

A Monster Calls Study Guide

A Monster Calls by Patrick Ness

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Plot Summary

NOTE: All citations in this Study Guide refer to the Kindle edition of *A Monster Calls*, published September 27, 2011.

Patrick Ness's YA novel *A Monster Calls* details the story of Conor O'Malley, a 13-year-old boy who is dealing with his mother's illness. Her impending death hangs over the bulk of the book, and Conor must explore his own emotions through stories to find peace in her passing and how he feels about it.

The Monster, birthed from the yew tree on the hill, appears in Conor's room one night. Conor feels like it will be scary—he refers to his “real” nightmare and the “real” fear—but the yew tree does not scare him. The Monster tells Conor he has come to tell him three stories. After that, he will hear a fourth story from Conor, and he promises the truth will come out in the process. Although Conor feels like he is dreaming, he sees evidence of the tree in his bedroom the next morning.

Conor's mother is still in the house, but is too ill to do much. Conor feeds himself and goes to school, where he is bullied by a local boy and his friends. A girl named Lily is there to stand up for Conor, but he will not receive her help; in fact, he rejects her. Back at home, Conor's mother warns him that his grandmother will be coming the next day to help them.

The Monster's first story is about a prince that murders his young bride in order to stage a revolution to take down the queen, who is secretly a witch. The story confuses Conor; it is not clear who is good or bad in the story, and the Monster reminds him that life, stories, and people are all this way: neither all good nor all bad, but a mix of both.

Conor's grandma arrives; she is cold and reserved and Conor feels more alone than ever. The boys at the school still pick at him, but he welcomes it. He tells Lily that he is angry that she knew first of his mother's illness and told everybody, making everyone treat him strangely. This is why he rejects her friendship. After school Conor's grandmother reports that his mother needed to go back to the hospital and that he will have to stay at her house for a few days.

Grandma's house is meticulous and pristine and Conor does not feel comfortable there. At 12:07 the Monster visits and tells him the second tale, about an apothecary and a parson. They are at odds in the village, with the parson decrying the apothecary's methods and refusing to allow him to use the village's yew tree to make healing balms. When the parson's own children fall ill, he tries to get the apothecary to help, even offering to go back on his beliefs to save them. The Monster destroys the parson's house in the dream, telling Conor that the parson would not hold to his truth and how important it is to believe something and stick to it. Conor helps the Monster destroy the house because the release of anger feels good; when he wakes he finds he has destroyed much of his grandma's sitting room. She returns home and rather than punish him, finishes the job in tears.



Conor's father arrives from America. Conor keeps expecting "a talk" from the adults but they will not be honest with him. At school, the bully and his friends decide to ignore Conor rather than beat on him, and this is somehow worse. Conor's mother confesses that she is on the very last treatment option available, but that she has hope because it comes from a yew tree.

The next day, the bully at school coldly tells Conor that he "no longer sees him." Conor is enraged, and the Monster arrives for the third tale, in which a man who was invisible makes himself seen. In the dream state, the Monster beats the other boy, making himself seen. However, eventually Conor realizes that it was he who beat up the boy, and he is taken to the headmistress who will not punish him because of what is going on at home. Conor learns from the Monster that even though Conor made himself seen through his violence, his fellow students start to ignore him.

A few days pass with no improvement in his mother; she develops an infection in her lungs and sleeps most of the time. At school Conor's friend Lily approaches him, telling him that she "sees" him. He is pulled from school to see his mother, who is not responding to treatment. Conor's mother tells him that the yew tree medicine did not work, and that if Conor is angry at her and at the world and cannot talk to her, she understands. She drifts off to sleep and Conor asks his grandma to take him home so he can visit the yew tree.

Once at his home, Conor demands that the Monster explain why he did not heal his mother. The Monster responds that he came to heal Conor, not his mother. Conor's actual nightmare appears, in which his mother is hanging over a cliff and Conor lets go of her hands. The truth is that Conor is tired of his mother's illness and is ready for her to die, and he is plagued by guilt that he has somehow caused her demise. The Monster assures him this is not true, that his emotions are normal and expected and he needs Conor to acknowledge this so he can forgive himself and live his life.

Conor goes to the hospital and tells his mother that he does not want her to die; the final scene shows him standing by her bedside, awaiting her passing.

Pages 1-22

Summary

In the first chapter of the novel, titled “A Monster Calls,” Conor wakes at night during what he calls “a” nightmare, as opposed to “the” nightmare. It is precisely 12:07 a.m. He ponders the secrecy of the nightmare, and how nobody must know about it. He realizes in his wakeful state that he hears his name. Fearful it is a monster, Conor tells himself that he is too old to be afraid; however, he does hear an unfamiliar voice. Conor rises from his bed and stares out the window to the yard outside. A great yew tree grows outside there. It stretches itself into a tall shape and comes to Conor’s window. The boy tells the tree monster that he is not afraid of it.

In the second chapter, titled “Breakfast,” Conor arrives in the kitchen with a bag full of yew tree clippings, which he shoves deep into the trash can. His mother is not in the kitchen; he surmises she is tired or ill. Without his mother there he is forced to make his own breakfast. As he eats he ponders what must have been a dream—seeing the tree monster outside his bedroom window. Conor is about to leave for school when his mother appears. She is tired and obviously ill—her bare scalp is covered in a scarf. Mum asks if Conor was awake late, because she heard a voice. Before he leaves for school Mum mentions that Grandma will be coming to visit and he is reluctant and nervous and feels like Mum is not ill enough to warrant a visit from Grandma.

In “School,” Conor is involved in a schoolyard scuffle with a few classmates: Harry, Anton, and Sully. For many years Conor had escaped the popular boy’s notice, but in the past year, when his pain and worry for Mum was known, Harry has been picking on him. The boys ready for another punch when Conor’s classmate Lily intervenes. When the teacher gets involved, Conor sides with the boys and Lily gets punished. Harry praises Conor for not telling on him.

Analysis

Author Patrick Ness begins *A Monster Calls* exploring the fear that plagues young Conor O'Malley. The descriptive mood of the scene is that of fear, one of the prevalent themes in the novel. Ness's imagery evokes the physical symptoms that Conor is feeling; and it is here he first delineates between “a” nightmare, and “the” nightmare. When Conor has his first conversation with the Monster, it is clear that he is not specifically afraid of just any nightmare or any Monster; thus, his fear isn't universal in that way. Conor's prevailing fear is quite specific, and Ness foreshadows this fact by stating that Conor had “seen worse,” and that Conor was not afraid, “not of you, anyway” (9). The section titled “A Monster Calls” also first describes the Yew Tree which is a prevalent symbol for healing, and of course, the Nightmare, which symbolizes Conor's fear for his mother's fate. Finally, the Monster appears precisely at 12:07 a.m.--



time, and this time specifically, is repeated motif throughout the plot symbolizing his mother's impending passing.

In "Breakfast," Conor carries a bag of yew tree clippings through the house that he had collected from his floor. Already Ness blurs the line between truth and reality, which is an apparent contradiction--an oft used theme in the plot. Contradictions are used often to beg the question: does something have to be one or the other, or can it be both/and? The yew tree clippings are a physical reminder of Conor's encounter with the Monster, and also a reminder of the course of healing on which Conor is embarking. Conor eating breakfast alone also highlights his loneliness, which is another symbol in the plot, exploring how pain isolates people.

