

# Empowerment in *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness

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## Abstract

The issue of power has always existed in literature and it also appears in children and young adult literature. Fiction for young adults addresses subjects which people are faced with in everyday life and writers of such fiction try to make use of tangible topics to give a voice to children and young adult literature reducing their Otherness in order to pave the way for empowerment. In this study *A Monster Calls* is analysed based on four types of empowerment. It is argued that as the central theme of the story is death, the writer has managed to guide the young protagonist of the story through different techniques of characterization, plot, setting, fantasy and pictures to come to terms with losing his mother to cancer. The reader can also go through the same stages and feel empowered at the end.

**Keywords:** *A Monster Calls*, literary empowerment, psychological empowerment, social empowerment, linguistic empowerment

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## Puissance dans <<A Monster Calls>> par Patrick Ness

### Résumé

Le problème de la puissance a toujours existé dans la littérature et elle apparaît aussi dans la littérature pour les enfants et les jeunes adultes. La fiction pour jeunes adultes aborde des sujets auxquels les gens sont confrontés dans la vie de tous les jours et les auteurs d'une telle fiction essaient d'utiliser des sujets tangibles pour donner une voix à la littérature des enfants et des jeunes adultes réduisant leur altérité pour ouvrir la voie à l'autonomisation. Dans cette étude, *A Monster Calls* est analysé en fonction de quatre types d'habilitation. On soutient que le thème central de l'histoire étant la mort, l'écrivain a réussi à guider le jeune protagoniste de l'histoire à travers différentes techniques de caractérisation, d'intrigue, de mise en scène, de fantaisie et d'images pour venir à bout de la perte de sa mère au cancer. Le lecteur peut également passer par les mêmes étapes et se sentir responsabilisé à la fin.

**Mots-clés:** *A Monster Calls*, puissance littéraire, habilitation psychologique, responsabilité sociale, autonomisation linguistique

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## 1. Introduction

*A Monster Calls* is a fantasy novel for young adults which has gained much recognition and many awards. Siobhan Dowd had the original idea for the novel *A Monster Calls*, but her sudden death left the ideas untouched; Patrick Ness was asked to write this low fantasy for young adults in 2011. Though a young adult fiction, it was illustrated by Jim Kay and these illustrations add to the

poignancy of the emotions and thoughts of the reading process. This novel has been very popular and is going to be made into a film; it is a novel of bereavement in which a monster plays the role of a helper in order to ease in the process of healing. The subject of power and empowerment in young adult literature has gained recognition and is studied by many scholars.

*A Monster Calls* is the story of thirteen-year old Conor O'Malley whose mother is suffering from cancer and undergoing chemotherapy treatment. The father left the family for a new wife and a new life six years ago living faraway in America. So Conor is suffering alone and without the support of a father while he is also losing his mother to cancer. He does not have a good relationship with his rich grandmother and hates her company. He never wants others' pity and tries to be dutiful so that the grandmother would not have to visit very often. However, his life is not easy as he is bullied at school, ignored and pitied by teachers and friends and is therefore, isolated. At home, the situation is no better in that he cannot sleep without the horrible nightmare of letting his mother's hand slip from his. Seeing his mother in pain is too much for him and he wants to get away from such pain. At the same time, knowing that he has not done his best to keep his mother's hand, he feels guilty and undeserving of the others' pity. There is a yew tree in their garden, and one night exactly at 12:07 midnight, it turns into a monster and tells Conor three stories. These stories come in handy and at the end, the monster makes Conor tell the fourth story which is the truth of letting his mother's hand go. It is with the help of the monster that Conor finally faces the reality, talks about it and comes to accept his mother's death.

## 2. Literature Review

Stephanie Elizabeth Dabrowski in her MA thesis entitled "Monstrous Losses and Broken Fairy Tales: Fantasy, Fairy Tales: Loss and Trauma in Young Adult Literature" discusses the role of the monster stating 'Ness's use of the monster figure... not only conveys the intensity of the emotional conflict and upheaval that Conor experiences but also how it is his isolation that brings about his own sense of being monstrous because of his feelings since it contributes to his anger and helplessness in the face of an overwhelming loss' (2016: 45).

