

The Portrayal of Monsters in Illustrated Children's Books : Catharsis in *A Monster Calls*

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Abstract

In this article, I shall try to discuss the function of the monster in *A Monster Calls* (2011), created through the collaboration of three creators: Patrick Ness (1971-), who was inspired to complete the story by writings left by Siobhan Dowd (1906-2007), and Jim Kay, who drew several pictures for this work. This work was awarded the CILIP Carnegie Medal and the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal in 2012. This is unparalleled in the history of children's literature and proves that *A Monster Calls* was highly regarded both as a story book and as a picture book.

First, the general use of monsters in picture books is examined. Second, the illustrations in *A Monster Calls* are analysed. Third, the function of the monster in this work is examined. As a consequence of the whole discussion, it is clear that both the story and the illustrations are essential for this work, and the function of the yew tree monster is healing, by making Conor the boy protagonist shout the truth. *A Monster Calls* indicates the possibility that suffering such as that of death sometimes creates something. Dowd, who died of a fatal disease, left this story of loss and catharsis.

子どものための絵入り本におけるモンスターの表象 ——『怪物はささやく』における^{カタルシス}浄化——

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要旨

A Monster Calls (2011) は 3 人の創作者による合作である。2007 年癌のため死去したアイルランド系イギリス人作家 Siobhan Dowd (1960-2007) の遺稿に触発されたアメリカ人作家 Patrick Ness (1971-) が仕上げ、イギリスの挿絵画家 Jim Kay が挿絵を付けた。本作品は、2012 年、優れた児童文学作品に与えられるカーネギー賞と併せて、挿絵の点で優れた児童書に授与されるケイト・グリーナウェイ賞を受賞し、史上初のダブル受賞作品となった。物語としてだけでなく、絵本としても価値が高いとみなされたことが、この評価の所以であるといえよう。

両親が 6 年前に離婚したため、13 歳の少年コナーは癌を患う母親と二人で暮らしている。ある日の真夜中過ぎ、コナーの前にイチイの木の姿をした怪物が現れる。怪物は 3 つの物語を語りに来たと告げ、コナー自身も第 4 の物語として真実を語らなければならないと言う。やがて最後の物語を語る時が訪れ、コナーは心の奥に隠し続けていた真実を悲痛な叫びと共に口にする。

本論では、本作品において文と一体になって物語を伝える挿絵の重要性に着目し、3 つの観点から *A Monster Calls* について考察する。まず絵本に描かれるモンスターについて概観し、次に *A Monster Calls* の挿絵を分析し、最後に本作品におけるイチイの木の怪物の機能について論じる。考察の結果、本作品における怪物は、苦悩する主人公の少年に真実を吐露させるという「癒し」をもたらす

存在であること、この喪失と浄化^{カタルシス}の物語を語る上で、文と挿絵はいずれも不可欠であることが明らかにされる。自身も死病のためこの世を去ったダウドが遺し、それを引き継いだ2人の創作者によって完成された *A Monster Calls* は、死が何かを生み出すこともあるという可能性を示唆した作品であるといえよう。

Introduction

In this article, I shall try to discuss the function of the monster in *A Monster Calls* (2011), created by Patrick Ness (1971-). This work was double awarded the CILIP Carnegie Medal and the CILIP Kate Greenaway Medal.¹ This is unparalleled in the history of children's literature² and proves that *A Monster Calls* was highly assessed both as a story book and as a picture book.³ It can be argued that the illustrations and the narrative are inseparable in this work because of the significance of the function of the illustrations. Thus, it will be necessary to consider not only the story inscribed but also the pictorial expressions to discuss the function of the monster in this work.

The whole discussion falls into three: First, an examination of the use of monsters in picture books in general; Second, an analysis of the illustrations in *A Monster Calls*; Third, a consideration of the function of the monster in this fiction in order to explore the great eminence of this work.

