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Monsters revisited: a comparative study of the use of humor in dramatizing benevolent monsters in *The Monsters under the Bed* and *The Boy Who Loved Monsters and the Girl Who Loved Peas*

Heidi Mohamed Bayoumy  ¹✉

Works for children are filled with a myriad of creatures that are often used by writers to convey certain messages to the young readers/audiences. From tamed to wild, real and imaginary beings, such creatures emerge either as benevolent or evil forces. This study seeks to highlight the role of humorous, benevolent monsters in works for children showing how their presence is laden with meanings. For this purpose, two plays for children are selected: *The Monsters under the Bed* (2007) by Fr. Dominic Garramone and Osb and the St.Bede Theater Troupe, and *The Boy Who Loved Monsters and the Girl Who Loved Peas* (2013) by Jonathan Graham. Drawing upon humor studies, monster studies, and child psychology, the paper attempts to analyze the use of humor in portraying friendly monsters in the selected works reflecting how it is through them that the children protagonists revisit their views of monsters and understand that they are a reflection of themselves (their needs/fears). The analysis of these benevolent monsters and their effect on the protagonists will be carried out in relation to the different theatrical elements and the verbal and visual signs which clarify and affirm the benevolence of such creatures and the humorous touch added to their roles.

¹Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University, Giza, Egypt. ✉email: heidi.bayoumy@cu.edu.eg

Introduction

In several works for children, writers often resort to the use of benevolent monsters. Whereas the use of typical terrifying monsters often serves to assert children's fears of the other, the portrayal of humorous, benevolent monsters in works for children stand out as they invite children to reconsider their own preconceived views of monsters and what they symbolize in relation to childhood. Unlike destructive or terrifying monsters, the portrayal of monsters as friendly and harmless allows children to rediscover themselves, understand their own needs/fears/problems in a safe environment without feeling threatened or frightened. This paper aims to explore the use of humor in dramatizing friendly monsters in two selected plays for children: *The Monsters under the Bed* (2007) by Fr. Dominic Garramone, Osb and the St.Bede Theater Troupe and *The Boy Who Loved Monsters and the Girl Who Loved Peas* (2013) by Jonathan Graham. The paper seeks to highlight how it is through the use of innocuous monsters that the children protagonists revisit their views and beliefs of monstrosity and monsters. Beneath the layer of humor, which is presented through the subverted monsters, there is a profound moral message: helping children express themselves, as well as explain and revisit their own ideas, beliefs, needs, and fears. In other words, the monsters help children go through a process of introspection; they learn to reflect, analyze their needs/fears, and eventually come up with a new understanding of themselves and others. The children protagonists thus emerge with a change in their attitude in the end of the plays signaling the change that such monsters effected in the minds of those children.

To children, monsters are seemingly destructive and fearful creatures; nevertheless, they are fascinating because of the powers and strength they possess. In other words, monsters carry the duality of love/hate, attraction/repulsion, as Jeffery Cohen (1996) asserts: "Th[e] simultaneous repulsion and attraction at the core of the monster's composition accounts greatly for its continued cultural popularity, ... We distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom" (17). In fact, such dualism reflects the parallelism between children and monsters as Michel Joseph (2011) asserts: "like monsters, literary children dismayingly breach boundaries, and in their passage into adulthood ..., they symbolize both chaos and order, antistructure and structure" (139). Cohen (1996) also confirms that "monsters are our children" (20) in the sense that they are a reflection of the self, they are created by and reflect us. This closely knitted and interconnected relation between monsters and the children exists because, as Margrit Shildrick (2002) explicates, the monster "cannot be separated entirely from the nature of man himself. ... the monster is taken to reflect back at least some contingent truths of the human condition. The monster is not thereby the absolute other, but rather a mirror of humanity" (2002, 16–17). Based on Shildrick's view, monsters are a reflection of the self, thus they can be perceived from different perspectives. They can be the means to revisit what is meant by the monstrous and to question what Ebony Thomas (2019) calls the "Dark Other," which has been associated with the "monstrous in our collective imaginations" (70). In this respect, monsters invite children to think about how they view themselves and others. Monsters thus have a dual function, as Wolfe and Manzo (2021) believe, "on the one hand, and most awkwardly, the monster is an individual who is 'pointed at,' who is shown; on the other hand, the monster is a sign, a portent, an omen, and in that sense 'shows us' something" (1–2). Consequently, the appearance or creation of monsters has a very important function in children's works: it unmasks the children's emotional and psychological needs, such as finding a friend, fearing people or objects, projecting emotions of sadness or anger ...etc. Monsters are also the means to understand the

minds of children and even their world because "these monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. ... They ask us why we have created them" (Cohen, 1996, 20).

In works for children, monsters can emerge either as benevolent or evil forces. As Lauren Christie (2020) asserts, the monster "can often be found championing good over evil, one that is able to help a child through turbulent issues, or as a comrade setting out to accompany them on great adventures" (2). According to Janet Evans (2015), "in reality, many young children have to deal with troubling, personal problems on a day-to-day basis" (5). Christie (2020) maintains that "When children become older, they are generally less shielded by adults, therefore they are forced to face reality more directly. The world around them can become increasingly darker when they are exposed to sinister events connected with the evil that can occur in reality" (5). She adds that "if fictional monsters act as a manifestation of this transition, then their existence remains vital in the typical maturational journey of the child; the monster allows the child to confront their darkest fears in a controlled environment" (5). Building up on Evans and Christie's previously mentioned views, the use of benevolent monsters is important for children's maturity and growth as they allow children to accept the problems or fears they encounter in real life and to revisit their own preconceived views of monsters.

