

THE NIGHT GARDEN



THE NIGHT GARDEN

THE MONSTER NEEDS A BODY

Why Frightening Images May Need Movement, Clay, Noise and Form

Oliver Riddett | The Archetype Approach

What has no form can feel infinite. When the monster gains a body, the child gains somewhere to meet it.

A child wakes from a dream and says there was something in the corner of the room.

"What did it look like?" the adult asks.

The child shakes their head.

"It did not have a face. It was just huge."

The adult offers the sensible answer: "It was only a dream. There is nothing there now."

True enough. The room is empty. The curtains are behaving themselves. Nobody is hiding behind the wardrobe.

But the child is still carrying it.

Later they run from an invisible creature in the garden. They roar at other children, hide inside a den and insist the entrance must be blocked. At the clay table they make a heavy black shape, squash it flat, then build it again.

The monster has entered waking life without ever becoming clear.

Perhaps that is part of what makes it powerful.

THE NIGHT GARDEN

A frightening image with no edges can spread everywhere. It can be behind the door, under the bed, inside the dark and somehow inside the child too.

The adult may want to explain it away.

The child may need to give it a body.

WHEN THE MONSTER HAS NO EDGE

Dreams are not obliged to obey the ordinary rules of size, distance or time.

A creature can be enormous without standing anywhere. A storm can fill the whole world. A hand can reach through a wall. A face can change while the child is looking at it. The child can be running and unable to move at the same time.

When the child wakes, the image may remain vivid but difficult to describe.

This is where adult language often arrives too quickly.

"Was it a wolf?"

"Did it look like the monster from that film?"

"Were you worried because Mummy went away yesterday?"

The questions are understandable. We are trying to help the image make sense.

But a dream image may not yet be ready to make sense in words.

It may first need weight, shape, sound, distance and an ending.

The child may need to discover whether it can be held in two hands, trapped beneath a box, made smaller, made ridiculous, given teeth, denied teeth, turned into a mask or placed at the far end of the room.

This is not decoding.

It is giving the child something to meet.

What has no form can feel infinite.

FORM CHANGES THE RELATIONSHIP

A lump of clay is not the dream.

A painted storm is not the terror of waking in the night.

THE NIGHT GARDEN

A roar in the garden is not the creature that seemed to fill the whole room.

But once an image enters material, something important changes.

It gains edges.

The child can look at it from the outside. They can turn it around. Add another head. Break off a claw. Put it in a cave. Cover it with fabric. Decide whether it is allowed to move.

The image becomes neither unreal nor literally real. It becomes playable.

That middle space matters.

Winnicott wrote about play as a space between inner and outer reality: neither pure fantasy nor merely the external world. It is where the child can bring something inward into relationship without having to explain it as fact.

In that space, the monster can be terrifying and made of cardboard.

The storm can be loud and stopped by the child.

The cave can be dark and have a door.

The body gives the image limits, and limits create possibility.

The child is no longer only the place where the monster happens.

They become somebody who can stand beside it.

THE BODY ARRIVES BEFORE THE EXPLANATION

Adults are fond of insight.

We like the moment when a feeling is named, a connection is made and the whole thing suddenly lines up nicely.

Children are often less tidy.

They may know something first through their muscles, breath, skin, voice and movement.

The child who cannot explain the creature may know exactly how it walks.

They know where it crouches. How fast it comes. The noise it makes before it attacks. The place in the body that goes tight when it appears.

THE NIGHT GARDEN

This bodily knowledge is not inferior to language. It is simply earlier, closer and sometimes more honest.

A child may need to stomp before they can speak. Crawl before they can draw. Build before they can remember. Roar before they can say, "I felt small."

The adult does not have to translate each action into a psychological statement.

We can simply notice that the child is finding a form strong enough to hold the feeling.

This is why early-years environments matter.

If the only available response to a powerful inner image is a calm conversation at a table, we may be offering the child the wrong doorway.

Some images need hands.

Some need feet.

Some need a proper noise.

BECOMING THE THING THAT CHASED YOU

Children often respond to a frightening figure by becoming it.

This can look alarming if we take the performance at face value.

The child who was scared of the monster is now the monster. They chase, snarl, command, threaten and take obvious delight in everybody else running away.

The adult may think, "Lovely. We have gone from nightmare to tiny dictator."

