

# Toxicity in Themes of Control: An Analysis of the Anglo-Western Cancer Rhetoric in *A Monster Calls*

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In Anglo-Western literature, most monsters are portrayed as conscious, tangible beings. Whether one believes that werewolves, cyborgs, and murderous serial killers could be even considered human, or that vampires and zombies count as being alive, usually the monsters audiences encounter are seen as cognizant, thinking, physical beings, meant to match the human (or human-like) heroes in wit, strength, and will. Still, we often confront monsters that are not considered cognizant or thinking that are just as complex and dangerous; while one might not immediately consider a disease to be a monster, how we respond to disease is similar to how we portray cognizant monsters. We see disease as an invader of the body, and it evokes terror and panic; for example, it is rare to find someone in modern Anglo-Western society who does not have some reaction to the word “cancer.” Many attend and host charity events and marathons fighting to find a cure, and several write books, create art, and film movies about how the disease affects lives. Rarely, though, do we think about how and why we monstrify cancer in pop culture. But Patrick Ness’s 2011 young adult novel, *A Monster Calls*, attempts to address these questions through its reflection of Anglo-Western cultural values of control in various characters; it seems that *A Monster Calls* is not merely a story of coping and grief, but also of how the Anglo-Western obsession with control and frequent refusal to accept complexity turns toxic, how it influences our lives, and how we can

## ABSTRACT

While infection has always haunted civilizations around the world, there are very few diseases that have had as much of an impact on Western culture as cancer has. The abundance of bereavement literature about characters with cancer begs the question; why cancer? This paper discusses ways in which cancer narratives reinforce Western obsession with control, through the lens of rhetoric and narrative structure. The author will specifically discuss how Patrick Ness’ 2011 novel, *A Monster Calls*, combats modern illness and cancer narratives and challenges themes of control threaded into Western culture.



learn to overcome it.

Using the lens of *A Monster Calls*, we can learn and understand more about Anglo-Western culture and how it is reflected in our rhetoric of cancer. First, this paper will analyze the rhetoric of cancer and illness narratives outside of *A Monster Calls* and draw conclusions from this research. In the next sections, the paper will discuss the main monsters of the story (the cancer, the Monster, the nightmare vortex, and Conor as a monster), explaining their literary relationship with the story and how they converse within our culture's current cancer narratives and rhetoric.

## BEREAVEMENT LITERATURE, CANCER NARRATIVES, AND THEIR CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

While it might be assumed that death is a subject too serious and dark for children and young adults, Giskin Day notes that within the past decade there has been a rise in the Western young adult (YA) book market in what is called “bereavement literature,” or books about death and grief (1). *A Monster Calls* falls under this category and fits the genre conventions; the novel is a harrowing story that follows Conor O'Malley, a thirteen-year-old boy living in modern day England, as he learns how to process his mother's cancer and his own grief. The book opens when Conor is summoned by a humanoid-tree monster: a walking, talking, surprisingly witty creature that takes the form of the yew tree in Conor's backyard. Still, this Monster (the character) is not the monster that Conor has been expecting; it is not the monster that has been haunting him for months in his nightmares. Even though Conor is unfazed by the Monster's menacing qualities (his mystical powers, his strength, his unpredictability), the Monster states that he has come walking to tell Conor three stories, and, in return for those stories, Conor will tell him the “truth.” Ultimately, the Monster and his stories become a metaphor for the difficulties and complexities of Conor's life in the real world as he balances his relationships, from his dying mother, to his chilly grandmother, to the teachers and bullies at his school. Along with the external monsters Conor is fighting, Conor also sees the cancer itself as a monster. And through his perception of his mother's cancer, audiences can begin to understand the methods Conor uses to cope with his grief and why.

Along with *A Monster Calls*, popular books like John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper*, Nicholas Sparks's *A Walk to Remember*, and Jesse Andrews's *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* all discuss characters dying of cancer and how they, their families, and their friends deal with the disease. YA bereavement literature has taken its place in Anglo-Western society, and, just as any works of art would, it speaks volumes about the people that consume



it, their interpretations of it, and the culture that produces it. So why cancer? Cancer survival (or non-survival) stories are a prevalent and common trend in popular culture narratives, but why is cancer such a common antagonist in these contemporary narratives? Is it because it is one of the leading causes of death? According to the National Cancer Institute, in 2012, 8.2 million people died cancer-related deaths worldwide (“Cancer Statistics”). Is it because we have not found a successful and consistent cure? Perhaps the abundance of cancer-related narratives is due, in part, to these reasons, but the nature of these stories also highlights a specific characteristic common to Western cultures: the fear of weakness and loss of control.