Lisa Sainsbury elaborates on 'thought experiments [which] are uncovered as key stimuli of philosophical potential in children's literature and their presentation and function' (2016: 1) in selected novels. She states, '*As A Monster Calls* ... confirms when the monster demands of Conor, 'You think I tell you stories to teach you lessons?'..., the thought experiment is a philosophical and transformative mechanism that entrusts knowledge to the mighty child' (2016: 16).

Giskin Day (2012) talking of bereavement literature discusses how Conor projects the monster and starts a narrative in order to come to terms with losing his mother while Jessica Bruder (2011) reviews the book stating it is 'a profoundly sad story. But it's also wise, darkly funny and brave, told in spare sentences, punctuated with fantastic images ... and stirring silences' (web).

Maria Nikolajeva focusing on some known Anglophone and Russian novels talks about the idea of empowerment and how characters are allowed some power. She, (Nikolajeva 2010) takes children as the Other in society: 'Children in our society are oppressed and powerless. Yet, paradoxically enough, children are allowed, in fiction written *by adults* for the enlightenment and enjoyment of children, to become strong, and independent—*on a certain conditions and for a limited time*' [original emphasis] (2010: 10).

John Stephens (2007) analyzes the ideology implanted in books and its power over the implied reader. Stephens believes that it is through the involvement and identification of the reader with the main character that narratives convey their ideology.

Roberta S. Trites (2000) in her book *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* talks about the frequent theme of most adolescent novels which is power.

### 3. Discussion

In this paper based on Elisheva Sadan's ideas of empowerment, *A Monster calls* by Patrick Ness is analyzed. Sadan mentions three kinds of empowerment: individual empowerment, community empowerment, and empowering professional practice. She states: "The process of individual empowerment ... can occur in an immense variety of circumstances and conditions, without any connection to the other two processes, but when it occurs in the course of active participation in social change processes in groups and organizations it has a special value for both the individual and the environment" (2004: 145). A modified version of Sadan's theory of empowerment in the form of a model of empowerment for literature is used to analyze this novel. This model of empowerment encompasses four kinds of empowerment, which comprise conceptual and textual aspects of a text.

Figure 1 shows the different aspects of the model which will be elaborated. First the three subcategories of 'literary empowerment': 'decentration,' 'literary elements', and finally 'teaching literary terms' are discussed.

