Stylistic devices in

Tim Burton’s

The Nightmare Before Christmas

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General information

The Nightmare Before Christmas, often promoted as Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas, is a 1993 American [stop motion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stop_motion) [musical](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_film) [fantasy film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fantasy_film) directed by [Henry Selick](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Selick) and produced by [Tim Burton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Burton). It tells the story of [Jack Skellington](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Skellington), a being from "[Halloween](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween) Town" who opens a [portal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal_(fiction)) to "[Christmas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas) Town" and decides to celebrate the holiday, with some dastardly and comical consequences.

The Nightmare Before Christmas originated in a poem written by Tim Burton in 1982. With the success of [Vincent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_(1982_film)) in the same year, Disney started to consider developing The Nightmare Before Christmas as either a [short film](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_film) or 30-minute [television special](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Television_special). Over the years, Burton's thoughts regularly returned to the project, and in 1990, he made a development deal with Disney. Production started in July 1991 in [San Francisco](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Francisco). [Disney](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Walt_Disney_Studios_(division)) decided to release the film under their [Touchstone Pictures](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Touchstone_Pictures) banner because they thought the movie would be "too dark, and scary for kids”.

The Nightmare Before Christmas was met with both critical and financial success. [Walt Disney Pictures](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walt_Disney_Pictures) has [reissued](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reissue) the film annually under their [Disney Digital 3D](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disney_Digital_3-D) format from 2006 until 2009, making it the first stop-motion animated feature to be entirely converted to 3D.

Plot

Halloween Town is a dream world filled with citizens such as deformed monsters, ghosts, ghouls, goblins, vampires, werewolves and witches. Jack Skellington, a respected entertainer amongst the citizens, grows tired of the repetitive yearly celebration of Halloween. He wanders in the wilderness, where he accidentally opens a portal to Christmas Town. Impressed by the feeling and style of Christmas, Jack presents the culture to the citizens of Halloween Town. While Jack may slightly understand Christmas, the town’s people fail to do so and compare everything Jack says to their ideas of Halloween. Nonetheless, the town’s people agree to celebrate Christmas and take over the holiday.

Jack's obsession with Christmas leads him to usurp the role of Santa Claus. Every resident is assigned a task, while Sally, a rag doll-type resident, fell in love with Jack. However, she alone fears that his plans will become disastrous. Jack then assigns Lock, Shock, and Barrel, a trio of mischievous children, to abduct Santa and take him to Halloween Town. Against Jack's wishes and largely for their amusement, the trio deliver Santa to Oogie Boogie, a gambling-addict bogeyman, who plots to play a game with Santa's life as the stake.

Christmas Eve arrives and Sally attempts to stop Jack, but he embarks into the sky on a coffin-like sled pulled by skeletal reindeer, hoping to deliver presents to children around the world. As Jack begins delivering gifts, children are horrified by their monstrous presents, which include shrunken heads, man-eating wreaths, vampiric teddy bears, 30-foot snakes, and pull-string ducks dotted with bloody bullet holes. Their parents believe Jack to be an imposter attempting to imitate Santa, and the military is commissioned to shoot Jack out of the sky. He is presumed dead by the Halloween citizens, but eventually is shown to be alive. Although he is initially depressed by the destruction he had caused, he realizes he is still the ruler of Halloween Town and can bring joy to the world in his own way.

Sally attempts to free Santa but fails and is captured by Oogie Boogie. With the climax ensuing, Jack rescues Sally and Santa and defeats Oogie Boogie. Santa reprimands Jack before setting off to save Jack's Christmas mistakes. Santa flies over Halloween Town and gives it snow as a gift to the town, signifying that there be no hard feelings between him and Jack. The town’s people are confused at first, but start to play in the snow. The film ends with Jack and Sally kissing on a spiral hill over the cemetery.

