



8-1-1980

A Critical Appraisal of James Whale's The Old Dark House

Christopher P. Jacobs

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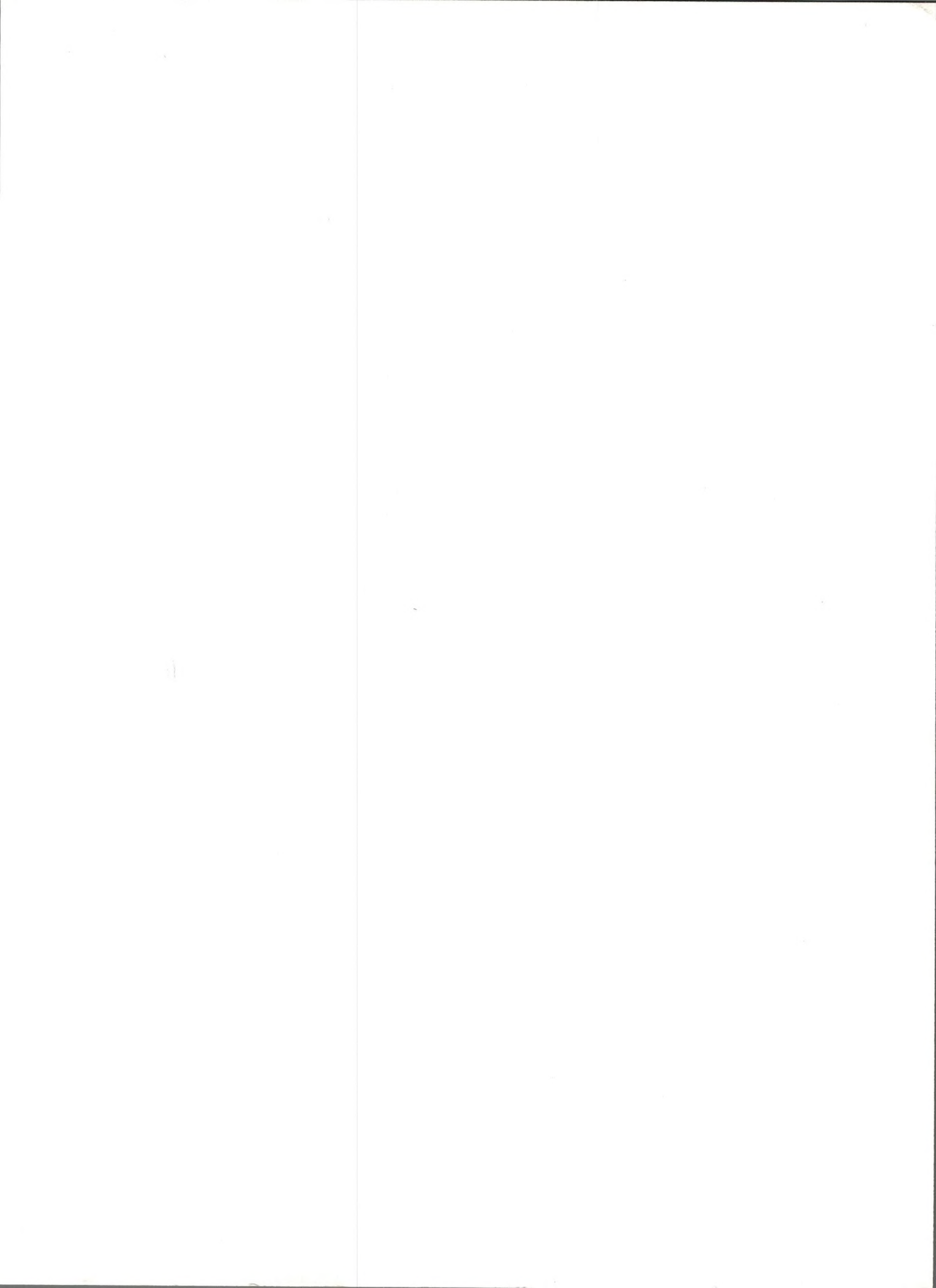
A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF
JAMES WHALE'S THE OLD DARK HOUSE

by
Christopher P. Jacobs

Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1976

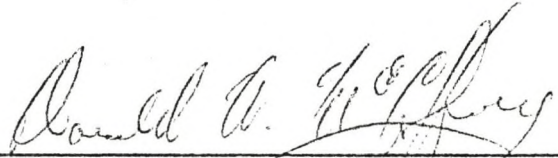
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of the
University of North Dakota
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
Grand Forks, North Dakota

August
1980

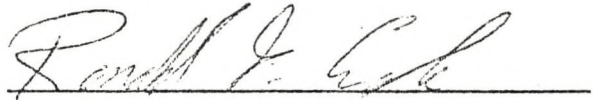


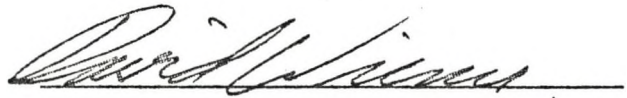
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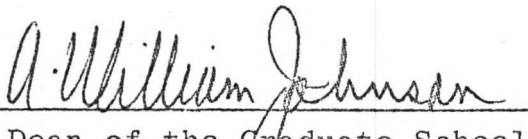


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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A thesis is never entirely the work of just one person. I would like to thank the people whose help and suggestions contributed greatly to making this study what it is.

Dr. Donald McCaffrey, my committee chairman, induced me to pursue a graduate degree in film, and was a guiding force helping me organize and cut down my material, as well as providing a strong background for analyzing comedy. Dr. Michael Anderegg, originally a committee member, was not able to be present for the final draft, but was invaluable for his encouragement and constructive criticism. Dr. David Wiener, who replaced him on short notice, nevertheless had a positive impact on the final draft. Dr. Ronald Engle, my third committee member, also provided input.

Others I would like to thank include Dr. Ben Collins, whose course in literary criticism was a heavy influence; Ted Larson, of Moorhead State University, who helped arrange a screening of The Old Dark House; and the Society for Cinephiles, whose annual conventions have provided countless hours of viewing rare and/or obscure films. My parents, too, deserve mention for their patience and encouragement over the past four years I have been a graduate student.

ABSTRACT

This study uses various critical approaches to analyze James Whale's 1932 film, The Old Dark House, and to some extent, the J. B. Priestley novel, Benighted, upon which it is based. The greatest difference between the two works is in their endings--the character Penderel dies in the novel but survives in the film version. The film also emphasizes the plot more than the characters, cutting much of the novel's character-developing monologues. This sacrifices, as well, much of Priestley's social commentary. The film nevertheless has more depth to its characters than many plot-oriented films of the period.

The Old Dark House fits into the horror genre, and it is pervaded by the common generic themes of danger and fear. Other ideas, such as isolation and alienation are also treated, however, expressed primarily through the character development in both the novel and the film. A major theme is the idea of confinement as a means of escaping danger, reversed at the end when characters leave the confines of the old house.

The film contains numerous possibilities for symbolic interpretation using mythic-archetypal and Freudian concepts, but much of this is open to speculation. The film also has possible homosexual overtones in the characters

of the house's residents, although this may or may not have been intentional.

Technically, The Old Dark House is an average film which uses standard functional devices to tell the dramatic story, but it does contain a few effective shots and scenes. Rather slow-starting, it builds to an effective crisis and climax, and improves upon the novel in its handling of dramatic tension. It uses no musical accompaniment on the soundtrack and relies heavily on dialogue throughout much of its length. When it is compared with other films of its genre from the same period, The Old Dark House is found to contain strong photography and competent editing.

Parallel elements--specifically the use of an old, dark house, an insane antagonist, and a mute servant--show up in several other films made the same year as The Old Dark House.

Whale's sense of humor--strange, very dry, and often elusive--is present throughout the film. The Old Dark House represents a turning point in the type of humor Whale used in his films of the horror genre.

The humor of The Old Dark House, in combination with its character development and possibilities for symbolic interpretation rank it among the best horror/thriller films of the 1930s, and one of James Whale's best pictures--second only to The Bride of Frankenstein.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In this critical look at the film The Old Dark House (and, to some extent, the novel upon which it is based), my methods will be drawn primarily from several critical approaches commonly used to analyze written literature--traditional approaches examining genre and paraphrasable content, historical and biographical significance, and moral-philosophical ideas, as well as such approaches as the formalistic, the mythic-archetypal, and the exponential schools of criticism. Since the cinema has the added aspects of image, sound, and time, there is more to analyze than merely content and structure. I shall thus also make eclectic use of several works on film theory and film's relationship to written literature.

The discussion of screen acting by Bela Balazs in his book Theory of the Film is very important in analyzing characters, and invaluable for comparing the visualized representation of characters acting out the story on the screen with the same characters described on the printed page. Balazs' observations on adaptations from one medium to another are also useful for analyzing a film based upon a novel, as is the case with The Old Dark House.

A film based on a play, story, or book is necessarily different from the original work. It is, in fact, a translation from the language of written words into the language of images and sounds. How closely a film follows the incidents, characters, and dialogue in a book may determine its success or failure in the eyes of certain critics. One of the most common complaints about film adaptations is that so much has been left out. Otherwise faithful movie versions of books may appear as mere synopses due to the limit of time that has become a filmic convention. This limit of one to three hours of screen time--as opposed to possibly ten or twenty or more hours of reading time for a novel--is being challenged to some extent with the advent of serialized presentations on television (much as novels were once serialized in newspapers), but most films produced are still rarely over two or three hours in length. As a result, only the most important and most interesting portions in the opinion of the adaptor are included in the film version of a written work.

