

# **Monstrous Losses and Broken Fairy Tales: Fantasy, Loss and Trauma in Young Adult Literature**

by  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the portrayal of loss and mourning in young adult fiction by analysing three contemporary examples, namely David Almond's *Skellig*, Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* and Alexia Casale's *The Bone Dragon*. In each of these novels the process of an adolescent protagonist coming to terms with a major loss or change, in itself a form of loss, is expressed and facilitated through the inclusion of a fantasy being that acts as a companion or guide within an otherwise realistic setting. While the fantasy elements draw from conventions in children's fiction and forms such as the fairy tale, the complexity of their function in these novels, in which they give access to interiority by prompting the exploration of internal issues or as externalised manifestations of internal states, is also consistent with conventions of narrating trauma which, according to psychoanalysis, seeks expression but cannot be confronted directly. The thesis thus traces the way in which fantasy features in these young adult fictions, looking at the shift away from fantasy being uncritically accepted as it is in children's fiction, a mode that is more consistent with magical realism, to the more ambiguous presence of fantasy in these young adult novels where fantasy can be read as an expression of psychological subjectivity and is more consistent with the fantastic. This allows for the exploration of difficult subject matter in a way that still resonates with children's fiction, expressing the process of transition into adolescence. Theory on adolescent development, loss, mourning and trauma is thus brought together with theory on fantasy and fairy tales in order to critically analyse the way these novels deliberately draw on children's fiction but move beyond it in terms of both the themes that are explored and the sophisticated use of fantasy to portray the internal confrontation with change and loss.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie tesis stel ondersoek in oor die uitbeelding van verlies en rou in jeugliteratuur deur middel van die analise van drie kontemporêre voorbeelde, naamlik David Almond se *Skellig*, Patrick Ness se *A Monster Calls* en Alexia Casale se *The Bone Dragon*. In elk van hierdie romans word 'n adolessente protagonis se persoonlike ontdekkingsreis van aansienlike verlies of lewensverandering (op sigself 'n vorm van verlies) deur die insluiting van 'n fantasie-wese wat optree as metgesel of gids binne 'n andersins realistiese omgewing uitgedruk of gefasiliteer. Terwyl die fantasie elemente in hierdie werke wel inspirasie trek uit beginsels wat meer gereeld in kinder-fiksie en sprokies verhale te vinde is, gee die kompleksiteit van hul funksie in hierdie romans toegang tot 'n innerlikheid deur die aanhitsing van 'n verkenning van interne kwessies en geëksternaliseerde manifestasies van interne toestande. Hierdie benadering is ook steekhoudend met die konvensies van trauma-vertellings wat, volgens psigoanalise, self uitdrukking soek sonder direkte konfrontasie. Hierdie tesis ligspoor dus die wyse waarop fantasie betoon word in jeugliteratuur, deur na sy uiteenloping met fantasie in die onkrities aanvaarbare vorm van kinderliteratuur te kyk. Laasgenoemde, 'n medium wat heelwat meer bestendig is met magiese realisme, tot die meer dubbelsinnige teenwoordigheid van fantasie in jeugliteratuur, waar fantasie ook gelees kan word as 'n uitdrukking van sielkundige subjektiwiteit en dikwels verenigbaar met die denkbeeldige is. Dit maak moontlik die ondersoek van gewigtige onderwerpe op n manier wat gehorig bly aan kinderliteratuur en sy uitbeelding van die oorgangsstadium na adolessensie. Teorie oor adolessente ontwikkeling, verlies, rou en trauma word dus verenig met teorie oor fantasie en sprokiesverhale om sodoende 'n kritiese ondersoek in te stel oor die onderwerp van hoe hierdie werke, met voorbedagtheid, elemente van kinderfiksie benut, maar verder gaan in terme van beide die temas wat aangeraak word sowel as die gesofistikeerde gebruik van fantasie om hierdie interne konfrontasies van verandering en verlies te skilder.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction:

#### **Young Adult Literature: Troubled Fictions of Transition, Loss and Mourning**

Like a trapeze artist, the young person in the middle of a vigorous motion must let go of his safe hold on childhood and reach out for a firm grasp on adulthood, depending for a breathless interval on a relatedness between the past and the future, and on the reliability of those he must let go of, and those who will 'receive' him.

(Erikson in Cline vii)

Narratives that portray harsh realities and difficult or disturbing experiences, frequently labelled as 'dark', have emerged as a prominent trend in contemporary novels within the young adult literature category. While young adult literature is generally distinguished by featuring an adolescent protagonist, someone between the ages of eleven or twelve to around eighteen or nineteen, and as such generally focuses on concerns associated with puberty and changing social roles, it encompasses the same variety of genres as adult fiction. As this category continues to mature and develop in line with changing views of its target audience, the range of issues and contexts addressed have also come to mirror the scope of adult literature, albeit from an adolescent perspective. The response to this growing but controversial trend, which has generated both praise and concern in contemporary popular debate, reflects a continued uncertainty and discomfort about how to define the age group located ambiguously between childhood and adulthood and what it is that should be marketed to them. Although modern adolescents occupy a world in which they are increasingly confronted by violent or traumatic events through television and the internet, the adult response to these realities appearing in young adult literature is that it remains contentious. This points to discrepancies about what the role of literature should be for this age group and registers its heritage as a subdivision of children's literature. The tendency to use the connotatively rich term *dark* to refer, rather generally, to novels considered unsettling and challenging in terms of tone and content often implicitly registers a judgement that such books are potentially unsuitable or even harmful. However, darkness also indicates what is hidden or unknown, a subtle shift in meaning that calls into question whether these novels might be dark in the sense that they raise and explore important issues that tend to be obscured, rather than because the material is in itself inappropriate. The term then

encompasses the very ambiguity that has sparked so much debate around the perceived requirements of the young adult audience who are themselves in an in-between and uncertain, therefore arguably *dark*, developmental stage.

This thesis considers one of the emerging themes of this trend by exploring the representation of loss in young adult fiction, focusing on David Almond's *Skellig* (2009), Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) and Alexia Casale's *The Bone Dragon* (2013). While the most prominent, and generally most traumatic, forms of loss involve the death of or separation from loved ones, the adolescent phase of transition comprises a myriad adjustments from childhood to a more adult position, and is therefore inherently shaped by the minor losses that accompany change and growth. I thus expand the notion of loss to include 'abstract' or ideologically located forms of loss such as those associated with growing up, for instance the loss of innocence or disillusionment, and consider the way they interact with concrete losses of place or people. The confrontation with death and loss in young adult literature, though not new, has become remarkably widespread in recent years, often being portrayed with great depth and complexity and emerging in many different genres, including historical fiction and non-fiction, fantasy and dystopian literature, and even in the adolescent romance genre. However, despite the prominence of loss in these novels, relatively few narratives focus on the process of mourning and coming to terms with loss, arguably the aspect that most clearly relates to the transitional phase of adolescence and the sometimes painful and difficult side of growing-up and gaining experience. I consequently explore the portrayal of loss specifically in these novels that engage closely with the loss or anticipated loss of a close family member and the process of coming to terms with this experience by introducing a fantasy companion or guide as a form of consolation that facilitates mourning. The monstrosity of these fantasy figures – Almond's *Skellig* is a tramp-like hybrid of angel and owl, Ness's monster is an elemental tree-giant and Casale's is a miniaturised version of a powerful dragon – produces companions that reflect the protagonists' experience and interior worlds. The repeated use of this element in portraying the process of adolescent mourning, of successfully working through loss and moving forward, suggests that writers rely on fantasy to represent the protagonist's reversion to childhood as a way of confronting and working through experiences with which they are not yet able to cope.

David Almond's critically acclaimed and much adapted *Skellig*, the first of the novels under discussion and the focus of the second chapter, follows ten-year-old Michael as he confronts his feelings about potentially losing his infant sister, who was born prematurely and might die from consequent complications, while also adapting to changes in family relationships and the move to a new house. Fantasy is introduced into this situation through Skellig, portrayed as a strange combination of man, owl and angel, whom Michael discovers in the dilapidated garage of the new house. It is in the process of nurturing the weak, arthritic Skellig back to health, with the help of the eccentric home-schooled girl Mina from next door, that Michael is able to work through his helplessness regarding his sister and develop important new ways of conceiving of the world that enable him to cope. The novel, variously described as either children's or young adult fiction and featuring a protagonist not yet in his teenage years, can be viewed as being on the verge of young adult fiction but not quite within the category, making it a valuable point of comparison with the other primary texts. Though *Skellig* does face its protagonist with questions about life and death and deploys fantasy as a way of working through these issues, it does so in a manner that is more consistent with children's fiction, considering that Skellig's realness is questioned only when Michael first meets him, making the use of fantasy more consistent with magical realism than as a means of depicting psychological trauma. Moreover, the anticipated loss of his sister does not come to pass. This chapter thus outlines the way *Skellig* falls within and yet pushes the boundaries of children's literature in order to better understand how the following two novels move into the young adult category despite similarities in form.

In chapter three, Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* is discussed as a novel that marks the transition into young adulthood via its portrayal of working through internal conflict and the isolation produced by anticipated loss within the context of a fractured family structure. The plot follows thirteen-year-old Conor O'Mally who is coming to terms with the fact that his mother is dying of cancer, after having already effectively lost his father when his parents divorced and he moved to America where he now has a new family. Conor's inability to cope with the position of adult responsibility he is placed in by his circumstances is communicated through nightmares, in which he fails to save his mother from a fiery monster, and by the introduction of a fantasy monster that begins to visit and tell him stories in order to help him resolve destructive repressed conflicts, the source of his nightmares, and to express his anger. Especially significant is that Conor must ultimately reciprocate by telling the monster those

feelings which are producing his nightmares, a process which amounts to admitting them to himself. Although the novel features illustrations and employs elements of the folk fairy tale, both characteristics associated with children's fiction, it unsettles the conventions and expectations of these forms to give expression to Conor's inner turmoil and to facilitate his move through a difficult emotional transition from denial and self-reproach to acceptance. The emphasis on the value of telling stories and speaking the truth is moreover consistent with psychoanalytic practice, as will be made apparent through discussion of Bruno Bettelheim's work on fairy tales and of trauma theory.

The fourth chapter focuses on Alexia Casale's *The Bone Dragon*, in which the most complex confrontation with loss is portrayed, showing both the sophistication and depth of current work in the young adult category. Evie, the fourteen-year-old protagonist, is a foster child who has suffered physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her maternal grandparents to whom she moves with her mother after losing her father to a motorbike accident. Her mother, who, it is suggested, had been similarly abused when a child fails to intervene and, when she dies of cancer, leaves Evie with the burden of unresolved anger. Her foster family is also affected by the loss of their own child, a factor which prompts their adoption of Evie. It is once she reveals that she has a broken rib, which she has been hiding for years, that she and her new parents begin to confront her past and can start to heal. The magical creature in this novel is a small dragon that Evie carves from her broken rib which had been surgically removed and wishes to life, creating a companion and protector that comes awake at night and guides her on dreamlike night-walks that facilitate healing and her coming to terms with the past. The fragmented and elusive first-person narrative is used to great effect to portray both Evie's negotiation with the effects of trauma and her development of identity under these circumstances, a key element of young adult novels.

The term 'young adult literature' represents a relatively recent conception of the literary genre intended for and marketed to adolescents. Having displaced the previously interchangeable classifications of 'adolescent', 'teen' and 'juvenile literature', due to the negative connotations of these terms, the concept of the young adult (YA) has gained ascendancy as a designation that not only affords a new respect to its readership, but also encapsulates their difficult and ambiguous position between the worlds of the adult and the child. Although the term 'young adult' would seem an apt name for this ambiguous position, the literary category it denotes nonetheless remains difficult to define as is reflected in

literary criticism and scholarship on the category. In 1996 Michael Cart noted that “even to try to define the phrase ‘young adult (or adolescent) literature’ can be migraine inducing” (in Allen 260). Amanda K. Allen has subsequently noted that, “although the academic field has expanded in the ensuing years since Cart published these words, attempts to define this literature remain inevitably fraught” (260). While young adult literature has become more established and certainly more prominent, its precise parameters continue to be elusive. Among the difficulties defining this category is the way it overlaps with the divisions of children’s and adult literature on either side of it as can be seen in the practices of the publishing industry. Researchers on young adult literature dating from 1980 to as recently as 2007 (see Carter, Cole, Donelson and Nilsen, Holland and Kaplan) have noted that the likelihood of a book being published as young adult or adult is largely determined by which publishing division shows interest or which option seems more marketable, regardless of the intended audience for which a text was written. This suggests not only the troubling degree of overlap between genres but has also caused some to question the plausibility of the young adult category. Considering the recent trend towards covering more controversial and difficult material, this blurred boundary with adult literature is increasingly prominent and also the one that has provoked the most discussion.

This blurring of boundaries has produced mixed reactions and extensive debate in the media that brings to light some of the difficulties still experienced in locating the young adult category. Ruth Graham sparked controversy by criticising the widespread popularity of young adult novels among adult readers and the way in which this has been largely embraced and encouraged by society.<sup>1</sup> Various examples listed by Graham, such as the prevalent “lists of YA novels that adults should read” and the “‘I read YA’ campaign for grownup YA fans”, are indicative not only of the growing popularity of young adult literature among adults but also of conscious efforts to market young adult literature to adult readers and make it an acceptable genre for this audience (n. pag.). While Graham views this phenomenon as indicative of low reading standards by contemporary adults – characterising the appeal of young adult fiction as purely “to do with escapism, instant gratification and nostalgia” and the books within the genre as lacking in the “emotional and moral ambiguity of adult fiction” – those in favour of young adult literature comment on its increasing sophistication and also

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<sup>1</sup> According to a 2012 market research survey in the US cited by Graham, “55 percent of [YA] books are bought by people older than 18” and the “largest group of buyers [...] are between 30 and 44” (n. pag.).

question the policing of what is considered age-appropriate. What is perhaps most revealing is the sheer volume of responses to this article across various media forums, marking the boundaries of young adult literature as one of the topical literary debates at the moment (see for example Medley, Faye and Pratt).

Despite the overlap with adult audiences and the fact that the young adult designation clearly encourages a closer association with adult fiction, young adult literature is still in many respects grouped with children's literature, such as in the classifications for literary awards like the Carnegie Medal and also in scholarly journals focussing predominantly on children's literature.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, at this end of the young adult spectrum the genre also garners controversy and criticism but, to some degree in contrast to Graham's critiques, for being inappropriate and too bleak for young readers. This has often been the case with novels which have won literary awards for the young adult category, since their acclaim makes them more readily available in schools and libraries and therefore more widely known and read, a factor paradoxically making them prominent targets for criticism. It seems often the case that the very qualities which attract award committees are the same ones which garner negativity and concern about being too advanced. This was the case with both *Into the River* by Ted Dawe, winner of the young adult fiction category at the *New Zealand Post* Children's Book Awards and Margaret Mahy Book of the Year in 2013, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, which won the 2007 National Book Award for Young People's Literature and was still an object of controversy in 2014.

The most recent example is Kevin Brooks' *The Bunker Diary* which won the 2014 Carnegie Medal, the most prestigious prize for children's literature in Britain (the equivalent of America's Newbery Medal). Brooks' novel, which takes the form of a diary written by a seventeen-year-old boy who is held hostage in a bunker along with other inmates, has been described by literary critic Lorna Bradbury, as a "uniquely sickening read" which "seems to have won on shock value rather than merit" ("Why Wish" n. pag.). While she mentions her support for previous winners of this particular award that have been considered "dark" and elicited "accusations of unsuitability", including *A Monster Calls* in 2012, she considers *Bunker Diaries* "nastier than any of the dystopian literature currently in vogue for young adults", partly because it is "too close to real life" and "there [is] no distancing world

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<sup>2</sup> For example *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* and *Children's Literature*.

scenario at work” (“Carnegie Medal” n. pag.). This statement highlights both the ongoing development of darker themes and narratives in young adult literature as well as the role that fantasy frequently plays in such literature by removing confrontation with dark material to a fictional world or mediating it through fantasy elements as in *Skellig*, *A Monster Calls* and *The Bone Dragon*.

Another significant issue raised in these articles is the question of shielding young people from what is deemed inappropriate content. Bradbury rather dramatically refers to a “nihilistic diet” to which “teenagers” are exposed through books, television, films and online content, and questions whether this is “good” for them and, consequently, whether books of this nature should be “championed” by such a prestigious and influential prize (“Why Wish” n. pag.). Even Bradbury’s use of the term “teenager” rather than the more contemporary term ‘young adult’, although this phrasing is not unique to her article, frames the group as younger and less mature and therefore as readers who need to be censored from certain content by more knowing and responsible adults. There is a sense in her article that the “teenage” audience needs to be protected and, therefore, that publishers should “think carefully” about the books that they are putting out there, “given that all of this can go on behind the backs of parents” (n. pag.). The question of adolescent agency thus becomes an important one since they are old enough to access material without having to go through their parents and yet there remains much anxiety about what they should be reading. Unlike with readers in the children’s literature category who tend to have their books purchased for them and read to them by parents or who are to a large degree kept to material deemed age-appropriate by their own reading capability, adolescents are reading by themselves and generally capable of the reading standard employed in any books in the young adult category, leaving parents in far less control over the content to which they are exposed. Additional anxiety seems to emerge because the young adult designation incorporates a fairly wide age-range in which significant development takes place and books suitable for older adolescents may be viewed as inappropriate for younger ages. Yet the books within this category are not as a rule classified according to age as is the case in children’s literature. While there are many discussions that express these concerns about books featuring or even focussing on the darker elements of life in the young adult category, the novels nevertheless continue to be popular. There are also, conversely, many who feel that good books are being needlessly banned and that the young adult audience is at risk of having their reading severely restricted.

The attack on *The Bunker Diary* by Bradbury also elicited a strong response from supporters of this novel, and others like it, who advocate for adolescents' ability to manage their own reading choices and deem books of this nature to be suitable and even valuable for them. Brooks, who had to fight for ten years to get his book published, was repeatedly told "it wouldn't work for children unless he changed the plot to allow for the possibility of hope" (in Bradbury "Why Wish" n. pag.). His refusal to compromise his vision is in line with his view that "children – and teens in particular – don't need to be cosseted with artificial hope that there will always be a happy ending [...] because they are perfectly aware that in real life things aren't always alright in the end" (in Flood n. pag.). Brooks' higher estimation of what content his adolescent audience can deal with also extends to his view of teenagers as "wise enough" to stop pursuing something that makes them uncomfortable (Flood n. pag.). This is not an opinion unique to Brooks but one shared by many writers and members of literary awards panels for young adult literature who seek to take their audience seriously. Patrick Ness, for instance, wrote a list of "'Unsuitable' Books for Teenagers", which lists adult books that "are actually rather better if read when you're a teen", whether it be because they are "entertaining contraband" or because "it can never be too early to read something so wonderful" ("Unsuitable Books" n. pag.). His tenth candidate is "Unrecommended by Unnamed" in which Ness rather facetiously insists that he "can't possibly recommend some of the books that [he] and other adults read when [they] were teenagers" and goes on to mention, after giving a few examples which would fall into this category, that teenagers are of course "WAY too young to read any of these books which are easily available at your local library" where they are conveniently "listed alphabetically by author" (n. pag.). With the implication of this statement being that teenagers should go out and explore, Ness not only characterises this foray into adult literature as "a great way to establish reading as exciting and even dangerous", but also takes a far more light-hearted approach to the prevalent debate about what is suitable for young adults to read and suggests that they can certainly be resilient, and perhaps even benefit from reading material which over-reaches or is most certainly 'inappropriate'.

Debates springing from the kind of criticism Bradbury directs at *Bunker Diaries* thus provide insight into the anxieties sparked by young adult literature and also emphasise the ambiguity of the young adult position. If one were to characterise young adult literature based on the extremes of current debate it would seem that it is a class of literature that is not

sophisticated enough for adults yet simultaneously inappropriate for adolescents, its intended audience, thereby situating it in an awkward no-man's land. While this is obviously a gross oversimplification, it effectively draws attention to the in-between space occupied by adolescents which is mirrored by this category that appears to be situated rather uncomfortably at the border between children's and adult literature. It also becomes apparent that young adult literature is subject to conflicting conceptions of adolescents held by adults as it is they who are debating what is appropriate for the young adult audience, with some viewing them as mature enough to enjoy and engage with challenging and sometimes dark material while others feel that they need to be protected and cannot establish for themselves what is good for them and what they can handle.

The early development of young adult literature is essentially a product of the commercial development and diversification of children's fiction. Although attributing a precise origin to children's fiction remains problematic, because establishing what exactly constitutes a children's book is still in contention, most scholars agree that "children's literature as we know it today, began in the mid eighteenth century and took hold first in Britain" (Grenby 4-5). M.O. Grenby, for example, notes that, although there were texts specifically aimed at children prior to this, for both education and entertainment, it was around this time that children's literature became a "commercially and culturally established" commodity which has continued up until today (6). This rise in the commercial viability of children's literature has been attributed to a series of factors which accompanied industrialisation and changed the book trade alongside the development of a more distinct concept of childhood. Although scholars are no longer of the opinion that "modern childhood – recognised as a distinct phase of life, with its own special needs – did not exist until the seventeenth century", as suggested by the influential French cultural historian Philippe Ariès, Grenby maintains that "his general observation that children gradually became the objects of greater parental and societal solicitude and psychological interest remains convincing" (7). Literature was an important component of this process as both a by-product of this greater solicitude for childhood and, in turn, as an influential force shaping the position of childhood since, written by adults, it was constructed around adult conceptions of childhood. David Rudd highlights this relationship, noting that "childhood itself [...] came into prominence with print technology, since which time it has become more the focus of consumer interest" (12).

The gradual diversification of children's literature into what would become today's young adult literature was also a consequence of industrialisation as the greater emphasis on education and establishment of formal schooling that resulted played an important role by creating a market for literature for young readers and facilitating categorisation according to age. Aaron H. Esman points out that prior to this children "attended school at unfixed times with school fellows of various ages", indicative of the lower degree of emphasis formerly placed on childhood as a life stage (Esman 11). As education became more important, "new educational methods were recommended and many new schools were established", resulting in a demand for "new books, designed especially for children" (Grenby 8). It was only around the mid-twentieth century that juvenile and adolescent literature materialised as a distinct category. Amanda K. Allen comments on its emergence by referring to Amy S. Pattee's book *Reading the Adolescent Romance* in which she traces the historical development of these texts. Pattee's opening chapter highlights how the early development of young adult literature was strongly shaped by "institutional authority", as "junior novels were [initially] primarily sold (and marketed) to high schools and public libraries" (in Allen 261). Soon after, adolescents in industrialised society gained "prosperity which allowed them to purchase books for themselves, without any sort of institutional mediator", producing a "significant shift" in the way juvenile literature was conceived and marketed as they now had to appeal directly to the newly formed adolescent market (261). While this shift was, arguably, formative in establishing today's young adult literature, due to the emphasis on appealing to adolescents themselves, the novels nonetheless continue to rely on evolving conceptions of the adolescent shaped by adults because then, as now, it is they who produce the literature for this market.

Although adolescence, in the sense that it exists today in western culture as a prolonged developmental stage, is a relatively new concept, it nonetheless has historical roots in earlier notions about the transition from childhood to adulthood. Heinz Werner, for examples, states that "in primitive societies there is an abrupt break between the two rigid social patterns of childhood and [adulthood]", which is "clearly defined by initiation ceremonies", whereas "[i]n advanced cultures there is a slow, long-lasting plastic transformation from one stage of life into the other" (in Esman 17). While adolescence has become a more prolonged process with an uncertain, and perhaps even indefinite, end-point, it is still understood as a period of adaption to the onset of puberty as well as the increased

social awareness and changing social role expectations that coincide with it. Erik Erikson, in his seminal 1950s work *Childhood and Society*, emphasises “the consolidation of a sense of ‘identity’ as the nuclear developmental issue of adolescence in any society” (in Esman 4). The adolescent’s pursuit of identity is one of the core defining tropes of young adult fiction and Erikson’s emphasis on identity is significant considering the in-between space that adolescence is now understood to occupy and the process of transition that is set in motion by this position.

