“What’s This?”

Liminality of Form and Content in Tim Burton’s *The Nightmare Before Christmas*

B.A. Essay

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Abstract
The heart of this essay’s inquiry is the Rites of Passage structure, with its emphasis on the liminal phase. Victor Turner’s concept of Liminality is seen in Tim Burton’s film *The Nightmare Before Christmas* as both a matter of genre and character development. The relevant leading characters, Jack the Pumpkin King and Sally, are examined through Turner’s triad of transition: separation, margin (liminal phase) and aggregation. Interpretation of the narrative reveals Jack, the Pumpkin King’s journey to find a feeling; his coming-of-age interweaves the phases of *Rites de Passage*, while Sally transforms from her constant state of in-betweenness to fixed status. Expanding the essay with exploration of the blending of genre within the visually grotesque yet endearing film, its form is tied together with song and dance. The film evokes liminality in its content, through Jack’s coming-of-age journey, paralleling the fairy tale genre along with Sally’s story. The coming-of-age journey of Burton’s misfit hero parallels the traditional fairy tale hero: although his personality evokes the archetype of the trickster and his image portrays the monster, Jack ultimately wants to do good. His inner state is explored, with consideration of how Sally embodies Jack’s inner struggle of restlessness and melancholy. The interweaving of genres broadens the heart of the essay’s inquiry and further evokes aspects of liminality, as the film’s genre interpretation never fully embodies any one genre at a specific time. The ambiguous genre qualities explored—the interweaving formal qualities of myth, musical, fantasy and horror—complement each other and further confirm the fairy tale aspects of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, as the liminality of content parallels the liminality of form.
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1. Introduction

*The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993), a stop-motion animation film based on a story and characters by Tim Burton and directed by Henry Selick, incorporates various genres simultaneously. With its content and form open to more than one interpretation, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* evokes Victor Turner’s concept of liminality. Turner expands on Arnold van Gennep’s *Rite de Passage* structure, which explains the transition of shifting through one social status to another: “Van Gennep has shown that all rites of transitions are marked by three phases: separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation” (“Betwixt and Between” 94). Turner’s concept of liminality expands the second phase of van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage*: “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (*The Ritual Process* 95).

In *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Jack, The Pumpkin King, is trapped within his feelings of melancholy about repeating the same old routine every year. Jack’s wistfulness for a change starts his coming-of-age journey. This, inevitably, starts a sequence of events that involve everyone in Halloween Town and Sally, the outsider, who is the only one that understands Jack, being in love with him. Jack’s adventure changes all their lives before he ultimately finds solace and falls in love with Sally.

In the film, dispirited, Jack removes himself away from Halloween Town. First, during the town’s celebrations of a triumphant Halloween, he stumbles through a magical door into Christmas Town, representing the threshold between the holiday worlds. Secondly, when contemplating the context of Christmas, Jack distresses his society by secluding from them his inner struggle after the events in Christmas Town. Here Jack marks his first phase of Rites of Passage as Turner explains that: “The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual […] either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both” (*The Ritual Process* 94).

In the film, Jack, secluded from the crowd, dissects the concept of Christmas and reprograms himself to steal this new holiday, transforming himself into Sandy Claws, a monstrous version of Santa Claus. The whole Town of Halloween partakes in the ritual process through the song “Making Christmas”. Here Jack marks the second
phase of his Rite of Passage, the liminal, as Turner explains: “During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (*The Ritual Process* 94-95).

Through the phases of Rites of Passage, we have alongside Jack’s story Sally, a ragdoll and misfit. Sally’s story evokes Turner’s liminality, however starting in the second phase: “The subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’” (“Betwixt and Between” 95). Sally is invisible to Halloween Town, secluded from participating in the celebration of Halloween. The town’s only scientist, Dr. Finkelstein, created Sally in his laboratory, and the town ignores her, dismissing her humanity. She is restless and repeatedly escapes her confinement to observe Halloween Town. Her in-betweenness, her separateness from the society of Halloween Town, allows her to act by herself to protect Jack. Her transition from a lower to a higher social status concludes in the story’s finale.

Upon completion of the second phase, the passenger reunites into society with new a status through the last phase of Rites of Passage, as Turner explains: “In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passenger is consummated. The ritual subject, individual […] is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards” (*The Ritual Process* 94-95). Sally’s Rite of Passage changes her identity from a constant state of in-betweenness to wholeness. Jack’s Rite of Passage transforms him into a better version of himself, and they fall in love.

In association with the film’s concern with in-betweenness, Bruno Bettelheim’s interpretation of the fairy tale genre accumulates within the film. Bettelheim connects the ambiguity of s to “the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society” (5). Burton’s intention with the film’s content is precisely that:

Here you have this story where there are no really bad characters […] And you have this character, Jack, who just wants to do good; he’s passionate about something, and basically he ends up being misperceived and scaring everybody. It’s funny, it took on the life of what it was about in real life. It was like, “Wait a minute. This is exactly what the movie is about. People are freaking out because
they think it’s scary, but it’s not. There really isn’t anything in it.” (Salisbury 124-125, emphasis in original)

*The Nightmare Before Christmas*’s interweaving of the fairy tale genre raises questions around Jack’s character traits associated with the archetype of the “trickster” discussed by Helena Bassil-Morozow in *Tim Burton: The Monster and the Crowd, A Post-Jungian Perspective*. The trickster archetype, derived from traditional stories and primitive mental images, pushes the genre to connect with myths. Other generic traits assembled within the film further the film’s liminal approach to genre.