But becoming the creature can change the child's position inside the story.

Yesterday they were pursued.

Today they have the claws.

Yesterday the sound came towards them.

Today they decide when the roar begins and when it stops.

This does not mean every aggressive game is healing, harmless or automatically profound. Other children still need consent, safety and a way out. A symbolic explanation must never become an excuse for hurting people.

But neither should we assume that taking the powerful role means the child wants to become cruel.

THE NIGHT GARDEN

They may be trying to possess a force that previously belonged entirely to the thing outside them.

They may be discovering that intensity can move through their body without owning the whole of them.

The useful question is not, "Why are you being the monster?"

It is, "What becomes possible when you are the monster?"

Sometimes the child becomes the creature so the creature is no longer the only one with power.

NOT EVERY ROAR IS AGGRESSION

Early-years settings often welcome quiet symbolism more easily than loud symbolism.

A child painting a dark creature may be seen as imaginative.

A child crawling beneath tables, growling and charging across the room is more likely to be told to calm down.

Sometimes they do need to calm down. The setting has walls. Other humans are present. Nobody has signed up to be bitten before lunch.

But if all intense embodiment is treated as misbehaviour, the child learns that only the polite parts of the image may come outside.

The rest remains unformed and underground.

Good provision makes room for intensity without surrendering the boundary.

The monster can roar outdoors.

The chase has a stop signal.

The drum can be played loudly and then brought to silence.

The clay can be struck, squeezed and rebuilt.

The den belongs to the child who built it, and entry requires permission.

This is not a free-for-all.

It is form.

THE NIGHT GARDEN

The boundary is not there to shame the force. It teaches the force how to live in relationship.

THE ARCHETYPE APPROACH: IMAGE, BODY AND BALANCE

The Archetype Approach does not ask which archetype a monster represents.

That would be another tidy adult answer pressed onto a living image.

Instead, the six axes of balance can help us notice what kind of experience the child may be trying to develop around it.

Movement and stillness: Can the child run, chase and prowl, but also stop, hide, watch and choose when the creature rests?

Care and playful disruption: Is the monster only destructive, or can it be fed, teased, protected, soothed or surprised?

Truth and harmony: Can the child say, "I do not like it," "I want to scare you," or "That was too much" without losing the relationship?

Imagination and order: Can the image gain rules, sequence, shape, boundaries and a chosen ending?

Intensity and intellect: Can the child move between full bodily feeling and moments of looking, naming and thinking?

Exploration and construction: Can the child enter the wild place and also build a shelter, tool, pathway or home?

The aim is not to calm every image into niceness.

A monster that immediately becomes a cuddly friend because the adult cannot tolerate danger has not necessarily been integrated. It may simply have been domesticated on our behalf.

Balance means the child gains access to more than one movement.

The creature can attack and retreat. The child can become it and step out of it. The story can intensify and settle. The image can remain strange without remaining limitless.

WAKING INVITATIONS

The invitation should follow what the child is already doing. We do not produce a full monster curriculum because somebody mentioned a bad dream on Tuesday.

THE NIGHT GARDEN

Bit much.

But when the image keeps returning, the environment can offer several ways for it to acquire form.

CLAY: GIVE IT EDGES

Clay allows pressure, weight, resistance and change.

A child can make the creature solid, push holes through it, add teeth, tear it apart, bury it, flatten it or build it again. The material pushes back without arguing.

The adult might say, "That one is heavy," or, "You have made the mouth much wider today."

The invitation is form without interpretation.

MOVEMENT: CHANGE POSITION

The child may need to run, creep, freeze, climb, hide or become enormous.

A chase game can have a clear beginning, safe bases, consent and a stopping signal. Children can swap roles. The creature can be fast, slow, blind, sleepy or unable to cross a particular line.

The invitation is agency inside intensity.

SOUND: BEGIN AND END THE STORM

Drums, stamping, humming, growling and changes between loud and quiet can give the child influence over a sound that once arrived without warning.

The child can start it. Build it. Stop it. Listen to the silence afterwards.

The invitation is intensity held within rhythm.

CONSTRUCTION: BUILD SOMEWHERE TO STAND

Blocks, fabric, boxes, doors, bridges and loose parts allow the child to build boundaries around an image.