Approaching humorous monsters through monster and humor studies

To understand the roles of humorous, friendly monsters in works for children, it is important to approach them through the lens of monster and humor studies. In fact, there has been extensive research on the use of monsters in children's literature, specifically, picture books or fiction, to mention but a few examples: *(De)monstariation: Interpreting the Monsters of English Children's Literature* (2006), *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture* (2015), *The Morals of Monster Stories: Essays on Children's Picture Book Messages* (2017), *Monsters, Darkness, Imagination: On Horror in Children's Literature* (2018), *The Monster in Theater History: This Thing of Darkness* (2018), *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* (2019), "The Evolution of Monsters in Children's Literature" (2020), and "Humanizing Horror: Rereading Monstrosity in Popular Literature" (2022). Such studies fall under the umbrella of Monster Studies, which is a scholarly approach to the concept of the monster and the monstrous. According to Asa S. Mittman (2012), the origins of monster studies can be traced back to "the Roman period, when, in the first century of the common era, Pliny the Elder could be said to have been a scholarly practitioner of Monster Studies, writing at length about the wonders at the edges of the known world" (3). Mittman adds, "as a modern academic field of study and theoretical discipline, Monster Studies is relatively new on the horizon" (2012, 3). Yasmine Musharbash and Geir H. Presterudstuen (2014) argue that "the interdisciplinary field of monster studies" is "a relatively young field" (1). They add that Cohen's book *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)* "constitutes something of a foundation to the concerted interdisciplinary effort of studying monsters. Over the last decade or so, monster studies has mushroomed as a cornucopia of recent articles, edited volumes, journals, and books about monsters" (1). Still, it is worth mentioning at this point that despite the presence of several books and articles on monsters in children's works from the lens of monsters studies and theory, studies on using humor in dramatizing benevolent monsters from the lens of humor studies are very few.

Like monster studies, humor studies is an interdisciplinary field which includes studies on humor in children's literature. In his *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, Salvatore Attardo (2014) identifies the term humor as an "umbrella term to cover all the synonyms" of humor such as "comic, ridicule, irony, mirth, laughable, jolly, funny, ludicrous" (xxxi). In her study on the relation between humor and the child's development, Katherine Kappas (1967) identifies ten types of humor: slapstick, exaggeration, incongruity, surprise, the absurd, human predicament, ridicule, defiance, violence, and verbal humor (qtd. in McGhee and Frank, 2013, 35). Building on Kappas, Aileen Beckman and Kerry Mallan believe that all ten types can be grouped under three main categories found in children's literature: humorous characters, humorous situations, and humorous discourse/language. Generally speaking, the use of humor in children's literature "is a very important aspect" (Nilsen, 1993, 262). In her important study on humor *Laugh Lines: Exploring Humor in Children's Literature*, Kerry Mallan (1993) explicates that some children's writers believe that realistic works for children are more important than humorous ones since they offer a realistic world to the young readers and help them "see themselves, or people like themselves, in the stories" (20). However, Mallan (1993) argues that even real problems that children experience can be discussed with a touch of humor: "What distinguishes [children's] books from adult books with similar themes is the treatment of the subject matter and the tone the author adopts. It is the responsibility of authors to make their stories manageable for the child and present them from a child's point of view. One way of helping to do this is to introduce moments of humor or passages of humorous tone" (20). In fact, humor in children's literature, as Elena Xenii (2010) asserts, "does not function for its own sake only, but that it has a lifetime purpose: to alleviate childhood's anxieties, worries and fears, thereby supporting in this way children's well-being" (157). She adds that "children identify with literature protagonists, who face common worries, anxieties and fears, laugh, enjoy and learn throughout reading and experience heroes' problematic situations with less stress and more joy, learning in such ways to face their own worries with less stress, anxiety and fear" (157). The power of humor is summarized by Shaeffer and Hopkins (1988) as follows: "Humor is a magical thing that allows us to endure life's hardships such as death, sickness, hunger, pain and fear" (89). It has a healing power as Michael Cart (1995) argues: "Laughter is therapeutic. It is healing. As a tonic for what ails us...If we hurt, we laugh. And laughing, we heal" (1-2).

Despite the importance of humor to the children's development on the cognitive, intellectual, cultural, psychological, and even social levels, very few studies that examine humor in children's literature have been conducted. Some of these prominent studies include *Humor in Children's Literature* (2010), *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature* (2010), *Reading in the Dark: Horror in Children's Literature and Culture* (2016), "Didactic Monstrosity and Postmodern Revisionism in Contemporary Children's Films" (2016), and "Humor in Children's and Young Adult Literature: The Work of Gilles Bachelet" (2021). The scarcity of studies on humor in children's literature can be attributed to, as Julie Cross (2011) believes, to the fact that "humorous books for junior readers are often ignored by the critical community" (1). Similarly, Diana Muela Bermejo (2021) asserts that "in recent decades, several researchers have claimed the presence of humor as one of the main mechanisms of children's and young adult literature which, however, had not received sufficient attention from the critical community" (2). In fact, there are several works for children in which humor is extensively employed but have not gained enough critical attention. This makes the humorous portrayal of imaginary characters

like monsters an important area to explore given the fear children harbor toward these creatures and given the problems and worries children usually have in their daily lives, which are often reflected in the figure of monsters in works for children.

Based on the previous views, the study proposes to examine the use of benevolent monsters that are given a humorous touch which allows the children to identify with them, learn from them, and, eventually, revisit their own views of monstrosity and monsters. Most studies conducted on humor and monsters focus on children's stories, picture books, and films; therefore, it is the aim of this study to explore the use of humor in portraying monsters in children's theater because this is an area yet to be explored. In fact, the scarcity of studies of monsters in theater is, as Michael Chemers (2018) asserts, "a sad fact" because "most scholars of the modern monstrous devote their energies to literary and cinematic achievements, giving short shrift (if any) to theatrical history- this omission ... leaves critical gaps in our understanding of what monsters are and what effect they may have on the development of individual conscience and ideas of social justice" (1). He adds that "unlike the monster in a novel, short story, poem, or even a film, a theatrical monster does not merely exist in the mind - it lives" (1). This makes the presence of monsters on stage an important aspect because "when a monster is not merely discussed or represented but performed, it enters [an embodied] realm" (xi). Seeing the monster on stage "summons" the monster "into our presence, into the physical space we occupy, and thereby makes possible an imaginative and emotional confrontation that is often lost or evaded in other narrative contexts" (Carey, 2018, xi). In children's theater, the monster on stage plays a bigger role. Given the immediacy children's theater, seeing the monsters on stage has indeed a great influence on children. To borrow Rutter's words on using children in theater, "the dramatic fiction, the immediacy and *presentness* of [the monsters and] child in front of spectators on ... stage, gives children space to speak, to act for themselves, to stimulate agency" (qtd. in Donelle Ruwe and James Leve, 2020, 25). The presence of monsters on stage and their interaction with the children protagonists allows the children to see, understand, and think of themselves, their fears, and needs. Moreover, the process of identification with the children protagonists who communicate, interact, and even befriend monsters on stage subverts the very essence of children's beliefs and assumptions. By focusing on plays in this study, the aim is to highlight how the use of benevolent and humorous monsters, despite its scarcity in comparison to the frequent use of frightening, horrifying monsters, is a significant technique especially when used in children's theater since it affects the children's thoughts of themselves and others and steers them toward growth and maturity.