The section entitled "School" displays Conor's school life. It exhibits Conor's courage, which is a theme in this novel; however, the courage to which Ness refers is not specifically committing acts of bravery as much as facing down hard tasks without relenting. In the schoolyard, Conor faces Harry the bully's treatment of him without flinching and without tattling to his teacher. This scene is also an example of violence, which is another motif repeated in this novel and symbolizing Conor's need to be punished for his own guilt. He does not mind Harry's treatment and will not tell on Harry because he thinks he deserves it. The reader can see Conor's isolation and loneliness as well, as he refuses to interact with his schoolmates, such as Lily, that would help him.

Discussion Question 1

What are some hints the author drops concerning Conor's mother's condition?

Discussion Question 2

What are some indications that Conor and Lily have a past friendship?

Discussion Question 3

How does Conor feel about his grandmother?

Vocabulary

groggily, gigantic, compost, violation, raggedy, spiky, settee, evaluation, mimic



Pages 23-43

Summary

In “Life Writing,” Conor reflects on his time in school when they are forced to write stories. He recalls the day before Mum told him she was ill. They had had a great day together. As he is walking home, Lily approaches him and asks why he lied about the schoolyard conflict with Harry and Sully. She complains that they used to be friends. Conor remembers that he and Lily used to be friends; and then his mother told Lily’s mother she was sick. He passes the yew tree and tells himself it is just a tree.

In “Three Stories,” Conor lies awake in his bed expecting the tree to appear. His evening with his mother had been difficult—she was too tired to cook and he managed on his own. From his room he can hear her vomiting into the night. At 12:07 again the monster appears outside of his window. The monster beckons Conor outside, and they talk in the yard. Conor is not afraid because something in his mind lurks that is even more fearful. The monster tells the boy that he is as old as the earth, and in the coming nights he will come and tell the boy three stories, and that Conor must in turn tell a fourth. He mentions Conor’s greatest truth, which is also Conor’s great fear; he demands that Conor tell him. Conor awakens with a shout; it is morning, and his floor is covered with yew berries.

In “Grandma,” Conor’s Grandma arrives at his house and makes him feel insignificant and messy. She is coiffed and tailored, not comfortable. He has tea with Mum and Grandma; the latter mentions sending him to school nearer to her house and Conor rejects the notion. That evening Grandma confronts him in the kitchen after dinner: she warns Conor about what “is going to happen” to his mother, and he refuses to listen (43). Grandma says Conor can live with her “after it is over”; Conor ends up running from the room (43).

Analysis

Storytelling is another prevalent theme in this novel, and Ness introduces it specifically in the section called “Life Writing,” where Conor’s teacher tries to evoke journal writing from her students. While she is simply requiring her students to write about one significant event in their lives, Conor can think of several. The concept that stories are unruly is representative of the truth that life itself is unruly, and this is borne out in Conor’s recollections of what he could write about for class: his father leaving, losing his cat, or the day his mother told him she had cancer. This chapter foreshadows the complicated truths around which the Monster will build his teaching time with Conor. Also in “Life Writing,” Conor rebuffs his friend Lily’s attempt to patch up their friendship, further highlighting Conor’s loneliness and isolation.



This isolation continues throughout the next section entitled "Three Stories," in which Conor cooks and eats his dinner and cleans it up by himself because his mother is too ill to engage with him. He can hear her getting sick, which contributes to his feelings of fear and pain. The Monster visits him precisely at 12:07, which is the repeated time to which the author refers. Again, Conor is moderately interested in the Monster rather than fearful; although the encounter is certainly a nightmare, and the Monster is certainly scary, Conor foreshadows something much more fearful than the current conversation. Ness refers to "something worse" several times. Although Conor technically realizes he is in a nightmare, the true symptoms of his fear--panic, terror, darkness--are absent with the yew tree Monster. The description of the yew tree reminds the reader that it is also a symbol, although it will not be until later that the author reveals for what yew trees are commonly used. The theme of storytelling is repeated in this section: the yew tree monster tells Conor that he plans to tell him three stories, and then Conor in exchange will tell the Monster one story, containing Conor's "truth." The reader can see immediately that Conor is scared of the truth.

Grandma is a force of fear unto herself. She is an example of how Ness uses contradiction as a theme: she is cold and reserved, showing Conor very little love or attention. However, she is desperately sad for her daughter. She covers her fear for her daughter behind criticism towards Conor and his habits. This contributes to Conor's own loneliness. Her mere presence is a hint to what is coming with Conor's mother, and when she tries to speak to Conor about it, he refuses to listen.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the author surround Conor with such an unsupportive cast of characters?

Discussion Question 2

How does the Monster's description of himself fit with the yew tree's history as a healing tree?

Discussion Question 3

How do Conor's teachers contribute to his sense of isolation?

Vocabulary

detention, nativity, duvet



Pages 44-64

Summary

In “The Wildness of Stories,” Conor is upset by what Grandma told him; he falls asleep that night and has “the” nightmare. When he wakes up screaming, it is 12:07 a.m. and the monster is standing in his backyard. They discuss the first story, but Conor walks away from the monster, seemingly without use for him because he has scarier things to think about. The monster promises he is not there to help Conor, but to share stories with him.

In “The First Tale,” the monster begins to spin his story: in a kingdom long ago, a king reigns alone with his infant son. He remarries and eventually dies himself before his son is old enough to reign. The kingdom is suspicious of the queen, but she is a good queen. The prince is nearly of age and has fallen in love with a local farmer’s daughter. The queen disapproves of the match, so the prince and his love elope. They fall asleep at the base of a tree. In the morning, the prince finds her stabbed to death, and his hands bloody. The prince rouses the villagers, blaming the queen for the girl’s murder. The yew tree stands and helps the villagers, removing the queen from her castle so the villagers can burn her alive.

In “The Rest of the First Tale,” when they reach the castle the prince simply takes the queen to a faraway place to stay. Conor is confused, so the monster explains that the prince was actually the girl’s murderer; he had staged the killing to rouse the villagers against his stepmother the queen. The queen actually was a witch, but she was not a killer. Conor has difficulty seeing the connection, but the monster tells the boy that both the prince and the queen did bad things, but only the prince was a killer. Conor is unimpressed, saying that the story is a cheat. The truth of the story is that all stories that are true feel like a cheat sometimes, and that most people are not all good or all bad.

Analysis

The “real” nightmare, a symbol for Conor's guilt, wakes him up in the beginning of “The Wildness of Stories.” It comes with physical symptoms of falling and terror and noises of screaming. He wakes up breathless. It is 12:07 a.m. and he expects to see the Monster. When he does find him in the backyard, they have an unusual conversation. Ness is continually breaking tradition in his fairy tale, starting with the fact that Conor simply is not scared of his Monster. Furthermore, the Monster comes with unusual weapons--stories. However, the reader will come to find that stories are powerful things, able to teach people truths that real life cannot. Often, this novel tells the reader, stories that are wild and difficult are able to help us deal with what is difficult in life. This cycle of stories and teaching and truth is repeated often in *A Monster Calls*.



The Monster begins with his first story. All of the Monster's stories have an element of contradiction--a prevalent theme--and destruction--a symbol for anger. Furthermore, the yew tree--specifically, the Monster in his oldest form--appears in each tale. The first tale involves a prince and his stepmother who sits on the throne of his kingdom. It has all of the earmarks of a good fairy tale until the prince takes the life of his betrothed in order to stage a revolt against his stepmother, who is surprisingly a witch. The prince and his bride recline for the evening underneath the old yew tree, and when the prince storms the castle, the tree--a symbol for healing and restoring--comes along to help the prince topple his evil queen.