1. Monsters in Picture Books

Monsters usually stand for naughtiness in young children, just as Pat Hutchins describes in *The Very Worst Monster* (1985). In this picture book, two naughty kids in a monster family (Fig.1) are tolerantly and humorously depicted. Although the parents regard their new-born baby boy as the worst monster, soon afterward they realise that there is another worst monster, that is, a girl monster named Hazel who acts as naughtily as her younger brother partly because of her spirit of competition and partly because of the slight jealousy she feels toward her baby brother, who monopolizes the parents' affection.

Moreover, a monster is used to portray a bully in *Masuda-kun Sitting Next to Me* (1991) by Miho Takeda (1959-). The whole story is told from the viewpoint of the girl heroine Miho. Miho's expression on the front cover (Fig.2) shows that she is obviously troubled by Masuda-kun's behaviour. However, at the end of this picture book, they become friends. On the final page of this picture book (Fig.3), Masuda-kun is for the first time described as

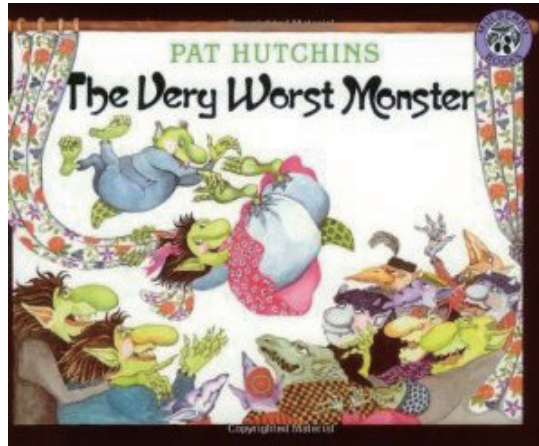


Figure 1. *The Very Worst Monster*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1985) front cover.



Figure 2 & 3. *Masuda-kun Sitting Next to Me*. (Tokyo: Popura-sha, 2012) front cover, page openings 12.

a boy because he is no longer a monster to Miho.

Maurice Sendak (1928-2012) suggests the other world where monsters inhabit as a portrayal of a boy's release from his anger in *Where the Wild Things Are* (1968), which is one of the representatives of modern picture books. Max is told to stay in his room without having supper because of his wild behaviour and his uncontrollable feelings transform his nursery into the other world. In the other world, he journeys to 'where the wild things are' and becomes the king of all the wild things there. (Fig.4)



Figure 4. *Where the Wild Things Are*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), page opening 15.

The journey described in this picture book is similar to the one in *Angry Arthur* (1988) by Satoshi Kitamura (1958-). The boy protagonist Arthur gets furious and his wrath destroys his bedroom, house, town, and finally the whole universe. (Fig. 5 & 6) Through his journey from his bedroom to space, Arthur's rage is dispelled.



Figure 5 & 6. *Angry Arthur*. (London: Red Fox, 1993) page openings 3, 5.

Just like Arthur, who forgets what he gets so angry about and calmly goes to bed at the end of this fantasy work, Max, who returns from his journey, seems to feel relieved when he finds his 'still hot' supper, which his mother left in his room. Taking off his wolf suit, Max is turned back again to an ordinary boy from a 'wild thing'.

As Sendak's monsters help Max to release his feelings, the Bogeyman in *Fungus the Bogeyman* by Raymond Briggs (1934-) plays a role to offer child readers a sense of release through the detailed description of Fungus because in the world of Bogeymen, matters considered taboo for children in the ordinary world are good manners.