Erikson compellingly illustrates the adolescent position by likening the young adult to a trapeze artist, as “the young person in the middle of a vigorous motion must let go of his safe hold on childhood and reach out for a firm grasp on adulthood[,] depending for a breathless interval on a relatedness between the past and the future” (in Cline vii). This analogy is particularly apt because it situates the adolescent in a suspended moment of crisis and instability located between comparatively consolidated, though not absolutely fixed, positions of childhood and adulthood. The vulnerability of this position is combined with a moment of daring and striving since the adolescent, in his/her attempt to reach out and grasp adulthood, must fling himself/herself forwards into unknown, indeterminate and unsupported space. Adding to the complexity of this position is the notion that adolescence, along with the young adult category, can be viewed not only as existing in a liminal space but also as being positioned in both the worlds of adulthood and childhood. This view is expressed by Isabelle Holland when she argues that “the adolescent is both a child and an adult, and his tastes in reading, as in everything else, reflect this fact” (34). Young adult fiction can thus also be conceived of as a category which comprises and blends the features of fiction for children and fiction for adults, rather than one that must operate outside these fields. What remains key to the genre is the focus on the concerns and anxieties of adolescent experience since it is those books “that touch the sensitive areas of adolescent life” that “are supremely young adult books” (36).

This period has thus come to be understood as one of “accelerated transition during which questions of identity become paramount” (Falconer 91). Armin Grams elaborates on how the quest for “identity” and independence is not unique to the adolescent period but foregrounds the onset of a more “individual and self-conscious” engagement with the world in contrast to the largely “uncritical” acquisition of experience up until that point (18). This is accompanied by consequent shifts in important relationships since an adolescent “will try to

leave behind the emotional dependence on parents” and come to rely more heavily on peer groups which provide a kind of buffer that postpones the need for “making individual decisions about who and what they are” and produces an environment in which “to try out various roles” (Grams 18, Donelson and Nilsen 4-5). Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen link the idea of the peer group with a “strong preference for reading books about people of approximately their own age”, young adult literature becoming an extension of the peer group that enables adolescents to broaden their vicarious interrogation of “the decisions they are making, the values they are choosing [and] the attitudes they are adopting” (5). What is coming to light in the current moment is young adult fiction not only being viewed as an extension of the peer group but also as a site for confronting difficult existential questions and challenges, such as loss and grieving, within the ‘safe’ environment of the novel. The tendency for these novels to centre on outsider figures is a further aspect attesting to the range of experience covered by contemporary young adult fiction, with their popularity suggesting that many in the young adult category can relate to the feelings of loneliness and marginality experienced by such characters. Literature for the young adult audience thus provides a means of navigating a complex period that seems to be an uncertain state of in-betweenness, in accordance with Erikson’s metaphor, and at the same time one of being in two different places at once, as Holland suggests.

There is perhaps no more widely recognised example of the potential range of young adult literature in contemporary society than J.K. Rowling’s critically acclaimed and much beloved *Harry Potter* series. These novels, although often referred to as ‘children’s books’, span virtually the entire age range of adolescence (following Harry through his high school years from the age of eleven to seventeen) and illustrate the great variability of the genre’s capacity to tackle complex issues. Moreover, the crossover appeal of the series with its record-breaking sales among adults and children alike, illustrated by the release of a set featuring more adult-friendly covers, is indicative of the young adult genre’s wide appeal and consistent with the overlapping space it occupies. As examples of young adult fiction, the *Harry Potter* novels vividly portray the changing nature of inquiry which emerges with adolescence by incorporating the fantasy world of witchcraft and wizardry into everyday reality. It is significant that Harry only gains knowledge of the magical world when he enters his adolescent years, allowing the process of finding out about this previously hidden reality, and his own place within it, to make explicit the more complex understanding of the world

and situating of the self that accompanies adolescence. The challenges of this stage are also evident in the way the plots and relationships increase in complexity as Harry grows older. Kate Behr comments on how Rowling's "narrative transformations" produce this effect through "clues or references planted [...] in earlier books [...] only [being] appreciated in the light of later events" as well as the general movement "from a mood of comic relief to one of darkening intensity" (113). This shift in tone extends to Harry's relationships with others and his own self-awareness becoming increasingly complicated by his confrontation with the darker and more ambiguous facets of human character and motives. Among the relationships Harry must negotiate is that with his deceased parents. Although the orphan figure is historically popular in young adult literature, providing a hero who is forced into the position of independence that the adolescent has begun to enter, in Rowling's novels the complex process of grieving and loss features prominently in the plot. The normal pattern of adolescent separation from parents is disrupted in Harry's case through his attempts to find ways of clinging more closely to the picture he constructs of them. This is a process troubled by many of the same challenges that face traditional adolescent-parent relationships as Harry gradually discovers flaws in the figures he has idolised and must come to terms with these aspects in attempting to define his own identity and his relation to them. Rowling's novels thus not only demonstrate many of the difficult processes of adolescence in an imaginatively rich setting, but additionally touch on the complexities of a theme gaining prevalence in the young adult genre, that of loss and mourning.

Sigmund Freud describes the mourning process as "involv[ing] grave departures from the normal attitude to life" which is only regarded as not being pathological because "we rely on its being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful" ("Mourning" 243-4). According to Freud, this disruption is produced by the libido's "understandable" opposition to being "withdrawn from its attachment to [the lost] object," even though "[r]eality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists" (244). In simpler terms, a person must accept that the object is lost and relinquish their emotional investment and dependence on the existence of this object. However, the opposition to this process can "be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (244). The fact that a person may choose to find means of denying a reality that is abundantly apparent illustrates the depth of pain that is involved in loosening such an

attachment. While these are all features of normal ‘healthy’ mourning, there are also cases in which this process can become prolonged and remain incomplete, constituting a pathological case of mourning, which is what Freud describes as “melancholia”.

The process of loss becomes further complicated when considering the position of children and adolescents since it has been argued that the ability of children to mourn in a psychological sense – that is to engage in deatthexis and withdraw emotional investment from the lost object – is limited to their level of development, although it is generally accepted that even very young children feel loss profoundly (Frankiel 327, see Wolfenstein, Furman and Gardener). Martha Wolfenstein in particular argues that proper mourning does not take place even during adolescence as on some level there is a tendency to deny the finality of the loss due to “developmental unreadiness [...] for the work of mourning”, although this does not “preclude an adaptive reaction to major object loss in childhood” (336-7). This is most specifically in the case of the loss of a parent because, according to Atle Dyregrov, this entails “not only [...] [the loss of] a person who is responsible for love and daily care” but, moreover, “the death often leads to less stability and an overturning of daily life” (47). Dyregrov goes on to say that “such a death is so penetrating that the child needs to keep the realities at a distance, not so that they lose contact with reality, but because the emotional magnitude can only be taken in step by step” (47). These assertions indicate the difficulties that children may experience in successfully mourning a parent who, being so closely related to their own developmental needs, constitutes a particularly unbearable loss which they may be unwilling or unable to fully accept. What the primary texts within this research will indicate is that this can apply to other forms of loss and even cases where loss is not traumatic but may result in drastic change and produce adaption strategies that hinge on a temporary distancing from reality.

Wolfenstein highlights the way “adolescence has been repeatedly likened to mourning” because the adolescent engages in the difficult process of separating from parents, as well as preconceived notions about the world and themselves which tend to become troubled at this time, and thus unconsciously goes through an operation similar to that of loss (350). In certain cases, especially with regard to parental loss, this can lead to particularly complex patterns of mourning as the adolescent is “devaluing the object that he is in the process of giving up”, unlike the typical case of “the mourner thinking of the [lost object] in a loving and idealized way” (353). This difference in the attitude to the lost object is

noteworthy when considering the effects of parental loss on the adolescent who, in consequence of the distancing in progress prior to loss, is likely to suffer from emotions of guilt and regret. This may result in “the reversal of the adolescent process of detachment” and lead to what is termed hypercathexis, “with a strong regressive pull toward a more childish and dependent relation, seen now in a highly idealized light” (338). Again, although this refers specifically to the loss of a parent, the kind of disruption that the other forms of loss portrayed in the primary texts focus on produces varying degrees of this response. The fantasy elements that feature in the novels are characteristic of children’s literature and can be viewed as a kind of regression to childhood coping mechanisms. This regression to a certain extent impedes the mourning process of relinquishing the hold on the lost object, although hypercathexis is a recognised part of the early stage of mourning, and can lead to an adolescent becoming fixed at this developmental phase. These processes are indicative of defensive mechanisms which seek by some means to maintain the lost parent’s existence, even though the adolescent is fully aware of the consequences of death. Wolfenstein describes this as a “splitting of the ego”, a defensive process in which “the denial of the parent’s death coexists with a correct conscious acknowledgement of what has really happened”, highlighting the need to keep the mourning removed to some degree by keeping part of the self protected from its full force and implications (344).

The need to shield the self from the full ramifications of loss is highly evocative of reactions to trauma which, like loss, constitutes an event or actuality that is so painful or disturbing that the psyche resists confronting it while simultaneously being unable to fully repress or ignore it. Such a loss can then indeed be considered a form of psychological trauma. Cathy Caruth, whose views are rooted in psychoanalysis, asserts that in psychological discourse trauma has come to be understood as a “wound inflicted [...] upon the mind” that, unlike a wounded body, is not “a simple and healable event, but rather [...] is experienced too soon [and] too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (3). This conception of trauma illustrates how the traces of traumatic experience reside in the unconscious and it is only when these traces come to the fore that trauma is confronted. For Caruth, at “the heart of Freud’s writing on trauma” is the notion that “trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in an attempt to tell

us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4). The notion of the wound can be considered in relation to the separation from parents that takes place during adolescence as this constitutes a kind of severance that must be worked through as part of the process of achieving identity and growing into adulthood. While this is not to equate the process of growing-up with the experience of severe psychological trauma, there is a sense in which the process of growth, like trauma, produces a psychological wound due to the losses necessary for further development, which gradually comes to be known and understood as maturation takes place. In the primary novels this process is further exaggerated and complicated, becoming more traumatic, because of the occurrence of other losses which disrupt this process.

John H. Harvey argues that, although all loss is not necessarily traumatic, “traumatic events [...] fundamentally are about loss” in its various forms (2). He considers loss and trauma to be forces which “spin us into dark woods” and constitute “assaults on the self that diminish us but that also sometimes help us grow”, as in the case of separating from parents (1). From a social-psychological perspective, the trauma of loss lies in the way it directly or indirectly impacts on our social connections since in this view “who we are and become is a function of [these] relations” (4). Thus, according to Harvey, “[w]hen we experience our greatest losses (e.g., the loss of a parent), they are social losses – of interaction, companionship, love, compassion, and the human touch” (6). This is perhaps especially significant in adolescence because of the unsettled state of identity at this time.

Harvey’s point about the way in which the traumatic experience of loss produces growth sheds some light on the popularity of this theme in contemporary young adult fiction. Eric L. Tribunella examines what he terms “a common narrative in twentieth-century American literature for youth: that of the child protagonist’s love for some cherished object – a dear friend, a dog, a possibility, an ideal – the loss of that loved object, and his or her subsequent maturation through the experience of loving and losing it” (xi). Although this research is applied specifically to American literature, Tribunella’s interrogation of the role of loss in these narratives raises an important argument about how maturation and the functionality of literature are conceptualised which can be more widely applied. He states that “[t]he striking recurrence of this pattern suggests that children’s literature [...] relies on the contrived traumatising of children – both protagonists and readers – as a way of representing and promoting the process of becoming a mature adult”(xi). Maturity is thus

understood to be a kind of “wounded” state, in the psychological sense, and the loss of a loved object a form of necessary “sacrifice” that “triggers [...] and constitutes maturation” (xiv). Literature is, moreover, perceived as having a role in this process as the confrontation with loss and trauma within novels supplements real life experience, acting like “a kind of inoculation by which the toxicity of loss is introduced into the life of the child in order to help [...] develop a resistance to extratextual realities, both the extremely damaging experiences we call traumatic and the more minutely but cumulatively oppressive banalities of life” (xii). Bearing in mind the current media debates sparked by controversial but award-winning young adult novels, it would seem that there has been a steady shift in viewing literature as a means of introducing children to the world and the challenges that they will face rather than as a way of preserving and extending the carefree innocence of childhood. Since adolescence is a period characterised as a transitional state between childhood and adulthood, it is not then surprising that narratives of this nature would be prominent in young adult literature. In the primary novels under discussion, for example, loss prompts the assumption of more adult roles and leads to maturation through the mourning process. However, the use of fantasy as the means by which this is achieved shows an attempt to take refuge in childhood even as this process is taking place, giving an in-depth view of the precariousness that generates maturity. As childhood and by extension adolescence have become sites for exploring the effects and nature of trauma, it is a period which has increasingly come to be viewed as the “originary moment of trauma” and one which thus merits study, an area which Tribunella mentions as only recently drawing scholarly interest (xiii).

The association of loss with maturation and growth is thus a well-established trope in fiction for younger audiences and seems to corroborate the idea that transitioning into adulthood is a process of loss. Although this is a relatively common plot device in this category, the focus texts under discussion represent a growing trend in which novels centre on and give form to the interior world of protagonists faced with loss during this transitional, and therefore precarious, life-stage. In contrast to self-help books or guides which are explicitly designed to steer the reader through the process of loss, we are now seeing novels that seek to accurately portray this often highly fraught process within a fictional narrative. Giskin Day argues that there has been an increase in literature for young adults specifically focused on bereavement. Day attributes this trend to a more open “contemporary attitude to death and grieving” that she refers to as “a bereavement turn” (1). Although, previously, very

few books for this age group “directly addressed illness and dying”, in “the last decade”, and the “past year” in particular, several critically acclaimed books have been published on this theme, most clearly reflected by “almost all” of “the eight novels shortlisted for the 2012 Carnegie Medal” dealing “directly or indirectly with bereavement” (1-2). For Day, this indicates “a wider movement in which mortality is being explored”, both because death has become “more public” due to the effects of modern technologies and also because such a large number of children worldwide are exposed to bereavement from the effects of “disease, poor nutrition and war” (2-3). The presence of these themes in literature also points to the more widely “acknowledged role for books in helping young people to cope with grief” since “bibliotherapy” is gaining currency with the National Health Services in the United Kingdom (3).<sup>3</sup> Considering the many challenges and dangers that young adults are exposed to and the number of books published recently that seek to bring such issues to light, particularly themes associated with ‘the problem novel’ – such as cutting, drugs and depression – it would seem that there is a therapeutic motivation behind many of these books so that readers may be more understanding of those who might suffer or find solace in not being alone. This therapeutic value is also frequently cited by those who defend young adult literature from criticism for its dark content.

Because of the nature of this subject matter, it is important to take into account how it is that texts are able to give a convincing sense of the traumatic experience of loss, particularly since trauma has come to be understood as unspeakable. Based on his work with survivors of the Holocaust, psychoanalyst Dori Laub argues that the telling of trauma can be considered necessary for survival since “the ‘not-telling’ of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny” insofar as “the events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life”, an occurrence which is evident in the primary novels (79). However, this “imperative to tell the story [...] is inhabited by the impossibility of telling” because “there are never words enough or the right words” for a narrative which “cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech*” (78-9, emphasis in original). This tension between the need to tell the trauma, in order to know the story, and the inability to satisfactorily articulate it is therefore highly characteristic of narratives which express traumatic experience.

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<sup>3</sup>Odhran O’Donoghue’s favourable review of *A Monster Calls* published in the *Lancet*, a respected oncology journal, is a clear indication of the importance of the subject matter covered and also testifies to the quality of the novel’s portrayal of confronting the loss of a family member to terminal illness.

In the primary novels discussed here, fantasy, introduced in the form of dark and ambiguous monster companions, is a crucial narrative strategy that externalises complex, often unconscious, emotional states related to loss and transition. Fantasy is thus employed to depict and facilitate the process of working through the traumatic aspects of growing into adolescence and confronting difficult new realities. Though historically dismissed by literary critics as a frivolous literary form not worthy of critical engagement, fantasy has increasingly come to be viewed as a valuable means of engaging with real issues rather than as an escape from them. This is particularly prominent in texts which incorporate fantasy elements in otherwise realistic narratives since in such instances fantasy often prompts a questioning and troubling of reality or allows for a more in-depth engagement with aspects of the real which are below the surface, including character interiority. Among critical theorists who changed the view of fantasy is Tzvetan Todorov who made use of structural analysis to clearly define a specific sub-genre of fantasy which he termed ‘the fantastic’, a form of fantasy that occurs specifically in texts set in everyday reality. For Todorov, at “the very heart of the fantastic” is the occurrence of an event within “a world which is indeed our world, the one we know”, that “cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world” (Todorov 25). Particular to the fantastic, seen to be an “interruption of the inadmissible” within the everyday order, is the notion that it is sustained through “hesitation”, meaning that the reader is left in doubt as to whether the fantasy elements are a psychological projection or supernatural in nature (Roger Caillois in Todorov 26, Todorov 25). According to Rosemary Jackson, a subsequent theorist working with fantasy, the eruption of fantasy into the real is the expression of desire in all senses, both the *telling* of desire and its *expulsion* in the sense of squeezing out elements which “threaten cultural order and continuity” (3-4). As opposed to a literature of escapism, fantasy is thus highly invested in its context since it “characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints” and, through seeking what is “experienced as absence” or “loss”, interrogates these absences (3-4).

Magical realism, another sub-category of fantasy which incorporates fantasy elements into a real-world setting and is particularly associated with post-colonial literature, similarly employs fantasy as a kind of subversive force, in this case to convey alternative view points and perceptions of reality. According to Maggie Ann Bowers, in magical realism “magical aspects are accepted as part of everyday reality throughout the text” and conveyed in a “matter-of-fact manner” in a “recognizably realistic setting”, unlike the “faltering between

belief and non-belief in the supernatural” that is produced by the fantastic (27, 31, 25). This produces a “tolerant and accepting type of fiction” which withholds “judgement” of different perspectives and fosters a “disruption of categories” (23-4). It is also a form of fantasy similar, though not identical, to that employed “in domestic fantasy and magical children’s fiction” since such texts also “provide an interesting insight into assumptions about the relationship of magic to everyday reality, and the human need to learn this process at an early age” (109). What these different uses and theories of fantasy point to is the genre’s potential to shine a light on aspects of the real that are generally either not apparent on the surface or not admissible. In the case of the young adult novel which is concerned with a period characterised by the tensions between being an individual and belonging to a group, and specifically novels that also engage trauma, dealing with emotional suffering that must be confronted and yet cannot be expressed, fantasy emerges as a powerful device for conveying the complexity of the adolescent experience as it coincides with traumatic loss.

In order to understand what the monster, as a fantasy element, brings to the primary novels and how it functions as an avenue for confronting and working through complex material within the young adult category, it is necessary to first consider the heritage of the monster in children’s fiction and especially within the fairy tale. Bettelheim, a well-known proponent of psychoanalysis, famously wrote one of the early studies on the value of the folk fairy tale for helping children to make meaning in their lives. Part of the reason he emphasised this genre was its inclusion of darker elements, such as the monster, which “confront[ ] the child squarely with the basic human predicaments” (8). This endorsement of the dark side of the fairy tale is rooted in the aim of “enabl[ing] man to accept the problematic nature of life without being defeated by it, or giving in to escapism” (8). For Bettelheim, fairy tales facilitate this process because they allow a child to achieve greater understanding of his “conscious self” and with it develop valuable coping mechanisms for the operations of the unconscious. This process occurs “not through rational comprehension of the nature and content of [the] unconscious, but by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams – ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures” (7). While Bettelheim’s rather procrustean application of psychoanalytic theory has been widely critiqued, notably by prominent fairy tale researcher Jack Zipes who has tended to focus on the meaning and value of tales in relation to their cultural context, Bettelheim’s emphasis on the value of the scary and

dangerous qualities of these tales has remained compelling. Moreover, in spite of the differences in their approach, Bettelheim and Zipes both draw attention to the value of stories and storytelling for making meaning. The monster in its many forms has emerged as an especially variable and malleable device that enables the confrontation of complex issues and the conveyance of important lessons in the form of fantasy.

Stephen T. Asma points out that the term monster is derived from the Latin root “*monere*” which means “to warn”, positioning this figure as essentially a kind of “omen” and shifting it from being purely “an odious creature of the imagination” (13). This framing of the monster, subtly imbuing it with a kind of practical purpose or service within the gap between warning and merely terrifying, in fact resonates strongly with the way it has been presented and utilised in children’s fairy tales and the folk tales from which they developed. Marina Warner describes the “[m]onsters, ogres, and beasts who kill and eat human flesh” as “variously represent[ing] abominations against society, civilisation and family”, while simultaneously serving as “vehicles for expressing ideas of proper behaviour and due order” (11). Although monsters are often associated with the fears of the childhood imagination, such as the Bogeyman or the monster-under-the-bed representing a fear of being left alone in the dark at bedtime, it is noteworthy that, as with all children’s literature, these are ideas and creatures which have largely been seeded by adults to conform with a particular idea of the child and to fulfil a certain purpose. In “Little Red Riding Hood”, the Big Bad Wolf is a kind of monster that embodies the dangers of talking to strangers, while the telling of the tale warns children of the consequences of such an action as in some versions she is devoured along with her grandmother whom she is on her way to visit. Many tales also present a world in which fears can be overcome and seemingly powerless children can triumph if they are cunning as in “Hansel and Gretel” in which the children manage to outwit an evil witch and bake her in the oven she would have cooked them in.<sup>4</sup> The monster was in all manifestations a creature that was threatening and dangerous, a source of fear or evil to be avoided, escaped from or defeated. The fact that it is a form of monster that is introduced in the primary novels thus conveys the internal emotional landscape of conflict and loss that the characters experience, highlighting their youth and vulnerability in facing losses they are not yet able to deal with, in a way that a more typically good and friendly figure from the fairytale might not. Furthermore, this figure functions as an urgent warning of the dangers of repression,

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<sup>4</sup> I refer to *The Complete Fairy Tales* of the Brothers Grimm published by Vintage Books.

forcing a confrontation with unspeakable loss through its menacing presence. However, the use of a monster as a source of aid and healing is also rooted in the contemporary shift to a more domesticated portrayal of this figure – positioning it as the misunderstood outsider or lonely figure with whom both children and adolescents are able to identify.

In many modern monster tales this figure has often been compassionately portrayed and regularly been cast as the hero of the story in children's and young adult fiction. Warner notes that, "[a]lthough much of the material that echoes to the bogeyman's tread is ancient [,] [...] the insistence on monsters in children's lives [has] present[ed] a new development in their entertainment" in the form of an "affinity with monsters" (14-5). The monster is thus less associated with the unknown and more frequently enters into the home space. In consequence of this change, "[m]onsters have become children's best friends, *alter egos* [and] inner selves", which is not only "fostered by commercial interest" but also by what has been "diagnosed [as] an identification that children themselves willingly and enthusiastically accept" (15). The animated film industry is a prominent example of the recent popularity of the monster, with young viewers clearly connecting with this figure. Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson's *Shrek* (2001) incorporates various figures from popular fairytales and nursery rhymes in a fantasy world in which the protagonist, who ultimately wins the princess, is the ogre while the would-be royal suitor, Lord Farquaad, is shown to be far more monstrous and amoral at heart. The film generates humour by subverting the expectations of the fairy tale while also poignantly displaying Shrek's struggles with prejudices against him. In a further twist the princess who originally sought true-love's first kiss to escape the curse of turning into an ogre each night remains in this form after falling in love with Shrek. In Pete Doctor, Lee Unkrich and David Silverman's *Monsters Inc* (2001), the terrifying monster-under-the-bed is re-imagined as an everyday member of the workforce of the fictional monster city Monstropolis which uses children's screams as its energy source. The film thus plays upon a stereotypical view of the monster to create a more compelling unknown world and subverts expectations when it is revealed that monsters are actually as afraid of children as children are of them. By the end of the film, the unlikely bond that forms between Boo, a young child who ends up in Monstropolis, and the "lead-scarer" James P. "Sully" Sullivan results in a total re-structuring of the system when it emerges that children's laughter is more powerful than their screams. This shifts the emphasis from scaring to entertaining and repositions the monster as friendly and funny once certain evil individuals have been overcome. Genndy

Tartakovsky's *Hotel Transylvania* (2012) swaps the role of human and monster as it depicts many of the stock characters of the monster novel – including Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, werewolves and several versions of the living dead – on a holiday retreat to get away from the fearful persecution of humankind. Within this setting the film centres on the coming of age of a young vampire who falls in love with a naive back-packer and the struggle she faces in overcoming her father's antipathy to people. In Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois's *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010), Hiccup, a misfit boy who is son of the chief of a Viking community plagued by an array of dragon species, seeks to prove himself by capturing and killing the rare and dreaded Night Fury. Once in possession of his quarry he cannot kill the dragon because of how strongly he identifies with it. Unable to set it free due to an injury that has impaired its flight, Hiccup begins to care for it, naming it Toothless, and develops a new understanding of these creatures which he is eventually able to convey to the community after he and Toothless defeat the giant dragon at the nest which has control over the others. These are all examples of figures which fall into the category of the monstrous, still possessing some aspects of the formidable quality of the monster, but which have come to be situated as companions or figures with which children identify.

