

Healing through Horror: Psychological Trauma in Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of psychological trauma in Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* and argues that the novel's horror elements, which include, a recurring nightmare, a monstrous yew-tree visitor, and a pervasive atmosphere of dread, function not as generic ornamentation but as a structured mechanism through which the child protagonist, Conor O'Malley, confronts and works through repressed grief. Drawing on attachment theory, grief theory, interpersonal psychiatry, and psychoanalytic dream theory, the study reads Conor's encounters with the monster as externalisations of an internal psychic process, in which fear operates paradoxically as a therapeutic rather than purely destructive force. The paper situates this reading within the broader tradition of English horror and Gothic literature, in which monstrosity has long served as a vehicle for confronting socially or psychologically unspeakable material, and considers how Ness adapts this tradition for a child readership working through terminal parental illness. Employing a qualitative method of close textual analysis supported by psychoanalytic and attachment-based criticism, the paper traces the stages of Conor's trauma, attachment disruption, family dysfunction, and repression, as they are mediated through the monster's stories, and argues that the novel's ending reframes fear as a precondition for honesty and recovery. The analysis suggests that the novel constructs horror as a restorative genre, in which the child's fear of the monster gradually gives way to a fear of his own suppressed truth, constituting the novel's central contribution to English horror literature's engagement with monstrosity as a means of psychological disclosure.

Keywords: patrick ness; psychological trauma; gothic horror; attachment theory; grief; the uncanny

Introduction

Horror as a literary mode has historically occupied an ambivalent position in relation to psychological suffering: it has been read both as a genre that exploits fear for sensational effect and as one that offers readers a controlled, symbolic space in which to confront experiences too painful to approach directly. English horror and Gothic fiction, from the eighteenth century onward, has repeatedly staged encounters with monstrous or supernatural figures that externalise repressed psychological material, offering protagonists and readers a mediated confrontation with grief, guilt, or trauma that direct realist narration might

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foreclose. Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* extends this tradition into contemporary young-adult fiction, using the figure of a monstrous yew tree to structure a thirteen-year-old boy's passage through his mother's terminal illness. This paper situates Ness's novel within that longer horror and Gothic inheritance while asking a more specific question: how does the novel's deployment of horror conventions that include nightmare, monstrosity, dread to function psychologically for its protagonist, and what does this suggest about horror's capacity to mediate trauma rather than simply represent it?

Trauma can have far-reaching effects on various aspects of a person's life. It may lead to symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, depression, mood swings, and difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships. Additionally, individuals who have experienced trauma may develop coping mechanisms, such as avoidance behaviours, dissociation, or substance abuse, as a means of trying to manage their overwhelming emotions. Psychological trauma encompasses a range of distressing experiences that can profoundly affect an individual's mental and emotional well-being. It often arises from events or situations that overwhelm a person's ability to cope, leaving them feeling helpless, frightened, or profoundly distressed. Such events can include, but are not limited to: physical or sexual abuse, natural disasters, combat experiences, accidents, and the sudden loss of a loved one.

In the novel, *A Monster Calls*, by Patrick Ness, the author introduces the protagonist, Conor O'Malley, and employs elements of horror to vividly depict the profound impact of Conor's trauma. Interestingly, the feelings of fear and dread in Ness' protagonist also helps him to face his own repressed emotions which ultimately heals in psychological trauma and normalises him to react and interact with his surroundings as is expected from a child of his age. *A Monster Calls* revolves around a young boy named Conor O'Malley, who is struggling to come to terms with the fact of the impending loss of his mother to cancer. The narrative begins with Conor experiencing a recurring nightmare involving a monstrous yew tree that visits him at precisely 12:07 a.m. The monster is a towering, ancient being, part tree and part creature, who comes to life to tell Conor a series of stories. These stories serve as parables, each illustrating a complex moral lesson. The monster insists that Conor, in return, must tell him a story of his own, his 'truth'. Conor is forced to confront uncomfortable truths and suppressed feelings, ultimately leading him to face the reality of his mother's illness and his own grief.

