

## The Origin Story in Werewolf Cinema of the 1930s and '40s

Of the classic Universal monsters comprising Dracula, Frankenstein's creature, the Mummy, and the Wolf man, it is the latter that presents what may be the most intriguing passage from literature to the screen. While the literary origins for Count Dracula and Doctor Frankenstein's monster are well-established, and the Mummy's genesis can be traced from both literary and real-life events, werewolf literature has received neither the attention nor the widespread distribution accorded Bram Stoker's and Mary Shelley's fantastic beings. This checkered literary history may at least partially account for the fact that the werewolf is the last of the "big four" to have made its way into production for the filmgoing audience.

As Brian J. Frost tells us in *The Essential Guide to Werewolf Literature*, the werewolf "is a man or woman who, either voluntarily or involuntarily, is supernaturally transformed into the shape of a wolf and endowed with all the physical characteristics of that animal—a shaggy covering of fur, glowing eyes, long canine teeth, and razor-sharp claws" (6). One key component of Frost's definition lies in his recognition that the transformation may occur either voluntarily or involuntarily, for most of the mainline cinematic depictions of werewolfery result from the film's focal character being bitten by another werewolf. What may come as a surprise to many werewolf fans is the extent to which such creatures have

appeared in literature, with the number of werewolf titles rivaling the more popular vampire tales. As Frost details in his study, publications focusing upon werewolves range from discussions of lycanthropy in such treatises as the *Malleus Malificarum*, a witch-hunters' guide co-authored by Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger in the 1480s, to R. L. Stine's young-adult horrors of contemporary times.

The concept whereby man can change into an animal appears as old as mankind itself, originating with the proposition that man and the wolf share common ancestry. According to Bill Pronzini in the introduction to his werewolf anthology, however, "The origin of the werewolf superstition is lost in antiquity" (xiv). As time passed, existing myths were augmented by hypotheses that werewolves are a hybrid resulting from the natural evolution that took place as man developed from the animals. Some permutations of this hypothesis suggest that the evolution may not have been completed so that isolated werewolf colonies developed in out-of-the-way settings. Frost feels that the most credible theory lies with "exaggerated accounts of nocturnal attacks on Stone Age settlements by bands of fur-clad warriors masquerading as wolves" (4).

Perhaps the most influential werewolf novel ever published is Guy Endore's *The Werewolf of Paris* (1933), which is considered in many circles to equal Stoker's *Dracula* as the seminal work in its field. Endore's book has rarely been out of print. While Frost touts it as "the only modern werewolf text of any literary quality" (145), it has failed to meet the widespread recognition accorded Stoker's vampire tale. Frost also claims that most extant werewolf stories, regardless of length, fall short of the literary quality found in Endore's work. Even contemporary werewolf stories published since 1990 exhibit "no corresponding improvement in the standard of writing, which was generally at a low level" (215). The printed werewolf tale thus appears to have experienced a checkered history as far as quality goes, with a large number of short stories and novels featuring the character falling short regarding their narrative construction and standard of writing.

As with Count Dracula, Frankenstein's "new man," and the Mummy, it would fall upon Universal Studios to popularize cinematic lycanthropy. Universal's initial offering in this sub-genre is not the widely acclaimed chiller starring Lon Chaney, Jr., however, but rather the lesser-known *Werewolf of London* in 1935. Starring Henry Hull as Dr. Wilfred Glendon and Warner Oland as Dr. Yogami, *Werewolf of London* initiates the oft-repeated plot device wherein the focal character becomes a werewolf when bitten by an existing one. As will happen continually in future werewolf films, the presence of the already-existing werewolf is taken for granted instead of being established through an origin story. However, rather than acting simply as a device to kick off the narrative's dramatic conflict, Dr. Yogami, the initial werewolf in *Werewolf of London*, serves as a major plot concern beyond simply biting Dr. Glendon during the film's opening scene and transmitting the curse to him.