When the Monster explains the tale in the next section, entitled "The Rest of the First Tale," Conor is confused. The contradiction occurs when Conor has to understand that neither the prince nor the queen were all good or all bad. Both characters were a little bit of both. The Monster, and Ness, want to indicate that all people are the same in this way, and that all stories that are true contain this same quality. After this explanation, Conor thinks of his grandmother, both good and bad, and asks if the Monster will save him from her. The Monster says, in a bit of foreshadowing, that there is someone else from whom Conor needs saving.

Discussion Question 1

How is the Monster's first tale very like a fairy tale? How is it not like a fairy tale?

Discussion Question 2

At this point in the story, how is the first tale relevant to Conor's life?

Discussion Question 3

How are Conor's mannerisms contrasted between "the" nightmare and his interactions with the Monster?

Vocabulary

dissipating, swift, topple, slew, violently



Pages 66-85

Summary

In “Understanding,” Lily tries to talk to Conor about their friendship. She offers forgiveness for Conor’s having gotten her in trouble, but Conor is not interested in conceding that he did anything to her. Lily’s mom says they need to be extra patient with Conor because of his struggle at home, but he refuses to accept her kindness. Conor recalls that as soon as his mother’s illness became known, Lily told a few friends and everyone started treating Conor strangely. Their “allowances” for his feelings made him lonely, and he blames Lily for knowing about his pain. In the schoolyard that day, Harry punches Conor. For a moment there is a standoff, where Harry threatens to hit Conor again but wants him to flinch. Conor does not flinch, and Harry leaves him alone. Miss Kwan sees the boys and breaks it up; she stops Conor to offer her condolences, which he does not want.

In “Little Talk,” Conor finds his grandma at home waiting for him. His Mum has gone back to the hospital and Conor has to go to his grandma’s house to stay. She breaks down and confesses to Conor that the treatment is not working. Moreover, Conor’s father is flying over from America, a signal that the progression is quicker than he thought. He visits his mother in bed; she tells him that she will be fine very soon even though the most recent treatment was not as effective as her doctor had hoped.

Conor goes home with his grandmother in “Grandma’s House.” Conor realizes he has not seen the Monster in five days. Conor’s grandmother is very meticulous and reserved, and they do not get along very well. Conor feels isolated there, just as everywhere else. The sitting room is especially fancy and feels foreign to him. Hanging over the mantel is a very fancy clock that his grandmother prizes. It chimes every 15 minutes. Conor’s father arrives just as Conor is at the peak of his loneliness.

Analysis

Although in the section titled “Understanding,” Lily is trying very hard to make a connection with Conor so that he will not feel alone, she does the opposite. When she says that her mother said to make allowances for Conor because of his struggles, he feels even worse. His mother’s cancer makes everybody treat him differently: either they ignore him completely, making him unseen, or they allow his bad behavior when he feels like he should be punished. In either situation, Conor ends up feeling even more isolated. This is also an example of a contradiction: it is all of the attention he receives for his mother’s cancer that results in his loneliness. Although Conor is at the center of everybody’s radar, he feels invisible. In the schoolyard Conor shows another example of a specific type of courage when Harry punches him and then stares him down. Rather than flinch, fight back, or run away, Conor simply stares the other boy in the face. In this mute exchange, Harry seems to understand what the author explains in later pages:



Conor wants Harry to hit him and punch him. In this story, violence is a vehicle for Conor's guilt, so he welcomes the punishment and the pain because they help him atone.

Conor's grandmother is waiting at his house in the section called "Little Talk." His mother is going back to the hospital because her treatment has failed and she is in great pain. Conor's father Liam will arrive in the next day to help care for Conor while his mother and grandmother stay at the hospital. Conor finds his mother in his bedroom, staring at the window at the yew tree on the hill--the symbol for healing and restoration. She does not take her eyes from it the whole time she talks, assuring Conor that she will eventually be fine. Before she leaves for the hospital she asks him to "keep an eye on it" while she is away (78). This conversation with his mother is another place where the adult fails to accurately communicate with Conor about the truth.

Five days pass before the action detailed in the chapter titled "Grandma's House." Conor's father is due to arrive soon and Conor has not seen the Monster in five whole days. While Conor waits alone, looking around at the finery in his grandma's house, the author introduces another element of time- a recurring symbol which reminds the reader that Conor's mother's passing is imminent, and that the Monster is on a schedule. Grandma has a very fancy clock in her sitting room, and it chimes every fifteen minutes, which lends an even more urgent image to the situation. Conor's time alone in his grandmother's house is also another use of isolation.

Discussion Question 1

Does Conor have a reason to be angry at Lily?

Discussion Question 2

What does the presence of the yew tree communicate to Conor and his mother?

Discussion Question 3

What are some indicators about the relationship Conor's father has with the rest of the family?

Vocabulary

curlicues, pendulum, convenient, trudged



Pages 86-114

Summary

In “Champ,” Conor sits at a pizza restaurant with his father. They have awkward conversation. Conor’s father, Liam, asks how he is holding up, and Conor shares his confidence that his mother will be fine. Liam invites Conor for a visit, which spurs a conversation about Conor not wanting to live with his grandmother. They have a spat about the fairness of Conor being shifted around between adults that do not act like they want him, and then the talk eases back into awkwardness.

In “Americans Don’t Get Much Holiday,” Liam drops Conor off back at his grandma’s house. She is still at the hospital. He finds himself jumping on her furniture and scratching the floor, and he likes the sensation. Conor decides to push the hands on her fancy clock, and they get stuck. He is worried about what he has done when he realizes that he accidentally stopped the clock on 12:07. He hears the Monster’s voice behind him. The Monster mentions that if Conor wants to be destructive, he can do better than that; he tells him it is time to hear the second tale—a tale about a man who was very selfish and was eventually punished very badly.

In “The Second Tale,” the Monster spins a story about an apothecary that lived in a village on the very hillside where Conor’s town sits. The apothecary was an unpleasant man, although he knew his craft well. Slowly the village loses interest in him as newer, more modern cures become the fashion. The apothecary shares the village with a parson that has two daughters. The apothecary would like to use the yew tree at the parsonage for some new cures, but the parson will not allow him. In fact, the parson begins preaching against the apothecary and his witchery, and the apothecary’s business suffers. Then, the parson’s daughters grow ill and none of his modern cures will help them. The parson finally swallows his pride and asks the apothecary to help, even saying he will go back on his convictions and sacrifice the yew tree. The apothecary refuses to help him and the children die. That night the Monster destroys the apothecary’s house.

In “The Rest of the Second Tale,” the Monster explains to Conor that the parson was a man with no convictions or beliefs, ready to sell all of his beliefs to save his daughters. The apothecary, while an unpleasant person, was a true healer that could have saved many lives had the parson given him the yew tree in the beginning. However, the parson was willing to stand firm when it suited him and back down in the same situation. In his dream state, Conor watches the Monster tear down the apothecary’s house. The Monster invites Conor to join in and Conor enjoys a satisfying time of destruction. When Conor comes to himself, he realizes he has destroyed his grandma’s sitting room.



