



“I Am the Eternal Green Man”: Holistic Ecology in Reading Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls*

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Abstract

Holistic ecology considers nature and society as a whole, viewing humans and the environment as interdependent and interconnected. This article takes the lens of holistic ecology to examine the representation of human–nature relationships in Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls* (2011) and explores how the novel guides the child reader to an environmental mind-set beyond overt didacticism. The article focuses on two aspects of the bond between the magical tree and the human characters in the novel: how the powerful tree empowers humans and how the human characters contribute to the tree’s expressions of power. The eternal Green Man—as the tree introduces itself—embodies this bond by being simultaneously tree-like and human-like, a complex merger of “the Green” (nature) and “the Man” (humanity). The monster-tree fulfils several powerful and empowering roles, such as monster and storyteller, destructive force and powerful healer, savage and philosopher, nightmare and escape. Importantly, it always keeps the shape of a yew tree. As such, *A Monster Calls* can contribute to children’s environmental education by illustrating the connection between the natural environment and humans: the eternal bond between “the Green” and “the Man.”

Keywords *A Monster Calls* · Children’s literature · Trees in fiction · Environmental education · Holistic ecology

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Introduction

The philosophy of holistic ecology advocates the interdependence and interconnectedness of all the species in the ecosystem. It derives from ecological studies, particularly the field of systems ecology, and considers nature and society as a whole, viewing humans as part of the eco-system rather than separated from it. Sven Jorgensen suggests two ways to approach ecology: reductionism, “where the relationships are found one by one and put together afterwards,” and holism, “where the entire system is considered and where it is attempted to reveal properties at system level” (1992, p. 25). A core principle in a holistic approach to ecosystems is that “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Jorgensen, 2016, p. 4). Holistic ecology, as defined by Jorgensen, underpins my analysis of Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls* (2011), which explores the characters in the complex context of nature-human interconnectedness and interdependence. Approaching the novel’s narrative through a lens of holistic ecology, I focus on the representation of the natural world and the human world affecting one another and existing as a single eco-system. Through a holistic ecology approach to a novel aimed at young readers, I acknowledge UNESCO’s statement that education for sustainable development “requires a shift from teaching to learning” (Leicht et al., 2018, p. 40). For children’s environmental literacy such an approach means shifting from teaching young readers behavioural models of how to be environmentally friendly to providing them with an opportunity to learn from literature that guides them towards a sustainable way of thinking and an environmental mind-set. In contemporary environmental education, the awareness that we live in the Anthropocene—“an epoch of the natural history of the Earth, driven by humankind” (Steffen et al., 2011, p. 843)—is crucial. Once humanity’s significant role in shaping the earth’s ecosystems has been recognized and theorized, environmental education can no longer refer to the environment without taking into account the impact humans have had on it. Mark Michael challenges the “prevailing view [...] that our primary duty towards environmental wholes is to respect their integrity, stability, and beauty, and that the best way to do that is to leave them alone and not interfere with them” (2002, p. 90). He suggests that human intervention can instead prevent eco-systems from deteriorating and therefore benefit the environment (2002, p. 96). Environmental education should therefore guide children to understand that in our present Anthropocene, the intervention of humans in the environment is not necessarily negative and may even lead to beneficial outcomes. According to my analysis, *A Monster Calls* can guide the child reader to a holistic view of the interconnected and interdependent relationships between humans and the environment and by doing so contribute to children’s environmental literacy.

