The Hero’s Journey in Tim Burton’s Corpse Bride

by Lucent Aster

Tim Burton’s 2005 Corpse Bride is a hero’s journey for Victor VanDort, one in which he encounters the Great Goddess in the forms of the maiden, the mother, and the witch, and one which takes him away from his stuffy Victorian life to a vibrant underworld.

Within the first ten minutes, the viewer meets two potential representatives of the great goddess: Nell VanDort and Maudeline Everglot. If they were to express more than selfish intentions, they would represent ideal mothers. Both openly express they want their child married; however, both desire the match for their own well-being. The VanDorts, the nuveau riche who have made a small fortune in fish, wish to attach their names to an established family. The Everglots, the broke aristocrats, need the assets to maintain their upper-class position. The VanDorts search for Victor after his disappearance with some concern for his well-being, but more concerned with his return before sunrise so he could marry Victoria. Mrs. Everglot never hides her selfishness, and when Barkis enters the film, she welcomes his apparent aristocracy and approves him as a match for her daughter. In fact, her name, Muadeline, similar to maudlin, or overly emotional to a ridiculous degree (like a drink) contrasts the complete lack of emotion with which she engages her daughter. Both mothers then fail as the representative mother goddess.

If we look beyond the obvious figures for mothers, we meet what the mother goddess, the Demeter, should be. She arrives as Hilda, the servant for the Everglots, and the black widow who assists the corpse bride in the afterlife. Hilda helps Victoria dress for her wedding (much like the nurse in Romeo and Juliet) and offers Victoria this advice, “the sea leads to many places.” When Victoria does wed Barkis, it is Hilda who weeps for her. The black widow also assumes this mother goddess role, watching for the maiden, offering her reassuring compliments.
and advice on how to deal with the living groom. However, though both the servant and the black widow may serve as mother figures, the women they help represent the other parts of the trinity.

If Victoria Everglot can represent the maiden, Persephone, then the corpse bride is the hag, the Hecate. Victoria is youthful and beautiful. Her youth wants to deny the Victorian severity, as is seen when she meets with Victor by the piano and gives him the branch from the vase. Her mother scorns this impropriety, but Victoria finds pleasure in Victor, and in their union, Victor sees the potential for happiness. Victoria lives in the civilized world, and marrying her would be a marriage to life. In Emily, however, the corpse bride, though Victor at one point resigns himself to a non-living happiness, she still best represents the hag. First, she is dead, and in her death, she crumbles in decay. Her hand snaps off, her leg and eye pop out, and a maggot feasts on her brain; yet, despite her obvious faltering flesh, she remains alluringly beautiful. Her body resides in the woods, the dark place, the unknown. Her hair flows in dark strands, and when she rises with Victor from the underworld, she dances and twirls beneath the moonlight, much like believers attributed to Hecate’s and witches’ midnight gallivants. As is the case with the hag or the witch, Emily associates with macabre creatures. Upon rising she brings with her crows. In the underworld she speaks with black widows. Coinciding with her appearance and associates, Emily can also bring death to men. She brings Victor to the underworld, and when they return, she says hopscotch and drags him back from the land of the living. To have and keep Victor for eternity, she must kill him. Again, marriage to Victoria represents a new life, with a new couple and children possibly in the future, but marriage to Emily brings nothing but sterility and death.

To fully understand Victor’s heroic journey, we must do more than view the women he encounters; we must also consider where he goes and what he learns while there. The film
introduces the concept of a pleasant afterlife in the opening scene. Victor draws a butterfly and sets his blue muse free. The butterfly flutters through the groggy gray streets of some 1800s Victorian set town, so the butterfly pops to life. A butterfly, of course, becomes after hatching from a cocoon, after hatching from an old life into a new. This butterfly represents the vibrancy of the afterlife Victor will soon meet. His current setting squeezes all joy and freedom from his life. His mother and father tell him he must marry Victoria. His future mother-in-law and father-in-law fail to hide their repulsion at his social status. Even Pastor Galswells does nothing but yell and demand and intimidate. Aside from brief intimate moments with Victoria, the drab, monotonous, stiff-set Victorian life resembles more a dreary death than a brief life.

