

Shading in a Violent Shadow:
A Hero's Confrontation with the American Shadow in Tim
Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

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Abstract

The movie, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, by Tim Burton contains several violent confrontations with the unconscious and conscious shadow as reflected from American culture. The hero of the story, Jack Skellington, ventures across realms to not only develop a sense of himself, but to ultimately bring what he learns from the "otherworld/realm" back to his community. Traversing these worlds brings about the obvious: chaos, destruction, and violence. However, by engaging the shadow aspect of the individual and collective community, Jack embraces this chaos to transform it into hope, togetherness, salvation, and love. By acknowledging, accepting, and addressing the issues of the shadow archetype, Jack begins his development in his quest for individuation and wholeness. Confronting the Oogie Boogie Man, the accumulated manifestation of the shadow, Jack brings order to his personal world and the lives of his community members. This creative film brings an awareness of Carl G. Jung's shadow archetype to its audience. American culture reflects its shadows through cinema, thus bringing light to the darkness that may consume us all at one point or another in our lives. Learning, as Jack does, to approach our shadows and fears strengthens who we are as individuals, and as a cohesive community.

Keywords

shadow archetype, Jungian themes, American culture, *Nightmare Before Christmas*

Everyone holds a certain level of darkness within his or her unconscious and conscious awareness. Through the individuation process they either repress or acknowledge this fundamental shadow archetype so prevalent in the American society. Tim Burton's 1993 claymation movie *The Nightmare Before Christmas* contains several violent confrontations with the unconscious shadow and the conscious sphere of existence. Jack Skellington, the main character of the film, leaves his home in Halloween Town to breach the consciousness of another world, Christmas Town. By traversing into another space, he confronts his own

unconscious and returns home to engage his hard-learned discoveries. Jack is dead, an afterlife-alive-skeleton; and is already classified as a dark character on the strict principle of life standing for light, and death representing decaying darkness. The movie is concerned with Jack's search for another purpose because he has become tired of his role as the Pumpkin King every single Halloween. During the search for something that is different, he comes to the cliché realization he is already the individual he wants to be. However, to get back into his routine, he must confront his developed shadow, the Oogie Boogie Man. Oogie is the manifested essence of violence and selfishness Jack struggles with during the movie. This confrontation resonates with Carl G. Jung's conception of the shadow archetype and its purpose within the psyche. Jack's character is a stereotype in the notion of learning from his mistakes and correcting them through a noble, selfless act; although, what is uniquely menacing in the story is the accumulation of Oogie's violent character.

In the film created by Burton, light and dark imagery relates to the very powerful parts of the human psyche. Jack is a human skeleton playing several major roles in the society of Halloween Town; he is the Pumpkin King, leader, and hero of the film. He is the well-known protagonist battling with his inner urge for a different purpose in his lively afterlife, and does not appreciate his role in the community. The community has become so attached to his role as the Halloween ritual master they are unable to separate themselves from him. This longing for something different from his normal routine brings about his intrusion upon another holiday, Christmas. However, his altered Christmas takeover plan must go up in smoke before he is ready to realize that everything he needs is waiting for him at home with his friends. The experience Jack goes through during the devastating Christmas fiasco, loss of his friends, and battle with Oogie, brings about a new realization in his personal consciousness, allowing him a deeper understanding of what he really wants for his afterlife and community. The opening of the film begins with the narrator telling the audience that this story comes from "a place that you've seen perhaps in your dreams," providing a creative, intense allure to the creative possibilities in this old time and unique location. Dreams reveal the inner nature of humans, while creating a new plane of existence and understanding for us. This is the interactive realm the narrator introduces to the audience. Setting the scene of the story in such a way is an advantage because it directly addresses both the conscious and archetypal world in which society has inherited. The narrator emphasizes the time the story takes place to open the imagination of what is to come next by saying: "Twas a long time ago, longer now than it seems...[and] took place in the holiday worlds of old," to introduce the dateless domain in which the characters are living. The narrator provides a hint of this story's relevance to everyone because it is an ancient moment both meaningful and applicable to modern American society.

Jack's journey to individuation begins by entering the world of Christmas Town as he literally dives into this other realm of consciousness in order to find his own identity. This is a violent, violating act he embarks upon for his quest. By going into another world, Jack is able to see himself as a separate entity from the landscape around him. Jack becomes aware of his own strangeness in another,

different world. In “Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious,” Jung writes, “Primitive man is not much interested in objective explanations of the obvious, but he has an imperative need—or rather, his unconscious psyche has an irresistible urge—to assimilate all outer sense experiences to inner, psychic events” (70-71). This concept is still true today and framed within this movie. The physical presence and feeling of being immersed in Christmas Town triggers Jack’s own consciousness as he absorbs the surroundings and new stimuli to improve his own personality and character. He feels, sees, hears, tastes, and smells all the beauty there is in the awkwardly peaceful place. Jack takes note of the beautiful and bright colors in the re-discovered land he experiences because he is not used to them. He has physically moved across a threshold into another world, while mentally thinking and feeling differently, making this adventure an important turning point in his afterlife. This is a transition for Jack because he is looking for something else that will motivate him to keep up his tired, drawn-out persona of being the Pumpkin King for Halloween Town, which is to the sole benefit of the community and not himself, or so he feels.