A Monster Calls is set in present-day England with Conor, a 13-year-old boy, trying to cope with his mother’s terminal illness. When she undergoes chemotherapy he is forced to live with his grandmother. Just after midnight, the yew tree in the boy’s garden turns into a monster and appears in his room. The monster visits Conor three times, each time telling him stories. The eternal Green Man, as the

monster introduces itself, is both tree-like and human-like, a complex merger of “the Green” (nature) and “the Man” (humanity). I will pay particular attention to the monster being a tree in the first place, to the holistic relationships between the tree and the human characters, and to the novel’s explicit and acknowledged focus on issues of bereavement. *A Monster Calls* has won prestigious literary awards, such as the Carnegie Medal for the text and the Kate Greenaway Medal for “the darkly atmospheric illustrations by Jim Kay” (Clements, 2012). It has been critically acclaimed as bereavement fiction that helps children understand loss and manage grief (Day, 2012; Bruder, 2011; Farnia and Pourgiv, 2017). The “therapeutic” value of the novel has also been discussed in health and psychology journals (Wheeler, 2012; Carlin, 2017). Despite the variety of thematic approaches to examine *A Monster Calls*, no research so far has focused on the monster’s character as a tree and the role of the novel in children’s environmental literacy. I will explore the novel’s potential for children’s environmental education. In my analysis, I use the term “the monster-tree,” even though this formulation never appears in the novel.

The relationships between the tree and each of the human characters operate on two levels: the mighty monster-tree empowers fragile and vulnerable humans and the human characters contribute to the tree’s expression of powers. The power relationships between the monster and the humans are not equal. All humans are shown as fragile: the mother is weakened by her illness, Conor is shattered by his mother’s inevitable death and bullied at school, and the grandmother has to deal with Conor’s anger and face her daughter’s death all by herself. The monster, by contrast, is shown as powerful and strong, omniscient and wise. However, the human characters create the premises for the tree’s powers to be revealed: the mother believes in its power to heal, the grandmother joins in the act of destruction and Conor engages with the stories. By depicting this nature-human interconnectedness the novel provides an implicit holistic ecological view that humans and nature exist in conjunction.

Environmental Education and Child Readers

Many children’s literature scholars have focused on the role of the reader in children’s environmental education. They emphasize the importance of literature that enhances children’s dynamic and thoughtful reading and fosters environmental awareness through critical thinking rather than straightforward messages. Stephen Bigger and Jean Webb (2010) argue that children’s fiction may facilitate environmental learning in a different manner than the instruction-based didactic approach often found in writing for children by encouraging environmental engagement and a sense of agency. Lisa Sainsbury (2017) suggests that in *A Monster Calls* “the thought experiment is a philosophical and transformative mechanism that entrusts knowledge to the mighty child” (p. 167). *A Monster Calls* has the potential to foster children’s environmental learning without overt didacticism. Sidney Dobrin (2010) views child readers “as active agents in the production and circulation of literatures, cultures, and identities” (p. 274). Games and films which are not immediately considered to be about the environment, but depict imagined places with

human-nature interactions, “contribute greatly to the viewer’s environmental education” (Dobrin, 2010, p. 272). In my analysis of *A Monster Calls*, I acknowledge the child reader as an active agent or interpreter of the text, which seems to be first and foremost a story about bereavement. The tree-ness of the monster adds an extra layer to the novel: an environmental dimension. The relationship between the human characters and the monster is at the same time the relationship between a human and a tree, albeit an anthropomorphized one.

Fantasy and magic realist children’s novels often depict trees as anthropomorphized characters that may be evil as well as benevolent, and that are often endowed with supernatural powers. In *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman* (2015), Zoe Jaques categorizes tree characters as either humans’ servants or aggressors. Both the “tree-as-friend” and the “animal-as-pet” are sentimental images implying the “promise of love and service” (p. 112). Jaques suggests that “giving trees voice [...] tends to encourage an attitude of stewardship that naturalizes a hierarchy of man over plant” (p. 115). She proposes yet another category: trees as ruthless and dangerous creatures that are “actively, directly and repeatedly protesting human maltreatment or rule” (2015, p. 132). *A Monster Calls* offers the child reader an alternative image to Jaques’s tree as either a friendly servant to humans or a tree dominated by and dangerous to humans. The tree’s simultaneous, opposite roles, as monster and helper, destructive force and powerful healer, savage and philosopher, nightmare and escape, position the tree character outside the definite categories of benevolence or danger. Even if the monster-tree is depicted as terrifying and powerful at the beginning of the novel and, according to Jaques, implies a “powerfully threatening nature” (2015, p. 134), it turns out that this complex character exists outside of any strict categories.