In *Keywords for Disability Studies*, Eva Feder Kittay writes, “what undermines the ability of disabled people to flourish is the view that being self-sufficient, self-reliant, and self-determining is the norm and the only desirable state of persons in a liberal society” (54). From this perspective, independence is the epitome of Western culture. In her book, *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson relates what liberal individualists call the “American ideal” to the disabled body, writing, “Such a self image parallels the national ideal in an individualist egalitarian democracy that each citizen is a microcosm of the nation as a whole. A well-regulated self thus contributes to a well-regulated nation. However, these four principles depend upon a body that is a stable, neutral instrument of the individual will” (42). Our society equates self-sufficiency and control with health and power, and we believe that every person is responsible for contributing to the improvement of the community. Dependency, then, is a sign of weakness. Weakness is, then, vulnerability and loss of control, and it is the vulnerable who suffer most in our society and are at risk of destruction.

Unsurprisingly, these fears are translated in the way we interpret illness narratives, or stories (fictional and nonfictional) about people coping with disease in an attempt to understand their traumatic experiences. The need for human stories in the face of inhuman diseases is vital in the road to healing; G. Thomas Couser notes in his article, “Critical Conditions: Teaching Illness Narrative,” “The more serious an illness the more it demands to be interpreted as a life event, and Western medicine does not concern itself with that demand. Illness narrative is often a way, then, of reclaiming one’s story, of re-siting one’s illness in the context of one’s whole life” (286). Experiencing a disease like cancer can be traumatic for the patient when they feel like they are the victims of their own bodies. Anglo-Western illness narratives, from personal survival anecdotes to fictional prose, give the patient power over how they are represented and portrayed. Still, these illness narrative characteristics (regaining power) can go too far, feeding into our desire



and obsession with control. Both the benefits and dangers of ideas of power and control can be seen most clearly in the “restitution and recovery” narrative structure, most commonly seen in cancer narratives.

In “The Cultural Construction of Risk Understandings through Narrative Illness,” Nancy Wong and Tracey King note that the dominant illness narrative of restitution and recovery in Anglo-Western culture emphasizes “personal agency, control, and survival” (Wong). In these types of narratives, the patient is in charge of their health and their disease. Even though the journey to recovery may be long and painful, the patient is optimistic, strong, and brave in their fight against their cancer, victorious and superior to their disease in their success. Curiously, there is an emphasis placed on the cancer as a war, a physical opponent separate from the patient’s body; in Clive Seale’s book, *Media and Health*, Susan Sontag notes the frequent use of military language to describe cancer, that cancer is “experienced as a ruthless, secret invasion . . . the disease itself is conceived as the enemy on which society wages war” and as “an evil, invincible predator” (qtd. in Seale 173). Through this language, the disease is seen as a tangible enemy that the patient must overcome to regain what is being threatened: bodily autonomy, past identity, independence, and selfhood. Even when the patient is failing, when it is clear that the patient will acquiesce to their illness, the patient is still expected to literally and metaphorically fight to the death, “consistent with the belief in Anglo-Western societies that acquiescence, fear, and denial (i.e., chaos stories) are not socially acceptable ways of dealing with disease” (Wong). Surrender is not an option, no matter what. According to restitution illness narratives, there is always something the patient can do. This speaks, again, to the idea in Western society that we believe “we can exert control over each and every experience, including death itself” (Wong). So it makes sense that the narratives we choose to focus on are ones of struggle but, ultimately, triumph.

Describing cancer as a physical monster implies the power of the individual; the situation is not hopeless, and the thought of suffering through the disease becomes a little more bearable. But through the lens of monster theory, the need to give cancer a physical body is more reflective of Anglo-Western culture than one might expect. In Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s article, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” he notes, “The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural movement . . . . The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read” (Cohen 4). While cancer itself is not fictional and its existence is not based on the fears of society, the rhetoric we use when talking about cancer in popular culture gives the disease a body, thereby creating a physical monster. Our monstrous interpretation



of cancer is the cultural construct and not necessarily the cancer itself.