The aspects of the monster that tend to position it on the margins of society can easily correspond to the experiences of children gradually learning acceptable behaviour and thus its dark history is crucial to its appeal in a more domesticated state. The value of the monstrous as a parallel to the child relating to growing up is demonstrated in Maurice Sendak's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*. The simple story tells of a young boy Max who is sent to his room without supper for causing "mischief" (1). As part of a process of finding an acceptable outlet for his impulses, Max enters a fantasy world when a forest grows into his room and he sails off across the ocean to a land of "wild things", or monsters, that make him their king as he is the wildest of all (17). In this way, he is enabled through fantasy, which reads as imaginative play, to express the urges for which he is punished, on the one hand, and, on the other, through his position of authority in this new environment, to work through the conflict with his mother. This is apparent when he stops the "rumpus" and mimics her actions by sending the wild things to bed without supper before following the smell of "good things to eat" and returning to "where someone love[s] him best of all", evident from the supper he finds "waiting" and "still hot" (22, 29-30, 35, 37). The straightforward transfer of real conflicts into a fantasy space demonstrates its value as a coping mechanism and means of

conflict resolution for young children, with the monster emerging as a compelling parallel to their position.

The primary novels under discussion essentially employ this same narrative technique to portray the interiority of adolescent protagonists confronting loss and change. The ambiguous position of this age-group and the more critical and self-aware manner in which they respond to their world results in a more ambiguous form of fantasy intervening in the real and a more complex use of the monster. Although adolescents are arguably too old for this kind of fantasy, it is precisely because of this that the narratives are so effective since they display the childlike vulnerability of the protagonists in the circumstances they face, but also show how interior fantasy becomes more complicated which reflects their more advanced age. *Skellig*, the novel which is most closely related to children's fiction, features the least typical, and the only humanoid, form of monster as the titular character is a composite figure containing elements of man, angel and owl. Although his association with the angel might seem to preclude reading this character as a monster, the way that Skellig initially comes across as an unsettling and repellent figure found in the gothic space of a derelict garage and only later, after receiving care from the children, takes on a more angelic role is evocative of the portrayal of the monster and its transformative quality. *A Monster Calls* features the most stereotypical incarnation of the monster which, through the ambiguous way it is presented, can be read as a projection of Conor's anger about losing his mother and his isolation in facing this loss. In *The Bone Dragon* the titular figure exists on one level as a kind of amulet, again an older system of knowledge and belief like the storytelling in *A Monster Calls* and the Blakean Spiritualism in *Skellig*, through the carving Evie makes from her rib and then, at night, as a living dragon called to existence by Evie's wish, as a monstrous projection of the power she longs for. These monsters thus operate in subtly different ways but in each case facilitate an expression of the inadmissible feelings of adolescent protagonists thrust into grown up situations by the experience of loss before they are ready. The use of the monster of children's fiction within the highly realistic and familiar settings that are typical of young adult literature conveys the loneliness and vulnerability of these characters while also contributing to the dark and scary aspects of the novels which sensitively deal with topics shown to be relevant to the young adult and the in-between space he/she occupies.

## Chapter 2

### “Happy Half the Time, Half the Time Dead Scared”: Configuring Adolescence in David Almond’s *Skellig*

‘What are you?’ I whispered. He shrugged again. ‘Something,’ he said. ‘Something like you, something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel.’  
(*Skellig* 158)

It’s a difficult time. Everything inside you’s changing. The world can seem a wild and weird place.  
(*Skellig* 114-5)

David Almond’s *Skellig* has been widely acclaimed for its originality and engagement with difficult subject-matter for young readers and as a text which draws attention to the blurred divide between children’s and young adult fiction. This ambiguous quality is produced by the titular owl-angel creature described by Carys Crossen as “something of a hybrid” like the novel itself (11). In 1998 it received the Carnegie Medal and Whitbread Children’s Book Award while also being considered a cross-over novel and taking runner-up for the Michael L. Printz Award which recognises literary excellence in young adult literature.<sup>5</sup> Although the Carnegie Medal judging panel has begun to assign a suggested age-range to shortlisted books, many awards that still judge young adult books as part of the children’s literature category do not necessarily distinguish them from the books for younger readers. This obscures the divide between these classifications and positions young adult literature as a division of children’s literature, in contrast to the distance the young *adult* designation implies. While this ambiguity about its classification is perhaps attributable to a slippage between terms or the position of young adult literature at the time, in this chapter I argue that *Skellig* is also a text that sits at the cusp between these two categories and just begins to transition into the young adult bracket, thus placing it as an example of such a transitional young adult fiction at the beginning of my exploration of the three novels that, each in its own way, negotiate this contested terrain. Almond’s incorporation of fantasy in the hybrid figure of Skellig stems from conventions in children’s fiction and yet exceeds these conventions through the way Skellig explicitly functions in relation to difficult aspects of growing up experienced by the ten-year-old protagonist Michael. Although I argue that *Skellig*’s happy ending ultimately

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<sup>5</sup> The Whitbread Children’s Book Award became the Costa Award in 2006.

keeps it within the bounds of children's literature, I nonetheless consider this a text which works with many issues relevant to adolescence, making it an important example of the way fantasy is beginning to be mobilised in young adult fiction dealing with loss and trauma.

The novel is narrated by Michael as a retrospective chronicle of his encounter with the dying creature Skellig that he discovers in the dangerously dilapidated garage of the run-down house he moves to with his parents at the start of the book. While the age of the protagonist and the explicit emphasis on conveying the story of his adventures with a fantastical being position *Skellig* as a children's novel, it nevertheless begins to push the boundaries of this category by dealing with the real-life challenges confronted by adolescents, such as coping with change and confronting larger existential questions. Michael's narrative spans both the period of his relationship with Skellig and a phase of transition for him and his family, comprising the move to the new house, previously inhabited by a lonely old man who died there, and the premature arrival of his baby sister whose life hangs in the balance for most of the novel. It is the narrative's continued investment in these challenging aspects of the everyday within a story ostensibly about a fantasy figure that registers a complex use of fantasy in relation to the real and begins to shift the novel into the young adult category. Describing himself to Michael as "[s]omething like you, something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel", Skellig is a hybrid humanoid character combining elements of nature and wildness, often associated with childhood, together with human aspects, with much of his initial behaviour reminiscent of the stereotypically aloof and difficult teenager, and the normally unearthly figure of the angel, generally a sentimental saviour figure in children's fiction (*Skellig* 158). This mix of characteristics places him between categories or within more than one, resonating with Michael's position between childhood and adolescence and as no longer comfortably fitting into his world. Skellig's precarious health also parallels that of the baby and of the deceased previous inhabitant of the house, Ernie Myers. He is thus able to fulfil a multifaceted role within the novel by embodying Michael's sense of abandonment and resentment and furthering his exposure to the realities of vulnerability and mortality, particularly acute since the baby, who is closer to Michael in age, may also die. Furthermore, Michael's discovery of Skellig prompts an exploration of different knowledge systems, as Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parsons have pointed out in their compelling reading of the novel as an example of magical realism, an inclusive mode in which fantastical occurrences are represented as part of

material reality. This is a process that is additionally facilitated by the friendship that develops between Michael and his eccentric home-schooled neighbour Mina, an isolated child whose father died before she was born. Her own experience of loss makes her sensitive to Michael's situation and places her as someone with whom he can share his secrets. In addition, her unusual outlook on life, which accommodates a variety of viewpoints, and her close connection to nature are elements which mirror Skellig's hybridity and position Mina as a counterpart to him in the narrative. This inclusion of different epistemological systems in relation to Skellig signals the value of alternative ways of seeing, showing Michael's assimilation of new ideas as he grows and adapts during this transitional period. Mina's role in the novel is especially significant because she is the only other character with whom Michael shares Skellig and she therefore endorses the point of view conveyed through his narrative.

The novel opens with Michael recounting his discovery of Skellig "in the garage on a Sunday afternoon [...] the day after [moving] to Falconer Road" and in the absence of his parents who are "inside the house [...] worrying about the baby" and consulting with her doctor, ominously referred to as "Doctor Death" by the young narrator (1). Michael's inclusion of details about his home situation at the time of his encounter with Skellig suggests their relevance to what follows, especially since this is a retrospective account which implies that elements included are the product of the informed understanding of how the story unfolds. The contextual information given in the opening draws attention to the fact that Michael is not simply exploring by himself, but is alone because his parents are preoccupied with their new child, alerting the reader from the outset to the fact that the baby's arrival has shifted him to the margins of the family unit during a time of significant change in his life. The precariousness of his sister's health, also in evidence in these first few lines, in combination with the condition of the new house, results in a more extreme shift of attention away from Michael to her care and improvements to the home, onto which his parents project much of their frustration and sense of helplessness. Being ten years old, a large age gap between siblings and a significant period of time to have held the position of only child, Michael is old enough to look after himself and help out, further contributing to his displacement as he is expected to take on an adult role and to understand the need to focus on the baby. These circumstances not only rapidly propel Michael into adolescence, arguably constituting a sudden push to the trapeze of Erikson's analogy as Michael is more rapidly

propelled to the moment he must “let go of his safe hold on childhood” in order to reach for adulthood, but also preclude him from resenting the baby which is a natural process of adaptation to a new sibling (in Cline vii). Thus, although he does not experience actual trauma, the sudden severance from his parents produced by these circumstance is also a kind of wounding that leaves him vulnerable and newly alone while working through feelings of alienation and uncertainty associated with the onset of puberty. While Michael does not elaborate on his feelings in his narrative or make use of the retrospective voice to analyse his behaviour as is often the case in this form of first-person narration, the details that he includes and the attitude that is communicated through his phrasing are employed to great effect to depict the feelings that his situation prevents him from openly expressing.

The move to the new house, seemingly undertaken in preparation for the addition to the family considering its proximity to the baby’s arrival, is the first aspect of the change that takes place in Michael’s life. At this early stage of transition into adolescence, it is already apparent that Michael’s attitude is at variance with that of his parents, indicating that a process of severance is taking place. While his parents are looking forward to the future and the start of this new chapter in their lives, viewing the move and the process of fixing up the house as part of “some big adventure”, Michael’s contrasting desire “to get out” and “get back to the old house again” reflects his resistance to this change and a longing for things to stay the same, a sentiment which I would argue extends to the baby as well (*Skellig* 2). His lack of enthusiasm for the house is evident from his description of the garden as a “wilderness” populated by “nettles” and “lumps of stone” instead of “benches and a table and a swing”, and of the garage, where he finds Skellig, as more akin to a “demolition site or [...] rubbish dump” (1-2, 5). By pairing descriptions of what is actually there and what his parents had said there *will* be or what the estate agent, who consistently instructed them to “see [the house] with [their] mind’s eye” and to “imagine what could be done”, had said there *could* be, Michael draws attention to all the ways this is not like a home and to the discrepancy between what he has been told by adults and what is there in reality (2). It is interesting that in the case of the house it is his parents, the adults, who are taken in by the fantasy the estate agent spins of the potential home, while it is Michael, the child, who sees it as it is and initially cannot, or will not, engage in imagining the home it could become.

Michael is also more affected than the others by the knowledge that the previous owner died in the house and “had been dead nearly a week before they found him under the

table in the kitchen” (2). The pervading signs of neglect and the things that are wrong about the house, such as the fact that there is “an old cracked toilet” installed in a corner of the dining room because Ernie “couldn’t manage the stairs”, not only testify to the extremely lonely and frail existence of its former inhabitant, but also make the house an unfamiliar and uncanny space (2). This setting shifts the fairly mundane act of moving to a new house into the realm of the Gothic mode which has historically been concerned with the secret and unsettling things that underlie the everyday and which, as Crossen points out with reference to Jerrold E. Hogle’s “general parameters” of this mode, typically “takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space” that contains hidden “secrets from the past” (Hogle in Crossen 13). Although Skellig, who is also more a Gothic monster than a typical angel, does not constitute such a secret, the history of the house and its inhabitant confront Michael with previously unfronted realities of death, the prospect of total isolation and the breakdown of the home, causing him to become concerned with complex existential questions at a time when he is feeling especially vulnerable.

Even the descriptions of natural creatures around the house in the early chapters refer mostly to things which are dead or associated with decay. In the garage where he finds Skellig, Michael repeatedly notes the “[d]ead bluebottles” that litter every surface and also comes across “the bones of some little animal” that died trapped in a “stone jar” (*Skellig* 6). In the process of removing Ernie’s old gas fire, Michael’s dad finds four dead birds, one of which has “[b]een there so long it’s nearly a fossil” and is “hard as stone” (14-15). The baby with her precarious health, and even to some extent her doctor – whom Michael nicknames Doctor Death because of the sickly appearance of his “grey” face and the “black spots on his hands”, his unhappy manner, and the fact that he once saw him “lighting up a fag in his car [...] as he drove away” – become further factors which confront him with the frailty of life and the prospect of death and add to the unsettling quality of his new environment (6). The sinister quality of the doctor, also attributable to the fact that his visits signal that the baby is not doing well, is an instance of how typically positive forces like doctors who are healers or the figure of the angel are subverted and given a darker and more unsettling quality by Almond, communicating the fear and uncertainty that surrounds death and illness and also making these characters more believable since they are not idealised. This also constitutes a style that is more in keeping with the young adult category since the Gothic is not a mode generally associated with children’s literature. The move to a new house, in many ways

synonymous with a process of growth and moving forward, is thus in this case also accompanied by Michael's exposure to uncomfortable new realisations, which convey the difficult aspects that come with change. It is additionally noteworthy that, in this process the home, the space which is supposed to be familiar and a safe retreat is now the very place which is uncomfortable and confronting him with life's complexities.

The impact that Michael's situation has on him is particularly evident in the one area of his life that has not changed, his school. When his mother shouts at him for investigating the garage, saying "Do you not think we have more to worry about than stupid you getting crushed in a stupid garage?", an indication that he is not the priority and should be old enough to know better, he thinks about how at the old house all his friends would be "up on the top field [...] playing a match that'd last all day" as if he longs to be with them (4). However, when the time comes to go to school and see them he does not seem to be looking forward to it and does not participate as usual (6). The fact that Michael has chosen to stay in his old school and take the bus everyday rather than attending a different one suggests its importance to him and is a further reflection of his desire for things to stay the same. However, when he returns it feels "strange" because "[l]oads had happened to [him], but school stayed just the same", demonstrating how even this familiar environment is impacted because Michael is different (12). The way he lists the teachers and their characteristic behaviours, using colourful nicknames they have been given by the pupils, and notes his best friends Leakey and Coot "argu[ing] for ages about whether a shot had gone over the line" vividly depict typical school-life and suggest his prior participation and sense of belonging there (12-13). But, in light of his altered circumstances, he now observes these familiar aspects from a new perspective in which the importance of his school pastimes is diminished, communicated by how he "couldn't be bothered with it all" and spends lunchtime staring "over the town to where [he lives] now" (13). With his friends seemingly oblivious to or disinterested in what is happening in his life and Michael still concerned about fitting in, a factor which contributes to him not confiding in Mrs Dando, "one of the auxiliaries" who repeatedly checks on his situation and brings him work that he has missed, the school emerges as another place where he does not have anyone to confide in (13). At moments when he is on the bus, such as on the first day when he has a fleeting impulse to "stand up and say, 'There's a man in our garage and my sister is ill and it's the first day I've travelled from the new house to the old school'", and on a subsequent occasion when he does indeed

tell this to an “old bloke” beside him who smells of “pee and pipesmoke” and clearly “wasn’t all there”, his isolation is apparent (12, 33-4).

As Michael is becoming more out of place in the areas of his life where he used to comfortably belong, he also begins to shift into new parts of himself that are most clearly evident in the friendship that develops with Mina and the process of knowing and helping Skellig which this friendship facilitates. As an isolated home-schooled child with an unusual outlook, Mina is an outsider who also has experience of loss, even though it occurred before she was born, and therefore someone Michael gravitates towards during this uncertain transitional period. After she introduces herself to him over the wall as he is leaving the garage after a second visit to try and confirm that Skellig was not a dream, Michael becomes curious about her, observing her activities in “another front garden” further down the street, and begins to go and talk to her (22). Michael notes that she has eyes that make “you think [they] can see right through you”, a characteristic he repeatedly alludes to, and he describes her as “nice” and “clever” when he is convincing Skellig to let her help (23, 53). Mina thus emerges as a perceptive girl who is open to the world around her and to different viewpoints, though opposed to formal schooling on the grounds that it is restrictive. In addition to introducing him to the wonderful things to be found in the neighbourhood and to new ideas, important in relation to Skellig, she also allows him to feel valued because she “look[s] forward to seeing him again”, unlike his friends who know and value the old Michael, and she notices when he is “unhappy” (24, 38). She also shows concern for the baby and empathy for “what [he’s] been through” (47). Being welcomed into her house, an intimate insular environment given the home-schooling and relationship between single parent and only child, additionally provides a surrogate home space that encapsulates what has been temporarily unsettled in Michael’s home and family. Mina thus provides a relationship that is safe enough for Michael to share Skellig without the risk of being thought stupid or insane, things he fears, and is a crucial part of his navigation through this transitional period. However, while this new friendship is arguably an unambiguously positive example of change, it still comes with loss and complications because it further develops that part that is alien to his old friends and therefore places more strain on that relationship. This is evident when Leakey and Coot come to visit and tease Michael about Mina who is subsequently dismissive of them and their pursuits, effectively confronting Michael with seemingly irreconcilable parts of himself that are reflected in the separate friendships and constitute a difficult aspect of growth that is

typical of identity formation during adolescence. The novel's exploration of this aspect of transition and growth largely achieved through Skellig's many characteristics and their associations.

The different facets of Skellig's character – the animal, the human, the bird and the angel – are disseminated throughout the text in ways which shift or extend meanings and unsettle categories, allowing him to connect to different characters and concerns. Birds are a particularly prominent presence in the narrative. Since it is spring, there are many chicks that are undergoing development and approaching maturity at this time. Michael's parents both refer to the baby as their "little chick" and Mina says that she and Michael are "still like chicks, [...] [h]appy half the time, half the time dead scared" (21, 45, 132). William Blake's line "How can a bird that is born for joy/ Sit in a cage and sing?", the motto underpinning Mina's learning, presents another comparison between children and birds in the context it is used (48). The act of listening for blackbird chicks, "a tiny squeaking sound, far-off, like it was coming from another world", is evoked in relation to Skellig's breathing, "a far-off whistling sound", and also in connection with the baby as Michael comes to believe he feels her heart beating beside his own, "something far-off and tiny, like blackbird chicks cheeping in a nest" (58, 108, 155). The baby's breathing, laboured due to her condition, produces "squeaking and hissing" sounds which are also typically animal noises (25). Michael has dreams which repeatedly transpose the child characters with chicks in a nest. In one, "the baby was in the blackbird's nest" where she was "fed on flies and spiders", like Skellig, and "got stronger and stronger until she flew out of the tree" (25). After visiting Skellig, Michael dreams his bed is "all twigs and leaves and feathers, just like a nest" (30). The blackbird chicks are also imagined by Mina to have dreams "of death all around them" and "[d]reams of life" (132).

In a similar way, the figure of the angel is also associated with the child characters. Mrs Mckee, Mina's mother, says Michael and Mina "are two angels", a description echoed by Skellig calling them "a pair of angels" because of how they have helped him (123, 157). The baby is affectionately called a "little angel" by her dad and when Michael asks his mother about the function of shoulder blades she says, "[t]hey say shoulder blades are where your wings were, when you were an angel" and "where your wings will grow again one day", suggesting that everyone was once an angel (149, 36). Mina says the same thing about shoulder blades but as a "proven fact" tied to evolutionary change rather than stories about

the angel figure (50). Skellig's beloved "[b]rown ale" and orders "27 and 53" from the "Chinese round the corner", things he used to scavenge from Ernie's bin, are amusingly described as the "[f]ood of the gods" and "[s]weetest of nectars", expressions which seem grossly misplaced in reference to leftover takeaways but here resituate the divine in the everyday just as Skellig is the angelic as tramp (20, 27, 53). Through the recurrence of these different character components, Skellig permeates the novel in various forms and comes to have a special connection to the child characters who are frequently described in terms that relate to his physical form. In this way he can be read as a being that makes manifest their half-fledged nature.

While this circulation of terms establishes these different aspects as important themes within the novel which relate to how the children are portrayed, it is really through the gradual process of Michael coming to recognise Skellig's different parts and how he relates them to his world that his own growth and ability to cope with change are enabled and communicated. His first impressions of Skellig are of a man, whom he initially thinks is "dead", with a "white face and [a] black suit" who is "filthy and pale and dried out" and "covered in dust and webs like everything else" (1, 7). Skellig thus initially reflects the state of the house, bringing Michael into further confrontation with the effects of neglect and isolation, and due to his frailty is also reminiscent of Ernie. Descriptions of how "[h]is voice squeaked like he hadn't used it in years" and the way "[h]e sighed, like he was sick to death of everything" further establish his isolation and additionally convey his depressed state. This is similarly suggested by Skellig's evasive and discouraging characterisations of himself, in response to Michael's many questions during early interactions, as "nobody" from "nowhere" who wants and will do "nothing", even when faced with the imminent destruction of the garage which is in any case not safe (27-28). In a subsequent meeting, Skellig amends this slightly, claiming that he is "nearly nothing" but that most of him is "Arthur Itis" who "turns you to stone then crumbles you away" (29). This emphasises the attrition that is taking place in both his body and mind as the juxtaposition between his constant negations of his identity and the personification of his disease suggest that his whole self has been taken up by his illness and that he is no longer resisting its effects. His description of the arthritis, moreover, resonates with Michael's observations of the garage's derelict state when he observes that "[e]ven the bricks were crumbling like they couldn't bear the weight any more", making it seem like "the whole thing was sick of itself and would collapse in a heap" (3-4). Skellig is

thus closely tied to the space in which he is discovered and constitutes a form of fantasy which remains, quite literally, close to home. This again evokes the Gothic with the supernatural figure emerging from the very fabric of the house and also in this case manifesting the anxieties of abandonment and the uncomfortable reality of death triggered by Michael's family dynamics, the dark secrets that underlie this new phase. Crossen's suggestion that the state of "existential despair" which "effect[s] [Skellig's] mind and body" follows from the Gothic's historical concern with the fear of "devolution or degeneration" is also compelling as Skellig then, at this stage, embodies the consequences of giving into despair and becoming "inert" instead of growing and moving forward (16, 18). It is this that is perhaps at the core of the fears triggered in Michael by the house and Ernie's story, although he may not be conscious of it since he is still struggling to come to terms with the changes in his life and longs to cling to the stability and familiarity of the past.

Therefore, certainly initially, Almond does not introduce a fantasy figure that acts as a saviour or enables escape from reality as might be expected, but instead one who confronts Michael with the fears that the move has stirred up. It is clear from Michael asking Skellig whether "[he's] not Ernie Myers" that he sees him as like Ernie despite Skellig's dismissive reference to Ernie as the "old git" who was always "[c]oughing his guts and spewing everywhere", ironic considering that Skellig also retches up things and has taken to Ernie's favoured foods (*Skellig*18). Skellig also, arguably, externalises aspects of how Michael feels, notably his fears of being forgotten and neglected, with his laconic responses and prickly demeanour evocative of the stereotypical difficult teenager. The closer similarity between fantasy and reality in *Skellig* is an aspect of the novel's shift towards the young adult appropriation of this category since the emphasis on real-life concerns is more directly maintained even through fantasy. It is also through fantasy that these concerns are dealt with. Confronted with the precariously situated and depressed Skellig while so newly acquainted with Ernie's lonely demise under similar conditions, Michael finds himself feeling responsible for him because he is the only person who knows of his situation and therefore the only one who can help. This marks a definite shift in him as the act of entering the garage is underpinned by a childish curiosity that disregards the very real danger of the derelict building and defies his parents' instructions and expectation of him to be responsible while they focus on the baby. Furthermore, the preoccupation with the baby and the fact that he was not supposed to be in the garage, along with his fear that he might be seeing things that are

not really there, make this a responsibility that he must shoulder alone before finding an appropriate partner in Mina. This shift extends to his attitude to the baby, because Skellig's vulnerability and poor health parallel her similarly precarious existence and place Michael in his parents' position to some extent. Like his parents with their sick child, Michael finds himself preoccupied by the knowledge that Skellig is weak, in danger, and just "waiting to die" and by the burden of needing to try and do something (45). With this awareness he seems able to move past the resentment initially evident in his reference to "the flaming baby" after his mother reprimands him about him going into the garage (4). Although initially still feeling on the outside, subsequent to meeting Skellig he goes on more than one occasion to look in on her during the night, often listens to the sound of her breathing and "kiss[es] her before school one morning" (9, 29-31). His ominous description of the baby's "dead white" face and "dead black" hair, echoing Skellig's white face against his black suit, adds a subtle physical parallel between the characters that connects them for Michael as two beings whose lives are precariously situated (10).

