

# Review: Coldheart Canyon

## A Hollywood Ghost Story

Clive Barker

What is this novel about? Why should I read it? Is it worth my time? These are the questions we must ask ourselves before undertaking the heftier novels out there. Should I commit?

Cold Heart Canyon is many things. This is the power of Clive Barker. He does many things well in his work, and he has been doing them well for a long time. The novel is essentially a gothic-tinged modern ghost story. But as stated, it is many things. It is an unhappy homage to Hollywood, it is a paean to the true and essential power of fandom, and it is a savage and satirical portrayal and condemnation of excess and self-absorption. One may consider the novel, broadly speaking, as a critique of the American Dream, however that may be an overly subjective reading.

What is it that Clive Barker does so well?

Barker employs the long sentence in the novel; the unnecessarily long sentence, and one way that he does this is to make use of the types of sentences that combine all manner of punctuation — some of which never really served a valid primary purpose of any real or discernible kind, being easily and coherently, perhaps cogently, replaced by other, more common marks or symbols — and he uses these long sentences to evoke what the observant reader will recognise as a trope of gothic fiction. In fact, it is a facet of much of the writing produced in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, at least when considered in the context of Western literature.

Barker's tale is described on the front cover of the 2001 HarperCollins edition as: "A Hollywood Ghost Story". Much of what writers use when constructing a traditional ghost story comes from the gothic period of European fiction, Consider such recognizable tropes and devices as:

- ancient evil
- insanity and obsession

- taboo or forbidden icons and objects
- wealthy and/or powerful and/or immoral figures
- the mysterious and/or mostly inaccessible castle or mansion on the hill
- the immoral procurement of unnatural or everlasting youth
- a relatable and accessible protagonist, the everyman/everywoman/everyperson figure
- an association of foreign people and places with the occult and/or depraved practices

All of the above-mentioned occur in the novel to one degree or another and are used by the author to lend the essence of gothic to his critique of modern celebrities and the world they inhabit. The protagonist, Tammy, is a normal young lady, initially displaying self-esteem issues, who proves to be made of much stronger stuff than we initially perceive. Tammy contrasts well with Katya, who comes from a foreign land, a place far away, a place reminiscent of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* who dwells in the place beyond the forest, beyond the liminal zone. Then we have the mansion of Cold Heart Canyon, located up in the Hollywood Hills, its actual location is difficult to find or position on a map. The tiled room far below the mansion, of which the rich and famous are desperate to get back to, caters to obsession. There are many other well-wrought examples, but that is enough for now.

Does the novel need to be this long?

Barker has been at it for most of his life. He knows what he is doing. I have consumed several of his works over the years and the author has routinely displayed a deft hand when dealing with long, woven, detailed plots. This novel is no exception. The arc of the story is delivered impeccably. Furthermore, it does not suffer from entanglement. Cold Heart Canyon tells a tale well. Unlike the shorter pieces produced by Poe, who, true to his form, believed that the reading of a story should be completed in one sitting, Barker employs that great invention, The Chapter, and portions his sweeping tale appropriately. The chapters are collected and portioned yet further into eleven books. We also have a prologue and an epilogue. And while I do enjoy short fiction, nothing lingers quite like a long form novel. This story is still with me; it took a (small) portion of my life to read it, and for that I am grateful. In short: due to Barker's insistence and persistence, not to mention his creative prowess, we are left with a complete and satisfying tale without any meaningful loose ends.

What else is to be expected?

Ghosts, death, and sex. These three are commonly featured in Barker's work. Barker's ghosts are often whimsical, he seems to sympathise with them. Many are forlorn, suffering from or resulting from some kind of injustice. Some form of redemption for the ghosts of his world can be expected. Barker is frequently descriptive of death, of violent death, and of beautiful death. It is as inescapable in his novels as it is in actuality. And what is life without death? Meaningless? Perhaps? Coitus is vocal in his writing. It is shameless. It is unabashed. Sometimes crude and of the body, sometimes a lovely union. It is many things. It is always present in some manner. Also, Barker is one of those writers who produces sentences that I feel compelled to write down, to take note of, so as to admire at a later date. Here are a few examples:

"The summer was as violently hot as the winter had been bitter, and it bred all manner of destroyers in the fabric of the building." Barker, Coldheart Canyon, Pg. 53.

"But he did not reason it out. He was beyond reasoning at that moment. Beyond anything, indeed, but *witnessing*. He had become a living instrument; a flesh-and-blood camera, recording this wonderland." Barker, Coldheart Canyon, Pg. 329.

"The brightness it shed was sickly however, as though it was blazing too brightly to stay aloft and alight for long, and would be consumed by its own fever." Barker, Coldheart Canyon, Pg. 614.

But really, why are you still reading this? Go read the novel; it's great.

M. D. George.