

Rating: «« ***out of 4 stars***

Running Time: 118 min.

I've often wondered why the spirits of the deceased are so darn vague in their warnings to loved ones in the movies. They make such a big deal about their appearance, often startling the party being haunted. But then, instead of explicitly stating the threat, warn that one should "beware" of something vague on the horizon. Perhaps they're on a schedule and can't float around for very long, or are just taking a wild guess themselves (although their calls always seem to come true), or maybe they simply enjoy messing with people.

Crimson Peak has its share of these moments. On a technical level, the ghosts are rather fantastic to witness when they do appear. Yet while this beautifully filmed effort is fun when the spirits visualize and the action occurs, it also gets a little too hung up on the Gothic melodrama. And that's when the mind wanders to the simple story's plot holes and other more earthbound questions that can't be clearly answered.

Set in the late 18th century, Edith Cushing (Mia Wasikowska) is a young aspiring novelist who yearns for freedom and independence. When she falls for Baronet Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston), she finds herself traveling across the Atlantic to his dilapidated and very haunted estate in England. Also in the mix are the husband's intense and controlling sister, Lucille (Jessica Chastain) and one Dr. McMichael (Charlie Hunnam), who desires Edith's affections.

Of course, things aren't as they initially appear. In fact, it isn't long before viewers will be pretty

certain of exactly what dastardly activities are taking place. As described, there's a heavy emphasis on the courting of Edith and the financial straits of Thomas and Lucille Sharpes. In fact, it's all melodrama for the first thirty minutes. This includes a long and slow-moving opening act. And the screenplay shows most of its cards early on, giving away a lot of mystery behind the protagonist's suitor in the process. Frankly, the motivations of more nefarious persons involved aren't nearly as shocking or interesting as they should be.

As the story moves to the haunted locale and the characters become more overtly hostile, the flick slowly begins picking up momentum. It's certainly campy, but there are some startling moments and visual panache as spirits disturb the estate's newest resident. This includes a wailing form covered in red clay with a cleaver firmly wedged in its head. Scares and action sequences are what director Guillermo Del Toro (*Pan's Labyrinth*, *Pacific Rim*) specializes in. And as events broil and violent action is taken, there are some great individual scenes of shapes moving in the background and stalking their prey.

It's unfortunate that the movie is so stiff, stately and reserved until the final act. An update of classic horror tropes would be welcome, but by the time the enjoyable confrontational fracas arrives (featuring one devilishly strong and wince-inducing moment), it feels like too many obvious clichés are slavishly observed, rather than being twisted and toyed with. In the end, there's not a whole lot to this spook-fest that viewers won't see coming well in advance.

Crimson Peak is certainly a wonder to look at and features a well-orchestrated finale (which may make it worth the price of admission alone). However, audiences will have to endure a few awkward and ineffectual melodramatic beats before they arrive at the more effective material they came out for. It isn't among the director's best works and ultimately leaves scare fans with both a sweet and sour taste in their mouths.