As Michael begins to take on a more active role in caring for Skellig, bringing him the food and "aspirin" he asks for, despite his claims of wanting "[n]othing" between requests, and later "cod liver oil" after consulting a doctor at the hospital about arthritis, he comes into closer contact with him and begins to notice his animal characteristics (18, 65). The descriptions of him eating, how he "stuck his tongue out and licked" and "slurped", are the first indicators of a more animal-like character, although this can also be attributed to his weakened state (26-7). Subsequent observations of the "red sauce below his lips [...]" congealed like blood" and of how his "breath stank" with "the stench of the other dead things he ate" such as "bluebottles and [...] spiders" are less ambiguous signs that there is something animalistic, and also potentially repulsive and sinister, about him (27-9). These aspects of his character are important for maintaining the dark, more young adult, tone of the book and for showing to what extent he is not a typical angel. The creature that is most closely associated with Skellig is the owl, evident from the "little heap of hard furry balls" beside him "made of tiny bones glued together with fur and skin", which Mina later explains are "owl pellets", consisting of regurgitated animal parts that "can't be digested", and the way he is fed by a pair of owls nesting in the empty house Mina inherited from her grandfather to which they move him (28, 128, 109). This aspect of his character is interesting given the owl's symbolism as "the bird of wisdom" and as an "ominous" presence whose cry, its "most

salient feature” given its “nocturnal” habits, has been viewed by “ancient and modern authors alike” as “prophetic of death” (Ferber 146). While the novel does not explicitly draw on either of these historical associations, the figure of the owl nonetheless adds to Skellig’s gothic quality because of the mysteriousness imbued by its nocturnal nature, the fact that it is a predator and its tendency to nest in abandoned buildings like the ones in the novel. Mina’s view of owls as “wild things[,] [k]illers, savages” and as “wonderful” conveys the novel’s engagement with and acceptance of the ferocity that is part of the wonder of these creatures, much as the children are enchanted by Skellig despite his rank breath and initially abrasive manner (*Skellig* 48). The hooting, rather than signalling death, is instead a form of connection between the children as Michael teaches Mina how to make the “noise an owl makes” by blowing into her cupped hands which they subsequently use to signal one another (49). Their ability to be in the attic with the owls and their nestlings, accompanied by a neighbourhood cat named Whisper who is another “savag[e]”, without being attacked additionally seems to indicate a degree of kinship or recognition between the children and these wild birds as they are not considered “intruders” (155, 41). The connection the children have with the animalistic Skellig and animals in general has been commented on by Almond who says that in animals they “see something that’s really similar to them” since they are “[h]alf civilised beings” and therefore “closer to animals” (Interview n. pag.). Skellig is thus positioned as representative of the children and by extension shows their “extraordinary” nature, a word Mina repeatedly applies to Skellig and other natural creatures and which is taken up by the children in reference to each other (76). The wings, which at this point Michael only suspects exist beneath his jacket, are another aspect of his owl side, but also become indicative of his angelic quality as he gains strength.

Significantly, Mina is introduced to Skellig when his animal phase is most prominent and before his wings, his most extraordinary feature, are revealed. Her presence is crucial to confirm his existence as the strangeness of his character, which is outside of known reality, becomes apparent and also to help Michael, and the reader, understand what Skellig is. Her confirmation of Skellig’s existence positions him in a way that is more in keeping with the less critical introduction of fantasy figures in children’s fiction where these elements are more easily accepted and doubt or incredulity are easily replaced by excitement and wonder. This also allows *Skellig* to be read as magical realism, a mode that complements the inclusivity Skellig embodies. Although the “matter-of-fact” manner of narrating fantasy

elements emphasised by Maggie Ann Bowers is not entirely present in *Skellig*, since he is clearly extraordinary and not presented as an unremarkable part of the everyday, his material reality is nevertheless accepted (Bowers 27). While there are moments when Michael and Mina question whether or not they are “dreaming”, this does not really detract from Skellig’s reality since sharing the same dream is arguably as miraculous as finding a fantasy creature and would therefore be part of the magical quality of the novel if it were so (*Skellig* 79).

It is, however, noteworthy that it is only the children, and specifically these two children, who experience Skellig as real. When Michael asks Skellig if Ernie saw him, the response is unclear as Skellig says, “he used to look at me, but look right through me” perhaps thinking he was a “figment” and when Michael’s mom witnesses him during a visit he makes to the baby in hospital she describes it as a “dream” although she felt sure she “was wide awake” (52, 149). This allows Almond to position the children as having privileged access or a superior capacity to see Skellig, which, further defines the boundary between adulthood and childhood rather than blurring it as one might expect in a novel of transition. However, on the other hand, this aspect has been cited as an area that shows the transition of the child characters to increased maturity and also disrupts or subverts in some way the boundary between children and adults. Don Latham, for instance, states that one of the liminal spaces depicted by *Skellig* is the “transition of two adolescent characters from childhood to adulthood” as, although still children in many senses, Michael and Mina “display levels of discernment and compassion one might expect from older, more experienced people” in their recognition of Skellig’s “extraordinary nature” and the “parental role [they fulfil] in caring for and protecting [him]” (n. pag.). Bullen and Parson similarly suggest that the novel’s “idiosyncratic use of magical realism”, a genre “inherently compatible with the disruption of knowledge hierarchies”, destabilises “the opposition between adults and children” because of the way that Skellig is infantilised and cared for by the children, even though he is clearly an adult who suffers from arthritis and wears a suit (130, 134). They take this point further by gesturing towards the novel’s incorporation and privileging of “non-scientific modes like Blakean spirituality” used by Mina and admired by Michael, and the way these modes are supported in subtle ways by some of the adult characters such as Mina’s mother, lending this view a certain adult authority (135). Even so, they still arrive at the same point that Latham makes, namely that through the “indeterminate adult responses” to Skellig “Almond arguably reinforces the polarization between

authoritative adult perception and unreliable child perception” (136). According to Bullen and Parson, this can be considered a “pedagogical agenda” within the novel that “invites child readers to engage in a combined imaginative and intellectual consideration of Michael and Mina’s version of events in tandem with the characters’ own assessment of Skellig” (136). Thus, although I would nonetheless argue that this specific aspect of the way fantasy is deployed in the text keeps the novel within the conventions and therefore the category of children’s rather than young adult fiction, Bullen and Parsons’ reading points to how *Skellig* does stretch this position and the use of fantasy which is also evident in the way it interacts with the question of life and death.

The return of Skellig’s strength, brought about by the ministrations of the children and the owls and the move to a different house, brings about his final shift into the angel. His transformation upon being carried out of the garage is almost miraculous as in the dawn light it becomes apparent that he “[isn’t] old”, but rather “seem[s] like a young man”, severing him from his similarity to Ernie (81). Although still weak and in pain, from this point on Skellig’s sense of self returns and he is no longer content to waste away. This is conveyed by how he finally tells Michael and Mina his name and moves further up the levels of the house with each passing night, never again being found in the same place they left him in (82). Although this new location is also an abandoned and neglected house, left to Mina by her grandfather, and therefore also a Gothic space, it is not associated with death and decay but instead with wonder. It is, for instance, in this space that the protuberances “[l]ike thin arms, folded up [...] [s]pringy and flexible”, “beneath [Skellig’s] shoulder[s]” and “held in by his jacket”, are revealed to be wings as Michael and Mina had “dreamed” they might be (29, 89). In addition to Skellig undergoing a gradual recovery and metamorphosis into his fully realised form, gaining an increasingly unearthly quality as his strength returns, Mina and Michael also undergo a brief transformation through their connectedness to him in a strange and surreal scene. The now “erect” Skellig who seems “stronger than he’d ever been” summons them to him, takes their hands and leads them in a turning circle like a “dance” (109-10). As Michael observes Skellig’s and Mina’s faces repeatedly moving “from shadow to light”, they seem to gradually change, becoming “more silvery [and] expressionless” in the light, while their eyes become “darker” and more “empty [and] penetrating” (110). While undergoing this strange transformation, it feels to him like they have “moved into each other, as if [they] have become one thing” (110). Most miraculous of all is the appearance of “ghostly wings” on the

two children who are “lifted from the floor” as they momentarily take flight (110-11). Skellig later performs this same ritual with the baby on the eve of the successful heart surgery that marks a turning point in her condition. This seems to suggest that by caring for Skellig Michael and Mina have returned him to his true form, enabling him to save the baby, a progression that Crossen points out as consistent with “the fairy tale convention of the animal helper” in which “a creature aided in some way by the hero [...] eventually repays their saviour in kind” (19). However, I argue that the novel also disrupts this neat conclusion since Skellig himself downplays his role in the baby’s recovery, saying that she was “glittering with life” and a source of “strength” rather than a receptacle for it (*Skellig*154). This constitutes another moment in which roles and expectations are reversed and categories undermined as the sickly baby is depicted as having strength to spare while the magical creature is saved by a pair of children. It is rather by considering Michael’s position when the difficult news of the baby needing surgery comes through to him, and looking at the way he processes this, that the growth he has undergone and Skellig’s role in it become apparent.

Michael’s discovery of Skellig’s wings significantly coincides with him learning evolutionary theory at school where he questions his teacher about the purpose of “shoulder blades” and asks if humans will “keep on changing shape”, inquiries which suggest that he is considering the possibility that Skellig is an example of evolutionary adaptation (32). Though Michael does not get any definitive answer at school, his repeated questions about shoulder blades – to his mother, who introduces the idea of them being where angel wings were attached and will return, and to Mina, who confirms his suspicion when she states that they are proven to be where humans’ wings were once attached and will attach again – constitute a continued search for connections and open up the possibility of Skellig as evolutionary relative and/or angel. While these aspects of Skellig’s character come to light through Michael coming to greater understanding of him, they also emerge as Skellig is helped by the children and regains his strength, showing dual journeys of progression that culminate in the achievement of wings like the fledglings who are eventually able to fly. It is, moreover, the processes of caring for and coming to an understanding of Skellig that allow Michael to evolve and cope. In caring for Skellig and bonding with Mina over their shared knowledge of his existence and the new ideas she introduces to him opened up by Skellig’s strangeness and ambiguity, Michael is clearly better able to cope with his feelings about the baby dying and able to project his desire to help onto Skellig, which in turn leaves open a possibility that this

reinforces his connection with the baby and helps her heal in some way. Michael's encounter with Skellig thus provides him with a way of alleviating and channelling his fears, gives him hope, and also forms a component of his exploration of other views of the world, all of which help him to cope and adapt. According to Bullen and Parsons *Skellig* "rejects the notion that a single epistemological system or tradition can provide the knowledge children need to cope with the anxieties that distinguish risk society" (129). This idea, informed by their reading of Ulrich Beck's concept of risk society, characterises contemporary modernity as involving the "questioning of master narratives", such as scientific rationality, which cannot necessarily "control" the "risks of contemporary life" and may in fact produce them as "the unforeseen consequences of scientific intervention" (130). These qualms about the "omnipotence of science" are moreover occurring in a world where "recourse to those forms of knowledge – progressively undermined by science since the Enlightenment – which formerly assisted individuals to cope with uncertainty and risk" is also declining (130). Skellig's characterisation as both an angel and an evolutionary intermediate form between birds and humans necessitates or encourages the use of a variety of knowledge systems that the children employ in trying to understand and help him, which in turn seem to have a bearing on the baby's recovery. Thus, although there is a critique of medicine and formal education, these systems are not discounted but placed alongside other conceptual systems which have additional rather than superior value.

Michael near the end of the novel is much more invested in his sister's well-being, more at home in the house where he has encountered new and wonderful things and in possession of new knowledge and ways of expressing and working through his feelings and ideas. Having by now faced the loss of home and his own sense of displacement, largely by projecting his concerns onto caring for Skellig and through having taken on the responsibility of caring for him, he is now faced with the difficult news of his sister's surgery which she might not survive. When his dad calls the school to tell him that "a lot of things" are not right with the baby and he needs to go in to the hospital, Michael's feelings of fear and helplessness threaten to overwhelm him (120). This time, in contrast to the start of the novel, he would like to be there to talk to the doctor. That same afternoon Michael learns that Skellig is "going away soon", again paralleling what seems to be happening to the baby, and that Michael "must keep coming to see him" (124). During the period of waiting for his father to come with news, Michael and Mina spend the afternoon drawing. As Michael draws

Skellig and Mina and Ernie Myers, he finds his “hand and arm [becoming] free”, with what “appeared on the page look[ing] more and more like what [he] saw or what [he] thought of in [his] head” (126). This description shows how drawing, something that he has taken up more freely since knowing Mina and Skellig, becomes a way of expressing the fears and preoccupations of his unconscious.

However, despite the maturation that Michael has gone through and the moment of flight he experienced with Skellig and Mina, there are still difficult periods characterised by doubt and fear as the novel repeatedly shows the difficulties of change and the sense of peril that surrounds the largest steps forward. When Michael and Mina go to visit Skellig on the day of the baby’s surgery, he “wasn’t there” for the first time since Michael found him, an ominous sign considering the connection built up between him and the baby. Immediately after this Michael becomes convinced that the baby is “dead” because he no longer feels her heart beating along with his (142). Overwhelmed with hopelessness, he briefly loses consciousness, descending into “blackness”, and wakes feeling “heavy and awkward” as if he has “arthritis” (140, 43). The imagery, recalling Skellig’s condition at the beginning of the novel, conveys the sense of despair Michael feels and suggests his loss of belief. However, even during this descent into despair there are parallels in the natural world, which has played such a significant role in Michael’s growth, which suggest the possibility of hope. The day of the surgery coincides with the blackbird fledglings leaving the nest and experiencing their “[f]irst day out” (135). Although this is a risky and vulnerable period, like adolescence, because they cannot fly and are “nearly all alone”, it is also moment of progression to a new stage that will ultimately lead to their flight (135). Mina’s mother also talks about the way “spring [makes] the world burst into life after months of apparent death” and shares the story of “the goddess called Persephone” who was “trapped inside the earth” during winter but brought spring with her when she was “released and made her slow way up to the world again” (137). The baby’s journey to health is thus likened to Persephone’s dark and difficult journey to the surface, even as Michael finds himself similarly trapped in darkness with worrying for her. In this way, the novel takes its readers up to the point of loss, conveying the darkness that descends on the world Michael has begun to feel part of again, but, in keeping with children’s fiction, allows for a happy ending where the baby does recover and reach the surface. These dark periods of winter are thus depicted as part of the cycle of growth and

regeneration while the terrain of actual mourning and close personal loss is, in the end, left unexplored.

The end of the novel is characterised by resolution and consolation and the act of moving on. Skellig, whom Michael and Mina see and fly with once more after the successful surgery, leaves to go “somewhere”, perhaps to be discovered by “someone else” (158). However, Mina’s solemn promise that “[they’ll] remember forever” and the drawings and stories about him ensure that his message remains with them (162). Michael is able to go back to the parts of his life he has become distanced from while also keeping what he has gained from the experience. He goes back to participating “brilliant[ly]” at school and reconnects with his friends who have felt as if he has been “miles and miles away” and who Michael might even be able to share his story with “one day” (160). The garage has been knocked down and he participates in getting the house ready for the baby and his mother’s return from the hospital. He is even able to order something different from the Chinese menu now that he no longer needs his leftovers for Skellig. And, at the very end, on another Sunday, the baby, now christened Joy, comes home, completing the family unit and allowing for the novel’s happy resolution.

Almond’s novel thus begins to move into a transitional space between children’s and young adult literature through the use of fantasy to facilitate an engagement with the difficult and complex realities of death and loss. This engagement is, however, restricted because, although the use of the magical realist mode allows fantasy to relate to reality in a sophisticated way by bringing together different epistemological systems that facilitate Michael’s relation to the world and these issues, the novel nonetheless provides a satisfying and consoling ending which remains in keeping with children’s literature. If we think back to Erikson’s analogy of the trapeze artist, we might imagine *Skellig* being far along the trajectory of swing away from children’s literature but not yet at the point of letting go. Furthermore, while *Skellig* does engage with death, it does so only through characters that are peripheral to Michael via the inclusion of details about Ernie Myers and mention of Mina’s father and grandfather who have both died. The more intimate losses of his baby sister and, to some extent, Skellig, due to his initial condition, are, on the other hand, only anticipated. Moreover, the baby sister who has barely come into her existence is also a character more remote than the parental loss that features in the next two novels and, consequently, even if the loss were to take place, the process of mourning would arguably be far less complex

although it would affect the family unit deeply. This is not to take away from the difficulty of the subject matter that *Skellig* explores but rather to point out how the novel discussed in the following chapter, *A Monster Calls*, which deals with parental loss, shifts more deliberately into the young adult category through its more intricate use of loss coinciding with the onset of adolescence.

### Chapter 3

#### Confronting Adolescent Loss through the Healing Wildness of Stories in Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls*

*Stories are the wildest things of all, the monster rumbled. Stories chase and bite and hunt.*

(Ness 45, emphasis in original)

In Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* more traditional monster figure – evocative of the fairy tale monster in children's literature traditionally used to teach important lessons, promote desirable behaviours and the cultural values of a given period, or to show that fears can be overcome – is employed to depict the difficult and unsettling transition from childhood to adolescence within the circumstances of anticipated loss in a contemporary setting. The novel, winner of the Carnegie Medal and Kate Greenaway Medal for illustration, follows the experience of thirteen-year-old Conor O'Mally as he struggles to confront his fears and conflicting emotions surrounding the impending death of his mother due to cancer, a difficult situation further exacerbated by their isolated circumstances.<sup>6</sup> With Conor's father now living overseas in America and preoccupied with a new family, his rather severe grandmother from his mother's side is the only other family member that participates in their lives. This also extends to their wider social situation where there is a marked absence of close friends or social institutions offering support. These circumstances increase the dependence between mother and son, making the prospect of her death particularly devastating for both of them. Out of the isolation produced by these circumstances in which Conor has very little help and nobody he can talk to, the figure of the monster is used by Ness to embody his fears of losing his mother and his conflicting feelings of guilt and anger while also facilitating his confrontation of them. In this chapter, I focus on the figure of the monster as a relic of children's fiction that is appropriated in a young adult text where it constitutes a form of regression in the face of a parental loss. Although the novel has certain elements which make it appear closer to children's fiction than *Skellig* is, for instance the inclusion of illustrations and the use of the third-person narrative perspective, I argue that the use of these and other aspects of children's literature is more complex in this text. Both novels show a process of coming to terms with loss and change and employ a monstrous figure that comprises aspects

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<sup>6</sup>The novel has also been adapted into a screenplay by Ness with the film due to be released in October 2016.

of wildness as a being that the lonely protagonist identifies with and is helped by during these circumstances. However, while *Skellig* is concerned with Michael's expanding perspective as a way of coping and adapting, *A Monster Calls* is more sophisticated because of the ambiguity of fantasy in the novel which casts the monster as an expression of Conor's interiority while not excluding the magical reading that children's fiction allows. The novel itself is thus a text that transitions out of children's fiction and into the young adult category, exploring a more traumatic form of loss than is seen in *Skellig* and showing the dangers of isolation and self-deception. By exploring the characterisation and framing of the monster as a figure from the folk tale and examining the way story-telling is employed in relation to a specific and in-depth exploration of loss, its shift into the young adult category will be demonstrated.

Ness's use of the monster figure, playing on its historical associations with what is abject or frightening, 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. This is expressed through the intrusion of two different monsters into the narrative during this time, both portrayed so that they can be read as expressions of his psychological interiority. The first of these is a fiery monster that pulls his mother from a ledge in a recurring nightmare in which Conor fails to save her. The nightmare represents the core conflict in the novel, as it expresses Conor's repressed desire for the suffering and loneliness in his life to end, a desire which is reprehensible to him and therefore something he cannot face. While the monster in the nightmare embodies what this situation is like for him and how helpless and alone he is in dealing with it, it is really his sense of his own monstrosity, a perception emerging from the guilt and shame he feels, that must be confronted and overcome. This process is both expressed and facilitated through the second monster in the novel, an elemental being that manifests as the yew tree from the graveyard opposite Conor's house coming to life and taking on a monstrous form. Although the yew monster is presented as if it is part of material reality, Ness's use of third-person narration focalised exclusively through Conor and the fact that the monster is evocative of something from ancient folklore or mythology, and therefore not inherently believable in the contemporary setting of the novel, allow it to maintain an ambiguous position between being a mysterious component of reality and a manifestation of Conor's imagination or

unconscious. This elusive quality is important for the way the yew monster functions as healing force within the novel, ostensibly summoned by Conor's need to express and acknowledge his feelings and to come to terms with the real fear that underlies his nightmare, as it can be read as a projection of his feelings outside of himself to allow him to work through them at a safe distance. The working through of difficult feelings is effected through an exchange of stories as the monster tells Conor three tales, styled in the form of folk fairy tales, after which he must reciprocate by telling the monster, and in the process acknowledging to himself, the true source of his nightmare. The tales focus on displaying the ambiguity of human actions and character, preparing him to understand the contradictions in his own feelings, and correspond to moments of intense anger and isolation, which gives him room to express and explore the parts of himself that he represses. This shows how Conor retreats into fantasy at moments when he is out of control and yet the fantasy is not an escape, but only a temporary distancing from his actions and feelings. It is thus through the monster that the core internal conflict of the novel – the tension between Conor not wanting to lose his mother and the desire for their suffering and isolation to come to an end – is portrayed and worked through.

The use of conventions associated with children's fiction – such as the frightening monster figure, the telling of fairy tales and the incorporation of fantasy elements into an otherwise realistic setting – within a novel that is transitioning away from this life phase constitutes a regression to an earlier pattern of problem solving and understanding that Ness employs to bring across Conor's isolated circumstances in facing a situation he is not yet equipped to deal with. Early on in the novel, there are already indications that Conor, as an only child with his father now living overseas with his new wife and baby, is almost entirely alone in facing the burden of his mother's illness. In the second chapter, entitled "Breakfast", it is evident that he has taken over much of the management of the household and thus performs the adult role which his mother is clearly no longer able to fill. In addition to making his own breakfast and getting ready for school by himself, things he has "grown used to doing", Conor rinses his dishes and puts them in the dishwasher, takes out the bin and the recycling, and starts a load of sheets in the washing machine, intending to hang them up when he gets home from school (20, 24). These activities, especially considering the way they are carried out without the prompting of an adult, are at odds with the expected behaviour of a thirteen-year-old boy and serve as a strong indicator of how grown-up Conor has needed to

be as well as how ill his mother is if she is no longer carrying out such chores. When she does come down to apologise for not being up and starts to explain, Conor cuts her off, insisting that it is “okay”, demonstrating his familiarity with the effects of her treatments and his resistance to talking about it as well as his insistence that they are coping and that he can take care of things that she cannot manage (25). The problematic aspect of this situation, in which Conor is missing out on his childhood in order to be grown-up and maintain what is left of his family, is poignantly expressed when his mother sadly comments that he is “a good boy” but that she wishes he “didn’t have to be quite *so* good” (26, emphasis in original). The way this chapter highlights a very commonplace setting, an aspect consistent with the realism characteristic of young adult fiction, draws attention to the shocking reality of the mother’s illness and incapacity, and shows how Conor’s life has changed because of it.