In this study, an eclectic approach comprising humor studies, monster studies, and child psychology will be adopted. Combining the three approaches will show how utilizing humorous monsters changes the children's conceptions of monsters; that is, their understanding of themselves and others. Whereas most studies, as previously mentioned, either adopt humor studies or monster studies in probing the use of monsters in works for children, the combination of both studies is meant to highlight the benevolent monsters' importance and impact on the children protagonists. For this purpose, two plays have been selected: *The Monsters under the Bed* (2007) by Fr. Dominic Garramone, Osb and the St. Bede Theater Troupe and *The Boy Who Loved Monsters and the Girl Who Loved Peas* (2013) by Jonathan Graham¹. *The Monsters under the Bed* was performed in "Saint Bede Abbey in Peru, IL at its Summer Theater Program" (*The Monsters* 6). It was also performed several times in schools. It deals with a group of young girls discussing their deepest and worst fears during a night over at their friend's place. One by one, they express their

fear of different things: darkness, noise, doctors, final exams, bullying, thunder...etc. Despite the presence of seven monsters that embody the worst fears of the girls, they are portrayed as harmless. Even more, the last monster to emerge on stage is the friend that acts as the real aiding force that helps the girls overcome their fears. *The Boy Who Loved Monsters and the Girl Who Loved Peas* “was developed and presented as a reading at Write Now, a national theater for young audiences symposium sponsored by Childsplay Theater and Indiana Repertory Theater, in March, 2013 ... The play was first produced by Pollyanna Theater Company (Austin, Texas) October 2013” (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 6). It revolves around the young boy Evan, who feels bored and lonely. Despite his parents’ attempts to persuade him to eat peas for dinner, he resents it, and wishes for a monster to appear and devour his whole family. However, the monster turns out to be nothing but a giant pea that, later on, befriends Evan and his sister Sue. He takes them to his own home in Monster World in which Evan realizes that the parents are an exact replica of his own; this in turn leads him to appreciate his own parents and learn the value of home.

The aim behind selecting both plays is to examine children protagonists who belong to stage four of humor development (known as “multiple meanings”) identified by McGhee and Frank (2013) who assert that, in this stage, children aging from seven till 11 begin to understand more sophisticated forms of language humor including puns, riddles...etc. (79). Moreover, these plays have been chosen because they have not received enough critical attention and because the children in the plays do not suffer from shocking incidents or events like death of parents, divorce, accidents, loss of a family member or friend. The authors of the two plays are thus able to use humor in the portrayal of monsters who simply stand for what children protagonists need/fear. Both plays, to borrow Peter Kunze’s words, view monsters as “the embodiment of fear ... and repression of some aspect of the self” (2016, 50) as well as the projection of their inner desires/wishes. The monsters thus mirror the children, who engage in a process of reflection and analysis. In such an introspection process, laughter is triggered and moral lessons as well. Both plays do not patronize or belittle children’s concerns, but help them revisit their own views of monsters. Thus, they end up accepting themselves and their worlds. Just as Jones et al. (2022) assert that there are “a four-step framework for discussing horror in the English language arts classroom: (1) feeling horror, (2) analyzing horror, (3) critiquing horror, and (4) restorying horror” (87), the present paper argues that through the use of humorous monsters, the children protagonists are able to “feel” fears, “analyze” them, “critique” them, and eventually look differently at/ “restory” them. This process takes place in a safe environment and with the occurrence of humorous situations that allow the children to both: laugh and think. The plays thus centralize children who become active doers; they solve their own problems by themselves, without the interference of adults, but with the support of monsters, who are shown from the beginning till the end of the as reflections of their inner selves, in a light comic atmosphere. By combining humor studies with monster studies and child psychology, the paper will examine the subversion of monsters focusing on their humorous and benevolent nature and how they change the children’s beliefs and views. In analyzing their roles, this comparative study draws upon Mallan’s classification of the three elements of humor in children’s literature: humorous characters, situations, and language, which are used in the portrayal of these creatures. The study will focus on comparing two major aspects in the plays: first, the portrayal of such humorous monsters, their symbolism, and how children initially view them; and, second, how the children protagonists eventually change their perspective of monsters and themselves, and reach maturity.

Viewing monsters through the eyes of children: a one-sided view

In the first part of the plays, the children protagonists see monsters based on their own preconceived ideas and on the connection they create between such monsters and other meanings or experiences in their own minds/lives. Therefore, the children initially focus on expressing their own subjective views of such creatures and on projecting their feelings on them. In *The Monsters under the Bed*, seven monsters appear to the young girls who are having a sleep over at Stephanie’s house. The number of monsters coincide with S. W. Garber, R. F. Spizman, and M. D. Garber’s view on how “numerous research studies have found that between the ages of six and twelve [children] experience an average of seven different fears” (1993, 10). Significantly, the monsters appear after the girls engage in their play as the stage directions indicate: “One stage, the boom box is playing a Halloween sound effects tape with ghostly moans and screams. Suddenly one of the girls yells ‘Boo!’ and they all scream and laugh” (*The Monsters* 7). After this initial play with their fears, the girls begin, one by one, to uncover their deepest nighttime fears which are visually transformed into monsters, thus the link between monstrosity and the feared, unwanted, and undesired is established from the very beginning. Hence, the title of the play is a symbolic sign that is repeated throughout the play acting as a refrain that reflects the fear of girls from different kinds of monsters that might exist under the bed; that is in their own lives. According to King et al. (1997), “nighttime fears are experienced by nearly all children” (1997 441). Fear of monsters is first introduced when Cathy, Stephanie’s elder sister, asks girls, who are spending the night at her house, to sleep:

Cathy: Okay – but don’t play that spooky tape again, and don’t stay up late too, or the monsters will come out from under the bed and GETCHA! (*She tickles Melissa.*) In fact, you’d better go to sleep right now- it’s later than I thought. (*Exits.*)

Melissa (afraid): Are there really monsters under the bed?