The central argument advanced here is that *A Monster Calls* constructs horror not as an obstacle to Conor's psychological recovery but as its very mechanism: the monster's frightening stories compel Conor toward a confrontation with attachment disruption, family dysfunction, and repressed grief that a purely comforting narrative could not achieve. This reading draws on attachment theory, grief theory, interpersonal psychiatry, and psychoanalytic theories of dreaming to trace how each of Conor's encounters with the monster corresponds to a distinct stage of psychological unworking. The paper proceeds by situating the novel within relevant scholarship on trauma, the Gothic, and children's horror fiction; outlining the qualitative, text-based method of analysis employed; and offering a close reading of the novel organised around three interlocking sources of Conor's trauma induced through his attachment to his mother, his fractured family structure, and his

repressed fear of loss, before considering how the monster's storytelling resolves these tensions.

Literature Review

Scholarship on trauma in children's and young-adult literature has increasingly moved away from treating difficult subject matter as something children's fiction should shield its readers from, and toward examining how such fiction can offer readers structured, symbolic means of processing loss, illness, and fear. Critics working in this vein have argued that fantastical and horror elements in children's fiction are frequently not incidental but load-bearing: the monster, the ghost, or the nightmare becomes the text's primary means of approaching material encompassing death, abandonment, and abuse, that the narrative's realist register alone cannot hold. This body of criticism provides the immediate context for reading *A Monster Calls*, a novel explicitly built around a child's confrontation with terminal parental illness.

Within Gothic and horror studies more broadly, the monster has long been theorised as a figure of return, the site at which repressed or socially unspeakable material resurfaces in symbolic form. Readings of the Gothic indebted to psychoanalysis have consistently emphasised that horror fiction externalises unconscious conflict, rendering visible what a character, or a culture, cannot otherwise articulate. Ness's 'Yew-Tree Monster', an ancient, part-vegetal, part-animate figure who arrives at a fixed hour each night, participates recognisably in this tradition of the returning, articulate monster, while adapting it to the register of contemporary young-adult fiction rather than adult Gothic romance.

A Monster Calls has tended to emphasise the novel's treatment of grief and its unusually candid engagement with childhood bereavement, but has been less consistent in analysing the mechanics of the novel's horror, that is, in specifying how fear, dread, and monstrosity operate as a psychological process for Conor rather than simply as thematic backdrop. The present paper addresses this gap by combining close reading with attachment theory, grief theory, and psychoanalytic dream theory to specify the mechanism by which the novel's horror becomes therapeutic rather than merely representational, foregrounding genre, specifically, horror's formal resources of suspense, dread, and monstrosity, as the operative element in Conor's psychological movement, rather than treating horror as incidental to a story that is about grief.

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative method of close textual analysis, supported by psychoanalytic and attachment-based literary criticism, rather than an empirical or quantitative research design. The primary evidence consists of textual details from *A Monster Calls*, its narrative structure, recurring imagery, characterisation, and the content of the monster's parabolic stories, read in conjunction with theoretical frameworks drawn from attachment theory (Bowlby; Siegel and Hartzell), grief theory (Kubler-Ross), interpersonal psychiatry (Sullivan), and psychoanalytic dream theory (Freud). These frameworks are employed not as external tests the novel is measured against, but as interpretive lenses that make visible the psychological logic organising Conor's encounters with the monster. Close reading remains

the paper's central procedure: passages are examined for how they stage attachment, family rupture, and repression, and are then related to the broader argument that horror, in this novel, operates as a mechanism of confrontation and healing rather than avoidance. This approach is consistent with established practice in psychoanalytic and Gothic literary criticism, where textual and theoretical analysis substitutes for empirical data collection.

Analysis and Discussion

Attachment Disruption and the Absent Mother

At the very onset, Conor's major cause of his psychological trauma can be attributed to his attachment to his mother. He inherently and deliberately denies himself the fact that he will soon have to witness the death of his mother. John Bowlby in his book *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*, talks about maternal deprivation hypothesis, where he suggests that continual attachment disruption between the infant and primary caregiver could result in long-term cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties for that infant. Bowlby writes, "From birth onward there is a need for a protective figure, who is stronger, wiser, and able to cope with the world, on whom the young child can rely for protection and advice, and from whom he derives a sense of security" (Bowlby 56). Bowlby further states, "Once a secure attachment has been established, a child is likely to become increasingly independent, not only in his physical activities but also in his exploration of the physical and social world around him." (Bowlby 92). Ness portrays Conor as an independent thirteen-year-old, but he does not get the opportunity to secure a wholesome attachment with his mother. Hence, he struggles to 'explore' his surroundings. He has a difficult time bonding with his classmates and even in making friends.