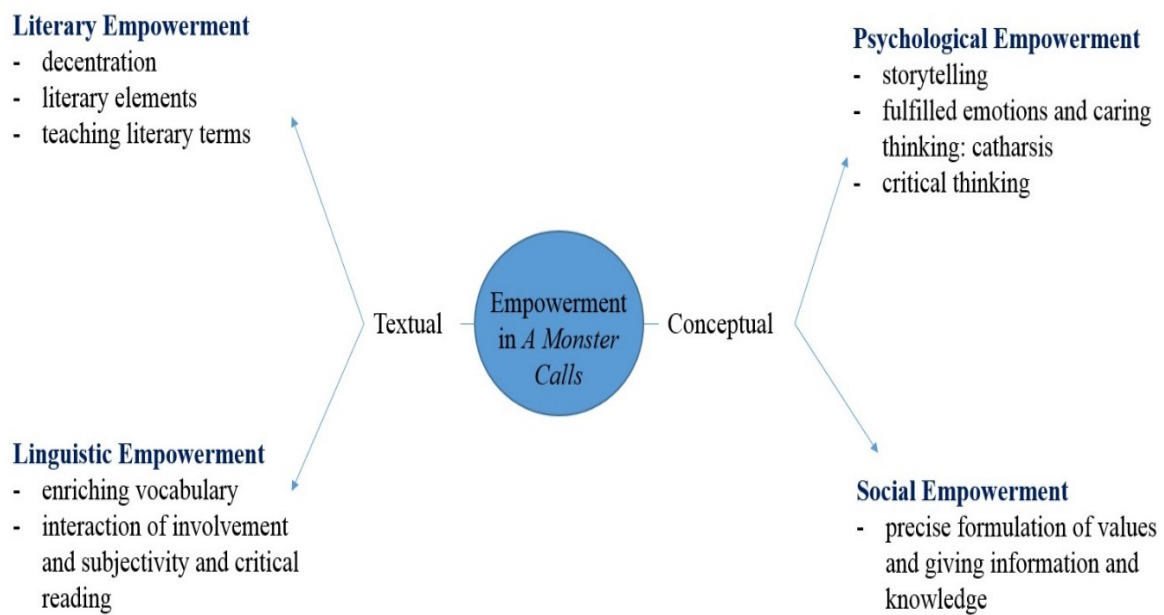


Figure 1. Empowerment

#### 3.1. Literary Empowerment

Three subcategories of decentration, literary elements and teaching literary terms are discussed in this part.

##### 3.1.1. Decentration

From among decentration devices, five items discussed by Khosronejad (2004) and Moradpour (2016): 'interruption of the narrator', 'home-away-home,' 'gaps,' 'surprise,' and 'embedded narrative' are chosen. In this novel we are dealing with the third person limited omniscient narrator. So the focalized character is Conor and with such a narrator we have his thoughts and feelings. However, we have some comments inserted in the narrative, which are mostly put in parenthesis. For instance, while he is in his grandmother's luxury sitting room, the antique clock noise gets on Conor's nerves and in a frenzy, he manages to take the hands off:

He could feel drops of sweat gathering on his forehead and his chest felt like it was glowing with heat.

(-almost like being in the nightmare, that same feverish blur of the world slipping off its axis, but this time *he* was the one in control, this time *he* was the nightmare-)

The second hand, the thinnest of the three, suddenly snapped and ... . (Ness 2011: 104)

Such sentences are capable of introducing a pause in the narration and thereby cause decentration.

At least twice, there is the pattern 'home-away-home' where the monster tells Conor a story, and it is as if he is taken away from the current time and place to gain the experience. Conor gets so much involved in each story that it is as if he lives through them. This is true for the second story and the third; in each of them, Conor participates and gets involved. The results are horrible in reality, but as time goes by, they have their effects on Conor.

The subject of cancer is not even mentioned once in the story. However, it is through the signs and the gaps that the reader understands Conor's mother is suffering from cancer. The first appearance of Conor's mother is explained as: 'She stopped, but still smiled back at him. She hadn't tied her scarf around her head yet this morning, and her bare scalp looked too soft, too fragile in the morning light, like a baby's. It made Conor's stomach hurt to see it' (*A Monster Calls* 25). These sentences are followed with a few sentences on treatments, so the reader can fill in the gap and surmise cancer. Another example is when the monster appears in the third story about the invisible man who is ignored by everyone and finally manages to make people see him. Conor is actually the invisible man at school so when Harry (a school fellow) shouts that he sees nobody:

Without turning around, Conor asked the monster a question.

"What did you do to help the invisible man?"

And he felt the monster's voice again, like it was in his own head.

*I made them see*, it said.

Conor clenched his fists even tighter.

Then the monster leapt forward to make Harry see. (*A Monster Calls* 162)

We have surprise in the monster's first and second tales. In the first tale, the yew tree starts walking and goes to rescue the witch queen so that people would not kill her. As the monster tells Conor that she has not been a good queen, the action of rescue is a surprise and decentrating and also helps the readers with critical thinking (*A Monster Calls* 68-72). In the second tale, we have another surprise; when the Apothecary denies helping the parson's daughters, they die:

*And that very night, I came walking.*

(Good! Conor shouted. "That stupid git deserves all the punishment he gets.")

*(I thought so too, said the monster.)*

*It was shortly after midnight that I tore the parson's home from its very foundations. (A Monster Calls 117)*

The presence of the three stories told by the monster can be taken as an eminent feature for the presence of embedded narrative in this novel. The third story and Conor's tale are so integrated in the narrative that it becomes impossible to separate them, but with the first and second tales, it is not the case.