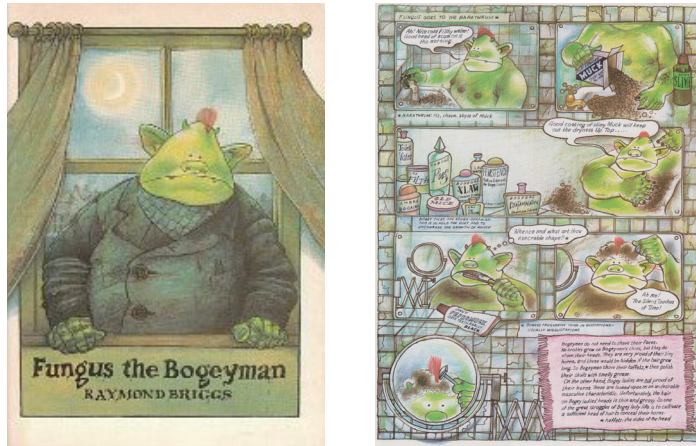


Figure 7 & 8. *Fungus the Bogeyman*. (London: Penguin Books, 1993) front cover, page opening 3.

For instance, Bogeymen need to make their hands dirty before meals. Just like an extraordinary feast on a birthday or a secret late-night snack, which also break taboos,⁴ the subversive etiquette in the Bogeymen world suggests release to the child reader.

Although Russel Hoban's (1925-) *Monsters* (1989) also describes the release of a boy's feeling, unlike the Bogeyman in Briggs, what is released seems to be something bizarre hidden in a child's inner world. John is interested only in drawing monsters and his parents worry about him. John's art teacher simply says to the parents, "I shouldn't worry about it if I were you . . . Boys are naturally a little monstrous."⁵ However, when John starts to draw a huge monster, adding to it little by little, his parents are scared of such an unusual work and in the end take John to a counsellor. Dr Plunger advises them to let John draw as much as he likes. After a while, John returns alone without the counsellor to the parents waiting in another room and tells them with a smile that he doesn't need to draw pictures any more.



Figure 9. *Monsters*. (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1989) page opening 13.

The final picture takes on a complementary role to words. One enormous monster peeps into the room through a half-open door. In the case of this picture book, a monster seems to release something fearful in a child.

Just as Hoban's monster embodies John's hidden feeling to release it, in Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls*, a yew tree in a graveyard is turned into a monster and starts to walk to release the unexpressed truth hidden in the protagonist's inner self.

2. The Function of Pictures in *A Monster Calls*

Conor, the boy protagonist of *A Monster Calls*, is thirteen and lives with his mother because his parents were divorced six years ago and his father moved to the US to live with his new family. From the time his mother is diagnosed with cancer, Conor's surroundings have changed: everybody carefully makes a wide circle around him. In contrast, a few of Conor's classmates have begun to bully him to express their irritation about his special treatment. Conor does not open up to anybody, even to his childhood friend Lily, who is trying to protect him from bullies, for her careless talk about his mother's illness in the first place causes the rumour to spread all over the school.

As has already been mentioned above, *A Monster Calls* won both the Carnegie Medal and the Kate Greenaway Medal, which has never been seen before.⁶ *A Monster Calls* is a collaboration of three creators. The American author Patrick Ness (1971-) expands the original idea of Siobhan Dowd (1960-2007), who was born in Ireland and lived in the UK. Since Dowd passed away when she was 47 years old to cancer, this work is based on a note she left. *A Monster Calls* was published with black-and-white illustrations drawn by the British children's illustrator Jim Kay.

In this book, fifteen double-spread illustrations are inserted, which indicate that Kay's illustrations are essential as well as significant in the whole work. The distinction of this work is reminiscent of *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (2007) by Brian Selznick (1966-), which contains more than 300 instances of black-and-white pictures among a total of 530 pages in the book. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* was awarded the Caldecott Medal in 2008 as the most excellent picture book published the previous year. In both books, the interaction between words and pictures functions in a similar way. The reader/viewer is interchangeably suggested the narrative through two ways: diegesis (telling) of story and mimesis (showing) of illustrations.⁷ As David Lewis points out, words and pictures effectively counterpoint to provide the reader 'alternative information' in these works.⁸

Rachel Levy, chair of the CILIP judges accounts of Kay's illustrations as follows:

Jim Kay's illustrations for *A Monster Calls* created the perfect synergy between the text and illustrations . . . Using only shades of black, white, and gray, he has beautifully, skillfully captured the atmosphere and emotion of the story and has produced a book that gives you a whole and satisfying experience. Finding a book in which the illustration and the story combined have created something so unique and stunning is extraordinary! Being able to celebrate the talents of both the writer and the illustrator for the same book is a once-in-a-generation opportunity.⁹

It seems to be necessary to consider how important and effective Kay's illustrations are, which collaborate with the story, to discuss the whole work.

