

A Monster Calls



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PATRICK NESS

Patrick Ness was born in the U.S. in 1971. Growing up, he moved around often because his father was in the U.S. Army before his family ultimately settled down in Los Angeles. Ness studied English literature at the University of Southern California, and then worked as a corporate writer for a cable company. He was working on his first novel when he moved to London in 1999. His first novel, the *Crash of Hennington*, was published in 2003, followed soon after by a short story collection in 2004. Ness became a naturalized British citizen in 2005 and entered into a civil partnership in 2006. He then published a trilogy of young adult novels in 2008, 2009, and 2010. The following year, he wrote *A Monster Calls*, based on an idea of another writer, Siobhan Dowd. Ness continued to write both young adult and adult novels until 2015, when he began writing a spinoff of the television series *Doctor Who* called *Class*. His most recent book, *Release*, was published in 2017. Ness has also taught creative writing at Oxford and has worked as a journalist for several British and American newspapers.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the book, the monster says that it has been called many names in the past: Herne the Hunter, Cernunnos, and the Green Man. All of these are variations of pagan deities associated with nature. Herne the Hunter is a ghost in English folklore associated with Windsor forest. He is said to have antlers upon his head and ride a horse. Cernunnos is a Celtic horned god. Little is known about this deity other than the fact that it is depicted with the antlers of a stag and is also identified as a god of nature and life. “Herne” may be a cognate of “Cernunnos” and these two deities may have the same origins. The Green Man is a representation of a sculpture or other representation of a face surrounded by or made from leaves, which makes it an apt name for the monster, who takes the form of a yew tree. The Green Man is usually interpreted as a symbol of rebirth or the life cycle, and is often used as a representation of various horned gods (such as Cernunnos or the Greek god Pan). The Green Man is often viewed as a pagan symbol, and yet images of the Green Man frequently appear carved into churches. This fact is also fitting for the story, as the monster takes the form of a yew tree that is found next to a church.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A Monster Calls draws on several literary traditions: first and

most notably, contemporary children’s fantasy literature. Conor’s use of fantasy to understand the world around him and the pain that he is experiencing is very similar to that of the protagonist in Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*. Additionally, there are similarities between this book and *Where the Wild Things Are*, though the latter is about and is written for younger children. *Where the Wild Things Are* deals with similar themes of anger and isolation for a boy who is learning to grow up. The monster’s three tales also resemble folklore that stems from oral traditions, such as *The Canterbury Tales* or *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, or J.K. Rowling’s *The Tales of Beadle the Bard*, for a modern example. It is worth noting that unlike these folk tale examples, the monster makes a point that its stories do not have explicit “lessons” or “morals,” and are instead meant to explore the complexity of the world and to help Conor understand human emotion, which distinguishes them from fairy tales.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Monster Calls*
- **When Written:** 2007-2011
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 2011
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Children’s fantasy
- **Setting:** England
- **Climax:** Conor tells the monster about his nightmare.
- **Antagonist:** Conor’s nightmare; death
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited (Conor’s perspective)

EXTRA CREDIT

A Melancholy Beginning. *A Monster Calls* was based on an idea by young adult novelist Siobhan Dowd. Dowd unfortunately did not have the chance to write the work herself, as she passed away from cancer. Dowd’s editor, Denise Johnstone-Burt, then arranged for Ness to complete the story.

A Tale of Two Medals. *A Monster Calls* is the only book to have won both the Carnegie Medal and the Greenaway Medal, which are awards that recognize outstanding writing and illustration, respectively.



PLOT SUMMARY

In a present-day English town, thirteen-year-old Conor

O'Malley is having a recurring nightmare. When he wakes from this terrible dream, he is visited by a monster, which takes the shape of the **yew tree** next to the church behind Conor's house. Conor, to the monster's surprise, is not afraid of the monster. The monster says it is going to tell Conor three stories, after which Conor must tell a fourth story: what happens in his recurring nightmare. Conor is terrified by this prospect.

That morning, Conor completes his daily routine. His mother is sick with cancer, and so he is often left to his own devices to make breakfast, brush his teeth, get dressed, pack his bag, and get himself to school. His mother is upset that he has to do these things for himself because she is so tired, and so she has invited his grandmother to visit and help take care of him, and to take care of her. Conor protests because he doesn't like his grandmother and thinks that they'll be fine without her, but his mother insists.

At school, Conor is bullied by a classmate named Harry, alongside his cronies Anton and Sully. Conor's friend Lily tries to defend him and pushes Sully into a bush, but this only embarrasses Conor further. When a teacher named Miss Kwan asks what's happening, Conor lies and says that he tripped and Harry was helping him up. Lily gets in trouble for pushing Sully. Walking home that evening, Lily confronts Conor about lying, but he brushes her off. He is angry with her because their mothers are close friends, and when Lily's mother told her about Conor's mother's illness, Lily promptly told other people. After that, all of Conor's friends and teachers began to treat him differently—mostly by leaving him alone.

Conor's grandmother arrives. She is very strict with Conor and starts to talk about taking him out of his current school and putting him into a school near her house, which worries Conor because it implies she is talking about a time after his mother has died. Conor's grandmother also becomes angry with him because he argues that she doesn't need to be there, but Conor's grandmother points out that Conor shouldn't bear the responsibility of taking care of his mother, their house, and himself alone.

That night, the monster tells the first tale. There once was a king, whose sons, wife, and daughter passed away over the course of his life, leaving only his grandson, a young prince, as an heir. The king then remarried a young queen, whom many people suspected was a witch. When the king passed away, the queen wanted to marry the prince in order to retain her throne. But the prince instead ran away with his lover, a farmer's daughter. One morning on their journey, the prince woke up and saw that someone had murdered the girl and made it look like he did it. The young prince assumed that it was the queen, and rallied the villagers to burn her at the stake. The monster, however, saved the queen from this fate, because it was actually the prince that did it. Conor asks if the lesson he is meant to learn is to be nicer to his grandmother, an idea that

the monster laughs off. The monster then explains that the queen was an evil witch, but was not a murderer, and that's why he saved her. Conor wonders who the "good guy" is in the story—the monster explains that life does not always have a good guy and bad guy.

The next day, Conor's grandmother tells Conor that his mother has to go to the hospital because her treatments aren't working. She also tells Conor that his father is coming to visit. (His father and mother are divorced, and he now lives in America with his new wife, Stephanie, and a new baby.) Conor talks to his mother, who assures him that she's going to be okay—the doctors just need to adjust her treatment.

Conor goes to live with his grandmother for the time being, all the while continuing to have his terrifying recurring nightmare. Conor isn't exactly comfortable at his grandmother's house, as his grandmother instates a lot of rules that he's never had to follow before. When Conor's father arrives, they go out to dinner, where Conor insists that he's fine and that his mother is going to be fine. Conor also tells his father that he's unhappy living with his grandmother, and wonders if he could come live with his father in America. His father says that it wouldn't be fair to Conor to pull him out of his life in England, but Conor accuses him of simply not wanting Conor to come to America with him.

Conor's father drops him back at his grandmother's house, where the monster arrives to tell the boy a second tale. One hundred and fifty years ago, there lived an Apothecary and a parson. The Apothecary dealt in the "old ways of medicine" and was greedy, often overcharging patients for his remedies. The Apothecary asked the parson to cut down the yew tree in the parsonage, because yew trees have healing properties if harvested correctly. The parson refused, and started to preach against the Apothecary because of his use of the "old ways." But one day, the parson's daughters fell ill with an infection, and the parson begged the Apothecary to help. He told the Apothecary that he would let him harvest the yew tree, and that he would preach sermons in the Apothecary's favor. The Apothecary told him that he could not help, and the parson's daughters died. The monster then destroyed the parson's house, because the parson was not truly a man of belief and should have given the Apothecary the yew tree when he first asked.

The monster shows Conor the destruction of the parson's house, and asks if Conor wants to join in. Conor aids in the destruction, but when the monster leaves, Conor can see that he has actually destroyed every inch of his grandmother's sitting room, which was full of priceless antiques. His grandmother arrives home and screams in horror. But instead of punishing Conor, she pulls down the only display cabinet left standing and goes up to her room, sobbing.

The next morning, Conor's father visits again to make him breakfast. Conor wonders if he'll be punished for what he did, but his dad says no, asking, "what could possibly be the point?"

His father then tells Conor that his mother has “taken a turn.” When Conor visits his mother in the hospital, she tells him that some of the new treatments haven’t been working. They’re going to try a final option, which is made from yew trees. Conor thinks that this must be why the monster has come: to cure his mother. Conor’s father then tells Conor that he has to fly back to America that night, but before he goes, he tries to be realistic with Conor. He tells Conor that it’s unlikely that the new medicine will cure his mother. Conor accuses his father of abandoning him and his mother, still adamant that his mother is going to be fine.

At school, Conor goes several days without speaking to anyone. He has stopped doing his schoolwork, but the teachers never call on him or ask for his assignments. Meanwhile, he is still angry with Lily. The only connection he has with other students is when Harry, Anton, and Sully come over to bully him. But Harry starts to realize that this is what Conor wants, and so one day at lunch, he simply says to Conor, “I no longer see you.” Conor is outraged, feeling completely helpless and invisible. Then the monster arrives at school to tell the third tale. The third tale is about a man who was invisible because people had become used to not seeing him. And so the monster made the other people see the man. As the monster narrates this story, it beats Harry up, breaking his arm, nose, and several teeth. When it is finished, it tells Conor that “there are harder things than being invisible.”

Conor lands in the headmistress’s office, who is shocked at the damage that Conor did to Harry. Conor tries to argue that the monster did it, but Miss Kwan says that many people saw Conor beating Harry up. The headmistress says that normally Conor would be expelled, but that she could not in good conscience expel Conor given his mother’s illness. Conor returns to class, where students are now terrified of him. He realizes that the monster was right: he is no longer invisible, but he is “further away than ever.”

About a week later, Lily passes a note to him, saying that she misses being his friend, and that *she* sees him. But before Conor can respond to Lily, he is pulled out of class to go to the hospital. Once there, his mother tells him that her new treatment isn’t working. Conor accuses her of lying, and refuses to look at her or touch her. She tells him that it is okay to be angry. Conor demands to be taken home, and when he arrives he goes to the yew tree behind his house and kicks it, asking the monster why it didn’t cure his mother. The monster says that it did not come to heal his mother, it came to heal *him*.

The monster says it is time for Conor himself to tell the fourth tale—what happens in his recurring nightmare. Conor enacts the story: his mother is standing on the edge of a cliff when an enormous creature grabs her and tries to pull her down over the edge. Conor holds onto her, feeling her getting heavier and heavier, until he has to let go. The monster tells Conor that he could have held on for longer, but he chose to let her go. Conor

admits, through tears, that he always knew she was going to die. He just wants the waiting, pain, and isolation to be over. The monster commends him for telling the truth. Then Conor says that it is his fault that she’s going to die, which the monster says is not true at all. The monster assures him that he only wanted to end his own pain, and that is very human. Conor can want his mother to go and at the same time want to save her, because “humans are complicated beasts.” Conor, comforted, falls asleep in the monster’s nest.

When Conor wakes, his grandmother has been frantically looking for him, and takes him to the hospital because his mother is in very critical condition. At the hospital, Conor tells his mother a final truth: that he doesn’t want her to go. The monster promises to stay with him until the end, and Conor cries, knowing that the end is very near. Conor holds his mother tightly, “and by doing so, he could finally let her go.”



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Conor O’Malley – The protagonist of the book, thirteen-year-old Conor is very responsible for his age, due primarily to the fact that his mother was diagnosed with cancer a year before the start of the book. Conor is her primary caretaker because Conor’s mother and father had gotten divorced five years before her diagnosis. At the beginning of the story, Conor refuses to believe that his mother’s health is deteriorating and tries to act as though everything is normal. However, different people and events prevent Conor from pretending that everything is normal. At school, he is very isolated, because his friend Lily told a few friends that his mother is sick, and word quickly got to the entire school. The students subsequently ignore him, worried that they might say the wrong thing. Additionally, his father and grandmother visit, which also makes Conor’s denial difficult. Both try to convince Conor that his mother isn’t getting any better, but he refuses to accept this. He also tries to push away the recurring nightmare that he keeps having, in which a creature tries to drag his mother over the edge of a cliff, and Conor is unable to hold onto her and save her. The guilt that Conor feels as a result of this nightmare is what calls the monster to him: an enormous being that takes the form of the **yew tree** outside Conor’s house. The monster tells Conor stories to try to help him acknowledge that life, and human emotions, are very complicated. With the monster’s help, Conor ultimately accepts the fact that in his nightmare, he could have held onto his mother longer but chose not to, because he just wants her pain—and his own pain—to finally end. Conor thus exhibits conflicting emotions: he wants the waiting regarding her illness to be over, but he is also desperate for her not to die. By accepting these complicated feelings, and by ultimately telling his mother that he doesn’t want her to go, he is finally able to feel like he might survive her death.