Another common complaint is that too much liberty has been taken and too many changes made from the original. However, for a film to succeed cinematically and as an ideal adaptation, it must do more than merely illustrate a story with moving pictures; it should attempt to capture the mood, spirit, and themes of the author in its own terms, replacing rhetorical conventions and tropes with filmic ones. Connotative word imagery in written description is eliminated in film, since the scenes and characters are visible immediately

and simultaneously with whatever action is occurring. Other techniques--primarily picture composition and editing (or, mise en scene and montage)--must be utilized to convey similar impressions.

Direct visual counterparts for word metaphors and similies which are effective in print often become trite and unnecessarily blatant on the screen, especially when emphasized by close-ups and cross-cutting. Visual symbolism is usually more effective when worked subtly into the story of a film for maximum artistic effect--for example, the use of birds in von Sternberg's The Blue Angel (Bluestone, pp. 25-26). The recurring image is a symbolic device common to literature and film but has a greater potential for subtlety and effective use in the naturally visual medium of film. This presents the critic with rich material for interpretation and one of the key elements in genre criticism.

The term genre is used variously by different critics, and in its broadest sense is simply an identifiable type or category. Thomas and Vivian C. Sobchack define film genre in their comprehensive textbook An Introduction to Film as "a particular group of films that are extremely similar in their subject matter, thematic concerns, characterizations, plot formulas, and visual settings " (Sobchack and Sobchack, p. 190). Comparison and contrast of a film with similar films can identify generic patterns which might aid understanding and can bring out variations on traditional generic treatment of elements.

The Old Dark House fits primarily in the horror/thriller genre with some aspects of the mystery genre. In his book American Film Genres Stuart M. Kaminsky states, "Horror films are overwhelmingly concerned with the fear of death and the loss of identity in modern society." (Kaminsky, p. 131). He goes on to identify common elements used in many horror films, such as the insane person "who exhibits animal irrationality--giving reign to one's animal passions by destroying those who are a threat to his unleashed perversions." (Kaminsky, p. 138). The horror film is also generally preoccupied with darkness, and Kaminsky finds most horror indoors, in "domestic sites or grotesque extensions of them. . . distortions of smaller homes, exotic versions of our own domestication." (Kaminsky, p. 138). John Brosnan in The Horror People believes "a horror film is one that is basically involved with the bizarre" (Brosnan, p. 4) and that a film does not have to horrify its viewers to be classified as a horror film. Elements from the gothic novel are often present in the horror film, such as mysterious rooms, dark stairways, and an atmosphere of terror. All of these definitions apply to The Old Dark House and its source novel Benighted, placing them in the horror genre. The thriller by definition provides its audience with thrills, using suspense or surprise. The mystery, by definition, deals with the mysterious, the unknown, although the term is usually associated with the detective story and the assembling of clues which will solve some crime and reveal

hidden motives. Horror, mystery, and thriller stories tend to emphasize plot and character rather than abstract philosophical ideas.

When written works are adapted to the screen, their success or failure is determined by the story's suitability for being visualized and acted out. With rare exceptions (e.g., John Updike's The Music School) a story which concentrates on action and character, rather than on thoughts and ideas makes the better film.

As I hope to show in this analysis of James Whale's 1932 film, The Old Dark House, even though plot and action are the most crucial elements to a successful film, it is still possible to incorporate symbols, archetypes, motifs, and allusions for a more complex, more effective work that stands up and even appears better after repeated viewings. Whale's film was adapted from J. B. Priestley's novel, Benighted, which was first published in 1927. The scenario by playwright Benn W. Levy with dialogue by another playwright, R. C. Sheriff, resembles a stage drama, but Whale, who himself had been a stage director, was able to make a good film from it. The film retains much (though not all) of Priestley's intent, while staying within the style of the Universal Studios horror/thriller pictures whose "globe" logo was the hallmark of that genre during the 1930s. Beneath the surface story there is much in the film that bears analysis, as well as identification as archetypal and representative of the genre, and it is this that makes

The Old Dark House stand as the classic such film historians and critics as William K. Everson, Leslie Halliwell, Steven C. Earley, Don Whittemore, and Philip Cecchetti, among others, acclaim it to be. Despite its defects, it is a film which deserves an in-depth examination and explication. As film theorist Robert Scholes, in his article "Narration and Narrativity in Film," has rather cryptically written, "A well-made film requires interpretation while a well-made novel may need only understanding." (Mast and Cohen, eds., pp. 427-28). This analysis hopes to set forth material that will evaluate the film and offer possible interpretations of Whale's The Old Dark House.

CHAPTER II
THE NOVEL AND THE FILM

Whale's film, for the most part, follows its source novel very closely. All of Priestley's characters are present in the movie version, the setting is unchanged, and the plot situations and incidents are virtually identical. A synopsis of the film follows, with brief references to major departures from the novel. This is followed by a comparative analysis of the two works.

Synopsis

During a torrential downpour in rural Wales, Philip and Margaret Waverton, accompanied by Roger Penderel, are driving home late at night after a party. After arguments on the muddy road, they finally take refuge in a large decaying mansion, where they are confronted by the ominous, mute butler, Morgan. The eccentric owners of the house, Horace Femm and his half-deaf sister, Rebecca, reluctantly allow the group to spend the night. An air of mystery surrounds both the house and its occupants.

Rebecca, a self-righteous religious fanatic, allows Margaret to use her room to change into some dry clothing,

and she relates a sketchy history of the Femm family to the amazed Mrs. Waverton. Sparing no details, Miss Femm reveals that her sinful sister Rachel died in that very room years earlier. She also mentions that Sir Roderick, her 102 year old father (her brother in the novel), "a wicked, blasphemous old man," still lives in the house as an invalid. The house was once filled with "laughter and sin," she tells Margaret--a sharp contrast from what it is now.

A relatively quiet dinner scene follows, interrupted by the arrival of two more stranded travelers, Sir William Porterhouse and his companion Gladys DuCane, whose car has been smashed in the still raging storm. After supper, the five unwelcome guests and Horace sit around the fireside talking, and decide to play "the Truth game," as it is referred to in the novel, with each character exposing something of his or her background and philosophy of life. In the film, only Sir William and Gladys tell of their pasts.

Suddenly Rebecca runs in screaming that Morgan is drinking heavily and liable to become dangerous. This upsets Horace greatly and causes general confusion. With all the fuss that is being made, Penderel and Gladys steal away to the garage to have a drink, while in the house the electricity goes off. Rebecca tells Horace to get the lamp kept on the top landing of the stairs. Philip accompanies him, and eventually has to get the lamp himself because Horace is too cowardly. On the way up, he hears a faint

voice behind a door, and on the top landing he sees a locked door with a partially eaten meal on a table next to it.

Downstairs Margaret is left alone when Sir William leaves with Rebecca to help shut a window. She amuses herself by making hand shadows on the wall, but the mysterious tension of the evening makes them seem to come alive and frighten her. Morgan suddenly appears and pursues her around the room. She runs upstairs after Philip, who confronts the slow, brutish Morgan on the stairs. The two fight violently until Philip is able to knock Morgan unconscious with the large oil lamp.

Out in the stable, Penderel and Gladys have a heart to heart discussion over their drinks and affirm their new-found love. When they return to the house they find only Sir William in the main room.

Upstairs, Philip and Margaret enter the bedroom of old Sir Roderick Femm. He fills them in somewhat on the family history, revealing who the mysterious person is of whom Horace is so afraid. He explains that another family member, Saul, is a mad pyromaniac who wants to turn the house into a burnt offering, and he is kept locked up on the top floor. For some reason Morgan is the only person who can control him, but if he gets drunk he might decide to release Saul. When Sir Roderick mentions this, Philip quickly checks the stairs to make sure Morgan is still unconscious, but discovers that Morgan is gone.

Horace comes out of his room and tells Philip to go

downstairs, wait, and kill Saul when he comes down. Philip and Margaret lock Sir Roderick's door to protect him, and everyone runs downstairs to the main room. Morgan appears at the top of the stairs, Saul's hand visible behind him on the bannister. Morgan descends violently and is dragged off into the kitchen. Rebecca offers her room to the women as a refuge, but is refused. Leaving the room, she locks the door behind her; and Penderel, to keep the women safe from Saul, locks them in a closet.

Saul comes downstairs and after feigning sanity (in the film only), attacks Penderel. He knocks Penderel to the floor and sets the curtains ablaze. Penderel staggers after him, they fight on the edge of the stairs, and fall together through the banister.

Morgan returns, hears the women banging on the door from within the closet, and lets them out. He thrusts Gladys aside and eyes Margaret lecherously. She is able to convince him that Penderel needs her help, and, more importantly, that Saul needs his help.

Morgan goes to the dead Saul, whimpers softly over him, and carries him upstairs. Philip and Sir William return and find the women with the prostrate Penderel. Gladys weeps over him, but suddenly realizes he is not dead.