Wong and King note that we typically ascribe to cancer “feral personalities,” using words like “savage,” “lawless,” and “relentless” (Wong). We can battle the cancer. We can fight the cancer. The cancer is an invisible opponent that we must destroy. And it is this desire to give cancer a body that, again, highlights our cultural resistance to the elements out of our control. We would like to imagine cancer as a physical monster because we can fight physical monsters. If we give cancer a face and a sword, then it is possible to imagine that by doing something (battling the monster) we can change our current situation. We monstrify cancer because, by doing so, it defines our agency and confirms our humanity (our desire to fight and find the will to live). Because without a body or a physical form, the disease becomes something that kills mindlessly. Cohen notes that a monster is “that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis” (6). If Anglo-Western culture tells us that we are in complete control of our bodies (that we either choose to be healthy or not), cancer and other diseases question that and challenge us to redefine the meaning of control. Perhaps we are not only afraid of dying from disease and losing control over our bodies because of it, but we fear the lack of reason or logic behind it. A disease does not care whether or not someone is a good person or if they deserve to have that disease. In our culture saturated with ideas of complete control over our lives, perhaps giving cancer a body makes cancer *less* monstrous than a formless, invisible thing that we simply cannot control. The real monster that we are avoiding is perhaps the idea that complete agency is a lie.

There is power in having control over a narrative; if we have power, then we have the ability to dictate our futures, reduce pain, and guarantee the safety of those we love. Therefore, applying these thought processes in situations of dire hopelessness can give strength. Still, this ableist belief in self-sufficiency and our ability to exert power over anything can be dangerous, causing more harm than good to our psyches. The way this belief turns toxic will be explored in this paper through the themes and characters of *A Monster Calls*. *A Monster Calls* highlights the problems associated with modern cancer narratives and the consequences of our obsession with control: a refusal to accept complexity, vulnerability, and powerlessness as natural and normal parts to being human.

## THE CANCER AS A MONSTER

One of the central questions of *A Monster Calls* is, “Who is the real monster of the story?” There are four perceived or potential antagonists of the story, and the uncertainty of their roles emphasizes a primary theme of the book. These perceived antagonists — the Monster (the character), the nightmare vortex (the monster



from Conor's dreams), Conor himself, and the cancer — create the complexity and confusion that Conor needs to acknowledge and understand in order to begin to heal.

The cancer (and the rhetoric surrounding the cancer) functions as a monster in the story in how Conor perceives it as an enemy, waging war on his mother's body. Again, although Cohen's research identifies mainly fictional monsters, the way that Conor interprets his mother's cancer is not unlike how the other monsters of the story function; the cancer is a representation of Conor's powerlessness to the natural forces of the world ("the monster signifies something other than itself" [Cohen 4]), it forces Conor to question his previous definitions and perceptions of the world ("they demand a radical rethinking of boundary and normality" [Cohen 6]), and it calls Conor to address his own fears and desires ("we distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair" [Cohen 17]). Similar to the functioning of cancer rhetoric on a larger scale in Anglo-Western cultures, Conor also perceives the cancer as something that he is physically fighting and waging war against. Toward the beginning of the book, Conor's grandmother attempts to discuss his living situation and implies that he will live with her after his mother dies. He says, "I'm *never* going to live with you," to which his grandmother replies, "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": "When all of this is over,' Conor said, with fury in his voice, 'you'll leave and we'll be fine'" (Ness 43). Conor's belief in his mother's recovery is persistent throughout almost the entire novel. When his mother tells him that the next treatment will work or that a new medication is available, he believes that her health is improving. They are doing everything they can to "fight" the cancer, and the cancer must not win. While the cancer is not a traditional monster, Conor sees it as the main antagonist he is battling.

Still, the underlying conflict that runs through Conor's actions is the belief that he deserves to be punished. What he truly desires is his mother's death and therefore the end of her drawn out suffering. But he believes that this desire is wrong and is then laden with guilt. Because of this desire, he wants to be reprimanded for his transgressions; he has done wrong because he wants his mother to succumb to her cancer. He wants the "enemy" to win, and how could a hero ever want the villain to win? This is translated most outwardly in the way that he interacts with his peers and teachers, enticing responses from bullies and almost encouraging his teachers to punish him.