Analysis

In “Champ,” there is a further example of an adult that is unable to be honest with Conor. Conor can see completely through his father, who is happy in America and does not want Conor to live with him. However, he is unable to speak to Conor directly about it. He speaks often about Conor being “brave,” and indeed, Conor is forced to push through the group of adults that do not act welcoming to him while his mother grows more and more ill. Conor wisely points out that, to adults, “being brave” means little more than being silent.

“Americans Don't Get Much Holiday” finds Conor leaving his father behind and entering his grandma's house alone. He pushes a chair around and scratches the wood floor; he finds that destroying Grandma's stuff feels good. In this story, destruction is a way for Conor to vent his anger. He turns his attention to the clock, and fiddles with the hands until they get stuck. This entire scene is symbolic of Conor's desire for time--with its ceaseless march towards his mother's death--to stop. However, it is also another example of Conor harming his grandmother's things in order to feel better about himself.

In “The Second Tale,” the Monster tells a story of a man who would not stand by his beliefs or his truths. The man with the higher morals, the apothecary, is also the man who shows himself to be bitter and difficult. Again, it is a story of contradictions, where the good man appears bad, and the reverse is also true. And again, Conor thinks of somebody in his life when he hears the description of the parson, a man who abandoned his beliefs and was very selfish. Ness is able to use each of the Monster's stories to teach his readers as well as Conor: stories, like life, are filled with heroes and villains, and often one person can fit both descriptions. Although the parson's reason for abandoning his standards is love for his daughters, the Monster will not allow grief to have the final word in the parson's life. This standard will be held for Conor later in the plot. The Monster more specifically describes the yew tree in his story--the tree in its oldest days was used for healing.

In “The Rest of the Second Tale,” the Monster encourages Conor to give vent to his anger by helping him destroy the parson's house in his dream. Again, Ness blurs dream and reality, as Conor blinks to find the Monster gone and his grandma's sitting room destroyed.

Discussion Question 1

Does Liam deserve Conor's harsh opinion of him? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Is the Monster's punishment of the parson too harsh?



Discussion Question 3

What claim does the Monster make about grief in his second tale?

Vocabulary

Skeptical, fidgeted, quizzical, ferociously, apothecary, seething



Pages 115-135

Summary

In “Destruction,” Conor realizes how broken and destroyed his grandma’s room is. The Monster, whom Conor blames for this turn of events, is gone. His grandma arrives home before he is able to do anything. When she sees the mess, his grandma practically breaks down in great sobs and moans; she steps into the sitting room and finishes what Conor started, kicking and smashing all of her belongings while sobbing and screaming. After a few minutes of this she leaves the room without speaking to him. He spends the rest of the evening cleaning up his mess while she weeps upstairs in her room.

In “Invisible,” Conor stands in the schoolyard alone. Nobody notices him, not even Lily, until Harry and his buddies arrive. When they do, grinning at him in cruel anticipation, he is relieved. When he’d woken that morning, his grandmother was gone and his father was there cooking his breakfast. Liam tells him that his mother had taken a bad turn and that he would fetch him after school to see her. At school Conor is in a daze and realizes he literally has not spoken all day long. During recess, Harry and Sully approach him again and just stand nearby threatening to hit him. Conor stares them down and really hopes they will hit him, but they do not.

In “Yew Trees,” Conor visits his mother in the hospital. She looks very ill. She tells Conor that the doctors are going to try one last-ditch treatment. What is more, the drug they will use is made from a yew tree, which the Monster has already told Conor is known for its healing properties.

In “Could It Be?” Conor ponders and hopes anew that his mother will get well—that the Monster did come walking to heal his mother. He ponders the dream state of his conversations with the Monster, and how when he wakes he sees leaves and berries in his room. It is all confusing. In the hospital, he hears his grandma and father fighting, and then his father tells him that the medicine will probably not work. Conor does not believe him. Liam says he has to go back to America for a week, but he will return. Conor is firm in his belief that his mother will be healed.

Analysis

The chapter titled “Destruction” is completely focused on anger. Grandma, instead of punishing Conor for how he treated her things, unleashes her own emotions as she continues what Conor started. In this way, the reader gets a closer glimpse into what is driving this character. Because destruction is a vehicle for anger in this story, the reader can see that Conor’s grandmother is also deeply saddened and angered by what is happening to her daughter. However, she ignores Conor completely, leaving him feeling isolated and lonely again, as well as unpunished.



In the next chapter, “Invisible,” Ness increases the pressure in Conor’s school life as the story barrels towards its climax. The boys at school have stopped hitting him, but Harry is still vaguely threatening and Conor knows that he understands exactly what Conor is going through. The fact that Conor wishes to be hit and punished is an ironic twist, and Harry has discovered it. Rather than give Conor what he wants, however, he leaves him alone. Conor stares the other boy down in the schoolyard, again showing his courageous ability to take difficulty while standing firm. Also in this chapter, the boy is fully isolated; he realizes at one point that he has actually not spoken the entire day. Conor begins this section waking up from “the” nightmare, and again Ness describes the physical sensations of fear that accompany the nightmare.

Conor’s mother has grown more ill in “Yew Trees.” As she runs out of time she is growing more honest with her son, but she still is holding out hope, or pretending to for Conor. The last treatment the doctors can try is derived from a yew tree, which is a symbol for restoration and healing. This fact springs hope in Conor’s heart that his mother will be healed. In fact, he latches onto the fact and is certain that she will be healed.

“Could it Be” is a brief chapter during which Conor feels a connection to hope; if the Monster has come to help him, the Monster could heal his mother. Here the author offers the physical evidence of Conor’s interactions with the Monster--not only the destroyed sitting room, but the bits and pieces of yew leaves and berries that he has found around the house--to suggest that the Monster may be real enough to move in Conor’s life. Conor speaks to his father, who finally admits that most of the adults have not been as honest with him as they could have. Liam suggests that Conor’s mother really is going to die soon, but armed with his new hope, Conor does not believe him. Liam reminds Conor that stories do not always have happy endings--just as in real life. In this case, Liam’s voice is that of Ness, reminding the readers that “stories are wild, wild animals...” (134). This last conversation with Liam is foreshadowing the short-lived nature of Conor’s hope.

Discussion Question 1

How is the grandmother’s reaction to the mess in her house a departure from her character?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the strange way that Conor needs Harry and his friends.

Discussion Question 3

How are Conor’s interactions with the Monster both logical and illogical?

Vocabulary

Upholstery, keening, wondrous, ferociously



Pages 136-158

Summary

In "No Tale," Grandma leaves Conor home alone while she returns to the hospital. Conor waits for 12:07 to arrive, and the Monster appears. Conor asks if the Monster is going to heal his mother; the Monster only replies that if she can be healed, the yew tree will do it. The Monster sits down and asks if Conor understands why he has come; Conor feels it must be to heal Mum, but the Monster does not openly confirm. He promises that the next time he comes, they will finish the stories. Conor's "true nightmare" arrives: he feels the mist, his mother's hands, and the terrible terror. Conor screams that the nightmare is not his truth. Conor asks the Monster to heal, and the monster says he will before he vanishes.

In "I No Longer See You," Conor is forced to go to school rather than stay with his mother. The day at school is long and Conor can barely pay attention. He sits at lunch and wishes with all his might for the monster to heal his mother. Then Harry and his friends arrive. The friends are eager for Harry to beat Conor up, but instead Harry shakes his hand in farewell and says, "I no longer see you." The boys, though confused, follow Harry's lead and completely ignore Conor. The clock turns to 12:07 p.m.