Ashley: of course not, silly.

Laurie: She was just kidding.

Jennifer: There aren’t any monsters in here, are there, Steph?

Stephanie: (in a spooky voice): Who knows? (*Girls all laugh.*) (*The Monsters* 8)

Cathy’s above words about monsters confirm how “fears of the dark, ghosts, monsters, and the supernatural come to the forefront [and] can be stimulated by what [the] child sees on television or a few gory stories told by an older sibling or friend” (Garber et al., 1993, 12). Therefore, the children’s understanding of monsters stems from the stories told by others as well as the association children create in their minds between such creatures and the negative feelings and situations that they experience in real life. Evidently, Cathy’s words trigger immediate recalling of the girls’ imaginings of frightful monsters. Thus, once the lights are turned out, Melissa calls for the lights since she fears darkness, which is visually translated into the monster Darkonomo:

Melissa: Stephanie, turn on the light – I’m scared. ...

Stephanie: Melissa, there’s nothing to be scared of. I was just kidding about the monsters under the bed.

Melissa: I’m just scared of the dark.

Darkness is like a monster at the window.
 The darkness monster, Darkonomo,
 Comes in the night and makes the wind blow.
 Tall and hooded, dressed in black,
 Leave the window open a crack,
 And he will slip into your room,
 To fill your heart with fear and gloom.

(As Melissa recited the poem, Darkonomo comes out from behind the curtain, and swirls silently around the bed. As the poem comes to an end, he stops and pulls his cape around himself). (*The Monsters* 9)

Melissa's above words exemplify how she does two things: she "feels" and "analyzes" her fear (Jones et al., 2022, 87). She first explicates her feelings toward the monster/darkness, thus asserting how "Monsters... put into words feelings that we struggle to express ourselves" (Erle and Hendry, 2020, 2). In this way, Melissa "identif[ies] and analyze[s] [her] emotional responses" (Jones et al., 2022, 88) to the monster of darkness. She lists what makes her frightened by providing a visual depiction of this creature which is accompanied by the physical emergence of Darkonomo. The physical presence of the monster on stage delineates the position of the monster as non-frightening. Even though using verbal signs such as "black" and "gloom" connote evil, the monster's appearance negates such thoughts. Thus, the discrepancy between the image Melissa has in her mind and the physical appearance of the monster, which is harmless, paves the way for the change in her perception of Darkonomo later on. Worth mentioning is that fear of darkness is one of the typical fears that almost all children have. Since "darkness and the unknown would seem to represent situations that have the potential to endanger humans" (King et al. 1997, 433); therefore, it remains one of the main sources of fear to children at bedtime.

Once Melissa uncovers her fear of the darkness monster, the other girls also begin to exhibit similar feelings and other monsters soon follow. Darkonomo's appearance thus acts as a prelude to the other monsters: the noises under the bed monster (Crumplebump), the math test monster (the Final Freak), the doctor with the needle monster (Dr Wicked Schott), the bully at school monster (Teazle), the thunderstorm monster (Big Bad Boom), and, finally, the monster who grabs your ankles (Gruntable). Like Melissa, all the girls engage in a similar process of expressing their fear of monsters and "analyzing" what makes such creatures disturbing or alarming from their own point of view (such as their association with "pain," "failure," "difficulty," and being "ma[de] fun" of). The seven monsters thus confirm the connection children have between monsters and negative childhood experiences: "over the years, as [the] child's world broadens, do his fears. Whereas before, his fears centered on home and family, in preadolescence, your child is likely to worry about what others think. Fears of school and other social situations take precedence" (Garber et al., 1993, 13). Rachman asserts that one of the ways of "fear acquisition [is] direct conditioning (e.g., child showing fear of darkness after being locked in a dark room or closet)" (qtd. In King et al., 1997, 433). Therefore, the girls' fears, which are exaggerated and visually translated into monsters, symbolize all that is negative, worrying, and intimidating in their real lives. Significantly, while the girls express their fears, the physical appearance of such monsters is not menacing or

threatening. In fact, these monsters are given voice to explain why girls fear them. One by one, they introduce themselves and highlight why they seem frightening. The following extract recited by the Final Freak is an example of how each monster introduces itself: "Beware, I'm the Final Freak. Kids think that I'm a geek. I flunk and fail kids like you. A year held back in misery, too... But kids like you who panic and don't study, ... I frighten them and freak them too" (*The Monsters* 12). Giving voice to the monsters is a dramatic technique used by the writer to assert their connection to the inner self of the girls. Here, the feared/the monster is given voice, not to express itself, but to confirm the one-sided point of view of the girls.

Significantly, Gruntable, the last monster to appear, offers a different view of monsters which, in turn, effects a change in the girls' perception of monsters. It destabilizes the very essence of monstrosity by its benevolence and humor. Whereas the previous six monsters are reflections of individual fears, Gruntable is the incarnation of the girls' worst fear: the fear of having their legs grabbed, which represents a physical threat. Upon Cathy's inquiry "did Gruntable reach out from under the bed and grab your legs?" (*The Monsters* 17), the girls' anxiety and fear arise from the knowledge that there is still one monster left. Amid the escalating fear in expectation of the emergence of this terrifying monster, Gruntable's appearance seems rather comical as evident in the stage directions: "The Girls lean down over the edge of the foot of the bed. They discover their teddy bears under the bed and make exclamations of surprise, etc. Meanwhile Gruntable comes out from under the bed near the other end, munches a little popcorn, and then leans down next to them" (*The Monsters* 18). According to James Smith (1967), laughter is triggered because "of discovering incongruities *within* a character or strange contrasts *between* characters" (215). Gruntable's appearance, which is a stark contrast to what is expected of a monster, is an example of incongruity. Paul E Mcghee and Mary Frank affirm that "incongruity refers to the simultaneous, or almost simultaneous, occurrence of normally incompatible elements (i.e., elements which are not ordinarily associated with each other in a given context)" (17). They add that

incongruity' designates the way in which the humorous situation 'works psychologically' in the individual who encounters it; certain features that the individual identifies activate familiar schemas (verbal or imaginal mental representations) and create expectations about how these features should relate to each other which are dependent upon prior experience of the environment and internalized representations of that experience. (17)

In the play, Gruntable appears in the peak of the girls' fear and expectation of a violent monster that might physically harm them but turns out to be a child just like them. Despite the initial reaction of the girls, which is "screaming," an auditory sign unraveling their fear, Gruntable's dialogue with Cathy confirms its benevolence and humorous nature:

Cathy: Gruntable, buddy!