In the morning Horace descends the stairs to the travelers. Philip and Margaret leave, promising to return with help for Penderel and the others, and Horace bids them an ironically fond farewell while Rebecca sneers from a

window. As Sir William snores, Penderel awakens and "in the cold light of day" asks Gladys to marry him. Gladys happily agrees as Sir William continues to snore, and the picture fades out.

Comparative Analysis

The film version of The Old Dark House, especially on first viewing, tends to emphasize the narrative aspects of the story and its action, paying less attention to the characters except to use them for helping set the mood and furthering the plot. In his novel, Priestley injects some blatant social commentary through the words and thoughts of his characters. The film, on the other hand, although it has levels of meaning deeper than the surface story, does not appear to be complex until it is analyzed and the symbolic content identified. Interestingly, the book occasionally compares people, places, and events to a film or the theatre, at some points comparing life to a stage play.

There are three primary differences between the novel and the film. Two of them deal primarily with character and the third deals with the plot itself.

In the novel, Priestley uses a limited omniscient point of view, selectively revealing the thoughts of the five stranded travelers. Long passages and entire chapters are told through the eyes of one character, and though not written in the first person this technique gives the effect

of subjective point of view. More is made in the novel of the marital problems between Philip and Margaret Waverton, by revealing alternately the thoughts of each of them. As the reader experiences the story with each character in turn, he is drawn much closer to the characters than is possible with the film medium. The movie, on the other hand, while never showing any of the five residents of the house without including at least one of the visitors in the scene (thus making the viewer identify himself more with the guests than with the hosts), generally allows all the action to unfold before the camera in such a way as to make the audience a detached observer.

The closeness to the characters' thoughts established by the novel is aided by more extensive character development and background information than is provided in the film. The novel uses a "Truth game" played after dinner by the main characters as a rather contrived author's device to include long speeches of character revelation. These speeches also provide the main substance of Priestley's social commentary about the post World War I generation in England. The film uses portions of this material but cuts most of it, presumably as extraneous to the plot and detrimental to the pace. Even the relatively brief sections of the film devoted to character revelation slow down the pace of the film considerably. The film also changes and/or rearranges some of the book's character developing material, to spread out its effect rather than having one sequence

devoted solely to characters talking about themselves.¹ The bulk of chapter five in the novel, consisting of characters discussing their philosophies of life and their backgrounds, seems out of place in the context of a mystery thriller story. The film, then, is a more conventional melodrama, with little or no attempt at explicit social relevance.

The novel and film differ most drastically in their endings. From the entrance of Saul Femm in the novel until the story's conclusion, only the most basic elements are used by the film, and many--most notably the death of Roger Penderel--are changed. In the novel, the character of Saul is never anything less than a raging maniac. When he enters behind Morgan, he immediately starts insulting and berating Rebecca, and urging Morgan to attack and kill everyone in the room.

In the film at this point, Saul remains a mystery to the guests. He is silent and only partially visible on the stairs. Then the film reverses the expectations of the audience by having Saul seem to be rational when he enters the room. He tries to play for sympathy before Penderel realizes that he is really insane. Finally Saul attacks Penderel, but is killed when they fall together through the bannister.

¹A minor character change in the film is the last name of Gladys Hoskiss to Perkins, evidently less strange-sounding to American audiences.

In the book, Saul makes no attempt to appear rational, but instead insanely attacks Penderel and both are killed in their fall from the stairway. The book then shifts to the next morning as Philip remembers the night's events and the discovery of the bodies. The film depicts this in proper sequence rather than in flashback, and also brings back Morgan for a subclimax. In the morning, Horace and Rebecca reappear in the film to bid farewell to Philip and Margaret, who leave to get help for the unconscious Penderel. None of the residents of the house reappears in the novel, and the remainder of the book is devoted to Philip and Margaret becoming reconciled, and to some discussion between Philip and Sir William. No one leaves the house in the end, although there is promise of future happiness at least for Philip and Margaret. The film, on the other hand, continues briefly as Penderel wakes up and proposes marriage to Gladys.

Probably the weakest aspect of the film version of The Old Dark House is that it does not probe the feelings and thoughts of the characters as thoroughly or as specifically as is possible through the written medium. Whale makes a few attempts to translate portions of the novel's subjective effect into film terms, so that the viewers can experience the same personal involvement possible for readers. The quick close-ups that introduce Morgan and the distorted reflections in broken mirrors that haunt Margaret are two of the most interesting moments of the

film, effectively drawing the viewer into the story. For the most part, however, Whale is satisfied to present the action to a more detached audience, merely staging (albeit skillfully) the events of the story in front of the camera.

Another problem in adapting the novel to the screen is Priestley's use of long speeches by characters, which serve both as character background and expression of his own social views. Such long passages of monologue would kill the pace of the film for the captive viewer. Whale's solution is to abridge or omit the speeches, and concentrate on the action. As mentioned earlier, this plays down the importance of the characters as individuals, and undercuts Priestley's social commentary. A longer film version or a television "miniseries" might dramatize the past events and personal experiences that the characters reveal verbally in the novel. Either flashbacks or, for more of an epic quality, correct temporal sequence might be employed for such material. As will be seen in the next chapter, the film does retain a certain depth of characterization.

The chief advantage of the film medium is its ability to establish a mood and setting visually while simultaneously presenting both action and dialogue, whereas the novel can handle only one at a time. This aspect of film's potential is exploited by Whale to create and sustain more tension through editing and photography than Priestley accomplishes in the book. The actors Whale chose are well-suited to Priestley's characters, and their acting

helps to compensate for the film's inability to examine their thoughts effectively. Bela Balazs' comments on "The Face of Man" and the "silent soliloquy" (Balazs, pp. 60-88) are brilliantly illustrated by the performances in The Old Dark House, especially those of Ernest Thesiger, Eva Moore, and Brember Wills as Horace, Rebecca, and Saul Femm. Their expression and physical appearances convey as much or more about their characters than is suggested by written descriptions.

Both the novel and the film, then, have their strong points and weak points. The novel definitely has a plot, but stresses the characters and their reactions, especially the relationship between Philip and Margaret Waverton, and Penderel's character growth. The film gives all the characters a suggestion of a past, and explores character reaction to some extent (concentrating on the relationship between Penderel and Gladys), but the most important element is the plot--and the tension that it develops. This plot centered nature of Whale's film illustrates George Bluestone's comment that all elements of film "must be subordinated to plot, the prime arbiter." (Bluestone, p. 103).

CHAPTER III

PLOT AND CHARACTERS

The story itself, as has been noted in the preceding chapter, is essentially the same in both the novel and the film versions until the ending. The following analysis covers both novel and film, but is concerned chiefly with the film.

Structure

Over a third of The Old Dark House is devoted to the structural element of exposition, and a large amount of the story may be labeled as development, as well. The remaining structural divisions of dramatic question, crisis, climax, and resolution or denouement, follow rather rapidly in succession until the film's conclusion.

The main exposition occurs at the beginning of the story up until the time of Rebecca's loud announcement of Morgan's drunkenness after the "Truth game." At this point, things begin to develop and the story picks up in pace a bit--although a certain amount of character exposition occurs throughout the story, both in the novel and in the film.

From the very beginning there is the dramatic question of "What will happen to these people?" When they arrive at the house another question is added: "What will these weird people in the house, especially the ominous Morgan, do to their guests?" The major dramatic question, however, occurs during Philip and Margaret's discussion with old Sir Roderick and might be phrased as, "Will the mad Saul get loose, and what will be the consequences if and when he does?" The main crisis occurs when Horace tells Philip that Morgan has released Saul, and everyone makes frantic preparations to avoid any confrontation with the insane pyromaniac. The climax is Saul's attack on Penderel and their fight to the death. Another crisis, Saul's igniting of the curtains, could be considered part of the climax. The climax is partially resolved when Penderel and Saul fall together to the floor, but a subclimax occurs almost immediately when Morgan returns and confronts the helpless women. This is soon resolved when Margaret convinces him to attend Saul, and in the novel it does not even occur, Morgan having been successfully driven into the cellar. The resolution continues as the men return and when Gladys discovers that Penderel is still alive. The book treats this in a flashback (but with Penderel dead) at the beginning of the denouement, which occurs the next morning in a new chapter following the one which relates the reactions of the women in the closet while Penderel fights Saul. The film, on the other hand, dramatizes the return of the men, punctuating this resolu-

tion with a fade which separates it from the quick denouement the next morning (much quicker than the long conclusion of the novel).

Strangely enough the incident of the burning curtains is never settled, or even mentioned again. In the book, there is no fire, only the fight on the stairs, and as mentioned, there is no extra crisis with Morgan and the women. The novel's resolution is much more drawn out following Penderel's death, and thus seems weaker than that of the film, although character relationships and feelings are far more detailed in the novel.

A weakness of both the novel and the film is the failure to explain satisfactorially Morgan or his strange relationship with Saul. There is only Sir Roderick's assertion that Morgan is the only one who can handle Saul: that Saul never harms him even when violent, and that Morgan is devoted to Saul. Saul also talks briefly to Morgan in the book but only to tell him to wait for him and to ignore Rebecca. The possibility that Morgan and Saul are homosexual lovers is discussed later in the chapter, and it is easier to read such a relationship into the film than into the book.