In "The Third Tale," the Monster shows up in the lunchroom to tell Conor the third tale. He says there was once an invisible man who was not actually invisible. It was just that people stopped seeing him. During the story, Conor is yelling at Harry and his friends, but they ignore him. The Monster continues: if people do not see a man, is he really there? Conor screams at Harry's back, and then lunges after the boy, grabbing him by the arm. As the Monster continues that one day the man decides to force people to see him, Conor asks the Monster to help him be seen. Harry interjects that everyone feels sorry for Conor because of his mother, and that Conor must want to be punished. In Conor's dream state, the Monster beats Harry repeatedly, making Harry see.

In "Punishment," Conor sits in the headmistress's office as she marvels at Conor's behavior. Harry has been beaten so badly so as to require hospitalization. The headmistress is amazed that Conor was able to wreak so much havoc alone. Conor recalls that he felt the Monster's hands on Harry, felt the punches and the rips; yet he still thought the Monster did it. Conor recalls thinking "never invisible again" as the Monster beat the other boy. Then the Monster vanished, leaving Conor in the cafeteria with his classmates staring at him in terror, avoiding his eyes. Conor is sure that the Monster did it, but the teachers tell him that everyone saw him beating Harry. The headmistress muses aloud that she should punish Conor, and he welcomes it. However, she abandons the notion. He leaves the office and notices that all of his classmates avoid him. Although they see him, they fear him.



Analysis

The next few chapters in the novel are filled with rising action and pressure as the plot moves towards the climax.

In "No Tale," the reader sees the relationship between Conor and the Monster growing friendlier. At precisely 12:07 a.m., reminding the reader that the plot is on schedule, Conor asks the Monster to heal his mother, but the Monster only says that he will do what he is able to do. However, as he is a healing tree, he will heal what he can. The Monster reminds Conor that the third story is approaching, and then the fourth, which will contain Conor's truth. At the word 'truth' Conor feels the physical sensations of the Nightmare gripping him: fear and terror and mist and screaming. The boy states that the Nightmare is not his truth; but the reader can sense the revelation of Conor's secret rapidly approaching.

The next section is titled "I No Longer See You" because it is the height of Conor's isolation and the contradiction that the Monster will reveal as they explore the concept. At exactly 12:07 p.m., during lunchtime at school, Harry and his friends approach Conor. Again, Conor desperately wishes for their notice and attention and subsequent beating; however, Harry has figured out that Conor needs this, so instead he shakes Conor's hand as if in farewell and seals the boy's loneliness by saying "I no longer see you." This cruel proclamation summons the Monster and the third tale, and is the ultimate blow to Conor's already lonely existence. For even the bullies to ignore him is too much to bear.

In "The Third Tale," which includes the first, smaller climax of the story, Conor breaks. Ness weaves a beautifully layered section of writing as the Monster tells a tale of a man who was invisible. While Conor stands in the lunchroom and calls after Harry and his friends to no avail, the Monster explains that the man was not truly invisible as much as people stopped seeing him. The Monster's words strike Conor in the heart, and it continues. How can the man force others to see him? Conor yells after the boys, grabs after Harry's shirt. He asks the Monster to help him "be seen" just as Harry taunts Conor, correctly saying that Conor wants to be punished. In that fine line between dream and reality, the Monster beats Harry, trying to make him see. It is both a violent and destructive passage, filled with Conor's repressed anger, his need to be noticed and loved, and a bit of guilt leaking through. Just as Conor saw his grandmother in the first tale and his father in the second, he sees himself in the third.

In "Punishment," in an ultimate contradiction, the invisible man makes himself seen only to make himself even more unseen. Because everybody in the lunchroom saw Conor beat Harry up, they are afraid of him and ignore him even more. Furthermore, his teachers are afraid to punish him, which he desperately wants them to do, because of "what he is going through at home." Conor has accomplished nothing through this last bit of expression, and the action in the story stalls.



Discussion Question 1

How is Conor both seen and unseen at the same time?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Harry proclaim that he no longer sees Conor?

Discussion Question 3

How does the Monster warn Conor to combat his fear?

Vocabulary

Suppress, sniggering, hysterical, circumstances, pummeled



Pages 159-183

Summary

In "A Note," Conor's life calms for a few days. The Monster does not visit. His school friends ignore him. His mother sleeps in her hospital bed. His father phones. Conor frequently has "the" nightmare. His mother develops an infection in her lungs. At school one day, Lily hands him a note. It contains an apology for telling everyone about his mother, and ends with the words "I see you." Conor is overwhelmed with relief. His eyes meet Lily's and he tries to thank her, when someone arrives at the door to fetch him.

In "100 Years," Conor enters his mother's hospital room to see her awake and sitting up, but he can tell she is not better. He is growing angry, but submits to his mother trying to connect with him. She says the yew tree medicine is not working, and she has an infection. She is going to die, and soon. She tells him it is okay for him to be angry, it is okay to break and destroy things. She tells him that it is okay for him to be upset, and that she knows that he loves her even if he is too angry to deal with it at that moment. She falls asleep, and Conor asks his grandmother to take him to his own house.

In "What's the Use of You?" Conor's grandma drops him at his house, telling him that she will be back in an hour. Conor walks straight outside to the yew tree and yells at it to wake up. Conor attacks the tree in anger, saying it is useless because his mother is going to die. The Monster appears and says Conor knows the truth of his own questions: that he did not come to heal his mother, he came to heal Conor. The Monster summons Conor's nightmare and asks him to tell the fourth tale.

In "The Fourth Tale," Conor's real nightmare appears. He is at a cliff, and his mother is standing at the edge. Conor yells at his mom to run as he hears the "real" monster climbing up the cliff face. Its hands reach up and snatch his mother over the edge, but Conor grabs her hands at the last minute. He and his mother are pulled to the edge, where the real monster awaits, red eyes and ash and fire and fear. Conor screams for help and tries to hold his mother, but the Monster proclaims Conor's truth just as he loses his grip and his mother falls.

Analysis

After such a violent turn of events in the previous section, there is a small lull in the rising action in the chapter titled "A Note." Conor goes through several long, boring days with no visits from the Monster, no improvement from his mother, and everyone giving him a wide berth at school. Again, Ness explores the theme of time, but in a different way. Whereas in previous sections time reminds the reader that Conor's mother is fading quickly, in "A Note" time seems to halt. This section is a stopping place between the intense event of Conor beating Harry, and the rest of the story, in which he will face his truth and lose his mother. At the very end of "A Note," Lily passes Conor a note in



class, breaking the isolating silence that the remainder of his classmates has inflicted on him. The note says "I see you," and for the first time in the story, Conor is willing to allow her to love him.

In "100 Years," Conor must begin to face his Grief head on. His mother is finally very honest with him and confesses that she is going to die. She tells Conor while he sits wordlessly that his grief and anger are acceptable and understandable, that it is okay even to not respond to her. She even supports his need to break and destroy things to vent his anger. This--allowing Conor to have his own pain and grief outside of what his mother is going through--is really the heart of the novel. It is a concept that is difficult even for adults, and Ness uses the magical realism storyline to make it approachable for children. Before she drifts off to sleep once more she says "I wish I had a hundred years...a hundred years I could give to you" (168). This is another reminder that time is nearly at an end for her.

In "What's the Use of You?," it is at the old yew tree in the churchyard behind his house that Conor confronts the Monster for not healing his mother. The boy is angry, just beginning to crack under his mounting grief, and the Monster tells him that he is a healer, but that his mother could not be healed. "I did not come to heal her...I came to heal you" (172).