In both form and content, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* evokes liminality. This essay will use Turner’s concept of liminality to explore the blending of genres, and coming-of-age narrative, within Burton’s film.
2. Liminality and Burton’s Inspiration

Liminality derives from the word “liminal,” meaning to occupy a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold (“Liminal”). In his essay “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” Turner contemplates van Gennep’s concept of the liminal period in rituals emphasizing the importance of transitions (“Betwixt and Between” 93).

Turner’s discussion is further expanded in The Ritual Process; Turner explains that van Gennep has shown that all Rites of Passage or “transitions” are marked by three phases: “separation, margin (signifying ‘threshold’) and aggregation” (94).

The first phase, separation, occurs when individual (or group) behavior diverges from established social or cultural states marking boundaries and limits; the passenger is deemed unstable. In the “liminal period” the individual or group’s (passengers) characteristics are ambiguous “since they pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of past coming state.” During the third phase, aggregation, the passenger is complete. Only then is the passenger complete, defined clearly in society and status (Turner, The Ritual Process 94-95).

Bjorn Thomassen’s discussion about the “intellectual history of the concept of liminality” reminds us that:

Liminality is indeed not any concept. Liminality does not and cannot “explain”. In liminality there is no certainty concerning the outcome. Liminality is a world of contingency where events and ideas, and “reality” itself, can be carried in different directions. (5, emphasis in original)

2.1 Burton’s Inspiration

When applying the concept of liminality to the form and content of The Nightmare Before Christmas, consideration of Burton’s inspiration for the film is appropriate. The story and characters came to life through a poem Burton wrote during a state of in-betweeness, while working for Disney as an animator. This poem was inspired by Clement Clark Moore’s poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” also known as “The Night
Before Christmas” (1823); Burton has described his poem as his contemplation of a different outcome for the night before Christmas (Salisbury 115).

Burton’s version of the poem imagines a scarier outcome. Rather than children’s delight at receiving good cheer from Father Christmas and a stocking full of presents described by Moore, Burton’s poem “The Nightmare Before Christmas” portrays Jack from “Halloweenland” who is bored with the same old routine. Jack stumbles upon Christmas Town and experiences the fascinating new things associated with it. Then, no longer haunted, Jack decides to steal Christmas. Jack prepares his own concept of Christmas to share with the world. Jack’s denial of his actions inspires fear in the human world, resulting in them shooting him down from the sky. Filled with grief over the “havoc,” Santa magically appears and reverses Jack’s mistake (“Original Poem by Tim Burton”).

Burton wrote the poem during a quite depressing time in his life, also characterized by a feeling of in-betweenness: “Disney was changing over, and […] I didn’t know if I was still an employee or not” (Salisbury 116). Finding solace in his artwork, he found himself in a state of liminality as he began to develop the film The Nightmare Before Christmas, since all his other independent work had been put in the “Disney vault,” deemed unsuitable for the Disney audience (Salisbury 117-118). The film was developed after Burton had transitioned through his personal liminal phase, establishing himself as an independent artist outside of Disney.

While Burton worked for Disney, the studio tried its best to transition him into an appropriate Disney animator, however Burton’s drawings for The Nightmare Before Christmas, as compared with the traditional Disney animation style, are dark, strange and unusual, as Burton often describes himself to be (Salisbury 2). Burton subverted form: “The first rule of animation is: Eyes for Expression,” but he created characters for The Nightmare Before Christmas that “either don’t have any eyes, or their eyes are sewn shut.” For Burton, it was fascinating to work to express Jack’s feelings with big pools of black instead of eyes (Salisbury 115).

Burton’s intention for Jack was a character “who is perceived as scary but isn’t […] Jack is like a lot of characters in classic literature that are passionate and have a desire to do something in a way that isn’t really acknowledged” (Salisbury 115-16). Burton’s experience of wanting to do something different is at the root of the film’s
content and form. In Burton’s mind, “scary” characters usually have more soul, a human aspect, than his human characters (Salisbury 124). For Burton, the monsters of Halloween Town are on the threshold of the unusual and the endearing. In this, The Nightmare Before Christmas parallels the genre of fairy tales as explained by Bettelheim:

The fairy tale leaves no doubt in the child’s mind that the pain must be endured and the risky chances taken, since one must achieve one’s personal identity; and, despite all anxieties, there is no question about the happy ending. (79)

This can be felt through the development of Jack, through his coming-of-age journey, his liminal transitions adapted from Burton’s life and through the film’s monstrous imagery.

The content of this movie is about being different, accepting who you are, making mistakes and learning from them, or as Burton explains, “movies are truly a form of therapy and work on your subconscious in the way fairy tales were meant to” (Salisbury 124). Burton seems to want the interpreter to go through a mental transition and create a new concept of monsters. Also, to think about the meaning of life and consider that Burton’s characters should not be judged by their appearance but their “human like” feelings and behavior (Salisbury 125). Jack’s liminality does not only “serve as moments of creativity that [freshen] up the social make-up” (Thomassen 14) because his coming-of-age journey emphasizes his human-like need to break free from the marginal.
3. Jack’s Liminal Quest

Jack’s song “Jack’s Lament” shows his frustration with the same old routine, the start of his in-betweenness, when he sings, “I excel without even trying.” Still, he fulfills his obligations as Pumpkin King, by scaring the humans year after year, being “master of fright.” Jack thirsts for something new and exclaims, “I grow so weary of the sounds of screams” and “who here would ever understand,” as the praise comes in from his peers for the accepted behavior of scaring humans. Indicating his in-betweenness, his feelings of obligation to his status as Pumpkin King and simultaneous struggle with his melancholy, “Jack’s Lament” sets up nicely the next phase of his quest.