The Monster – A giant creature who takes the shape of a **yew tree**. Conor's pain, grief, and inability to accept his feelings and his mother's impending death is what calls the monster to him. The monster says that it has been called Herne the Hunter, Cernunnos, and the Green Man in the past—all implying that it is a natural spirit of pagan lore. The monster comes to tell stories to Conor to try and help him heal, and to help him understand that life and human emotions are complex and resist simple answers. The monster appears to be heavily linked to Conor's denial surrounding his mother: the more Conor tries to deny that anything is wrong, the more violent both the monster and Conor get. But when Conor finally accepts the truth about his guilt and the fact that his mother is likely going to die, the monster becomes gentler and more like a parental figure. The monster stays with Conor at the end of the book, and helps support him as his mother quietly passes away. In contrast to other family members, who either require Conor to grow up too quickly or try to take away all responsibilities from him, the monster allows Conor to *both* be a child and an adult. The monster helps Conor face adulthood and the challenges that he is grappling with in his life, but the monster also helps Conor retain some of his innocence by comforting him. And because the monster is only able to comfort Conor when he finally accepts the truth, Ness argues that only by facing his emotions rather than trying to suppress them is Conor able to move past his grief.

Conor's Mother – Though it is only explicitly stated that Conor's mother is sick, details that Ness includes heavily implies that she has cancer: Conor's mother has lost her hair and wears a scarf, goes through rounds of treatments, and is often exhausted and nauseous. As Conor's mother's condition deteriorates over the course of the book, she feels increasingly guilty about the responsibility that Conor has been forced to take on in caring for her. This leads her to ask his grandmother (her mother) to visit and help her and Conor, despite the fact that Conor doesn't like his grandmother very much. When Conor's mother's treatments stop working, she tries to tell Conor that she believes her last option, the one made from **yew trees**, will work. When she reveals to him later that this treatment is also failing, he becomes angry with his mother for lying to him. She says, however, that his belief that she would get better is what had been keeping her alive for so long—demonstrating how Conor's mother had also been incentivizing his denial. Ultimately, when the monster helps Conor accept the truth, he returns to his mother and is finally able to tell her that he doesn't want her to die, resolving the anger between them. In the final pages of the book, it is implied that Conor's mother passes away very shortly after its conclusion.

Conor's Grandmother – Conor's maternal grandmother. Conor's grandmother is cold and somewhat strict, and Conor doesn't like her very much. He doesn't understand why she

tries to make herself look young and still works. At the beginning of the book, Conor's mother invites Conor's grandmother to visit to help take care of Conor and herself. Conor is disdainful of her visit, both because she treats him like a child (even though he's been taking care of his mother alone up to this point), and because her presence inherently indicates that something is wrong. As Conor's mother gets worse and goes to the hospital, Conor is forced to move in with his grandmother, a prospect that he abhors because she enforces rules he has never had to follow, and he doesn't feel like he belongs in her home. When the monster tells Conor the first tale, Conor immediately connects his grandmother to the character of the evil queen—someone who makes herself look younger and wants to rule the kingdom. But the monster's story argues that just because the queen wasn't nice, doesn't mean that she was guilty of a terrible crime. This story eventually helps Conor see that just because he and his grandmother don't get along very well, doesn't necessarily mean that she's a bad person or intentionally trying to hurt him. At the end of the book Conor and his grandmother reconcile, and agree to try to treat each other better going forward.

Conor's Father – Conor's father and the ex-husband of Conor's mother. Conor's mother and father divorced when Conor was seven years old, and Conor explains that he barely remembers what it's like to have a father in the house. Conor's father now lives in America with his new wife, Stephanie, and a new baby. Conor's father comes to visit when Conor's mother ends up in the hospital. Conor is happy to see him—he enjoys being with his father and is comforted to have a parental figure to help take care of him and relieve him of some of his responsibility. However, even though it is clear that Conor's father has good intentions, he is rather flaky. When Conor asks if he could live with his father in America instead of living with his grandmother, Conor's father quickly makes excuses as to why Conor can't live with him. Instead of trying to make his son's life easier, he repeats several times that Conor will have to “be brave” in the coming weeks. Thus, in contrast to Conor's grandmother, who insists on treating him like a child, Conor's father's lack of taking responsibility forces Conor to be even more of an adult.

Lily Andrews – Conor's best friend and classmate. Conor's mother and Lily's mother have been friends for a long time, and Conor and Lily grew up together. But at the beginning of the book, Conor is angry with Lily: when she found out about Conor's mother's diagnosis, she told a few friends, who quickly spread the news to the entire school and caused people to avoid him. This sequence of events makes Conor frustrated with her, to the point where he gets her into trouble while she was trying to save Conor from being bullied by Harry. This, in turn, makes Lily angry with Conor, which causes Conor to feel even more isolated. But when Lily sees Conor beat up Harry, she starts to realize how hurt Conor is from being made to feel

invisible. She reaches out to him with a note in class, telling him that she “sees” him and that she misses being his friend. This is incredibly touching to Conor, and proves Ness’s argument regarding Conor’s isolation: that even though other students are avoiding Conor in an effort to be sensitive to him, it is really everyone’s responsibility to know when someone is hurting and to reach out and support that person, as Lily does.

Harry – The school bully, who has been targeting Conor ever since Conor learned of his mother’s diagnosis. Harry is often flanked by his cronies, Anton and Sully. Harry frequently trips, punches, and taunts Conor. As the book goes on, however, Harry starts to realize that Conor actually *wants* to get beaten up—as Conor describes in the book, Harry’s bullying is one of the only things that feels normal in his life. When Harry realizes this, he quickly changes tactics. He tells Conor that he is going to do the worst thing he can think of to do to Conor, which amounts to simply ignoring him along with the rest of the students. This makes Conor feel completely invisible, and he becomes extremely angry. Conor confronts Harry in the cafeteria, and while the monster narrates the third tale about an invisible man who wanted to make people see him, Conor beats Harry up. Conor breaks Harry’s nose, arm, and several teeth, demonstrating how isolation can turn even a gentle kid into a violent monster.

The Evil Queen – One of the characters in the monster’s first tale. The evil queen is the young prince’s stepmother, and she is much younger than the king (though many of the villagers in the kingdom are suspicious of her and suspect that she is a witch using magic to make herself young). In the story, the monster saves her from being burned at the stake for a murder that she did not commit. The evil queen has an allegorical connection to Conor’s grandmother, because she also makes herself seem younger and effectively takes over Conor’s household (both of which cause him to dislike her). But the monster argues that even though the evil queen may not be a nice person, she did not commit the crime of murder and therefore should not be punished as such. This is a metaphor for the idea that even though Conor doesn’t like his grandmother, she shouldn’t be blamed for his mother’s failing health and should not be the subject of his ire. Through the story of the evil queen, the monster doesn’t tell Conor to be nicer to his grandmother but instead shows Conor that his grandmother is a complex person and is neither good nor bad.

The Parson – One of the characters in the monster’s second tale. The parson is the head of a great parsonage, and preaches against the Apothecary for his use of the old ways to heal people. He also refuses to let the Apothecary cut down the **yew tree** in his graveyard, which the Apothecary needs to make medicine. But when his daughters fall ill, the parson begs the Apothecary to save them, telling him that he will give up the yew tree, and preach sermons in favor of the Apothecary. The Apothecary refuses, and the parson’s daughters die. The

monster adds to this grief by destroying the parson’s home, saying that he was not a man of belief because he was willing to give up everything he believed in, and should have given the yew tree over when the Apothecary first asked. Conor connects this character to his father, who is well-meaning but who often fails to do the right thing until it is too late.

The Young Prince – One of the characters in the monster’s first tale. The young prince is the grandson of a king, and his stepmother is the evil queen. When the king passes away, the evil queen wants to marry the young prince to retain her throne, and so the young prince runs away with his lover, the farmer’s daughter. But as they run away, the young prince murders the farmer’s daughter and then convinces the townspeople that the evil queen did it so that they would turn against her. The young prince thus demonstrates the complexity of human nature: even though he rules justly and kindly for many years, he had also committed an evil deed in order to do so.

The Apothecary – One of the characters in the monster’s second tale, who is described as greedy and very disagreeable. The Apothecary is a healer, and asks the parson to harvest the **yew tree** that grows in his parsonage. The parson refuses, and even preaches sermons against the Apothecary. But when the parson’s daughters fall ill, he begs the Apothecary to cure them, saying that he will give up the yew tree and essentially all he believes in. The Apothecary refuses, and the parson’s daughters die as a result.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Miss Kwan – One of the Conor’s teachers. Miss Kwan tries to help Conor and asks if Harry, Anton, and Sully are bullying him. When she tells Conor she can’t imagine what he’s going through, however, the statement only isolates him and makes him feel even more upset.

The Farmer’s Daughter – The young prince’s lover. The young prince runs away with the farmer’s daughter, then murders her and accuses the evil queen of committing the crime in order to get the villagers to rebel against her.

Anton – One of Harry’s cronies, who bullies and teases Conor along with Sully.

Sully – One of Harry’s cronies, who bullies and teases Conor along with Anton.

Stephanie – Conor’s father’s new wife in America and Conor’s stepmother.

Mrs. Marl – Conor’s English teacher.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes

occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



DEATH, DENIAL, AND ACCEPTANCE

In *A Monster Calls*, thirteen-year-old Conor lives in an English town with his mother, who is implied to be battling cancer. Over the course of the book,

Conor's mother grows more and more ill as multiple treatments fail her, and it's implied that she passes away just after the novel's conclusion. At the beginning of the book, Conor has a difficult time coming to terms with the very real possibility that his mother may not get better. One night, as he is grappling with this denial, an enormous monster that takes the shape of a **yew tree** pays him a visit and returns on several other occasions. Though the monster looks terrifying, its intention is to tell Conor stories and to help him try to heal from the pain and sadness he is experiencing. What the monster ultimately helps Conor recognize, and what the book ultimately argues, is that Conor and his family cannot avoid suffering and death; instead, they must confront their pain head on in order to eventually move past it.

Conor is constantly confronted with his mother's suffering and evidence of her impending death. Despite the fact that her health is deteriorating right before his eyes, Conor holds out hope that she will get better and tries to push away his own suffering in the process. Ness fills the book with examples of Conor's mother's sickness: she feels exhausted and often falls asleep in odd places; she is losing her hair from her treatments; she vomits so often that Conor describes this as "normal." Despite these facts, Conor is firmly in denial about his mother's condition. When Conor's mother tries to tell him that she won't get better, he rejects this idea and accuses her of lying because she had said she believed her treatments would work. His mother is incredibly hurt by this, but she tells him through sobs that she understands why he is angry with her. This reaction demonstrates how Conor's attempt to push away his own grief only inflicts more pain and suffering on himself and those around him.

Because he is in denial about his mother's illness, Conor attempts to make things appear completely normal at all costs. But in doing so, he only gets more and more upset when people try to make changes in his life, because he wants to continue believing that everything is normal. This leads to difficult situations with his family members, who are attempting to prepare Conor for his mother's death. For instance, Conor and his grandmother have a difficult relationship, as she is often cold and strict towards him. Conor is adamant that everything is fine and that he doesn't need to live with his grandmother when his mother ends up in the hospital, but his grandmother insists that he live with her. Eventually Conor takes out his frustration with the situation by destroying her antique-filled

living room. Conor also has a confrontation with his father, who divorced his mother several years earlier and now lives in America with his new wife, Stephanie, and a new baby. Conor's father insists that Conor has to be brave for what could come "after," but Conor insists that he doesn't want to talk about what the future might be like until after his mother gets better, again displaying his deep-rooted denial.

Conor's inability to face his mother's death is what summons the monster to his room. The monster tells Conor stories in order to show him that it is okay to be angry at the world, to be frustrated with his family, and to be upset about the weight that his mother's illness places on him. After the monster gives Conor permission to express his grief and pain, the climax of the book shows Conor finally coming to terms with his mother's impending death. Conor understands the necessity of expressing his grief rather than denying it, because allowing himself to feel the painful sting of loss is the only way he can eventually move past that pain. The monster pushes Conor to face a recurring nightmare in which his mother is falling from a cliff and Conor tries to save her. Conor lets go of his mother because she has become so heavy, even though he knows that he could hold onto her for a little bit longer. The nightmare shows how Conor is weighed down by the emotional pain of watching his mother die. He explains to the monster, "I started to think how much I wanted it to be over. How much I just wanted to stop having to think about it. How I couldn't stand the waiting anymore." Conor has experienced so much suffering, and has tried to avoid it for so long, that he fears confronting his own emotional pain even more than he fears his mother's death. However, after Conor speaks this truth, the monster is able to comfort Conor; the monster tells him that it is okay, and very human, to wish for the end of pain, and that Conor does not have to feel guilty for his mother's death because Conor is not responsible for it. Unlike in his nightmare, when he tries to cling to his mother's hand and keep her from falling into the pit (thus making him responsible for whether she lives or dies), in real life he has no control over the outcome of her battle with cancer. The monster also helps Conor admit to his mother that he doesn't want her to die, a final honest confession that releases the tension between them. The monster even stays with Conor as his mother passes away. These actions of comfort show that while Conor's suffering is unavoidable, attempting to suppress it only makes it worse. Only in expressing his grief over his mother's death is Conor then able to receive the monster's comfort, which he acknowledges will help him get through this terrible pain.



