

## Meddlesome Gods

Of all the books we have read as a class, *A Monster Calls* was equally the easiest and the hardest. Easiest in that once I got into it I could not put it down. Hardest in how it came at me emotionally. All of the books have had some aspect that was intended to tug at the heartstrings of the reader. Maybe it was how Ness went about it in this one that made it so much more significant. This is not the first book the class has read where the main character lost a parent, however, this is the first time that we knew it was coming and had to watch helplessly as Conor kept himself in denial about the seriousness of his mother's condition. That is what made *A Monster Calls* hurt so much. We all expect to one day have to bury our parents, but we expect it to happen suddenly, hopefully with Mom and Dad passing away in their sleep. The foreboding feeling of knowing it is coming years before it should be expected but not knowing precisely when makes this an emotional roller coaster for the reader.

One way Ness locks the reader into the roller coaster cart is the point of view. He uses a limited third person POV. We often see this as Conor does, but not always. If it was told in the first person, the story would have been over in a few paragraphs because Conor's truth would have been apparent from the get-go. However, the limited third person POV gives us just enough to get a taste of Conor's world as we see through his eyes but not through his mind. This is important when it comes to the monster. Connor regularly converses with a monster who takes his form from a yew tree, but things often seem to happen during these interactions that Conor could not have done himself. In one scene, his father had just dropped him off at his grandmother's house and he proceeds to destroy her sitting room. This destruction happens during the second story while the monster is destroying the house of the parson. During the

destruction, the monster invites Conor to help with the demolition of the house. Conor helps the monster obliterate the house while screaming for him to "Smash their furniture!" "Smash everything!" As well as, "TEAR THE WHOLE THING DOWN!" Conor comes to shortly and sees the destruction he has wrought in the sitting room. The destruction that seems far too great for a single boy to have done (Ness 114). This happens again during the third tale the monster tells Conor. This particular story he tells while hurting Harry for Conor, making sure that he is not invisible anymore, but also leaving him with the lesson, "there are harder things than being invisible" (Ness 159). Naturally this lead to a trip to the headmistress who voiced the opinion, "I'm not even sure how one boy could have caused so much damage by himself" (Ness 154).

During that fight with Harry, Conor felt what the monster was doing through him, which leads us to another major theme in the story: the supernatural. While that particular instance was less supernatural and more psychological repression on Conor's part, every scene with the monster uses supernatural forces to help move the story forward. Though it could be argued that none of it is supernatural and it is all psychological as we learn by the end of the story that the monster really is just Conor's way of trying to cope with the impending death of his mother. However, we shall examine it as supernatural and even some of the cultural relevance. It is unclear where this story actually takes place, it could be somewhere in England or possibly in Ireland. Given both areas were inhabited by the Celts years ago it does not really matter as the local lore would have been similar. On page thirty-four the monster introduces himself to Conor, "I am Herne the Hunter! I am Cernunnos! I am the eternal Green Man!" The Green Man is often used in Celtic lore as the name for the consort of the goddess. Which would actually make him a god himself. Perhaps because this is a YA book written for young readers in

America, referring to him as "the god" rather than "the monster" would have been asking for the book to be banned. It would have also made him less frightening. The language used is important, we think of monsters differently than we think of gods. Maybe because we expect more from them. Nobody really would have expected the monster to save his mother; however, acknowledging his godhead would mean a different set of expectations. Accepting that the monster is, in fact, a god allows us to look at the previous examples from a different perspective. All the destruction wrought by Conor on his grandmother's possessions and on Harry are far more believable if we accept that Conor was in fact possessed by a deity.

Shortly after their formal introduction, the monster tells Conor he will tell him three stories. When Conor seems skeptical about this, the monster goes on to say, "Stories are the wildest things of all...Stories chase, and bite, and hunt." The stories the monster tells Conor act as the wild hunt of the narrative, the wild hunt is a host that sweeps across the country at night, sometimes looking for evil doers, others simply sweeping up anyone unfortunate enough to be caught up in their path. Traditional Celtic lore has Cernunnos as the head of the wild hunt, knowing that makes the connection that much clearer (Duir). Further, each of the stories ends up with someone being swept away or punished. Punishment and sweeping others into it are what the wild hunt was known for. Being swept away could mean joining the hunt to help carry out a sentence on the evildoer, or as was the case with the Witch Queen, being taken away and left somewhere safe.

Another device that is used to allude to the impending death is the clocks. Also, every time that Conor is visited by the monster it is 12:07. Ness never does reveal the significance of the time aside we are lead to believe that it is at 12:07 in the morning when Conor's mother

dies. We do not know for sure that it occurs then, only that when Conor arrives to see his mother it is 11:46 and he internally notes he has twenty-one minutes left. He believes she will pass at 12:07. Ness, however, ends it rather ambiguously and we do not know whether she died then or lived another month. Given that the monster finally got Conor admit that he wanted it done just so it would be over, we can assume that she does die then. I digress, the clocks, six in total, all serve to summon the monster to Conor. The first clock in his bedroom. Then the grandfather clock in his grandmother's house, the digital clock that replaces the grandfather clock after Conor destroys it. All those and more leading up to the final clock in Conor's mom's hospital room, where the monster is summoned for the final time, where he is able to complete his task of healing Conor, which could not happen until Conor finally let go. At face value, clocks serve as a marker of time passing. However, when waiting for a metaphorical bomb to go off, clocks instead serve as a countdown. Would they have been more effective if they seemed to be counting down? Maybe if the first time the monster appeared it was three in the morning, then with each appearance the time would be later and later. Counting down to the 11th hour where Conor still has not resolved his feelings with his mom. It would have been a different feel, however just as when Conor arrived and it was 11:46 the reader knows that the upcoming 12:07 would be significant. I almost would have liked to read it in this way, but that may have lessened the significance of the clocks and thus the appearance of the monster.

The three aspects all help move along the plot and further help with the feeling of foreboding that the reader experiences knowing that Conor's mother is going to die. The point of view gives us just enough information while keeping Conor's inner most thoughts secret. The supernatural factor and the literal divine intervention create conflict. While the monster is

upfront and lets us know that he is there to heal, an astute reader will know that he is not there to heal Conor's mom. Perhaps it is the concept that magic and medicine do not mix, this is a concept that appears often in literature and other media when there is a supernatural factor. Lastly, the clocks serving as a count down to the inevitable death illustrate mortality and the fact that no amount of divine intervention can change the fact that we are all just a bunch of mortals. Despite knowing what was coming, it was not any less heartbreaking to read.

#### Works Cited

Duir, Alexa. "Who Is Cernunnos?" *Who Is Cernunnos?* 2005. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.

Ness, Patrick. *A Monster Calls*. Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick, 2013. Print.