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ENG 350: Literature for Young Adults

12 June 2012

The Monster Tells Every Reader’s Story of Grief and Guilt

Readers respond very personally to Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls,* the story of one boy’s efforts to cope with his mother’s terminal illness. Book-sharing and reader-reviewing sites on the Web give abundant evidence of the novel’s power. One reader remembers her brother in his casket, along with her sense of disbelief in the reality of the situation; another tells about a father’s death and the hole it left in her life. The readers’ responses are filled with pain. But readers rate *A Monster Calls* very highly. In Patrick Ness’s novel, with award-winning brooding black-and-white illustrations by Jim Kay, we recognize the monster of grief and guilt and pain that we have encountered in our own lives.

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Who the Monster Is: The Myth

“What are you?” Conor asked, pulling his arms closer around himself.

*I am not a “what,”* frowned the monster. *I am a “who.”*

“*Who* are you, then?” Conor said. . . .

*I have had as many names as there are years to time itself!”* roared the monster. *I am Herne the Hunter! I am Cernunnos! I am the eternal Green Man!* (Ness 31, 34)

This exchange provides the primary explanation for the origins of the monster of Conor’s dream. It appears to be the enormous yew tree from the nearby churchyard, which has grown arms and legs and a horrid face and left its rooted spot among the peaceful graves to call to Conor from just outside his window.

As Conor watched, the uppermost branches of the tree gathered themselves into a great and terrible face, shimmering into a mouth and nose and even eyes, peering back at him. Other branches twisted around one another, always creaking, always groaning, until they formed two long arms and a second leg to set down beside the main trunk. The rest of the tree gathered itself into a spine and then a torso, the thin, needle-like leaves weaving together to make a green, furry skin that moved and breathed as if there were muscles and lungs underneath. . . . It set its giant hands on either side of his window, lowering its head until its huge eyes filled the frame, holding Conor with its glare. (Ness 4-5)

Herne the Hunter


Print by George Cruikshank, 1843

The legend of Herne the Hunter apparently makes its first appearance in written text in Shakespeare, according to Wikipedia. The article quotes the following lines:

Sometime a keeper here in Windsor Forest,

Doth all the winter-time, at still midnight,

Walk round about an oak, with great ragg'd horns;

And there he blasts the tree, and takes the cattle,

And makes milch-kine yield blood, and shakes a chain

In a most hideous and dreadful manner.

You have heard of such a spirit, and well you know

The superstitious idle-headed eld

Receiv'd, and did deliver to our age,

This tale of Herne the Hunter for a truth.

— William Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

The ghost story is told in detail on David Nash Ford’s *Royal Berkshire History* web site. Disgraced when he was framed for poaching in the King’s forest, Herne hanged himself on an oak tree and made a ghostly appearance to King Richard II, accusing the two envious huntsmen who had framed him. The power of his legend for Patrick Ness’s tale is twofold: his association with the tree and his appearance at times of upheaval and death:

With his hounds and the two resentful huntsmen, who are compelled to ride with him for eternity, Herne leads a wild hunt through the Forest and across the night’s sky, searching for damned souls lost in the wilderness. . . . He materialises there when the sovereign is unjust or close to death, or when the nation is otherwise in danger. (Ford)

 The Wikipedia article cites various sources for connections between the Herne legend and the godlike figure that Ness’s monster suggests. Referencing a 1929 book, the article connects Herne with Cernunnos:

In his 1929 book *The History of the Devil - The Horned God of the West Herne* R. Lowe Thompson suggests that "Herne" as well as other Wild Huntsmen in European folklore all derive from the same ancient source, citing that "Herne" may be a cognate of the name of Gaulish deity Cernunnos in the same way that the English "horn" is a cognate of the Latin "cornu" . . . .

Other linguistic connections based in relationships between languages are cited from several sources in this article to link Herne with the Norse god Odin:

In the Early Middle Ages, Windsor Forest came under the control of the pagan Angles who worshiped their own pantheon of gods, including Woden, who was sometimes depicted as horned, and whose Norse equivalent Odin rode across the night sky with his own Wild Hunt and hanged himself on the world tree Yggdrasil in order to learn the secret of the runic alphabet. It has been suggested that the name *Herne* is derived from the title *Herian*, a title used for Woden in his role as leader of fallen warriors (Old Norse *Einherjar*).

These associations emphasize the Hunt, however, along with the horned appearance.

