

The Nightmare Before Christmas [1993]

by

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Nightmare Before Christmas may be one of the psychologically most insightful films of the decade. Like most of Tim Burton's films, *Nightmare Before Christmas* looks like a film for kids, but actually it speaks both to adults *and* to young people. The problem is that the psychological messages are directed toward adults and the sociological messages toward children. Worse, these messages point in distinctly different directions, almost in conflict. Let's look at the adult messages first.

Each male character represents a different stage of mature male psychological development. In Jack Skellington, the film makers chose not to have a Manichian division between good and evil. Evil is contained within Jack's own psychological trajectory as much as good. Jack has spent his life establishing himself as the Pumpkin King. Because of his success, he is respected and loved by all. But, like many men in the real world, he says to himself, "Now what? Is this it?" Jack has done it all, done it well, and is now looking for more. Jack's having a mid-life crisis.

The Mayor is quite different. He loves to face his public with two faces – one pessimistic, one optimistic. We understand him when we realize that he spins his head about to use whichever face the current situation requires – he's politically correct at all times. Now, most of us do this all the time. This is what Jungian psychologists call Persona – that aspect of ourselves that we use to deal with the outside world but which is not our true core (which we keep private). This is not only handy, it's healthy - unless we lose track of our core and become nothing but Persona. This is what has happened to the Mayor – he is nothing but his two faces.

The Evil Scientist is Baron Frankenstein and Dr. Strangelove rolled into one. Like the Baron, he cannot establish a normal relation with a woman, so he usurps her procreative power and produces what he hopes to be perfection – Sally. Of course, his creation is a monster who turns against him. At the psychological level, his own internal feminine is so weak and corrupted that he projects her as an impotent rag doll. Like the title character of *Dr. Strangelove* [1964], his twisted and damaging psychology is

reflected in his twisted and damaged body. The hopelessness of his position is seen at the end of the film when he successfully constructs a woman by giving her half of his brain. While he is physically open-minded (literally), psychologically he is just the opposite. What he wants is another like himself, a mirror, a clone. This desire condemns him to a life of repetition and stasis, for growth can only stem from discovering the importance of the feminine "other."

At the other end of this psychological spectrum is Sandy Claws himself. He has fully integrated the internal feminine: he can nurture rather than frighten children, his gifts bring happiness rather than terror, he is part of a supportive, integrated community. Sandy has arrived at his happy ripe old-age by, presumably, passing through the very identity crisis that now plagues Jack.

After a lifetime of successfully establishing his Persona, Jack mistakenly attempts to use it to solve his mid-life crisis. He wants to take on the "look," the outer characteristics, of Sandy Claws – who he correctly perceives to be a psychologically balanced figure. Jack goes for the external trappings rather than the internal essence: he commands Sally to make him a red suit, others to build a sleigh from a coffin and reindeer out of skeletons. Most significantly, in his elation and inflation, he is totally unaware of his errors. He doesn't realize that the old ways of Persona and externality will no longer work for him. He simply cannot step into another person's more desirable shoes and merely go on with a new life.

Two important elements must connect to pass successfully through mid-life: intuition and the contra-gender function. Intuition seems pretty easy for Jack. He wanders comfortably into the forest – a constant symbol of the unconscious in myths and fairy tales (just think of all the forests where people get lost and ultimately find the answers to their problems: Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, and so on). There he finds a circle of trees – a complex figure whose shape (a circle) represents wholeness or completion, and whose structure (trees) symbolizes growth. He intuitively picks the right tree and inside finds a world which he intuitively knows holds the solutions to his current crisis. Jack has no great problems with his intuition; however, the feminine is something else.

Sally is as fascinating and complex as Jack. Her various physical characteristics have psychological parallels: she can disassemble herself so that she can work in two places seemingly at once; she can put people to sleep; she can create a confusing fog. Intuitively she knows that a new Persona is not the answer to Jack's problem (we have seen that this is a road to failure in the character of the Mayor). She uses her feminine knowledge of herbs and potions (traditional story-book connection between women and nature) to put the distorted masculine to sleep, for she knows that control and restriction also are a road to failure. She is sure that Jack's attempt to usurp Christmas will be a disaster. Her task is to set Jack on the right road, despite himself.

The conclusion of the story is played upon a stage supported by a solid substructure of symbols that drive home its various meanings. A violent explosion throws Jack into a graveyard where he awakens suspended on a tombstone, like a Renaissance

Pieta, in the arms of an angel holding a book (of knowledge of self, of course). He finds himself literally in the hands of the feminine. He has died and has been awakened to the truth of his life. He now goes to rescue Sally and Sandy (the similarity in the names is not accidental, for they both represent the fulfillment Jack seeks). He rescues them from imprisonment on a game show-like wheel of torture. Notice that the film, which began with Jack discovering his possible future within a circle of trees, now concludes with the discovery of the true path toward his Self on another circular figure.

Passing through mid-life is the road which C. G. Jung called individuation, that is, finding out who you really are, accepting it, and thereby becoming happy with it. Most films that deal with this search (of which, outside the science fiction genre, unfortunately, there are precious few) portray the door to the new life as a radical change from the old. What *Nightmare Before Christmas* is all about is something far more difficult - no change. When all is said and done, Jack finds out that the Pumpkin King is to be his destiny. And, with the help of the feminine he previously ignored, he recognizes his destiny *and* is now happy to be the Pumpkin King. In this respect, *Nightmare Before Christmas* is a fairy tale for adults that not only deals with one of life's most difficult transitions, mid-life, but deals with perhaps the most difficult variation of that crisis. A rare breed of film.

So much for the adults, what about the kids watching this film? What messages do they get? This is, I feel, where *Nightmare Before Christmas* runs into trouble. But without the perspective of adulthood, the healing psychological messages on how to survive the mid-life crisis will have little meaning and can easily be read in a completely different way - a way I find quite uncomfortable. For instance, the message to an adult about finding satisfaction with yourself as you are can be seen as advocating a lack of ambition or drive when applied to children. The message of this film can be read by young people as just the opposite of the famous Army recruiting slogan, "Be all you can be" - "Be what you are now." What can be comfortable satisfaction for an adult may be lethal stasis for a young person.)

Nightmare Before Christmas. Directed by Henry Selick. Produced by Tim Burton and Denise DiNovi. Screenplay by Caroline Thompson. Based on a story and characters by Tim Burton. Art Direction by Deane Taylor. Music by Danny Elfman. Distributed by Touchstone Films, 1993.