Glendon is a botanist who is shown during the film's expository scene leading an expedition searching in Tibet for the *mariphaisa lumina lupina*, a rare flower that only blooms by moonlight. It is during Glendon's discovery of the flower that he is attacked by a shadowy creature. While Glendon is able to fend off the assault, the attacker manages to bite him on the arm. This scene thus establishes the transferal of the curse to Glendon by the already lycanthropic Yogami. According to the narrative's mythology, the *mariphaisa* flower serves as an antidote to the hirsute stage experienced during the cycle of the full moon by those afflicted with the curse. As Yogami explains to Glendon, the flower is not a cure, for its effect only lasts for a few hours. In addition, Glendon, who is initially skeptical about all this "medieval unpleasantness," is taken aback to learn that the werewolf instinctively seeks to kill the people it loves the most. In this case, Glendon would seek out his wife, Lisa (Valerie Hobson), who is falling into an affair with her old flame due to Glendon's monomaniacal attention to his study of the *mariphaisa*. As one would expect, several killings ensue by the hands of both Glendon and Yogami while they wait for the blooms that Glendon has brought back with him from Tibet to blossom under the artificial moonlight lamps Glendon has created. By the film's conclusion,

Glendon is shot by a police inspector investigating the killings. Contrary to the conventional wisdom regarding the dispatching of werewolves, Glendon is killed by an ordinary bullet rather than a silver one.

*Werewolf of London* stands in the horror catalogue as a missed opportunity. The film, first of all, does an inadequate job of inserting what are supposed to be moments of humor into its narrative; instead, the comic scenes slow down what is already a plodding plotline. In addition, Henry Hull's depiction of Doctor Glendon as the film's focal character does little to create audience identification with, and sympathy for, his plight, because the good doctor comes off as a stuffed shirt whose only real affection for his wife is expressed verbally without the physical intimacy one would expect. Since we are given no origin story for the werewolf curse that he and Yogami share, the only reason for a viewer to associate with Glendon's situation at all is that there is no other character to go to in this film. Werner Oland's Yogami supplies the bite that changes Glendon's life as well as spinning what mythology exists in the tale. Aside from that, he is repeatedly left to look on with exasperation whenever Ettie Coombes (Spring Byington in another dotty matron role) mispronounces his name in what passes for several of the comic (and, unfortunately, racist) moments in the story line.

Perhaps the ultimate missed opportunity in this production lies with the climax. The moon is full, and both Yogami and Glendon have made their way to Glendon's laboratory to snatch up the remaining mariphausa flower. While Glendon is turned away, Yogami grabs the flower and uses all of its nectar for himself. The two begin to struggle, and Glendon transforms, killing the man who passed the curse on to him. As many of the film's critics have noted, the production team passed up an obvious opportunity here as the climactic struggle could have occurred between two werewolves rather than between the newly-cursed and the man who bit him. This unrealized climax seems so evident that one wonders how seriously involved with the project the crew was, for a werewolf-on-werewolf confrontation would have been the first such depiction in a mass-market released film and given the title some much-needed "buzz."

One aspect of this film displaying a degree of artistic production is Glendon's first transformation. Although this scene takes up only a brief portion of the photoplay, it stands as an example of what could have been done for the overall production had a little more consideration been given during pre-production. Dr. Glendon is reclining on a chair in his sitting room attempting to make sense of all Yogami has told him when the Glendon family cat begins spitting at its owner. This reaction from the favored pet cues Glendon to the change that is beginning in him. He shoos the cat away and looks down at his hands and notices the excessive hair that has sprouted. With Yogami's words detailing the physical transformation sounding in his head, Glendon proceeds to the stairs. As he moves toward the stairway, director Stuart Walker first frames him between the doorway's strong verticals as he passes through, and then shoots him through a series of upright banister supports to symbolize that Glendon is locked into his fate. The doctor then turns around and heads outside to his garden. As he hurries through the garden to his laboratory, Glendon passes two pillars. When he emerges on the other side of each pillar, his transformation progresses in stages to the satanic werewolf makeup created for Hull by Jack Pierce. Exhibiting both the symbolism inherent in the curse as well as a more fluid transformation than would be attempted later on during the Lon Chaney, Jr., films, this scene more than any other suggests what might have been.