The monster may need a cage, but it may also need a home. The child may build a wall, a second exit, a watchtower, a tunnel or a place where smaller figures can return.

The invitation is safety made visible.

THE NIGHT GARDEN

MASKS AND PUPPETS: HOLD IT AT A DISTANCE

A mask allows the child to wear the creature and remove it.

A puppet allows the creature to speak from the hand rather than the whole body. It can argue, whisper, hide, be questioned or refuse to answer.

The invitation is relationship with a boundary.

WHEN THE ADULT GETS TWITCHY

Powerful play does not only stir the child.

It stirs us.

A practitioner may worry that allowing monsters will encourage aggression. A parent may hear the dream and fear that something terrible has happened. Another adult may become fascinated and start asking questions until the child is performing the image for them.

Our urgency can easily become the loudest thing in the room.

Sometimes the child is distressed and needs direct support. Repeated nightmares, loss of sleep, sudden behavioural change, waking-life disclosures or play that repeatedly overwhelms the child must be taken seriously and responded to through ordinary safeguarding and professional pathways.

But seriousness is not the same as certainty.

A monster does not prove trauma.

A child who enjoys frightening play is not therefore disturbed.

A body-based response is not automatically therapeutic.

The adult can remain alert without turning every claw into evidence.

We need enough steadiness to protect the boundary and enough humility not to claim the child's image as our discovery.

FORM WITHOUT FORCE

The Night Garden rests on a simple rule: the child owns the image.

That means the child may refuse to draw it.

THE NIGHT GARDEN

They may make the monster and immediately destroy it.

They may change the subject, laugh, say nothing or decide the creature is actually a bus driver called Kevin.

Fine.

The adult offers materials and companionship, not a symbolic homework assignment.

We do not force reenactment. We do not ask the child to become a frightening figure when they do not want to. We do not keep a private image alive after the child has left it behind. We do not place words into the monster's mouth or insist that the story reaches a reassuring ending.

Most importantly, we do not confuse early-years provision with therapy.

Practitioners can make space for drawing, movement, sound and construction. They can observe, co-regulate, protect and follow the child's play.

They should not conduct amateur trauma work in the role-play corner.

Form helps only when the child retains agency over the form.

Give the image a body, but do not take ownership of its life.

OBSERVATION WITHOUT DECODING

If the play is recorded, the observation should stay close to what happened.

"The child used black clay to make a figure with four legs and no face. They pressed it flat three times and rebuilt it. They said, 'Now it can fit in the box.' Later they chose to be the creature during outdoor play and stopped when another child used the agreed signal."

That tells us plenty.

It shows repetition, material exploration, language, role, agency, social awareness and change.

It does not need the sentence: "The faceless monster represents unprocessed anxiety."

Perhaps it does.

Perhaps it does not.

THE NIGHT GARDEN

Describe the form. Describe the movement. Describe what the child chose and what changed.

Leave the inner verdict open.

A HYPOTHESIS WORTH TESTING

The Night Garden offers a careful hypothesis.

When a frightening or recurring image is allowed to take child-chosen form through clay, movement, sound, construction, drawing or role play, the child may develop greater agency and a less overwhelming relationship with it.

The important change may not be that the monster disappears.

It may still have claws.

It may still live in the dark.

But perhaps it now has a size.

Perhaps it can be placed somewhere.

Perhaps the child can become it, leave it, stop it, rebuild it or decide that today it stays in the box.

These possibilities deserve careful observation rather than grand claims.

Does the child gain more control over beginnings and endings? Can they move between roles? Does the image become more detailed, bounded or playful? Can intensity rise and settle? Do shelters, tools, helpers or routes of escape appear?

Does the child show relief, pleasure, curiosity or greater flexibility after giving the image form? Can adults support this without leading, diagnosing or turning the setting into a clinic?

Those are questions for reflective practice and future research.

For now, the monster offers one useful lesson.

The opposite of fear is not always reassurance.

Sometimes it is form.

When the monster gains a body, the child gains somewhere to meet it.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oliver Riddett is the founder of the Archetype Approach, a developmental and relational model of childhood built around twelve universal archetypes. Developed through practice at Children of Towan in Porthtowan, Cornwall, the approach helps parents and practitioners look beneath behaviour and respond through balance rather than correction.