What follows is a detailed examination of the relationships between the tree and each of the main human characters in *A Monster Calls*. Applying a holistic ecology framework based on nature–human wholeness, I examine how the tree and the humans in the novel establish a bond and become interconnected outside the hierarchical order where a dominant human tries to control untamed nature. In order to explore these relationships, I examine each human character’s interaction and (sometimes unintentional) cooperation with the tree. In her discussion of animal–human interaction in *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway (2008) suggests that even unintentional responses of animals to human actions make them active participants of the process: “Nothing is passive to the action of another” (pp. 262–263). Haraway elaborates on the concept of a contact zone where “people can stop looking for some single defining difference between them and everybody else and understand that they are in rich and largely uncharted, material-semiotic, flesh-to-flesh and face-to-face connection with a host of significant others” (p. 235). Haraway’s philosophical speculation about unintentional cooperation in a contact zone illuminates the relationship between the human characters and the tree and is in line with Jorgensen’s holistic ecology concept of cooperative units in the ecosystem. Each character has a contact zone for bonding with the tree and their cooperation is mutually empowering. The concept of power as it is used in this paper goes beyond the meaning of control and domination. On the contrary, the mother’s power of faith, Conor’s physical and emotional strengths, the power of knowledge that Conor gains

as he matures, and ultimately the power of storytelling all foreground the bonding between the humans and the tree. The following sections will show how each character has an especially acute need for such an empowering interaction.

The Mother and the Tree

Conor's mother never encounters the tree in the shape of a monster. Her faith is her contact zone: it turns the yew tree into a magical healer that eventually helps Conor. Despite the fact that her relationship with the monster is not made explicit, the mother and the monster-tree are interconnected throughout the novel. Most of the episodes featuring Conor's mother depict her as exhausted and vulnerable. The mother's "thin arms" are "skinny" and "just bone and skin" (Ness, 2011, pp. 87–88). Her grip is described as "weak, *so weak*" (p. 177, italics in the original). The mother's bodily powerlessness is especially striking in contrast to the description of the monster-tree, which appears as strong and mighty, with arms in the form of "great wiry ropes of branches constantly twisting and shifting together" (p. 41). Throughout the novel the tree remains the mother's hope for recovery and is always on her mind. Her faith is particularly evident in a conversation with Conor about a medicine that did not cure her, where she compares the tree to a "friend out there who'd help [...] if things got to their worst" (p. 176). The association seems striking to Conor as the unsuccessful cancer medicine is actually made from the yew tree. The mother's faith in the remedial qualities of the yew tree supports and empowers her, if only temporarily, while the tree is paradoxically empowered *by the mother* through her faith. The subtlety of such power play is shown when Conor's mother reflects on the treatment she receives in hospital: "I hoped it would never get this far, but it just seemed incredible that all that time we could see a yew tree from our own house. And that very tree could be the thing that healed me" (p. 140). The mother speaks about the tree as a passive object of observation ("we could see a yew tree"), but after she has started believing in its remedial qualities, it becomes an active subject ("the thing that healed me"). This suggests a reciprocity of powers between the mother and the tree. Without her need for it, it would remain just a yew tree in the garden. As long as the mother has faith in its healing capacities, the tree is empowered. This reciprocal connection between humans and nature illustrates the philosophy of a holistic ecology: an ecosystem of cooperative units, as defined by Jorgensen (2016, p. 4). The paradox of this mutual empowerment is grounded on an inequality of powers: the mother is a weak human being and the tree is a mighty monster. However, the power of her faith is what makes the tree a powerful healer.

The healing qualities go beyond the simplistic image of the yew tree as a remedial plant, as shown when Conor demands that the monster-tree should cure his mother. Unlike a "benevolent interdependence of man and nature" (Jaques, 2015, p. 127) and a consequent sacrifice of the tree for the sake of the human, the monster-tree never explains to Conor *how* humans should make use of the yew tree's healing qualities:

"Can you heal her?" Conor asked.