Customarily in coming-of-age journeys and fairy tales, the hero secludes himself and then “is helped by being in touch with primitive things—a tree, an animal, nature” (Bettelheim 11). Jack secludes himself from Halloween Town, walking aimlessly, to find himself in a new place. There he finds a grove with trees that have colorful doors that visually represent the different Holiday Worlds of Old. Curiosity draws him to the brightest door, which looks like a decorated Christmas tree, a door that crosses over the threshold to the parallel universe of Christmas Town.

Jack enters Christmas Town and his lyrics in the song “What’s This?” show his disbelief. “I can’t believe my eyes / I must be dreaming,” he sings, as snow falls on his head. Jack, drawn to the colors and magical atmosphere, becomes fascinated with this new concept. This is expressed while he watches people sing songs and laugh. Not believing this to be true, he sings, “Everybody is so happy / Have I possibly gone daffy?” Jack’s sneaking around Christmas Town show his liminality forming, as Turner explains: “Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low excited, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low” (The Ritual Process 97).

Jack’s discovery fills his bones with warmth after his earlier experience of in-betweenness. He sings out in “What’s This?” with pure glee:

The monsters are all missing
And the nightmares can’t be found
And in their place there seems to be
Good feeling all around.
At the end of his exploration of Christmas Town, the empty place inside his bones is filling up and he desperately wants it all for himself, setting the course for his transition through the phases of the Rite of Passage.

Jack’s disappearance the day after Halloween is very unusual and the town goes on alert. The distress that Halloween Town feels when their Pumpkin King goes missing for a night instigates Jack’s dismissal of socially accepted behavior. (Halloween Town’s distress is a natural human response, which is how Burton wants us to interpret his monsters.) Jack, oblivious to their distress, further pushes himself over the threshold into the phase of seclusion.

Jack tries his best to transfer this newfound treasure by sharing with his community inanimate objects and the happy feelings he discovered in Christmas Town in the song “Town Meeting Song”:

**Jack**

This is a thing called a present / The whole thing starts with a box

**Devil**

A box? / Is it steel?

**Werewolf**

Are there locks?

**Harlequin Demon**

Is it filled with a pox?

**Devil, Werewolf, Harlequin Demon**

A pox / How delightful, a pox

**Jack**

If you please / Just a box with bright-colored paper
And the whole thing’s topped with a bow
Witches
A bow? / But why? / How Ugly / What’s in it? / What’s in it?

Jack
That’s the point of the thing, not to know
[…]
Listen now, you don’t understand / That’s not the point of Christmas land

However, the monsters of Halloween Town do not fully grasp what he wants from them expressed in the song, turning every concept into a nightmare.

This associates with Turner’s discussion of the transition though the Rites of Passage to the phase of seclusion, as the response from Halloween Town forces Jack to reevaluate his life, pushing him into the liminal phase. Jack’s frustration with his society’s inability to understand the concept of Christmas forces him simultaneously to alter the information to suit society and isolate himself. Giving up, he exclaims: “I might as well give them what they want.” Halloween Town functions according to specific rules and the passenger entering liminality deviates from them often at a personal price since, as Turner writes, “life in ‘structure’ is filled with objective difficulties: decisions have to be made, inclinations sacrificed to the wishes and need of the group” (The Ritual Process 139). Jack sacrifices the concept of Christmas, giving in to the needs of Halloween Town.

The Town decides to partake in Christmas when Jack changes the narrative associated with Santa Claus from the distributer of cheer to a scarier version, a giant red monster called Sandy Claws. This new identity forming, associated with Jack entering the phase of liminality, will commence during the ritual participated by the whole of Halloween Town in the song “Making Christmas,” concluding Jack’s liminality with acceptance of his identity as Pumpkin King.

First, however, Jack further secludes himself from Halloween Town, frustrated by the lack of apparent meaning to the cheerful lights, toys, packages with bows and pies. He seeks assistance from Halloween Town’s only scientist Dr. Finkelstein, Sally’s maker. Jack, equipped with the necessary tools to experiment on the decorations and ornaments, melts down candy canes, breaks lights and dissects teddy bears, only to find
that even though all his experimentation produces interesting reactions, they do not provide an answer to his questions about what they mean beyond their appearance.

At the same time, Halloween Town’s inhabitants lurk around Jack’s tower, the song “Jack’s Obsession” showing their concern with his seclusion and abnormal behavior. The monsters of Halloween Town repeat the phrase “Something’s up with Jack” while wondering if they will ever get him back; their concern associates with “giving recognition to an essential and generic human bond, without which there could be no society” (Turner, The Ritual Process 97, emphasis in the original). Although their concern is not apparent to Jack, it is a vital part of the Town’s interlude with passing over the threshold to the liminal phase with Jack in the song “Making Christmas” because “each individual’s life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and communitas, and to states and transitions” (Turner, The Ritual Process 97).