Gruntable: Cathy! (*They hug.*) Long time no snort!

Stephanie: You know each other?

Cathy: Sure! We've been friends for a long time! I told you, this used to be my room. (*The Monsters* 18)

The obvious kinesthetic sign of hugging and the verbal signs "buddy" and "friends" used in greeting Gruntable immediately help the girls in identifying it as a harmless monster. Even more,

upon Laurie's inquiry about the reason behind Gruntable taking all their teddy bears and placing them under the bed, it simply replies: "Because I was lonely. How would you like to live under a bed with a bunch of horrible monsters with bad breath and no table manners? And besides... ever since Cathy moved out, I haven't had anyone to play with, boo-hoo! (*Cries noisily and blows his nose. Cathy comforts him*)" (*The Monsters* 18–19). The previous words have two main functions: first, they reconfigure the girls' view of monsters, allaying any potential threat or fear. Gruntable's words implicitly lists all the aspects that delineate his benevolence. It thus eliminates elements of threat, horror, or evil. If the other monsters analyzed what make them trigger fear, Gruntable expresses what makes it friendly and harmless. In this respect, Gruntable's words destabilize the girls' fears and views. Second, its words are a clear example of humorous language, which is the third element of humor found in children's literature according to Mallan's classification. Put together with physical humor related to the appearance of Gruntable, laughter is thus triggered since the monster resembles children. Kerry Mallan (1993) explains that one main type of humor in children's works is the creation of humorous characters: "Exaggeration of human traits and foibles is one device used to create humorous characters. Of course, to appreciate the humor generated by exaggeration, the reader needs to be familiar with the type of person the character is satirising, whether it be a teacher, cleric, police officer, shopkeeper or someone else" (9). Here the exaggerated character is the monster that all the girls were initially afraid of. The discrepancy between the image children have of monsters and the appearance of Gruntable makes the girls realize that it is parallel to them; the monster is merely a child that exhibits similar fears and worries just like them. Gruntable thus reconfigures the preconceived image the girls initially had of this monster.

In *The Boy Who Loved Monsters and the Girl Who Loved Peas*, Evan, unlike the girls, desires to have a monster as a friend. Evan thus welcomes monsters and monstrosity seeing them as the gateway to escape his boredom, dissatisfaction with his busy parents, discontent with his dinner (peas), and his inability to befriend to his younger sister Sue. Evan's negative feelings toward his family gradually escalate and culminate in his wish for a monster: "If I was Godzilla, I sure wouldn't eat any peas. Pine trees, maybe. Or pianos. Or the pyramids in Egypt, but not any stupid peas. (He squishes the pea softly with one finger.) I wish I had a monster that would eat all my peas, then I wouldn't have to. I wish a monster would come and eat this house" (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 12). According to Cohen (1996), "The monster is born only at ... metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place" (4). The creation of the monster at this moment, with such negative feelings harbored, and in Evan's home is symbolic of his strong desire for freedom and independence. Unlike the girls, Evan embraces monstrosity which, to him, stands for freedom and rebellion against all the established values imposed by the parents. Hence, in Evan's eyes, the monster signifies the violation of rules. To borrow Cohen's words, the monster in Evan's mind, "is continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce. The monster also attracts. The same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint" (15–16). Evan's repeated wish to have a monster is an outlet of his inner desire to escape and break parental authority and rules: "I wish I had a monster who was my friend. And it would eat my family, and then we could go on an adventure instead of going to bed. (*An enormous PEA now begins to emerge from EVAN's plate.*)" (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 12). Ironically, the

appearance of the monster is a subverted version of what he desired. In other words, it is a combination of what he and his sister love/hate: Evan loves monsters, but hate peas, and Sue, on the other hand, loves peas, but fears monsters. The duality of love/hate, surprise/ disappointment is thus embodied in Pea. According to Smith (1967), "Probably the most common of all sources of children's humor is the physical situation with its obvious elements of contrast and surprise" (207). The visual appearance of the monster that Evan wished for in the form of a pea is an example of physical humor. In fact, the mere transformation of the pea he initially refused to eat into a monster is a confirmation of the humorous nature of the monster. According to Kerry Mallan (1993), "The motif of transformation is common in traditional literature ... It is also used by contemporary writers to create comic situations" (13). The transformation of Pea becomes the means to revisit the image of the monster that Evan has always had; this is because, paradoxically, it is the incarnation, or rather a merge, of the hated/desired things, love/hate duality. In other words, the physical appearance of Pea disturbs the preconceived image of monsters in Evan's mind; thus his first reaction is shock.

Reticent and intimidated, Evan initially resists the very existence of the pea monster that seems rather comical. According to Asmaa Abu Taleb (2002), children at this age love adventures and have a wild sense of imagination (57). Christopher Day and Anita Midbjør (2007) also assert that "adults live (mostly) in a world of material facts – 'known' and unchanging. For children, the 'real' world is often servant to an imaginary world. Even single rooms, gardens or behind-the-shed forgotten places can be whole palettes of mood, whole geographies of mountains and jungles, harbors and shops – places to live out fantasy through action" (4). Therefore, Evan's disappointment stems from the realization that Pea can never fulfill his long-desired dreams and imaginary adventures: "I wanted a monster that could pull out trees by the roots, pick up trains right off the tracks and even scare grown-ups. And you're not that kind of monster" (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 28). Whereas the girls in *The Monsters under the Bed* engage in a process of "analyzing" what seems terrifying about the monsters, Evan does the opposite. He engages in a process of expressing how he "feels" toward this monster and what he abhors about it: its mildness. He thus "analyzes" the benevolence of the monster and its humorous acts. In this respect, Evan, unlike the girls, does not express fear of monsters, but rather disappointment of the domesticated monster, which clearly conflicts with the exaggerated image of the destructive monster he had in mind. Evan's rejection of the pea monster thus results from his realization that the monster's tameness signifies compliance and abidance by the very rules that he is revolting against.