One night, at seven minutes past midnight, a monster appears in front of the thirteen-year-old boy protagonist, Conor. The monster, which is shaped like the yew tree that grows in the graveyard, comes up to Conor and calls his name, "Conor". (Fig.10 & 11) Except for a few illustrations, the reader shares the viewpoint of Conor because his figure is not drawn in most of the pictures in this work.¹⁰



Figure 10 & 11. *A Monster Calls* (Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 2011), page openings 2, 5.

Since then, the monster begins to visit Conor almost every night to tell him three stories. Although the existence of the monster remains vague, Conor thinks it real because there are leaves or poisonous yew berries left behind. Because illustrations describe the concrete and detailed image of the monster, the reader sharing Conor's viewpoint, which includes his inner self as well, is clearly offered its existence. At first sight, Conor recognises that the monster is the yew tree that can be seen from the window of the house where Conor

and his mother live together. His mother has repeatedly told him of the poisonous as well as the healing elements that yew trees possess. When he won the double prize, Kay told a BBC interviewer his advantage in depicting the yew-shaped monster in such realistic detail:

Jim Kay told . . . his previous jobs in the archives at the Tate Gallery and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew had heavily influenced his art. "Prior to this commission I'd been working on drawings of ancient trees in Richmond Park, so it felt like manna from heaven that this commission landed in my lap."¹¹

The monster approaches Conor closer and closer whenever it turns up. When it tells the first story, the monster is in the garden (Fig.12), and it enters the living room to tell the second story. (Fig.13) The monster sits in front of Conor for the first time when it starts to tell the third story. (Fig. 14) The size of the monster gradually becomes recognisably bigger and bigger, as if it were the portrayal of Conor's anxiousness.

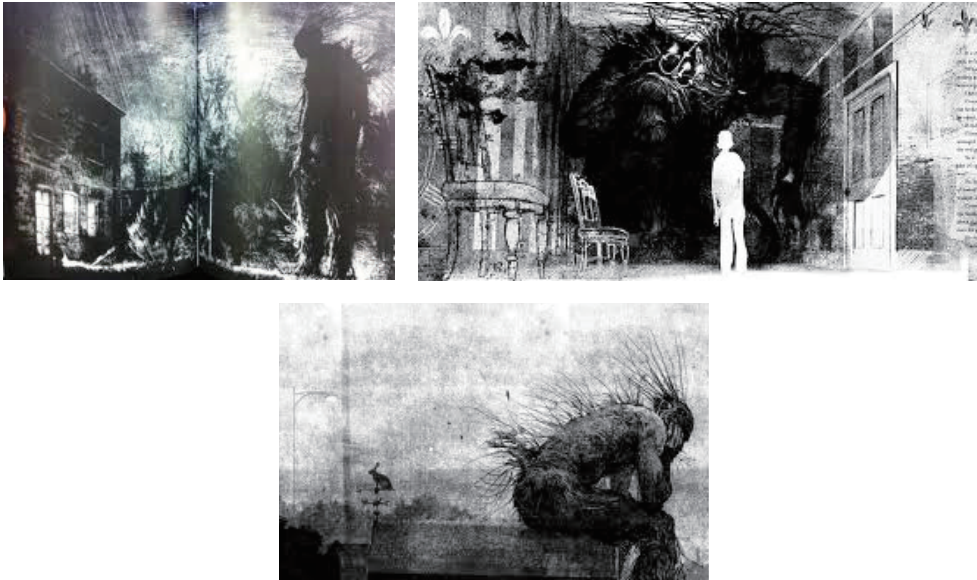


Figure 12-14. *Ibid*, page openings 24, 48, 68.