This Universal potboiler is not the first werewolf film released to the public. Brunas, Brunas, and Weaver identify short films such as 1913's *The Werewolf* as well as the following year's *The White Wolf* as two films featuring title characters of American Indian origin. Several other productions appeared from 1915 through 1932 from both U. S. and International sources that contain the name of the fantasy creature in their titles. In these films, however, the protagonists turn out to be human rather than lycanthropes.

The year following *Werewolf of London*'s release found Universal in financial difficulties that led to Carl Laemmle's ill-conceived agreement to make the studio available to the Standard Capital Corporation in return

for a \$750,000 loan. Thinking the loan company would never exercise its \$5.5 million option to purchase the studio, Laemmle agreed to the terms that would cause him to lose control of his pet. As a result, the new owners de-emphasized horror titles following the release of *Dracula's Daughter* in 1936 in favor of low-budget comedy, action, and musical productions. The strategy failed to improve Universal's bottom line, however, until a new management team was brought in. Among the decisions made by incoming president Nate Blumberg, was the reissuing of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* as a double-feature across the country. The pairing proved financially successful and popular with the filmgoing audience, and prompted Universal to revive its horror productions beginning with Boris Karloff's third turn as the creature in *Son of Frankenstein*.

The decision to emphasize horror once again led to creation of the final member of Universal's "big four," *The Wolf Man*, in 1941. Developed predominantly as a star vehicle for Lon Chaney, Jr., in order to let the studio cash in on his famous last name, *The Wolf Man* also displayed the writing talent of Curt Siodmak who ignored the science-fiction-based mythology created in *Werewolf of London*. Returning to the werewolf's roots as embedded in European lore, Siodmak included a number of "rules" that have become commonplace for later werewolf films. Included among these tenets are the need to subdue the werewolf with a silver bullet or bludgeon it with a silver object (such as the walking stick in this film); the transference of the curse from one person to another when the existing werewolf bites its victim who, nonetheless, survives (a carryover from both the previous film and much werewolf literature); the sign of the pentagram identifying those who carry the curse; the werewolf's ability to see the pentagram in the hand of its next victim; the werewolf's aversion to wolfsbane; and, of course, Siodmak's ditty that is spoken early in the film not once, but three times (by Gwen Conliffe, Sir John Talbot, and Jenny Williams) to be sure the viewer recognizes that someone will turn into a werewolf when the full moon rises in this film. Often falsely attributed to existing mythology, the poem, "Even a man who's pure in heart, /and

says his prayers by night, / may become a wolf when the wolfsbane blooms, / and the autumn moon in bright," was solely Siodmak's creation.

As in *Werewolf of London*, the source of the curse that turns the gypsy fortuneteller Bela (Bela Lugosi) into the film's original werewolf is shunted aside. Thus, we do not know whether Bela contracted the curse from another werewolf or whether he is the first of the species. Siodmak does dabble with the cause of lycanthropy a couple times in the script, with Sir John Talbot (Claude Rains) blithely telling son Larry (Lon Chaney, Jr.) the affliction is simply another form of schizophrenia. Later in the story, Sir John also refers to werewolfery as a recognition of the good and the bad in every person's personality. The film's voice of rationality, Sir John is fated to discover there is more to lycanthrophobia than its manifestation as a mental problem, for it is he who is fated to kill Larry during the climax.

Lon Chaney, Jr.'s Larry Talbot is much easier for a viewer to identify with than Henry Hull's Doctor Glendon, a trait due in great part to Siodmak's screenplay. It is not enough complication for Larry to be coming home after substantial time in the United States, for his father immediately makes his son aware of his duties and obligations as the next in line to run the family estate. On top of assimilating these responsibilities, he also finds himself falling for Gwen Conliffe and having to come to grips with the curse of the werewolf in a period of a few days. If ever a horror film character was a candidate for the psychiatric ward, it is Larry Talbot, and Chaney pulls off the role's various shadings with ease. Indeed, the character proved such a bankable hit for Universal that Chaney returned the wolf man to the screen four more times from 1943-48 during what would become known as the studio's "monster rally" films. *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*, *House of Frankenstein*, *House of Dracula*, and the horror-comedy *Abbot & Costello Meet Frankenstein* often eschewed any pretense at narrative consistency from film to film. They were ultimately produced on the theory that if the audience liked one monster in a film, it should lap up stories featuring two or more of their favorite bogeymen per release. In all of these releases, Larry Talbot shows