### 3.2. *Literary Elements*

The first element is genre. This novel is a crossgenre novel and combines 'fantasy' with 'realism'. For this very reason, this novel is also known as a low fantasy. The existence of the monster makes the story a fantasy. It is argued that Ness has chosen the best media for this novel of loss and grievance. As Rosemary Jackson claims "Fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss" (qtd. in Chengcheng 1981: 34). Furthermore, according to Dabrowski the genre of fantasy in such novels is important:

... to the way they [these novels] function as transitional texts and also informs an idea of the role of literature in relation to loss, and by extension to other difficult subject-matter. In using fantasy companions more typical of children's literature these novels arguably enact a form of regression as they progress into the young adult category because adolescents are thought too old for this form of fantasy. (2016: 94)

Moreover, as Ness is tackling the idea of 'loss' and fear of losing, the novel belongs to the genre of realism; it is effective on its own terms as according to what Ness himself says: '... there's not a person in the world – young or old – who hasn't experienced that' (qtd. in Wheeler 2012).

As two genres of fantasy and realism are enveloped in this novel, it is possible to take the 'liminal space' created by the interaction of the two as empowering. Furthermore, it can be argued that the pictures have a great share in creating such a liminal space. For example, when the monster appears the first night, Conor repeats to himself that he has been dreaming. However, as soon as he gets out of his bed, we read: 'Every inch of his bedroom floor was covered in short, spiky yew tree leaves' (*A Monster Calls* 21) and the picture following shows Conor's room is covered with yew tree leaves.

With 'plot' the reader is faced with Conor's quest: how to deal with his mother's ailment and the fear of loss. It is with the help of the monster and the power of storytelling, and of course telling the truth, that Conor is able to face the reality and accept it, painful as it may be. In children's literature, the 'absence of parents' is taken as an empowering feature in the process of the protagonist's empowerment (Nikolajeva 16), while it is not so in young adult literature; that is, the presence of an empowered adult seems to be an empowering feature. In this novel, however, there is the presence of a monster instead of an adult. The monster plays the most significant role in this novel from several perspectives and it is important to mention that its existence is indeed empowering for Conor. First of all, by putting a monster in this novel, Ness has made the novel a fantasy. Also by telling Conor stories, the monster actually helps and heals Conor, so at the end he knows how to put up with grief and accepts the reality. Next, the monster has its symbolic connotations. According to Wheeler 'the monster is a fantastically astute metaphor for all Conor's confusing, frightening and bewildering feelings'; in other words, it can be taken "as an expression of Conor's interiority" (Dabrowski 45).

### **3.3. Teaching Literary Terms**

The main literary element that can be learned in this novel is the use of imagery. In this novel Ness has made use of an excessive amount of imageries: visual, auditory and tactile are among the most frequent ones. For instance, in the description of the monster's voice there are 'auditory' and 'tactile' imageries at the same time: 'Its voice rumbled low and loud, with a vibration so deep Conor could feel in his chest' (*A Monster Calls* 18).

### **3.4. Linguistic Empowerment**

In this part, 'enriching vocabulary,' 'critical reading,' and 'the interaction of involvement and subjectivity' are discussed. The action of reading helps learning and the enrichment of vocabulary. However, for words such as 'apothecary' (113), or with idioms like: 'Worse things happen at sea' (134) lead to vocabulary enrichment. Also in this novel there are a series of British English words and at the same time some American ones: for example, 'form', for class as an English word; and 'sport' as a way of addressing someone, as an American.

