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# The Monstrous Children: Reading Tim Burton's Poetry through Gothic and Monster Theory

## 1. Introduction

Tim Burton is best known as an American filmmaker, celebrated for cult classics such as *Batman* (1989), *Beetlejuice* (1988), and *Edward Scissorhands* (1990). His widespread acclaim stems from his distinctive authorial style, frequently described as "Burtonesque"[1], which is deeply rooted in the Gothic tradition. Characterised by an obsession with the porous boundaries between the natural and the supernatural, this aesthetic employs a visual language rich in macabre settings, grotesque figures, and monstrous bodies. Burton's stylistic approach resonates with both literary Gothic – epitomised by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1746) – and the conventions of early Gothic cinema, particularly the warped visuals and psychological unease of German Expressionist films like Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920).

As Stella Hockenhull and Fran Pheasant-Kelly observe, "bodies are central to Burton's films in ways that exceed their obvious necessity to narrative"[2]. Indeed, Burton's bodies are often rendered monstrous – deformed, disfigured, or undead – reflecting his own professed affinity for such figures. As he once remarked: "I felt most monsters were basically misperceived, they usually had more heartfelt souls than the human characters around them"[3]. Themes of alienation, misperception, and the porous boundary between humanity and monstrosity pervade Burton's oeuvre, frequently crystallising in his adolescent characters[4]. These figures position the monstrous child as a recurring and thematically potent motif in his work.

[1] Salisbury M., *Burton on Burton*, London, Faber and Faber, 2006, s. XVIII.

[2] Hockenhull S., Pheasant-Kelly F., *Tim Burton's Bodies: Gothic, Animated, Creaturely and Corporeal*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022.

[3] Salisbury M., *Burton on Burton,* op. cit., s. 2–3.

[4] Barkman A., Sanna A. (red.), *A Critical Companion to Tim Burton*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2017, s. IX.

This paper expands critical discussions of bodily centrality in Burton's oeuvre by examining a relatively underexplored dimension of his creative practice: his poetry. Focusing on three selections from his 1997 illustrated collection *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy & Other Stories – Robot Boy*, *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy*, and *Mummy Boy* – this study employs Gothic and monster theory to demonstrate how these poetic works position children as embodiments of abjection and alterity. The analysis is grounded in a qualitative, interpretive methodology that combines close reading with theoretical frameworks drawn from Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's taxonomy of monstrosity, and Margarita Georgieva's theory of the Gothic child. Attending to imagery, narrative structure, symbolic contradiction, and intertextual resonances, the article approaches the poems not merely as aesthetic compositions but as cultural texts that encode anxieties about parenthood, corporeality, and normativity. The poems' preoccupation with physical difference, childhood terror, and fluid identity markers reveals their deep consonance with Gothic tradition's enduring fascinations. As such, this analysis illuminates Burton's significant yet understudied contribution to Gothic discourse through his poetic works.

Tim Burton's oeuvre demonstrates a persistent preoccupation with corporeal aberration, frequently manifested through synecdochic emphasis on exaggerated eyes, hands, and other anatomical features. As Bassil-Morozow[5] notes, such visual motifs simultaneously signify Burton's characters' misunderstood genius and reinforce their social marginalisation. This perspective is echoed by Lipiner and Cobb[6], who contend that Burton's deployment of physical deformity visually encodes his protagonists' alienation from normative social structures. Building on these observations, Xavier Aldana Reyes'[7] theorisation of Gothic bodies proves particularly illuminating: the terror they evoke stems from their ontological indeterminacy – their capacity to destabilise rigid human categories and subvert hegemonic notions of bodily integrity.

These theoretical frameworks prove especially pertinent when examining the monstrous children of *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy*, *Robot Boy*, and *Mummy Boy*. Each figure embodies a radical challenge to conventional human ontology: Oyster Boy exists as a grotesque hybrid, his molluscan physiology rendering him neither fully human nor entirely other; Robot Boy's mechanical constitution and electrical dependency problematise organic vitality; and Mummy Boy's desiccated, bandage-wrapped form literalises the paradox of animate death. These characters fundamentally reject traditional conceptions of childhood as a state defined by vitality, growth, and innocence, instead occupying liminal spaces that render them profoundly unsettling with-

[5] Bassil-Morozow H., *The Semiotics of a Broken Body: Tim Burton's Use of Synecdoche* [W:] S. Hockenhull, F. Pheasant-Kelly (red.), *Tim Burton's Bodies: Gothic, Animated, Creaturely and Corporeal*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, s. 163.