STORYTELLING

The titular monster in *A Monster Calls* comes to Conor with a clear purpose: to tell him three stories, after which Conor will tell the monster one story of his own. Each of the stories that the monster relays

bears similarities with Conor's life, and because of this he starts to expect that there is a clear-cut moral lesson to be learned at the end of each one. But the stories that appear within the book's pages are not meant to relay clear lessons of good and evil that instruct the listener on what they should do. Instead of clear-cut guidance, stories can help people to see their own lives in a different light, gain perspective on their challenges, and interpret their contradictory emotions.

In each of the stories that the monster tells, Conor sees comparisons with his own life, which leads him to believe that the point of the stories is to teach him a lesson. The monster's first story centers on an evil queen and a handsome young prince. The evil queen wants to marry the prince, but the prince decides to run away with his lover, a farmer's daughter, instead. But one day, the prince awakens to find the farmer's daughter murdered, and assume that the queen committed the crime. The people believe the prince and attempt to burn the queen at the stake. Conor sees comparisons between the evil queen and his grandmother—who is very strict, and whom Conor doesn't want ruling his life and imposing rules on him. He wonders, referring to his grandmother, "I don't suppose you [the monster] can help me with her?" The monster then reveals that the handsome prince is the one who actually murdered his lover in order to turn the subjects against her, and so the monster saved her from this fate. The monster acknowledges that the queen was indeed an evil witch, but she did not commit murder, and therefore it would not have been fair to punish her for that crime. In seeing the connections, Conor starts to assume that the monster is trying to teach him a lesson about being nice to his grandmother.

However, just because the characters appear to have some connection to Conor does not necessarily mean that there is an explicit "lesson" in the stories. When Conor asks if he's supposed to be gleaning moral lessons from the monster's stories, the monster laughs loudly, exclaiming, "You think I tell stories to teach you *lessons*?" The monster goes on to point out the inherent absurdity in the idea that it "c[a]me walking out of time and earth itself to teach [Conor] a *lesson* in *niceness*." The monster's stories are important and complex, and to try to condense them into a trite moral lesson would be an oversimplification. The monster appears to make a distinction between teaching Conor a moral, or a way of behaving, versus trying to help him understand a truth about human nature and life itself.

Despite the fact that the monster explicitly says there are no simple lessons underpinning his stories, the monster does intend for the stories to help Conor understand the world around him and put his circumstances into perspective. While stories don't always tell a person what to do in a given situation—what is right and wrong, good and evil—they allow the listener to step into another person's shoes and consequently see their own problems in a different, perhaps

enlightening, way. The monster summarizes the primary idea couched within the stories after it tells the first tale: "There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad guy. Most people are somewhere in between." In other words, the novel's stories don't neatly categorize its characters as good or evil, echoing the complexity of people in real life. Conor himself follows this principle when he tells the fourth story, assuming the role of the storyteller rather than listener. In Conor's story, he is holding on to his mother, who is falling off of a cliff. He knows he can hang on to her longer, but he chooses to let her go. Conor is deeply troubled by this story, acknowledging that he wanted to let her go so that neither of them would have to endure any more pain. However, this does not make Conor a bad or immoral person, the monster says—again avoiding a clear-cut lesson. Rather, the monster helps Conor to interpret his own feelings and understand that his feelings are just as complex and valid as those of the characters in the first three stories.

The monster highlights the importance of stories to help people understand the world while subverting the idea that stories necessarily mean "lessons." Its stories instead allow Conor to understand that he has contradictory feelings regarding his mother's sickness and impending death and that these feelings do not make him a bad person. Conor wants his mother's pain to end (even if that means her death), but at the same time is desperate to save her from death. And it is only by acknowledging this fact, through the lens of his story, that Conor can be free of the guilt that has been plaguing him, a fact which also demonstrates that stories can help with the coping and healing processes. Through *A Monster Calls*, Ness encourages readers who might have some connection to Conor understand their own anger, pain, isolation, sadness, and guilt—and hopefully to begin their own healing process by turning to stories.



ISOLATION

One of Conor's primary struggles in the story is his isolation as a result of his mother's cancer diagnosis. When Conor's mother is diagnosed, she tells the mother of a friend of his, Lily, and Lily subsequently tells a few friends of hers. This quickly results in the entire school knowing that Conor's mother is battling cancer, and immediately they begin to treat Conor differently. Conor's friends and classmates begin to leave him alone, perhaps because they want to be sensitive to what he's going through, or because they don't know how to act around him, or perhaps because they don't want to deal with someone associated with illness and death. Conor feels the world shift around him as a result, which is particularly difficult when he is trying to deny that anything is wrong. Through Conor's struggles at school, Ness highlights the human impulse to give people space when they're struggling, but suggests that such imposed isolation can

actually deepen feelings of pain and grief. Instead, leaning in and offering support to people in pain is often far more helpful and appreciated.

Conor describes early in the book how people have changed their behavior toward him after learning of his mother's illness. Whether they're uncomfortable around Conor or want to give him space to grieve, most people naturally avoid Conor rather than run to comfort him. Conor explains that, after Lily knew about his mother's cancer, everyone knew, and that this spreading of information "changed the whole world in a single day." He describes that "it was like a circle had opened around him, a dead area with Conor at the center, surrounded by land mines that everyone was afraid to walk through." This word choice implies that the people around him worry about how to treat Conor—worried he will self-destruct if they make one wrong move—and therefore they simply choose to tiptoe around him instead of directly engaging with him. Friends stop talking to Conor when he walks up to them, people whisper as he walks by, and teachers look at him differently when he raises his hand in class. "So eventually," Ness writes, "he stopped going over to groups of friends, stopped looking up at the whispers, and even stopped putting up his hand"—and that no one even noticed when he stopped these actions. Conor pins his anger squarely on Lily because of the fact that others now treat him differently. However, getting mad at Lily only isolates Conor further, pushing him away from one of his closest friends. Through these descriptions, Ness demonstrates how isolation—whether it is intentional or not—can amplify the pain and grief of dealing with a tragedy in one's family.

Due to this isolation, Conor starts to feel invisible, and looks for opportunities to know that he is being seen and heard even in the midst of his grief. Conor even starts to cherish being bullied because at least he knows that Harry (the school bully) sees him. When Harry and his cronies, Sully and Anton, walk towards him, Conor describes feeling "weak with relief," because at least someone is paying attention to him. However, even Harry starts to realize that Conor longs to be noticed, and so he, too, treats Conor like he is invisible. Harry tells Conor that he is going to do "the very worst thing I can do to you," before shaking his hand and telling him, "I no longer see you." This confirms that Harry knows how painful it is for Conor to be ignored or isolated, as even his bully capitalizes on it.

Conor is normally very gentle and kind, but as soon as he feels completely invisible, he acts out violently in order to get noticed, once again revealing his heartbreaking longing for human connection in the face of his deep pain and grief. When Harry starts to ignore Conor, Conor calls upon the monster to tell him the third story. The third story is about an invisible man who is not actually invisible but whom people had become used to not seeing—a metaphor, it seems, for Conor's own situation at school. Conor then beats up Harry in the school cafeteria in order to be noticed, going to such extremes that he sends

Harry flying across the room. When Harry continues to taunt Conor by repeating that he doesn't see him, Conor only becomes more enraged. Conor breaks Harry's arm, nose, and several of his teeth, landing Harry in the hospital. Even though Conor gets himself noticed, he only becomes more isolated from his peers for his violent solution. He describes how he is no longer invisible, but he is "further away than ever" from the other students, who now clearly fear him. Through Conor's fruitless attempts at connection, Ness seems to suggest that everyone has the responsibility to understand when someone is hurting and to actively reach out. It is only when Lily passes Conor a note, apologizing for what she did and writing, "I see you," that Conor feels comforted. If isolation is incredibly harmful to Conor, then it is human connection that gives him the support he needs to make it through a tough time.



FAMILY AND GROWING UP

Yet another difficult aspect of Conor's story can be found in the way that he is forced to grow up far sooner than he would have if his mother had not gotten sick. Conor's parents are divorced, and his father lives in America with his new family. Thus, because it's only Conor and his mother in their household, thirteen-year-old Conor is forced to take on a lot of responsibility when his mother is diagnosed with cancer. Conor is caught between two opposing needs: he realizes that he needs to be responsible for his mother and would rather take care of her than see their family dynamic change, but he also has a desire to remain a child. His family members also treat him in contradictory ways, demonstrating how often a child on the verge of becoming a young adult needs both a feeling of responsibility and a measure of protection and innocence.

At the beginning of the story, Ness demonstrates the many ways in which Conor is forced to grow up and take on responsibility due to the fact that his mother has become incapable of taking care of him. In the opening pages, Conor cleans his own room without prompting, makes breakfast for himself, dresses in his school uniform, and packs his backpack for the day without help. He also puts the dishes in the dishwasher, takes the garbage out, and starts a load of laundry. Ness notes that these are "all things he'd done for himself," observing how Conor has been forced to become unusually responsible for his age. After the monster visits for the first time, Ness provides another description, this time of Conor's evening: spreading a blanket over his mother, who had fallen asleep on the couch; doing his homework at the kitchen table; brushing his teeth and putting himself to bed; asking if his mother needs his help when he later hears her throwing up in the bathroom. All of these are small but telling examples of how Conor has had to become self-sufficient, and has had to deal with far more adult responsibilities than most thirteen-year-olds.

Conor's father also makes it difficult for Conor to be a child because he lives in America with a new family. Thus, Conor is thrust into a more parental role because he has been taking care of his mother alone. Conor's father is increasingly absent from his life and makes it hard for Conor to go to him as a parental figure. When Conor tries to talk to his father about his mother's hospitalization, Conor's father simply says that Conor has to be "brave for her." Conor's father effectively pushes him into the role of being the support system for his mother, when it should be the other way around. When Conor and his father are discussing where Conor might live if his mother died, Conor asks to move in with him. But Conor's father refuses because he says that there is no room for Conor. He suggests Conor live with his grandmother instead, but this is quite harsh on a boy who is already losing one parent. After Conor and his father share a meal, Conor's dad asks if he wants company that night while his grandmother is visiting his mother in the hospital, to which Conor responds, "I'm fine on my own." Their interactions ultimately lead Conor to believe he has to grow up and be self-sufficient, even though he is looking to his father for comfort and familiarity.

Yet Conor's mom is pained that Conor has had to grow up so quickly; she and her mother (Conor's grandmother) work to help Conor remain a child who can rely on adults for protection and to relieve him of some of his responsibility. When Conor's mom notes all of the things that Conor has to do on his own, she comments that he is a "very good boy." But she also wishes Conor "didn't have to be quite so good," understanding that Conor has had to act with the generosity of a parent towards her when it should be the other way around. Spurred by this wish, she asks her own mother (Conor's grandmother) to stay at the house and take care of Conor while she remains weak from her treatments. Conor's mother is worried that Conor is being forced to mature too quickly because of her sickness. Thus, she tries to retain his innocence by making sure that someone can take care of him. Conor's grandmother also emphasizes the fact that Conor shouldn't have to take on the responsibility that he is assuming at such a young age. She criticizes him for wiping down the kitchen counter, saying "thirteen-year-old boys shouldn't be wiping down counters without being asked to first." She, too, wants Conor to be able to be a normal, more carefree boy.

Ultimately it is the monster that allows Conor to both grow up and remain a child, which the novel argues is exactly what children Conor's age need. Throughout the story, Conor feels the impending weight of having to take on more and more responsibility, yet he also wants to be released from that responsibility. After Conor reveals how much weight his mother's illness presses upon him, Ness describes how Conor "faintly felt the huge hands of the monster pick him up, forming a little nest to hold him." The monster helps him face adulthood by allowing him to accept his mother's illness and the fact that

she is likely going to die, but the monster also affords him the security of being held. The monster thus does what no member of Conor's family is able to do: the monster helps Conor grow up as his mother passes by guiding him through the process, while also allowing him to retain his ability to be a child—to be loved and comforted and taken care of.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE YEWE TREE

On the surface, the yew tree is a symbol of healing for both Conor and his mother, but on a deeper level, the yew tree also symbolizes Conor's denial and his false hope regarding his mother's condition. The yew tree is introduced very early in the book. When Conor looks out his window in the first chapter, he sees the one that stands in the church graveyard behind their house. This tree takes on more and more importance as the book goes on. First, and perhaps most importantly, the monster itself takes the form of this yew tree each time it visits Conor. Additionally, throughout the book, Conor's mother frequently looks out at the yew tree behind their house, and she reveals that it feels like she has a "friend out there who'd help [her] if things got to their worst." This is only made more poignant when Conor's mother tells him that the final treatment the doctors are going to try on her is made from yew trees, which causes Conor to conclude that this is why the monster has come walking—to cure his mother. But this is false hope, one that is only stoked by Conor's mother's statement that she believes the treatment will work. When it doesn't, Conor is only more upset with her (and with the monster) because the yew tree had been feeding this false hope. It is then that the monster reveals its true purpose: it did not come to heal his mother of her sickness, it came to heal Conor of his grief and pain. Therefore, the yew tree does, by the end, return to being a symbol of healing—only for Conor instead of for his mother, as the monster allows Conor to heal from the loss and emotional pain of his mother's death.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Candlewick edition of *A Monster Calls* published in 2013.