 While a Hunt seems irrelevant to Conor’s personal story of grief in contemporary Ireland, the violence of his emotional outburst when his anger reaches its highest point is akin to the fury of the Wild Hunt. Conor is driven by several factors: grief and guilt when his mother is hospitalized for yet more treatments that do not work against the cancer that is destroying her; rage at his father for abandoning them both to start a new life in the United States; frustration at being either ignored or treated with kid gloves by his classmates and the friends he has distanced himself from; dislike of his grandmother, with whom he is destined to live after his mother’s death. He vents these destructive emotions by destroying a roomful of antiques in his grandmother’s home.

 No one is more surprised than Conor when his grandmother’s reaction to the sight of her ruined treasures, after long days and nights at his mother’s bedside, is to push over one more expensive piece of furniture, adding to the wreck of her parlor. The elemental rage that Conor and his grandmother both feel finds its symbolic equivalent in these old, old stories of an out-of-control mythic figure.

Cernunnos


From a first-century A.D. pillar in Paris

 In the *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend,* Green identifies the name “Cernunnos” with the definition “horned one.” Images of an antlered god predate the Herne ghost story by many centuries, some appearing before the Roman Empire’s occupation of Celtic lands: “The earliest recorded manifestation is on a 4th c. BC rock-carving at Paspardo in Camonica Valley in North Italy . . .” (Green 59). Many of the images of this period are found in Gaul (mostly in today’s France) and are associated with fertility. Mixing human and animal figures, his most important role seems to be as “lord of animals” (Green 60), but he represents “wild and tamed nature” (61). While all of these features are also stressed in the *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, its author, MacKillop, adds that images of this god range “from what is today Romania to Ireland. There are convincing traces of him in the literary traditions of both Wales and Ireland . . .” (76).

 A Celtic god is the appropriate deity to respond to this Irish boy’s need, and the monster tells Conor, “This is why you called me,” though Conor protests that he did not, believing that the monster has come of its own accord to frighten him (Ness 36). Its wildness is indeed frightening. In further explanation of his identity, the monster roars,

I am the spine that the mountains hang upon! I am the tears that the rivers cry! I am the lungs that breathe the wind! I am the wolf that kills the stag, the hawk that kills the mouse, the spider that kills the fly! I am the stag, the mouse, and the fly that are eaten! I am the snake of the world devouring its tail! I am everything untamed and untameable! . . . I am this wild earth, come for you, Conor O’Malley. (34)

Yet Conor refuses to be frightened by the destructive force of nature, dismissing these claims with the flippant observation, “You look like a tree” (35). In response, the monster squeezes him. Then, like Conor’s English teacher, who assigns him “life writing, . . . . Their family tree, where they’d lived, holiday trips, and happy memories. Important things that had happened” (13), the monster gives him an assignment. The monster will tell Conor three stories, and after the telling, Conor must tell his story to the monster. If Conor refuses, the monster will “eat [him] alive” (37). Stories, we learn, “are the wildest things of all . . . . Stories chase and bite and hunt” (35).

Green Man


From a Lincolnshire Church

 The Green Man is a more widespread symbol in mythology, prevalent in the British Isles. Images of the Green Man appear as carvings in churches as well as in other settings. Because Conor’s monster is a walking yew tree and comes from a cemetery, the Green Man seems a better name than the others that the monster claims because the Green Man is a vegetative, rather than an animal (or zoomorphic) deity. According to Wikipedia, Green Man carvings appear in cemeteries too: “On gravestones and other memorials, human skulls are sometimes shown sprouting grape vines or other vegetation, presumably as a symbol of resurrection . . . .”

 The Green Man is both a fertility symbol “Strongly connected to Jack in the Green and the May King, as well as John Barleycorn during the fall harvest” and a “forest spirit” (Wigington). The power of the ancient forests is evoked in this passage: “In the British Isles, the forests a thousand years ago were vast, spreading for miles and miles, farther than the eye could see. Because of the sheer size, the forest could be a dark and scary place” (Wigington). A famous literary Green Man appears in the 14th-century verse romance, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” an Arthurian tale.