[6] Cobb T. J., Lipiner M., *The Grotesque Social Outcast in the Films of Tim Burton* [W:] S. Hockenhull, F. Pheasant-Kelly (red.), *Tim Burton's Bodies: Gothic, Animated, Creaturely and Corporeal*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022, s. 217.

[7] Aldana Reyes X., *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2014, s. 5.

in both Gothic conventions and societal expectations of childhood. Crucially, these characters' physical aberrations transcend mere spectacle. Their deformities operate as potent visual metaphors for cultural anxieties surrounding nonconformity, social exclusion, and the failure to meet idealised developmental benchmarks. As such, their bodies function not merely as objects of horror or pathos, but as sites of cultural critique – demonstrating how Gothic representations of childhood frequently serve as vehicles for interrogating broader societal fears and instabilities.

As Andrew Scahill[8] compellingly argues, the monstrous child resists reduction to a mere diminutive version of adult monstrosity; instead, it represents a distinct ontological category requiring specialised critical engagement. Within Gothic narratives, child monsters crystallise cultural anxieties that extend beyond conventional concerns with corporeality and identity to encompass fundamental questions about innocence, vulnerability, and futurity. This critical perspective necessitates reading Mummy Boy, Oyster Boy, and Robot Boy not simply as grotesque curiosities, but as complex embodiments of childhood monstrosity – their significance fundamentally shaped by their developmental stage and their fraught positions within both familial hierarchies and broader social systems.Margarita Georgieva[9] posits that Gothic narratives frequently frame childhood through a dual lens of birth and termination, observing that "the creation of children thus ensures continuity and transmission of the heritage but also brings death." This fundamental paradox where the child simultaneously embodies hope and decay, underpins the fragile equilibrium of both Gothic familial and social structures. Burton's *Robot Boy*, *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy*, and *Mummy Boy* render this dynamic with grotesque literality. Each poem commences not with a conventional birth, but with the emergence of a child already inscribed with monstrosity. Their anomalous origins transcend mere association with mortality – they constitute mortality itself. Robot Boy, conceived through mechanical adultery, enters the world as synthetic artifice. Oyster Boy emerges as destined consumption, his very ontology anticipating ingestion. Mummy Boy, framed as the product of an "old pharaoh curse," manifests as a corpse-child. These figures destabilise Georgieva's binary; they function simultaneously as birth and death. Their monstrosity resides not in subsequent transformation, but in the essential conditions of their being, situating them in an ontological limbo between vitality and decay. These are not children who become monstrous – they are children whose very conception constitutes an act of monstrosity.

Georgieva[10] observes that Gothic narratives often foreground "the struggle between good and evil in a child's soul," a dichotomy that fundamentally shapes narrative outcomes: "An evil child is thus either destined to die or to grow into a gothic villain. A good child is destined to die or to suffer, fight and grow into a gothic hero

[8] Scahill A., *The Revolting Child in Horror Cinema: Youth Rebellion and Queer Spectatorship*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan US, 2015, s. 4.

[9] Georgieva M., *The Gothic Child*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, s. 197.

[10] Ibidem, s. 39–40.

or heroine." This moral binary has traditionally governed Gothic literature's representation of childhood, positioning children as either corrupted innocents or doomed saints. Yet Burton's Robot Boy, Oyster Boy, and Mummy Boy resist this paradigm entirely.

As Jessica Balanzategui[11] contends, horror can alternatively arise from "the complex and impalpable ways in which [children] seem at once familiar and alien, vulnerable and threatening, innocent and dangerously indecipherable" – a formulation that resonates strongly with Sigmund Freud's conceptualisation of the uncanny (*unheimlich*). Burton's monstrous children epitomise this uncanny duality: they exist outside conventional moral categories, neither villains nor heroes, neither wholly corrupt nor purely innocent. Their disturbing power stems precisely from their ontological indeterminacy within domestic spaces – as figures that simultaneously belong and repel, that are recognised yet remain ultimately unknowable. These characters expose the fundamental instabilities of the family structure not through moral struggle, but through their very being. They constitute what Julia Kristeva might term "abject" presences – entities that "disturb[s] identity, system, order"[12] by refusing clear categorisation. In this way, Burton's children represent a radical departure from Gothic tradition: their horror emerges not from internal moral conflict, but from their existential challenge to the symbolic order of the domestic sphere.