In general, it is a natural instinct to want to comfort someone who is grieving or suffering, and the adults in Conor's life perceive his situation to be distressing



and absolutely devastating. When someone is grappling with the illness of a loved one, one would want to do anything they could to help that person, and the way that Conor's teachers and peers do this is by giving him "space." When he does not want to speak in class, teachers politely glance over him and ignore his lack of participation. They let him pass on assignments without punishment and go out of their way to single him out and show their support and kindness. His peers look at him differently, treating him "like *he* was the one who was ill," skirting around him, afraid to approach or hurt him (Ness 69, emphasis original). These actions are well intentioned and are not meant to be tactless, yet these are the actions that hurt Conor the most and the ones that haunt him.

When Conor's teacher, Miss Kwan, pardons him from a school fight, Ness writes, "And for a moment, Conor was entirely alone. He knew right then he could probably stay out there all day and no one would punish him for it. Which somehow made him feel even worse" (Ness 73). In the same scene with Miss Kwan, Ness writes, "Conor said nothing, and the silence took on a particular quality, one he was familiar with . . . . He knew what was coming. He knew and he hated it . . . . He couldn't look at her, couldn't see the care there, couldn't *bear* to hear it in her voice. (Because he didn't deserve it.)" (Ness 72-73, emphasis original). What Conor wants is for the world to be simple. He wants his actions to be placed in tidy categories because it gives him a sense of control in the world, but perhaps also because it gives him a better sense of understanding in a world that refuses to make sense to him. Why do good people die pointless deaths? Why do well-intentioned people make bad decisions? If Conor is punished for his perceived transgressions (desiring his mother's death) in the real world, then it reassures him that justice exists, and, if it exists for him, perhaps it exists for his mother. What Conor fears is that his "bad" actions will go unpunished and that he, a villain, will walk throughout the world unharmed. While Conor seems to outwardly insist that the real monster is the cancer, the audience begins to see that the monster Conor is grappling with is himself. Conor believes that the cancer is a monster but that he is the worse monster.

Perhaps this is what also drives his relationship with Harry, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, charming, but vicious, schoolyard bully. Conor relishes the fights goaded on by Harry, which are not so much fights as they are Conor permitting Harry to hit him. It is as if Harry somehow understands that what Conor wants is to be seen, not necessarily in a good or bad way, but truly seen for what he is. Conor does not think the other peers and teachers see who he is on the inside (a monster), essentially invisible to the outside world. But Harry continues to see Conor, and it is only Harry that understands what Conor wants. At the climax of



their relationship, and when Harry finally understands what will hurt Conor most, he states, “Here is the hardest hit of all, O’Malley,’ . . . ‘Here is the very worse thing I can do to you . . . Good-bye, O’Malley,’ Harry said, looking into Conor’s eyes. ‘I no longer see you.’” (Ness 144-145). What drives Conor is guilt, but what hurts Conor is injustice. What hurts him is becoming invisible, his feelings, thoughts, and actions becoming irrelevant to everyone around him. After Harry leaves Conor, the Monster appears, stating, “*It was not that he was actually invisible . . . It was that people had become used to not seeing him . . . And if no one really sees you . . . are you really there at all?*” (Ness 146, emphasis original). What Conor wants is for his actions to have consequences; if he perceives his “evil” thoughts to be harmful, then maybe, if he is punished, justice will be restored. Conor mistakenly believes that he is responsible for his mother’s suffering (because he wishes for her death, because he does not believe in her recovery) and that his thoughts and beliefs have more power than they actually do (“I didn’t mean to let her go! And now it’s for real! Now she’s going to die and it’s my fault!” [Ness 190]). Conor cannot control his mother’s cancer, but his belief that he actually *can* control the cancer and her suffering through his thoughts and actions is what gives him the illusion of power. Conor fears the meaninglessness of his actions because it forces him to recognize that his power and control are, in fact, illusions; there is nothing he can do to help his mother.

This deep repression of fear causes Conor to act rashly and violently toward his friends and family, in the verbal abuse of his best friend (Ness 25-26), the almost self-inflicted punishments from Harry (Ness 18-22), and the physical destruction of his grandmother’s living room (Ness 110-114) and the school cafeteria (Ness 146-152). An understandable desire to help his mother and control her disease turns into obsessive and harmful thoughts and actions. Ultimately, this belief (that her suffering is his fault) prevents him from grieving properly, causing psychological and emotional stress. So while the cancer is not a thinking, tangible monster that fights the protagonist, the cancer forces Conor to analyze his perceptions of right and wrong and the extent of his control over his situations. This conflict of interest thus rises from Conor’s subconscious in the forms of tangible monsters.