A Monster Calls Quotes

☝☝ He'd told no one about the nightmare. Not his mum, obviously, but no one else either, not his dad in their fortnightly (or so) phone call, *definitely* not his grandma, and no one at school. Absolutely not.

Related Characters: The Monster, Conor's Grandmother, Conor's Father, Conor's Mother, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

When Ness first introduces thirteen-year-old Conor O'Malley, he is reeling from a recurring nightmare that often causes him to wake up screaming. It is not revealed until the very end of the book exactly what the nightmare entails: Conor's mother being dragged over the edge of a cliff by a monstrous creature, and Conor trying to desperately to hold onto her as she gets heavier and heavier. The nightmare becomes a metaphor for Conor's mother's illness, as she has cancer and Conor can feel the emotional weight of her illness and the responsibility for taking care of her constantly pressing down on him.

This early description of how Conor treats the nightmare establishes an important theme: the fact that Conor is constantly in denial about his pain and fear surrounding his mother's illness. This is evident in the way that Conor is adamant that he is not going to tell the people closest to him—his mother, father, grandmother, and friends at school—about what is happening. He doesn't even reveal the details to the reader until the end of the book. But this denial actually becomes really harmful to Conor. He is plagued by the nightmare throughout the rest of the book, making him feel worse and worse as time goes on. However, when he finally confesses the details of the story to the monster, only then is he able to be comforted by it. Thus, Ness argues that only through facing pain and fear can one alleviate it and move past it.

Breakfast Quotes

☝☝ But she wasn't in the kitchen. Which meant she was probably still up in her bed. Which meant Conor would have to make his own breakfast, something he'd grown used to doing. Fine. *Good*, in fact, especially *this* morning.

Related Characters: The Monster, Conor's Mother, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

After Conor's first encounter with the monster, he wakes up the next day and goes about his normal routine. The insight into Conor's thoughts here is telling: Conor, even at thirteen years old, has grown accustomed to being responsible for himself, because his mother is often too tired to take care of him when she is in the midst of a round of treatments. Making breakfast is not the only thing that Conor does without prompting: he also does the dishes, brushes his teeth, takes out the trash, does a load of laundry, changes into his uniform and packs his bag without any supervision. The extraordinary maturity that Conor shows in doing these tasks demonstrates how Conor has been forced to grow up much more quickly than many of his peers. Even though he is still on the cusp of adolescence, Conor takes on a great deal of responsibility because there is no one else to take care of himself and his mother. This is something that causes his mother great distress, because she wants to make sure that he can still retain some aspects of childhood.

☝☝ "I'm going to be late," Conor said, eyeing the clock. "Okay, sweetheart," she said, teetering over to kiss him on the forehead. "You're a good boy," she said again. "I wish you didn't have to be quite so good."

Related Characters: Conor's Mother, Conor O'Malley (speaker), Conor's Grandmother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

After Ness's description of Conor's morning routine (demonstrating the many things that Conor must do for himself, like making breakfast, doing the dishes, and taking out the trash), Conor's mother wakes up. Conor's mother appreciates all the things that Conor has to do by himself in order to take care of both of them, but she is also adamant that she doesn't want Conor to have to do all of these tasks alone, or have to grow up too soon.

This is one of the reasons that Conor's mother invites Conor's grandmother to come stay with them: so that Conor will have an adult to take care of him, and so that he doesn't have to bear the responsibility of looking after his

sick mother alone. In asking his grandmother to stay, his mother wants to make sure that Conor can be somewhat of a normal kid even in the midst of extraordinarily unfortunate circumstances. Her word choice of wishing that Conor “didn’t have to be so good” refers to the fact that Conor has had unfair burdens placed on him to be stronger and more responsible than the average kid. Conor hates this idea because he is very resistant to any kind of change, and he doesn’t want this to be a kind of transitional period that will eventually lead to his moving in with his grandmother (which eventually does happen). Conor’s denial runs so deep that he would rather take on this responsibility and pretend that everything is normal than try to gain more support from his family.

Three Stories Quotes

☹️ *You know that is not true, the monster said. You know that your truth, the one that you hide, Conor O'Malley, is the thing you are most afraid of.*

Related Characters: The Monster (speaker), Conor’s Mother, Conor O’Malley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

When the monster visits Conor a second time, it explains why it has come: it is going to tell Conor three stories, and then Conor himself must tell a fourth tale: that of his own story, his own truth. What the monster means is that Conor must talk about what happens in his nightmare. This not only means what happens in it, wherein Conor is unable to save his mother from a nightmarish creature (symbolizing death) that is pulling her off of a cliff, but also how Conor feels about it. At the end of the book it is revealed that Conor acknowledges that he could hold onto his mother for longer, but that he chooses to let her go because he is exhausted by the emotional weight and isolation that he experiences from watching her die, and that he just wants it to be over.

The monster’s words here highlight two ideas: first, that telling the truth is difficult, but that it is necessary. Conor spends most of the novel in complete denial of his mother’s deterioration, and also in denial of his feelings about what is happening. Second, the monster demonstrates that stories can be very complicated, especially when they deal with “truth.” As the monster’s three stories demonstrate, there isn’t always a good side and a bad side, and therefore it

eventually demonstrates that despite Conor’s fear that he will be thought to be a bad person, stories can allow him to understand his thoughts and emotions as just that: thoughts and emotions. Neither of those two things make Conor evil; they simply make him human. But only by revealing what he is feeling can Conor face his fears and move past them.

The Wildness of Stories Quotes

☹️ *And you have worse things to be frightened of, said the monster, but not as a question.*

Conor looked at the ground, then up at the moon, anywhere but at the monster’s eyes. The nightmare feeling was rising in him, turning everything around him to darkness, making everything seem heavy and impossible, like he’d been asked to lift a mountain with his bare hands and no one would let him leave until he did.

Related Characters: The Monster (speaker), Conor O’Malley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

When the monster arrives to tell Conor the first story, it expresses surprise that Conor doesn’t appear to be frightened of it at all. In this quote, however, the monster starts to acknowledge that Conor has worse things to be frightened of. Hearing this statement, Conor thinks about his nightmare, in which he must face a much more nightmarish monster, a monster that represents death, which has come to take his gravely ill mother from him.

Conor’s feelings vividly illustrate the weight of the pain and responsibility that Conor bears in having to deal with his mother’s illness. One of Conor’s largest struggles is that he has had to become an adult much faster than his peers, and the monster even acknowledges this in its statement. Conor isn’t afraid of an enormous tree monster, as might be true of a normal boy his age; instead, his fears are much darker and more complicated. These fears include his mother’s death and suffering, his own pain, and the feeling that he will not be able to hold the responsibility that he is trying to shoulder. These fears are much more mature, which is what makes it even more difficult that Conor refuses to accept them or to talk to anybody else about them. This is the reason that the monster arrives in the first place: to help Conor face this “nightmare feeling,” ultimately helping him

to do so and allowing him to heal from this pain.

The Rest of the First Tale Quotes

☞ You think I tell you stories to teach you *lessons*? the monster said. You think I have come walking out of time and earth itself to teach you a *lesson in niceness*?

Related Characters: The Monster (speaker), The Evil Queen, The Farmer's Daughter, The Young Prince, Conor's Grandmother, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

The monster tells Conor the first tale, in which the monster saves an evil queen from being burned at the stake because she did not commit the crime for which she was being punished. Conor makes a connection between this evil queen, who wanted to overtake the kingdom, and his own grandmother, and asks the monster if the point of the story was to teach him to be nicer to his grandmother. The monster's response to Conor is telling: it makes fun of Conor for the idea that it has come to teach him a simple, feel-good lesson about being nice. This provides Conor with a distinction between the idea that the monster is trying to instill a moral into Conor, as many of these kinds of oral folk tales do, and helping Conor to understand his own emotions and the complexities of human nature. The monster's mocking language shows that its stories are important and complex, and cannot be condensed into a simplistic lesson.

☞ *There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere in between.*

Conor shook his head. "That's a terrible story. And a cheat."

It is a true story, the monster said. Many things that are true feel like a cheat. Kingdoms get the princes they deserve, farmers' daughters die for no reason, and sometimes witches merit saving.

Related Characters: Conor O'Malley, The Monster (speaker), The Evil Queen, The Farmer's Daughter, The Young Prince, Conor's Mother, Conor's Grandmother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

Just after the monster tells Conor the first tale, it explains to Conor that the tale isn't meant to teach him a trite moral lesson; instead, as the monster elaborates on here, the story is meant to teach him about the complexity of the world and human nature. But even though Conor has a very easy time linking the evil queen with his stuffy grandmother, he doesn't understand how these concepts apply to him, or at least, he doesn't want to acknowledge how these concepts apply to him.

This story is very relevant to Conor's own life, as some of the characters serve as metaphorical stand-ins for Conor's family members and even himself. But Conor refuses to see the nuances in this story, and in his own. He doesn't want to accept that his mother (represented by the farmer's daughter) died for no reason. He wants to be able to blame his grandmother (the evil queen) for the changes in his life, even though his grandmother (while she is a cold, strict woman) is not guilty of the crime that she is charged with. And he has a hard time understanding that he (like the prince) is capable of both good and evil, even though he himself does some very good deeds and some very bad ones through the course of the book. It isn't until the end of the book that Conor understands how these complexities apply to his own life.

Understanding Quotes

☞ Those friends told a few more, who told a few more, and before the day was half through, it was like a circle had opened around him, a dead area with Conor at the center, surrounded by land mines that everyone was afraid to walk through.

Related Characters: Conor's Mother, Lily Andrews, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

When Lily tries to make amends with Conor walking home one day, he refuses her apology and refuses to say sorry for lying and getting her into trouble at school. As he storms away, he thinks about what she did that caused him to feel so alone at school: because his mother had told her mother about her cancer diagnosis, Lily soon found out and told a few friends, and then the information had spread quickly throughout the school. Subsequently, Conor became

extremely isolated by his friends, classmates, and even teachers.

This description is one of the only insights into why the students isolate him, but it provides minimal insight. Perhaps the students are trying to be sensitive to him, and don't want to "set him off," to borrow the metaphor of the land mines. Perhaps they don't know how to treat Conor, or perhaps they don't want to be associated someone who is so plagued by death. But through this description, Ness demonstrates how even if this treatment may be well-intentioned, it is actually extremely harmful to Conor, because it only adds to the pain and struggle that he is experiencing on top of actually dealing with his mother's illness. When Lily reaches out more earnestly to Conor at the end of book, it is Ness's way of arguing that the impetus is on others to reach out to Conor and give him the support he needs to get through a difficult time.

☝ And for a moment, Conor was entirely alone.

He knew right then he could probably stay out there all day and no one would punish him for it.

Which somehow made him feel even worse.

Related Characters: Conor's Mother, Sully, Anton, Harry, Miss Kwan, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

One day, when Conor is being bullied by Harry, Anton, and Sully in the school yard, they stay a few minutes past break and all get in trouble with the teacher, Miss Kwan. Afterward, however, Miss Kwan pulls Conor aside. She tries to connect with him and tells him not to worry about getting in trouble—and adds that she can't imagine what he's going through, which is a phrase Conor hates. When she returns inside, Conor is left completely alone. This exchange is not comforting to Conor for two reasons. First, even though Miss Kwan's intentions are good, her expression of the fact that she can't imagine what Conor is going through gets at the heart of one of his biggest issues: isolation. No one feels that they can relate to Conor because of his mother's illness, and this pain becomes very isolating for him. No one seems to know how to talk or act around him, and therefore they simply try to avoid it. Additionally, Conor's mother's illness changes the way in which people treat him, in that people are very lenient with Conor. Conor simply wants to

act like everything is normal and even wants to be punished like a regular kid would be, because that is a way in which things can feel normal for him. But here, Conor knows that almost any behavior will go unpunished, and, as he expresses, that only makes him feel worse.

Champ Quotes

☝☝ "We barely have room for the three of us, Con. Your grandma has a lot more money and space than we do. Plus, you're in school here, your friends are here, your whole *life* is here. It would be unfair to just take you out of all that."

"Unfair to who?" Conor asked.

His father sighed. "This is what I meant," he said. "This is what I meant when I said you were going to have to be brave."

Related Characters: Conor O'Malley, Conor's Father (speaker), Conor's Mother, Conor's Grandmother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

When Conor's mother is in the hospital, Conor's father comes to visit from America, and he and Conor have dinner together. During the dinner, Conor asks his father if he can come live with him in America. Conor's father makes one excuse after another, arguing that Conor won't have much room, the family doesn't have much money, and he doesn't want to pull him away from his life in England. This exchange illustrates key aspects of the relationship between Conor and his father, and a lot about Conor's father's character. Even though Conor's father is well-meaning and is trying to comfort his son, he shows himself to be very flaky. Instead of helping to take care of Conor's mother, as well as his own son, Conor's father instead tells Conor that *he* has to be brave, essentially foisting him into an adult role. Conor's father and mother divorced six years prior, which means that Conor has essentially been her sole caretaker while she's been ill. Conor is initially relieved to see his father, presumably because he hopes his father will help take care of him, but his father quickly proves that he won't be changing anytime soon. It is also notable that this is a rare instance in which Conor permits himself to think about a possible future after his mother's death, but his father shuts down any hope Conor might have of living with his dad, it's a heartbreaking instance of how grown up his father expects Conor to be.