up, still alive despite whatever travails he suffered during his previous film appearance. As one monster rally morphed into another, Universal's screenwriters became less concerned about maintaining any recognition of Talbot's demise in the previous title and his revivification in the next one. In every instance, Talbot is portrayed as a cursed soul seeking an "ultimate death" in order to keep from turning into the wolf man once again during the next full moon. As David Skal tells us in *The Monster Show*, "The Wolf Man's saga was the most consistent and sustained monster myth of the (second world) war, beginning with the first year of America's involvement, and finishing up just in time for Hiroshima" (218).

Another notable werewolf who appeared during the 1940s was Andreas Obry, Armand Tesla's hirsute assistant portrayed by Matt Willis in 1944's *The Return of the Vampire*. Released by Columbia Pictures rather than Universal, the film was hurried into production when the Columbia brass saw the success that Universal garnered with its initial monster rally, *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*, the previous year. Since Columbia could not wrest the copyright away from Universal for Count Dracula, Bela Lugosi's Tesla, while Dracula in all respects, is given an origin story citing his emergence as a vampire as the result of his overly-zealous experiments with the black arts. During Tesla's reign of terror, he is assisted by Andreas, who can be transformed into a werewolf by Tesla's mesmerizing stare. The plot's early scenes find Tesla eventually being destroyed, and Andreas adopted as a hospital worker by the doctor (Frieda Inescort) responsible for Tesla's demise. Years later, during World War II, a German bombing run unearths Tesla's grave and two field workers unwittingly remove the stake that had been driven into the vampire's heart. Tesla thus returns to his undead state, from which he swears vengeance upon the family of those who put him away earlier. As part of his revenge plot, Tesla is overjoyed to discover Andreas still alive and working in the hospital in which Tesla's quarry reside. Andreas once again succumbs to Tesla's lycanthropic curse (apparently, the full moon is not necessary) and is forced to help further the vampire's designs. Tesla manages to keep Andreas under his thumb by continually promising to lift the curse

from him. The vampire, however, only uses this ruse to keep Andreas bound to him to carry out his schemes. Ultimately, Andreas dies at Tesla's hand during yet another air raid, when the vampire feels he has no further use for him. Tesla also perishes when he is forced into the sunlight by the bombing, and his body decomposes in the light.

The plot device of turning someone into a werewolf without the person's being bitten by an existing lycanthrope was also featured in the "Poverty Row" film, *The Mad Monster* (1942). In this release, horror staple George Zucco stars as Dr. Lorenzo Cameron, who is about to realize the culmination of his experiments emphasizing injections of animal blood into human beings. Cameron's studies are not without altruistic motives, as he hopes his discovery will benefit the War Department by allowing the United States to create an army of wolf men to fight the Axis powers in World War II as well as re-establish his academic credentials with the faculty colleagues who denied him a position at a nearby university. A riff on Robert Louis Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde formula, leavened with a pinch of Shelley, Fred K. Myton's script foregoes the mythology established in *Werewolf of London* and *The Wolf Man* in order to suggest once again that there are, indeed, some things that humankind is not meant to know. As one might expect from a plot following this formula, Dr. Cameron's guinea pig, Petro (Glenn Strange), eventually begins transforming into a werewolf without the assistance of Cameron's shots, and goes on a killing spree. Cameron is far from sane at this point in the proceedings, and decides to send the good-hearted Petro to the city to dispatch the professors who caused Cameron to be booted from campus. As must eventually happen to all good werewolves during the 1940s, Petro is killed during a fiery climax when Dr. Cameron's southern hideaway is set ablaze by the *deus ex machina* of a lightening bolt that sets the house on fire while the scientist and his creature struggle against each other amidst the flames. Produced without a silver bullet or wolfsbane sprig in sight, *The Mad Monster* does feature several on-screen lap dissolves showing Petro turning into a wolf man—a rare special effect for a low-budget release. On the other hand, Glenn Strange fails to