## 2. Oyster Boy – familial disruption

As Bernice Murphy[13] observes, the family unit has consistently functioned as a primary locus of horror in Gothic tradition, particularly within American cultural production. Murphy argues that Gothic narratives often locate terror not in external threats but within the domestic sphere itself, where familial relationships become the source of dread[14]. For instance, in the American Suburban Gothic, the disturbance frequently originates not from an outsider but from within the family, disrupting the idealised vision of the suburban home[15]. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy*, where the child's monstrous body destabilises the seemingly normative family structure. Rather than responding with parental care, Oyster Boy's parents react with horror, shame, and ultimately rejection, projecting their disappointment and relational dysfunction onto their offspring. Their sex life deteriorates, their marriage falters, and the child becomes a scapegoat for their emo-

[11] Balanzategui J., *The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema: Ghosts of Futurity at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, s. 12.

[12] Kristeva J., *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982, s. 4.

[13] Murphy B. M., *Children Misbehaving in the Walls!" Or, Wes Craven's Suburban Family Values* [W:] A. Andeweg, S. Zlosnik (red.), *Gothic Kinship*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013, s. 81.

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Murphy B. M., *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, s. 136.

tional disintegration. The expected nurturing bond between parent and child is here grotesquely transformed: the parents become the agents of harm. This encapsulates a central Gothic anxiety surrounding reproductive failure – the fear of producing something unknowable, unlovable, or unmanageable, and of being unequipped to parent it. The poem ultimately reveals domestic harmony as a cultural fiction, one that crumbles when confronted with the reality of difference and the limitations of parental love.

Kristeva's theory of abjection provides a powerful framework for understanding the horror provoked by Oyster Boy's monstrous embodiment. As Kristeva defines it, abjection emerges from encounters with what "disturbs identity, system, and order," eliciting profound physical revulsion[16]. Oyster Boy epitomises this categorical crisis—his mucous-covered, shell-encased form becomes the literal embodiment of boundary transgression. The mother's horrified rejection ("He cannot be mine. / He smells of the ocean, of seaweed and brine"[17]) vividly manifests Kristeva's concept of maternal abjection, where the child's threatening liminality triggers violent repudiation. Rather than embracing the child as an extension of self, she expels him as fundamentally alien and contaminating. This moment gains deeper resonance when contextualised against the family's earlier maritime domesticity – their Capri honeymoon and seafood dinners. Oyster Boy's body emerges as the grotesque return of this repressed aquatic symbolism: his clam shell functions as a yonic symbol, simultaneously signifying the mother's sexuality and the terrifying fluidity between her body and the child's. His very form materialises the abject horror of maternal permeability, transforming what was once romanticised (the sea, shellfish) into a source of visceral dread.

The paternal confrontation with abjection takes a radically different form: violent annihilation. In a desperate attempt to restore domestic order and reclaim conventional fatherhood, the father follows the doctor's suggestion and consumes Sam, The Oyster Boy: "As he picked up his son, / Sam dripped on his coat. / With the shell to his lips, / Sam slipped down his throat."[18] This horrific act embodies Kristevan abjection – the literal incorporation of that which threatens the self's boundaries. The child's bodily difference, already rejected by the mother, is now physically eradicated by the father in a grotesque perversion of paternal care that echoes the Cronus myth. This cannibalistic moment functions as a purifying ritual, exemplifying Kristeva's observation that "corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live."[19] Oyster Boy becomes a sacrificial offering through which the father attempts to purge domestic monstrosity, his consumption embodying both revulsion and the desire for restoration. The act also reveals deeper cultural anxieties about masculine identity and reproductive control. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock notes, "patriarchal logic turns

[16] Kristeva J., *Powers of Horror…*, op. cit., s. 4.

[17] Burton T., *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy & Other Stories*, London, Faber and Faber, 2005, s. 35.

[18] Burton T., *The Melancholy Death…*, op. cit., s. 45.

[19] Kristeva J., *Powers of Horror…*, op. cit., s. 3.

difference into edible submission"[20] – the father's devouring constitutes a violent reassertion of dominance over what he cannot comprehend or accept.