While the loss of a mother is a traumatic and highly destabilising form of loss for any adolescent, its impact is further intensified in Conor’s case by his experience of prior losses in his family, most notably his father leaving, which have made him sensitive to loss and have left him in a particularly precarious position. His total isolation in trying to cope with his own feelings in addition to daily responsibilities is illustrated early on when he describes the recurring nightmare, the form in which his deeply repressed fears emerge, as “something no one else ever needed to know” (12). The extent to which he is unwilling, or unable, to share these fears is further emphasised when he mentions specifically that he had not told “his mum, obviously”, or his dad in their “fortnightly (or so) phone call, [and] *definitely* not his grandma, and no one at school” (12, 11, emphasis in original). This listing of people he cannot speak to, which includes all those you might expect him to be able to confide in, along with details that suggest why he feels he cannot seek support from them, clearly expresses his sense of being cut-off. This is not only because of the shame aroused by how he allows his mother to be taken in the nightmare but also because he does not have any strong connections he can rely on, as is evident with his grandmother whom he does not relate to and his largely absent father within the family circle as well as with the people at his school. His grandmother, the only person who is present and offering assistance, is described as not “like other grandmas” because she is concerned with staying modern and young, has a job, does not “really cook”, makes you feel like you are “under evaluation” when talking to her and has a house which is “full of expensive things you could never touch” (48-9, 26). This paints a picture of someone who is materialistic and self-absorbed and not a warm or stereotypically

nurturing maternal figure. Although it is clear within the text that she cares deeply, similar to the way that Michael's parents in *Skellig* clearly care about his wellbeing although he feels overlooked, she is not someone that Conor feels he can confide in. The way she treats him like a child makes him feel undervalued and helpless, an aspect that makes her assistance and her offer to take care of him when his mother dies unwelcome rather than comforting. While his mother's illness has been devastating for Conor it has also given him increased independence and responsibility, aspects of growth that will be revoked and undermined at his grandmother's house, taking away even the things he has gained from the painful circumstances he has faced.

In a sad contrast to this, the person that Conor would actually like to be with is his father who prioritises his new wife and baby and who is also responsible for the first painful loss his son suffered. When given a life-writing assignment at school, the important events that come to Conor's mind, although they are not topics he wishes to write about, are of "his father leaving" and "the cat wandering off one day and never coming back" (33-4). The mention of the cat, a comparatively insignificant loss, suggests the importance its companionship held for him, probably in the absence of his father, and depicts Conor as a lonely child as well as suggesting that he has started to build up an expectation and dread of further loss. The lack of support offered by his father is clear both in the way Conor speaks about him and in his actions when he eventually comes for a visit at the request of Conor's mother once she has been hospitalised and Conor has had to move in with his grandmother. Although the visit causes Conor to smile "wider than he had for at least a year", it soon turns into another abandonment and further isolation (95). The reality of the disconnection between father and son is subtly highlighted throughout their interaction by Conor's father's use of American terms of endearment such as "champ" which sound strange and register his increasingly alien status (96). This foreshadows a broader and more deep-seated disconnection in the way that he completely fails to engage sensitively with his son's situation, additionally obvious from the way he had to be asked to come, his intention to stay for only a few days and his early departure at the request of his current wife who is anxious about their baby. His interest and attention are thus directed towards his new life in which it is made clear that there is "no room" for Conor (102). The effect of the discussion with his father during which Conor comes to understand how little he can rely on what will soon be his only parent is painfully evident in the way, at the end of their evening together, he rejects

his father's offer to wait with him until his grandmother gets home, saying, "I'm fine on my own" (102).

Conor is similarly alone in his school environment where everyone, teachers and students alike, treat him differently from how they used to and tend to avoid him once the news of his mother's illness spreads. It is through his best friend Lily, who is like a sister to him because they have been friends since early childhood, that this difficult reality becomes widely known at school. To Conor it felt as if "the whole world changed in a single day" and "a circle had opened around him, a dead area with him at the centre, surrounded by landmines that everyone was afraid to walk through" (36, 78). Although Lily did this unintentionally, having told only a few of her other friends, Conor, in his helplessness, blames her for his alienated position and pushes her away, increasing his isolation. Although the teachers make sure he knows that they are available for him to talk to, they stop expecting him to participate in class or give in his work, inadvertently taking still more of the normality out of his life and allowing his sense of isolation and disconnection to increase. Judith Herman has pointed out that "stigma" often attaches to victims of trauma or those who witness it: just as an individual has a need to internally repress trauma, a society may seek ways to ignore reminders of trauma by overlooking those who have been exposed to it (2). This is similar to the alienation that Conor experiences as everyone is made uncomfortable by the knowledge of his situation and, rather than face it, choose to ignore it completely. In response, he gradually withdraws as he is never called on to participate, which is detrimental because he has nothing to focus on but his mother's condition and also because it increases his guilt as he is continually given chances and free passes he does not feel he deserves. Within this vacuum of human engagement, with Conor sometimes going whole days without speaking a word to anyone, he comes to rely on his last regular interaction with the school bully, Harry. Not only is this the only time he feels 'seen' or acknowledged, but Harry's physical assaults also give him the punishment he so desperately craves. It is once Harry realises Conor's dependence on this contact and tells him "I no longer see you" making Conor's invisibility complete, that the boundary between Conor and the monster becomes most indistinct during the telling of the third tale (155).

This lonely position produces a degree of interdependence between Conor and his mother that prohibits either of them from honestly confronting what will happen, resulting instead in a denial of her probable death and its consequences through an unrealistic belief in

her recovery. The pattern of denial is clear from the casual and optimistic way Conor's mother speaks about her illness and inevitable recovery at various points in the narrative as well as through Conor's hostility towards anyone who suggests a future that varies from this outcome. It is evident from his mother's inability to perform day-to-day tasks how little it is within her power to lessen the impact of her illness on her son and thus she seeks to protect him by maintaining a hopeful and positive attitude. When she is hospitalised in the chapter entitled "Little Talk", there are numerous additional signs, such as Conor's grandmother avoiding eye-contact with him when she tells him that the medicine is "not working" and the news of his father coming for an uncharacteristic visit, that suggest her deteriorating condition, but she continues to assure him that she is "going to be okay", just like previous occasions when she has "felt really bad" (Ness 85, 87). The chapter heading perfectly encapsulates how this serious subject-matter is softened in her discussion with him, ultimately treating him as you would a much younger child when telling them about difficult or upsetting material that they do not fully understand. In trying to make light of the situation she neglects to speak to him about what will happen, instead instilling an unrealistic, although well-intentioned, emphasis on the belief that the treatments will work and that she will get better. The way he takes up this attitude is apparent when the reader is given access to his thoughts or when he is speaking to people about her, for example when his grandmother attempts to broach the subject of "what's going to happen" and he angrily rebuffs her, insisting that "The treatments are making her better" (51-2).

Giskin Day categorises this determinedly positive outlook by both Conor and his mother as consistent with denial in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief, "originally based on interviews with terminally ill patients about how to come to terms with impending death" (in Day 7). Denial, the first of these stages, is linked to the act of repression as the truth of impending death is so unspeakable that an individual seeks to convince themselves of its unreality. It is Conor's mother who is most invested in this belief, since the alternative is that she will have to confront her death and consequent abandonment of her child. The value that her positive view has held for her becomes apparent after the last resort for treatment finally fails when, in response to his accusation that she did not believe in the treatment, she tells Conor that "believing it so that *you* would" is "probably what's kept me here so long" (Ness 176, emphasis in original). Although this state of denial functions as a coping mechanism for his mother in coming to terms with her own death, and is in a sense another

form of protective fantasy, it nonetheless proves detrimental to Conor's ability to come to terms with losing her. The effort it takes him to believe in this fantasy, which he feels compelled to do because of how much he needs his mother as well as how dependent she has become on him for care, is the cause of his internal conflict and the unhealthy repression of feelings that contradict this.

Although Conor's mother believes so strongly in her recovery in order to protect him from pain, it is the cause of internal conflict because he is old enough to recognise that she may not recover but still young enough to perceive this as a monstrous betrayal when her hope and belief are seemingly so strong and secure. The way he repeatedly, though tentatively, questions her assurances – asking if she is “sure” that there is more that they can do for her and even saying that if this is not the case “you can tell me” – demonstrates that he has doubts (88). The invitation for her to be honest further shows that he would be willing to face the truth because it is a reality he suspects and which it would be a relief to be able to acknowledge. However, her need to protect him prompts her to be unwavering in what is effectively the fantasy of her recovery, in turn alienating Conor from his own doubts which he represses in order to adamantly take on the same stance, not only because he does not wish to acknowledge that he might lose his mother but also because he comes to believe that her recovery is contingent on his belief in it. It is this conflict that continually resurfaces in the world of the nightmare as Conor does not fail to save his mother but lets her go because he wants the suffering for both of them to be at an end. Although this is an understandable feeling, particularly given the drawn out experience both of watching his mother's illness and of being isolated by it, Conor condemns himself for it and in so doing alienates a part of himself. This situation, emerging to a large extent as a result of their social isolation also exacerbates this state since it prevents him from being able to confide his anxieties to his mother as well as his grandmother, father, teachers and school friend Lily who are all people who threaten the delicate subterfuge that he and his mother play out by reminding him of the reality of the situation. It is out of this context that the significance of an outlet and working through in the form of another, arguably more unconscious, fantasy accessed through the figure of the monster becomes evident.

The opening line of the novel, describing how “[t]he Monster showed up just after midnight [...] [a]s they do”, is immediately suggestive of a fairy tale, both because of the introduction of the mysterious and magical time of midnight, or the witching hour, which is

often a time of transformation in fairy tales, and the style of narration. While in many young adult novels the use of first-person narration is favoured for its ability to capture the adolescent state of mind and the urgency of the questions of place and identity they confront, this novel instead makes use of third-person narration focalised through the protagonist. This allows for insight into Conor's interiority and situates the narrative from his perspective while still locating him as the subject of the narration rather than being in control of it, emphasising his childlike position and enforcing the fairy tale feeling of the opening since the narrator is like the storyteller looking in and conveying the story from the outside. The yew monster, moreover, characterises itself as a kind of personification of the whole "*wild earth*", able to take on many forms and having been known by "*as many names as there are years to time itself*", including "*Herne the Hunter*", "*Cernnunos*" and "*the eternal Green Man*" (44).<sup>7</sup> These different titles comprise references to legends, ancient deities and religious symbols that have all been passed down in tales which, like the folk fairy tale, come from periods when the understanding of the world accommodated elements of the marvellous and supernatural. By evoking these figures and their stories, Ness further establishes the fairy tale quality of the monster and gives it a long history that imbues it, and the view of the world that produced such stories, with an authenticity that allows for the monster to be read as a real presence within the novel while also establishing the value of such stories. In this sense the yew monster is a link to the natural world, which ties in to the way it helps Conor to understand human nature and its inherent contradictions, and to more ancient forms of knowledge, providing a source of guidance that is lacking from social institutions such as religion or even school in the novel.

The characterisation of the monster thus suggests its role as a kind of teacher or guide, a wise being that serves as a warning against denial and uses tales of previous interventions to undermine Conor's rigid outlook and to push him to a more mature understanding of his own humanity. Moreover, in performing this function the monster also becomes a source of healing, reflected by its choice of the yew tree as the form it visits in. The tree itself is described as "so ancient it almost seemed to be made of the same stone as the church", giving it in its unaltered natural form an inherent sense of presence and even wisdom from its long life, and making it a fitting vessel for the monster (12). This aspect of the tree is further revealed in the way that the first two tales the monster tells feature this very same yew tree,

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<sup>7</sup> The monster's speech is indicated by italics and will be reproduced in this way throughout the chapter.

positioned as a kind of witness to the occurrences in both stories that take place in different time periods and with the surroundings having been substantially changed from the first to the second tale while the tree remains standing. Over and above this, the yew is a tree that is associated with healing. The monster describes the yew as “*the most powerful of all the healing trees*” for “*its berries, its bark, its leaves, its sap, its pulp, its wood [...] all thrum and burn and twist with life*” that “*can cure almost any ailment man suffers from*” (114). When Conor learns that the last resort treatment his mother can try is derived from the yew he begins to believe that the purpose of the monster’s visit is to heal her, reflecting a rather childlike hope that his problem can be magically made to go away. However, the novel does not allow for this simple solution as it is not through the tree’s physical properties that it is ultimately able to effect healing, but instead through its figurative and fantastic value in the form of the monster. The monster is thus placed as a kind of tree of knowledge which, rather than damning Conor, frees him from his repressed guilt and enables him to heal by allowing him to fully understand and accept aspects of his own nature that trouble him.

The fact that it is the yew tree that overlooks Conor’s house, a familiar component of his daily life, that becomes the monster is additionally reminiscent of modern children’s fiction where the fantastic and the magical frequently enter a realistic setting and as a result are more ambiguously situated between the realms of reality and the imaginary.<sup>8</sup> While such unlikely beings and occurrences are rarely presented as if they are purely imagined, the inclusion of the fantastic within the familiar leaves open the possibility that they are dreams or the products of make-believe play. In this sense, the monster can be viewed as Conor’s unconscious projection of his repressed feelings and unmet needs onto the yew tree, creating an imaginary ally or guardian that helps him in his isolation, a reading supported by the fact that the monster claims it has come because Conor “*called*” it (46). The use of the monster in this healing role ties in with the more domesticated versions of this figure that Marina Warner discusses, considering the positive force the monster represents in the novel, and how Conor increasingly identifies with it as he works through the most wild and uncontrolled parts of himself. This function is further augmented by its location within the context of the fairy tale, characterising it as a warning, in this case against the dangers of repressing his feelings,

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<sup>8</sup> A toy may gain the ability to come to life as in Lynne Reid Banks’s *The Indian in the Cupboard* or A.A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh*; an everyday location becomes the entrance to a fantasy world as in C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*; or fantastical beings may invade the familiar as in Mary Norton’s *The Borrowers* or E Nesbit’s *Five Children and It*.

which is both frightening and well-intentioned. While all these elements, along with the fact that the original edition was illustrated, seem more fitting for a children's book, the tension produced between these different readings of the monster complicate the figure and allow it to represent Conor's complex interiority and the process of transition. These features additionally mark the novel as a text in transition since it consistently employs features typical of children's fiction but does not remain comfortably within these conventions.

Ness purposefully uses this blurred boundary between what is real and what is imagined to trouble the nature of the monster's existence, thereby allowing its role and function to be complicated even as the resonance with children's fiction is maintained. The focalisation through Conor, meaning that access to the monster is only ever gained via his subjectivity, is a crucial narrative strategy that suggests that it is a psychological manifestation. This is further evidenced by the fact that the monster is never witnessed by anybody else within the narrative, not even when it comes to Conor in the middle of the busy school cafeteria during lunch. Another indicator of its potential unreality is that certain physical effects produced by its actions during visits vanish once it has left. During its first appearance, the yew monster, in response to the lack of fear and defiance displayed by Conor who is expecting the nightmare monster and is thus "disappoint[ed]" by it, demonstrates its fearsome strength and authority by destroying his upstairs bedroom from the outside and snatching him up from the wreckage (18). The narrative describes in detail how "with a *roar* it pounded two fists against the house", causing the "ceiling [to buckle] under the blows and huge cracks [to appear] in the walls" before, goaded on by Conor's continued defiance, "[it] roared even louder and smashed an arm through [his] window, shattering glass and wood and brick" (20, emphasis in original). Yet, despite the vivid picture of destruction given during the encounter, the following morning there is "no damage at all, no gaping hole into the back garden" and Conor's mother is only aware of thinking she "heard [his] voice" "sometime after midnight", all of which cause Conor to question if it really happened (21, 25-6). However, Ness also does not permit such an easy categorisation of the monster as purely imaginary since other features of its interactions with Conor validate its material existence and express the realness of it to him.

A subtle cause for this ambiguity is Conor's apparent lack of control of the fantasy he enters into, or, more accurately, the fantasy that intrudes into his world. Unlike in *Where the Wild Things Are* which features a very direct transference of a conflict in reality to an

imagined space where it is resolved, with Max at all times maintaining complete control over his fantasy illustrated by his position as king, in *A Monster Calls* Conor doubts and resists the elements of fantasy that he is confronted with. At the first “rush of panic” when he hears his name being called and thinks the monster from the nightmare has “followed him” Conor immediately discounts his fears as “stupid” (12). When he wakes up the following morning he persuades himself that the monster’s visit “had been a dream” and on his way home from school he purposefully looks at the tree and “force[s] himself to keep looking at it, making himself see that it was just a tree [...] like any other” and “[t]hat’s all it *ever* was” (21, 37, emphasis in original). At precisely these moments when Conor seeks to deny the existence of the monster it shows itself in some way and thus affirms the reality of what he has experienced, in contravention of his will. When he looks up at the tree as he approaches home it is described as “hovering over the grave yard like a sleeping giant”, a description that cleverly references the monstrous form Conor seeks to deny (37). As he persists in forcing himself to see only a normal tree it “rear[s] up a giant face to look at him in the sunlight, its arms reaching out, its voice saying, *Conor*” (37). Unlike the monster’s visits at night, this sighting during the day positions it more concretely in the conscious and waking world of reality where it seems improbable that it is a dream. While this does not preclude the monster being the product of Conor’s imagination, it gives it agency and makes it seem very real to him, even against his wishes, a significant factor when subjected to a psychoanalytic reading in relation to dealing with trauma.

The reality of the monster’s presence is also suggested through less subtle signs that are not as easily attributed to Conor’s subjective experience. Although certain marks of the monster’s behaviour and presence disappear as if they were in a dream, after many of its initial visits traces in the form of some sign of the yew tree having been there are left that hamper Conor’s ability to pretend nothing happened. When, after their first meeting, he awakes to find his room whole and undamaged his conclusion that it was only a dream is swiftly undermined by the discovery that “every inch of his bedroom floor was covered in short, spiky yew tree leaves” real enough to necessitate sweeping them up and disposing of them in a plastic bag at the bottom of the bin (21). While this first sign can potentially be attributed, although somewhat tenuously, to the windy night and Conor’s open window, traces left after subsequent encounters are more difficult to explain away. This is clear from the following two interactions with the monster: in the first instance, “[h]is floor was covered

in poisonous red yew tree berries [...] [w]hich had all somehow come though a closed and locked window” and, after a later meeting, “a fresh, new and very solid sapling had sprouted, about a foot tall”, “from a knot in a floorboard” which took Conor “half an hour” to saw through with a knife (47, 76). The signs that the tree leaves behind, notably produced by the one aspect of the monster that is definitely real, thus become increasingly impossible to ignore just as the monster becomes more real to Conor although its liminal position between reality and fantasy is always maintained.

The use of illustrations, particularly unusual for a young adult novel due to their association with children’s literature, is put to great effect in the narrative to portray the way that fantasy intrudes into Conor’s life. Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott consider “text and image” as “two different forms of communication” that can work together and exist in a variety of relationships to produce or enhance meaning.<sup>9</sup> While much of the added dimension that pictures bring to a text – for instance humour, irony or tension between fantasy and reality – tends to be particularly marked in books where there is a degree of discrepancy between picture and text, revealing extra information about characters or an alternate point of view that produces a more varied reading, even pictures which are essentially complementary to the text can enhance it by the way characters are depicted or through subtle details of the illustration that provide a fuller sense of what is being said. Though it is apparent from the release of a subsequent non-illustrated edition of *A Monster Calls* marketed at adults, that the narrative is not dependent on the pictures to be understood, I nonetheless argue that images contribute to the portrayal of Conor’s experience. Illustrator Jim Kay’s impressionistic black and white illustrations which, rather than being presented as separate plates, flow from page to page in the margins of the text and take over the full spread at key moments, evocatively render both the lonely and frightening quality of Conor’s emotional landscape and the sense of fantasy emerging into the real, heralded by the wild and elemental monster. The technique of intaglio printing, a process involving inking various surfaces and objects and running them through a printing press to produce different patterns and textures, allowed the characters to maintain an indistinct and ambiguous quality, considered important by both author and illustrator, and, according to Kay, “gave the images an injection of something extra, an element of something uncontrolled” (in Dennis, n.pag.).

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<sup>9</sup> The term “picturebook” employed by Nikolajeva and Scott is used to distinguish books where the meaning is dependent on both pictures and text, unlike in books which are merely illustrated. in which case “the picture is subordinated to the words and the text is not dependent on illustrations to convey its essential message” (8).

It is precisely this element of the uncontrolled that the illustrations so adeptly emphasise, enhancing the tone of the narrative and allowing Conor's chaotic internal world to emerge visually as the monster comes alive from the tree and the settings of the tales flow into and momentarily envelop his reality. The intaglio printing seems particularly fitting on a symbolic level as well since familiar everyday surfaces are transformed and rendered strange once their texture is produced in ink, just as the threat of loss has transformed Conor's world and sense of self and the intrusions of fantasy unsettle the real. Moreover, the black and white pallet combined with this style of art communicates the darker tone of the text and differentiates it from more typical illustrations for children. While the closer relationship between text and image produced by the arrangement and distribution of the images is actually a layout most characteristic of picture books for young children, in this case the format is augmented by the style in such a way that it heightens the atmosphere and enhances the slippage between fantasy and reality as well as portraying the uncontrollable darkness that moves into Conor's life, the feeling of the nightmare. Perhaps most significant is the way the visual language precisely complements his point of view rather than contesting it and undermining the ambiguity of the fantasy elements that are so key to the narrative. We see the monster in all its vital reality, the tales that Conor sinks into in the full page illustrations and, in contrast, experience the gaping absences in his world as the human characters are not depicted. The inclusion of the visual thus constitutes another layer in which the silent truth at the centre of the narrative is absent and thereby adds to the impact of this space in the novel. Considering the importance of conventions from children's literature, the illustrations work well to link to this heritage while also shifting beyond it via the unique presentation and style. Their inclusion is also particularly effective at bringing the monster to life, both in the way it dominates the pages where it is featured and through the scatterings of leaves or berries that are the smaller signs that remain in its wake.

While the ambiguity of the monster produces resonances with children's literature, Conor's resistance to and lack of control over it, taken into account alongside the monster's role in facilitating his confrontation with his repressed fear and anger, point to a deeper use of this mode which can be explored through psychoanalysis. The fact that the fantastic elements in the text seem to exist only for Conor but do not submit to his control corresponds to the notion of phantasies in psychoanalysis which refer to unconscious drives or desires. Andrew M. Butler notes how the unconscious phantasy, that is always present although the conscious

psyche is unaware of it, emerges in disguised and obscured fashion into the consciousness and “may be glimpsed in dreams, artworks and jokes”, “manifest itself as neuroses or psychoses” and sometimes “may be reversed or displaced onto something other than what the desire is really for” or form a component of “several phantasies [...] condensed into one” (92). This obscurity is due to the fact that material in the unconscious is not only unavailable to the consciousness but is not admissible either and is thus expressed, both in terms of gaining utterance and being withdrawn from the self, in disguised form. It is this concept of the unconscious that Jackson uses as a point of departure in combination with her reading of Todorov to theorize fantasy as a response to a lack and as an expression of the inadmissible.

*A Monster Calls* provides a more typical version of the psychoanalytic phantasy in the form of Conor’s nightmare as well as literary fantasy and instances of the fantastic through the inclusion of the yew monster and its ambiguous positioning in the text. It is in Conor’s nightmare that his own dark truth resides and, although a cursory reading of the dream might view it as a simple manifestation of the fear of losing his mother, through the prompting of the monster he is compelled to admit that it is concerned at a deeper level with his repressed desire for their suffering to end and the self-loathing that this produces. What he truly fears is letting her go voluntarily, of giving her up because holding on is too painful and of what this makes of him. While the nightmare’s function reflects the workings of the unconscious as presented in psychoanalytic theory, the fantasy component with the monster functions along the lines of psychoanalytic therapy rooted in the ‘talking cure’, involving the reading of the surface fantasy to reveal what is repressed and in so doing dispelling the internal conflict it produces. The ambiguous nature of the monster allows it to be viewed as an elaborate form of self-therapy for Conor that enables him to process the insistent fear and shame that manifests as the recurring nightmare.