The yew is a healing tree, the monster said. [...]

Conor frowned. “That’s not really an answer.”

The monster just gave him that evil grin. (Ness, 2011, p. 146, italics in the original)

The monster-tree gives an ambiguous answer to Conor’s question, but does not deny the power of healing. The reader is encouraged to understand that healing happens outside the one-sided format of a human using a plant as a medicine. In the final scene where Conor sees his mother before she passes away, the boy cannot accept the yew tree’s medical failure to cure her: “You *said*. You *believed* it would work.” The mother responds: “‘I *did* believe it would work,’ she said. ‘It’s probably what’s kept me here so long, Conor. Believing it so *you* would’” (p. 176, italics in the original). The mother’s response demonstrates that even though she has not been cured, the tree has been that powerful healer for her throughout her illness. This relationship based on the mother’s faith and the tree’s healing qualities shows the bond between the human and nature.

The Grandmother and the Tree

The grandmother is connected to the monster-tree in a different way. Unlike for the mother, the yew tree does not exist for the grandmother. The relationship between them is based on unintentional cooperation. Nature does play an important role in how the grandmother is described. She is depicted as a strong and intimidating woman comparable to a predator, as shown in a passage where Conor comes back from school and sees his grandmother waiting for him, looking “like a bird of prey. A hawk that could carry off a sheep” (Ness 2011, p. 84). Her severe personality is reflected in her garden, a bare space deprived of trees and grass:

She’d crammed her back garden with sheds and a stone pond and a wood-panelled ‘office’ she’d had installed across the back half [...] Everything else was just brick paths and flowers in pots. No room for a tree at all. It didn’t even have *grass*. (Ness, 2011, p. 90, italics in the original).

The garden is a denaturalized place with little free space, without trees and grass, and an over-abundance of bricks and stones; even the flowers grow unnaturally (in pots). By removing trees and grass from her garden the grandmother tries to take control of nature. Her house is “cleaner than [her daughter’s] hospital room” (Ness 2011, p. 91). The comparison does not only suggest a sterile home, it also presents a space deprived of everything natural. Her initial relationship with nature is constructed as the human dominating the natural environment. However, the grandmother’s destructive actions towards the environment are evoked in a subtle way, without didactic criticism of humans cutting out plants.

The order of the grandmother’s house is severely disturbed when Conor has a tantrum and ruins her living room: “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” (Ness, 2011, p. 125). Conor’s violent wrecking may be interpreted as his attempt to destroy her artificial environment and by creating chaos he turns it back

to nature. In other words, he naturalizes the denaturalized space. Importantly, Conor has the power to control the monster-tree's actions: "'Smash their furniture!' Conor shouted. 'Smash everything!'" (p. 121). Conor joins the monster disappearing "into the frenzy of destruction, just mindlessly smashing and smashing and smashing" (p. 121). Eventually they act as a whole: "*What shall I destroy next?*" it asked, stepping over to the second monster, and in a terrible blurring of the eyes, they merged together, making a single monster who was even bigger" (p. 120, italics in the original). When the monster and Conor unite, each realizes their full potential. The tree needs Conor to direct its forces and the grandmother's denaturalized space to operate. Their merging implies that neither human nor nature dominates the other. Their joint, albeit incompatible powers lead to the complete destruction of the room: "*Now that, said the monster, is how destruction is properly done*" (Ness, 2011, p. 124, emphasis in the original). The only thing undamaged in the room is the cabinet. When the grandmother violently smashes this sole remaining piece of furniture it is as if she has joined the merger of the monster and Conor, adding her destructive force to the action:

And she grabbed [the cabinet] by one side—
And pulled on it hard once—
Twice—
And a third time.