## THE MONSTER (THE CHARACTER) AS A REPRESENTATION OF COMPLEXITY AND POWERLESSNESS

One of these monsters is the Monster (the character); he is the main “monster” that Conor directly interacts with and the one that the audience sees most in the story. It is through the Monster and his stories that Conor begins to



understand that the reason he feels so vulnerable and powerless is because of the complexity and ambiguity of his emotions; Cohen mentions in his research that monsters resist easy categorization, but through Ness's description and portrayal of the Monster, it seems that the Monster and the stories he tells Conor represent complexity itself.

In the novel, Conor struggles to define who the Monster is and what his purpose in Conor's life is; the Monster insists that Conor is the one who called for him and that Conor is the one who wants his help, but it is not clear how the Monster is supposed to be helping him. The Monster is not necessarily evil because he does not encourage Conor's self-destruction; however, he threatens Conor's demise by forcing him to recognize his vulnerability. He encourages Conor to tear apart his grandmother's living room and violently attack Harry as destructive ways to express his pain, but he also encourages Conor to find peace within the world and rehabilitate. This ambiguity can be seen through the Monster's physical traits as well; the Monster describes himself as wild and untamable (*"I am this wild earth"* and *"I am everything untamed and untamable!"* [Ness 34]). Interestingly, Wong and King note in their research that cancer tends to be described with words like "insidious," "mysterious," "lawless," and "savage" (Wong). The Monster has ancient magic, the power to destroy buildings, and the power to move across time and space; he is not bound to the logic and reality of the world. But while the Monster seems chaotic and destructive, he also physically represents hope and recovery. In the story, Conor's mother begins a new drug therapy in a final attempt toward improvement; one of the ingredients in the drug is yew bark (from the same type of tree that the Monster has chosen as a body). As Conor and the audience discover the Monster's character throughout the book, it becomes harder to classify him as an actual monster, or at least what Conor perceives monsters are supposed to be (evil, villainous, antagonistic) when he also symbolizes hope in Conor's, and his mother's, rehabilitation.

Even though the Monster himself is a complex beast, it is his stories that force Conor to acknowledge ambiguity. The Monster is aware that his stories and his motives bring pain and alleviation together. He gives Conor stories that do not make sense to Conor; while each of the three stories he tells are set in different times and places, they all emphasize complexity within morality. The characters of the Monster's stories do not fit into clear categories (hero, villain, victim, etc.). For example, in the first, a right-thinking prince performs evil actions with good intentions, and the evil witch is not necessarily the enemy. In the second, a good-hearted priest creates destruction through unintended selfishness, and the Monster portrays a purposely selfish, bitter apothecary as the victim. In the third, the



line between reality and fantasy blurs when the Monster makes Conor the main character and Harry the villain, making the actions performed by Conor in the story become real. When Conor confronts the Monster about the ambiguity of these stories, he asks, “I don’t understand. Who’s the good guy here?” (Ness 63). The Monster then replies, “*There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere in between*” (Ness 64). Conor wants a moral to the Monster’s stories and the knowledge that goodness triumphs over evil in the end. Still, the Monster makes a point that the purpose of his stories is not meant to be clear; he states, “*You think I tell you stories to teach you lessons? . . . You think I have come walking out of time and earth itself to teach you a lesson in niceness?*” (Ness 63, emphasis original). The Monster is not inherently good or evil, just as his stories, motives, and actions are not clear or straightforward. What makes this monster particularly compelling is that he specifically symbolizes complexity; he does not simply represent complexity in a certain societal norm or cultural trend, but he embodies the nature and fear of complexity itself.

What Conor fears is the complexity and the indefinable sources of his problems; he does not understand how he can want his mother to survive and so desperately wish for the end of her suffering at the same time. What the Monster forces him to confront is the idea that his mother’s cancer, his thoughts, and his entire world cannot be clearly defined and are, therefore, uncontrollable. Just as the Monster and his stories are not things Conor can control, his life and his mind cannot be controlled either. Through the Monster’s character, Conor and the audience are invited to think critically about how we define villains and heroes, and how much influence we actually have over those definitions (and consequently ourselves). Most importantly, though, the Monster and his stories prepare Conor for the ultimate test of his strength: confronting his own fears of becoming a monster.