"The Fourth Tale" marks the beginning of the story's climax. The reader sees Conor's "real" nightmare, the one that he has hinted at throughout the novel, the one that has sent him into physical terror and panic. It is a maelstrom of fear, terror, grief, and guilt as Conor has the chance to pull his mother over the cliff, but cannot. The language in the description of the nightmare evokes frightening images, with swirling mist, a roaring wind, and an actual Monster that is red and demonic and terrifying--one that awaits over the cliff to take his mother. It is the representation of the conflicting emotions Conor has been barely holding at bay throughout the time his mother has been ill.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Conor finally decide to forgive Lily?

Discussion Question 2

What is the function of the lull in the action in "A Note"?

Discussion Question 3

How does 'The' Nightmare explain what Conor is going through?

Vocabulary

vicinity, gesturing, beckoning, slumping, wheezy



Pages 184-205

Summary

In “The Rest of the Fourth Tale,” Conor is still in the nightmare. He asks the Monster to take him out, but he will not. He says the truth is that Conor let his mother go. Conor argues with the Monster; the Monster says Conor must admit the truth or be trapped in the nightmare. The pain of the nightmare builds and continues with the Monster urging him to speak the truth, until Conor finally admits that he cannot stand knowing that his mother is going to die; that for a year he just wanted her suffering to be over. The nightmare fades around him as he feels the punishment he deserves.

In “Life After Death,” Conor is on the hill behind his house. He wonders why the fire monster in the nightmare did not kill him. Conor explains to the Monster that he never believed that she would get better, and that deep down he had wished she would die faster rather than prolong the suffering. The Monster tells Conor it is not his fault—that he was not wishing for his mother’s death as much as an end to his own pain and isolation. The Monster reminds him that people can have contradictory emotions, like in his stories, and that Conor could both want his mother healed and wish for her to die. The Monster reminds Conor that speaking the truth will help him feel free.

In “Something in Common,” Conor’s grandma finds him asleep in the branch of the yew tree. She yells at him for delaying. He tries to apologize to her and she breaks down. She says they will have to learn to get along. She says they do have one thing in common—Conor’s mother.

In “The Truth,” Conor and his grandma arrive at the hospital in time. His mother is still alive. Conor takes her hand and feels the Monster standing behind him with its hands on his shoulders. He urges Conor to simply tell the truth. Conor knows that his mother will pass away soon, but that he will face it and survive. The Monster promises to stay with him. Conor tells his mother that he does not want her to die. He waits with the Monster for 12:07 to arrive.

Analysis

In “The Rest of the Fourth Tale,” the violent storm of Conor's nightmare is still upon him as the Monster demands that Conor confess his truth. The Monster is relentless here, telling the boy that if he does not face the storm with the truth he will be “trapped in the nightmare forever.” This figurative language expresses that if Conor does not allow himself to be forgiven for his own pain and grief, he will spend his life trapped in guilt and anger for his mother’s death. Conor finally admits that he was ready for his mother to die because he could not stand the waiting for it, especially as she suffered. This is the culmination of his grief and the reason for his nightmares: that he wished her inevitable end would come faster. Conor awaits “the punishment he deserves”- -this is



the reason for the fighting with Harry and the violence and for Conor's disappointment whenever the adults in his life failed to punish him.

In "Life After Death," the Monster divides the actual truth--that Conor wanted his mother's suffering to end--from his perceived offense--that he was somehow causing her death by his wish. The Monster has said repeatedly that stories are good if they have truth in them, and that Conor can face his difficult emotions by applying truth, and here the Monster shows Conor how it works. The Monster has used the stories to show Conor how natural it is to have contradictions in one's emotions, and how Conor could both wish for his mother's healing and wish for her suffering to end. Ness further explores the nature of grief with the idea that Conor could naturally want an end to his own pain and how his mother's illness made him feel lonely and isolated. With all of these realizations, the actual nightmare, along with its physical symptoms, recedes as Conor is able to rest.

Conor and his grandmother finally make a connection in the very end as she drives him back to the hospital to hopefully catch his mother before she dies. With the boy able to emerge from his own cocoon of emotion, he and his grandmother can discuss moving on in their lives together.

The last chapter is titled "The Truth." Here, Conor is courageous and faces what is inevitable head on. He allows his grief to be true as he sits at his mother's bedside and tells her a last true thing--that he does not want her to go. The Monster has taught him that he can face this terrible thing and that he will survive; also that his feelings about his mother's death are natural and real and not a cause for guilt. Ness does a beautiful and heartbreaking job in this final scene by developing the image of Conor's mother slowly slipping away as 12:07 approaches, while Conor sits and holds her hand. Behind him stands the Monster, who promises to sit with Conor until it is over. The idea that the sad and frightened boy somehow "summoned" the Monster to help him deal with his feelings is a high concept, and the book walks a tightrope between reality and dream, and does it well. That the Monster would come to help the boy be freed from the hardest thing he will ever face is a beautiful concept to ponder.

Discussion Question 1

How have all of the Monster's stories all been about Conor?

Discussion Question 2

Is the Monster effective that teaching Conor the truth about his emotions?

Discussion Question 3

How does the talk with his grandmother help Conor face his mother's death?

Vocabulary

looming, tendrils, isolated, towering, sprinted



Characters

Conor O'Malley

Conor is the heartbreaking main character in the novel. He is a thirteen-year-old boy that has, for the better part of a year, watched his mother slowly slip away to cancer.

Conor's struggle is with forgiving himself; he feels guilty for wishing his mother's struggle would end. In many ways he is innocent--he is still prone to nightmares and schoolyard skirmishes--yet he has already carried more burdens than any child should.

Conor is brave and strong. A shell has formed over his heart from the hardship in his life: his father has abandoned him and his mother at a young age, and then he has to live through his mother's terminal illness. By the end of the novel, Conor will actually find his strength by admitting his weakness.

The Monster

The Monster refers to himself as old as the Earth itself. He tells Conor that he has walked the earth in many forms for all time. In each of his stories he appears as a yew tree, known for its healing properties.

The Monster's key role in the novel is to provide healing for Conor; to help him walk through his feelings about his mother's impending death without being saddled by guilt.

Because the Monster is a representation of Conor's true heart, he is brutally honest and harsh in order to share the truth. This story is a type of fairy tale, and the Monster is similar to an antithetical fairy godmother.

Conor's Mum

Conor's mother, who remains unnamed throughout the story, is a faint and angelic character who is dying of cancer. She is constantly cheerful and upbeat even though she suffers through every scene in which the reader sees her. She is a cheerleader for her son and for life itself, providing a needed optimism to balance against The Monster and his brutal realism.

Liam O'Malley

Liam is Conor's father. For the first half of the novel he is in America with his new wife and child. He is spoken about by Conor's mother and grandmother in a peripheral way. They feel as if he abandoned them, and he puts little effort towards keeping up with Conor from across the Atlantic.



When Mum takes a turn, Liam comes to talk to Conor and help him. As a character, he is fairly two-dimensional, providing little but a front as a father that is trying but failing to be there for his son.

Conor's Grandma

Conor's Grandma is likewise unnamed throughout the novel. Her character--cold and reserved--is a foil to her daughter, who remains sunny and encouraging even through her pain and exhaustion. The reader can sense that Grandma is working hard to hide her feelings of despair and grief, and in the end she and Conor share a moment that lends hope that they will get along okay after their shared relationship (Conor's Mum) is gone.