Sending it crashing to the floor with a final-sounding crunch. (Ness, 2011, p. 128)

The relationship between the monster-tree and the grandmother shows that the nature–human bond exists even if it is not intended. The grandmother's violent reaction implies the continuation of the monster-tree in action. She surrenders and lets the monster (nature) overcome her. The tree, Conor and the grandmother cooperate as units in an ecosystem in order to complete the destruction which becomes the context for both to express their emotions: "[The grandmother] took away her hands, balling them into fists, opened her mouth wide and screamed. Screamed so loudly Conor did put his hands up to his ears. She wasn't looking at him, she wasn't looking at anything, just screaming into the air" (p. 128). This is the moment of transformation in the grandmother's relationship with Conor. By destroying the unnatural setting in the house, Conor unintentionally breaks into the grandmother's real personal space only to see that she is as fragile as everyone else, masquerading as a strong and powerful woman. When the mother has passed away, the grandmother admits that she and Conor are "[n]ot the most natural fit" but stresses that they are going "to have to learn" (p. 209). This shift in their relationship shows that the grandmother opens up to building the relationship with Conor anew. The development of her personality outside her sterile space guides the reader to understanding that the bond with nature leads to the character's reunion with herself.

Conor and the Tree

Whereas the monster-tree is a powerful healer for the mother and a violent destroyer in the grandmother's house, in the relationships with Conor it reveals its full potential as a mighty creature. At first the monster-tree is depicted as more

powerful than the boy as well as endowed with wisdom and authority. However, it is made evident that Conor and the tree *equally need each other* in order to express their (seemingly incompatible) powers. The holistic ecology philosophy of nature–human interconnectedness outside a structure of dominance is represented in the relationships between the mortal fragile human and the mighty immortal creature. The boy's and the monster's unequal physical strength only emphasizes the paradox of these characters' interdependence.

The monster introduces itself to Conor as “Herne the Hunter [...] the eternal Green Man” (p. 44):

Who am I? the monster repeated, still roaring. 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 everything untamed and untameable! [...] I am this wild earth, come for you, Conor O'Malley. (Ness, 2011, p. 44, italics in the original).

The monster-tree describes itself as an eco-system in all its power and omnipresence. Being characterized as “untamed and untameable,” nature is constructed as powerful and free from human domination. The tree's “*monstrous*” voice is described as “wild and untamed” (p. 13, italics in the original). However, paradoxically the monster's violent actions are controlled by Conor. When they destroy the grandmother's room, the monster needs Conor's approval to continue: “*I await your command, boy,* it said” (p. 120, italics in the original), which undermines the monster's image as an untamed and untameable creature. The disruption of hierarchies between a vulnerable human being and a mighty monster leads to the discovery of a different level of human–nature relationships promoted by holistic ecology: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The wild and monstrous qualities of the tree come forth in Conor's first encounter with it, where the tree's monstrosity is paradoxically constructed through anthropomorphism:

Conor could hear the creak of wood, groaning and yawning in the monster's huge body [...] the monster's arms [...] connected to a massive trunk of a chest, topped by a head and teeth that could chomp him down in one bite. (Ness, 2011, p. 41)

This excerpt illustrates the power of a creature that literally merges human features with nature. The phrase “the trunk of a chest” demonstrates the combination of the body of a tree (trunk) and that of a human (chest). The image of the tree biting Conor adds further monstrosity. The monster-tree could be interpreted as the enemy of humans, the ruthless and dangerous creature defined by Jaques (2015, p. 132). However, the narrative guides the reader away from this interpretation by illustrating Conor's fearless relationship with the tree. The child reader is encouraged to feel with Conor “[n]o terror, no panic, no darkness, for one thing” (Ness, 2011, p. 40). The harmless interaction with Conor