Once waking in the afterlife, we quickly see death is more like Oz and life more like Kansas. At no point do the characters in the afterlife mention God or devil, heaven or hell. When Barkis dies, we can assume he gets punished for his sins, but it is a punished administered by his fellow dead, not by some governing being of the underworld. In this sense then, the afterlife is not a Judaic or Christian afterlife. It may compare better to the Greek concept of the underworld. However, these dead are not just spirits. They may not even be souls. Physically, the dead carry on in the afterlife. Some bodies face immortality as a set of bones, and the levels of decay vary from half decomposed arms to rotted noses. None of the dead restore to absolute beauty. Death continues to work on the dead. But in the afterlife, the dead continue to work as well.

Unlike the Victorian life Victor knew, life in the afterlife allows for freedom and fun. Yes, the dead do have jobs. Caterers, bartenders, jazz musicians, street sweepers, bakers - they all have purpose in the afterlife. Here they dance and sing and, again, unlike upstairs, they welcome all. When Victor awakes, they openly welcome him to their society. The VanDort’s stagecoach driver coughs himself to death after years of being told to shut up and being treated like an idiot,
and then he finds himself crowded by the dead, enjoying a glass of poison. The colors in the afterlife reflect the liveliness portrayed in their spirited celebrations. Skeletons play pool, a Napoleonic figure swigs beers- to match this joy, reds, oranges, and yellows burst on the walls of this winding city, and though it is a city, it is one in which the citizens do not despise or upturn their noses at each other- maybe because most of their noses fell off already.

This portrayal may appear, due to its excitement, uncontrolled by rules, and some rules are broken, but the dead do have to follow some regulations. In the underworld, Victor reunites with his dog, Scraps, and in this reunion Scraps jumps up at Victor. In life, Scraps could not display his excitement. When Victor meets the Everglots, Victoria tells him no one can play the piano, yet Victor possesses talent on the keys. In the afterlife, Victor and Emily enjoy a duet together. However, the dead do have to follow some rules. In the church, when the dead realize Barkis’s part in Emily’s death, they want to harm him, but the elder reminds them: the dead cannot harm the living. If the living knew this earlier in the film, they would not have responded so wildly when the dead rose. In this scene, though the living overreact, they eventually realize their loved ones have returned. This scene introduces the most hopeful point concerning the afterlife: no matter how long ago the dead became citizens of the brightly colored underworld, they can reach the living; they do not forget the loved ones they left. If anything, death has fortified their love.

Victor does venture out on a hero’s journey, and he returns with this message of love. He leaves civility and wanders into the woods, that magically mysterious place where strange stories occur. He travels to a foreign land, a land so foreign that aside from the spiders and maggots, Victor represents the only living figure. The Everglots set a time limit for his journey, stating he must return before dawn to claim their daughter. He returns to the land of the living by deceiving Emily, and while it was not the nicest trick, it was reminiscent of Odysseus’s trickery
throughout his journey home. Even when Victor does return for good, he must physically battle the evil Barkis Bittern in the church, and like Odysseus, Victor receives assistance from the otherworld when Emily throws herself before Barkis’s blade. Victor, like Odysseus, also receives the offer of immortality and love; however, if Victor were to stay in the underworld and not return, then the hero’s journey would remain incomplete. By returning to Victoria, Victor brings with him a better grasp of love, marriage, self-sacrifice, and how to rejoice in life.

When Tim Burton’s *Corpse Bride* hit screens in 2005, it may have received laughs for its slap-stick portrayal of skulls falling off shoulders and corpses tripping over roots; its contrasting images of drab Victorian life and the vivacious afterlife may have wowed the audience. However, in this film, Victor does venture to the unknown Greek-styled afterlife and does meet representatives of the Great Goddess to return with knowledge of what life could offer if he were to loosen the strict rules forced upon him. If a bunch of rotting corpses could transform the afterlife into such a welcoming, pleasurable experience, what could the living do with the now?