In the film both Rebecca and Sir Roderick Femm are neither seen nor mentioned after the main crisis until the closing minutes when they watch Philip and Margaret leave. In the novel they are never seen again, but their actions after Saul's death are recounted in Philip's mind. This leaves fewer loose ends than the film has on the whole.

The film's ending, however, comes off as stronger than the novel, since at least two of the characters (Philip and Margaret) leave the house in the morning, with the promise to return for the other travelers. The novel resolves the character conflicts between the houseguests, but concludes while they are all still at the house, waiting for the weather to clear sufficiently to depart. Also, as mentioned above, none of the residents of the house return after the climax--they are only discussed by the author.

Some structural devices used by the novel, while probing the thoughts of characters effectively, tend to dull the impact of the story. Certain chapters repeat the same time period just covered in a previous chapter, but follow the thoughts and actions of a different set of characters. This technique develops the characters' own inner conflicts, but it de-emphasizes the immediate plot situation. The film treats the same material more effectively by cross-cutting from one location to another to show simultaneous action. A good example is Penderel's fight on the stairs while the women huddle in the locked closet. The conflict is heightened in the film, the cinematic treatment building the suspense to a greater degree, although perhaps necessarily eliminating the more personal involvement which the novel is able to create.

From the simple synopsis at the beginning of the preceding chapter, it is obvious that the dramatic unities of time and location are fairly closely adhered to. The story

begins after dark one stormy evening, is played out through the night, and concludes the following morning--all the action occurring within a space of about ten hours or less. The entire film is set in the old dark house or its stable (and brief scenes just outside the house) with the exception of the opening scene on the road. Both the novel and the film use this limiting form as an effective means of emphasizing certain themes.

Content

The five travelers move from the outdoors and the threat of destruction by nature to the interior of the house, safe from the elements. They soon discover that, although they have adequate refuge from the storm, they have as much or more cause for fear as they did on the uncertain road. They are now confined with the ominous and uninviting residents of the house. Horace, a cowardly cynic, is wanted by the police. Rebecca, his sister, is a bitter religious fanatic. Morgan, the scarred, mute butler, is a subhuman brute, and dangerous when drunk. The family patriarch, Sir Roderick, is ancient, bedridden, and helpless. Eventually the stranded travelers learn of another family member, the insane pyromaniac, Saul, who inspires fear even in the other inhabitants of the house.

The threat of physical harm thus pervades the plot, moving from the outside and conflict of man against nature,

to the inside and the conflict of man against man (specifically, the rational versus the irrational, and intelligence versus brute strength).

The themes of danger and fear are common to all films and stories belonging to the horror genre, and it is the characters' own fear, transferred to the audience, which separates the horror film from the mystery film treating similar material. Works of the horror genre are representations of the collectively shared fears which surface in nightmares, most drastically of pain and death, but also very commonly of helplessness, betrayal, and failure, in addition to private phobias.

The very title, "The Old Dark House," plays on many persons' fear of the dark and implies something unknown and mysterious, another common source of fear. As does virtually every horror film, The Old Dark House makes great use of the fears of pain and death. The natural threat of the collapsing mountainside is soon replaced by two stereotypes of the genre--the brute, in the person of Morgan, and the madman, in the person of Saul. These threats to the physical safety of the characters (strangers thrown together in perilous circumstances--an oft-used dramatic device) are compounded by the isolation of the house. The separation from familiar surroundings, from possible aid by others, and from any kind of official authority is instrumental in maintaining a feeling of helplessness. The characters are forced to rely upon themselves for survival, and, to some

extent, to unite for added strength. This obligatory cooperation does much to remove the alienation felt by the guests.

The title of the novel, Benighted, gives a clue to another theme treated. The obvious meaning of the word "benighted" is "overtaken by the darkness of the night," but there is also a second, figurative meaning: "involved in intellectual or moral darkness." Many modern dictionaries list only the metaphoric meaning, or place it first, so it seems clear that Priestley meant his title as a pun to describe both the premise of the plot and the mental state of some, if not all of his characters. The travelers, upon their arrival, are certainly ignorant of the dangers of the house and the fate which will soon befall them. The permanent residents of the house live in ignorance of events in the outside world. Some of them are "benighted" in other ways, as well. Morgan, the slow-witted butler, is aware of little but immediate needs and desires. Higher thought for him does not exist. The insane Saul lives in his own little world, mentally and often physically isolated from the other family members. Sir Roderick is bedridden, and thus generally ignorant of what goes on outside his room. As Penderel says at one point in the film, "This is certainly a benighted household."

Don Whittemore and Philip Alan Cecchetti, in the chapter on James Whale in their anthology, Passport to Hollywood: Film Immigrants, attach even greater significance

to the original title and the characters' living in ignorance than viewing it as merely an interesting facet of the story. Indeed, they seem to be the only critics to take the novel seriously, interpreting it as an allegorical portrait of contemporary England. The Femms represent "the decrepit remnants of Victorian England" whose minds "are so clouded over that they cannot recognize the needs and desires of the postwar generation" (Whittemore and Cecchettini, p. 278). The guests, all at least a generation younger than the bizarre household members, stand for various types of young people touched by and/or emerging from the effects of World War I. The house itself Whittemore and Cecchettini see as a microcosm of England, the contrast and conflict between the two distinct groups of people reflecting the social situation following the First World War.

Taking their analysis further, the theme of isolation can be extended beyond a mere plot-serving device into the isolation from society experienced by the old. This can be isolation by choice (Rebecca feels morally superior to the rest of society), by necessity (Horace is in hiding from the police), or by compulsion (Sir Roderick is bedridden, and Saul's dangerous mania forces the others to lock him up). All, too, are considered undesirable by the modern society in which they live. Margaret does not feel that Horace should participate in the "Truth game" the travelers play after dinner. Each group looks upon and is looked upon by the other with suspicion and some disdain. For

that matter, each individual is primarily self-concerned at the start, even within the two groups. Old Sir Roderick is the only one of the residents for whom the travelers have some concern, and he is the only one who cares enough for the uninvited guests to explain their dangerous situation. It is, perhaps, significant that he was once the wildest member of the family (and now an invalid) and that the two guests to encounter him (Philip and Margaret) seem to be the most traditional of the five. Even so, the meeting between the Wavertons and Sir Roderick arises more out of their curiosity than initial concern. Curiosity might thus be considered one motivation for the necessary communication that can lead to bridging the generation gap that always seems to exist in leisure-oriented societies.

The Wavertons become not only interested in Sir Roderick through their meeting, but closer to each other, as well. From the beginning they are alienated from each other and almost on the verge of divorce. Each successive incident in their night of terror tends to make them see each other more and more favorably. Alienation is a theme which touches each character in the story, as will be seen in the discussion of character.

Character

The ten characters of The Old Dark House are evenly divided into two groups, with five permanent residents of

the house and five visitors forced to take refuge because of the storm. We are first introduced to three travelers, Philip and Margaret Waverton, and Roger Penderel. They soon meet three inhabitants of the house, Morgan the butler, and Horace and Rebecca Femm. Two more travelers arrive, Sir William Porterhouse and Gladys DuCane, and later the other two residents of the house, Sir Roderick and Saul Femm, are revealed.

There is not an exact one-to-one correspondence between the characters of one group and the other, but there are certain parallels. Each group of characters contains a knight--Sir William is one of the visitors and Sir Roderick is one of the residents. One person in each group is from the lower classes--Gladys and Morgan. Penderel and Horace are both often outspoken, constantly saying things they know will annoy their acquaintances, and both are confirmed cynics. There are also distinct contrasts in each of these pairs. Sir Roderick is an aging invalid, whereas Sir William is young and robust. Gladys is a talkative social climber and Morgan is mute and in a stagnant position as a butler. Penderel is an adventurous ne'er-do-well, and Horace is a cowardly recluse.

The film brings out less of the background and personal philosophies of the characters than does the novel. In the book each of the travelers makes a rather long and revealing speech for the Truth game, and Horace, too, is asked and answers a question about himself. Sir Roderick's

scene with the Wavertons is also much longer and more detailed than it is in the film, and what he discusses is the same nature as typical Truth game material.

Philip's answer in the game is to the question of what is the bad thing about life, asked, significantly, by Penderel. The repressed alienation felt by Philip comes out when he explains that nobody can trust life or ever truly be happy because life demands so much care to be lived well that there is never time to relax and enjoy it. People who don't bother to worry eventually pay for their complacency.

Philip asks his wife what she wants most in life as her question in the game. She responds that she wants to create a certain pleasant atmosphere around herself, which, in effect reinforces her individuality as a woman. Although by this time she is warming towards her husband, Margaret reveals at least a slight feeling of alienation from all men, whom she feels put the good things in life above life itself. She also looks down on Gladys in much the same way Rebecca looks down on everyone--another sense of alienation, which is resolved during the women's experience of being locked in the closet together as Penderel battles Saul.

Penderel's character is revealed, first as adventurous, fun-loving, and irresponsible, but later, especially in his speech for the Truth game in the novel, he is shown as bitter and basically disillusioned with life. His glib

facade is shown to be a coverup for his indifference and embitterment after his war experiences. He had readily and enthusiastically accepted Horace's toast "to illusion," and during the game he pours out his past to the others in answer to Gladys' question of why he is so bitter. The war was responsible for the early deaths of his father and brother; he had joined the army at 17 and while in Europe was disappointed in love. After the war he went to Africa as an escape from his memories and was taken in a business swindle. Since then he just drifted from one thing to another. In the film he tells of his past only to Gladys in their scene together in the stable. His meeting with her provides him with the impetus for trying to make something of his life and it is his concern for what she thinks of him that causes him to fight it out with Saul at the end of the story.