The renowned psychologist and author, Dr. Daniel J. Siegel in his co-written book with Mary Hartzell, *Parenting from the Inside Out*, points out that, "Attachment disruptions can lead to difficulties in emotional regulation, making it harder for children to navigate social situations effectively." (Siegel and Hartzell 136). Conor's inability to cope at school, frequently becoming the target of bullying, and inability to stand up for his friend in distress clearly calls to attention his disrupted attachment with his mother, along with his yearning for a concrete emotional support, which was never granted to him. John Bowlby's argument in his work on 'attachment theory' also explains the psychological imbalance in Conor as the novel progresses.

Family Dysfunction and the Stages of Grief

The trauma in Conor is mostly induced as a result of his growing up in an extremely dysfunctional family. The absence of Conor's father strains his relationship with his mother, as well as with his grandmother. Kubler-Ross in her seminal work, *On Death and Dying* talks about the five stages of grief associated with terminal illness and death, and how it leads to a family being torn apart psychologically, giving rise to several mental traumas. The stages run through the following framework: "denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance" (Kubler-Ross 159). In the Ness' novel, Conor's family passes through this exact framework. The father is estranged and settles himself in United States with his new family. Conor never

experiences a strong father figure who could shield him from the grief that would ensue from the imminent absence of his terminally ill mother.

The Monster as Gothic and Therapeutic Figure

Considered as a Gothic figure, the yew-tree monster occupies a doubled position that is central to the novel's therapeutic logic. On one hand, it possesses the conventional attributes of the horror monster: it is enormous, ancient, arrives at a precise and uncanny hour, and initially threatens Conor with violence should he fail to tell his own story. On the other hand, its horror is never sadistic; each frightening tale it tells inverts a moral expectation Conor holds, forcing him to recognise the coexistence of guilt and love, or of anger and grief, within a single feeling. This oscillation between menace and moral instruction positions the monster within a lineage of Gothic figures who are simultaneously destructive and revelatory, and it is this doubled function: frightening enough to compel confrontation, yet purposeful enough to guide it, that distinguishes *A Monster Calls* from horror fiction in which monstrosity remains unresolved terror. The novel's horror, in other words, is instrumentalised: dread becomes the precondition for Conor's eventual honesty about his own feelings, rather than an end in itself.

The healing process in Conor happens in a subconscious state and he achieves it through his everyday meetings with the monster. In his seminal work, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, Henry Stack Sullivan states:

... so far as actual development of interpersonal relations goes, is the more significant difference between the two epochs; it can be stated in terms of required behavior. At birth the infant can do practically nothing to assure his own survival. During infancy, he learns only the grossest culture patterns about zonal and general needs. But throughout the era of childhood there is an increasing demand for his cooperation. The child is expected to do things which are brought to his attention or impressed on him as requirements for action by the authority-carrying environment; the mother, increasingly the father, and perhaps miscellaneous siblings, servants, and what not. (Sullivan 199)

Read alongside Conor's situation, Sullivan's account of the child's dependence on an 'authority-carrying environment' clarifies why the erosion of Conor's family structure with his father's absence, his mother's illness, his strained relationship with his grandmother, leaves him without the relational scaffolding Sullivan identifies as necessary for healthy development. The monster's nightly visits can be read as a substitute, if unconventional, source of this authority: it makes demands of Conor, insists on reciprocity, and requires him to take responsibility for his own narrative in a way none of the adults in his life are currently able to provide.