The viewpoints of these three pictures are changed from the third person to the first person. In the first one, readers/viewers see the monster standing in the garden from the third person view, and in the second one readers/viewers share Conor's view because he turns his back to them.¹²

Readers/viewers are offered the viewpoint of the third person again while they are told/shown Conor's hidden suffering through both the story and the illustrations. In the scenes of Conor's explosion of anger, such as the destruction of his grandmother's sitting room or the attack against a bully, the Monster is described as if it were combined with Conor. (Fig. 15)



Figure 15. *Ibid.*, page opening 73.

During both destructive actions, Conor believes that everything is caused by a monster. However, in the case of the attack towards a bully, there are so many people who are actually watching Conor's violence that Conor thus realizes the fact he himself is monstrous. The illustration (Fig. 15) complementally conveys the fact to the reader/viewer preceding the words.

As has been discussed in this section, it is recognizable that Kay's illustrations of the monster play a significant role in *A Monster Calls*. Next, the function of the monster in this work is examined.

3. Shouting from Within and Catharsis

Although Conor beats up a classmate bully, nobody punishes him, as he is so shocked to be disappointed. In fact, Conor has been wounded emotionally since the time his mother became fatally ill because of the people around him, who treat Conor with great caution. Since his teachers and schoolmates treat him as if he were invisible, Conor becomes more isolated when his mother gets worse.

Nevertheless, as Adam Philips points out, anger often functions to reveal problems and to help self-realisation.¹³ Conor's destructive action leads his true friend to come back to him. During class, Lily hands Conor a foul line note, which saves him:

I'm sorry for telling everyone about your mum, read the first line.

I miss being your friend, read the second.

Are you okay? read the third.

I see you, read the fourth, with the I underlined about a hundred times.¹⁴

Conor, who realises that there is somebody else who really sees him, talks to Lily on his own after such a long interval, though it is interrupted by a sign of tragedy: Conor is called to the hospital by his grandmother.

Although Conor blames the monster for not saving his mother and asks what use it is, the monster says, “*You are the one who called me, Conor O’ Mally . . . I did not come to heal her . . . I came to heal you.*”¹⁵

The monster, who finishes telling the three stories, requires Conor to tell his own true story as the fourth one. Conor’s story reveals his nightmare, which is the most frightening thing in the world for him. When he first encounters the yew tree monster, he is not scared of it because he knows even scarier things, namely this nightmare, which repeatedly troubles Conor almost every night. He lets his mother go when she is taken from him to the cliff by the real monster in his nightmare. Under such pressure, Conor finally shouts the truth, “*I can’t stand it anymore! . . . I can’t stand knowing that she’ll go! I just want it to be over! I want it to be finished!*”¹⁶ Conor admits that he has pretended to believe his mother’s words, though he has known she is not healed any more. The monster accepts Conor as one of human beings, who are such ‘complicated beasts’, in its words:

. . . your mind will contradict itself a hundred times each day. You wanted her [his mother] to go at the same time you were desperate for me to save her. Your mind will believe comforting lies while also knowing the painful truths that make those lies necessary . . . This is why I came walking, to tell you this so that you may heal. You must listen . . . You do not write your life with words . . . You write it with actions.¹⁷

The monster encourages Conor to tell the truth when he sees his mother the next time after resting a while.

Among all the illustrations in this book, there is only one that does not play a complementary role to the story. (Fig. 16) There are no words to explain this picture, and thus the reader/viewer is shown an implied explanation: this is the healing brought by the yew-shaped monster, which receives Conor in its arms to let him sleep a sound sleep until the time he needs to confront the final moment.



Figure 16. *Ibid*, page opening 96.