The Second Tale Quotes

☛☛ *The yew tree is the most important of all the healing trees, it said. It lives for thousands of years. Its berries, its bark, its leaves, its sap, its pulp, its wood, they all thrum and burn and twist with life. It can cure almost any ailment man suffers from, mixed and treated by the right apothecary.*

Related Characters: The Monster (speaker), The Parson, The Apothecary, Conor's Mother, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 105

Explanation and Analysis

The monster's second tale describes a story in which an Apothecary asks a parson to cut down the yew tree in the parsonage so that he can harvest it. During the story, Conor is surprised to learn that the yew tree is a tree of healing. This information is significant for a few reasons—most importantly, because the monster takes the shape of a yew tree that stands outside of Conor's house. Additionally, the final treatment that the doctors eventually try with Conor's mother is also made from yew trees. This causes Conor to think that this is why the monster has come: to cure his mother with its healing powers. But this belief is only another extension of Conor's denial, as he hopes that the monster can stave off his mother's death. What he is unable to see is that the monster is not here to heal his mother; it is here so that it can heal *him*. The healing that the yew tree provides for Conor is not a literal healing of an illness, but is instead the monster showing him how to accept and recover from his mother's worsening condition and eventual death.

Destruction Quotes

☛☛ She walked right past him, her face twisted in tears, the moaning spilling out of her again. She went to the display cabinet, the only thing remaining upright in the room.

And she grabbed it by one side—

And pulled on it hard once—

Twice—

And a third time.

Sending it crashing to the floor with a final-sounding crunch.

Related Characters: The Parson, The Monster, Conor

O'Malley, Conor's Grandmother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

After the monster tells Conor the second tale, Conor joins in the destruction of the parson's house. But when the monster leaves, Conor sees that he has actually destroyed his grandmother's sitting room, which was full of priceless antiques. When Conor's grandmother returns home and sees this destruction, she does not punish him. Instead, she finishes the job, destroying the only thing that is left standing. This incident shows first some of the negative consequences that have befallen Conor because he has been denying his mother's worsening condition for so long. The pent-up anger and pain is being unleashed in ways that he doesn't intend. This also plays into the tension that Conor is feeling in terms of growing up. He has to be so responsible at home with his mom, and is such a meek victim of bullying at school, that it makes sense that sometimes Conor is unable to hold up that mature façade. In a way, this is like a temper tantrum for him—he needs to unleash his emotions, but because they have been simmering for so long, they become unleashed in unhealthy and excessive ways. The fact that Conor's grandmother joins in the destruction as well instead of punishing Conor shows that she understands why Conor did it and that punishing him wouldn't be any use. At the same time, her joining in shows that she, too, has some unresolved emotions, and uses this incident as an opportunity to express her own anger and pain as she must bear the responsibility of both Conor and Conor's mother.

Invisible Quotes

☛☛ His classmates kept their distance from him, too, like he was giving off a bad smell. He tried to remember if he'd talked to any of them since he'd arrived this morning. He didn't think he had. Which meant he hadn't actually spoken to *anyone* since his father that morning.

How could something like that happen?

But, finally, here was Harry. And that, at least, felt normal.

Related Characters: Sully, Anton, Harry, Conor's Grandmother, Conor's Mother, Conor's Father, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

The morning after Conor destroys his grandmother's sitting room, he goes to school and faces yet another day of isolation, with most of his classmates completely ignoring him. This quote demonstrates just how deeply Conor is desperate for human connection—to the point where he actually wants to be bullied because it confirms that people can actually see him. The quote also proves how much Conor wishes to be treated normally, even if this means being punished or bullied. His father and his teachers have been insistent on not punishing him, even when he does something wrong—like destroying his grandmother's sitting room, for example, or not doing his school work. But Harry, Anton, and Sully have no such misgivings, and Conor actually starts to crave their abuse because it shows that they don't care about treating him delicately. They don't use Conor's mother's illness as an excuse to treat him better, as other people do. Conor's desire is exceptionally harmful to him, however, and becomes even more harmful in later chapters when Harry realizes that Conor wants to be punished and starts to ignore him, too.

Could It Be? Quotes

☝☝ “Son,” his father said, leaning forward. “Stories don't always have happy endings.”

This stopped him. Because they didn't, did they? That's one thing the monster had definitely taught him. Stories were wild, wild animals and went off in directions you couldn't expect.

Related Characters: Conor's Father (speaker), The Monster, Conor's Mother, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

When Conor visits his mother at the hospital and learns that she is trying one last treatment—a drug made from yew trees—Conor's father then takes Conor for a walk outside the hospital. Conor's father tells him that it is unlikely the treatment will cure his mother or stave off her illness—a fact that Conor denies. But Conor's father's words here stop Conor, as they begin to make him realize why the monster has come, and why the monster is telling him

stories. Even though Conor has been very skeptical about what he is supposed to learn from the monster's tales, Conor's realization makes it clear that he understands a core truth about each story: that they don't necessarily have happy endings. The stories, like life itself, are complex. They are meant to help Conor accept the truth about what is happening with his mother, and even though he still doesn't fully realize their purpose, this is a key turning point in which he starts to understand what the monster is trying to show him. Even though he still denies what his father is saying and argues that his mother will be okay, this moment lays the groundwork for Conor's eventual acceptance that his mother is going to die.

The Third Tale Quotes

☝☝ Harry leaned forward, his eyes flashing. “I see *nothing*,” he said. Without turning around, Conor asked the monster a question. “What did you do to help the invisible man?”

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

I made them see, it said.

Conor clenched his fists even tighter.

Then the monster leapt forward to make Harry see.

Related Characters: The Monster, Conor O'Malley, Harry (speaker), Conor's Mother, Lily Andrews

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

As Conor's mother's condition in the hospital worsens, Conor continues to be isolated at school. One day, however, Conor hits a breaking point, when Harry decides that the worst way to bully Conor is to tell him that he no longer sees him. At that moment, the monster appears to tell Conor the third tale, which centers on an invisible man who wanted to be seen again. This incident demonstrates the true toll of Conor's isolation at school. On top of the burden that he bears due to his mother, Conor experiences even more pain because no one will talk to him or even acknowledge that they see him. This pain becomes so severe that Conor is forced to act violently, and on top of that, he doesn't realize that *he* is the one who beats Harry—he is convinced that the monster is the one who did it.

As the monster points out and Conor quickly learns, this act

of violence only leads to more isolation because people become afraid of Conor. This sequence of events illustrates that the isolation imposed on Conor by other students, while it might be well-intended by some, becomes extremely harmful to him at a time when he is already quite vulnerable. The only way to remedy this, Ness demonstrates, is through human connection, like when Lily reaches out in a subsequent chapter.

Punishment Quotes

☝ He was going to be punished. It was finally going to happen. Everything was going to make sense again. She was going to expel him.

Punishment was coming.

Related Characters: Conor's Mother, Harry, Miss Kwan, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

After Conor beats up Harry, he ends up putting Harry in the hospital with a broken arm, a broken nose, and broken teeth. He lands in the headmistress's office, where she tells him that normally, a student in Conor's position would be expelled from the school. This statement actually fills Conor with relief, because he doesn't want the headmistress to give him special treatment because his mother is sick. Just like Harry's bullying, he associates being punished with being treated normally. Thus, Conor only feels worse when the headmistress decides not to punish him because of his mother's situation.

Conor also has some deep-seated reasons why he is so keen on being punished. Although he doesn't reveal this until the end of the book, Conor is exhausted and just wants his mother's illness to be over, even if this means her death. But Conor is also desperate for his mother to live, and these thoughts fill him with conflict and guilt. But instead of accepting these feelings and confiding in someone, he keeps them inside and represses these emotions, which only leads to more guilt, and the kind of anger that allowed him to hurt Harry in the first place.

☝ *There are worse things than being invisible*, the monster had said, and it was right.

Conor was no longer invisible. They all saw him now. But he was further away than ever.

Related Characters: The Monster (speaker), Lily Andrews, Harry, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

After Conor returns from the headmistress's office, having received no punishment for beating up Harry, he notices a change in the way students treat him. Whereas before, he was completely invisible to them, which is what had led to his isolation and ultimately to the anger that caused him to beat up Harry. But now, he is no longer invisible: when he returns to class, kids notice him and avoid him as much as possible, terrified that he will hurt them. This reveals the complexity in the third tale: that even though Conor was deeply upset by his isolation, his violent reaction to that isolation had actually only made his situation worse—and now he feels more isolated than ever. Ness thus demonstrates how Conor's mother's illness, and the way that people treat him because of it, have created a downward cycle of isolation, pain, violence, and even more isolation. The only thing that can break the cycle is a demonstration of support, which Lily fortunately gives to Conor in the following chapter.

A Note Quotes

☝ *I'm sorry for telling everyone about your mum*, read the first line.

I miss being your friend, read the second.

Are you okay? read the third.

I see you, read the fourth, with the *I* underlined about a hundred times.

Related Characters: Lily Andrews (speaker), Harry, Conor's Mother, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

When Conor returns from the headmistress's office, Lily

passes him a note in English class, reaching out to make amends. Even though he isn't able to fully respond to Lily, he chokes up reading the note and is very moved by it. Lily's note is so vital to Conor at this moment because he feels completely isolated from everyone around him. His friends have all abandoned him; people seem more interested in trying to avoid making him upset than empathizing with him and genuinely asking about how he is; and due to the incident with Harry, he has become more lonely than ever. And Lily acknowledges, as well, that she is part of the reason that this is the case. Her taking responsibility for this misstep is something that really moves Conor because he had been really hurt by it, and it had been previously unacknowledged. With Lily's note, Ness suggests that when someone is in pain, the responsibility of actively reaching out and making sure that the person is okay rests on everyone else. Only through this human connection does Conor finally feel like he is being understood, and that others care enough about his pain to give him support.

Life After Death Quotes

“I've known forever she wasn't going to make it, almost from the beginning. She said she was getting better because that's what I wanted to hear. And I believed her. Except I didn't.”
No, the monster said.

Conor swallowed, still struggling. “And I started to think how much I wanted it to be over. How much I just wanted to stop having to *think* about it. How I couldn't stand the waiting anymore. I couldn't stand how alone it made me feel.”

Related Characters: The Monster, Conor O'Malley (speaker), Conor's Mother

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the book, the monster forces Conor to tell the fourth tale—in which his mother is pulled over the edge of a cliff and Conor is unable to hold onto her. But the monster makes Conor admit a final truth, which is that he simply wants the waiting to be over. He wants an end to his mother's, and his own, pain and suffering. This represents the turning point for Conor's character, as he is finally able to accept the ideas that he has denied through the entirety of the book. He accepts that his mother is going to die, despite the fact that he is desperate for her to live. And he

accepts that he wants her suffering to be over, because her illness has been an emotional weight that has been excruciating for him to bear. He even acknowledges how inextricably tied her illness and his isolation are: as other people have shown, Conor's mother's illness made people feel unable to relate to him, and therefore they simply stopped interacting with him and added to his pain. Conor's ability to admit this becomes hugely important, because only in acknowledging his pain is he able to be comforted by the monster, and understand that he can move past that pain in the coming chapters.

He faintly felt the huge hands of the monster pick him up, forming a little nest to hold him. He was only vaguely aware of the leaves and branches twisting around him, softening and widening to let him lie back.

Related Characters: Conor's Mother, The Monster, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

After Conor finally admits the truth to the monster and finishes the fourth tale, he expresses a final worry: that it is his fault that his mother is dying, because he thought about how much he wanted the whole ordeal to end. As he is consumed by grief and sinks to the ground, the monster's response is to lift him up and to comfort him. This caring gesture shows why it was so important for Conor to admit the truth. When he was denying it, and holding in all of his pain and suffering and guilt, his emotions only festered and grew. But when he was finally able to express those emotions, to grieve not only for his mother's impending death but also to acknowledge his worst thoughts, the monster is then able to comfort him.

Additionally, this small action shows how, in contrast to most of Conor's family, the monster equips him to both grow up and to retain some innocence. The monster helps Conor face adulthood in acknowledging that his mother is likely going to die. But the monster also consoles and protects him, almost in a parental way. And for a thirteen-year-old boy facing an intense family trauma, Conor needs to have the ability to be a boy and to have someone take care of him, but also to understand the gravity of the situation and learn how to handle his own emotions.

●● You were merely wishing for the end of pain, the monster said.
Your own pain. An end to how it isolated you. It is the most human wish of all.

"I didn't mean it," Conor said.

You did, the monster said, but you also did not.

Conor sniffed and looked up to its face, which was as big as a wall in front of him. "How can both be true?"

Because humans are complicated beasts, the monster said. How can a queen be both a good witch and a bad witch? How can a prince be a murderer and a saviour?