 A commercial web site, *Ancientspiral.com*, which cites no sources, presents correlations between pre-Christian traditions and Christian celebrations and figures. On this site, Cernunnos’ antlers are said to be associated with the devil’s horns by theologians who came along in later centuries than the period in which the solstice celebration was chosen for Christmas, the Norse spring goddess Eostre was identified with Christ’s resurrection, and so forth. Rather than a one-to-one correlation, according to the *Ancientspiral.com* site, the Green Man was subordinated to other elements of Christianity: “The Green Man image, previously regarded as one of many gods, became a symbol of the spirit of nature within the total creation of the one god.” A greater separation between the Green Man and Christianity is suggested on a web page copyrighted in 2011 by the “Green Man East Anglia”: “Rabanus Maurus an 8th c theologian said the Green Man represented the sins of the flesh, lustful wicked men doomed to eternal damnation. This seems to be a long way from the meaning to those who used his image 6 centuries previously.”

 This source, though, also makes a connection to the female that is suggestive for *A Monster Calls*, in which Conor’s mother suffers from cancer, and the reader may well assume the cancer is breast cancer, since that is the disease that proved fatal for author Siobhan Dowd at age 47, whose idea *A Monster Calls* was taken up by Patrick Ness at his publisher’s request, after Dowd’s death (Ness n.p.). The East Anglian Green Man states, “Western Paganism defines the Green Man as the symbol of godhood within the male as well as the symbol of life, death and rebirth (a theme reminiscent with the story of Christ) and its relationship with the transcendent life-force, the goddess, the female expression of the godhead.” The breast is, of course, both female and life-giving. A woman who suffers from breast cancer may feel that her essence as a woman—and in the case of this novel, as a mother—is assailed.

*A Monster Calls*: Cancer and Family Matters

Conor’s mother is divorced and has been ill for some time as the novel begins. She has undergone two cycles, at least, of chemotherapy, and her hair has fallen out. Conor takes care of himself and his mother to the best of his ability. He misses his father, who divorced his mother before her illness was diagnosed and then moved to America, where he has a new life with a new wife and, recently, a new baby. Conor is angry at his father for leaving, for having a new family that interferes with his ability to sustain contact with Conor.

 As a male child and only child in a family split by a divorce, Conor has tried to step into the role of “the man of the family.” The responsibility is too great for him—as it is for any child.

 Moreover, Conor’s parents have not leveled with him about the gravity of his mother’s condition. His mother puts a brave face on her struggle, always hopeful that the next round of treatment will bring remission. She is clearly reluctant to leave Conor, likely feeling that her death will result in his feeling abandoned by both his parents. She tells him, “I wish I had a hundred years . . . . A hundred years I could give to you” (Ness 168). She may also be lying to herself about her prognosis.

Conor’s grandmother disapproves of this withholding of the truth, as shown when she arrives to help out, and she tries to prepare him to face a future without his mother, as well as to face the present reality of the pain: “’She’ll *seem* better tomorrow,’ his grandma said, her voice huskier, ‘but she won’t be, Conor’” (Ness 42). In response to his grandmother’s efforts, Conor resorts to denial and anger at his grandmother, and he affirms, “’The treatments are making her better’ . . .” (Ness 42). When his grandmother persists, Conor’s anger grows, and we feel the connection between his explosive emotions and the monster that visits him at night.

His grandma just looked at him for a long minute, like she was trying to decide something. “You need to talk to her about this, Conor,” she finally said. Then she said, as if to herself, “She needs to talk about this with *you.*”

“Talk to me about what?” Conor asked.

His grandma crossed her arms. “About you coming to live with me.”

Conor frowned, and for a second the whole room seemed to get darker, for a second it felt like the whole house was shrinking, for a second it felt like he could reach down and tear the whole floor right out of the dark and loamy earth-- . . .

“I’m *never* going to live with you.”

“Yes, you are,” she said. “I’m sorry, but you are. And I know she’s trying to protect you, but I think it’s vitally important for you to know that when this is all over, you’ve got a home, my boy. With someone who’ll love you and care for you.”

“When this is all over,” Conor said, fury in his voice, “you’ll leave and we’ll be fine.” (Ness 42-43)

Throughout this exchange, Conor can see the monster outside his window.

Living with the Monster

 Poor Conor—now an outsider at school, never talked to as a normal kid, not since everyone learned from his best friend that his mother suffers from cancer. He also needs punishment, apparently, because when he is physically abused by bullies, he takes the bullying in stride and protects his persecutors from discovery by school authorities. What he finds most troubling is the sense that he has become invisible, a zero. Being bullied confirms that he is not invisible.