Gladys reveals to the group that her real name is Perkins (Hoskiss in the book) and that they have probably already guessed that she is a chorus girl. She defends her loose way of life by telling of her impoverished childhood, contrasting it with the comfortable life she now has. Even though her morals alienate her from the rest of society she doesn't really care what others think, preferring to live for herself.

In the film Sir William discusses his past. He is a self-made rich industrialist who had been married to a lower class Lancashire girl. The snobbish circles in which

he circulated did not accept her, purposely making her uncomfortable at social functions. She still wanted to please him, however, and her devotion to him caused a mental conflict that induced a psychosomatic illness eventually resulting in her death. The grief-stricken Sir William vowed to get even by ruthlessly fighting his way to the top of the industry, ruining those he held responsible for his wife's death. He now keeps Gladys mainly as a reminder of his lower beginnings, and makes few demands on her, satisfied only with her company. In the book, no mention is made of Sir William's beginnings, but he is revealed as disliking self-assured upper class executives when he tells the group that he arranged to have a young man fired who was a good worker, but whose well-educated too-perfect presence made him feel uneasy. Both the novel and the film show Sir William as alienated from those for whom everything is easy, although he comes off more sympathetically in the film.

None of the travelers is as well-developed in the film as in the novel, but, as mentioned, each has at least the suggestion of a past.

The residents of the house are not as deeply developed as the travelers in either the novel or the film, serving mainly as stereotyped antagonists. All are eccentric, and with the possible exception of Sir Roderick all exhibit some degree of mental imbalance. Saul, of course, is a homicidal pyromaniac. Horace is paranoid. Rebecca is

obsessed. Morgan lacks the intelligence to ever be considered normal, and is unable to control his physical drives. Sir Roderick is a rather pathetic figure, once a strong and free-minded head of the household, now confined to a bed with only memories. He relates that the other family members were not always insane, that they are now only shells of their former selves, but not enough is revealed for true empathy by the audience.

In the film, there is some evidence to suggest that the male residents of the house are homosexuals. The name of the family itself--Femm--is a slang term for a male homosexual, and the self-indulgently effeminate portrayal of Horace Femm by Ernest Thesiger strengthens the association. The role of Sir Roderick is played by a woman--Elspeth Dudgeon (listed in the credits as John Dudgeon). This might have been a conscious attempt on the part of Whale--himself a homosexual (Whittemore and Cecchettini, p. 15)--to intimate what type of debauchery Rebecca's "Laughter and sin" refers to. Homosexuality would also account for the relationship between Morgan and Saul. In fact the film seems to point to this by bringing back Morgan after Saul's death and having him abandon his confrontation with the defenseless women to weep over Saul's body and carry him away. Saul in the film speaks calmly at first, and refers to Morgan beating him, evidently regularly--yet it is known that Morgan has some strange effect on Saul. Sado-masochism is not an unknown fetish between

homosexual lovers, and given the strangeness of the household it is conceivable that this explains the bond between them. Saul also tells Penderel just before he attacks him, "Like you? My friend, I love you!" Then he begins spouting mad allusions to the first book of Samuel, chapter 18 (I Kings xviii in some editions of the Bible), saying that Saul loved David but was afraid of him because the Lord was with him and had departed from Saul. As he tells of Saul's throwing the javelin at David, he thrusts his knife at Penderel. In Samuel, however, the hint is stronger that David rather than King Saul had a homosexual affair.

Even Rebecca might have repressed lesbian urges, since in both the novel and film during her bedroom lecture to Margaret Waverton she fingers the material of Mrs. Waverton's gown, saying, "That's fine stuff, but it'll rot." Then she places her hand on Margaret's bare chest, exposed by her low-cut dress, continuing, "That's finer stuff, still --but it'll also rot!" Mrs. Waverton explodes in indignation, ordering her out: and as she leaves, the withered Miss Femm stops to primp in front of a mirror.

The residents are clearly meant to function as foils for the normal people who stumble in on them. Significantly, none of the chapters in the novel delve into the thoughts of any of the residents as they do in the limited omniscient chapters from each of the travelers' points of view. This makes the household as mysterious for the reader as it is for the visitors in the story.

It is possible that the audience is supposed to associate the crumbling house of Femm, the broken Sir Roderick, and the dead sister Rachel with the falling house of Usher, Roderick Usher, and his sister, the dead Lady Madeline. There is too close a parallel to be coincidental, and the climax is a kind of variation on Poe's story. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" the supposedly dead body of Madeline is locked away, only to rise and create a traumatic scene at the end. In The Old Dark House, Saul (who is dead to rational thought) escapes from where he had been locked away and also creates panic--and almost the fall of the house of Femm. If members of the audience are familiar with Poe and catch the similarities to "The Fall of the House of Usher" they may expect elements even more bizarre than those Priestley uses.

CHAPTER IV
SETTING AND SYMBOLS--IMAGERY

With multiple viewings and careful examination of the film, the discerning critic will realize that though not always immediately apparent, symbolic elements and allusions abound in The Old Dark House.

The Old Dark House is set, logically enough, in an old, dark house. More important to the plot, the house is isolated from civilization, miles away from the nearest town and completely cut off by the fierce storm which opens the story. It also takes place at night--always a time associated with mystery, evil, and danger in the cinema and in literature. In addition, it is in a country foreign to the five travelers, who are English passing through Wales. The setting emphasizes one of the key elements of the story, the theme of isolation discussed earlier. All the familiar icons of the horror genre combine to make The Old Dark House an archetype.¹ It is superior to a mere stereotype in that it employs motifs which can be seen as

¹"A belated blueprint" according to William K. Everson (Whittemore and Cecchetti, p. 285), referring to The Cat and the Canary, which preceded it by five years, and numerous other "dark house" mysteries of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

more than simple plot devices.

The dark and stormy night, thunder and lightening punctuating ominous actions and lines of dialogue, is a hackneyed stereotype. Yet on a deeper level it is a reminder of the deluge which destroyed virtually all human life in numerous mythologies, reinforcing the threat of death inherent in the genre. The storm does not worry Rebecca, however, who reassures everyone that the "house is built on rock"--another Biblical allusion, implying that it was built by a wise man and that it will not be swept away by the water. If it is true that the Femm who constructed the house was a wise man, this allusion serves to emphasize the extent of the family Femm's current state of degredation--again drawing to mind the association with the house of Usher and with it no reassurance that the house of Femm will not fall.

The house pervades the film and is presented in three main ways: first as a place of refuge from the elements, then immediately as a place of mystery, and soon as a place of fear and danger. The word "house" has often been used as a synonym for "brothel," and the idea of a "house of ill repute" is reinforced when Rebecca alludes to wild orgies of earlier times during her lecture to Margaret. The old house is more than literally dark--it holds the darker side of humanity, benighted rejects from society. The Femms are decrepit outcasts--a criminal, a madman, an invalid, and a fanatic. Their servant is an alcoholic brute.

All are confined to the house as in a private world, segregated from normal people, and neither concerned with nor a cause for concern by the rest of society.

The motif of confinement as a means of escaping danger is also present throughout the story, recurring with many variations. In the beginning, the travelers have relative shelter from the storm while they are confined inside the car. Soon they reach the house and inside it are safe from landslides as well as the wind and rain. Even within the house itself confinement is associated with safety. Saul has been locked away in the attic to keep the household safe. Horace's fears cause him to confine himself in his room when Philip gets the oil lamp. Later, when Morgan is drunk and Saul is loose, Rebecca retreats to her room. The Wavertons lock Sir Roderick in his room for his own protection, and Penderel hides the women in a closet which he locks. The men force Morgan back into the kitchen to confine him in order that the others will be safe.

The safety of confinement is reversed, however, when Penderel finds himself locked in the main hall with the psychotic Saul. The locked doors prevent his escape and make it impossible for him to summon help. The confinement of the women in the closet, too, although it protects them from Saul and Morgan, keeps them from seeing what is going on--keeping them "in the dark," as it were. Their screams to be let out to see what has happened between Penderel and Saul attract Morgan. He unlocks the closet

door and the women are immediately cornered. Relief comes when the hall door is finally battered in by the rest of the men, literally and figuratively shattering the claustrophobia of the scene. With the dawn comes the freedom to leave the house in light and safety, and it is the outside world that provides relief--and escape from confinement.

More traditional mythic elements also can be found in The Old Dark House. A suggestion of the Eden myth is present, with the guests playing their role in the pattern by gradually gaining the knowledge of the good of each other and the evil secret of the house and family history of the Femms. In the book, Philip actually mentions "the Tree of Knowledge," although it is in a different connection. Horace has a touch of the Satanic or at least demonic in his character. He is a criminal, in hiding from the police (for what, it is not clear). He is anti-religious, outwardly showing his disdain and contempt for Rebecca's vehement piety when she insists on a blessing for their meal. Things normal people would consider pleasant diversions or niceties annoy Horace. He puts a stop to Sir William's joking and singing at the table by telling him in a strangely ominous tone to have a potato, and early in the film he throws his sister's flowers into the fire. He is also cowardly; he is afraid of the storm, and he lies to Philip to avoid going near Saul's door.