With the help of gaps and the illustrations it is possible to infer some implicit messages, all of which would lead to a critical reading. From the opening of the novel, the narrator gradually gives us pieces of information so that very soon the reader realizes that Conor's mother is seriously sick and has cancer. Furthermore, the paratextual elements help the writer convey critical reading and subjectivity easier. The paratextual elements such as: illustrations, font, and italics, and colors

all lead to subjectivity and thereby critical reading. Based on the experiment that Aggleton had with children, it is possible to maintain that:

The children with an illustrated copy engaged with the text more deeply and critically than the others. They were also more likely to relate the story to their own lives. The illustrations were found to work alongside the participants' own visualisations rather than replacing them, and opened up further possible interpretations rather than limiting them. (2016:1)

Also according to Chilton (2011): 'The drawings are part of the very fabric of the book, almost seeming to grow out of the page, like the tree monster himself' (web). Kay's illustrations link the pages together and seem to go beyond mere pages. As far as the font and italics are concerned, the reader would notice that together with the monster's speeches, which are always in italics, some single words are also italicized. Such incongruity in font leads to subjectivity and thereby critical reading. Finally, the reason behind such black and white illustrations can also lead the implied reader to match the colors with the ideas of loss, mourning and death. Therefore, one can say that paratextuality has a main share in critical reading of the novel.

### **3.5. Psychological Empowerment**

In this section story telling, fulfilled emotions and caring, thinking, catharsis, and critical thinking are discussed. During the course of the novel, Conor's progression and psychological development are noticed as Jones (2012) puts it: 'He's first an observer, then a participant, then a hero, then he tells his own story' (web). During the first tale, Conor just listens and comments and when he thinks the story is no good, he decides to leave but the monster forces him to listen:

“I knew it,” Conor grumbled. “These kinds of stories always have stupid princes falling in love.” He started walking back to the house. “I thought this was going to be *good*.”  
(With one swift movement, the monster grabbed Conor's ankles in a long, strong hand and flipped him upside down, holding him in mid-air so his t-shirt rucked up and his heartbeat thudded in his head.) (*A Monster Calls* 64)

In the second tale, the monster tells the story of a parson who is selfish so that the yew tree comes alive and starts to smash his home as a punishment. He asks Conor to join in and he accepts finding destruction satisfactory (*A Monster Calls* 120-24). Thus he participates in the action of destruction, while in reality he notices that he has smashed whatsoever has existed in his grandmother's luxury sitting room where he has never even been allowed to enter.

The monster's third tale is actually Conor's own tale. He is the invisible man whom nobody sees or cares for at school. Harry is the last person who at the end decides to ignore Conor, like others, and thereby bids him goodbye. In his fury, Connor is reminded of the monster and the third tale, so he does as he is told by the monster, making everyone at school see him. He pulls Harry down, and breaks his arm and nose (*A Monster Calls* 156-62). Thus Conor becomes visible making everyone notice him.

Finally, it is time for the fourth tale. Conor resists telling it as it is too painful for him. However, the monster is there to help him and he has to go through all the pain and agony in order to be able to tell the truth. He confesses that he wants to let his mother go as the indeterminacy of the situation is too painful for him. So the tree forces him to tell his own story and set himself free of the guilt (*A Monster Calls* 184-98). At the end it is through the development of the character, that the empowered Conor is able to face his mother's death. Therefore, 'storytelling' is used as an instrumental technique in psychological empowerment. Buckley considers this novel as 'psychological gothic' (2014: 254) and Day believes that '*A Monster Calls* is an important addition to the canon of fictional pathography' (Day, 2012:1).

The main subject matter of this novel is how to deal with the universal heartbreaking realities of life, such as loss of a dear one and the ability to go on. Thereby, with this novel, ideas like hate, tiredness, loneliness of a child and a divorced parent, and suppressed emotions like problems of children of divorce, fear of loss and serious illnesses are conveyed to the readers. It is due to this very reason that Wheeler believes this novel '... is a harrowing and deeply engaging account of the heartbreaking effects that cancer has on the children of afflicted patients.' The reader deeply feels how Conor feels and is afraid of. Ness and also Dowd have taken young readers as potent human beings and not as minors or Others; thus they have tried to provide the readers a sort of "emotional directness" or "emotional truth" so that the young readers are feeling at ease with what they feel not to be ashamed of their emotions and thoughts. Such a purging factor is implied in two of monster's tales and Conor's own life story. In these stories, the characters are both good and bad at the same time, showing the complexity of human nature. It is normal that Conor feels sick of waiting and tolerating so much pain; it is natural that he wants all his pain to be finished. That is the very reason he lets his mother's hand slip from his, the very reason that he lets his mother fall in his frequent nightmares. Therefore, the final message of this novel is the sentence stated by the monster: "How can both be true?" *Because humans are complicated beasts*" (*A Monster Calls* 201).