Related Characters: Conor O'Malley, The Monster (speaker), The Parson, The Apothecary, The Young Prince, The Evil Queen, Conor's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

As Conor and the monster continue to parse through Conor's feelings following the fourth tale, the monster provides some final insight on why it came to tell Conor stories. It proves that Conor is not meant to glean lessons from them; instead, the stories are meant to illustrate the complexity of the human condition. The queen is both good and bad, as is the prince, the Apothecary, and the parson. Humans are not wholly good or purely bad, in essence—they all have good and bad traits.

And so, Conor, being one of those humans, is also complicated. Conor truly wants an end to his pain and isolation, as the monster points out. But he also does not want the end to the pain and isolation, because he knows that this means his mother's death. The stories, then, are meant to show Conor that people have both good and bad intentions, but it is his actions that truly count. The monster helps Conor face the fact that his mother's death is not his fault, which Conor deeply feared and felt a lot of guilt for. The monster thus helps Conor accept his mother's death, helps him accept the fact that he has conflicting emotions, and comforts him with the realization that his conflicting emotions are not the cause of his mother's death—and that acceptance enables him to move past that pain.

The Truth Quotes

●● And he also knew he was going to get through it.

It would be terrible. It would be beyond terrible.

But he'd survive.

And it was for this that the monster came. It must have been.

Conor had needed it, and his need had somehow called it. And it had come walking. Just for this moment.

Related Characters: Conor's Mother, The Monster, Conor O'Malley

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

When Conor pays his mother a final visit in the hospital, he sees how weak and exhausted she is and understands that this is likely the end. He begins to accept it, and the description here also demonstrates that Conor finally understands that the monster came to help him, not his mother. Conor needed to be healed just as much as she did, and the monster came to make sure that Conor would be able to survive, as he notes here.

Conor has spent nearly the entire novel in denial of this moment, and the monster's role was to ensure that when the moment finally came, Conor would be prepared for it. And the only way that Conor could be prepared, Ness suggests, is if Conor acknowledged that it might happen. If the monster hadn't come knocking, Conor might have continued to push down his emotions, and it's possible he would have been unable to handle the news of his mother's death. In this quote, Ness thus shows not only that Conor accepts his mother's impending death, but also that Conor recognizes that he needed to accept it in order to survive it.

●● "You'll stay?" Conor whispered to the monster, barely able to speak. "You'll stay until. . ."

I will stay, the monster said, its hands still on Conor's shoulders. *Now all you have to do is speak the truth.*

And so Conor did.

He took in a breath.

And, at last, he spoke the final and total truth.

"I don't want you to go," he said, the tears dropping from his eyes, slowly at first, then spilling like a river.

Related Characters: The Monster, Conor O'Malley

(speaker), Conor's Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

In Conor's final words with his mother, the monster helps him a final time. The monster provides support for Conor when he is most in need, helping Conor to accept a final truth. Ness also includes an image in which the monster holds Conor's shoulders, as if it is helping to hold him up as he takes on this difficult task. The monster again serves as a kind of parental figure, providing literal support and staying with him like a loyal friend. But, in addition to protecting

Conor, the monster also helps Conor into adulthood by enabling him to face a hard truth. And because the monster is essentially a part of Conor's mind or imagination, the monster represents Conor's own ability to protect himself and hold himself up.

Additionally, Conor's final words to his mother demonstrate his ability to grow up as well. Though it might seem paradoxical that his saying that he doesn't want his mother to go really shows his maturity, it actually does. On his previous hospital visit, he called his mother a liar and refused to show any emotion besides anger toward her. But in now acknowledging his love for her and in having the maturity to show and accept his emotions, Conor's last words to his mother show how much he has grown over the course of the book, with the help of the monster.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A MONSTER CALLS

The monster arrives just after midnight. Meanwhile, Conor has just woken up from a nightmare. He's been having this same nightmare a lot, but he's been too afraid to tell anyone about it—certainly not his mother, and not his grandmother or father either, and no one at school. He hears someone calling his name, a quiet whisper over and over again coming from outside his open window. He starts to get panicky and goes over to the window.

Conor notes the **yew tree** rising from the center of the graveyard, next to the church near his house. He only knows it's a yew tree because his mother has recently started staring out of their kitchen window and saying, "that's a yew tree, you know." He hears the whisper of his name again.

A cloud passes over the moon, covering the view in darkness. When the moon shines again, the **yew tree** is standing in the middle of Conor's backyard. This is the monster: the branches of the tree twisting into a "great and terrible face," with a powerful spine and torso. It bends down to the window, saying in a low, rumbling voice that it has come to get Conor. It pushes against the house, shaking Conor's wall and sending objects tumbling to the floor.

Conor isn't scared, however: "this wasn't the monster he was expecting." He says, "come and get me then." The monster roars and pounds its fists on the walls. It grabs Conor and swings him out of the window. The monster is surprised to see Conor isn't frightened, telling Conor that he will be afraid "before the end." The monster opens its mouth and roars, preparing to eat him alive.

The beginning of the book introduces Conor's denial. Not only does he refuse to tell his family and friends about his recurring nightmare, but this information is withheld from the reader as well. This illustrates how Conor doesn't even want to think about the nightmare in his own mind, which foreshadows his struggle with accepting what happens in it.



This passage introduces the yew tree, which is the central symbol in the book. The fact that both Conor and his mother keep an eye out for it suggest that it is—and will continue to be—important to the both of them.



It is no accident that the monster springs out of this yew tree, further signifying the yew tree's significance in the story.



Conor's lack of fear in the face of the monster is an early example of how he has been forced to become an adult, even at thirteen years old. He isn't afraid of this giant beast; as the novel will soon reveal, Conor's fears are much more mature and complicated than what the monster is expecting. The monster defies Conor's expectations, too, as this passage notes that Conor was waiting for a monster of a different sort, and is possibly tied to his recurring nightmares.



BREAKFAST

Conor steps into the kitchen in the morning while his mother is still asleep. He makes his own breakfast, already in his school uniform with his backpack packed for school: “all things he’d done for himself.” He thinks about the previous evening, which he assumed had been a dream—until he saw his entire bedroom floor covered in **yew tree** leaves. He convinced himself that they’d blown in through the open window and cleaned them up.

Conor decides that it’s best to take the trash out so that his mother doesn’t find the leaves. He also takes the recycling out and puts a load of sheets into the washer. Ten minutes before Conor leaves for school, his mother comes into the kitchen. She notes softly how clean the kitchen is, and apologizes for not being awake to make him breakfast. Conor says it’s not a problem.

Conor’s mother hasn’t yet tied a scarf around her bald head this morning, and it “[makes] Conor’s stomach hurt to see it.” Conor’s mother tells him that his grandmother is coming to visit the next day. Conor complains, arguing that they don’t need her at the house. But his mother says that she wouldn’t have asked his grandmother to come if she didn’t need her to help during this round of treatments.

Conor is upset, not only because he has to give up his room every time his grandmother visits but also because she talks to him like he is “an employee under evaluation.” Conor’s mother assures him that his grandmother will only be staying for a few nights. Conor says he’s going to be late for school. “You’re a good boy,” his mother says. “I wish you didn’t have to be quite so good.” Conor leaves for school.

SCHOOL

Conor can taste blood in his mouth. He bit the inside of his lip when Harry and his cronies, Anton and Sully, tripped him walking into school just now. The three boys laugh, and Harry tells Conor to be careful of the steps. Harry hasn’t always bullied Conor, but when Conor started having “that nightmare,” Harry started noticing him—“like a secret mark had been placed on him that only Harry could see.”

Ness’s description of Conor’s morning demonstrates the various ways in which Conor has been forced to take on a lot of responsibility for such a young boy. It seems that Conor takes on the role of caregiver with his mother, in a reversal from the normal parent-child relationship.



The mixture of sadness and gratitude in Conor’s mother’s voice implies that she would much rather Conor be able to be a normal thirteen-year-old boy, but also that she needs him and his help.



This passage provides an answer as to why Conor must take on so much responsibility, and, perhaps, why he’s having nightmares: his mother is sick with cancer. One of the reasons Conor doesn’t mind taking on the responsibility is because it allows him to act as though everything is normal, even in the face of clear evidence that his mother is very sick. This is why he opposes his grandmother’s visit: he is in denial that his mother might be so sick that she needs someone other than Conor to take care of her.



Again, Conor’s mother’s statement expresses her wish to enable Conor to remain a child. She wants to allow him to retain his innocence by making sure that someone can take care of him when she cannot, and that someone can relieve Conor of the burden of taking care of herself.



Ness draws a connection between Conor’s nightmare and the beginning of Harry’s bullying. This implies that Conor’s nightmare, which he refuses to acknowledge to other people, makes him isolated and vulnerable, and therefore more easily victimized.



Conor starts to get up off of the ground, when he sees a girl in his class, Lily Andrews, coming over. She tells Harry, Anton, and Sully to leave Conor alone. They make fun of him for the fact that Lily is coming over to save him. Harry also notes that Conor is bleeding, and Sully cries that Conor will have to get his “baldy mother to kiss it better for him!” Conor’s stomach turns into “a ball of fire,” and Lily pushes Sully into a bush at this remark.

Their teacher, Miss Kwan, storms over, scolding Lily. Lily says that Sully was making fun of Conor’s mother. Everyone freezes, and Conor is both furious and embarrassed. Miss Kwan asks if this is true. Conor looks at the three boys, and says no—he fell, and Harry, Anton, and Sully were helping him up. Lily is stunned, and Miss Kwan sharply asks her to stay behind as the other boys go to their next class. Harry picks up Conor’s backpack and gives it back to him, saying, “Well done.”

LIFE WRITING

Conor walks home after avoiding Harry the rest of the day. He also avoided Lily, who was very upset when she returned to class. In English class, Mrs. Marl gave them an assignment to write about themselves called “Life Writing,” encouraging the students by saying that they have stories to tell, though Conor dreads the assignment.

Conor thinks about a few important events that had happened in his life: his father leaving, the cat wandering off, the afternoon his mother said they needed to have a “little talk”—but nothing he wants to write about. He remembers the day before they had the “little talk,” when he and his mother got Indian food and laughed all the way home as they “fart[ed]” in the car. But then, the next day, when they had the “little talk,” he understood “what his mum had done and why she had done it.”

As Conor walks, Lily calls after him and confronts him, asking why he lied and got her into trouble. Conor asks her to leave him alone, saying that he doesn’t need her help and that she shouldn’t have been meddling in his business. She says it’s his fault that she’s got detention all week, and that the school sent a note home to her parents. Conor says it’s all *her* fault and storms off.

The fact that Sully makes fun of Conor’s mother because of her cancer is despicable, but the remark horrifies Conor for two additional reasons. The acknowledgement of her illness makes it difficult for Conor to deny that anything is wrong, and it also isolates him from the other students because he becomes singled out and made fun of for it.



Conor turns on Lily here because, as Ness will explain in the next few chapters, she told other people about Conor’s mother’s cancer. This caused people to start to avoid him, and he has become incredibly isolated as a result. His anger with Lily has only exacerbated that isolation.



The assignment that Conor gets in school foreshadows the eventual story, “the fourth story,” that he will have to tell the monster about his own life. Conor’s apprehension about the assignment demonstrates his skepticism of how stories might be useful to him.



The story about the Indian food, followed by the “little talk,” in which it is implied that Conor’s mother told him of her diagnosis, proves the point that the monster eventually makes: that people and life are both complicated, and a story can be both happy and sad at the same time. Conor realizes that his mother took him out to have a final night of carefree fun before telling him about her diagnosis, showing her willingness to deny that anything is wrong, and her desire to help her son maintain some innocence.



It is notable that in this moment, Conor asks Lily to leave him alone. As he goes on to explain in this and later chapters, she is the reason that he feels so isolated at school. But at the same time, Conor pushes away the closest friend he has, which only makes him more isolated.



Conor has known Lily “for as long as he [can] remember.” Their mothers had been friends before the two kids were born, and because of this, Conor and Lily have always felt more like siblings. After Conor’s mother had a “little talk” with him, she then told Lily’s mother the news. Lily’s mother then told Lily, and then suddenly everyone knew—“which changed the world in a single day.”

Conor arrives home to the house that he has always lived in. After his mother and father had divorced, and his father had moved to America, his mother only asked to keep the house. That was six years ago, and now Conor can’t remember what it was like to have a father in the house. Conor looks past the house and spots the **yew tree** in the church graveyard. He assures himself that it’s only a tree.

THREE STORIES

That evening, Conor’s mother falls asleep five minutes into watching TV, exhausted from cooking frozen lasagna for dinner. Conor spreads a duvet over her and does the dishes. He then does some of his school work (though he stops before doing the Life Writing assignment) plays around on the internet, brushes his teeth, and puts himself to bed.

Just after Conor turns the light out, his mother “very apologetically—and very groggily—come[s] in to kiss him good night.” A few minutes later, Conor hears his mother vomiting in the bathroom. He asks if she needs help, but she says no, and adds that she’s used to it by now. He realizes that he’s pretty used to it as well.