After he shouts the confession of his hidden fear, Conor has an honest talk with his grandmother for the first time. They admit to each other two truths, that is, they can't be fond of each other. However, they can get along with each other because of the only thing they have in common, Conor's mother.

Finally, the reason why the monster always appears at seven past twelve at night is revealed, that is, it appears to be the time of the death of Conor's mother. Just a few minutes before this time, Conor reaches his mother to tell her the truth. The monster is with Conor until the final moment arrives.

And, at last, he spoke the final and total truth.

"I don't want you to go," he said, the tears dropping from his eyes, slowly at first, then spilling like a river.

"I know, my love," his mother said in her heavy voice. "I know."

He could feel the monster, holding him up and letting him stand there.

"I don't want you to go," he said again.

And that was all he needed to say.¹⁸

Through shouting the truth from within, Conor finally reaches catharsis. Holding her tightly, he lets his mother go in peace.

Levy regards this work as "an exquisite piece of writing":

One of our judges - bereaved at a young age - said she wished that she'd had *A Monster Calls* to read then, because while it describes the nature of grief with an extraordinary clarity it also fills the reader with a spirit of hopefulness and a love for life that is profound and lasting.¹⁹

Conclusion

Ness says that stories are things that make trouble.²⁰ *A Monster Calls* represents such a story, making so much trouble with the support of a monster to finally reach peace and silence.

As a consequence of the whole discussion, it seems to be clarified that both the story and the illustrations are essential for this work: the former was awarded the Carnegie Medal whereas the latter won the Kate Greenaway Medal. They effectively interact with each other in this book.

Healing brought by the yew tree monster is making Conor shout the truth. The boy protagonist, who has highly pressured himself to be a good boy to ease his mother, finally admits that he has been, without any shadow of a doubt, really frightened to lose her. His first shout to hold his mother tight conversely encourages him to accept his mother's unavoidable death. As the yew tree monster points out, human beings are such 'complicated beasts'.

A Monster Calls indicates the possibility that such suffering as that of death sometimes creates something. Dowd, who died of a fatal disease, left the story of loss and catharsis and after her death Ness the writer and Kay the illustrator succeed in bringing her story to fruition.

Notes

- 1 The proper names of these prizes were lately changed from the original one to add CILIP (the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals). However, they are hereinafter shortened to the Carnegie Medal and the Kate Greenaway Medal in this article.
- 2 'An Historic Moment in Children's Literature: Patrick Ness Wins Second Consecutive CILIP Carnegie Medal as "A Monster Calls" Does Unique Double' <<http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk/pressdesk>> (14 June 2012)
- 3 The Kate Greenaway Medal is awarded to the best children's book with illustrations.
- 4 John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 122-3.
- 5 Russel Hoban, *Monsters* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1989), page opening 9.

- 6 ‘Carnegie Medal: Patrick Ness book *A Monster Calls* scoops double honours’ <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsentertainment-arts-184152>> (14 June 2012)
- 7 Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, *How Picturebooks Work* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.66-7.
- 8 David Lewis, *Reading Contemporary Picture books: Picturing Text* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.39.
- 9 ‘“A Monster Calls” Wins Carnegie and Greenaway Medals’ <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens>> (14 June 2012)
- 10 Nicholaeva and Scott, pp.164-5.
- 11 ‘Carnegie Medal’ <bbc.co.uk>
- 12 Nicholaeva and Scott point out that the same method to let the reader share the view of the protagonist is employed in *Where the Wild Things Are*. (p.164)
- 13 Adam Phillips, *The Beast in the Nursery* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p.95.
- 14 Patrick Ness, *A Monster Calls* (Massachusetts: Candlestick Press, 2011), p.161.
- 15 *Ibid*, pp.171-2.
- 16 *Ibid*, p. 188.
- 17 *Ibid*, p.191-2.
- 18 *Ibid*, p.204.
- 19 ‘Carnegie Medal’ <bbc.co.uk>
- 20 ‘Author’s Note’ of *A Monster Calls*.

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