The book also brings in a variation on the archetypal motif of the sacrificial scapegoat when Penderel dies,

alone battling Saul to save the others. Had Saul been successful in setting fire to the house, Penderel would have been a part of his burnt offering and the atonement for "the sins of the fathers" Rebecca is so preoccupied with.

Additionally, Penderel's self-examination and character transformation immediately before his death in the novel fit into a rite of passage pattern. Penderel is the only person in the story whose character shows any kind of major change or growth. The experience of the war and his disappointment at love were responsible for the disillusioned cynicism with which he begins the story. The acceptance of his affection by Gladys and the crisis provided by Saul's escape lead to his accepting the challenge to regain his sense of self-worth. Indeed, this positive character transformation, although not as clear in the film, is probably a major factor in the filmmakers' decision not to let Penderel die in the end.

Mythic-archetypal elements are not the only exponents which can be identified in The Old Dark House. Freud's concept of the Id, the Ego, and the Superego are represented in various characters, perhaps unconsciously on the part of Priestley. The wild and uncontrollable emotions of Morgan and Saul naturally are from the id, and Rebecca stands for the superego with her single-minded obsession with how wicked everyone but herself is. The ego is personified in the five travelers, especially Philip and Margaret, who try to maintain some sort of balance between the

extremes. Philip tries to remain calm throughout, but can become violent when necessary to protect his wife. Margaret is a respectable wife, but she enjoys her womanhood and is repulsed by Rebecca's self-important celibacy.

Rebecca makes a strong enough impression, however, that Margaret is haunted by her--much as the ego is torn at times between the id and the superego. This inner conflict is shown beautifully in the film after Rebecca leaves Margaret to finish changing her clothes. Margaret looks into a cracked mirror which distorts her own face and then seems to show her Rebecca's face repeating part of her sermon. Several twisted close-ups of Rebecca follow in rapid succession, interrupted once by a very brief shot of Morgan--the surfacing of the id in response to an over-dominant superego, and a sinister foreshadowing of the danger that is to come later. This scene also shows Margaret opening a window to relieve some of the oppressive atmosphere Rebecca has left, but like a Pandora opening her box, all she lets in is the raging storm, blowing wind and rain into the room--later the cause of her being left alone in the main hall where Morgan confronts her.

A less dangerous personification of the id is Gladys, a symbol of the new generation of freer sexual morals. She takes responsibility for her own body and wants to live with Penderel, not mentioning marriage as either a prerequisite or an eventual goal. Penderel, for the most part much more worldly and fancy-free, plays the part of the ego with

her and proposes marriage, an important step in his character transformation (and one of the few obvious ones in the film version).

An icon that occurs often in horror films is fire imagery. In The Old Dark House, Saul is obsessed with fire and wants to purify the house through flame--make it a "burnt offering," it is never clear just why. He calls flames "cold," "like knives," and succeeds in igniting the curtains in the main hall. The big climax of the film is the fight between Saul and Penderel as the flames rage, yet the fire somehow manages to burn itself out with no outside help before it can destroy the house. The fire makes the scene more exciting but is unfortunately not used to full advantage, and then is forgotten. The book does not even use fire in the scene.

The dark stairwell and the locked door are other recurring images of the genre, both figuring prominently in The Old Dark House. Most of the action takes place on the stairs during the climactic fight between Penderel and Saul, and Philip fights Morgan on the stairs. The first appearances of Horace and Saul both show them on the stairs. The mad Saul and Morgan can only be restrained by locked doors, and both break loose. Horace, Rebecca, Sir Roderick, Margaret and Gladys all retreat behind locked doors to escape Saul.

Both through its script and its visual artistry, The Old Dark House contains multiple levels of meaning, brought

out in this chapter, which place it above the many quickly made, low-budget horror films that were produced only to fill a quota of program pictures. Some of its complexity arises from incorporation of generic elements, but occasionally goes beyond genre for its symbolic content (e.g., the use of Freudian elements). Whale does not appear to interrelate the symbolic exponents, however, for an overall integrated statement. The various uses of allusions and symbolism seem to operate independently of each other, rather than fall into one master pattern.

CHAPTER V
COMPARISON OF
FILM TECHNIQUES AND GENERIC ELEMENTS

Viewed as a whole, The Old Dark House is not a slick or impressive film technically. It is not nearly so polished and stylish as Whale's later The Bride of Frankenstein but it shows improvement from his earlier work, Frankenstein. There is far more camera movement in The Old Dark House than in Frankenstein and, even more importantly, fewer awkward pauses between lines. The cast of Frankenstein was uneven whereas everyone who appears in The Old Dark House gives a credible performance which holds up better today than most of the acting in Frankenstein.

Camera takes are generally shorter in The Old Dark House and the editing in general is tighter. Short close-ups of Morgan at several points in the film alternate with long shots rather than medium shots for an effective unsettling effect. A relatively long seven to eight-second shot in the fight between Philip and Morgan is made more interesting with a pan to follow the action, and all the shots surrounding it are much shorter--half its length or less. Several long takes are used to advantage by employing a dolly and allowing the camera to move into the scene.

One of the best examples is the dolly shot following the Wavertons into Sir Roderick's room. Another, using a crane as well, follows Philip upstairs. Such techniques foreshadow the extremely fluid, almost dazzling camera work in The Bride of Frankenstein.

Good camera angles and skillful use of light and shadow, a strong point of Frankenstein, again stand out in The Old Dark House. The severity of the rainstorm is emphasized by closeups of water trickling off the back of Waverton's hat onto his neck, the drenched roadmap with water-smearred ink, and the tires spinning in the mud. In some cases, the shots in the car are timed to illustrate the dialogue. Well-composed shots include grotesquely carved gargoyles on the stairs in the same scenes with Horace and Morgan, suggesting a sinister connection and nicely paralleling their twisted characters. An unusual high-angle view of Penderel and Saul is notable, since no other shots are made from such a high angle (although Frankenstein had several high-angle shots).

Another unusual technique is the use of distorted views of Rebecca during her tirade to Margaret Waverton about Rachel. The twisted images intensify Rebecca's twisted personality and are repeated with even more distortion in one of the best parts of the film later in the same scene--the quick series of shots in the broken mirror which frighten Mrs. Waverton.

Whale's staging of the actors and editing provide

additional memorable moments. The cross-cutting in the film is used effectively to build tension toward toward its conclusion, as pointed out in the discussion of structure in chapter 3. A shot of the drunken Morgan through a window as Gladys moves past on her way to the stable is suddenly made exciting when Morgan lunges toward the window (and the camera) and thrusts his hand through the glass, groping for Gladys. Later, as Mrs. Waverton looks out the door into the rain for Penderel and Gladys, a hand appears above her head and all at once slams the door in front of her. Then Morgan is revealed looming over her. Still later, when Saul is first shown, only his hand on the bannister can be seen at first. Also, the first clue to the audience that Saul is truly insane is shown visually. After he has convinced Penderel that he is rational and being held prisoner, Penderel looks away to try the bolted door. While Penderel is at the door, the shot cuts to a tight close-up of Saul as his face twists into a strange expression and he utters a soft maniacal chuckle. As soon as Penderel looks back at him, Saul's expression immediately shifts back to one of persecuted innocence. The picture composition in the scene in which Margaret Waverton's hand shadows on the wall turn into the shadow of Rebecca harassing Mrs. Waverton's shadow exhibit Whale's skill at setting mood and establishing mental states without resorting to dialogue or even music.

In The Old Dark House, as in his earlier Frankenstein, Whale uses only dialogue and sound effects on the film's

soundtrack. Except during the opening and closing credits no music is heard at all, other than a brief paraphrased rendition of "Singing in the Rain" sung a capella by Pen-derel near the beginning of the picture. The same year, The Most Dangerous Game had a fine musical score, synchronized to most of the action in the picture. In The Old Dark House the persistent rain, wind, and thunder provide their own accompaniment to the story, helping establish the mood and accentuate the action. Although in this case, Whale's avoiding the convention of background mood music is fairly effective, he could have improved Frankenstein with some well-chosen and well-placed music. With The Bride of Frankenstein, three years after The Old Dark House, he changed his technique and exploited the soundtrack to the fullest with a brilliant and almost continuous musical score by Franz Waxman.

Other films from the period should be taken into consideration when analyzing The Old Dark House, particularly films of the same genre and which have similar elements. There are few silent horror films, but the movie which shows the most influence on The Old Dark House is probably Paul Leni's 1927 mystery-comedy, The Cat and the Canary, also made for Universal Studios. Leni's film similarly takes place in an old, dark house during the course of one night, and also uses insanity as an important element of the plot. There is an eccentric and rather ominous housekeeper named Mammy Pleasant who is to some extent

a counterpart to Horace and Rebecca Femm. Since Priestley's novel came out in 1927, he may or may not have seen or read the 1922 stage play of The Cat and the Canary before he wrote his book, but there is a strong chance that Whale (or at least his photographer, Arthur Edeson) saw the film version before making The Old Dark House. One shot in particular has a direct counterpart in the earlier film: curtains billowing in a darkened hallway. The Cat and the Canary is the best-remembered silent film exploiting a darkened house for thrills, but was by no means the only one. Even a relatively light comedy of manners like Thirteen Washington Square (1928) --also made for Universal--had a dark house sequence.