After a while, the vomiting stops, but Conor lies awake for two hours. He watches the clock tick to 12:07 a.m., gets up, and goes over to the window. The monster is waiting there, and tells him to come outside. Once Conor comes out to his backyard, he asks what the monster is. The monster’s eyes widen and it grows taller, a wind whipping up as it spreads its arms. “I am Herne the Hunter! I am Cernunnos! I am the eternal Green Man!” it roars. “I am everything untamed and untameable!” it continues. “I am this wild earth, come for you.”

Conor’s description here hints at what he explains later: Lily told a few friends, who in turn told a few more. This caused people to treat Conor differently at school and avoid him, which is particularly hard on Conor when the only thing that he wants from his friends and teachers is to be treated normally, as he is in denial that anything is wrong.



The six years referred to here, coupled with the time frame given in the chapter “Understanding,” suggests that Conor’s mother and father were already divorced by the time that she was diagnosed with cancer. This highlights the fact that Conor has been pushed into a parental role in the absence of his father, and has been forced to grow up quickly in order to take care of his mother essentially alone.



Conor’s evening routine serves as a bookend to his morning routine in the chapter entitled “Breakfast.” Just as in that chapter, Conor takes on a lot of responsibility for himself and his mother. This again demonstrates some of the various ways in which Conor has had to prematurely grow up and become far more mature than his other thirteen-year-old peers.



Conor’s descriptions imply that a nauseating new normal has been established in his life, which is why he is so desperate to avoid any kind of further change. His mother’s treatment schedule has become routine, but the book implies that his larger unspoken fear is that it might get worse—an idea he refuses to accept.



Herne the Hunter, Cernunnos, and the Green Man are all variations of a pagan Horned God that is associated with the life cycle, nature, and wilderness. As the novel goes on, Conor begins to suspect that the monster might be there to help his mother live; given the nature of the monster’s many names, this expectation makes a lot of sense.



The monster lifts Conor up, who asks what the monster wants from him, dreading the answer. The monster says that it will come to Conor again, and will tell him three stories from when the monster “walked before.” Conor is a bit disappointed, wondering how that’s supposed to scare him. “Stories are the wildest things of all,” the monster replies.

The monster then says that Conor will tell a fourth story, that the story will be *his truth*—the one that Conor “hides,” and that he is “most afraid of.” Conor is actually afraid, and thinks to himself that there is no way he is going to reveal “what happened in the real nightmare.” Conor asks what will happen if he does not tell the fourth story. The monster says that it will eat him alive, opening its mouth wide. Conor sits up in bed with a start, realizing that it must have been a dream. He goes to get himself a drink of water when he feels something squish under his foot: his floor is covered in poisonous **yew tree** berries.

GRANDMA

When Conor’s grandmother arrives, she tells Conor immediately to put on a pot of tea for her and his mother. Conor’s grandma is not like other grandmothers: she wears pantsuits, dyes her hair to keep it from going gray, and still has a job. Her house is even worse, Conor thinks, because it’s filled with “expensive old things you could never touch.”

Conor brings the tea to his mother and grandmother. His grandma asks how school was, and he says it was fine—even though Lily was still fuming, Harry was still bullying him, and Miss Kwan had pulled him aside to ask “How He Was Holding Up.” His grandmother mentions that there’s a great boys’ school close to her house, which Conor suspects is a hint at the future. He starts to get angry, but his mother interjects, saying that Conor is happy where he is.

Since Conor’s grandmother doesn’t really cook, they have Chinese takeout for dinner. After dinner, Conor cleans up the food in the kitchen and starts wiping down the countertop. He and his grandmother start to argue about why she’s there, and she says that she is there to help his mother, and “because thirteen-year-old boys shouldn’t be wiping down counters without being asked to first.” He is adamant that they don’t need her there.

Conor displays his early skepticism that stories are relevant to him or of any value. The monster’s comment that “[s]tories are the wildest things of all” foreshadows the way that the monster’s stories will unleash Conor’s own anger over his mother’s illness, but also how ignoring the truth can be incredibly harmful and scary.



Conor’s first instance of real denial is on display here. He knows what is in the real nightmare—later revealed to center around the idea that he wishes his mother’s suffering would end, even if it means her death—but he can’t bear the thought of revealing it because of his intense guilt. Yet this denial only prolongs the pain and suffering that he is experiencing.



The first description of Conor’s grandmother bears some connections with the first story that the monster tells, which describes an evil queen that wants to take over the kingdom from the rightful heir and ruler, a handsome prince.



Conor’s grandmother wants to make additional changes in the young boy’s already tumultuous life. However, Conor is adamant that no changes need to be made because he wants to act as though everything is entirely normal. This is also why he continues to insist that nothing is wrong at school, even though everyone has changed the way they treat him and even his long-standing friendship with Lily has changed for the worse.



His grandmother introduces another reason why she’s there: Conor’s mother is concerned that he is growing up too quickly and is being forced to take on too much responsibility in caring for her. Although Conor’s mother and grandmother have good intentions, the young boy’s response acknowledges that he would rather take on this responsibility than make any more changes in his life.



Conor's grandmother sighs angrily—though Conor thinks that she may not be angry at him. She says that the treatments aren't actually making his mother better, and that they need to talk about him coming to live at her house. Conor is furious, and feels like "he could reach down and tear the whole floor right out of the dark and loamy earth." He tells his grandmother that he will never live with her.

Conor's grandmother reiterates that when this is all over, she wants Conor to know that he has a home with someone who will love him and care for him. Conor counters that when this is all over, she will leave, and he and his mother will be fine. Then they hear Conor's mother call for his grandmother, and his grandmother rushes out of the kitchen to comfort his mother as she throws up.

THE WILDNESS OF STORIES

That night, Conor lies awake on the couch, thinking about his mother. Usually by this time, three full days after her treatment, she starts to feel better. But she's still throwing up and exhausted. Conor drifts asleep and starts to have his recurring nightmare, with "the wind roaring and the ground shaking and the hands holding tight but still somehow slipping away."

Conor wakes with a shout of terror and tries to quiet himself. He glances at the clock: 12:07 a.m. He goes into the kitchen, looks out the window, and sees the monster in his yard. Conor goes outside, and the monster tells him that it is time for the first story. Conor refuses, telling the monster to leave him alone. The monster is again perplexed that Conor is not frightened of it, but it realizes that Conor "has worse things to be frightened of."

Conor looks away from the monster, feeling "the nightmare feeling" return to him, "making everything seem heavy and impossible." Conor says that he thought the monster might be there to help him. The monster counters that it is not there to "slay [his] dragons" or "topple [his] enemies," but that it is going to tell him stories of how *he* toppled enemies and slew dragons. The monster, glancing at Conor's bedroom window, where his grandmother is sleeping, says that it is going to tell the story of a wicked queen.

One of the other things that makes their relationship so difficult is that Conor's grandmother is much more realistic about his mother's condition than Conor is, as he continues to deny it. Here Ness foreshadows the violent consequences that Conor's denial will have, as the anger and pain grows inside Conor and threatens to spill over.



Conor's grandmother's interaction with his mother also has connections with monster's first story. Even though Conor's grandmother isn't particularly warm or kind to him and he doesn't like her very much, she is still a caring parent and an important support system for Conor and his mother.



Conor understands on some level that his mother is not getting better after this round of treatments, but he refuses to go a step further and acknowledge that this could mean her death very soon. Ness again withholds the crux of Conor's nightmare, reinforcing the idea that Conor does not want to face it.



In realizing that Conor has worse things to be frightened of, the monster acknowledges Conor's maturity. A large beast is not the thing that Conor fears. Instead, it is the idea of his mother's death, and that others might find out that he just wants the waiting and suffering to be over—both of which are very adult fears.



Conor hopes for help from the monster in defeating the pain and suffering that he and his mother are experiencing. But this passage suggests that the monster is really there to help Conor simply acknowledge that pain and suffering in order to help him move past it. Additionally, the monster's subtle glance at Conor's window connects the wicked queen to Conor's grandmother, allowing him to make the connection between the story and his own life.



THE FIRST TALE

Conor's town was once a kingdom, the monster begins. The king and his wife had four sons, but over the course of the king's rein, battles and hardship had taken the lives of the four princes, as well as the king's wife and daughter. All he had left he had left was an infant grandson, the young prince. Conor is skeptical that this sounds too much like a fairy tale, but the monster tells him to be quiet.

The king decided to remarry, setting his sights on a princess from a neighboring kingdom. She was young and fair, and soon became the queen. Time passed; the young prince turned sixteen, and the king grew ill. Rumors began to spread that the queen had been poisoning him, and had been using magic to make herself look younger. The king died a year before the prince was old enough to take the throne, and so the queen became regent.

The prince, meanwhile, had fallen in love with a farmer's daughter, and the kingdom "smiled on the match." The queen, however, wanted to marry the young prince in order to continue ruling. The prince and the farmer's daughter decided to run away together. As they rode off, they stopped to sleep together in the shade of a **yew tree**—the monster. When the prince woke up, he saw that he and the farmer's daughter were covered in blood. Someone had murdered his beloved and left a knife to make it look like he had done it.

The prince cried out that the queen was responsible for this—that she was trying to frame him so he would be put to death for his crime and she could rule freely. He asked the monster for help, and told the villagers that the queen murdered the farmer's daughter. The prince was so beloved by the people that they stormed the castle immediately, especially when they saw the monster walking with the prince. The mob then seized the queen and dragged her to be burned at the stake.

Conor smiles, saying she deserved it. He then glances at his bedroom, where his grandmother is sleeping. He doesn't want to burn her alive, but wonders if the monster could help him deal with her. The monster says that his story is not yet finished.

As the monster begins, Conor continues to be skeptical that he can gain anything from the stories that the monster is telling. But over the course of the story, Conor starts to draw connections between the tale and his own life.



The monster's description of the queen has some echoes of Conor's criticism of his grandmother. Conor feels like his grandmother is constantly trying to make herself seem younger, highlighting her connection to this character, whom many believe is also trying to make herself look younger.



Ness makes further subtle connections between this parable and what Conor is experiencing in his own life. Conor—who is represented here by the young prince—feels that he is old enough to take care of the household and his mother, while his grandmother wants to take over the household and make changes in his life, which he resists.



Again, a connection can be made between Conor's situation and the monster's story. The prince does not like the queen, but that doesn't automatically mean that she is a murderer. Even though Conor doesn't like his grandmother very much, it doesn't mean that she's not trying her best to take care of him and his mother.



Conor believes that the monster's story is an attempt to show Conor how he can help with his situation—again highlighting the connection between the queen and his grandmother because he hopes the monster can get rid of her, too. But the fact that the story isn't finished yet casts doubt upon Conor's assumption.



THE REST OF THE FIRST TALE

The monster explains that when the people tried to burn the queen at the stake, the monster reached in to save her, and carried her away so that the villagers could never find her. Conor is aghast, protesting that she was a murderer. The monster clarifies: it never said that she killed the farmer's daughter; only that the prince said so. Conor asks who killed the girl.

The monster gathers a mist to show Conor what happened. Where his backyard once was, Conor sees a field with the prince and the farmer's daughter sleeping under the **yew tree**. He sees the prince wake up, take a knife out of his bag, and stab his lover. Conor is shocked. The monster explains that the prince then went back to sleep. When he woke up again, "he acted out a pantomime" in case anyone was watching—and also for himself. "Sometimes people need to lie to themselves most of all," the monster explains.

The monster goes on, saying that when the prince asked for help, he told the monster that he had done it for the good of the kingdom. The queen was a witch and he couldn't overthrow her alone; he needed the fury of the villagers. Conor protests that he didn't need to kill the farmer's daughter—that they would have rallied behind him anyway. The monster explains that that's why it saved the queen.

Conor asks if the prince got caught; the monster explains that the prince became a beloved king and ruled happily for the rest of his life. Conor wonders if the lesson he's supposed to learn is that he should be nice to his grandmother. The monster laughs at Conor, asking, "You think I have come walking out of time and earth itself to teach you a *lesson in niceness*?"

The monster then explains that the queen was a witch and might have done great evil. But she was not a murderer, it emphasizes. Conor doesn't understand, wondering who the "good guy" is. The monster explains that there is not always a good guy and a bad guy, that most people are "somewhere in between."

Conor feels tricked and cheated by the story, wondering how it's supposed to save him from his grandmother. The monster emphasizes that it is not his grandmother that Conor needs saving from. Then Conor wakes up, back on the couch. The clock reads 12:07 a.m., and he sees a foot-tall sapling has sprouted from a knot in a floorboard. He goes to get a knife to saw it out of the floor.

The monster's first tale highlights that often life and people are more complex than they appear at first blush—a principle that Conor has a hard time learning from this story and the other two stories that the monster tells him.



The monster's statement here reinforces Conor's own connection to the young prince, particularly the idea that he had to lie to himself more than anyone else. Conor is a master at self-deception, as he tries to convince himself that his mother is going to be just fine despite knowing deep down that she will probably not get better.



This element of the parable also has implications for Conor's own life: that he doesn't have to be antagonistic to his grandmother. Conor will grow up and be in control of his own life, but the path to get there doesn't have to be as fraught as he is making it.



Here the monster stresses a key point about his stories. He makes a distinction between "lessons"—that Conor is meant to learn a clear moral from the tales—and "stories," which are meant to help Conor understand more about his emotions and situations.