Through this consumption, the father performs the ultimate ontological reduction: transforming his hybrid child into mere food, erasing Sam's humanity while paradoxically incorporating him into his own body. This creates a disturbing collapse of boundaries between self/other and parent/child, even as it attempts to reinforce patriarchal order. Oyster Boy's body thus becomes the ultimate Gothic battleground – a site where both maternal and paternal anxieties are violently projected and "resolved" through literal digestion, making him the perfect victim of the abject family structure.

*The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy*'s narrative illustrates society's tendency to construct childhood monstrosity as justification for violence and exclusion. The institutional figures surrounding him – his parents and a doctor – respond not with compassion but with visceral disgust. Oyster Boy's mere existence provokes terror by embodying three fundamental transgressions: the disruption of reproductive norms, the subversion of sexual boundaries, and the challenge to human exceptionalism. The story's true horror emerges through this reversal: the child's imagined monstrosity ultimately reveals the authentic moral deformity of society. What appears as a tale about an abnormal child becomes an indictment of the cruelty, hypocrisy, and self-interest concealed beneath conventional domesticity. Oyster Boy functions as a Gothic mirror, reflecting not his own flaws but the monstrous capacities of those who claim normalcy.

The child's abrupt burial – "They buried him quickly in the sand by the sea"[21] – signifies not mourning but disposal. Oyster Boy's return to the marine environment that shaped his existence completes the cycle of rejection, literalising Kristeva's imperative that "the abject must be radically excluded"[22] through both expulsion and concealment. Throughout the narrative, Oyster Boy remains profoundly passive – never threatening, yet perpetually silenced – his voicelessness intensifying his ultimate powerlessness. This silent suffering transforms him into what Weinstock terms Gothic childhood's most potent function: an "instrument of revelation."[23] As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen reminds us, "the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically 'that which reveals'"[24], and so, Oyster Boy's violated body becomes a reflective surface exposing the rot beneath domestic fantasies. Through this child-monster, Burton uncovers the family's deepest terrors: the dread of reproductive failure, the horror of difference, and the paralysing fear of the uncanny emerging from within supposedly safe spaces of kinship.

[20] Weinstock J. A., *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2023, s. 64.

[21] Burton T., *The Melancholy Death…*, op. cit., s. 47.

[22] Kristeva J., *Powers of Horror…*, op. cit., s. 3.

[23] Weinstock J. A., *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment…*, op. cit., s. 61.

[24] Cohen J. J. (red.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, s. 4.

## 3. Robot Boy – a machine fusion

Noël Carroll identifies fusion as one of the primary means by which monstrosity is constructed in horror narratives. Fusion monsters, he argues, transgress fundamental categorical boundaries, such as inside and outside, living and dead, human and machine, by combining incompatible traits in a single, discrete entity.[25] Robot Boy perfectly embodies such a fusion figure. His body merges the innocence and vulnerability of a human child with the artificial, inorganic qualities of a machine. As the poem notes, he "wasn't warm and cuddly / and he didn't have skin. / Instead, there was a cold, thin layer of tin."[26] Robot Boy exists in a state of ontological ambiguity. He doesn't live biologically but merely functions when plugged in, blurring the line between life and mechanism. His mechanical body reduces childhood to an artificial construct, transforming what should be organic and warm into something cold and manufactured. The image of a baby with an extension cable for an umbilical cord and metal for skin grotesquely conflates birth with industrial production, nurture with electrical utility. This fusion creates profound uncanniness – a child figure that appears familiar yet is fundamentally alien. Within the family, such categorical ambiguity cannot be tolerated. Robot Boy's mere existence threatens both domestic and ontological order, making him not just an oddity but a walking violation of nature itself. His passive presence exposes society's deep anxiety about boundaries being crossed, particularly those that separate the human from the technological, the natural from the artificial.

Building on Michel Foucault's analysis of sexuality and surveillance and Susan Stewart's work on monstrous autonomy, Cohen contends that "the monster embodies those sexual practices that must not be committed, or that may be committed only through the body of the monster."[27] This framework illuminates Robot Boy's origins in transgressive sexuality – his conception through his mother's absurd affair with a "microwave blender." The child becomes a physical manifestation of forbidden desire, his very existence documenting the adulterous act society seeks to suppress. His mechanical form – the cold tin shell, electrical dependency, and detachable plug – grotesquely parodies reproductive biology, transforming the maternal womb into an industrial apparatus. Through a Kristevan lens, Robot Boy epitomises the abject: his body materialises the mother's disruptive sexuality and the breakdown of domestic containment. He is more than a technological hybrid; he is sexual transgression incarnate – an impossible offspring whose form destabilises moral, familial, and human boundaries. This ontological threat generates dual parental anxieties. For the mother, he embodies her deviant desire made visible. For Mr. Smith, the child provokes crises of masculinity and paternity, culminating in the doctor's revelation that "this

[25] Carroll N., *Fantastic Biologies and the Structures of Horrific Imagery* [W:] J. A. Weinstock (red.), *The Monster Theory Reader*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, s. 137.