It is moreover significant that the therapy provided takes on the form of the exchange of tales, introducing another layer of fantasy as the tales become brief entries into other worlds and within which Conor comes to a greater understanding of the ambiguities of human character in turn allowing his acceptance of his internal conflict. Each of the monster’s tales is triggered by moments of anger when Conor experiences increased isolation and withdrawal from the people in his life who fail to provide support. While the tales feature characters that correspond to those who have failed Conor the endings are always unexpected; the person who seems most in the wrong and who corresponds to the real

equivalent in Conor's life is never the one who is punished by the monster. While this ambiguity is a subversion of the typically more black and white structure of good and bad in the folk tale it nonetheless provides lessons for Conor similar to the behavioural guidance behind the traditional folk tale. In addition, the tales provide an imagined space he projects himself into where he can express his anger outside of his own situation. He becomes more and more closely associated with the monster in successive tales as his anger and isolation intensify and it is only through the monster that these feelings are expressed, positioning it as a kind of double that externalises his most monstrous impulses. Ness thus conveys the tales in such a way that the worlds of fantasy, the psychoanalytic notion of phantasy and the practice of storytelling are strongly intertwined to produce a rich account of facing loss and the emerging inconsistencies of the self. Moreover, the framing of the tales in the form of the folk fairy tale draws attention to the older ways of understanding the world and the value that stories played in facilitating understanding or expressing emotions and impulses. It is this value that the novel seems to reclaim, corresponding with the emphasis placed on the folk fairy tale by both Bettelheim and Zipes, as the use of fantasy and storytelling becomes the area in which the core conflicts of the narrative are resolved.

The three tales that the monster tells map a progression of Conor's anger and guilt as well as his increased absorption into the world of fantasy and identification with the monster within the tales. The first tale is in response to his troubled relationship with his grandmother and the anxiety caused by possibly having to live with her. She not only represents someone who treats Conor like a small child, undermining the freedom and responsibility he has gained as a result of his mother's illness, while at the same time not being stereotypically nurturing, but also constitutes a threat to the denial he and his mother live in. These factors all come to a head shortly before the telling of the first tale when she comes to stay with them and discusses the future, trying to assure Conor that he will have a place with her but in effect only making him feel more angry and alone. The monster starts to enter into the narrative during this interaction as Conor, who is desperate for rescue from her and the unwelcome truths she represents, notices it watching through the window.

A link between the monster and Conor during spells of heightened emotion also begins to be established here as his anger causes the room to seem "darker" and makes him feel "like he could reach down and tear the whole floor right out of the dark and loamy earth", imagery typical of the monster and suggestive of its connection to his turbulent

internal state (52-3). Conor's sense of desperation is evident from the way he interprets the monster's presence during the fight as a sign that it might be there to help him with this situation. Although he is initially disappointed that "all [it] want[s] to do is tell [him] *stories*", the resonance between the tale and his situation suggests that it might contain a solution or at least align with his desires (61, emphasis in original). It captures his interest by saying it will tell him a story "*of the end of a wicked queen and how I made sure she was never seen again*", creating a parallel between his grandmother and this familiar stock character who is normally thwarted in the fairy tale, leading Conor to believe he will learn from it how to get rid of her (61). Within the tale it initially appears as if an evil queen, rumoured to be a hag who uses "*grave magicks to make herself look younger*", has poisoned the king to take control of the throne while the only surviving heir, the king's grandson, is not yet of age (64). When the time approaches for the prince to take over, the queen is reluctant to lose her place and wants the prince to marry her. Repulsed, he runs away with his beloved, vowing to return and claim the kingdom on his eighteenth birthday. That night they shelter under the yew tree and the following morning his beloved has been murdered, an act for which the queen is blamed and so the whole village sets off to capture her and burn her alive. Conor's grandmother is easily associated with the queen who also makes herself look younger and thus, although Conor is initially sceptical of the story, he rapidly becomes engrossed in longing for her destruction. However, the story works by subverting this expectation and troubling what appears to be truth, since it is the prince who has murdered his beloved in order to incite the villagers to defeat the queen and enable him to reclaim the kingdom. The monster acts to ensure justice is done, saving the queen from being wrongfully accused and destroying the Prince's castle as punishment.

This subversion of the expected fairy tale plot is shown to be involved in revealing the nuances of human character and the ambiguities of truth as opposed to the expected dichotomy of good versus evil. In grappling with the story, Conor tries to figure out what "lesson" it is trying to teach him by the evil queen being wrongfully accused, and asks if it means that he should "be nice" to his grandma (73). Though the monster rebuffs this direct transfer of the story's outcome to Conor's own life, amused that the boy thinks it is there to teach a "*lesson in niceness*", it insists that it is a "*true*" story in which the queen may have caused great evil but was "*not [...] a murderer*" (73). This is consequently a tale with no clear distinction between good and bad, reflecting that "*most people are somewhere in between*"

(74). Even the prince's response to murdering his beloved is further complicated because his actions of waking up in the morning and feigning shock at finding her murdered are revealed to be "*a pantomime*", acted as much for "*himself*" as for anyone who might be watching, displaying how "*sometimes people need to lie to themselves most of all*" (72). The process the monster refers to here can be described as repression since the Prince has done something so terrible that he cannot acknowledge it and thus dissociates himself from his own actions. This not only relates directly to the denial and repression in Conor's own life but also – similarly to how the prince is able to convince himself that the queen, who is in fact a witch, is responsible for the death of his beloved because he *had* to kill her in order to gain the villagers' help – relates to how Conor interprets his grandmother's good intentions unfavourably and blames her for disrupting the belief in his mother's recovery even though deep down he is not convinced of it himself. Although his grandmother may not be typical of the qualities associated with a motherly figure, Conor forgets that she is also losing her daughter and will have to deal with the consequences of her daughter's death, in other words the care of Conor, in a way her daughter will not. This adds to the sense of urgency she feels about preparing him for the loss of his mother, but casts her in the negative role of representing the unwanted truth. The tale's conclusion proves deeply unsatisfactory to Conor who considers it "a cheat" because it does not end as it should, or show any way to "save [him] from her", although the monster insists "*it's not her you need saving from*" (74). It is therefore clear that Conor does not yet understand, or perhaps is not yet *willing* to understand, what is implied about truth and human actions within the tale; yet, it is a significant first step, demonstrating the power that stories can hold in unsettling assumptions and revealing truths which, as the monster acknowledges, "*often feel like a cheat*" (74).

This pattern established by the first tale continues throughout the rest of the narrative, each time reflecting another example of human complexity and also shifting with Conor's changing perceptions of why the monster might have come. However, the tales also reveal the intensification of Conor's fear and loneliness as he becomes increasingly involved in the monster's destructive antics which punish someone, although never the obvious candidate, at the close of each story. By the second tale, Conor's mother has been hospitalised and he is living in his grandmother's strict and uninviting home. Within this context the announcement of his father's visit brings with it the first source of happiness and comfort that he has experienced since his mother's hospitalisation, sadly soon replaced by a renewed sense of his

isolation. While Conor begins to hope that the purpose of his dad's visit is to ask him to live with him, he is soon made aware that there is "no room" for him on a permanent basis in his father's new life (102). Moreover, the visit, at Conor's mother's request, is also a further unwelcome indication of her worsening condition as his visits are clearly not common. The urgency of finding an outlet for his feelings is revealed when Conor starts breaking his grandmother's rules about her house once he gets home and projects his resentment onto her most prized item, her antique clock handed down from her own mother, "with its pendulum swinging back and forth [...] like it was getting on with its own private life, not caring about Conor at all" (103). This description of the clock makes explicit his feelings about his father, while he also resents it as one of the many items his grandmother will not let anybody touch. It is in anger at these two people, both transferred anger from his helpless situation and anger at their failure to help him, that he destroys the clock and calls the monster to him as the hands come to rest on the same time as its initial visit at "12:07" (105).

It is the precise moment when Conor realises what he has done, having lost control of his feelings as he destroyed the clock, that the monster appears and intervenes by drawing him into the world of the second tale, creating a space for him to enact the full force of this anger. The tale, which is "*about a man who thought only of himself*" and who "*gets punished very, very badly*", again mirrors Conor's current concerns and aligns with his feelings about his father (108). The potency of the tale in facilitating the expression of his feelings is enhanced through its visual dimension, produced by the monster as it creates a mist that eclipses the real world of the sitting room and clears to reveal the time and space of the story. In this way, Conor is not only able to watch the story unfold as it is told to him, but, also, is within the world of the story and thus removed from his own reality. This extensive incorporation of the visual, only occurring very briefly in the first tale, represents an escalation of the intrusion of the fantastic into the real as well as an increased blurring between the two realms. This is confirmed in the illustration in which Conor is depicted standing within the landscape of the fairy tale beside the monster rather than just viewing it as is suggested by the illustration for the previous tale which only features the occurrences within the tale and thus positions Conor's perspective from outside looking in.

This time, when the monster causes destruction as a form of punishment, he is invited to join in and becomes lost in the act of destruction it condones. Conor's involvement escalates from him instructing the monster's actions to joining in and "mindlessly smashing

and smashing and smashing” until he realises that he alone is doing the damage as “when he finally stopped, he found the monster watching him quietly from outside the wreckage” (121). When, after this, the monster disappears altogether it becomes apparent that the fantasy has actually screened Conor from his own actions as he emerges from the tale to discover that he has wrecked his grandmother’s orderly and pristine sitting room. This transition back out of the fantasy is again perfectly registered by the illustration as the image of the ruins of the house Conor participated in destroying within the tale evocatively spills over onto the next spread and subtly shifts through the fluid illustration style into a mass of ruined objects within the sitting room. While Conor’s actions are not shown, the picture of the end result allows the reader to realise what has happened along with him, allowing for a slower understanding of what he has done as the focalised narration describes the details of the wreckage that Conor sees as if only consciously aware of it for the first time.

In Ness’s novel, the different roles of fantasy are separated since the merging of Conor with the monster enables the much-needed expression of his feelings, while the stories and the conversations with the monster fulfil the role of working through difficult material and uncovering what has been repressed. This dual function of the monster ties in with the claim made by David Gilmore, highlighted by Day in her article, that in psychological terms “the monster of dreams and fantasies represents an amalgam of the ‘chaotic danger of the id and the punishing superego’ thus comprising both a release of uncontrolled emotion and a criticism of it” (Gilmore in Day 9). The way fantasy functions to allow the expression of repressed feeling also constitutes a kind of a regression to childhood strategies in the face of such overwhelming feelings. In *A Monster Calls* this regression is far more complex and ambiguous as it is clear that during these ‘episodes’ Conor is not in control and his link to reality becomes tenuous. This is reminiscent of the protective psychological responses that are triggered by trauma and demonstrates how his psyche has produced a similar effect in response to his own actions and feelings.

The extent of internal conflict and alienation is most clearly revealed in the scenario surrounding the third tale which is far less removed from Conor’s reality than the others, placing him in the position of the hero of the story. The monster’s third tale, which takes place in the cafeteria at lunch time as the wall clock strikes 12:07 and is about “*an invisible man [...] who had grown tired of being unseen*”, relates very directly to Conor’s isolated situation at school (156). Rather than being set in an earlier time period and featuring a story

that merely corresponds to his situation in some way, as in the previous tales, in this case Conor is the invisible man and there is no removed fantasy world as the tale unfolds within his present in the cafeteria. The tale begins shortly after Harry realises that Conor has come to rely on their encounters as a source of relief from both his intense isolation and his guilt. Harry thus comes to understand that the best way to hurt Conor is to render his invisibility complete and so tells him “I no longer see you” (155). This final deprivation of any form of acknowledgement pushes Conor’s rage at his own isolation, inseparable from the resultant guilt this produces in relation to wanting his mother’s long illness to come to an end, to a breaking point and within the framing of the third tale he turns on Harry as the invisible man. During this incident his voice merges completely with that of the monster as when he hears it speaking to him it becomes increasingly intimate, progressing from “whispering into [his ear]” to feeling “like it was in his own head” and hearing his own words echoed in its voice (157, 161). The rage with which the monster, by implication Conor, attacks Harry, yelling, “*Never invisible again*”, is indicative of the extent of the trauma inflicted on Conor by his isolation and his consequent outburst is violent enough to put Harry in hospital with a broken nose and arm and probably damaged teeth (163, 4). Yet this attack is, for Conor, entirely filtered through the actions of the monster, although he “*felt* what the monster was doing to Harry, felt it in his own hands” (164, emphasis in original). Thus, in this most violent outburst, Conor becomes the monster, which both acts as a form of self-defence and symbolically represents the way his isolation from family and community and the repression of his feelings have made him seem monstrous to himself. This is also the moment when the monster can be argued to most clearly be a manifestation of Conor’s unconscious because when it comes into a room full of people no one else sees it and, at a deeper level, because of the way it merges with Conor and becomes a form of split self expressing repressed aspects. However, it is also in this moment of monstrousness that Conor is profoundly human because he cannot control his emotional response to a load he is not equipped to bear. The third tale not only serves the function of enabling his most violent emotions to surface but continues the theme of human ambiguity and brings it in closer relation to Conor, since, although he makes people see him, he comes to find that he is now “further away than ever” (168). The tales consequently enact a progression from more distanced stories to ones which become increasingly entangled in Conor’s own reality as his situation intensifies and his emotions are more difficult to control.

The power of stories is most evident when it is Conor's turn to reciprocate and tell the story of his nightmare, occurring after his mother has finally told him that there is nothing more to be done for her. He experiences an intense physical response to revealing this repressed truth and consciously reliving his nightmare as the narration describes how he resists and feels like he is "splitting open" and his body is "twisting apart" (182). In the depths of the pain of realising that he will lose his mother he finally asks the monster to help him and it is through making him confront his feelings by telling the fourth tale that this help is provided. As Conor pleads with it not to make him tell this truth, saying it will "kill me" to do so, the monster is "scariest" than he has ever seen it, insisting that "*it will kill you if you do not*" (197). It is therefore only under the pressure of its fierce insistence that he must speak the truth along with the enveloping darkness of the nightmare, that he admits "I can't *stand* it any more!", and "I want it to be *finished!*" and consequently that he let his mother fall (198, emphasis in original). This first difficult admission allows him, in the chapter significantly titled "Life After Death" to tell the monster his fear that it is his "fault" that she is dying, "because [he has] known forever that she wasn't going to make it" and wanted it to stop because he "couldn't stand the waiting" or "how alone it made [him] feel" (199). However, through reference to the ambiguities in the stories it has told, the monster is able to show Conor that he is not culpable because of these feelings since "*humans are complicated beasts*" whose "*mind[s] will believe comforting lies while also knowing painful truths that make those lies necessary*" (201). These stories allow Conor to see that he can simultaneously wish for his mother's ordeal to be over and yet just as truly wish for her not to leave him, thoughts and feelings that make him human and not monstrous. When, shortly after the fourth tale, he goes to say goodbye to her for the last time, the monster accompanies him to help him confront the truth and thereby face what has to come. The novel thus concludes with Conor telling her honestly that he does not want her to go, and, by allowing him to acknowledge this fear of loss, enables him to relinquish his tight hold on her and begin the work of mourning without being inhibited by his guilt.

In this novel, elements of children's fantasy are put to sophisticated use in relation to portraying interiority and the traumatic aspects of loss suffered by a protagonist whose circumstances have propelled him into an adolescent position but who, due to the impending loss of his mother and isolated circumstances, is extremely vulnerable. The way in which the fantasy elements are questioned in the narrative, in contrast to how Skellig is more

unambiguously presented as real in Almond's novel, is a crucial element of how fantasy becomes a way of expressing emotional states and psychological repression. However, although *A Monster Calls* ends with loss, unlike the recovery of Michael's sister at the conclusion of *Skellig*, it nonetheless closes with the sense that after his experiences with the monster Conor will be able to engage in successful mourning for his mother and be able to move forward with his life. This presents a conclusion that provides the consolation appropriate to both the child and young adult reader, while not diminishing the severity of the loss Conor has to confront. In the following chapter, I will discuss Alexia Casale's *The Bone Dragon* in which the portrayal of multi-faceted traumatic loss calls into question the possibility of complete and successful mourning, thus placing this novel more unambiguously in the category of young adult fiction while still including the central dimension of fantasy.

## Chapter 4

### “Grief Waiting Beside Knowledge”: Mourning, Childhood Abuse and the Loss of Innocence in Alexia Casale’s *The Bone Dragon*

[I]nnocence is so much bigger. It’s every aspect of the life you have before you know how precious and wonderful it is to be ignorant. It’s all the time you spend rushing, rushing to *know*, never expecting to find grief waiting beside knowledge.

(Casale 233, emphasis in original)

Alexia Casale’s *The Bone Dragon* is another example of a young adult novel that features intrusions of the fantastic into everyday reality in the form of an intervening companion or guide that facilitates and represents the process of coming to terms with traumatic loss. While in *A Monster Calls* this fantasy element is clearly rooted in the conventions of children’s fiction and functions largely in relation to the transition into adolescence, Casale’s first-person narrated novel is more concretely situated within the young adult category, employing fantasy to engage with questions of subjectivity, the speaking of trauma, the costs of childhood abuse and concomitant loss of innocence, and the possibility, or impossibility, of complete mourning and recovery. The difference in the characterisation and implementation of fantasy within the two novels, particularly in the way the loss of innocence through knowledge is registered, is illustrative of this development in complexity. In *A Monster Calls*, Conor’s progression is from a more childlike innocence in the face of anticipated maternal loss and a state of internal conflict to greater self-understanding as the consequent foundation for successfully tackling the difficult task of mourning. This progression is enabled through fantasy in the form of the monstrous and elemental living tree of knowledge which is linked to forgotten and ancient wisdom conveyed through folk tales. The characterisation of the yew-tree monster as powerful and dangerous yet capable of providing healing portrays the development of this understanding as a difficult but beneficial and even necessary component of the often unsettling and painful process of growth. In *The Bone Dragon*, however, the fourteen-year-old protagonist and narrator Evie never really enjoys the innocence of childhood due to the physical and emotional abuse she suffers at the hands of her maternal grandparents after her father dies and while her mother Fiona, who in all likelihood suffered the same fate, turns a blind eye. She is consequently placed in a position of knowing too much too soon, a description often applied to traumatic experience. The novel thus looks

beyond the end-point of new understanding that facilitates mourning and healing achieved at and as closure in *A Monster Calls* to the actions and insights necessary to cope with the fundamental loss of innocence consequent upon knowledge brought about by abuse, the complete recovery from which may not in the end be possible. This more disquieting portrayal of the acquisition of knowledge is reflected by the fantasy element introduced in the form of a dragon that Evie carves from a surgically removed fragment of one her ribs, broken during one such act of abuse, that begins to come to life at night and guide her on dreamlike adventures after she wishes for it to be real. The creation of the dragon from her rib, in addition to being a more intimate and internal companion closely associated with her traumatic past, in contrast to the external tree of Ness's novel which is more independent of Conor, draws an explicit association with Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. This is an intertext that frames certain types of knowledge as forbidden and the gain of such knowledge as a transgression leading to a loss of innocence and fall from grace, a parallel to Evie's situation as her experiences have placed her outside the paradise of childhood innocence just as Eve was banished after eating the forbidden fruit. Although it is clear that Evie has been thrust into this state of knowing through the trauma she experiences, she must nonetheless find ways to come to terms with who she is because of it, a process that constitutes the central narrative journey in the novel.

This process is further complicated by the way it coincides with Evie's observation of loss and mourning in the loving adoptive family she is part of in the present. This family, consisting of her adoptive parents Amy and Paul and the frequent addition of Amy's brother Uncle Ben, has been deeply affected by the loss of four family members in a car accident two years prior to her adoption. They therefore demonstrate both what a family should be and the enduring and sometimes subtle ways that loss can produce isolation even in such circumstances, which works against the consolation of closure. Of particular significance among those lost, which include Amy and Uncle Ben's parents and Uncle Ben's wife Aunt Minnie, is Amy and Paul's only son Adam who would have been Evie's age had he lived and whose birthday was only days apart from hers, making her his replacement.<sup>10</sup> Evie is thus

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<sup>10</sup> The name Adam draws an additional link to the Garden of Eden, positioning him as the first child, with the adoption of Evie gaining particular meaning because of his loss, similar to Eve's creation from Adam's rib in the biblical story. Adam also ends up outside of the Eden of childhood; in this case displacement occurs as a result of his physical death at a young age unlike Evie who represents a lost childhood in a more abstract sense as she is deprived of the innocence and naivety that are characteristic of this space.

very complexly situated in the novel as a member of these two very different families: the potentially ideal family that has been fractured by external trauma, representing her narrative present, and the damaged and damaging family of her origins that produces and perpetuates trauma in its members from the inside, representing her past narrated as memory and flashback. This positioning of the protagonist sets up the novel's more advanced engagement with the theme of traumatic loss in comparison with *A Monster Calls*. While Conor's experience of guilt and isolation in consequence of his mother's long illness and his fear of losing her, aggravated by how the family unit has fallen apart, are clearly deeply traumatic to him, his situation is nonetheless simpler than that of Evie who has come from a family that is dangerous and unpredictable, and in which she had felt unloved and unsafe. Her narrative begins at the point when, having become part of a new family that provides what a family ought to, she feels safe enough to disclose her physical injury and by extension the facts of her past, thus bringing about a more open confrontation with the psychological trauma that still affects her. Moreover, although she is not isolated in the same sense as Conor is, the contrast in the family dynamics, as well as between the mourning she observes and her own anger, leads to a sense of being contaminated and a fear of alienation that isolates her.

Within this difficult context, the dragon functions most fundamentally as a protector, on one hand embodying and externalising aspects of Evie from which she needs to distance herself in order to salvage some innocence, and on the other operating as an amulet through which she can be powerful and safely assert that power against those who hurt her. The dreamlike nightly adventures that she undertakes with her dragon serve both these purposes: on the surface Evie's guided forays into the fenlands lead to an enchanted space in which she can be herself, gain strength and heal, recovering something of the childhood that was lost, while below this there is a darker motive revealed when these adventures ultimately emerge as preparation for revenge on her grandparents in the form of a house-fire that kills them both towards the end of the novel. Casale makes it deliberately unclear whether it was Evie or her dragon that started the fire, showing how the blurring of fantasy and reality enables her protagonist to be protected from the potential ramifications of this act at a psychological level. Although this novel, like *A Monster Calls*, ends with hope, the ethically troubling nature of the fire and the potential consequences of this act prohibit a neat resolution. Despite the incorporation of fantasy in a way that is still reminiscent of the childhood imaginary friend, *The Bone Dragon* is clearly written for young adults, not only due to its extensive

engagement with the concerns of adolescence but, also, because of its more multifarious engagement with trauma, the unsettling circumstances that accompany its conclusion and the complex narrative structure that combines the evasiveness of the trauma narrative with the adolescent voice.

The sophistication of the depiction of traumatic loss and the difficulty of the process of coming to terms with and moving on from such an experience that Casale achieves in *A Bone Dragon* is effected through the different narrative dimensions of the first-person account, which, with its attempts to control the influx of traumatic content and the inclusion of Evie's observation of mourning and the effects of trauma on others as a counterpoint to her own experience, invites a reading of the text itself as a fragmented and traumatised body. It is through Evie's narration that the young adult focus of the novel is most apparent as the adolescent first-person perspective is often used in young adult literature to convey the urgency of questions of the self in relation to society and the more critical yet still developing appraisal of the various elements they encounter. In this case, however, the first-person narration is additionally inflected with Evie's experiences of trauma which continually invade and shape her perceptions and interactions during her adolescence. The consequence of her attempts to limit this influence is a narrative style characterised by evasion and the conscious control and censorship of information pertaining to her past. Casale opens the novel shortly after Evie has told Amy and Paul about the injury to her ribs, necessitating an account of her history to them and then the police in a formal statement, which begins the narrative at the point when, for the first time, others are aware of her past and are trying to help her with it. Although Evie has been compelled to confront her history to a certain degree because of the pain in her ribs, both in the sense that this has prevented her from fully repressing her abuse and pretending it did not take place and because it is her injury that eventually prompts her to confide in her adoptive parents, she nonetheless does not like to have the facts of her past known or openly discussed.

This is evident from the enduring hatred she feels towards the policewoman who took down her statement because she "wouldn't let [Evie] talk around things" that she had "never said out loud" only to write it all up "with about seven billion spelling mistakes and no grammar" (Casale 156). Evie's description of this encounter reflects a concern with both the necessity of talking evasively and, to some degree contradictorily, with expressing things well and correctly. This paradox in turn points to the fact that trauma cannot be directly

addressed and can find expression only in evasive speech, and yet it also demands respectful treatment once recounted. Her awareness of the significance of language is addressed directly and more fully when she thinks that “[s]ome things should never be said”:

Not out loud in clear, simple words. You talk around them. You leave gaps and blanks. You use other words and talk in curves and arcs for the worst things because you need to keep them like mist. Words are dangerous. Like a spell, if you name the mist, call out all of the words that describe it sharp and clear, you turn it solid, into something that no one should ever have to hold in their hands. Better that it stays like water, slipping between your fingers. (60)

Evie’s strong sense of the power of language is thus closely related to her own experience of trauma and her need to control how traumatic memories are approached as much as possible through indirection.