Significantly, it is Pea's otherness, symbolized in his humor, tameness, and subverted appearance, that become the key to change Evan's attitude and to trigger laughter. According to Roderick McGillis (2009), "children's humor depends largely on the body ... slapstick, caricature, parody, the grotesque, ridicule, and the improbable in human predicaments concern the body, and so does the nonsense" (258). The mere appearance of Pea with his big pea head exemplifies this type of humor. McGillis (2009) also adds that "humor in children's literature comes in a variety of forms, both verbal and visual" (270). In the play, there are several visual and verbal examples of slapstick humor defined by Rod A. Martin (2007) as a type of humor that comprises "minor mishaps and pratfalls such as the person slipping on a banana peel or spilling a drink on one's shirt. These sorts of events are funny when they occur in a surprising and incongruous manner and when the person experiencing them is not seriously hurt or badly embarrassed" (14). Examples of slapstick humor in the play include the fork stuck in Pea's head, stealing

the shoes of Evan's father and wearing them, and taking the cookies and pancakes of Evan's parents. Another example is when Pea hides under the table, eats ferociously, and burps out loud, thus triggering laughter since, as Mallan (1993) argues, children "appreciate ... gross exaggeration" (7). Such moments reinforce the image of Pea as a humorous and benevolent monster and pave the way for its friendship with Evan and Sue.

Re-viewing monsters: self-acceptance and maturity

In the second part of the plays, the children begin to "critique" and "restory" monsters (Jones et al., 2022, 87), thus steering their perception of such creatures away from the two poles: fascination/hatred to be positioned in a midway state which allows the children to rediscover themselves and to reach growth. In *The Monsters under the Bed*, the girls reflect upon monsters/fears every time one of them expresses her fear of a certain monster. An example of this is when Melissa expresses her fear of darkness, Stephanie helps her look at darkness from a different perspective:

Stephanie: This is silly! There's nothing to be afraid of
Melissa, come to with me to the window. (*They walk to the window and look out.*)

Darkness comes when it is night,

So I can see the stars so bright.

I'm not scared by the dark you see,

Because all the stars are winking at me.

(*During this poem, Darkonomo switches on the lights built into his shirt and opens his cape to reveal 'stars' shining. During Melissa's next speech, he returns backstage.*)

Melisa: Gee, Stephanie, I never thought of that before.
Darkonomo makes the stars come out, and I like stars, so I guess he's not really trying to scare me. (*The Monsters 10*)

In the above quote, Stephanie identifies and "critiques" the aspects that make the darkness monster terrifying in Melissa's eyes (such as darkness, gloominess, fear) and reverses them. She thus "restories" Melissa's fear by reciting an alternative poem (opposite to the one Melissa said when she expressed her fear of darkness). Such restorying results in the change in Melissa's attitude as she immediately admits that such an angle of seeing/perceiving darkness is not frightening, but rather fascinating. Such repositioning of the monster becomes possible through the use of two psychological strategies. First is what Mary-Louise Maynes (2020) calls "Positive pretense," which is that "either the monster changes in physical form or the [child's] understanding of the monster changes" (4). This change happens because "the child protagonist has misunderstood or misinterpreted events or phenomena. The imaginary scary event, creature or situation is recognized and accepted, but the characteristics or perception of it change, so that it is no longer a danger" (4). Maynes (2020) further clarifies that "a scary monster who initially seems frightening to a child is, for example, revealed as having different, less scary characteristics or properties than was previously supposed, or the child may acquire abilities or equipment to overcome the monster/ fear, such as a magic blanket or shield" (4). The girls overcome their fears not because they are equipped by some magic powers, but by a change in their own understanding of monsters. They thus learn to accept the otherness of the monster which is a reflection of their own individual otherness and differences. The second strategy is what Maynes (2020) calls

"approach strategy," (4), which is facing the fear itself. By going to the window and looking at the dark sky and the darkness enveloping the world outside, Melissa is directly facing her herself and her own fears. She thus rethinks and reconfigures her perception of herself and of monsters.

Another strategy used in restorying monsters, paradoxically, comes from Grutable itself: the monster. In this respect, accepting monstrosity, represented in Grutable, allows the children to have the power to understand and accept themselves and their own worries/fears. Significantly, Grutable advises the girls to use humor in facing their fears. The following extract is an example: "Melissa (*to Darkonomo*): I love this cape, it is so cool. Black is like my favorite color, you know? Can I borrow this for Halloween? Stephanie, come feels this material... (*Darkonomo hurriedly exists*)" (*The Monsters 20*). The humorous way that Melissa follows in facing her biggest worry, Darkonomo, shows the power of humor, which is one of the tools used to help children overcome their own fears. Martha Wolfenstein (1954) argues that "joking is a gallant attempt to ward off the oppressive difficulties of life, a bit of humble heroism, which for the moment that it succeeds provides elation" (11). In the play, "joking" about the monsters becomes a technique that enables the girls to resist and even overcome their established beliefs and ideas about monsters and about themselves. The use of the same humorous technique by all the girls confirms how humor is "one of the most flexible tools in social interaction, serving a variety of functions including enhancing relationships, increasing or maintaining group cohesion, relieving tension, saving face, and expressing aggression in a socially acceptable way" (Semrud-Clikeman and Glass, 2010, 1). Employing humor in this scene confirms its social function: it unites the girls as a group, increases their interaction, and helps them address their fears collectively because the humorous pattern used by Melissa is followed by the other girls, who now understand that the more they use humor in facing their monsters, the stronger they become. This is an implicit message to the young of the power of humor in alleviating tension, attacking the established authority, and establishing a sense of empowerment. The stage directions indicate that "the girls cheer, laugh, and congratulate themselves" (*The Monsters 21*). Thus, their laughter at the end after driving away their fears/ monsters confirms their maturity because "humor is a way of relieving anxiety; children enjoy feeling superior to their younger selves and are relieved to know they've grown" (Cleary, 1982, 560-561). In this respect, the use of humor, especially in this scene, "is inextricably tied to development and serves a social and developmental purpose" (Semrud-Clikeman and Glass, 2010, 2). Worth mentioning is that this humorous confrontation and interaction between the girls and the monsters is one of the significant theatrical moments in the play as the girls communicate directly with the monsters and eventually reverse their own fears.