do much when depicting the werewolf side of his character. Strange's lycanthrope is always shown shambling along much as he does when he is Petro, who is a ringer for Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*. Indeed, Strange puts more into his depiction of the slow-witted handyman than into the werewolf since he totally fails to incorporate any of the animal-like movements that both Henry Hull and Lon Chaney, Jr., give us in their Universal incarnations.

Another form of the origin story is utilized in two lesser-known werewolf films released by major studios during this era. In 1942, 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox released *The Undying Monster*, a film whose structure places it more properly in the mystery category. The film takes place at Hammond Hall, where a murder has taken place. The hall in question even comes with its own family ditty, a la *The Wolf Man*: "When stars are bright on a frosty night, Beware thy bane, on the rocky lane." The killer in this epic is eventually discovered to be family member, Oliver Hammond, who has inherited the family curse that causes members to turn into werewolves. Here, the werewolf is eventually killed by an ordinary bullet from a policeman's gun instead of a silver bullet as in the Universal series. Starring Bramwell Fletcher—who kick-started the goings-on in *The Mummy* by reading the scroll that brought the mummy back to life—this title only reveals the werewolf during the climax. However, the revelation that the killer is a lycanthrope that succumbs to a family curse presents an origin story that had heretofore been unused.

In 1944 Columbia, the studio that had released *The Return of the Vampire* the previous year, gave us a different kind of werewolf in *Cry of the Werewolf*. Starring Nina Foch, who was Armand Tesla's target in the previous year's title, this story finds Foch's werewolf turning into a full-fledged wolf on four legs. As in *The Undying Monster*, this film also finds its werewolf resulting from a curse—this time handed down from her dead mother. In another carry over from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox film, the werewolf in this title is simply shot to death with no silver in sight. As one can tell from the brevity of these synop-

ses, neither film is considered a major title in werewolf cinema, although both utilize the plot device of werewolves' resulting from some form of curse.

In retrospect, we find that the major werewolf films of this era initiate the three forms of the origin story that will also be found in later narratives. The template originated by the Universal Studios films that finds an extant werewolf prowling around who attacks the film's leading character and passes on the condition will be utilized repeatedly in such later titles as *Wolf*, *The Howling*, *Ginger Snaps*, *Dog Soldiers*, and many more. Both *The Mad Monster* and *The Return of the Vampire* find their werewolves created by the machinations of others. This origin formula will come to light again in the 1950s teen exploitation flick *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* and the more recent release, *Underworld*, in which werewolves have been made by the vampires to act as the vampires' daytime guardians. Finally, the plotline that sees the film's werewolf resulting from a family curse also undergirds Hammer Film's lone werewolf production, *The Curse of the Werewolf*, and 1985's *Silver Bullet*, the cinematic adaptation of Stephen King's novelette, *Cycle of the Werewolf*.

A review of Brian Frost's survey suggests that a backstory telling us how a werewolf comes into being is not a major facet of werewolf literature. In werewolf cinema, an origin story detailing how the film's original werewolf(s) comes about is evident in about half of the major films made. However, werewolf films generally contain some form of an origin story, since many titles ask the audience to assume the existence of werewolves at the story's beginning. In these narratives, it is the existing lupine that usually bites the film's main character, turning him/her into a werewolf. The plot then focuses on the conflicts that arise for this character in dealing with the change that takes place, usually during the full moon. Thus, werewolf films prompt us to consider what we mean when we use the term *origin story*, since most werewolf productions feature a form of back story. Unlike the origin stories found in the Frankenstein and Mummy films, in which we are

shown how the focal monster is created, in werewolf cinema the origin focus may or may not be on the main character.

**J. Robert Craig**  
**Professor of Broadcast & Cinematic Arts**  
**Central Michigan University**  
**Mount Pleasant, MI 48859**

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