[26] Burton T., *The Melancholy Death…*, op. cit., s. 5.

[27] Cohen J. J. (red.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, s. 14.

is not your son." The exposure of fabricated fatherhood and mechanised maternity reconfigures the entire family as monstrous, collapsing traditional parental roles. The once-stable household fractures under this compounded transgression – the father rendered biologically irrelevant, the mother's sexuality mechanised, and their child an uncanny product of technological adultery.

Robot Boy's body thus becomes the locus of both maternal transgression and paternal failure, serving as a grotesque catalyst for familial disintegration. In the poem, Mr. Smith's outrage culminates in a confrontation with the doctor: "What have you done to my boy? / He's not flesh and blood, / he's aluminum alloy!"[28] This outburst expresses more than disbelief; it exposes a fundamental rupture in the symbolic order of the family. As Kristeva notes, drawing from Jacques Lacan's theory of the symbolic, the paternal function is always subject to disruption when the Other infiltrates the family structure.[29] Robot Boy embodies this disruption: an artificial child born of adultery, he enters the household like a mechanical cuckoo in the nest. He is not only alien in form but illegitimate in origin, a being whose presence renders the domestic sphere a site of betrayal and collapse. Mr. Smith's rage stems not merely from the loss of biological lineage but from the collapse of his symbolic authority as father. Unable to assert control or restore order, and unwilling to dismantle the family completely, he is left emasculated and displaced – an emotional state mirrored by the household, now filled with "misery and strife."[30]

The abjection projected onto Robot Boy's mechanical form has profound consequences for his very existence. Already marked as Other by his artificial origins, he suffers further dehumanisation through the denial of fundamental subjectivity and identity. Stripped of agency over his own body, even his gender becomes contested – reduced to clinical speculation when the doctor states "there still is some question / about the child's gender."[31] While superficially referred to as "boy," "son," and eventually "young man," these labels ring hollow against his ontological resistance to binary classification. Georgieva's analysis of Gothic childhood proves illuminating here, as she identifies gender ambiguity as a recurring feature of monstrous children who occupy liminal states – beings that exist "simultaneously male and female, self and other, an ultimate and total representation of all being."[32] Robot Boy's indeterminate gender thus transcends mere medical curiosity; it signifies his fundamental Gothic nature as a creature of thresholds and contradictions. His mechanical body, artificial "life," and ambiguous identity collectively position him outside human categories, making him not just a technological hybrid but an ontological paradox. In this light, his gender instability becomes not a defect but a manifestation of his monstrous transcendence – a being whose very existence challenges the frameworks we use to define personhood.

[28] Burton T., *The Melancholy Death…*, op. cit., s. 7.

[29] Kristeva J., *Powers of Horror…*, op. cit., s. 7–10.

[30] Burton T., *The Melancholy Death…*, op. cit., s. 9.

[31] Ibidem, s. 7.

[32] Georgieva M., *The Gothic Child*, op. cit., s. 198.

Robot Boy's liminal existence culminates in his tragic metamorphosis into pure object: "Robot Boy grew to be a young man. / Though he was often mistaken for a garbage can."[33] Here, his body becomes completely symbolic of disposability. His personhood is eclipsed by function; his physical difference is reinterpreted as waste. As Weinstock argues, the non-normative child becomes a "cipher of systemic neglect and depersonalization,"[34] and Robot Boy's fate epitomises this process. Stripped of identity, denied care, and rejected by his creators, he becomes an empty shell – both literally and metaphorically.