In *The Boy Who Loved Monsters and the Girl Who Loved Peas*, the change in Evan's point of view of the pea monster is carried out through a different process. Since Evan, unlike the girls, never feared the monster, but welcomed its existence, the change in his attitude is centered on his acceptance of a different monster, which is parallel to his own peculiarities and those of his own family members. In other words, Pea compels Evan to reconsider differences and otherness and to accept them. Its benevolence and humor become the force that attracts Evan to befriend it. Hence, Pea's friendliness instigates Evan to "restory" his own understanding of monsters. In fact, their closeness can be seen in the roleplay which allows Evan to realize that Pea is more human than monstrous. Such roleplaying has a great impact on Evan because it helps him interact and reconnect with his own sister. According to Johan Meire (2007), "play helps children to understand and deal with their emotions ... different identities and social relationships can be tried out in role play" (33). During their play, both Evan and Sue pretend to be flying in outer space

free and away from the rules and restrictions imposed on them by their parents; they thus “play with ideas” and “rules.” This discovery asserts how “inside every monster lurks a human being. ... This is because all monsters are human creations. They exist because we create or define them as such. We therefore owe them our care and attention” (Mittman and Hensel, 2018, x). Pea after all is Evan’s wish as he asserts at one point in the play: “Pea: Well, Evan wished for a real monster, because that’s what he’s wanted most of all” (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 42). Therefore, Pea’s resemblance to Evan is striking: he is friendly, “likes to play and make up stories” (46). Pea himself acknowledges his difference from the other monsters in his own world: “I don’t fit in so well in Monster World. I’m not into knocking down skyscrapers or swallowing grandpas in one big gulp. I might get a little rowdy sometimes” (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 47). Such an admission clarifies the parallelism between both Pea and Evan. In fact, the dialogue between Evan’s parents and the pea monster confirms how they also had a monster when they were at Evan’s age:

DADDY (to PEA). How did you get in here?

PEA. As I was saying, Evan wished for a monster. And of course, Sue loves peas. So you put the two together and, well—

DADDY. So you’re saying they dreamed you up?

PEA. I’m saying that of all the monsters in Monster World, I’m the one for you.

DADDY. No offense, but I really don’t think I need a monster.

PEA. You didn’t *always* feel that way.

DADDY. What are you talking about?

PEA. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten about Mr. Sarcophagus?

MOMMY. Who is that?

DADDY. Just a monster I had when I was a kid—

EVAN. You did?

PEA. And your mommy had a castle haunted by the Bee-Gee-Wee-Gees?

SUE. What’s a Bee-Gee-Wee-Gee, Mommy?

MOMMY. It was the 70 s, sweetie. It’s hard to explain. ... (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 42–43)

The above conversation confirms the strong connection between the self/childhood and monsters. It emphasizes how desiring a monster as a play companion and friend is a normal and ordinary wish that children, like Evan and Sue, usually experience. According to Marjorie Taylor (1999), “fantasy play is an important component of children’s cognitive and emotional development. More specifically, the creation of an imaginary companion is healthy and relatively common” (4). She adds that the creation of an unreal friend, like monsters, “allows a child to work on a variety of concerns, fears, and problems” (4). Evan’s wish for a monster, which is transformed into Pea, helps him accept himself and others, thus asserting how Pea symbolizes individual otherness inside Evan’s family. In fact, Evan admits

that “Pea is like a gift that was sent to [them] because each member of the family is engrossed in his/her own world with nothing to unite them as a family: “EVAN (*a lightbulb. To MOMMY and DADDY*). Yeah ... but what do we all share together? ... But if Pea was our monster, we could play with it after school. And Pea’s good at cleaning up after we play, too” (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 45, 47–48). While “restoring” Pea, Evan engages in a process of “analyzing” why a monster should be welcomed by the whole family. In other words, Evan repositions the monster, asserting its place in his own family. By instigating the parents to think upon what they lack as a family, Evan views the monster as the link and the connection between them. Thus, Evan is familiarizing the monster/otherness confirming that it is part of them and of their family. Evan even asserts that “When I wished for a monster, I was wishing for a monster that would be all mine ... but I think Pea is for all of us” (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 48). In this respect, the symbolism of Pea is visually and verbally confirmed when the whole family and Pea engage in their play about monsters. It is during their play that humor is triggered once more asserting, as Kuchner confirms, how “humor evolves through a social experience. It emerges as a form of play: language play, play with and on ideas, and play with social rules and relationships” (qtd. in Morreall, 1987, 115). The family’s engagement in this humorous roleplay is the first visual sign confirming their integration; thus signaling the reconciliation of the family members and sending an important message to both children and adults of the importance of embracing individual differences.