suggests that Ness's tree differs from the traditional monster as a dark, violent, terrifying creature. In *Monsters and the Monstrous* (2007), Niall Scott states that "[t]he monster is perhaps one of the most significant creations serving to reflect and critique human existence" (p. 1). Ness's monster is unique because it is an anthropomorphized monster-tree that also illuminates humanity's co-existence with nature. The monster-tree is human-like and humane. According to Scott, "the monster gives a space in which perspectives can be adopted and the permissible and impermissible can be played with" (p. 1). Ness plays with the 'impermissible' combination of the monster-tree's physical monstrosity and its simultaneous dependence on humans. Paradoxically, only in a contact zone with Conor does the tree become the monster; it exists only as long as Conor lets it through both intentional cooperation (Conor merges with the monster to destroy the grandmother's room and to fight with bullies at school) and unintentional cooperation (Conor needs the monster to cope with his grief and unconsciously calls it). The narrative invites the reader into a gradual acceptance of the fact that even seemingly incompatible characters in terms of power and authority are bound in interdependence. The novel creates a space in which a holistic ecology perspective on nature and humanity's wholeness can be adopted.

In merging, the monster-tree embodies Conor and shares with him its physically powerful body. This is the boy's and the tree's contact zone where, as Hara-way (2008) suggests, all participants are active and cooperative. Conor becomes powerful and visible through the joint destruction when he and the monster act as a "a cooperative unit of organisms" (Jorgensen, 2016, p. 4) and when they attack Conor's bullies:

Conor had felt what the monster was doing to Harry, felt it in his own hands. When the monster gripped Harry's shirt, Conor felt the material against his own palms. When the monster struck a blow, Conor felt the sting of it in his own fist. (Ness, 2011, p. 164)

Their consequent actions suggest that the monster-tree's agency is only possible as long as Conor continues fighting. While Conor bonds with the monster-tree, they both are powerful fighters. When the link is broken, the monster ceases to exist, supposedly returning to its passive state of a tree in the garden: "And it [the monster] vanished, leaving Conor standing alone over the shivering, bleeding Harry" (Ness 2011, p. 165). The "untamed" nature of Conor's anger appears as the only condition for the monster to reveal its wild powers. When Conor accepts his mother's death, he takes a step towards emotional maturity and the monster returns to the garden. For the adult characters the tree has a different role: a destroyer, a source of hope, a remedy; only for Conor is it a wild monster that also transforms him. By illustrating the interconnectedness between the tree and the human, the novel encourages the reader to adopt a holistic view on the environment, a perspective which is also reinforced by the monster's tales, as I will demonstrate in the next section.

The Eternal Green Man: Narrative and Holistic Ecology

Ness pays tribute to the power of storytelling through the monster's meta-stories. Along with the representation of the human characters' connections with the tree and the implied bonds between humanity and nature, the monster narrates stories which depict its connection with human meta-characters. These stories focus on the Anthropocene and the outcomes of the intervention of humans in the environment. Their twisted endings illuminate the complexity of humanity's relationship with nature. The narrative adds a further imaginative aspect where the border between humanity and nature is blurred: humans and trees speak the same language. The monster-tree's narrative takes Conor (and the child reader) back to a time when humans were connected with nature and lived in unity:

Long ago, the monster said, before this was a town with roads and trains and cars, it was a green place. Trees covered every hill and bordered every path. They shaded every stream and protected every house. (Ness, 2011, p. 62, italics in the original)

In the monster-tree's story, nature is caring and protective of humans. The child reader is guided to consider the importance of the natural environment for humanity. The trees are depicted not as the background for human life, but as the agents which "cover," "border," "shade," and "protect"—all verbs that indicate action. What is more, humans are able to speak with trees in this story, placing them on equal footing: "The barrier between things was thinner, easier to pass through" (p. 66). The passage cited above encourages the child reader to compare a modern setting of "roads and trains" with the time when humans lost their connection with nature and thus became unprotected: without harmony with nature, humanity is vulnerable and fragile. The monster-tree predicts that this process will intensify in years to come. In one of the stories, the natural environment is completely destroyed:

*Trees fell, fields were up-ended, rivers blackened. The sky choked on smoke and ash, and the people did, too, spending their days coughing and itching, their eyes turned forever towards the ground. Villages grew into towns, towns into cities. And people began to live **on** the earth rather than **within** it.* (Ness, 2011, p. 109, emphasis in the original)

The emphasis on people living "**on** the earth rather than **within** it" suggests the loss of nature–human bonds and its destructive consequences. The Anthropocene, as it is narrated by the monster-tree, encourages human intervention in a positive sense, "a non-destructive interference" (Michael, 2002, p. 91) and reflects a holistic philosophy of humanity and nature existing in cooperation (Jorgensen, 2016, p. 4). The parallel use of the verb "choke" for both people and (metaphorically) the sky puts further emphasis on the reciprocal dependence of nature and humanity.