But what has he done? the reader wonders, that he needs punishment. In his recurring nightmare, he struggles to hold on to his mother. But sometimes, he finally acknowledges, he just wants the struggle to be over. And this sentiment overwhelms him with guilt, guilt that results in a sense that punishment is appropriate.

When the monster’s destructive capacity transforms into Conor’s destruction of his grandmother’s treasured possessions, he does something that truly deserves punishment:

The monster stomped around the interior of the house, crushing every piece of furniture it could find with satisfying crashes and crunches. . . . Conor rushed in to help . . . . He was yelling as he did it, so loud he couldn’t hear himself think, disappearing into the frenzy of destruction, just mindlessly smashing and smashing and smashing. THe monster was right. It was *very* satisfying. . . . When he finally stopped, he found the monster watching him quietly from outside the wreckage. (Ness 111)

The settee was shattered into pieces beyond counting. Every wooden leg was broken, the upholstery ripped to shreds, hunks of stuffing strewn across the floor, along with the remains of the clock, flung from the wall and broken to almost unrecognizable bits. So too were the lamps and both small tables that had sat at the ends of the settee, as well as the bookcase under the front window, every book of which was torn from cover to cover. Even the wallpaper had been ripped back in dirty, uneven strips. The only thing left standing was the display cabinet, though its glass doors were smashed and everything inside hurled to the floor. (Ness 115)

As the daughter of a cancer victim, I empathize. When my mom died, I felt release, relief, especially after those last few days. I didn’t feel guilty about the relief, though. I was 39 years old, and that’s old enough to cope with losing a mother—even if we’re all always children inside when it comes to the deaths of the people we love.

 It was a hard time, even if I coped. My mother’s cancer was diagnosed and then metasthatized during the time that I was dealing with the breakup of my marriage. My ex-husband left in 1983, shortly before the girls’ fourth and second birthdays. Mom’s colon cancer was diagnosed in 1984. My divorce was in December 1986. It must have been right around that time we learned that she had liver cancer, but she lived much longer than she should have after that diagnosis, until 1988. Throughout those years, what was most painful was that she was not herself, something that Conor doesn’t have to cope with, although I appreciate his denial and his grandmother’s disapproval that his parents have not been straightforward about the imminence of her death. My mom retreated into an Alzheimer-like world of a never-diagnosed illness, the same one her father had suffered from, the same one that appeared in my brother’s life a couple of years ago and remains undiagnosed despite extensive testing. Chuck still functions, just aware that he has brain damage; he’s able to teach, but the way he discovered the illness was that he had to relearn the math he needed to teach Structural Geology. The pain of losing my mom as the person she was may have outweighed the pain of seeing her undergo cancer treatment.

 My sister-in-law Dara, Chuck’s wife, underwent surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation for breast treatment in 2003-2004. She’s a survivor.

 My father-in-law died of lung cancer at age 55 in 1980 within a week of my older daughter’s first birthday. He died two months after my sister-in-law lost a child to SIDS.

 My mother-in-law died of bone cancer at age 60 in 1988 five to six weeks after my mother died.

 My grandmother had died—not of cancer—at age 93 in 1988 six weeks before my mother died.

 It was a horrid spring.

 I don’t have many good memories of the 1980s—except for the joy I took in my children, who were born in 1979 and 1981.

Conor’s Pain

The monster comes at Conor’s call, though at first he hears it calling him, and he doesn’t realize he has called it. “*I have come to get you, Conor O’Malley,*” it says (Ness 8), but he isn’t afraid: “. . . this wasn’t the monster he was expecting” (Ness 8). He defies it when it pounds against his house and fills his bedroom with wind, saying, “’Shout all you want . . . . I’ve seen worse’” (Ness 9). He is not afraid of the monster, and he is not afraid of the bullies at school.

Conor *is* filled with rage, the rage that erupts in his smashing of his grandmother’s things.

I understand rage, the rage that says, “No, this can’t be happening to my mother—anyone but *my* mother.”

I understand guilt, the guilt we eventually understand as readers of *A Monster Calls*: Conor feels enormous guilt because he longs for his pain to end at the same time that he knows the end of his pain will come with his mother’s death. No matter what the adults tell him or withhold from him.