Jack comes to no apparent logical conclusion about this Christmas thing and expresses his desperation to understand the empty colorful decorations in “Jack’s Obsession”:

In these little bric-a-brac  
A secret’s waiting to be cracked  
These dolls and toys confuse me so  
Confound it all, I love it though

Jack complains about having read all the Christmas books and knowing all the rhymes by heart. His skull, so full of Christmas, seems to be tearing apart until he figures that perhaps his obsession is not as complicated as he believes, developing his transition through the phase of seclusion in his coming-of-age journey:

It’s simple really, very clear  
Like music drifting in the air  
Invisible, yet everywhere  
Just because I cannot see it  
 Doesn’t mean I can’t believe it
After this discovery, Jack makes a decision that alters the whole town and his transition into the state of liminality calling out, “Eureka!! This year, Christmas will be ours!” while laughing manically. Jack changes the course of Halloween Town.

Turner’s phrase “spontaneous communitas” coincides here with the story’s development: Halloween Town’s ritual of making Christmas their own “is richly charged with affects, mainly pleasurable ones” (The Ritual Process 139). In the song representing this ritual, “Making Christmas,” the cheerful Christmas preparation witnessed by Jack in Christmas Town becomes a scarier version. The preparations are liminal, not completely Christmas Town neither Halloween Town but somewhere in-between. These preparations bring pleasure to the townspeople, who sing “Time to give them something fun / They’ll talk about it for years to come / It’s ours this time” as they wrap up mice and snakes with spiders as bows.

The preparations have, as Turner describes the happening surrounding spontaneous communitas, “something ‘magical’ about them. Subjectively there is in it the feeling of endless power” (The Ritual Process 139). Jack was looking for something new, and the power that surges through him during this ritual evidently aids forwarding his coming-of-age journey, and indicates his childlike longings when he says:

I don’t believe what’s happening to me
My hopes, my dreams, my fantasies
Hee, hee, hee, hee.

Turner explains: “Spontaneous communitas is a phase, a moment, not a permanent condition” (The Ritual Process 140), which applies to the townspeople and reinforces their liminality as they are all involved in the ritual of making Christmas, and no longer partaking in their normal ritual of making Halloween. The joy and power derived from the “Making Christmas” song transitions the whole community. Here the whole town is crossing over the threshold, as the people are neither Halloween nor Christmas, they are in-between the two. To finalize the transition of Jack’s identity from Pumpkin King to Sandy Claws, Jack sends his best “trick or treaters” (Lock, Stock and Barrel) to kidnap Santa Claus.
Jack’s transition through the liminal into the phase of aggregation commences. For Jack when Santa is delivered, however, his liminal phase is not completely concluded. Jack finalizes his reprogramming as Sandy Claws by stealing Santa’s hat. Now transitioning from one state to another, Jack ventures to the human world in his home-made sleigh—made from a coffin, filled with scary packages, pulled by skeleton reindeer—excited and delusional about his acceptance into the human world. However, things do not turn out as Jack envisions since the humans, on the other side of the threshold of holiday fantasy, shoot Jack the imposter down from the sky.

The song “Poor Jack” shows Jack’s coming-of-age journey ending and his phase of aggregation commencing, as he accepts his mistake. Giving the monster Jack a relatable human essence, his identity crosses the threshold from Sandy Claws to Pumpkin King while he sings, and explains that on his journey to find himself his intentions were not bad:

But I never intended all this madness, never
And nobody really understood, well how could they?
The all I wanted was to give them something great
Why does nothing ever turn out like it should?
[…]
Well what the heck, I went and did my best
And, by God, I really tasted something swell
[…]
And for the first time since I don’t remember when
I felt like my old bony self again
And I, Jack, the Pumpkin King
That’s right! I am the Pumpkin King, ha, ha, ha, ha

And I just can’t wait until next Halloween
‘Cause I’ve got some new ideas that will really make them scream
And, by God, I’m really going to give it all my might
Uh oh, I hope there’s still time to set things right.
Although his acknowledgement of his mistake and accepting who he truly is concludes his coming-of-age narrative, his transition from the state of liminality to aggregation is not complete until the events around the rescue of Father Christmas, Sally and their falling in love.

3.1 Sally

The only individual outside of the community of Halloween Town is Sally, although she partakes in the spontaneous communitas. She is given a role to play in the ritual of making Christmas—her talent for sewing is known in Halloween Town—but her plotline indicates her status as a misfit and shows her story is a “side story” (Abbot 37). Sally, regarded by Halloween Town as merely the town scientist Dr. Finkelstein’s creation, is ignored by the other monsters when she ventures out. She is beautifully although monstrously sewn together—her appearance and existence mirror Jack’s feelings.

For Burton, her long auburn hair, big eyes and body, with a feminine physique but filled with dead leaves, represent the “psychological thing of being pieced together” (Salisbury 122), which incidentally is Jack’s psychological dilemma as well. Sally’s crisis in Dr. Finkelstein’s ivory tower pushes her to confront her status, pulling herself forward away from her status as a misfit, her maker’s property.

Sally’s plotline shows her symbolizing liminality. She is one of Turner’s “symbols of Liminality that indicate the structural invisibility of novices undergoing life crisis-rituals—how, for example, they are secluded from the spheres of everyday life” (The Ritual Process 169). Sally fulfills these criteria: her liminality derives from her status as an outsider in Halloween Town. Feeling restless, she constantly drugs Dr. Finkelstein to escape her confinement. Invisible, she is unable to interact with anybody in Halloween Town, except when Jack needs to make his Sandy Claws costume. Jack considers her the only one clever enough to make it, since she is constantly sewing herself together.