## THE NIGHTMARE VORTEX AND CONOR AS MONSTER

The monster that Conor must face in order to overcome his fears (the nightmare vortex) appears finally at the end of the novel, after the Monster has told the three tales. At the climax of the story, the Monster brings Conor to the source of his nightmare; in the scene, a swirling, black, powerful vacuum begins to pull Conor’s mother off a cliff, threatening to eat her alive. The audience assumes that this vortex is the monster that Conor refers to at the beginning of the story, and the connection to his mother’s cancer is clear; Ness writes, “cloud and ash and dark flames, but with real muscle, real strength, real red eyes that glared back at him and flashing teeth that would eat his mother alive” (Ness 179). The impossibly powerful



monster that is eating his mother away in real life is here to eat her in his dreams, and this monster seems to be a personification of the cancer. Still, as the nightmare scene continues, the audience sees that Conor is more afraid of himself than the vortex around him. As he catches his mother moments before she falls, he finds her growing heavier and heavier, until he cannot bear the weight of her and lets her plummet to her death. What Conor cannot admit, cannot even utter, is that he wanted her to fall because she was too heavy to carry by himself. This truth is what Conor is ultimately afraid of: that he himself is the monster because he is the one that causes her death.

This moment is the climax of the story, but it is also an essential coming-of-age point for Conor. As the nightmare vortex begins to consume Conor, the Monster says, “*You must tell the truth or you will never leave this nightmare . . . You will be trapped here alone for the rest of your life*” (Ness 185). In both a literal and metaphorical sense, this monster (the belief that Conor is the cause of his mother’s suffering) will kill Conor. The ugliness of the truth, represented through the way the “nightmare’s tendrils were binding him now,” will suffocate him; the longer he stays silent, the farther he pushes his words down his throat (Ness 186). Conor’s grief and guilt overwhelm him, so much that they make him incapable of processing life normally (“Conor’s grief was a physical thing, gripping him like a clamp, clenching him tight as a muscle” [Ness 190]).

Interestingly, though, the Monster (the character) says specifically that Conor must say the truth in order to be able to move on. What destroys Conor even more than his guilt is a lack of expression of that guilt and an inability to say what makes him vulnerable and afraid. The words themselves have more power than anything else; the Monster notes, “*You were willing to die rather than speak [the truth]*” (Ness 192). Conor believes that he has control over his emotions and that he has the ability to make his complex situations simple. He is evil because he desires his mother’s death. So if he denies this desire and instead tells himself to believe in a cure for her cancer, then he can find redemption. These are, then, attempts to try and control his feelings through self-inflicted punishment, anger, physical violence, and denial of his emotions. He believes he has the power to control how he feels about his mother’s illness, and so his inability to control his complex and ambiguous emotions makes him a monster.

But as the Monster and the nightmare vortex show Conor, we do *not* have the ability to pick and choose what we control. Conor does not overcome the nightmare vortex by changing his thought process, but by admitting a truth that he does not want to speak; he must admit that he does not have complete control over how he thinks and feels and that he does not have control over his



mother's cancer. There is no concrete reason why Conor's mother has cancer, and Conor has no physical way to save her. Believing that he has control and that there *is* something he can do is what nearly destroys him. In the end, the only way Conor can overcome his grief and his guilt is by physically speaking the truth and acknowledging his vulnerability and powerlessness to the Monster and, consequently, to himself. The complexities of Conor's situation will always remain complex, and he may not understand why exactly he feels certain ways. But Conor's ambiguity and lack of control do not make him inherently evil, nor do they make him inherently good. Our inability to control everything does not make us monsters, but is, instead, something that makes us human.

## CONCLUSION

As a story of grief and coping, *A Monster Calls* seems to be a novel about ways we can understand the death and suffering of those closest to us. But, as a story that also participates in a larger conversation involving how Anglo-Western cultures perceive cancer, illness, and disease, it is also a story about our inevitable powerlessness to the forces beyond us. We cannot always anticipate and prevent diseases like cancer, and we cannot always save the people that deserve saving. We cannot always control the ambiguity and complexity in our lives. We do have a choice in whether or not we let that fear consume us. The monstrous antagonist of *A Monster Calls*, then, is not even the nightmare vortex or the cancer itself, but the dangerous illusion of control that we have infused in Anglo-Western culture and cancer restoration narratives. What Conor's story warns us about is the way that persistence and relentlessness can turn toxic, resisting that which makes us human.



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