Lily

Lily is Conor's schoolyard friend, and her mother is a friend of Conor's mother. Lily is a steadfast friend to Conor who watches his struggle from afar, even as Conor keeps her at arm's length. Because she knew of his mother's cancer first, and showed him sympathy when he did not want it, he directs his anger towards Lily. She takes this treatment well and never abandons the friendship. In the end, she provides a much-needed release for the boy when she tells him, "I see you."

Harry

Harry is the school bully that is attracted to Conor's weakness. It seems that he has specifically focused on Conor since his mother's diagnosis. In several scenes, he beats on Conor, asking the boy to admit his weakness, to seek help, and to crumple. At each opportunity Conor stands firm. Harry is a classic foil. To all of Conor's messiness, Harry is good-looking and smart. Harry is the most popular boy in class while Conor goes unnoticed by most.

The Headmistress

Conor visits the head of school after beating Harry senseless. He really wishes he would get punished for the act due to his underlying guilt about his mother, but she gives him a pass.

Sully

Sully is Harry's best friend, a joiner in the bullying without any discernible contribution. Sully is a classic "yes man" or "mouthpiece" to Harry's more pointed psychological bullying.

Miss Kwan

Miss Kwan is Conor's teacher, who, like Lily, gives him sympathy when he does not really want it.



Symbols and Symbolism

Yew Tree

The yew tree is a symbol for healing, both in this story and throughout folklore. The monster, which is a vehicle for Conor's healing through his mother's death, is a yew tree. Several times throughout the novel Conor's mother points this out and often stares out the window at the old tree. In one of the monster's stories, the apothecary wants to cut down the yew tree to use the bark to heal his village. The doctor's last ditch effort for Conor's mother's cancer is a formula made from yew bark.

Time

Time is frequently used in this story as a symbol for when Conor's mother will lose her struggle. Several times the author mentions Conor's grandmother's very expensive clock, which Conor subsequently smashes in his wish to stop time from advancing towards his mother's end. Whenever the monster appears in the story, it is always 12:07, both a.m. and p.m. This time is significant; the author hints that Conor's mother will die at that time, a predetermined 12:07 in the future.

Loneliness/Isolation

The author constantly refers to Conor's loneliness to highlight the isolation that he feels due to what he is going through. It is only at the climax of the story, when Conor is facing the truth of his emotions about his mother's illness, when he feels connected to people again. For example, he begins a conversation with Lily right when he is pulled from school to visit his mother in the hospital. Furthermore, after he has confessed his truth to the Monster, he is able to have a real conversation with his grandmother about the pain they are both experiencing.

Violence

In *A Monster Calls*, violence symbolizes Conor's perceived need to be punished for his thoughts about his mother. It even gets to the point where he wants Harry to hit him, he wants to be punished for destroying his grandma's home, and he wants to be punished for beating Harry up. This desire to feel pain is linked to his own pain and guilt that he feels.

Nightmare

Conor's recurring "real" nightmare is a symbol for his fear that he is somehow responsible for his mother's illness. It is the true fear behind anything the Monster



teaches him. Anytime Conor considers his nightmare, he experiences physical symptoms of fear. In "Life After Death," after he has confessed his fears to the Monster, the physical symptoms subside and the nightmare no longer has control over him.

Destruction

In this story, destruction is a vehicle for anger. Conor shows several signs of destructive behavior in order to vent his anger, and all of the Monster's stories contain some element of destruction.

Adult Weakness

In this plot, Ness shows the children to be the strong and courageous ones, while the adults have a difficult time being honest with Conor. Conor's mother, father, and grandmother are all slow to be truthful with the boy about Conor's mother's condition; furthermore, Conor's father Liam is a weak sort of character who abandons one family for another. Meanwhile, the Monster encourages Conor to combat guilt with truth.

Truth

Any reference to "the truth" is simply the Monster's way of seeing into Conor's heart, to the boy's desire to see his mother's pain and suffering end. "The Truth" is the nature of grief--that Conor's mother's death causes pain and isolation for Conor.

Leaves

The leaves from the yew tree that Conor carries from his bedroom after visits from the Monster represent the blurred lines between reality and fantasy. The tree leaves suggest that Conor was really visited during the night by the Monster.

Lily's Letter

Lily's letter symbolizes her commitment to her friendship with Conor. Despite Conor's repeated rejections to Lily's friendship, she tells him in her letter that she sees him, and this statement lends some healing to the boy.



Settings

The Churchyard

Conor's house sits near a hillside with an old church yard. This is where the yew tree stands, visible from Conor's home. It is also the site of two of the Monster's stories. This connection lends old-world feeling to the Monster, who claims residence on the earth long before people. For Conor to recognize the hillside in the story dreams also highlights the blurred line between dreams and reality.

Grandma's House

Grandma's house is important because it is the scene of one of Conor's dream-states, where in the dream he acts out his aggression and finds that he was actually doing so in reality. In this case, he finds he has destroyed his grandmother's sitting room. Conor's grandmother's house also represents the future, where Conor will live after his mother's death. This may be one reason that Conor expresses his resentment of the house.

School

School is another place where Conor spends much of his time, and a place where he lives in his magical-realism world. At school he faces bullies and walks as an invisible man. He also urges the Monster to "make him seen" as he pummels the bully Harry, only to find that he had done so in real life.

The Hospital

The hospital is the site of the most significant event in the story, when Conor makes his peace with his mother and says his final goodbyes. The author does not describe the hospital in any detail, so the reader does not have a grasp of what type of place it is. However, the hospital is where the story closes, leaving Conor grasping his mother's hand and awaiting her final passing.

The Cliff

Although the reader doesn't glimpse this location until the very end of the story, Conor spends a lot of time here. It is the source of his grief, his guilt, his anxiety, his pain, and his need to be punished and noticed. It is also where he finds forgiveness for himself when the Monster shares "truth" with him-- that seeking respite from his pain and isolation does not mean he wants his mother to die.



Themes and Motifs

Grief

By the end of the novel, the reader finds that grief is a complex emotion. There is a person suffering from death and disease; a person in pain who realizes that their life is nearing its end. Yet grief demands that some of the sadness should be reserved for the people that are left behind. This is the heart of the struggle in this story. Conor feels the pull of relief that his mother's suffering will soon end; his suffering will end as well, and there is tension where his relief and his sadness meet.

The Monster's purpose in this novel is to show Conor that his almost-tangible relief is nothing for which he should feel guilty. It is the heart of grief, is expected, and is okay. Conor's nightmare is that he wishes for his mother to die, a thought that plagues him with monsters and terrors. The author uses the Monster's stories to show the boy that his feelings are just part of the difficulties of losing a loved one.

All of the Monster's stories deal in complexities and tension. There are no absolutes, only partials; and the emotion of grief rests in this category.

Fear

The reader ultimately finds that fear is an emotion that brings us close to our emotions.

Conor's greatest fear is that he secretly wishes for his mother's death, and this worry is brought to his mind over and over again via a recurring nightmare. In this nightmare, there are dark images: swirling winds, a heart-pounding fall from a cliff, and a "real" monster waiting at the bottom of the cliff when Conor tries to save his mother. This "real" monster, with its demonic and scary face, holds Conor's guilt in its hands.