The monster-tree's stories encourage the child reader to make their own judgments outside simplistic moral categories and they illuminate the complexity of being good or bad, suggesting instead that each human is the combination of the two. Heroic battles of good against evil anticipated by Conor lead to disillusion as

the stories highlight the ambiguity of human nature. Conor expects to hear a didactic message from the monster: “So the good prince was a murderer and the evil queen wasn’t a witch after all. Is that supposed to be the lesson of all this?” His worldview is undermined by the monster: “There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere inbetween” (p. 74). As the monster trusts Conor to develop his capacity to understand the complexity of reality, the novel encourages the reader to do the same. Throughout the storytelling moments, the monster reminds Conor that he has to be reflective in order to make judgements about anything. The monster’s question “*You think I tell you stories to teach you lessons?*” (p. 73, emphasis in the original) becomes the implied question to the child reader. Seemingly didactic, the tree’s narrative does not provide the child reader with lessons; it rather guides the child reader to their own understanding of the interconnectedness between nature and humans.

The novel reflects a holistic ecology philosophy suggesting that when the human characters and the tree act as a whole they become more powerful. In the episode when the monster-tree spurs Conor to tell the truth, it is emphasized that Conor empowers the tree to become a monster and visit him:

You will tell it, the monster said. For this is why you called me.

Conor grew even more confused. ‘*Called you? I didn’t call you [...]*’ (Ness, 2011, p. 46, emphasis in the original)

At this moment, the monster’s and Conor’s roles are reversed; even the title of the novel is inverted: *a monster is called* by the boy. As the monster and Conor’s dialogue unfolds, Conor’s active role is emphasized: “‘What do you want from me?’ Conor said. [...] *It is not what I want from you, Conor O’Malley, it said. It is what you want from me*” (p. 40, emphasis in the original). Paradoxically, Conor empowers the monster unintentionally; but without Conor’s “calling” the tree’s monstrosity disappears.

The boy’s emotional breakdown while telling the last story paradoxically becomes an act of mutual empowerment. The monster allows the boy to reveal his inner fear of accepting the truth of the mother’s inevitable death. The final violent expression of Conor’s inner turmoil is also the boy’s empowerment on his path to emotional survival and maturity, while the disruption of hierarchies between the monster and Conor also breaks down the hierarchies between the author and the child reader. The monster’s storytelling is represented outside the format of someone “wise and knowledgeable” teaching someone “naïve and inexperienced,” as each story depends on Conor’s authority of interpretation. On the characters’ level, Conor is guided to learn by himself, rather than from the monster’s lessons. On the reader’s level, the child is invited to find the meaning in this complex philosophical plot rather than in an explicit didactic message.

The Monster and the Tree

“You’re just a *tree*,” Conor said,
and there was no other way he could think about it.
(Ness, 2011, p. 60, italics in the original)