Robot Boy's mechanical form serves as the literal embodiment of monstrous alterity – what Cohen famously terms "difference made flesh."[35] His monstrosity emerges not through violent acts or antisocial behaviour, but through the fundamentally unassimilable nature of his being. The cold aluminium shell that replaces human skin, his ambiguous gender, and his purely functional existence collectively place him outside all normative categories of childhood, masculinity, and even personhood. Like refuse meant for disposal, his very presence demands concealment or eradication – yet he persists, an uncanny remainder that refuses to disappear. This persistent visibility constitutes his true Gothic horror. Robot Boy becomes what society cannot acknowledge yet cannot destroy: the genderless child, the unlovable offspring, the unclaimable creation. His mechanical body stands as both accusation and evidence, exposing the violence of categorical thinking. In this way, he fulfils the ultimate Gothic paradox – simultaneously representing what must be rejected and what cannot be erased, making visible the social limits of tolerance through his very existence at its margins.

## 4. Mummy Boy – the past infecting the present

Kristeva defines the corpse as "the utmost of abjection" because it forces the living subject to confront death as something both intrinsic to and expelled from life.[36] In this framework, Mummy Boy is the abject made literal: a child whose body, rather than symbolising vitality, is marked from the start by death and decay. His form is "hollow" and wrapped in bandages, and he is diagnosed not as a living child but as the result of "an old pharaoh curse."[37] Rather than being embraced by his parents, he is dismissed as "a reject from an archaeological expedition,"[38] treated as a relic rather than a son. His existence collapses binary oppositions, living and dead, young and ancient, human and object, disrupting the symbolic and biological boundaries that structure familial and social order. Mummy Boy's monstrosity is rooted not in any be-

[33] Burton T., *The Melancholy Death…*, op. cit., s. 9.

[34] Weinstock J. A., *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment…*, op. cit., s. 39.

[35] Cohen J. J. (ed.*), Monster Theory…*, op. cit., s. 7.

[36] Kristeva J., *Powers of Horror…*, op. cit., s. 4.

[37] Burton T., *The Melancholy Death…*, op. cit., s. 77.

[38] Ibidem, s. 78.

haviour, but in the disturbing contradiction of his body: a child born already marked by the signs of death.

This fusion of incompatible states also positions Mummy Boy as what Jackson et al.[39] describe as a Gothic chronotope – a figure through which the past that remains present is made visible. In Gothic child narratives, they argue, the past often projects itself through the child, and Mummy Boy embodies this projection in full. His corpse-like body becomes a literal archive of ancient trauma, and his every gesture, his wrapped limbs, lifeless frame, and supernatural origin, anchors the narrative in a temporality that is neither past nor present. He does not simply carry historical residue; he is a living site of historical intrusion. Instead of representing a future to be nurtured, Mummy Boy turns the domestic space into a haunted terrain where the ancient past lingers, unsettling any coherent sense of linear time or generational continuity. In this way, his monstrosity functions not just through abjection, but through temporal dislocation, rendering him both a symbolic corpse and a living chronotope.

This embodiment of the past is echoed in Mummy Boy's actions, which enact rituals and references far removed from the world of his peers. He suggests playing "an ancient game of virgin sacrifice," builds miniature pyramids for his mummy dog, and consumes "tanna leaves."[40, 41] These behaviours are not incidental as they reflect how his identity is shaped entirely by cultural and historical scripts of monstrosity. His actions reinforce the notion that he is more myth than child, more relic than person. Rather than developing a sense of self or individuality, Mummy Boy performs his monstrous inheritance. He becomes an objectified vehicle for the performance of history and horror, unable to escape the legacy inscribed onto his body. In this way, he exemplifies how the Gothic child functions not only as a symbol of familial anxiety, but also as a site through which cultural memory and collective fear are staged.

All the markers of Mummy Boy's abjection: his corpse-like body, his temporal dislocation, and his status as a literal embodiment of the past haunting the present, do not remain without consequence for him as a subject. Although described as "not very nice" by his peers, he is portrayed as a compassionate and gentle figure, especially in his care for a stray mummy dog. Rejected by his parents and dismissed by other children, Mummy Boy attempts to reclaim a sliver of subjectivity through this small act of nurturing. Yet even this effort is violently undermined. When he takes his dog for a walk in the park, he encounters a Mexican girl's birthday party. There, he is not recognised as a child or even as a living being but mistaken for a piñata: a literal object to be broken. This moment seals his dehumanisation, reducing him to a festive prop whose destruction is not only accepted but celebrated. His death is framed not as a tragedy, but as a misrecognition turned lethal.

