The Wolf Man was Lon Chaney Jr.'s second horror movie and his first appearance in the role for which he is best remembered--no doubt because his Larry Talbot, the amiable young man controlled by evil impulses he cannot understand, relies on the actor's own character to generate much the same sort of sympathy as his Lennie in Of Mice and Men (1939), the gentle giant who longs to love but is condemned to kill. The intriguing conception of Larry Talbot as hero / villain is successfully achieved by the fact that Chaney is able to inject individuality into his werewolf--incongruously covered in facial fur with fangs and canine snout yet sporting black shirt and trousers, it seems less an entirely separate entity than an extension of his personality.

The film strengthens the rather weak myth of The Werewolf of London (1935) by replacing the Tibetan flower with a silver-topped cane mounted with the head of a wolf and a five-pointed star, whose implications are cleverly woven through the film. The tragic circle begins
when Chaney acquires the cane from the girl he is to fall in love with, Evelyn Ankers, and ends when his own father, Claude Rains, is forced to use it to beat him to death with. At its centre is the atmospheric minatory visit to a gypsy camp in the forest where he is bitten by a werewolf (Bela Lugosi, in a minor role after being slated to play the lead), warned by a fortune-teller, and then finds the pentagram symbol mysteriously imprinted over his heart.

The Wolf Man benefits from a literate script and unusually good cast, but its trump card is the superbly suspenseful atmosphere in which Valentine's camera makes virtuoso use of fog and mist to create an eerie fairytale world out of the quaint little Welsh village, the forbidding baronial hall and the gypsy encampment in a forest clearing. Universal lavished care and money on the film and were rewarded by a box-office success that revived their languishing interest in horror and sparked off their second cycle of movies in the genre.

--PHIL HARDY, ed. from The Encyclopedia of Horror Films, 1986

"Even a man who is pure in heart, And says his prayers by night, May become a wolf when the wolfbane blooms And the Autumn moon is bright."

It wasn't so much the moon that turned Lon Chaney into The Wolf Man (1941), or even a bite from Bela Lugosi. It was a six-hour sit in the make-up chair while Jack Pierce painstakingly pasted him over with yak-hair and stranded kelp. Wearing a T-shaped nosepiece of molded rubber, fangs on his teeth, hair in his palms, and feet tippy-toed into padded paws, Chaney knew what it was to suffer the curse of the pentagram. Small wonder Evelyn Ankers screamed at the sight, so frightfully well that this Chilean-born English lass became the second First Lady of Horror, finally tucking more monster movies under her girdle than even Fay Wray. But Pierce's processing was only the beginning of Chaney's ordeal. Worse even than the nightly eat-off with acetone was the great transformation scene organized by Pierce, Fulton, and Joseph Valentine the photographer.

"The day we did the transformations I came in at two a.m. When I hit that position they would take little nails and drive them through the skin at the edge of my fingers, on both hands, so that I wouldn't move them any more. While I was in this position they would build a plaster cast of the back of my head. Then they would take the drapes from behind me and starch them, and while they were drying them, they would take the camera and weigh it
down with one ton, so that it wouldn't quiver when people walked. They had targets for my eyes up there. Then, while I’m still in this position, they would shoot five or ten frames of film in the camera. They'd take that film out and send it to the lab. While it was there the makeup man would come and take the whole thing off my face, and put on a new one, only less. I’m still immobile.

When the film came back from the lab they'd put it back in the camera and then they'd check me. They’d say, ‘Your eyes have moved a little bit, move them to the right . . . now your shoulder is up . . .’ Then they'd roll it again and shoot another ten frames. Well, we did twenty-one changes of makeup and it took twenty-two hours. I won't discuss about the bathroom!

Yet for all that, Chaney loved his Wolf Man: "He was my baby!" Although an unlikely choice for an English heir (he plays Lawrence Talbot, son of Sir John Talbot of Llanwelly, Wales), with an unlikely star for a father (Chaney towered a good foot over Claude Rains), he did the double in the best Jekyll and Hyde tradition. The Wolf Man, a title originally announced for Lugosi in 1932, sprang from the monster makeup of Werewolf of London. It also had that film's plot twist of the two werewolves. Lugosi, aptly cast as Bela, played the biter, but Chaney soon killed him with his silver-handled cane. Maleva, the mother who crooned the rune, had more to say over her son's corpse, and over Larry's later.

“The way you walked was thorny through no fault of your own. For as the rain enters the soil, and the river enters the sea, so tears run to their predestined end. Your suffering is over. Now find peace for eternity, my son.”

Fine words, written by Curt Siodmak, intoned by an ex-star of the Moscow Art Theatre, Madame Maria Ouspenskaya. But they still failed to end Chaney's suffering, for he would go on to play the wolf man in four more Universal films: Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man (1943), House of Frankenstein (1944), House of Dracula (1945), and Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (1948).

--DENIS GIFFORD, from A Pictorial History of Horror Movies, 1973