Sally’s story shows she carries a torch for Jack and understands his inner struggle, although she is unable to express this to him. Forced to return Dr. Finkelstein’s tower, where she is reminded that her feelings of restlessness are just a silly phase that everyone goes through, Sally voices her dislike for Dr. Finkelstein’s suppression of her
participation in the town’s life motives her little rebellious acts, beginning her transformation away from the social status Dr. Finkelstein pushes upon her.

Sally’s plotline further frames her story as a coming-of-age narrative. Her in-betweenness enables her character to do things differently from the crowd. When Jack secludes himself, experimenting with the concept of Christmas, Sally is the only one who breaks his isolation, bringing him a snack. Her actions show her affection. After a premonition showing Jack’s Christmas turning into a catastrophe, Sally tries to push through her phase of seclusion to warn Jack of the mistake he is about to make, while making his Sandy Claws outfit. However, just like the town, he ignores her, and brushes her concern aside.

As the town is ritualizing Christmas, all partaking in transition through the phase of liminality, Sally is included into the ritual only to complete Jack’s identity-building. Her role is making him the Sandy Claws suit, altering her personal liminal phase only slightly, as she is still considered an outsider. Since nobody heeds her warning, she tries sabotaging Jack’s transition to the human world, confronting her status. However, her failure enables Jack to descend to the human world filled with the power of delusion. While Jack descends upon the humans, Sally sings about her in-betweenness in the song “Sally’s Song,” in which she hopes her premonition is wrong while expressing her concern about Jack:

What will become of my dear friend?
Where will his actions lead us then?
Although I’d like to join the crowd
In their enthusiastic cloud
Try as I may, it doesn’t last

And will we ever end up together?
No, I think not, it’s never to become
For I am not the one.

Watching through the fountain, another fantastical threshold, Halloween Town cheers while watching Jack’s horrendous Christmas come to life in the human world. Sally
sees the problem growing; she pushes the boundaries of her in-betweenness as she decides to aid Jack by saving Santa Claus, only to be captured herself.

After Jack’s fall from power, he accepts his fault and sets out to save Santa Claus. Here the final phase of Rites of Passage fully begins for both Jack and Sally. By finding Sally kidnapped with Santa, Jack realizes she is the only one that understood his inner struggle and feels remorse over his blindness towards her affection. Jack returns Sally’s love and with his acknowledgement concludes Sally’s transition through the Rites of Passage, her “change from one state to another” and “entry into a new achieved status” (Turner, “Betwixt and Between” 95). She is now part of society, brought upon by Jack’s love for her enabling her a socially acceptable status as Jack’s bride. Now her phase of aggregation concludes; meanwhile Jack’s transition though aggregation concludes with his return to Halloween Town, as Pumpkin King, after rescuing Santa and Sally, where his return is celebrated.

Santa Claus resolves the mayhem caused by Jack and delivers snow to the inhabitants of Halloween Town before the film concludes with the song “Finale,” as the inhabitants of Halloween Town experience “Jack’s obsession.”

The identity-building quest and Rite of Passage transitions for Jack and Sally end happily, expressed by them in “Finale”. Secluded from the crowd, Jack, shown content as Pumpkin King, searches for Sally. Finding her in the cemetery, Jack asks to join her on a hill and as they embrace, they sing about their fairy tale-like ending:

And sit together, now and forever
For it is plain as anyone can see
We’re simply meant to be
4. Ambiguous Genre

Establishing liminality in the characters’ identity-building and coming-of-age narratives does not completely resolve the discussion of the film’s form. The ambiguity of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* incorporates a coming-of-age story with social misfits finding their way through the triad of transitions in the Rites of Passage. The content of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* interweaves different genres simultaneously and the form is open to interpretation, rendering it ambiguous. It is in a state of in-between at various moments.

The visuals of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* incorporate elements of horror, dark and monstrous surroundings, and the nightmarish, while the film’s narration incorporates aspects of musicals, with action and characters’ internal monologues presented with song. The film shows a hero struggling with his existence, in monstrous packaging containing song, the fantastic and the magical.

Exploration of the film’s form will show it is not completely one genre at any specific time, since it weaves together animation, fantasy, horror, and the musical and fairy tale genres.

4.1 The fairy tale Hero: Liminal Trickster

Upon a closer inspection, the content of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* falls into the fairy tale genre with Jack’s quest to find a feeling. The story incorporates the archetypes of the fairy tale, since within the story Jack relates to Bettelheim’s interpretation of the fairy tale genre conveying that:

> if one wishes to gain selfhood, achieve integrity, and secure one’s identity, difficult developments must be undergone: hardships suffered, dangers met, victories won. Only in this way can one become master of one’s fate and win one’s kingdom. (278)

This can be found within *The Nightmare Before Christmas* through Jack’s coming-of-age, as the transition into and out of the liminal phase allows him to become master of his fate as Pumpkin King in his kingdom of Halloween Town, and through Sally’s transition from an outsider to Jack’s soul mate. However, Jack’s inner unhappiness is
the cause of his hardship; as Bettelheim comments, “meritorious such as self-development is, and while it may save our soul, it is still not enough for happiness. For this, one must go beyond one’s isolation and form a bond with another” (278). His coming of-age-journey ensures he becomes the master of his inner self and content within his home, however it is not fully complete, as he has not recognized Sally after he concludes his identity-building and Rite of Passage.