Her narration embodies this relationship to language since her references to the past are characterised by abrupt gaps, unfinished sentences and deflections via shifts in attention to more mundane details situated in the present. This is most directly apparent in Evie’s informal therapy sessions with her favourite teacher, Ms Winters, enlisted by Amy and Paul to work on “getting [her] to *talk* in between helping [her] with [...] schoolwork” she missed because of recovery from the surgery (27, emphasis in original). Although Evie has developed an aversion to formal counselling after two previous trials in which she blocked out the “awful” counsellors who insisted on saying the “sorts of things” that “[n]o one should ever say”, she consents to talk to Ms Winters whom she knows and likes and who seems to have personal experience like hers because Evie feels that she “really knows about people like me” (26, 86). Yet, even so, Evie always works to control and inhibit their conversations when they relate to her past, a process of self-censorship the first-person narrative makes apparent. In an early session in which Ms Winters asks if Evie has any fond memories of her mother Fiona, she thinks about “how to deal with this”, hesitating “only a few seconds” because “any longer and Ms Winters will never let it drop” (50). Her account of the conversation shows how she tries to strategically position herself so as to give away as little as possible. When asked about her life before living with Fiona’s parents, she chooses to “lie” by saying “I don’t remember”, and plays down the importance with a “nonchalant” shrug (51). Evie’s concessions to talking about her past are thus part of the subterfuge of trying to

appear less affected by it than she is since she “know[s] the only way to escape the topic is to go with it just enough for [Ms Winters] to think [she’s] not afraid to talk about it” (51).

In the discrepancy between Evie’s brief responses to Ms Winters’s penetrating questions and the more detailed thoughts and memories that are elicited but which she refuses to express, the extent of control she exercises over access to her past, or perhaps rather the access her past gains to her present, is apparent. It is precisely because of the stringency with which she avoids engaging with these fairly straightforward questions that the reader gains insight into the extent of trauma still produced by memories. At other times Evie unintentionally says more than she intends and gets too close to something that she remembers but cannot face, moments which are generally characterised by narrative fragmentation. This is the case when she starts to tell Ms Winters about how she used to climb “outside to sit on the roof of Fiona’s parents’ house” but stops when she gets to “when” she used to do this, suggesting that something terrible prompted this escape but that she is not willing to speak about it (30). The shifting of focus to the present is another way of creating distance from the past, apparent in these sessions when Evie is far more communicative about current difficulties, like being bullied, than about her history and tends to shift the conversation to immediate issues to avoid discussing her traumatic experiences.

This is also a prominent feature of the wider narrative since Evie navigates her life as it is now while still having to repeatedly confront her life as it was. Many of the things she draws attention to, such as being able to enjoy the touch of Amy’s hand at her elbow when she helps Evie up the stairs during her convalescence, are things she notices and attributes importance to because of the contrast to the past when such a touch “would have made [her] jump” (17). In this example, as in many others like it, Evie does not elaborate on her memories of the past, but the degree of focus on the novelty of being able to enjoy this relatively commonplace experience which may easily be taken for granted suggests the shadowy alternative that is avoided even in moments when her narrative is reflecting on positive things that she has now. Moreover, the degree of perceptiveness and awareness that she displays in relation to the actions and behaviour of those around her stems from her need to assess and control her environment. Although, in some ways, this control that she exercises and the clarity with which she remembers details of her past appear to fall outside of general representations of trauma as that which cannot be known and which therefore often exists

outside of memory, it is precisely the extent of her endeavours to control that point to the enduring affect that the past has on her.

The conscious control and self-censorship exercised by Evie in her narrative when it relates to the past form part of the pervasive tendency towards fragmentation that Casale produces in the text as a whole. The structure of the novel reflects this, both in the way that it is organised into sections and in the style of writing used to convey Evie's speech and thoughts. Considering that Evie attributes great importance to the way things are expressed, her own rather unorthodox narrative style consisting almost entirely of short, simple sentences and sentence fragments is noteworthy. This style of writing Casale employs allows meaning to be built up gradually by juxtaposing fragments of information instead of conveying these different aspects within a single sentence where they would by necessity be linked and situated more clearly. While this conveys Evie's own caution in speaking about her past and registers her external *and* internal resistance to confronting it, it also produces visual fragmentation of the text that disrupts the process of reading. Furthermore, Casale has not made use of conventional chapters demarcated either by numbers, conveying a sense of order and progression, or headings that frame the content of the chapter for the reader and may relate it to what has gone before. Instead, the novel is divided into scenes separated by section-breaks denoted by a small silhouette of a wispy dragon, an image of Evie's fantasy companion that could be read as a trace of illustrations in children's fiction left behind in a novel written for young adults in which images are typically few or entirely absent. This format registers the intrusion of fantasy, an element of the unconscious, into the narrative while also producing a more fragmented and less conclusive reading experience in keeping with the ambiguous nature of the first-person account, a further indication of the novel's departure from children's literature which tends to be organised in a way that is more manageable for its readers.

Much as the dragon image winds through the text, creating the visual effect of fantasy interrupting the flow of linear narration, the recurring references to Evie's past, the re-emergence of trauma and her nightly adventures with the dragon break into the narrative of the present that she attempts to tell. While her ostensibly controlled narrative seeks always to suppress the past, Casale ensures that her history persistently emerges, for instance through unbidden memories or indirectly via overheard conversations, creating a tension which produces information in scattered pieces that when assembled still leave much unresolved.

Although Evie's attempt to control all forms of narration is a precaution against potential triggers of unconscious material, something to which she knows herself to be susceptible, there are nonetheless moments when the conscious aspect of control is fractured by intrusions of the unconscious as the trauma of the past reasserts itself in the present. Subtle indications of this occur during the sessions with Ms Winters when, unlike Evie's purposeful evasion, discomfort is acted out, for example when she "turn[s] [her] attention to a catch in [her] nail" and works at it with increasing vigour when Mrs Winter asks her about Fiona (51).

More overt vestiges of the fears coded into Evie's unconscious emerge in the form of residual responses predicated on past traumatic experiences that persist even though there is no longer a situation to warrant them. One such case is her wariness of people standing in her blind spot. For instance, Uncle Ben leaning over her shoulder to look at a book causes her, for a moment, "to freeze at the feeling that someone is standing Right Behind Me, where I can't see them and can't know what they're about to do" (107). The emphasis produced by the capitalisation of words in the sentence communicates the internalised panic triggered by this everyday action, conveying how Evie physically relives the time in her life when a nearby human presence signalled a threat. More complete breaks with reality occur in the form of flashbacks she describes as moments when "*then* is suddenly flaring in your senses again, no longer dim and distant but clear and sharp and *present*" (87, emphasis in original). Although she never seems to lose the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is not and is aware of these flashbacks taking place, she is nonetheless unable to respond accordingly since "the past was once real as now is" and seems so again during these incidents (87). The eruption of detail in these scenes contrasts with the sparing detail she consciously provides and in this way the text signals the different state she has entered into.

Evie's night-time forays with the dragon can similarly be characterised as intrusions of the unconscious, albeit in a different capacity. As in the previous two novels, the introduction of a fantasy component into an otherwise realistic setting leads the reader to question its reality, opening up a psychoanalytic reading in which such elements are attributed to projections of the unconscious. In Casale's novel, as in *A Monster Calls*, it is clear that the action that takes place during these fantasy encounters is real to a degree. Amy's discovery of Evie's wet clothes on the morning following an excursion and Paul's observation of the mud on the table that she uses to climb into her bedroom window, are unambiguous signs that she goes out at night. However, the reality of the dragon actually

coming to life nevertheless remains questionable due to the novel's use of realism in conjunction with its contemporary setting. The fact that Evie is the only one to interact with the dragon and that it only comes to life at night, generally waking her from sleep and returning to lifeless bone by morning, associates its presence with the world of dreams. Evie's reference to their encounters as "Dragon-dreams" along with the way she wakes feeling "rested" rather than tired further enforces this association (45). While it remains difficult to reconcile the obvious reality of some aspects of these walks with the improbability of a living dragon, it is nonetheless useful to approach these nocturnal wanderings as being situated within the vein of dreams given that this is how Evie categorises them for herself. This is, moreover, a reading that corresponds to the other unconscious elements present within the narrative.

The idea that these dragon-dreams are unconsciously produced by Evie as a means of achieving closure on her past is furthermore evocative of Sigmund Freud's conception of dreams as "fulfilments of wishes" providing coded access to the unconscious (*Interpretation* 147). This is similar in function to the way Rosemary Jackson conceptualises fantasy as responding to a lack or absence in reality (3-4). These incidents of altered reality that interrupt the otherwise real setting of the story are crucial spaces in which Evie works through her feelings and ultimately takes the action she deems necessary to move on, which is made possible by the distance provided by the intervening veil of fantasy. It is, furthermore, in the space of dreamlike fantasy that she does not consciously have to hide or attempt to exert control, as is evident again in the change in the narrative style that shifts from short fragmented sentences to flowing and lyrical descriptions of the enchanted space of the night-time fenlands and her freedom and sense of power within it. This resonates with the metaphor of mist she uses to describe the necessary way of speaking about trauma and shows how fantasy enables her freedom of experience and expression without the pain of direct confrontation. The fragmentation of the first-person narrative produced through these interruptions of trauma and fantasy from the unconscious, and complimented by the structural and stylistic dimensions of the text, is significant because it allows a reading of the narrative itself as metonymically performing trauma as its fragmentation approximates the state of the traumatised psyche. This constitutes an important component of the overall account of trauma that Casale produces in the novel.

A further important dimension of the multifaceted narrative is its incorporation of the legacy of a separate history of trauma through Evie's observations of the impact of loss in her new family. While adding to the overall fragmentation of Evie's story, this also provides an external view of trauma that offsets the first-person account and incorporates an important point of comparison with her story. Unlike many of her other digressions, which are either outside her control or employed intentionally to avoid confronting traumatic material, her observation of the mourning process in her new family stems from perceptiveness and curiosity produced by her past and leads to a distanced exploration of trauma that ultimately enables confrontation with her own history. When Evie is first getting to know Amy and Paul, the sparse information she receives about their loss is "that they'd had a little boy who died" and "that they didn't like to talk about him", already giving a clear sense that they are still in the process of grieving (Casale 98). It is only once she has come to live with them, having by that stage known them "more than a year", that Adam is brought up accidentally by Amy upon seeing Evie struggling with fractions like he used to (97). Evie's habitually careful observation notes the unspoken upset this causes as the way Amy "[goes] very still and Paul [takes] his feet off the spare chair", startled from his comfortable position, register how this unexpected evocation of their loss momentarily unbalances the careful control they generally exercise (99). When she cannot resist seizing upon this rare opportunity to ask what Adam looks like, in itself an indication that there are no photos of him in the house, it is with "precise and careful" movements that Amy acquiesces and shows her the picture she keeps in her locket (99). The way Amy has to physically brace herself for this process, signalled by her taking "a deep breath [and] smoothing her hands down her arms, all the way from her shoulders to her elbows" in what seems to Evie "an attempt to [physically] push the pain away from her chest" demonstrates the overwhelming reaction she still experiences when referring to her son (99). During this interaction Paul disappears, likewise indicating his inability to face Adam's loss. In addition, Paul leaving fits into another pattern that Evie identifies, noting that he and Amy never discuss Adam in each other's presence whereas "separately", although still reticent on the subject, "they've added a few facts" (100). A rift between them that relates to the loss of Adam and which cannot be resolved because they cannot discuss their loss is thus apparent.

This highlights the isolating aspect of unresolved trauma, particularly interesting in this instance because it is a shared trauma and yet the response to it remains highly subjective

and personal. Evie thus comes to navigate these various silences in her desire to know more about the family members she will never meet, turning to Uncle Ben “when there’s something [she’s] just *got* to know about Adam” and to “Amy or Paul [...] about [his wife] Aunt Minnie” as he is similarly silent on the loss most painful to him (100, emphasis in original). The effectiveness of this narrative strand stems from the way it is largely conveyed through Evie’s perceptive observation of body language, interactions between family members and features within the home that are suggestive rather than explicit in communicating trauma. In this way, the narration remains consistent with the elusiveness that has come to be typical of trauma narratives. In addition, the sensitivity that Evie has gained from her past is reflected in the degree of perceptiveness she displays and through the delicacy with which she engages with what she recognises as traumatic material, showing how trauma can produce compassion and understanding. While for the most part the narrative exists entirely out of observations which Evie does not elaborate upon, over time she begins to think more critically of the family’s engagement with their traumatic past and relate it to her own experience.

It is during the present after having known the family for three years, which also coincide with her early adolescence, that Evie begins to consider these observations in relation to the question of whether they have “moved on” from their loss or not (101). Reflections prompted by what would have been Uncle Ben’s wedding anniversary, a day that is always difficult for him and on which the conversation remains “stubbornly fixed on lighter things”, lead her to recognise that he has remained isolated, as if tethered by what he has lost (93). Amy and Paul, rather than mourning and moving on, have “just tried to start a new [life]” by adopting her and eradicating signs of Adam, “as if they’ve pushed all their memories of [him] into a room and closed the door on the wreckage and then papered over that door to pretend it’s not even there anymore” (101). Her familiarity with this manner of coping is reflected by the way she unpacks how they might think “they can eventually open the door [to find] all those broken things [...] have mouldered away”, leaving “the wood splinters and glass shards [...] rounded at the edges [and] safe to pick up again[,] soft as ashes” (101). This description registers a belief in the ability of time to dull the pain if it can be ignored long enough. However, Evie’s observations of the family convey how it is other aspects of their lives that decay while their loss is so tightly guarded that it is kept safe from even the forces

of time. The fact that she has herself been prevented by the pain in her ribs from successfully pretending away the painful elements of her past allows her a more critical perspective on how it might be “worse” to be able to lock everything away, because, “though it seems easier” and “may hurt less”, it is “perhaps just as much work” (101-2).

The density and complexity of the text produced by the intersection of these different narrative components Casale uses is registered most clearly by the difficulties it poses to a coherent account of Evie’s story, despite the fact that she is the narrator and at the centre of the novel. Because of the way her traumatic past continually resurfaces as present through thoughts and memories, and also fundamentally frames the perspective of Evie’s narration of the present, these two phases of her life are difficult to separate and remain stubbornly entangled. Moreover, to look at the fantasy she enters into is also to look at her reality, consisting of both past and present simultaneously, which informs it. By the same token, the role of the living dragon of fantasy requires exploration of its dormant form and in turn the rib from which it was carved along with the history and meaning that it brings with it. Attempts by the reader to maintain focus on Evie and the journey she takes with her dragon are also inevitably thwarted by the inclusion of the process of mourning she observes in her new family which, despite its relevance as an influential point of contrast, seems to disrupt the flow and lead in a new direction. Thinking through Evie’s present position also triggers discussion of Adam’s absence, situating her as a replacement of a dead child and inviting comparison of her more abstract lost childhood with his physical death. Furthermore, the association of these two central child characters with the biblical tale of Adam and Eve and their fall from grace and innocence in consequence of eating from the tree of knowledge sets up a tantalising comparison between childhood and the Garden of Eden, potentially opening up the broader philosophical consideration of innocence and knowledge as a theme within the narrative, again seeming to lead away from the specificity of Evie’s story. Any reading of Evie’s story is therefore, to a large extent, the process of looking at gaps and holes, at silences and diversions and at all the ways in which it is left vague and incomplete; in other words, at everything else that is not quite Evie’s story. Despite the proliferating connections between the various points of interest in the novel, they remain difficult to organise linearly, demonstrating how

*The Bone Dragon* functions as a trauma text and how Evie's narrative performs traumatic experience in its evasiveness and, paradoxically, persistence.

However, the novel's effectiveness as a young adult novel lies not as much in the sophistication of its depiction of trauma as in the way the coming-of-age plot typical of this category is married with the first-person narration of the process of coming to terms with its long-term impact. The novel opens with Evie's gradual return to consciousness after surgery, which she experiences and describes as surfacing from deep, dark water. This not only establishes the importance of the removal of the rib as a point of origin for the growth and healing she undergoes and narrates, but also, in the use of descriptive language and imagery, anticipates her later descriptions of the dreamlike encounters with the dragon. Her experience of this moment is of being reluctantly but inexorably drawn up from safely "floating in the shadows" towards "low echoes" of sound and the distant pain "belonging to the light and the warmth and the air", a description highly evocative of being on the brink of life or death, which frames this opening scene as a kind of rebirth (1). It is this moment, then, rather than when she first becomes part of a new family, that is a new beginning, pain and difficulty inevitably accompanying the entry into the harsh light of reality, with darkness, in contrast, representing a safe and protective space that re-emerges in the dragon-dreams. While the gradual recovery from surgery conveys a physical dimension to healing and adaptation, there is the corresponding emotional and social component often evident in her interactions at school. Just as she takes the lost rib and creates the dragon, a symbol of power that becomes an agent of protection and a guide in the dream-world of fantasy she enters, in her immediate reality she also needs to find ways of feeling secure and of growing through loss and vulnerability. In this way, Casale conflates the processes of maturation and healing through the different ways in which Evie responds to the loss of her rib and the different dimensions in which her recovery, not only from this loss but also from the past that produced it, unfolds.

The traumatic nature of having the rib exposed as a concrete sign of what Evie has suffered is conveyed by the way Amy "flinches, drawing back into herself" and Paul "jerks oddly, his face twisting", when the doctor gives the fragment to Evie, preserved in its small pot of fluid (7). In this way, the extracted fragment is much like the plain speech that Evie so carefully avoids, because it 'speaks' her history "out loud in clear, simple words" like a

“spell” turning it “solid” and therefore indisputably real (60). However, for Evie this spell operates differently as she has lived with the daily, hidden pain of the broken rib for so long and has always been reminded of the past by it. Her first impression of it as “something an odd mix of grey, white and pink” captures the strangeness of seeing this internal and previously hidden part of herself brought out into the light where it should not be and casts the rib as something almost alien (6). While this highlights the dissociation produced by trauma, it also imposes a literal distance between herself and what is broken within her, that paradoxically allows her to approach and shape the effects of the past. This shift emerges in the way she feels “curious [a]nd a little sad”, rather than “horrified” like Amy and Paul, seeing the rib in a new light as “another thing [she has] lost” (7). The doctor’s crisp characterisation of the rib as having been “completely dead” with “no chance of [...] healing” reveals that this loss had, in a physiological sense, already taken place. However, it is only with its removal that Evie, seeing it with her own eyes, can come to terms with it (6). It is fitting that her physical recovery, like the process of psychological recovery, will never be complete. While taking out the rib “should stop [her] chest hurting” once the new wound of surgery has healed, she will always be without a rib and she will likewise always be affected psychologically, even if she reaches a point where the past does not hurt (6).

In the period following her surgery, the healing wound in Evie’s chest continually hampers her in simple day to day tasks, serving as a constant reminder of what she has experienced as well as preventing her from easily engaging in everyday life. Initially, she is unable to even laugh or sigh, getting around is difficult and she cannot shower by herself. While these early restrictions are typical of the recovery process after surgery and do not necessarily convey the speaking of trauma, the way the pain affects some of Evie’s interactions enforces her feelings of isolation and of being different by reminding her of her past as well as limiting her capacity to fully engage in the present. This aspect of her injury is most apparent in relation to her school life. When Ms Winter asks her if she is looking forward to returning to school during one of their sessions, Evie’s thoughts reveal her anxieties about starting “three weeks late” due to missing out on things with her friends Phee and Lynne (26). This anxiety had already been confirmed for her during her friends’ visit the weekend before when “everything [the three of them] tried to talk about ended up taking [them] on to things [Evie] hadn’t done and hadn’t seen and couldn’t understand” (26). This demonstrates how the loss of her rib leads to her perception of additional losses through “new

things [she] [isn't] part of" and "new ways [she is] different" (26). These are moments when her young adult voice becomes particularly clear as many of the concerns that Evie raises are typical of adolescent anxieties about finding an identity while also fitting in and adapting to friendship circles. While her heightened awareness allows her to clearly recognise her friends' attempts to limit her exposure to things she is not a part of, the insecurity produced by her past prevents her from acknowledging her own role in distancing herself and the fact that her friends' behaviour shows their concern for her. Evie's wound limits her even during a moment when Phee and Lynne are confirming her membership in the group by trying to link arms with her. Although the awkward moment that results because Evie only has one good side which is occupied by her school bag is resolved by Phee offering to take her bag, leaving her good side free, it reveals both Evie's deep-seated insecurities, which continue to emerge even as she is healing, and the disconnect this produces between her and her friends as they do not know why she feels the limitations produced by her healing so profoundly as exclusion.

Her sense of vulnerability at school is exacerbated by her interactions with a boy named Sonny Rawlins who is generally a bully but has singled Evie out in particular. As if confirming the frailty of all connections she might make with others, Sonny intrudes at this point as yet another difficult factor that she must confront and overcome since he pinches her somewhere that causes her to jump in shock and pull painfully on the "still-healing skin" of her injury, consequently toppling herself and her two friends over (83). Because of her history and her injury, Sonny's fairly minor brand of teasing and bullying becomes a trigger for traumatic memory and ultimately becomes quite dangerous, strongly communicating Evie's vulnerability. This is clear during a birthday party when he pushes her into the pool, the impact of which leaves "her chest compressed with pain" and leads to her almost drowning (139). She is left severely shaken, in a lot of pain and "humiliated" (149). In the immediate aftermath of this incident, the old "dull, dirty pain of the damaged bones" sits below the new "sharp and immediate, clean" pain of the operation, "as if the broken ends are still grating against each other", although they have now been replaced by a gap framed by bone ends that are not as they should be (144). The pain also triggers flashbacks to Evie's past, suggesting how the healing in the present remains tied to the pains that evoke her past.

The rivalry between Evie and Sonny is ambiguously positioned as a result of a misunderstanding produced precisely from the distrust and insecurities stemming from her history. While she notices his interest in her from the start, she never considers that it might be anything other than malicious. Thus, when he presents her with flowers on Valentine's day and asks if she "know[s] what they're called", she, recognising them as "deadly nightshade", presumes he is trying to publically humiliate her and responds by "throwing the flowers in his smug, expectant face" and shaming him in front of "[h]alf the school" (113-4). Although she notes with surprise "his eyes full of hurt [and] tears", she attributes it to his anger at being thwarted in his plan to trick "the clever new girl" and revels in her victory, since "[she] hadn't escaped Fiona and her parents to become Sonny Rawlins's plaything" (114). While the source of her view of him is left implicit within the narrative, in the "Author's Note" Casale explains that "*atropa belladonna*" is also "often referred to as simply *belladonna*", which in Italian translates to "beautiful woman" (297). Although the note is not accompanied by any further explanation or elaboration, it is clear from its inclusion that Evie's reading may be incorrect, particularly as Sonny's mother is a garden designer, which provides a credible reason for him knowing about the meaning of *belladonna*. It is ironic that there could perhaps have been no more perfect flower for Evie, given her nightly and shadowy ramblings with the dragon as well as her sense of herself as having a certain powerful darkness within her. Given the other associated meaning with the scientific name of deadly nightshade, being offered these flowers could be read as a sign of recognition of her true self but not a rejection of it as Evie tends to assume.