Analysis

In the beginning of the film the audience is introduced to the narrator who tells the story using rhyme, which gives us the sense of mystery:

*It was a long time ago, longer now than it seems*

*In a place that perhaps you’ve seen in your dreams.*

*For the story that you are about to be told*

*Took place in the holiday worlds of old.*

*Now you’ve probably wondered where holidays come from*

*If you haven’t, I’d say it’s time you began.*

After such an introduction, we hear a song about Halloween city. The town’s people address to us, using questions and imperative sentences thus making us be involved in the action, which takes place:

*Boys and girls of every age,*

*Wouldn’t you like to see something strange?*

*Come with us and you will see*

*This our town of Halloween*

This song also contains other stylistic devices such as:

* Epithets: *teeth grind sharp, eyes glowing red* (used to describe different creatures living in Halloween town, show their monstrosity);
* Similes: *fingers like snakes* (characterizes one of the monsters)*, scream like a banshee* (used to describe Jack’s horrible voice which is similar to a banshee’s one, a female spirit whose wailing warns of impending death);
* Metaphors: *dead of night* (a trite metaphor describing pitch darkness and making this town seem more scary);
* Personification: *pumpkins scream* (underlines that this is a fantastic, magic world where inanimate things can be animate);
* Rhetoric question: *Aren’t you scared?* (this question is addressed to us and shows the town’s people absolute certainty about their ability to make us be afraid of them);
* Periphrasis: *King of the Pumpkin Patch* (this title conferred to Jack stresses his significance in Halloween Town and respect of the town’s citizens for him);
* Hyperboles: *die of fright, jump out of your skin* (used to emphasize the great power which all the described monsters have to scare us);
* Oxymoron: a good scare (this stylistic device was used to show the town’s people’s attitude to fear)

Then the major and minor characters are introduced to us. Describing them, the author uses allusions. For example, *Dr. Finkelstein* refers us to famous Dr. Frankenstein. A rag doll *Sally* is somewhat similar to the Frankenstein’s monster and the Bride of Frankenstein, as she was a sewn-up monster created by a mad scientist. Moreover, Dr. Finkelstein speaks with a slight German accent, pronouncing her name like Shally and thus referring us to Mary Shelley, an English writer and the author of the novel about Frankenstein. *Igor*, the assistant of a mad doctor, has the same name as the assistant of Dr. Frankenstein. The vampires’ Romanian accent is referred to B. Stocker’s Dracula and creates a typical vampire’s image. *Mr. Hyde*, one of the minor characters, who has two smaller copies of himself inside his hat, is based on the character of the same name from the novel Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde by Robert L. Stevenson. Behemoth, another character, is named after a gigantic beast described in the Old Testament. Another stylistic device we can find in the characters’ names is a play upon words. For instance, Santa Claus is named *Sandy Claws* in the movie, because Jack, describing Christmas to his friends, wanted to awake their interest in this holiday and scare them. The names of three assistants The names of *Lock, Shock and Barrel,* characters which can cheat everybody or steal everything, are derived from a wordplay of the phrase "Lock, stock, and barrel," meaning 'everything', which in turn was derived from the components of a musket. The main antagonist, *Oogie Boogie man*, refers us to a well-known monster used to threat children – a boogeyman. All these stylistic devices were used to create more appropriate names for characters in such a dark and gloomy film and call up proper associations for the audience.

Then the author describes the impressions of the Halloween’s citizens after an annual All Saints’ Day. To do it he uses exclamatory sentences with affective epithets and rhetorical questions, showing their delight and admiration by the holiday: *It’s over! We did it! Wasn’t it terrifying? What a night! It was our most horrible yet! How perfectly marvelous!*

The witches, admired by Jack after the celebration, also express their feelings with exclamatory sentences containing affective epithets, hyperboles and genuine metaphors for emphasizing their ecstasy: *You’re such a scream! You’re witch’s fondest dream! You made walls fall! You made the very mountains crack! You made wounds ooze and flesh crawl!*

But Jack isn’t happy. He’s tired of this routine. So he goes to the cemetery where he sings a song about himself. In this song we can find different stylistic devices, helping to describe Jack and express his mood:

* Personification: *an emptiness began to grow* (shows that Jack’s sorrow is an uncontrolled action, living its own life);
* Epithets: *well-placed moan* (shows Jack’s wide experience in moaning)*, fury of my recitations* (a reversed epithet used to show Jack’s despair and rage by the situation);
* Simile: *no animal, no man can scream like I can* (shows Jack’s superiority in a scream skill);
* Allusion: *I can take off my head to recite Shakespearean quotations* (refers us to the dialog between Hamlet and Horatio about Yorick in Shakespeare’s tragedy “Hamlet”);
* Hyperbole: *I’ll scare you right out of your pants* (this hyperbole shows how skillful Jack is in scaring people);

After singing the protagonist goes for a walk and get in a random way to Christmas Town, an unknown place for him. To express Jack’s bewilderment and astonishment, the author uses:

* Repetition: *What’s this?* (the most repetitive phrase expressing Jack’s great surprise)*, This looks like fun! This looks like fun!* (this phrase tells us that Jack likes what is happening in this place), *I want it, oh, I want it, oh, I want it for my own!* (emphasizes Jack’s desire to celebrate this holiday in his town), *I’ve got to know, I’ve got to know what is this place that I have found!* (underlines Jack’s curiosity and his wish to know where he is);
* Periphrasis: *white things* (snowflakes)*, little tree* (Christmas tree)*, tiny little things* (Christmas tree decorations) – all the expressions emphasize Jack’s lack of knowledge of Christmas and its way of celebration;

Meanwhile the citizens of Halloween city are confused by Jack’s sudden disappearance. Their perplexity is shown with such a device like gradation, showing the growing anxiety for Jack: *It’s suspicious! It’s peculiar! It’s scary!*

But Jack is back and wants to tell to everybody about Christmas Town and the holiday itself. But in order to intrigue his friends and awake their interest in it he has to color the truth and make his speech more expressive. Analyzing it we can find the following stylistic devices:

* Similes: *it’s* *real as my scull and it does exist* (makes the town’s people be sure that Christmas town really exists)*, like a lobster huge and red* (describes Santa Claus)*, he flies into a fog like a vulture in the sky* (describes Santa’s flight across the sky and characterizes Santa as a negative character);
* Epithets: *big great arms* (shows Santa’s size)*, on a dark cold light under full moonlight* (describes a sinister atmosphere in which Santa flies)*, deep mighty voice* (describes Santa’s voice)*, fearsome king* (used to make the citizens believe that Santa is a scary person);
* Paraphrase: *ruler of the Christmasland* (used instead of Santa Claus);

The idea of celebrating Christmas seems interesting for the town’s people. Their approval is expressed with exclamatory sentences with affective epithets: *What a splendid idea! This Christmas sounds fun! I fully endorse it! How horrible our Christmas will be! How jolly! That’s splendid!*

Jack thinks about the way of celebrating Christmas but he can’t understand how it works.

* Personification: *Christmas time is buzzing in my skull* (shows that the thoughts about Christmas haunt him);
* Simile: *Through my bony fingers it does slip like a snowflake in a fiery grip* (underlines that Jack seems to be come close to hold the key to Christmas mystery);
* Repetition: *What does it mean? What does it mean?* (a phrase used underline Jack’s incomprehension of Christmas);
* Allusion: *Eureka!* (this phrase said by Jack when he understood how he can celebrate Christmas refer us to Archimedes and his famous exclamation);

Finally he decides to hire three tricksters to kidnap Santa Claus. He addresses to them using gradation showing all the risks of this work: *It requires craft, cunning, mischief.*

Further we can see a paraphrase and a pun in Lock, Shock and Barrel’s speech: *big red lobster man* (used instead of the name of Santa Claus) and *Jack will beat us black and green* (a pun derived from the expression ‘to beat black and blue’ which means ‘to bemaul somebody’; moreover, since one of the main colors of Halloween are black and green, the word ‘blue’ was changed).

Toward the end of the movie stylistic devices are found rarely. There are some of them deserving our attention:

* Simile: *this fog as thick as jellied brains* (describes the fog created by Sally who had a foreboding of evil and wanted to prevent Jack from his sleigh ride)*;*
* Irony: *I made you with my own hands* (a Dr. Finkelstein’s phrase which is ironic as his body doesn’t have hands but deformed extremities which look like flippers);
* Gradation: *my hopes, my dreams, my fantasies* (Jack’s phrase expressing that all he wanted becomes real); *there go all of my hopes, my precious plans, my glorious dreams* (this gradation containing affective epithets is used to show Jack’s despair because of an inability to make Christmas);
* Inversion: *Here lies poor old Jack* (a typical inscription on a gravestone said by Jack who wanted to die because he spoiled Christmas);
* Onomatopoeia: *tickle tickle tickle* (characterizes a typical sound pronounced by Oogie Boogie who tickled Sally);
* Hyperbole: *I’m drowning in my tears* (shows Oogie Boogie’s state since he has a lot of fun because Santa Claus wasn’t so scary as Jack described him).

To sum up, it’s worth saying that Tim Burton using not only the above-listed expressive means and stylistic devices, but also image and sound effects, created a dark fantastic world and plunged us to its gloomy atmosphere. He described skillfully all the characters and showed their moods, opinions, views. This movie in a little ironic way expresses the author’s main idea: everyone ought to be oneself and stick to one’s last.