Often within the traditional fairy tale the story is concluded with love:

[T]he rescuer demonstrates his love for his future bride in some form. We are left in the dark about the feelings of the heroines […] the rescuers fall in love with these heroines because of their beauty, which symbolizes their perfection. Being in love, the rescuers have to become active and prove that they are worthy of the woman they love – something quite different from the heroine’s passive acceptance of being loved. (Bettelheim 277)

A modern version of this is found in The Nightmare Before Christmas. Sally’s love for Jack is expressed through action: she proves her love for him when she tries to rescue Santa Claus, though this results in her being rescued by Jack. Her actions prove her worth and Jack falls in love with her. In the context provided by Bettelheim, Jack and Sally trade places as hero and damsel in distress, since Sally is the active party in this love story. Jack does not fall in love with Sally because of her beauty. Her actions are a declaration of her love for Jack, her commitment to being in love. Sally enters liminality with her generic fairy tale role as rescuer and in need of rescuing. Sally is not a passive heroine; her actions give her the resolution to change her fate. Catherine Spooner discusses the nontraditional strong characteristics of feminine characters in Burton’s films:

[S]elf-fashioning patchwork girls are perhaps his strongest feminist statement, as they rewrite the Frankenstein narrative to show versions of Frankenstein’s bride escaping the patriarchal system that constructs her and taking control of her identity through the manipulation of body-as-costume. (53)
Seen in this light, Sally is more fairy tale hero than damsel in distress. As discussed before, Sally’s character—“an icon of self-transformation”—is “endlessly unpicking, dismantling and re-stitching her patchwork body to facilitate her intervention in the narrative” (Spooner 53). Her ability to do this suggests her liminality within the film’s form: she is terrifying, yet has attributes of the fairy tale hero as well.

Incorporating the generic elements of the fairy tale in exploration of form and content, Helena Bassil-Morozow and Katherine A. Fowkes consider another aspect of Jack’s character development: Jack as the trickster, paralleling with myth more than fairy tales. Bettelheim defines the differences and similarities between the fairy tale and myth as:

> There are not only essential similarities between myths and fairy tales; there are also inherent differences. Although the same exemplary figures and situations are found in both and equally miraculous events occur in both, there is a crucial difference in the way these are communicated. Put simply, the dominant feeling a myth conveys is: this is absolutely unique; it could not have happened to any other person […] although the events which occur in fairy tales are often unusual and most improbable […] something that could happen to you or me or the person next door […] [A] significant difference between these two kinds of story is the ending, which in myths is nearly always tragic, while always happy in fairy tales […] The myth is pessimistic, while the fairy story is optimistic, no matter how terrifyingly serious some features of the story may be. It is this decisive difference which sets the fairy tale apart from other stories […] (36-37).

The film incorporates fairy tale generics; Jack’s Rite of Passage, his in-betweenness are relatable, there is optimism and the story has a happy ending. There is a strong correlation between Bassil-Morozow and Fowkes’s discussions, indicating Jack’s character traits as the trickster while in the liminal phase. Jack is in-between the trickster archetype and fairy tale hero.

Fowkes points out that Jack “becomes a trickster twice over, on the one hand, subverting the values of Halloweentown, and on the other, subverting the values of Christmas by infusing the joy of Christmas with scary and grotesque gifts that frighten
children” (233). Fowkes distinguishes Jack as a “psychopomp who exhibits a number of trickster qualities and transcends the worlds of the living and the dead”; these characteristics give him the ability to “represent the crossing of boundaries” (234).

Bassil-Morozow’s analysis of Jack’s identity interweaves the archetype of the trickster with the fairy tale hero archetype further. Bassil-Morozow envisions “the trickster and the shadow as forming a continuous spectrum rather than being two separate archetypes” (141). That said, there is a “generic divergence between the two types of the double. Whereas the trickster is more unconscious, playful and benign, the shadow’s actions are conscious and deliberate” (139-140). Jack’s ritual of making Christmas is not deliberate in its destruction of the concept of Christmas.

She further elaborates that Jack’s reasoning for his transition tie him further to the archetype of the trickster because the “worst of all boundaries for the trickster is the ‘cage’ in which the tricksters are initially locked—the metaphorical representation of ‘being repressed in the unconscious’” (147). This in the case of Jack happens when he runs out of “creative steam because he feels stifled within a small space” (147), the small space being his home of Halloween Town. Although Jack is celebrated as trickster within his society, this does not stop him from searching for something new, as “one cannot make anything new without disregarding the old. To transgress is a trickster’s way—but is also the way of this artist” (Bassil-Morozow 148). Considering the trickster archetype in conjunction with Jack’s character development validates Jack’s transition through liminality, from Sandy Claws back to Pumpkin King, as the trickster to the fairy tale hero because, according to Bettelheim:

Once the fairy tale hero has achieved his true identity at the story’s ending (and with it inner security about himself, his body, his life, his position in society), he is happy the way he is and no longer unusual in any respect. (57-58)

The film’s story incorporates fairy tale more than myth, as Burton’s interest with Jack’s character lies in his search for a feeling, to find his place and not scare anybody, connecting back to Bettelheim’s claim that:
Myths and fairy stories both answer the eternal questions: What is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself? The answers given by myths are definite, while fairy tale is suggestive; its messages may imply solution, but never spell them out. (45)

The tale of Jack’s endeavor is a form of fairy tale therapy. The Nightmare Before Christmas incorporates the message of the fairy tale, which is not to imprint useful information about the external world, but to aid the inner process taking place (Bettelheim 25).