Repression, Dreaming, and the Return of the Truth

As Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory asserts, the subconscious often finds expression in dreams. Conor's nightmares are an encapsulation of his repressed emotions and fears, ultimately illustrating the psychological toll of repressing one's feelings. The entirety of the novel revolves around Conor's repressed fears, denial and overall trauma associated with his mother's illness, and the probability of her absence. Freud is of the opinion that, "It is nothing

new or strange that our conscious waking life should fail to recognize the existence of desires, ideas, and feelings which nevertheless, as is shown by their effects, must be assumed to be present somewhere in the mind.” (Freud 68)

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud’s opines, “A thorough investigation of dreams is thus one of the most important ways of learning about the unconscious emotional life.” (Freud 25). Patrick Ness creates the character of Conor who is mostly caught up in his waking dream of the ‘Yew Tree Monster’. The monster symbolises his subconscious state of mind, which horrifies him through dystopian stories with cataclysmal ends. But, at the same time, his psyche determines a self-healing path for Conor to come to terms with the reality. The exploration of psychological trauma in Patrick Ness’ *A Monster Calls*, sheds light on the intricate interplay of various elements including attachment to the mother, dysfunctional family dynamics, repressed fears, social isolation, all through the lens of psychoanalysis. In culmination, *A Monster Calls* serves as a poignant exploration of the complexities of psychological trauma, offering a nuanced portrayal of the healing process through the prism of horror.

Research Findings and Critical Insights

The preceding analysis suggests three interlocking critical insights. First, Conor’s trauma is not attributable to a single cause but emerges from the convergence of attachment disruption, family dysfunction, and anticipatory grief, each of which the novel represents through a distinct narrative strand before drawing them together in the monster’s demand for Conor’s ‘truth.’ Second, the novel’s horror elements are not separable from its psychological content: the monster’s frightening stories are the mechanism by which repressed material becomes available to Conor’s consciousness, suggesting that horror, in this text, functions less as a genre of avoidance than as a genre of disclosure. Third, the novel’s ending, in which Conor’s confession is met with recognition rather than punishment, implies a model of psychological healing in which fear is not something to be eliminated but something to be moved through, a reading consistent with the novel’s title and its broader claim that horror can heal rather than merely wound.

Limitations

This study is limited in several respects. Its analysis is confined to a single primary text and does not extend comparatively to other horror or Gothic works addressing childhood bereavement, which might test the generalisability of its claims about horror’s therapeutic function. The theoretical frameworks employed which include, attachment theory, grief theory, interpersonal psychiatry, and classical psychoanalysis, represent one set of interpretive lenses among several that could be applied to the novel; readings grounded in trauma theory, affect theory, or eco-criticism, given the yew tree’s status as a natural as well as monstrous figure, might yield complementary insights not pursued here. Finally, as a work of literary-critical rather than empirical research, the paper’s conclusions describe patterns of textual and psychological representation rather than claims about the actual therapeutic effects of horror fiction on child readers, a question that would require separate reader-response or clinical research to address.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* uses the conventions of horror that encompasses nightmare, monstrosity, dread, and an insistent supernatural visitor, as the mechanism through which its child protagonist confronts and works through trauma rooted in disrupted attachment, family dysfunction, and repressed grief. Read through attachment theory, grief theory, interpersonal psychiatry, and psychoanalytic dream theory, Conor's encounters with the yew-tree monster emerge not as isolated frightening episodes but as a structured sequence of confrontations, each compelling him closer to the 'truth' he has repressed: his own complicated wish for his mother's suffering to end. The novel makes a distinctive contribution to the study of English horror literature by demonstrating that monstrosity and dread can function affirmatively, as instruments of psychological disclosure rather than sources of unresolved terror. This reading extends trauma-focused scholarship on the novel by foregrounding the formal resources of horror, structuring around, suspense, monstrous embodiment, and the uncanny recurrence of the nightmare, as the mechanism of that disclosure, rather than treating horror as incidental to a narrative fundamentally about bereavement. Future research might extend this analysis comparatively, examining how other works of children's and young-adult horror stage similarly therapeutic encounters with monstrosity, or might complement the present reading with trauma theory, eco-criticism, or reader-response research into the effects of horror fiction on child readers navigating grief. Ness's novel positions horror not as an obstacle to healing but as one of its most powerful literary instruments for confronting what cannot otherwise be said.

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