The rib which continually brings her past into the present also becomes the means of her healing, both in the form of the carving, functioning as a kind of amulet from which Evie draws strength and comfort, and in its fantasy form as guide and protector. The dragon, essentially a serpentine mythical creature, though there are many variations on its physical characteristics and abilities, has been described by Ariane and Christian Delacampagne as "a ubiquitous" and widely "ambivalent" figure appearing in "world art and folklore" (126, 130). While in some cases it has been depicted as a "nasty" or greedy creature that covets treasure and power and may "scare innocent people" or "lead them into temptation", there "is also the good dragon [which] uses its strength to terrorise evil, drive away enemies" and to "protect" (130). Though the dragon has also been domesticated in contemporary children's fiction and

film, like other monster figures, in Casale's novel it maintains much of its mythical quality and heritage. Evie's carving is based on an image from a Chinese art book, a culture in which the dragon is "essentially a good omen" and "symbolic of wisdom, prosperity and perfection", in addition to being "an emblem of power", subtly framing her dragon as good and beneficial (137). However, the inclusion of wings and its fire-breathing capability, a capacity that Evie specifically desires and which becomes important in relation to its role in her grand parents' house burning down, are features more characteristic of the often "malicious" western dragon (138). The inclusion of both the sinister and the benevolent sides of the dragon is important for Evie given the darkness she perceives within herself and the way the dragon functions as an externalisation of this aspect. This is alluded to in the novel during one of her early encounters with the dragon when she asks if "there really is such a thing as a phoenix", a creature symbolic of re-birth, but shows disinterest in discussing unicorns, a mythical creature stereotypically popular with girls, because "they only go to the pure" and "chaste", qualities that she feels she does not possess and which hint at the sexual abuse she has suffered (Casale 72). Given this sense of herself and the issues she must confront, the dragon, described by Evie as "a study in power and arrogance" and "beautiful to the point of cruelty", is a fitting companion for her on her journey to confronting the damage that had been done to her and exacting revenge for it.

Unlike the unconscious production of the yew monster in Ness's novel, Evie is actively and consciously involved in the process of shaping the rib and then of wishing the dragon to life. In this way she invests the rib with a kind of power that is evocative of an amulet, particularly as the dragon's role as protector is emphasised, evoking yet another older system of belief as a way of coping in a young adult novel. Sir E. A. Wallis Budge states that among the elements contributing to the power of an amulet are the beneficial "qualities and attributes" of the "materials from which [it is] made", the "influence of inscription" to "supplement [...] the innate power of the material" and the "firm belief of the wearer", all aspects that echo the process by which Evie creates her dragon as a source of "power that is bound to [her] not by blood, but by bone" (xxiii, Casale 125). The main urges which historically underpin the usage of amulets are the desire for protection and to try to "divine the future", an aspect of their power that was in some cases believed to manifest as "dreams in which [the] future [of the wearer] would be revealed" (Budge xv, xxii). While Evie's dragon is deliberately cryptic in order to protect her from the ramifications of the revenge she

takes, the dragon-dreams nevertheless guide her towards this desire that she needs for closure but cannot acknowledge to herself, and thus arguably play on the link between the amulet and dreams. A crucial point made by Budge is that the amulet is fundamentally tied to “self-preservation” and therefore “has nothing evil connected with it”, a notion that resonates with how the novel exonerates Evie’s actions through the use of the dragon (xxii). Though Evie already takes comfort from the idea of the bone dragon and the carving she is making before it is complete, it is only after she wishes for it to come to life, effectively an act of belief, which unleashes the magical properties she has transferred to her lost rib, that the carving becomes an effective amulet to her.

The act of wishing is an important aspect of the genesis of the dragon not only because it makes Evie a conscious participant in the regression to childhood belief, but also because the notion of wishing is linked to happy memories in both her past and present families. In addition to being the one that suggests the idea of making her rib into a companion, Uncle Ben also mentions that although the carving is “[n]ot quite as good as a real [dragon]” there is at least the “nice thought” that if Evie “did a spell [...] or a wish” it might become real (Casale 13). While this light-hearted suggestion captures Evie’s imagination and gives her something positive to focus on, it is waking up from a nightmare to the song “When you wish upon a star” playing on her stereo, and being suddenly reminded of a rare moment of happiness and safety shared with Fiona that prompts her to make a wish (33). Evie remembers her mother taking her to see *Pinocchio* “in the middle of the day” and “smil[ing] in the darkness of the cinema” with “[h]er hand [...] warm and soft around mine”, a brief moment in which they are enclosed in the “warm safety of darkness” that the cinema provides and able to escape into another world where anyone can wish on a star (33). Unlike with prayers, a form of belief that would more likely be held by an adolescent but which Evie has turned away from because hers were never answered, with wishes she feels it “doesn’t matter” who you are (10, 33). Although she acknowledges that making a wish is “stupid and childish” she takes advantage of the fact that “it’s night time and it’s dark and no one can see [her]”, another reference to darkness as a safe space, to “wish until her heart aches with fierceness” (34).

Although the dragon comes to life that night, it is only on the second night that Evie is consciously aware of it and after their third encounter that she is able to confirm for herself

that their interactions really take place. This continues the gradual process that was first begun with the removal of the rib and the carving of the bone, forming part of the careful and precise journey that is now facilitated by the dragon in order for Evie to heal and reach the point where she can carry out the underlying reason for wanting the dragon and which will provide some degree of closure. The dragon first appears when she has gone back to sleep after her wish. This is hinted at through impressions that filter into a dream she is having of being in Geppetto's shop from *Pinocchio*, significantly a story in which the eponymous wooden puppet comes to life as a result of his creator's wish for him to be real. The dream is briefly interrupted when Evie "twitches reflexively" in response to "a noise by [her] bed" (34). Although she is drawn back into the dream before she sees anything, it now includes a "mouse dart[ing] among the discarded tools on the old wooden table" which she knows is "watching" her (34). With the carving's presence on the side table having been mentioned shortly before, the scene is suggestive of the dragon coming to life and producing a stimulus that registers as the mouse in her dream. This moment also sets up the dream-like quality of the dragon that is maintained in the narrative, even once it is clear that the nocturnal adventures that Evie undertakes under its guidance really occur. When she awakes the following night with the impression that "someone is watching [her]" and sees the living dragon for the first time, she immediately reads the situation as a dream and yet is simultaneously aware of a "tingly, uncomfortable feeling that [she's] dreaming *against* [herself] somehow" (40). The way that Evie initially questions certain aspects of what happens, such as how she knows what the dragon is saying even though it does not speak and whether it is safe to climb onto the garage roof from her bedroom window, as well as her "irritation that [her] ribs hurt even in dreams" are further indications that this may not be a dream (40-41). However, when she awakes the following morning "feeling calm and rested rather than as if [she has] been trapped, struggling desperately in the darkness" of a nightmare to find the dragon "bare bone once more", it seems that she dreamt the encounter (44-45). While after this first occasion Evie "can't bear to check whether the trainers in the back of [her] wardrobe are still damp", unwilling to risk knowing that the dragon is not real, following subsequent outings she confirms that they are "damp and pungent" from the night before (44, 57). This, along with the signs of her movements discovered by Amy and Paul, confirms that she leaves her bed at night to go on these outings with the dragon although she still tends to think of them as dreams (88-9, 134). There is also no evidence that corroborates

the dragon as real, because it is witnessed by only Evie, leaving open the idea that she imagines it, which is strongly suggested towards the end of the novel.

Evie's dragon-dreams, similar to the monster's tales in Ness's novel, are clearly related to the vulnerable position that she occupies and are explicitly used to facilitate her journey through this period of healing and coming to terms with both her physical injury and the past neglect and abuse that produced it. While the dragon characterises itself as her "protector" that has "come so that you will be free", the way in which their nightly adventures fulfil this role remains rather ambiguous, again like the idea of mist that Evie conjures as necessary when dealing with trauma (181).<sup>11</sup> Like the protagonists of *Skellig* and *A Monster Calls*, Evie tries to look for meaning in her fantastical encounters by relating them to existing story patterns, presuming that she is "meant to learn something" because that is what happens "[i]n books, when people have adventures with mystical creatures" (73). Here, again, the role of fantasy is made more complicated, because, although she does learn things from these outings, it is not the "purpose" for which the dragon came (73). This purpose, ultimately revealed to be to help Evie refuse her victimhood and free herself from the past by burning down her grandparents' house, is foreshadowed at the outset of their first excursion when she describes how, "[e]ven with my heart full of the joy of the Dragon, I find myself turning to stare down the towpath to my left" towards "the village where Fiona's parents live", a mere "seven miles" away (42). Though "[b]y car, it takes [...] long enough to feel safe", it is implied that this is not the case "by river or on a bike, riding along the canal", information that is relevant both to the enduring impact they have on Evie's life and to her going there towards the novel's conclusion (42). As she finds herself "leaning forwards [...] as if the house and the people in it are pulling me", she contemplates the idea "that I could go there in the dark, ride up the towpath, and no one would ever know" (42). It is clear that at this stage she has no real notion of what she would do since she does not "know if the feeling this gives her is want or rage or fear or power", but she grasps that going to "stand outside the house and hate" would not be much of a "victory" (42). When this momentary hold on Evie breaks, the dragon tells her "*When you are strong, we can do anything you wish*", responding to the unspoken desires and fears "in [her] heart" and, through the use of the word 'wish'

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<sup>11</sup>Here again, like with the monster in *A Monster Calls*, the dragon's speech is indicated by italics, in this case specifically conveying the mysterious manner in which Evie knows or thinks it speaking. The use of this format in both novels is interesting in relation to the portrayal or suggestion of internal speech which I was not able to elaborate on within this thesis.

recalling the wish she made for her dragon and establishing a link between it and the unspoken thing that draws her (42-3). Although the dragon enables Evie to make the trip that she holds back from in the beginning, it does so without explicitly revealing to her what they are doing, telling her “*part of my purpose – and the keystone of our contract – is that you should only understand as much as is to your benefit*”, another way in which it acts as a protector (104). Their excursions are thus a cloaked form of preparation for the final goal, on one hand giving Evie a space to “*heal*” through being exposed to the “*beauty and wild magic of the night*” and on the other hand functioning as stages in the development of her trust in the dragon and of the plan that will allow the purpose of her wish to be realised (73).

Much of this healing and preparation is effected through different natural settings and conditions that she encounters on her journeys. This immersion into the natural world provides as a new kind of Eden for Evie, taking her into a natural space where she is able, at times, to enter into a more childlike state. Upon first entering this world it is as if she takes on new life when “the night rushes clean and cold into [her] mouth and [...] throat, swelling [her] chest with pain and delight” (41). The change in narrative style to longer flowing sentences dense with beautiful imagery marks a departure from the fragmented and restrained style that characterises her descriptions of the past and day-to-day life, contributing to the magical quality of this new space she enters. It is noteworthy that, although Evie’s spirit reaches out to this world immediately, she is initially limited by the still healing scar across her chest, apparent on the first night when her “rib won’t allow” her to “race across the grass [...] into the maelstrom of [...] shadows” produced by the clouds moving across the moon (42). Thus one aspect of the dragon-dreams is to allow her to build up her strength. Her increasing freedom from the limitation of her past is already evident on the second outing on a misty night when she is able to “laugh, raising [her] arms as [she] spin[s] round and round” (57). This also extends to her emotional state as on the first night her “eyes prickl[e] with the threat of tears and that strange feeling that could be absolute happiness...or grief that you can never hold anything perfect still and safe”, a feeling that ties into what her own experience has been and constitutes a kind of mourning for the inevitable losses of life, while on the second night there is “so much to feel and smell and see and hear and taste that [she] forget[s] to hurt (43, 56 ellipses in original).

Later outings then begin to shift into building Evie's sense of being powerful. On the first of three new moons that they encounter, referred to as the "*dark moon*" by the dragon, Evie is guided through total darkness in an exercise that heightens her awareness when she is unable to see and gives her a sense of having "no limits" as she "bleed[s] out into the hugeness of the night, [...] filling up with power" (72, 105-6). The dragon places special emphasis on this lunar phase as "*a time for change [and] beginnings*" because it "*marks the birth of the new moon, like a phoenix rising from the ashes*" (72). The dark moon nights are thus special with this one being set aside "*for gathering strength*" and "*making plans*", suggesting the importance of Evie being able to navigate the dark and foreshadowing what is to come (106). Allusions to animals hunting and being hunted, occurring in almost all of the dragon-dreams, feed into this strengthening process and contribute a darker tone that heightens the tension of the narrative. On one occasion, when Evie and the dragon both thrill at the sight of an owl capturing its prey she experiences the "terrifying and wonderful feeling that I will never be helpless again", a feeling the dragon corroborates as it assures her that it "*will make sure of it*", again foreshadowing the conclusion of their contract (125).

These nightly excursions, though aimed at resolving aspects of Evie's past, are also influenced by and deal with certain events from her day-to-day life. Soon after the dragon-dreams begin, Paul and Uncle Ben also start going out at night on mysterious business that they hide from Amy and herself, although Uncle Ben repeatedly encourages Paul to include her. While the dragon makes sure that Evie is never seen, it also prompts her to keep abreast of what they are doing. From the snatches of conversation that she overhears from her bedroom window, informed by a conversation she overheard near the start of the novel when Uncle Ben and her parents were discussing how her case would not be taken forward because of a lack of evidence and Paul expressed a desire to "hire someone to deal with [her grandparents]", Evie begins to think that these excursions relate to her (22). This suspicion, which she cannot bear to put into words, produces internal conflict as she seems to both long to be right so that she would feel less alone and also dreads this being the case because of the implications for these good and untainted people that she loves and envies. However, when she learns that they have been going out to try and get pictures of a group of vandals who have been targeting the graveyard where their family members are buried and witnesses them congratulating themselves once they are successful, she experiences a surge of "fury", "jealousy" and even "hate" because, although she did not want them to do "something awful"

that “would have ruined them inside”, she cannot help part of her wishing that they were a bit like her (242-3). At the core of her feelings is the bitter unfairness that “at *their* age” they think that what they faced was “*danger*” when Evie “can’t even *remember* what it is not to know” real fear and danger and how terrible people can be (243, emphasis in original). This moment is important as it reveals how isolated she still is. The dragon is a vital form of support and guidance at this especially vulnerable moment, allowing Evie this night “*for weakness before we gather our strength*” and also helps her to understand that “*This was neither what she wanted or needed*”, while assuring her that “*together we are strong enough to move the stars*” when “*you [...] make the right wish*” (242, 244).

The dragon also helps her to take action against Sonny after the pool incident. Evie finds herself curiously unwilling to make use of the usual channels like the police and the school to deal with the incident, partly because of her past experience with the police, but also because the others “don’t understand how much I want Sony Rawlins to pay” (164). The incident stirs up for her the patchy memory of fighting back against her grandfather, described as the only time “I ever [got] to hurt anyone half as much as they hurt me”, which was “the nicest thing I’d ever felt” (159). Punishing Sonny, which is orchestrated by the dragon ruining his expensive racing bike in such a way that it appears to be foxes and results in him being punished by his father, becomes like a practice run for their final task. When Evie attempts to bolt from the scene as soon as the dragon is finished but is forced to stop because of the pain in her ribs, it assures her that it will not “*put you in any true danger*” and explains that “*when you hunt wisely, there is no need to run afterwards*” (180-1). These moments when Evie’s day-to-day world comes into contact with the dream-space she occupies with the dragon are thus important for focussing on what she needs to be free, drawing attention to the importance of her taking personal action, through the dragon, in order to escape her victimhood.

It is as the third dark moon approaches that the time finally comes for Evie’s true wish to be realised. On the last outing described prior to this, the dragon takes her to a herd of horses during a thunder storm, teaching her to approach them as she would her dreams, because, it tells her, “*you must wait before you reach out and clasp your dreams[,] [w]ait just long enough, but no longer*” (254). On the night of their third dark moon, the number three often being a significant and magical number in fairytales and other children’s fiction, unlike

previous interactions, the dragon insists that Evie “*go to sleep*” because she “*must be dreaming*” when the moon comes (273-4). This time she wakes up “feeling limp and wrung out”, her legs and arms “stiff and achey” but with no recollection of what took place the night before except for a vague impression of being on her bicycle and “concrete grinding under [her] weight as [she] turns onto the towpath” (274-5). The implication that she has done something to do with her grandparents is confirmed later that day when two policemen arrive with the news that their “house burned down last night” and they “died in the fire” (277-78). As they explain the details, Evie sees “a photo-flash” mental image “of the living room” with “all the old family furniture and ornaments” and “the ashtray tipped at a precarious angle by the newspapers stacked underneath” (278). This “image, frozen out of time”, which continues to play out in Evie’s mind, vividly showing the fire catching and spreading, strongly suggests her involvement when read in combination with the condition in which she wakes up (279).

In the immediate aftermath, however, it is rather the dragon, an external part of her, that appears to be responsible for the fire as, even after these flashbacks, she asks ““Was that why you never woke me up last night?””, a question that permits the reading that she was asleep, given some plausibility because the way she felt that morning was what it used to be like when she had “nightmares all night long” (275, 281). When the dragon’s “smile deepens” and “[a] wisp of smoke curls from its nostrils” in response to her query, Evie seems convinced that the fire was its doing, saying only that they have to be “careful” (282). This period allows her time to literally put the past to rest by burying her grandparents’ ashes in Fiona’s grave which she is able to visit once she has ensured the headstone “just [has] her name and the dates on it” without any other message, an act ensuring that the word mother, which Evie avoids using throughout the narrative, does not appear (288).<sup>12</sup> In this way, Evie also punishes her mother since, despite knowing that being buried “was the last thing Fiona wanted”, she leaves her there with her parents, whom she obviously feared, so they can “rot in the dark together”, an ending that is true to the lives they led (287, 291). It is only later, when Evie has achieved the kind of closure she imagined, that the narrative turns back to the cause of the fire and hints that she was responsible. The dragon subtly orchestrates her rediscovery of a book of matches, taken as a keepsake from a Chinese restaurant, which is now inexplicably “crumpled and a little dirty”, with “three of the matches missing” (926). As

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<sup>12</sup> She also refers to Fiona’s parents rather than using the term grandparents. In both cases this is a rejection of the family relationship between her and those who hurt or neglected her.

she reflects on why a dragon would “even *need* matches”, it seems clear that she used them to start the fire and on some level must be aware of it (296, emphasis in original). The emphasis the dragon placed on her cleaning her shoes and other signs of her nightly wanderings thus gains a more calculated significance as these things could have implicated her. Although fantasy produces ambiguity throughout the course of the narrative, allowing the reader to accompany Evie on a magical adventure, by the end the “mist” of fantasy clears to reveal the reality of an adolescent girl orchestrating the murder of her grandparents.

The novel, nevertheless, appears to condone Evie’s actions, as is suggested by a conversation she overhears between her parents and Uncle Ben after the news of the fire, which highlights the moral complexity of what has happened. While Uncle Ben considers it “practically a fairy tale ending”, taking Evie’s story back to a form of children’s literature where witches are vanquished by being cooked in ovens and evil is punished in proportion to the wrong done, and Amy refers to the fire as purifying, an image evocative of the phoenix that portrays the fire as a form of rebirth for Evie, Paul notes the real consequences by saying that it seems “too good to be true” and that it “feels like there’s a price to be paid” (282, 285). Although Uncle Ben points out that “Evie’s paid any price ten times over”, again implicitly exonerating her actions and framing what happened as fair, the points Paul raises nonetheless reflect on what the implications might be for Evie herself (285). The use of fantasy in this novel enables her to do what she does in an unconscious or protected state, but, as the resurgence of traumatic material throughout the narrative indicates, repressed material will inevitably resurface. Although the novel ends in hope and a new beginning, it does not allow the realities and long term affects of abuse and parental neglect to be softened or for the act of revenge that leads to closure to be viewed as unproblematic and without potential further cost. Evie’s fractured first-person voice produces a trauma text which conveys the psychological and physical wounds she has sustained and shows how they continue to be a part of her present and of her identity as she navigates her adolescence.

Unlike *Skellig*, which deals with the navigation of a tricky period to a happy resolution and the confrontation with death at a conceptual level, and *A Monster Calls*, which deals with severe loss but focuses on the anticipation of that loss and gives a sense of possible closure at its conclusion, *The Bone Dragon* is the only novel that examines the process of mourning after traumatic loss and abuse, experiences for which complete closure and neat

resolution would be inauthentic, and features a protagonist who is able to take action in regard to her circumstances.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

This thesis, in tracing a trajectory from *Skellig* as a children's novel on the cusp of the young adult category, through to *A Monster Calls* as a transitional text and ending with *A Bone Dragon* which is unambiguously situated in the young adult category, has sought to explore and theorise the transition into the in-between phase of adolescence and how it is related to the processes of loss and mourning in recent literature focussing on this shift. In each of the primary novels there is a clear emphasis on confronting and working through loss which, because of the age of the protagonists, produces transition and maturation and forms part of the move into adolescence. In *Skellig* ten-year-old Michael begins to confront issues typical of adolescence when the arrival of his new sister displaces him into a different position within the family and he encounters daunting new realities such as mortality, change in previously stable relationships and also changes in himself. These shifts are consistent with the transitional stage of adolescence and prompt him to expand his views as he negotiates new things. In *A Monster Calls* Conor is a thirteen-year-old dealing with adult issues because the nuclear family has split up leaving him largely alone with the reality of his mother dying. It is only through the process of facing his conflicted feelings and learning to understand his own grey areas that he becomes able to cope, a process of gaining a more critical view of the self again characteristic of adolescence. *A Bone Dragon* then looks at fourteen-year-old Evie's negotiation of the long-term effects of childhood trauma from physical and sexual abuse and parental neglect. Although Evie loses her childhood innocence at a young age due to this abuse, it is once she is in her adolescence that she is in a position to take an active role in moving on from her past. Her process of transition is thus one of attempting to heal and reach closure and also of coming to terms with who she is because of her history, arguably a process that will never be complete but which significantly starts during her adolescence. It is noteworthy that although facing loss and adapting to change are processes of growth, these novels nevertheless register the painful process of letting go in order to move forward, largely through the use of fantasy companions drawing from conventions in children's fantasy which can be considered a form of regression, and thus give insight into the vulnerable and difficult process of growing-up.

The role of fantasy in these novels is significant to the way they 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. While this regression conveys how these protagonists are not fully equipped to deal with the things they are confronted with, it also positions fantasy as a way of facing things that are difficult or that seem inadmissible. In addition to the fantasy figures, whose monstrous qualities tend to produce ambiguous figures that resonates with the in-between space of adolescence, the use of creative outlets like drawing and writing in *Skellig* or the storytelling in *A Monster Calls* or the belief in wishes in *The Bone Dragon* emerge as coping skills that allow an outlet for the things that seem too much to deal with. This resonates with Atle Dyregrov's assertion that "emotional magnitude can only be taken in step by step" and with psychoanalytic theory that shows how some material can only be expressed and faced indirectly (47). In light of this, the role of novels about difficult subjects can be considered a way of allowing access to new understanding and to confronting things which are kept hidden or are turned away from. Casale's "Author's Note" to *The Bone Dragon* attests to this as she mentions that she has "a grand total of four potted ribs" and always "planned to make the first rib into a necklace ornament [...] of a Dragon" (300). Although her protagonist is not her, the story is informed by her own experiences and publishing it shows her belief that it is a story worth telling to other adolescents. *A Bone Dragon* is also notable for the way it positions darkness as a potentially safe and secret space where things that are uncomfortable or painful and which may seem potentially alienating, as is prominent with Evie and her sense that she has been contaminated by her past, can gradually be come to understood and worked through. Young adult novels which engage with the dark experiences faced by many adolescents then arguably provide stories and access to fictional worlds, even in highly realistic narratives, in which certain feelings can be explored in a safe and enclosed space. Although this space has been thought too dark by some, the primary texts that I have discussed attest to the necessity, or perhaps rather the inevitability, of darkness when traversing the uncertain terrain of development and of letting go which, as is attested by Erikson's trapeze analogy, is necessary in order to catch on to the next stage and continue.

I find these three novels to be exemplary of the kind of sensitive but challenging engagement with complex subjects that can be achieved in young adult literature. The fact that they centre on early adolescence seems to attest to the more difficult demands being placed on modern childhood and to the more rapid progression into the young adult stage. Focussing on the very intimate losses that occur within the domestic space of home and family – a unit which can go through periods of disruption as in *Skellig*, or fall apart as in *A Monster Calls* or be dangerous as in *The Bone Dragon* – shows the intimate places in which loss occurs and isolation is experienced. Although loss features in much of the literature for older adolescents, many of these novels tend to have shifted on to the subject of the self in relation to society and broader social critique, often apparent in dystopian fantasy and historical fiction, or explore loss within romantic relationships that have recently tended to be between outsider figures who are limited in other connections for various reasons such as in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* and Jennifer Niven's *All the Bright Places*. In these transitional novels, however, the process of working through loss is the core focus and the central journey within the narrative. The way the focus novels insist on the necessity of traversing dark periods and experiences in order to be able to grow from them is a crucial message that informs all later experiences with issues like loss. In the same way that the characters within the novels are aided by fantasy and storytelling, the adolescent readers of these novels can grow from reading their stories.

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