I was so relieved by my mother’s death that I didn’t truly start to grieve for several months—a situation that I recognized as unhealthy and, later, when my father died in 2000, I made sure that I allowed myself to grieve at the time (which coincidentally was the period in which I was preparing to teach YA literature and was reading through my list of 200 YA books, so it’s no wonder I didn’t notice how dark so many of those 1980s problem novels were—after all, the 1980s had been a pretty dark decade for me). Dark thoughts and fears and pain and depression seemed normal to me in the 1980s—and then I recognized them for what they were in 2000 and lived through my grieving and came out on the other side a healthy woman. But I wasn’t a child in years then.

Siobhan Dowd: Where the Story Started

 I’m not a follower of authors’ lives, and Siobhan Dowd’s death of breast cancer at age 47 did not make NPR’s morning or afternoon newscasts in 2007 (Fryer; Tucker). I read her first novel, *A Swift Pure Cry,* a haunting story of a dead infant found in a cave and the community’s speculations as to whose child it is, along with the uncovering of some unpleasant secrets. I read another of her novels too, *Bog Child,* about another discovery of a dead child—this one centuries old, preserved in a peat bog, a less disturbing story because the child’s relatives were many centuries dead. I didn’t know it was published posthumously.

 *A Monster Calls* starts with a note by author Patrick Ness:

I never got to meet Siobhan Dowd. I only know her the way that most of the rest of you will—through her superb books. Four electric young adult novels, two published in her lifetime, two after her too-early death. . . .

This would have been her fifth book. She had the characters, a premise, and a beginning. What she didn’t have, unfortunately, was time.

When I was asked if I would consider turning her work into a book, I hesitated. What I wouldn’t do—what I *couldn’t* do—was write a novel mimicking her voice. . . .

But the good thing about good ideas is that they grow other ideas. . . .

I felt—and feel—as if I’ve been handed a baton, like a particularly fine writer has given me her story and said, “Go. Run with it. Make trouble.” So that’s what I tried to do. . . .

And now it’s time to hand the baton on to you. Stories don’t end with the writers, however many started the race. Here’s what Siobhan and I came up with. So go. Run with it. (Ness n.p.)

 Dowd’s legacy also lives in a trust set up to promote literacy among children. A book trailer for *A Monster Calls* is featured on the Siobhan Dowd Trust web site. Stories are essential for children. Through stories, we understand our lives.

 As the monster says, “*Stories are the wildest things of all . . . . Stories chase and bite and hunt*” (Ness 35). Though Conor tries to defy the monster, the monster has the upper hand. He assures Conor that even if he isn’t afraid in these early confrontations, “*You will be . . . . Before the end*” (Ness 9). The end the monster alludes to, the reader senses, is Conor’s mother’s death.

 One senses, too, that Siobhan Dowd’s death haunted author Patrick Ness as he picked up the threads of the story she left behind and wove them into a new creation, his own, a wild story that hunts down the reader’s fears and griefs.

Patrick Ness and Jim Kay, Who Brought the Doomed Story to Fruition

 Both the author and the illustrator of *A Monster Calls* have won awards for the book. “This year, for the first time ever, the same book, A Monster Calls, has won the CILIP Carnegie Medal for children’s literature and its companion prize for illustration, the Kate Greenaway Medal” (Jones). The powerful illustrations, based on Green Man lore and other ancient sources, are as haunting as the story of Conor’s coming to terms with his mother’s terminal condition within weeks, or perhaps days, of her death, where the novel ends. Ness explains his portrayal of Conor O’Malley this way in a joint interview with Jim Kay by the *Daily Telegraph* as “accepting a teenager as a genuine human being, not as a symbol of transition from boy to man but as a real person, going through real time and real things, with some tenderness, sympathy and gentleness. I don’t think teenagers get much gentleness.” (Jones)

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Wild, Not Gentle

 The events that shape teenagers’ lives are all too often not gentle. Teens who suffer loss need to understand the emotions that accompany their grief and pain—the rage that can fester inside them, the rage that is eased by the sharing of stories. Sooner or later, we all experience loss. We need stories to help us negotiate the wild emotions that accompany loss. We need both to listen and to tell our own stories. *A Monster Calls* performs the cathartic function of inviting vicarious grief. The monster tells stories; Conor tells his story. Patrick Ness read Siobhan Dowd’s notes and then told his own story; Jim Kay read Ness’s story and told his own story through illustrations. Readers read *A Monster Calls* and then post their own stories on the Internet. The cycle of destruction and rebirth—out of death comes new growth—is enacted again and again.

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