[39] Jackson A. i in. (red.), *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders*, New York, Routledge, 2007, s. 14.

[40] Burton T., *The Melancholy Death…*, op. cit., s. 79–84.

[41] Burton's "tanna leaves" seem like a nod to Universal's *The Mummy* franchise, where a brew of tanna leaves sustains the undead.

Dale Townshend observes that sympathy for the Gothic Other is "indistinguishable from the violent forms of actual and symbolic murder with which these narratives often end—the dismemberment and obliteration of the monster or the expulsion and exorcism of the ghost."[42] Mummy Boy exemplifies this contradiction. Although portrayed as kind and caring, he remains fundamentally unassimilable. His body, marked by death from the start, places him beyond recognition as a real child. Misrecognised as a piñata, he is violently destroyed by his peers, his difference rendered not only irredeemable but disposable. His annihilation, despite his gentleness, underlines the Gothic logic that even sympathetic monsters must be eradicated. In *Mummy Boy*, Burton stages monstrosity not as threat, but as the condition of being unrecognised within systems that demand conformity. He becomes, ultimately, not a villain, but a victim of symbolic and narrative necessity.

## 5. Conclusion

Tim Burton's *Robot Boy*, *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy*, and *Mummy Boy* challenge conventional representations of childhood by positioning the child as an abject, monstrous figure. These children occupy a liminal space between categories: living and dead, organic and artificial, human and nonhuman. Their bodies defy the idealised image of the innocent child, instead becoming sites of collapse, disorder, and rejection. This inversion places Burton's poems firmly within the Gothic tradition, where the family is a space of unease, and the child becomes a vessel for cultural anxiety.

Their monstrosity does not stem from any act of violence or malice, but from the way others react to their difference. As Kristeva contends, the abject must be cast out to preserve symbolic order, and Burton's child-figures are expelled precisely because they disrupt that order. Robot Boy's mechanical body fractures the coherence of the family unit; Oyster Boy's hybrid form provokes disgust rather than care; Mummy Boy's corpse-like appearance renders him unrecognisable as a child at all. As Cohen observes, the monster is "difference made flesh,"[43] and these children embody that difference in its most delicate, unprotected form. Each of their narratives culminate not in redemption but in obliteration: Robot Boy is mistaken for refuse, Oyster Boy is devoured by his father, and Mummy Boy is killed through misrecognition. These are not accidental deaths, but the logical outcome of a Gothic structure in which that which cannot be assimilated must be eliminated. Burton's monstrous children are not agents of horror but its victims, undone not by monstrosity itself, but by a society incapable of accepting ambiguity. Their families cannot nurture them; their communities cannot recognise them; and so they are erased.

[42] Townshend D., *The Gothic and the Question of Ethics: Otherness, Alterity, Violence* [W:] J. E. Hogle (red.), *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, s. 293.

[43] Cohen J. J. (red.), *Monster Theory…*, op. cit., s. 7.

Ultimately, Burton's poems reimagine the Gothic child not as a threat, but as a reflection. These figures illuminate the limits of care, the violence of normativity, and the deep discomfort society feels towards bodies that resist categorisation. As Weinstock[44] writes, the Gothic child "exists to illuminate the horrors of the world that excludes them"[45], and so Burton's children are not terrifying because they are monsters, but because they reveal the monstrousness of our refusal to see humanity in what is strange.

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## The Monstrous Children: Reading Tim Burton's Poetry through Gothic and Monster Theory

**Summary**: This article analyses three poems from Tim Burton's *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy & Other Stories – Robot Boy*, *The Melancholy Death of Oyster Boy*, and *Mummy Boy* – through the lenses of Gothic and monster theory. It contends that Burton crafts monstrous children whose bodies symbolise abjection, otherness, and cultural anxieties. Existing in liminal spaces – between human and non-human, living and dead, child and object – these figures disrupt familial and societal norms. Engaging with theorists such as Kristeva, Cohen, Georgieva, and Scahill, the article investigates how Burton's child monsters serve as boundary-crossing entities that unveil the instability of identity, the brutality of normative frameworks, and the Gothic's critique of the family. Rather than posing a threat, these children are themselves victims: silenced, ostracised, and ultimately obliterated, demonstrating that monstrosity is not an inherent quality but a manifestation of societal failure.

**Keywords:** Gothic Child, Abjection, Tim Burton, Monster Theory, Gothic Theory

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