Furthermore, this novel can be taken as a crossover book in that it has equally effective messages for adults. In a few sentences, the adult reader would also have caring thoughts for Conor's mother. From the beginning of the novel, we read that the mother stares at the yew tree and mumbles: "There's that old yew tree" (27); the reader would gradually understand the significance of this sentence. However, towards the end of the novel, when the last medicine made of yew tree does not prove to be helpful, we realize the mother's loneliness and helplessness in taking the yew tree as a friend: "I know," his mum said, her sad smile still there. 'Looking at that yew tree every day, it felt like I had a friend out there who'd help me if things got to their worst'" (176).

The monster plays a very important role for Conor; it is trying to make him understand the situation, be able to tolerate his mother's loss and accept the reality. In order to make him come to such a level of cognitive thinking, the monster takes up telling stories. By the end of the third story, Conor knows that it is normal for people to have two sets of different characteristics at the same time (201). The monster analyzes the situation and explains to Conor how it all goes after the third story leading Conor to come to this conclusion that he has to tell the truth or he has to tell his own story. By the end of the novel, when he is by his mother's bed, he is able to manage the task and realizes how the monster has helped him, therefore he moves to the 'interpretation' stage.

### **3.6. Social Empowerment**

In this section precise formulation of values, providing information and knowledge, psychological information and values, literary information and ecocritical information and values are explained.

There are many examples of psychological information and formation of values in the novel such as:

- It is good to be independent and be able to manage your own affairs. (20-24)
- "*Belief is half of all healing.*" (Original emphasis, 119)
- "There were worse things than being invisible..." (168)
- "As incredible as it seemed, time kept moving forward for the rest of the world. The rest of the world that wasn't waiting." (170)
- *Because humans are complicated beasts*" (201)

Thus the reader and the character are made aware of some realities of life in order to come to terms with misfortunes and pain. They become empowered by adversity.

The novel contains sentences which refer to literature as well ecological concerns:

- "Stories are the wildest things" (45)

- *Stories are wild creatures*, the monster said. *When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?*" (61)
- "Stories don't always have happy endings." (144)
- "Stories were wild, wild animals and went off in directions you couldn't expect." (144).
- "*Stories are important*, the monster said. *They can be more important than anything. If they carry the truth.*" (151)
- Knowledge about yew trees. (115)
- "The green things of this world are just wondrous, aren't they? ... We work so hard to get rid of them when sometimes they're the very thing that saves us." (140)

Getting to know nature strengthens Conor and makes him come to terms with pain, suffering and death.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *A Monster Calls* Conor is portrayed as the Other. This is in the eyes of the other characters that are, his grandmother, his teachers, and friends. He has a good relationship with his mother, but by the end of the novel, when we realize his pain, we know that he has been overpowered by pain, suffering and sickness. He has always tried to disregard the fact that his mother is dying. Thus, Ness has tried to portray a marginalized young adult, who is little by little empowered and ready to face the realities of life. This process of coming to terms with loss is accomplished with the help of the monster, so the monster is actually the empowering professional who tries to help Conor understand his true self first. In this novel, only Conor becomes empowered and as he is the main character we can feel his empowerment process. However, we have a sort of empowerment process for the grandmother as well. It is implied that when she could not find Conor that very last night, she was extremely worried and at that critical point she realized how much she loves her grandson. We know all these when she rushes to Conor and finds him next to the yew tree; also the talk they have in the car while she is in tears paves the way for mutual understanding of the two. Conor finds out that his grandmother is suffering, too. Therefore, empowerment is implied for Conor's grandmother as well.

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