation, the antagonist's motives are not explored – the secret behind the locked doors is so monstrous, that the folktale deems the exploration of its motives to be impossible, almost immoral. "Peak", even though ending on the similar violent note (not a spoiler – the movie opens with the flash-forward of its bloody finale), reaches the opposite conclusion.

The film goes to the great lengths to show that it was precisely the lack of understanding, the lack of willingness to accept the certain darker aspects of life that lead to the birth of "Crimson Peak's" monsters in the first place. Often quoted G.K. Chesterton has said, that "Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed." "Crimson Peak" stays true to this notion while making a modern spin on it; the film suggest that confronting darkness with darkness would only create more of it; the way to defeat the all-too-real dragons (let me stress it again – the ghosts in the film are the backdrop, not the focus) is to embrace the darkness rather than vilify it. Thus, the ultimate message of the movie is quite positive, which is a welcome change in the horror scene. As for the tropes of the 19th Century romantic novels, let's just say that the greatest joy comes from recognizing them and realizing, how the typical character roles are switched around in the end; it is no coincidence that the promotional posters show manly doctor McMichael in the innocent and bridal white light, while Edith stands like bloodied warrior, braving the battle.

Even though the establishing and the subversion of clichés might not be everyone's cup of tea, I must address the elephant in the room – the film is also gorgeous, easily

recommendable to anyone (well, anyone with eyes) based on its aesthetics. The post-production of “Crimson Peak” took the whopping twelve months, which is clearly seen from the perfection of the editing and the meticulous attention to mise-en-scène, evident in every single shot. “Peak” is absolutely beautiful movie, its haunted mansion full of life and decay in equal doses, so real you can easily suspend your disbelief and enjoy the unfolding events like if you were a participant. The ghost design is more imaginative than genuinely frightening; Del Toro always makes sure the audiences see his creatures in all their glory, hence, the clever combinations of practical and computer generated special effects do not create much of the mystique or terror, but function as another component of the fascinating scenery. The actors play their respective character types admirably, especially scene-stealing Jessica Chastain. The weak link is Charlie Hunnam, but it is hard to hold it against the casting too much, as his character is supposed to be a weak link in the story on purpose.

Predictable plot, cliché characters, unbelievable dialogue. All of these are true regarding “Crimson Peak.” The movie is not scary nor particularly thrilling; a typical horror film it is not. However, if you are a viewer with patience, an eye for gorgeous details or the appreciation of the classic tales and literature, the “Peak” might be perfect for you. “Not a ghost story, but a story with ghosts in it” is a beautiful fairy tale for grown-ups deserving appreciation, as, sadly, we do not get enough of these anymore.

References:

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