The final episode of the novel is concerned with a nature–human reunion. After acting out its powerful and empowering roles as healer, destroyer, and storyteller, the monster eventually returns to its natural state—a tree. This return is possible when the monster has fulfilled its roles in cooperation and connection with each of the human characters. Conor finds peace in the roots of the tree: “He was still on the hill behind his house, nestled in the roots of the yew tree towering over him. He looked up. It was just a tree” (Ness, 2011, p. 207). The passage suggests the protagonist’s bond with the tree, a synergy with nature which protects him. By cooperating with the monster-tree, Conor accepts his mother’s death, comes to a reconciliation with his grandmother and becomes visible at school. A holistic ecology lens allows the reader to view the tragedy of his mother’s death as a transition to the afterlife beyond the human: her death unites her with the tree, with “the yew tree hovering over the graveyard like a sleeping giant” (Ness, 2011, p. 37). With the tree shielding the mother’s grave, her death might be perceived as less disturbing for the child reader. Eugene Arva explains the role of magic realism in representing trauma: “Magic is the indispensable element by which the traumatic imagination rearranges, reconstructs and re-presents reality when mimetic reality-testing hits the wall of an unassimilated—and inassimilable—event” (2008, p. 5). The mother’s death is so traumatic for Conor that it has remained unassimilated throughout the novel. However, following Arva’s terms, the magic realist tree *re-presents* the reality of her death for Conor as something acceptable. By disrupting categories of good versus bad in the stories, the tree also disrupts the categories of life versus death. The final scene in the movie based on Ness’s novel even features a drawing by Conor that depicts his mother sitting on the shoulder of the monster-tree (Bayona 2016). This drawing (which never appears in the book) suggests that the mother continues living as part of nature. In an environmental reading of the novel, Conor’s reconciliation with his mother’s death marks the end of his resistance against nature and his eventual acceptance of death as an inseparable part of life’s eternity. The mother and the tree’s relationship then symbolizes the endless cycle of life and death in which humans and the environment are inseparable. The novel’s closure is far from a happy ending. However, the turmoil that all the characters go through results in acceptance of each other. Conor and his grandmother accept the mother’s death, overcome their disconnection and emotionally survive the loss. The monster-tree’s magical powers come full circle and the monster is relieved of its task; what is left is “just a tree” (Ness, 2011, p. 60), and its return to its natural tree shape reflects the eventual peace achieved by establishing the bond between nature and humanity.

Conclusion

As stated in UNESCO's Education agenda for 2030, the role of education is moving beyond the development of knowledge and cognitive skills to building values, soft skills and attitudes among learners (Leicht et al., 2018). Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* may contribute to a transformative environmental education because of the narrative's capacity to guide its readers towards a sustainable way of thinking and an environmental mind-set. It may foster children's environmental education beyond overt didacticism. By incorporating a holistic ecology view which advocates for the interdependence of all the species and the environment (Jorgensen, 1992), I have explored how the representation of mutual dependence in the relationships between the humans and the tree in *A Monster Calls* guides the child reader to an understanding of the interconnectedness between humanity and nature and promotes an environmental awareness among the readers in the way that UNESCO tries to foster. The monster-tree as represented in the novel is more than a tree; it is depicted as an embodiment of nature–human bond, and empowers humans by being their source of physical strength, faith and wisdom, being their shelter and their guardian in the afterlife. At the same time, the relationships with humans empower the tree to express its agency as a monster, a violent destroyer, a magical remedy, and a wise storyteller. Nature can provide a powerful remedy if humans believe in its power to heal, it provides shelter when humans accept its power to shield, and becomes a powerful destructive force in human hands. An understanding of this interdependence encourages the reader to adopt an environmental awareness.

The fact that it is *the tree* that performs all the above-mentioned roles has made it possible to explore the novel's environmental dimension beyond its undeniable value as bereavement fiction. The educational potential of *A Monster Calls* for teaching environmental awareness beyond a didactic approach is demonstrated in how the monster's self-reflective tales encourage Conor's active and responsible attitudes in his relationships with the tree. By inverting the roles between Conor (who initially thinks the monster has called him) and the tree (which, as it eventually turned out, has been called by the boy), the novel encourages the reader to interpret the text and actively reflect on the environmental ideas implied in the plot. By exploring the eternal Green Man's various powerful and empowering roles, *A Monster Calls* might shift the reader's perspective beyond an anthropocentric view on nature serving humanity, instead illuminating a holistic ecology view that people and the environment are bound and exist in everlasting connections—in the eternal bond between “the Green” (nature) and “the Man” (humanity).

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