Ironically, it is because of this nightmare, this "real" fear, that when Conor encounters the Monster for the first time, he is not scared. All of the fear in this story is reserved not for Conor's mother's death, but for Conor's own emotions in regards to it. Thus, he is not afraid of the path to healing, which the Monster comes to represent; he does not even fear his mother's death. He only fears his own guilt.

The author uses dark images to convey this fear through Conor's mind.

Storytelling

The author uses storytelling to demonstrate the complexities of human relationships. Not only does the Monster use stories to help Conor understand the tumultuous landscape of his emotions, Conor's own life is a story as the author blurs the line between dream and reality.



Conor awakens from his encounters with the Monster as if from a dream, but he finds bits of yew tree all over his bedroom floor. When he wishes to summon the Monster, he does not come at the boy's beck and call. On two occasions, Conor feels as if he is dreaming. In his dream state he destroys an old shack--the release of anger feels liberating. However, suddenly he is alone and his grandmother's sitting room is destroyed. Likewise, he feels as if he's watching the Monster beat Harry up, but in actuality Conor is doing the beating.

The author deftly weaves stories into stories, layering Conor's truth into the stories that the Monster tells. Just as a person uses journal writing to express and explore how they feel, the author speaks of stories as if they are living and active beings, capable of telling us real truths about ourselves. Twice Conor mentions his Life Writing assignments for class, and many relevant quotes compare the strange fiction of stories to the actual wildness of true life.

Courage

Through Conor's actions, the reader finds that courage can be described as holding steady in the face of great turmoil. Courage and its cousin bravery are often described as acts of valor; however, in his story, Conor shows courage by staying the course while his world is literally falling apart around him.

Conor continues to walk through his life as though his mother were not ill: he continues to cook and clean and do his schoolwork. He takes care of himself without resentment, only wishing to honor his mother by doing his best. Several times his mother and grandmother mention that Conor should not be as good as he is.

When Harry bullies him in the schoolyard, Conor refuses to either tell the teacher or fight back. On the contrary, he stands firm, does not look away from Harry's leering face, and does not blink. He walks through the moment without flinching.

Only in his "dreams" with the Monster does Conor lose his resolute manner of facing his world: he destroys his grandmother's sitting room and beats Harry up, but in both cases he does not realize he is doing it. Even with these anomalies, the adults in the novel all agree that Conor is a "brave" young boy; in two conversations with his grandmother and father, Conor hears from the adults in his life that he has to be brave.

Contradictions

This plot is rife with purposeful contradictions to show the reader that life is a mixture of good things and bad and some of them coexist. Rarely do absolutes exist.

For example: people are human, and therefore a mix of good and bad. Through all of his stories the Monster demonstrates that a person is rarely all of one thing and none of the other: they are both/and. In the first story, the queen is both a good ruler and a witch and the prince is both a good prince and a murderer. Liam is a good father and husband



in his new life, but not so to Conor and his mother. Conor is both prepared to grieve his mother's death and will be happy that she is gone. The grandmother is both cold and reserved to her grandson, but cloaked in tender emotion towards her daughter.

In the Monster's final story, he shows that through Conor's actions--beating up Harry--he has stepped forth from anonymity and is seen. However, his classmates exist in fear of him and thus ignore him, making him unseen. Throughout the novel Conor is both highly visible because everyone knows of his mother's illness, but most of his classmates give him a wide berth, making him feel invisible.

Styles

Point of View

The narrative of *A Monster Calls* is related from a third-person, limited point of view, although always focused on Conor's perspective. It is not broad view of everything happening. This is a good choice because this story wholly belongs to Conor. Every important event happens inside his own heart and mind; however, a few key scenes need to be described from outside his view. For example, when Conor feels in a dream like he is watching the Monster beat Harry, he slowly realizes that he is holding the bleeding boy. The scene is described from the outside so the reader can see the horror that Conor's classmates are feeling.

Language and Meaning

This novel is rated as Young Adult, but a Middle Grade reader could also enjoy it. For that reason, the language is not complex. The vocabulary is relatively simple. Nonetheless, the author is so skilled that the novel does not feel simple. When the Monster speaks, his voice has an older cadence to it than Conor's, because he is supposed to be as old as the earth. The voices between the main characters are clearly discernible.

Structure

There are no chapter numbers, only chapter titles that clearly describe the events contained therein. The sections are sparse, not lengthy, and the passages themselves mirror this structure. It is a book written for younger readers to be able to get through easily.



Quotes

Stories are the wildest things of all. Stories bite and chase and hunt.
-- The Monster (Page 36)

Importance: This quote is significant because the book deals in fearful possibilities and how they compare with truth and reality.

What would be the point, Conor? What could possibly be the point?
-- Liam (Page 124)

Importance: All of the adults in Conor's life refuse to punish him and refuse to be honest with him in view of the great tragedy of him losing his mother. Liam says the above after Conor destroys his grandma's sitting room.

Belief is half of healing."
-- The Monster (Page 129)

Importance: The Monster says this to Conor when they discuss the parson in the second tale. The Monster criticizes the parson for so quickly abandoning his beliefs; he reminds Conor how important it is to feel confident in what you hope for.

Stories were wild, wild animals and went off in directions you couldn't expect."
-- Conor (Page 134)

Importance: This is one of the examples that the author draws between stories and real life: neither are predictable and neither work out how we wish. Furthermore, both are populated with characters that are a mix of good and bad.

Stories are important...They can be more important than anything. If they carry the truth.
-- The Monster (Page 141)

Importance: The Monster carries the analogy between stories and reality a step further, inserting his own desire for truth in all of the telling.

As incredible as it seemed, time kept moving forward for the rest of the world.
-- Conor (Page 160)

Importance: This quote demonstrates how time slows and stops for those that lose loved ones; however, it painfully marches on for the rest of the world and we are powerless to control it.

He welcomed it with relief, because it was, at last, the punishment he deserved.
-- Conor (Page 188)



Importance: Conor has long felt that he deserved his pain because he wished for the end of his mother's. In the climax of the novel, when he confronts the truth that he wishes her suffering would end, he would gladly take all of the pain and suffering for her.

The yew tree is the most important of all the healing trees. It lives for thousands of years. Its berries, its bark, its sap, its pulp, its wood, they all thrum and burn and twist with life. It can cure almost any ailment man suffers from, mixed and treated by the right apothecary.

-- The Monster (Page 105)

Importance: The Monster communicates this information during the Second Tale. The Yew Tree is used throughout the novel as a symbol for healing and restoration.

I did not come to heal her...I came to heal you.

-- The Monster (Page 168)

Importance: This is the crux of the story; it is not about Conor's mother at all, but about the Monster showing Conor some elemental Truths that will help him go on with his life after her passing.

You be as angry as you need to be...Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Not your grandma, not your dad, no one. And if you need to break things, then by God, you break them good and hard.

-- Conor's Mum (Page 167)

Importance: Throughout the novel, Conor's destructive rants have been a way for him to express his anger. Here his mother is confirming this and telling him that it is an acceptable way to grieve.

But what is a dream, Conor O'Malley? Who is to say that it is not everything else that is the dream?"

-- The Monster (Page 30)

Importance: This quote demonstrates the magical realism aspect of this novel, that often times the dreams slip into reality, and the reverse is also true.

You know that is not true. You know that your truth, the one that you hide, Conor O' Malley, is the thing you are most afraid of.

-- The Monster (Page 36)

Importance: This quote is the first reference to Conor's deep fear, around which the story revolves--that he secretly wishes his mother would die.