This persona of what he knows he must be, yet is unable to accept for a period of time, is what Jack struggles with throughout the film. In “The Relations between the Ego and the Unconscious,” Jung writes, “The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual” (94). The first image of Jack the onlooker observes is a character’s face concealed within a pumpkin. Jung would say that this is a manifestation of his persona because Jack is the Pumpkin King. Jack no longer wants to hold the role of Halloween master for the community. He has outgrown the role he once found so invigorating. He consciously understands that he wishes to be something different from his persona, yet maintains a facade until coming across another intriguing, curious plane of existence. Jung goes on to write, “The construction of a collectively suitable persona means a formidable concession to the external world, a genuine self-sacrifice which drives the ego straight into identification with the persona, so that people really do exist who believe they are what they pretend to be” (“Relations...” 95). Jack feels the strain of constantly living out a persona that no longer serves him. He does not want to pretend to be something he feels he is not. He resists the pull to be consumed by the persona. Towards the end of the movie, Jack realizes he wants to continue to live as the Pumpkin King, but has developed enough individuation for the strength to lay down his boundaries, so the persona does not consume his ego. From a Jungian perspective, Jack in this scene ritualistically is a performing sacrifice to the external world in his persona because in the opening scene he takes a torch, puts it in his mouth, and executes his pumpkin head as it bursts into flames. This is a lively scene in which the community idolizes Jack. Shortly after the performance, he is bombarded with compliments from the witches, vampires, ghouls, and dead creatures who make up the grotesque but admiring community. They quite literally worship his persona, while ignoring the individual located behind the mask.

The interaction Jack has with the characters of his community directly relates to his persona. The community feeds off of, thrives from, and worships it as they continue to try and sustain the idea of the Pumpkin King. However, he tries to get away from this worshiped position as much as possible by escaping to the cemetery in which he feels comfortable and at home. From a Jungian perspective, the emergence of Oogie is the retaliation of the repression of Jack's longing for something different than his exhausted persona. For Jack, the persona has created negative energy giving form to and feeding his dark shadow. The first scene of the film introduces the community of Halloween Town in their musical, and shows Oogie's shadow on the moon. Oogie is scary, menacing, and playfully enticing as he sings, "I am the shadow on the moon at night, filling your dreams to the brim with fright." This introduction of Oogie is memorable because he claims to be a shadow and represents scary moments during the time people are unconscious. Dreams may possess violent interactions, and this is what Oogie threatens. He is quite menacing towards other's unconsciousness. However, only the shadow of Oogie is shown, instead of his real, solid form. This shadow of Jack does not have enough power to manifest until the third instance he is introduced. The second scene, in which Oogie is presented, still shows a shadow and not a fully formed creature as he feeds on a helpless, caged insect. During this scene, Oogie listens in on what his henchmen, Shock, Lock, and Barrel, discuss concerning capturing Santa Claus, the lord of the other realm Jack invades, Christmas Town. Only after this scene do solid forms of Oogie appear. He finally gains enough strength to reveal himself.

In the third scene concerning Oogie, he finally appears in the solid mass of a deformed potato sack. This emergence is because he now has Santa as his prisoner, and has gained enough power from the darkness he inhabits. The darkness has captured the light, and Oogie has enough power to fully manifest. As this scene goes on, Oogie sings, "I'm ancient. I'm ugly. I don't know which is worse," in the hopes of scaring Santa. Jung would refer to this moment as an exposing of the shadow, revealing its archetypal nature to Santa, an outside presence and a threat to his existence. The shadow is part of the collective unconscious, but Oogie specifically is Jack's inner demon. Oogie is the representation of what everyone dislikes about their shadow; it knows secrets, is dark, and has more power when it is repressed. In "The Shadow," Jung writes, "Though the shadow is a motif as well known to mythology as anima and animus, it represents first and foremost the personal unconscious, and its content can therefore be made conscious without too much difficulty" (93). The conscious confrontation of the shadow by Jack later in the movie is his understanding that the darkness of oneself should not be suppressed, but should be brought to the light, made conscious, and addressed in a balancing action. The only way to defeat the shadow is to accept the dark aspects, confront them, and treat the issues that have come to the surface from the unconscious. Jung goes further in saying, "With a little self-criticism one can see through the shadow-so far as its nature is personal" ("The Shadow" 93). The only person Oogie is afraid of is Jack. It is therefore Jack's responsibility to defeat and/or balance Oogie because he is the only character in the film capable of conquering this evil manifestation. Jack was

locked into a vicious cycle, unappreciative of his afterlife, and Oogie appeared as the part of what Jack discarded. Jack wanted no more parts in the construction of the Halloween tradition and this brief refusal comes back in full circle to haunt him. The shrugging off of responsibility for his own shadow tapped into the collective unconscious of the shadow archetype and Oogie was born.