Finally, the change in the protagonists’ view of the monsters becomes possible, firstly, because of the benevolent and humorous nature of the monsters, which is visually and verbally confirmed throughout the plays, and, secondly, because of the setting in which such monsters appear. Cohen (1996) argues that “the monster ... resides in that marginal geography of the Exterior, beyond the limits of the Thinkable, a place that is doubly dangerous: simultaneously ‘exorbitant’ and ‘quite close’” (20). Contrary to Cohen’s view, the monsters in the two plays emerge in a well-known, friendly atmosphere, and safe environment: the protagonists’ homes; this establishes a significant connection or correlation between the benevolent nature of the monsters and the children protagonists, and allows for humorous situations to happen which will in turn help the children change their preconceived ideas of monsters. The girls accept the presence of Gruntable and the other monsters under their beds, in their homes, in their lives. In other words, they accept and embrace difference. Similarly, Evan and Sue do the same. Even when transported to Monster World, Evan and Sue soon discover that Pea’s home and parents are very much parallel to theirs. Humor is thus produced because of the parallelism between the two homes in the two worlds, which at first disappoints Evan, but eventually leads him to appreciate his own home, his life, and his own parents, and to accept them as they are. At one point, Pea even provides the real reason behind bringing the two siblings to his home affirming the real value of home: “Pea: I brought them here ‘cause I knew they’d be safe” (*The Boy Who Loved Monsters* 31). The scene in Monster World is indeed short, but it has an important structural and thematic function: it serves to reinforce the parallelism between humans and monsters, since monsters are extensions of the self. Thus, the scene is meant to change the perspective of children showing how monsters represent one side/aspect of them or their family.

Conclusion

The representation of monsters on stage in plays for children is a technique used by writers to broaden the children’s perspective

and understanding of themselves and others. The two plays offer a lively and vivid portrayal of monsters which help subvert children's preconceived ideas of monsters. As Chemers asserts, "because of performance's unique qualities, it has provided a happy home for monsters as far back in time and across human cultures as history reveals. The study of monsters, then, must perforce enrich both our understanding of our own culture and of history in general" (2). Examining the use of monsters in both plays confirms how the representation of monsters subverts the typical imaginings of monsters. In fact, their physical presence and interaction with the children protagonists, to borrow David Wood and Janet Grant's words on the importance of children's theater, "open doors to a new world of imagination, excitement, and thoughtfulness" (2017, 6).

The use of humor in dramatizing the benevolent monsters in the two selected works helps the children go through a four-step process that eventually helps them in redefining monsters: "feeling," "analyzing," "critiquing," and finally "restorying." The combination of the monsters' humor and benevolence acts as the agent that compels children to accept themselves and cope with the real world. Humor, to borrow Rollo May's words, helps in "preserving the sense of self... It is the healthy way of feeling a 'distance' between one's self and the problem, a way of standing off and looking at one's problem with perspective" (1953, 40). Humor is thus used to "distance" the children from their own beliefs, problems, and fears, and to allow them to rethink, redefine, and, even, accept their own differences, symbolized in the monsters. Kerry Mallan (1993) asserts that "humorous situations and characters provide children with much appreciated sources of laughter. ... They need to see that even in life's more serious moments humor has its place not humor of the belly-laugh kind, but the sort which shows that life can be viewed through different lenses" (32). In this respect, humorous monsters instigate children to explore the relationship between childhood and monstrosity from a different angle. The humorous portrayal of such friendly monsters allows children to reconsider/reflect upon the problems they experience in their everyday lives, their fears and worries from a different perspective; thus giving way for self-exploration and confrontation, and not "a creation of a false impression of the real world" (Mallan, 1993, 20). Through the humorous touches added to these innocuous monsters, the children become involved in a process of reflection that eventually leads them to understand themselves and others. It is thus an enlightening process in which children listen, learn, and eventually act.

Combining monster studies and humor studies in approaching both works confirms how monsters and monstrosity can be revisited in works for children. The subversion of the monsters in both texts is an invitation to review certain values and beliefs because they destabilize the concept of monstrosity in relation to children. As Jones et al. (2022) argue, "When people regard others as 'monsters,' they reveal their underlying biases and values. It is through the challenging of stereotypes that we counter what is dehumanizing about horror texts" (90). Unlike other works for children in which the dichotomy of the self, childhood/monster is maintained, the two selected plays assert the strong connection between childhood and monstrosity eliminating the boundaries between them and emphasizing how embracing one's differences is the key and catalyst to reach maturity. The two plays thus empathize with monsters; they thus instigate children to think beyond their fears and differences. Hence, the moral messages are sent through the use of humor in dramatizing these monsters because, as Julie Cross (2011) affirms, works for children have moral lessons and messages to deliver; such messages resonate in the minds of children when they are presented/sugarcoated with humor (26). The ending of both works shows the reconciliation of

the children with the problems, worries, needs, and fears and their attempt to accept, face, and even change their understanding of them without the need for any magical or external aid. The ending thus shows the children coping and embracing what they feared/needed before: the girls and Evan's family embrace their fears/differences. In *The Boy Who Loved Monsters and the Girl Who Loved Peas*, the monster becomes the catalyst that brings the family together. This specific dimension is missing in *Monsters under the Bed*, in which the focus is more on using humor as a coping mechanism with different types of fears. Indeed, it would have been more effective if *Monsters under the Bed* highlighted the children's family life as well. Perhaps the playwright could have also made all the monsters/fears embodied/personified in Gruntable himself, as is the case with Pea, so that he would have a bigger role throughout the play, not just the final scene of the play.

In both works, unlike other works for children in which terrifying monsters are used, the monsters are not controlled or dominated. According to Compagna and Steinhart (2020), most "narratives," a term they use to refer to both: "high arts products" and "popular culture," feature monsters that appear as "contained," have to be "destroyed," sometimes there is even "adjustment of (beauty) standards," "modified," or "integrated in the social order" (xi). The two selected plays present a different role of monsters, asserting how they should not be "contained" or "modified," but the children have to accept them in order to reach self-acceptance. Thus, the monsters in the plays do not disappear. Cohen (1996) argues that monsters "can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return" (20). He adds that "when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, human knowledge" (20). In the selected works, the friendly monsters help the children understand themselves, but they do not disappear or are "pushed" away. They continue to exist and even Gruntable promises to return. However, the protagonists are aware that its return will not be frightening or worrying at all, but rather accepted because the protagonists have learned to accept their fears and differences. Maynes (2020) asserts that "the monster should have the last word" in bedtime monster stories (7). Applying the previous words to the selected plays, the benevolent monsters are the ones who end the plays affirming their existence as part of the children's lives, but at the same time, confirming that the children are now more mature as they show deeper understanding of themselves and their own world.

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Note

1 When using extracts from the plays, the titles will henceforth be cited as follows: *The Monsters* and *The Boy Who Loved Peas*.

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Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Heidi Mohamed Bayoumy.

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