With the coming of sound came a wave of horror and suspense films, many set either partially or completely in some sort of old dark house. Bulldog Drummond (1929) has some effective scenes in a sinister house at night, and The Bat Whispers (1930) takes place in an old, dark house (with more verbal comedy relief than The Cat and the Canary). The opening sequence inside Dracula's mansion in Tod Browning's Dracula (1930) has a very well-developed mood. Count Dracula poised on the stairs is not unlike Horace Femm greeting his visitors for the first time. Renfield cautiously climbing the stairs is similar to Philip and Margaret looking for Sir Roderick.

Several films were made during 1932--the year of The Old Dark House--that contain parallel elements. It might

even be called the "golden year" of the horror-mystery-thriller. The Most Dangerous Game has an old house with evil secrets, and even more the sense of isolation--the house is on an otherwise deserted island. In The Mystery of the Wax Museum (not released until February, 1933, although made late in 1932) uses the familiar image of someone exploring a dark, mysterious building at least three times. Fay Wray searches for her boyfriend in the shadowy back corridors of the wax museum; Glenda Farrell wanders through the supposedly empty museum before it opens, and then looks around a dark basement with a twisted, angular stairway. The dark house in Doctor X is again isolated, and literally has a skeleton in the closet Lee Tracy stumbles into! The first half of Number Seventeen takes place late at night in a large deserted house, into which various characters wander and encounter each other.

Fear--specifically the fears of insanity and brute strength--again are pervading themes in The Most Dangerous Game, The Mystery of the Wax Museum, and Doctor X. The mad owner of the house in The Most Dangerous Game makes a practice of hunting and killing his guests, and as in The Old Dark House, he has a large, mute servant. The Mystery of the Wax Museum also has an insane villain with a mute servant, although Lionel Atwill's Dr. Igor is portrayed more sympathetically than most horror film antagonists. Doctor X, too, has an insane antagonist, but his identity is not revealed until the end, as had been the case in

The Cat and the Canary.

Some remarkably close similarities to Whale's The Old Dark House may be observed in Alfred Hitchcock's underrated and greatly overlooked Number Seventeen, made in England in the same year. A group of gangsters using the house as a hideout and rendezvous are the main source of conflict and antagonism in the house. In Whale's film, the family which owns and resides in the house provides the conflict, which is confined entirely to the house. This is more sinister psychologically than the situation in Number Seventeen, in which strangers merely use an empty house as a meeting place, and the conflict eventually moves outside in an exciting chase on a train (also at night, however).

The similarity of mood and setting in the two films is worth noting, as is the use of characters, strangers to each other, who suddenly find themselves in a difficult and tense situation. Both seem to have been influenced by The Cat and the Canary in their treatments of these elements. Shots of characters emphasize their unfamiliarity and sense of uneasiness with their surroundings in all three films. Whale and Hitchcock both inject their own wry and often perverse humor into their films, avoiding what could easily have become heavy-handed melodrama, yet never being nearly as broad and obvious as the comedy in The Cat and the Canary, which uses several character stereotypes and stock comic situations for achieving laughs.

Although Number Seventeen and The Old Dark House have

definite similarities, there are also important differences. Hitchcock begins his film without a word of dialogue--the protagonist is followed by a mobile camera into and through the darkened, deserted house to the accompaniment of a very evocative music score on the soundtrack. As noted before, The Old Dark House uses no music during the film. Whale uses a great deal of dialogue at the beginning of his film, to set the mood as well as to establish the characters (the very first word of the film is an exasperated, "Hell!" spoken by Philip). Later he uses periods of silence to develop and heighten the mood: notably in two solo scenes with Mrs. Waverton. Dialogue is crucial in several character developing scenes of The Old Dark House (except, of course, in the case of Morgan), whereas the paucity of dialogue in Number Seventeen results in relatively shallow development of characters and somewhat confusing situations at times. The characters in The Old Dark House each have at least the suggestion of a past, while Hitchcock uses his characters primarily to further the action of his story. The Old Dark House, and even more so its source novel, Benighted, concentrate on characters in a situation rather than a situation with characters in it. This presence of character development makes Whale's film superior to most thrillers of its type, which are almost all plot and setting in some cases.

CHAPTER VI

WHALE'S USE OF COMEDY

Many, if not most of the early horror films injected a certain amount of humor into their stories--usually in the form of one or more stock comic characters borrowed from theatrical tradition. The bumbling fool was probably the most common (e.g., Snitz Edwards in The Phantom of the Opera and Creighton Hale in The Cat and the Canary). The pompous old man and the talkative old woman are other familiar types used. It was as though producers felt that audiences could not handle an entire film of mystery and tension without liberal doses of broad comedy relief. Even though The Cat and the Canary is as much a comedy-romance as it is a mystery-thriller, it was reworked as a straight comedy with slightly mysterious elements in the 1930 short, The Laurel and Hardy Murder Case, a spoof of the old dark house genre.

The Most Dangerous Game has a semi-comic drunk at the beginning, but its main humor comes from the enjoyably overacted performances. Leslie Banks' villain, played self-indulgently to the hilt, gives the picture a tongue-in-cheek mood that balances the suspense and terror. There is often a fine line between such humor and the uninten-

tional "camp" humor which derives from dated acting styles. When the actors themselves appear to relish their roles, as they do in The Most Dangerous Game and The Old Dark House and especially The Bride of Frankenstein, the humor found by modern audiences was more than likely intended. This type of humor is sometimes easy to miss on first viewing of a film if the viewer is caught up in the melodrama of the story and anxious to see how it will be resolved, particularly if the viewer is accustomed to and makes allowances for earlier acting and production techniques. On subsequent viewings, the ending is already known and more attention can be paid to aspects of the film other than the story line, thus letting the viewer derive full enjoyment from the production.

In James Whale's first horror film, Frankenstein, he injected comedy scenes using the broad comic antagonism between the old baron and the burgomaster--both variations on the classic senex character, or foolish old man from ancient Roman comedy. With The Old Dark House, Whale's humor is much less exaggerated and not so episodic. Instead of occasional, strictly comic scenes, humor is used throughout the film, and with a more mature, controlled style. There are no characters who are purely comic--rather, the comedy arises from certain characters' own senses of humor and from Whale's flair for understatement. Alfred Hitchcock has stated, "Nothing amuses me so much as understatement." (Truffaut, p. 170). Whale's films reflect

a similar philosophy with macabre subject material--especially The Old Dark House and his genre masterpiece, The Bride of Frankenstein. Whale's brand of understated humor, often perverse, satiric, and ironic, is not unlike Hitchcock's. Both directors use comedy in much the same way--to relieve the tension of an effectively established mood, and to poke fun, to some extent, at the very material that is being used, often at the characters themselves.

The Old Dark House contains some of Whale's driest (and to some viewers, possibly his most elusive) comedy. Film critics Don Whittemore and Philip Alan Cecchettini agree that it takes more than one viewing for full appreciation (Whittemore and Cecchettini, p. 277). There is only one character who might be considered as a provider of comic relief--Penderel--and he is not a character to be laughed at but to be laughed with. His flippant wisecracks make him similar to the smart-aleck reporters in The Mystery of the Wax Museum and Doctor X, yet he has a more serious side to his personality when the situation demands it. He might be considered as a forerunner of the protagonists in the American sophisticated comedies Hollywood would produce over the next ten years, and it is easy to imagine Cary Grant or William Powell in place of Melvyn Douglas in that role. Douglas, himself, went on to appear in such classic thirties comedies as Ninotchka and Theodora Goes Wild. In The Old Dark House he stands out among the five travelers as perhaps the closest to a protagonist

figure, although Penderel's shiftless nature make him more of an anti-hero than a hero.

Penderel throughout the film makes wry comments on the state of events. He cheerfully accepts the prospect of being "stuck for the night, stuck for the night," which he sings loudly. When first confronted by Morgan's guttural grunting at the door to the house, he remarks, "Even Welsh ought not sound like that!" Then he speculates enthusiastically that everyone inside might be murdered. His spirit of play is a major trait of his screen character. At times this spirit of play has a slight edge of invective to it, such as when he off-handedly insults Rebecca at dinner (though she is either unaware of or ignores any insult) when he says in a sarcastic tone of voice, "Vinegar, Miss Femm?" and then makes a point of turning down her silent offer of pickled onions. Out in the stable he tells Gladys that he will carry her back to the house but if she's too heavy he will drop her--and then Whale actually shows him slipping and almost dropping her in the mud. Back inside, Penderel tells Sir William that Gladys "got her feet wet," and the repetition of the line several times plus the tone of voice and facial expressions of the characters clearly indicate that he is playing with the metaphoric association that she experienced something for the first time with him out in the stable. A light-hearted battle of the sexes follows briefly as the three decide to set up the overturned dinner table. Penderel says, "Miss Perkins, tend the roast

beef," to which she responds, "Tend it yourself," and instead returns the candle to the candleholder (with almost Freudian deliberation).