Jack is not capable of recognizing the danger of Oogie until he is ready to go back to his world, Halloween Town, and assume ownership of his responsibilities. Jung explains in "On the Psychology of the Unconscious" that "The devil is a variant of the 'shadow' archetype, i.e., of the dangerous aspect of the unrecognized dark half of the personality" (79). Oogie is the dark part of Jack. This American film creatively reveals the character trait of the shadow aspect of the American psyche. Society craves a protagonist who is relatable, strong, and virtuous, and has just as many issues as any expected hero. Modern American consciousness relates to this movie and its themes because the process of embracing the shadow with a better understanding further develops an individual's personal world, just as Jack has shown the audience.

The vicious cycle of Jack pushing away his responsibility perpetuates the situation in which the darkness goes elsewhere. The shadow will not simply disappear and be forgotten, it will rot and decay until it becomes destructive to the community, or individual. Jung writes, "The most accessible of these [archetypes], and the easiest to experience, is the shadow, for its nature can in large measure be inferred from the contents of the personal unconscious" ("The Shadow" 91). Jack's shadow of Oogie is an ideal example of the modern American consciousness. Society is becoming more involved with the idea of understanding that there is darkness inside everyone, and that there are ways to deal with the darkness before it becomes violent. Recognizing personal darkness is what individuals must continue to work on for mental health purposes. This ordeal connects directly to Jack's character making the conscious decision to ensure Oogie is not involved in any aspect of the Christmas takeover plan the community is undertaking. To continue the issue of forgetting and leaving darkness, Jung writes, "They must not be suppressed out of hand, but must be very carefully weighted and considered, if only because of the danger of psychic infection they carry with them" ("Psychology of the Unconscious" 78). Jack did not deal with his shadow appropriately, and the shadow uses the negative energy surrounding his unconscious to attack others who do not belong in the shadows within the film.

The concept of belonging somewhere and understanding everyone is trying to find their place in the world is an old story that still holds relevance to each and every person today. In order to go back to where Jack lives, he must confront his shadow and send Santa back to where he belongs. Oogie is not afraid of anyone or anything, with the exception of Jack. This antagonist-protagonist struggle clearly defines the essential moment of Jack's coming to terms with his shadow and keeping it from hurting anyone else. Jung writes, "it is quite within the bounds of possibility for a man to recognize the relative evil of his nature, but it is a rare and shattering experience for him to gaze into the face of absolute evil" ("The Shadow" 93). Jack confronts his shadow and defeats the evil lurking within it. Oogie is comprised of a burlap sack filled with bugs and is exposed when Jack

pulls apart the whole bag with a small tug on a single strand, symbolizing how easy it is to reveal one's darkness when actually putting forth effort. Performing this act unveils the inner darkness of Oogie, and as the bugs are scurrying around, Santa squashes one himself. In "The Fight with the Shadow," Jung writes, "The archetypes I had observed expressed primitivity, violence, and cruelty" ("Fight with the Shadow" 194-95). This confrontational scene with Oogie and Jack exposes the cruel intentions of this particular shadow. Looking at this scene through a Jungian perspective, one would say that because Jack opened up the floor for recognizing Oogie for what he is, this then provides an opportunity for others such as Santa to take his personal revenge.

As Jack pulls the string on the sack destroying Oogie, he says, "How dare you treat my friends so shamefully!" Jack is mortified both by the exposure of the shadow and of its actions. However, he does recognize that it is his job to fix things and put them back to how they should be for the community. This is a moment in which Jack consciously explains that the way others were treated by his darkness is not appropriate, because he should have taken better care of them himself. He also recognizes he should have dealt with his shadow long ago. The defeat of the shadow gives Jack an opportunity to watch how he projects his negative energy and use it constructively. Jack's individuation process is greatly affected by addressing his shadow and recognizing who he really is as a person/skeleton. Jack acknowledges he has a shadow, pushes it aside in the beginning, and then ultimately confronts it in hopes "there's still time to set things right" (*Nightmare Before Christmas*) after he fails to merge his reality with another consciousness. As Jack understands his mistake in an entire plan to take over a holiday that is not his own, he comes to the realization that he is actually happy with himself after all. This cliché moment is a reflection on modern American society's grasp on the concept of individuation. When someone comes to the understanding they are in a place, or space they do not belong, and must move or change in order to fit into it, they have grown. Jack tries to change himself when he did not need changing. He simply needed the experience of finding where he does not belong, in order to confront his shadow in his own world/consciousness.

Jung would have been surprised to see the kind of facetious characters Tim Burton uses reflecting American society in an undead and comical version of reality. From a Jungian perspective, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is a play on the conscious and unconscious scenarios with which American society is plagued. The creative representations of the struggles every person goes through in this movie are entertaining, intriguing, and useful to remember when thinking about conscious and unconscious acts. Repressing darkness only leads to negative outcomes, as this film fully represents the events and strange repercussions of what such an action will produce. Violent actions within the film represent the American society's ongoing struggle for control over the unconscious. The confrontation with the unconscious is never cut-and-dried, and in Jack's case, leads to a great deal of shadow management, which could have easily been avoided. The process of individuation for the character of Jack derives from his experience in Christmas Town, the confrontation of his shadow, and his

realization that he must accept his responsibilities in order to maintain a healthy ego.

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