For Burton, the content of The Nightmare Before Christmas is about feeling something, even if that meaning is not clear to anyone but himself, because “movies are truly a form of therapy and work on your subconscious in the way fairy tales were meant to” (Salisbury 124). To Burton, fairy tales and monster movies are “fairly similar” in meaning:

[F]airy tales are extremely violent and extremely symbolic and disturbing, probably even more so than Frankenstein and stuff like that, which are kind of mythic and perceived as fairy-tale like. (Salisbury 3)

Jack’s story does not deliver useful real world information about how to deal with feeling like a misfit, or show a perfect solution to fixing melancholy. His story however is suggestive as there is an end to the liminality of a coming-of-age narrative, showing how feelings of in-betweenness, the perception of the grass being greener on the other side and the process of owning up to mistakes all build identity.

4.2 Musical Narration
Incorporating generic elements of the musical, The Nightmare Before Christmas features diegetic music. In other words, it is a stop-motion animation musical, since the content of the film is largely narrated through music, which moves the plot forward when tied together with sparse spoken dialogue (van Elferen 78).

Isabella van Elferen’s essay “Danny Elfman’s Musical Fantasyland” explores composer Elfman’s music, considering the various musical themes associated with various characters, as these “highlight just how important music is for Burton’s fantasy
universes” (79). Noting that *The Nightmare Before Christmas* ties together character
development, plot, the inner feelings of Jack and Sally in their coming-of-age quest, and
other characters’ participation in their in-betweenness, van Elferen’s discussion
concludes that in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* diegetic music “creates a musical
reality in which the laws and conventions of the symbolic order are overthrown and
replaced by melody, harmony, timbre and rhythm,” and also, that films such as *The
Nightmare Before Christmas* that incorporate “diegetic music show that fantasy can
overthrow reality and nothing is impossible” (van Elferen 79-80).

Interestingly, van Elferen’s exploration harmonizes the concept of the music that
Burton and Elfman were working towards at the very beginning. They would meet up
together to consult Burton’s drawings, his poem and a ten-year-old story outline and
would “just treat it like an operetta, not like the musicals that they did, but more like
that old-fashioned kind of thing, where the songs are more engrained in the story”
(Salisbury 120). Burton worked on the songs and script simultaneously. Elfman
completed the story through musical numbers, and gives the leading character Jack
Skellington his voice. The development of the story evokes the liminal phase, as
adapting the content from the poem to a script portrays a musical, gothic horror
entwined with the fairy tale.

The simplicity of the text and the openness to interpretation of the story parallel
the fairy tale, as Bettelheim explains: “The fairy tale’s deepest meaning will be different
for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his life” (12).

4.3 Fantasy Gothic Horror

In general, and in terms of fictional genre, a “Nightmare” is a very unpleasant and
frightening experience (“Nightmare”). In “This Is Halloween,” the opening song in *The
Nightmare Before Christmas*, the monsters introduce themselves. One by one they
proclaim their identity and purpose: the creature under the bed has red glowing eyes and
sharp teeth, the man under the stairs has spiders in his hair. Choruses of corpses and
ghosts, werewolf and vampires join in the song. All these monsters and creatures can be
identified from fictional genres such as gothic horror. Although their appearance is
unpleasant, though, it is evident that the monsters of Halloween Town do not consider
themselves bad, as they sing: “Life’s no fun without a good scare / That’s our job, but
we’re not mean / In our town of Halloween.”
The film incorporates elements of the fantasy genre, associated with gothic horror, with supernatural beings. Jack is a skeleton who can take off his head to recite Shakespeare, Sally a beautiful creation that constantly stitches herself back together. The film features a trio of vampires who receive rewards for draining the most blood in a single night, as well as “a werewolf, witches and creatures from the Black Lagoon” (Salisbury 124).

As Jack travels between the thresholds of Holiday Worlds of Old and the human world, the representations of these worlds are fantastical. Halloween Town represents the Gothic with its black and gray landscape, strange and unusual buildings, and large cemetery inhabited by ghosts and other liminal creatures. The Town’s inhabitants are plucked from the nightmarish: clowns with tear away faces and a scary scientist, all incorporating the traits of horror as they all lack large expressive eyes and appear monstrous before they start singing.

Meanwhile, Christmas Town is a fantastical universe made up of happy little elves, pies and all the colors of the rainbow. Laughing children throw snowballs instead of heads, and assemble innocent-looking toys while trimming the Christmas tree with colorful lights, instead of waiting to pounce from shadows or filling dreams with fright. The world of the humans evokes in-betweenness with its typically suburban symbols: perfect little houses, perfect little children and bland colors connote the same old routine, which is then disrupted when Jack changes the Christmas in a fantastical yet horrendous manner. At the same time, the lyrics of the film’s songs are consistent with the theme of the Nightmarish. For example, in the song “Kidnap the Sandy Claws,” Lock, Stock and Barrel go over which plan for kidnapping Santa Claus is best:

Kidnap the Sandy Claws, beat him with a stick
Lock him up for ninety years, see what makes him tick
Kidnap the Sandy Claws, chop him into bits
[...]  
Lock him in a cage and then, throw away the key.
This contains disturbing content associated with the nightmarish; although delivered cheerfully through song, their adventure to kidnap Santa Claus combines the fantastical elements of the film’s form and gothic horror.