Whale also turns the Femms into a source of humor, making the bizarre family a kind of sardonic counterpart to the eccentric families and characters of which director Frank Capra soon would make so much use. Rebecca Femm comes close to being a comic stereotype with her selective deafness and self-important fanaticism. She shrieks out, "No beds--they can't have beds!" And when Margaret asks if she may change her wet clothes she says, "You look wet. You'd better change your clothes." Despite her aged appearance, Rebecca still has the conceit to primp in front of a mirror--certainly a reversal of expectations an audience would normally have from such a character. At dinner she eats voraciously, in sharp contrast to everyone else's preoccupied picking at their food. Her character is a deviation from the norm which makes her a comic figure to both the audience and the other characters in the film. Although the other characters find Rebecca somewhat amusing, she is strange enough to make them uneasy, as well, and she cannot be classed as typical comic relief.

Horace, too, is not a broadly comic character, though he is often a source of humor--derived mainly from his inversion of values. His perversity and contempt for Rebecca are shown when he greets the travelers for the first time and they illustrate Whale's weird sense of what is

funny. Horace says, "My sister was on the point of arranging these flowers," and immediately throws them into the fire. His cowardice has a kind of tragic humor to it, especially when he realizes that he has just admitted to Philip that he was lying about the weight of the oil lamp Rebecca had told him to get. Later, in a rhetorical understatement, he asks the group of travelers, "Can you conceive of anybody living in a house like this if they didn't have to?" More of Whale's humor comes out when Sir William answers Horace, "There's no accounting for taste, you know," upon which Horace glares distastefully at Gladys and sneers back at Sir William, "No," providing the topper to the conversation. Before the group discussion around the fire (the novel's Truth game) Sir William comments that no one there knows much about any of the others. Horace, characteristically, responds, "How reassuring!"

Some of Whale's comedy in The Old Dark House is even more subtle. At dinner, Mrs. Waverton, to make conversation, remarks that the rain is coming down "in bucketfulls." Penderel trivially tells her that "bucketfulls" is precisely the word he has been searching for all evening to describe the weather. Then, when Sir William arrives, the first thing he says to everybody is that the rain is coming down in bucketfulls, completing the running gag.

In general, The Old Dark House has the most understated humor of Whale's four horror films. In The Invisible Man (1933) the comedy is basically drawn directly from H. G.

Wells' novel. In The Bride of Frankenstein, Whale made virtually the entire film tongue-in-cheek. Ernest Thesiger's Dr. Praetorious is more self-consciously witty than his Horace, but is a refinement of the earlier character. Even some lines are similar: most noticeably, "Have some gin; it's my only weakness." In The Old Dark House he had said, "Have some gin. I like gin," and the more ironic version from The Bride of Frankenstein is often mistakenly attributed to The Old Dark House.

Comedy ties Whale's four horror films to each other and The Old Dark House illustrates his developing experience with both comedy and the film medium. It shows him using the story material itself to develop humor rather than relying solely on artificial comic conventions inserted from time to time into the story as he had in Frankenstein. With The Bride of Frankenstein Whale's technical style would reach its pinnacle. His comedy, too, would be even more evident, combining earlier styles. Thesiger's dry wit would be balanced by Una O'Connor's broad stereotyped yenta and Karloff's naive and uncoordinated monster.

In general, horror films during the 1930s made use of some degree of humor. Perhaps this was more an attempt to appease critics who were repulsed by depictions of horror, violence, and ugliness on the screen, than it was a desire to entertain the audience. At that time, both critics and audiences usually responded unfavorably to even straight dramas about the seedy side of life or with

an unhappy ending.

Whale's horror films, while they have more or less happy endings forced on them by the studio, seem to reflect a genuine sense of humor, and the intention of amusing at least himself, if not his audiences. The Old Dark House remains one of Whale's best films--its generally subtle humor one of its strongest assets.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

James Whale's 1932 film, The Old Dark House is generally a faithful adaptation of the 1927 novel, Benighted, by J. B. Priestley, except in its ending. The most obvious difference between the two works is that the character Penderel dies in the novel but survives in the film. Presumably this change was made because the film studio felt that audiences would prefer a happy ending. The denouement is also much shorter in the film than in the novel. The other major differences are in the extent and type of character development used in the works. The novel has several long character-developing monologues which are abridged or eliminated in the film. The novel also reveals the thoughts of the five travelers at times, by using a limited omniscient technique in the narration of the story, whereas the film version shows merely the action without probing characters' thoughts. The character development in the film is accomplished through a combination of dialogue and effective characterizations by the players.

The film progresses slowly for the first third of the work, but towards the mid-point it picks up pace and builds to an effective crisis and climax. It handles dramatic

tension more effectively than does the novel, but reduces the novel's character development to a bare minimum, thus emphasizing the plot more than the characters. Nevertheless, The Old Dark House contains more depth of characterization than many plot and action oriented films.

The common generic themes of danger and fear used by horror films pervade The Old Dark House, and examination of other films reveals that it contains certain elements which show up in several other pictures made the same year-- specifically the use of an old, dark house, an insane antagonist, and a mute servant. Definitions of the horror film set forth in the introduction all apply to The Old Dark House, placing it in the horror genre. The thriller film by definition provides its audience with thrills, by means of suspense and/or surprise. Generally the audience is given certain information not known by the characters, adding to the tension, but in The Old Dark House the viewers see only what the five visitors to the house see, and at the same time. This keeps the audience as uncertain about what will happen as are the travelers. Thrills are provided by such devices as the surprise close-ups used to introduce the forboding Morgan, distorted visions of the weird Rebecca Femm in a broken mirror, and the unexpected rush of wind and rain into the room when a window blows open. The only time true suspense is used is the moment when Saul twists his face into a maniacal grin when Penderel's back is turned, informing the audience of Saul's

madness shortly before Penderel realizes it. Most of the film is more concerned with mystery--the strange and unclear pasts of the permanent residents of the house, and what effect they will have on the unwelcome guests. Unlike a conventional mystery, however, such as a detective story, the characters do not learn facts before the audience, and indeed fact-gathering is not the primary focus in The Old Dark House. The mystery is simply another aspect of the plot, and much of it is never fully explained as it inevitably is at the end of every detective story. The mystery is a part of the gothic mood that is so often characteristic of the horror film genre. Further examination turns up other generic themes--such as isolation and alienation, expressed through the character development in both the novel and the film. A major motif is the idea of confinement as a means of escaping danger, reversed at the end when characters leave the confines of the old house.

More importantly, close study of the film shows a complexity uncommon in standard films of its type allowing multiple levels of interpretation. There are, in the film, possible homosexual overtones in the characters of the house's residents, particularly the male residents. Whether or not this was intentional is open to speculation and the director's own homosexuality may or may not have any bearing on such an interpretation.

Throughout the film there are numerous possibilities for symbolic interpretation, using mythic-archetypal and

Freudian concepts, but again, much of this remains on the level of speculation. To a certain extent, personifications of Freud's id, ego, and superego, seem fairly obvious in several of the characters. Mythic-archetypal elements like the rite of initiation, the scapegoat motif, and portions of the Eden myth require an interpretation which might be reading significance into the film which was not originally intended. Yet other elements, such as Biblical allusions, are explicit in the dialogue.

Technically, The Old Dark House is an average film, which uses, for the most part, standard functional devices. A few effective shots and scenes are present, however. The film uses no musical accompaniment on the soundtrack and relies heavily on dialogue throughout much of its length. It does exhibit strong photography and competent editing, comparable to other, similar films from the same period, and to Whale's other films.

Whale's sense of humor--strange, very dry, and often elusive--is present throughout The Old Dark House, becoming more evident after repeated viewings. Whale had used broad comedy relief in his first horror film, Frankenstein, and then reversed his style by using very understated, even esoteric humor in The Old Dark House. Whale might have felt he had gone too far, because in later films of the same genre, The Invisible Man and especially The Bride of Frankenstein, he would incorporate more of a balance between the two types of comedy. The Old Dark House, then,

might be considered a turning point in Whale's use of humor with horror, and it certainly contains the most understated comedy of his four horror films.

The acting in The Old Dark House is superior to that in most other films from the same period. Although the film must be viewed today with an historical perspective, the performances do not seem nearly so dated as other melodramas from the period now often appear. As a result, the humor is most likely not merely "camp," but intentional on the part of both the actors and the director.

It is the sense of humor which pervades The Old Dark House, combined with its more than ordinary amount of character development and its operation (whether intentional or not) on multiple levels of meaning which this study considers to be the film's strongest attributes. It overcomes its technical limitations and its occasionally stilted dialogue scenes to an extent that this analysis supports other critics who rank it among the best horror/thriller films of the 1930s and one of James Whale's best films--second only to his The Bride of Frankenstein.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

PRODUCTION CREDITS FOR THE OLD DARK HOUSE

Directed by James Whale; screenplay by Benn W. Levy, based on the novel Benighted by J. B. Priestley; additional dialogue by R. C. Sheriff; presented by Carl Laemmle, produced by Carl Laemmle, Jr.; A Universal Picture; released October, 1932; 75 minutes.

Cast (in order of appearance)

Philip Waverton	Raymond Massey
Margaret Waverton	Gloria Stuart
Roger Penderel	Melvyn Douglas
Morgan	Boris Karloff
Horace Femm	Ernest Thesiger
Rebecca Femm	Eva Moore
Sir William Porterhouse	Charles Laughton
Gladys DuCane	Lillian Bond
Sir Roderick Femm	John Dudgeon (Elspeth Dudgeon)
Saul Femm	Brember Wills

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