When the fantastic, magical and fairy tale aspect are peeled away, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* stands out for its generic similarities with gothic horror.

Viktória Prohášzková’s study of the horror genre describes its dominant features. Her study follows Tordorov’s division of horror into three subgenres: the uncanny, marvelous and fantastic. One of his categories is particularly applicable to *The Nightmare Before Christmas*: “the fantastic horror, [in which] seemingly irrational and incomprehensible phenomena can be explained only by accepting the second layer of reality—the supernatural while the story lasts” (Prohášzková 133, emphasis in original).

She further points out that the horror genre can be found “in every type of art and media,” and categorizes *The Nightmare Before Christmas* as “other horror” since it falls into the category of animation within the many subgenres discussed in her article (140). The placement of “other horror” coincides with the gothic horror generics visually displayed through fantastical elements and the various character traits displayed by the monsters of Halloween Town. As discussed, *The Nightmare Before Christmas* combines generic traits of the fairy tale, the musical and gothic horror, showing the film’s formal ambiguity.

An exploration of the different genres traits incorporated within the form of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* evokes Turner’s concept of liminality, as the movie, open to interpretation, transitions through the threshold of these generic elements as the story unfolds, reminding us that “ambiguity need not by now surprise us, for it’s a property of all centrally liminal processes and institutions” (*The Ritual Process* 201).
5. Conclusion

Turner’s concept of liminality is evoked through Jack’s coming-of-age journey. His transition through the triad of Rites of Passage phases—seclusion, margin and aggregation—freshen up his identity and the social makeup of Halloween Town. The inhabitants of Halloween Town do not force these transitions upon him; he enters them unwittingly through his coming-of-age journey.

His character traits, which resemble those of the trickster archetype, empower him to alter the outcome of his predicament, and that consequently is vital to the revival of Halloween Town. Jack’s trickster traits allow him to involve Halloween Town in the ritual of making Christmas, although they do not completely grasp the spirit of the holiday. Jack then quickly changes his agenda of explaining the concept of Christmas, the joyful magic that has changed his melancholy, to a socially acceptable concept that includes them in his liminal phase. This, rather than a ritual designed by the society of Halloween Town, alters his makeup, enforcing a change in his character and a fulfillment of his social obligations.

This ritual of changing Christmas enables Jack to reprogram himself into Sandy Claws, building his identity. Therefore Jack is no longer going through the continuous ritual of the same old preparations of Halloween. Jack’s reaction, through his experience of liminality, ties together his feelings of melancholy and his in-betweenness. Finding his wish to change this, he crosses over the threshold. Jack’s transition ends in a happy manner as he discovers that trying new things, and embracing other concepts and people into his life, is not wrong; correlating to the fairy tale hero, he sets out to fix his wrongdoing resulting in the happy ending associated with that genre.

These transitions give his monstrousness a human connection, evoking Burton’s desire for others to be able to see his monsters as misunderstood misfits: outsiders, like Jack and Sally, dealing with inner struggles, un-voiced or voiced, that are relatable and real.

Jack’s quest for a feeling, his dissatisfaction with delightfully scaring people, embodies a character that sets out to do something to fill the emptiness in his bones, albeit in an unconventional manner. This relates to Burton’s personal experience watching monster movies and feeling a deep connection with the monsters in them, the
misunderstood monsters that, like Jack, only want to do well. A relatable hero in monstrous packaging, Jack is framed though the fantastical and the magical in the songs “Jack’s Lament”, “What’s This? “, “Jack’s Obsession” and “Poor Jack”.

Paralleling the traditional fairy tale hero, as one that conquers his inner struggles in a fantastical way, Jack’s development throughout the story is interwoven with Sally’s change from one social status to another, further evoking Turner’s concept of liminality with their transition.

The film’s blending of genres also evokes liminality. The film is in-between. The film connects to the musical, with large parts of the stories dialogue expressed through song. Attributes of gothic horror and the nightmarish are present in the dark and grotesque landscape of Halloween Town, and the looks of the characters when their magical and fantastical attributes are stripped away. However, at heart *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is a fairy tale.

The film’s content and form demonstrate Bettelheim’s discussion of the fairy tale. *The Nightmare Before Christmas* embraces the fairy tale archetype with both Jack’s and Sally’s coming-of-age journey. At the close of the film, the hero is finally able to recognize love and accept his identity as the Pumpkin King, and embrace his kingdom of Halloween Town. Too, the film’s generic ambiguity gives it the enchantment we experience when interacting with fairy tales. Sally’s side story, in which the invisible outsider is empowered to change her circumstances, frames the content further within the fairy tale genre as she gently takes over the role of hero. Her physical appearance portrays Jack’s inner struggle, her character traits as the outsider looking in help him through his transition. Her actions when trying to stop Jack’s delusion of power as Sandy Claws subtly give her the appearance of the hero, rather than the damsel in distress.

Jack’s quest to find a feeling and Sally’s journey to become part of society, their transition through the Rites of Passage in the narrative discourse, tie together the interweaving of genres within Burton’s film.
Works Cited


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