The monster's stories are complex, just like life and people, and it shows how Conor is making a mistake in trying to neatly shelve people as either purely good or entirely bad.



Even though Conor doesn't fully understand how the story is relevant to him, it appears that the point of the story is to show that while Conor's grandmother isn't perfect, she certainly isn't evil, as he believes her to be. It seems the monster's stories are meant to give Conor insight into human nature and the messy complexities of life—not tell him what to do.



UNDERSTANDING

The next morning, Conor is walking to school, still frustrated with the monster's story. His morning was frustrating, too: he spent half an hour sawing the sapling out of the floor in the middle of the night and then woke up late. Then his grandmother wouldn't let him say goodbye to his mother because she said his mother had a "rough night," which made Conor feel guilty for not helping her.

Lily catches Conor on his walk, saying that she forgives him for lying and getting her into trouble. But Conor says that he's not sorry, and that *he* doesn't forgive *her*. Lily says that her mother told her to "make allowances" for Conor, because of what he's going through. This only infuriates Conor even more, and he storms away.

It was just over a year ago that Lily had told a few friends about Conor's mother's diagnosis, and the news had quickly spread around the school. Conor thinks, "it was like a circle had opened around him [...] that everyone was afraid to walk through." It was as though he had suddenly become invisible. And pretty soon, he stopped trying to engage with other people.

Conor and his mother had hoped that by the summer holiday, her first round of treatments would put everything behind them, but then treatment had extended to a second and third round. When he got back to school in the fall, he was singled out to teachers because of his mother, and kids still treated him "like he was the one who was ill." And so he now blames Lily, because there's no one else to blame.

At school, Harry punches Conor in the stomach and he falls to the ground, scraping his knee. Anton and Sully continue to make fun of Conor. When Conor stands, he spots Lily leaning against the school wall, watching him before walking away. The school bell rings, indicating that they're meant to go inside.

Harry raises his fist once more, as if to swing it at his face, but Conor doesn't flinch, when Harry sees this, he lowers his fist as if he's realized something. Miss Kwan comes over and gives them a warning for being late to class. She sends them inside, but asks to speak to Conor privately. She asks if everything is okay between him and the other boys, acknowledging that Harry can be a bully. Conor says yes.

Conor is again frustrated that his grandmother won't allow him to take on the responsibility of helping to take care of his mother, particularly because he is already guilty due to his recurring nightmare.



Lily's comment touches on a nerve for Conor because he is frustrated that people treat him differently because of his mother (an idea that is explored throughout the rest of the chapter as well). Conor, instead of acknowledging the things going on in his life and how they change his attitude and behavior, instead wants to deny them.



The fact that other people try to avoid him makes Conor feel even more isolated during an already difficult time, which also makes it difficult for Conor to feel like a normal thirteen-year-old boy.



Conor's mother's continued treatments clearly indicate the fact that she is not getting better (or at least, not nearly as quickly as they'd hoped). But instead of dealing with the pain of this fact head on, Conor instead deflects his anger to Lily simply because it is easy to be angry at her.



Now that Conor is angry at Lily, he becomes even more isolated because he is not getting support from her in standing up to Harry.



In this moment, Harry realizes an idea that he will capitalize on in a later chapter: Conor is so desperate to feel normal and acknowledged that he actually wants to be bullied, and therefore doesn't flinch when Harry raises his fist.



Miss Kwan then says something that Conor always hates to hear: “I can’t imagine what you must be going through.” He can’t stand to hear her concern, thinking to himself that he doesn’t deserve it. He says that he’s fine, and that he’s not going through anything. Miss Kwan sighs, tells him to forget about her warning, and slips inside the classroom. Conor is left alone in the yard, knowing that he could probably stay outside all day and no one would punish him—which makes him feel worse.

Miss Kwan’s words, while well-intentioned, only highlight how isolated Conor is, because no one feels that they can relate to him. Conor’s hatred of these words also implies that he has heard this sentiment many times before. Also, similar to the idea that Conor wants to be bullied, here Conor is so desperate to be treated normally that he longs to be punished for staying outside too long.



LITTLE TALK

After school, Conor’s grandmother tells Conor that his mother has to go to the hospital because she’s in a lot of pain. Conor tries to protest, but his grandmother tells him sternly that the treatments aren’t working. She also tells Conor that his father is flying in on Sunday to visit. Conor’s father hadn’t visited from America since last Christmas, and Conor wonders why his father is coming now.

Even though Conor’s grandmother is trying to make sure that Conor can be a normal thirteen-year-old boy, she doesn’t want to sugar coat things for him. She wants him to understand that his mother is not getting better so that he can try to prepare himself to lose her. Yet, in not understanding why his father is coming (presumably to say his final goodbyes to his ex-wife), Conor shows once again that he is somewhat in denial about how bad things are getting.



Conor’s mother calls Conor up to his room, where she is lying on his bed, staring out at the **yew tree**. Conor asks why she’s going back to the hospital, even though he can see that she’s in a lot of pain. She assures him that she’s going to be okay. Conor’s mother explains that her latest treatment isn’t doing what it’s supposed to do, but that the doctors are going to try to adjust her treatment.

While Conor’s grandmother is trying to be more realistic with him, Conor’s mother is enabling his denial. Even though she likely knows that she will not get better, she wants him to be able to hold out hope and act as though things are normal. These mixed messages prove challenging for Conor, because they lead him to demonize his grandmother for implying that Conor’s mother will die soon.



Conor says to his mother that she could tell him if things weren’t normal. She doesn’t respond, instead pulling him into a hug. She tells him to keep an eye on the **yew tree** while she’s away, and make sure it’s there when she gets back. Conor understands that this is her way of saying that she is coming back.

Conor’s mother is not only enabling Conor’s optimism, she is enabling her own as well. In some ways, the more that she tells Conor that nothing is wrong, the more in denial she can be about her worsening condition as well.



GRANDMA’S HOUSE

Conor is now staying at his grandmother’s house, and the monster hasn’t visited him in five days. He wonders if his grandmother lives too far away from his house for the monster to visit. It is Sunday, the day his father is arriving. Conor’s grandmother has been driving Conor the 45 minutes to school every day, and then picking him up after school to take him to the hospital to see his mother. They usually only stay for an hour or so because his mother is always so exhausted, and then they often go home and have takeout.

At his grandmother’s house, Conor has to deal with both a new routine and a new type of family dynamic. But it is clear throughout the chapter that even at his grandmother’s house, he is caught between having the responsibility of an adult (particularly as his mother’s condition worsens) and the carefree attitude of a thirteen-year-old.



Conor's grandmother leaves to go to the hospital while Conor waits for his father. He goes up to the "guest room," which his grandmother insists on calling "his room." But Conor argues that it doesn't look like his room, or even any boy's room. He grabs a book to read because his grandmother has forbidden the video games in the house.

Conor isn't normally allowed in the sitting room, but he settles in there to read his book while waiting for his father. He marvels at the pristine antiques that no one is allowed to touch. He realizes as he waits that he is nervous to see his father: they haven't seen each other in person in a long time, and he still doesn't know why his father is coming to visit. Eventually, Conor's father arrives, and when Conor greets him at the door, he smiles "wider than he had for at least a year."

CHAMP

Conor and his father go out for pizza, and Conor's notes that his father sounds more and more American every time they speak. His father then asks (for "the eight hundredth time," according to Conor) how Conor is holding up. Conor says he's fine, and that his mother is on a new medicine that will make her better, even though she doesn't look so good. Conor doesn't know why everyone is acting so worried. Conor's father says that Conor will have to "be brave for her."

Conor's father invites Conor to visit him and his family in America for Christmas. Conor asks why it would only be a visit, adamantly saying that he doesn't want to live with his grandmother, and asks why he can't live with his father in America. Conor complains about not being comfortable at his grandmother's house (which he calls "an old lady's house"), and that he wants his own room in his own house.

Conor's father argues that Conor's grandmother has more money and space, and that it wouldn't be fair to Conor to pull him away from his life in England. Conor protests, thinking that his father just doesn't want him to come to America. Conor's father says that he wishes things were different, but Conor is unconvinced. Conor asks if they can talk about it more when his mother gets better, and his dad reluctantly agrees.

Even though Conor is now living with his grandmother for the foreseeable future, he insists that it is only temporary by refusing to call the guest room "his room," again denying the potential future that might await him. Meanwhile, his grandmother is characteristically realistic and urges him to take ownership over the room and begin to acclimate himself with his new life.



Conor's smile when he sees his father for the first time in years is significant because it suggests that a weight has been lifted off of Conor's shoulders, at least temporarily. Conor has had to fill a parental role for a while now, and so being able to be a kid and be emotionally taken care of by his father is a relief for him.



The opening of Conor and his father's exchange brings up two main points: first, that Conor is still in denial about what's happening, ignoring the evidence that his mother is getting worse in order to push away his own pain. Additionally, Conor's father's statement shows how he has put the responsibility of being brave and being more adult onto Conor's shoulders while he's been away.



The conversation that Conor has with his father also connects his father with the parson in the monster's second tale. Like the parson, Conor's father is a good man, but he says things that he doesn't believe in (like what is implied to be an empty promise for Conor to visit America) and shirks the responsibility of taking care of his son while Conor's mother is dying.



This exchange shows the deep contradictions of Conor's thoughts. His proposal to move to America is clearly in the event that his mother dies, yet he says that he doesn't want to talk about it until his mother gets better, in which case he wouldn't need to move to America in the first place. In this conversation, Conor shows that he privately understands his mother might not—and probably will not—get better but still has trouble acknowledging this aloud.



AMERICANS DON'T GET MUCH HOLIDAY

Conor's father drives Conor home after dinner. When Conor asks how long he's staying, Conor's father tells him that he's only there for a few days, as "Americans don't get much holiday." Conor is upset that he's there for so little time, asking why he came at all. Conor's father says that Conor's mother asked him to come.

The fact that Conor is so upset over his father being there only a few days emphasizes how desperate Conor is to have someone who can understand him and take care of him as a parental figure—but not just any adult or relative will do, as evidenced by the fact that Conor repeatedly rejects his grandmother's attempts to fill that role. Instead, Conor longs for his parents to care for him, but neither of them can right now due to distance and illness. The fact that he wants his father to stay longer suggests that Conor longs for life to be normal—which perhaps means how life was before his mother's illness and even before the divorce.



Conor goes into the house. His grandmother isn't home yet, so he is entirely alone. He sits on the couch, relishing hearing it creak as he sits. He then gets up and jumps on it, scratching the hardwood floor. He smiles at this destruction. Then he spots his grandmother's most prized possession: an antique clock. Conor pulls the minute and second hands from their mechanism and spins them ahead. He is in a "feverish blur" that makes him think of being in the nightmare, but this time *he* is the nightmare. Conor then watches as the second hand falls snaps from the clock face and onto the floor. The clock stops ticking and whirring, and Conor realizes suddenly what he's done.

This is the first instance in which the toll of Conor's mother's illness becomes clear. The more he tries to push away and deny the pain and guilt that he is experiencing, the more angry and violent Conor becomes. Conor is beginning to turn into a monster, born of his inability to truly face and grieve what is happening in his life.



Conor starts to panic when he notices the time that the clock now reads: 12:07 a.m. When he turns back around, the monster is there, sitting in his grandmother's living room—though the room is far too small to hold it. The monster announces that it has come to tell the second tale. Conor asks if it's a "cheating story" like the last one. The monster says that it is about a man who thinks "only of himself," and who gets punished "very, very badly indeed." Conor thinks of his father, and says that he is listening.

Just like the first tale, in which Conor immediately conflated his grandmother with the wicked witch, here Conor makes an instant connection between the tale and his father—who is, Conor thinks, the man who thinks only of himself. It seems that Conor is desperate to point fingers and place blame on someone for his mother's illness and his own changing circumstances.



THE SECOND TALE

The monster begins that 150 years ago, the country was a place of industry, and towns and cities had begun to spring up "like weeds." The monster conjures another mist, showing a field overlooking a valley taken over by industrial houses and factories. At the edge of the field, the monster goes on, lived a man called the Apothecary, who was a pharmacist that dealt in "the old ways of medicine."

As the first tale illustrated the complexity of human nature and life, it's likely that this story is meant to do the same thing. Even though the monster assures Conor that it is not "a cheating story," it will still surprise the boy because there is no clear-cut lesson; there is no "good guy" or "bad guy."



The Apothecary, the monster says, had a harder and harder time finding the leaves and berries and herbs that he used as the years passed, because the factories and roads overtook the fields and forests. The Apothecary grew bitter at these changes, though he had always been bitter. He was greedy and charged too much money, and his unpleasant attitude caused many people to seek other, more modern remedies.

The monster then shows Conor a hill with a church and a great **yew tree** next to it, which Conor recognizes as the hill behind his house. The monster introduces another character: the parson, who had two daughters that were “the light of his life.” The Apothecary wanted the yew tree in the parsonage, because it was “the most important of all the healing trees,” according to the monster. The Apothecary wanted to cut down the tree to harvest it, but the parson refused, because the yew tree protected the church. The parson then preached against the Apothecary’s use of the old ways, and the Apothecary’s business shrank even more.

One day, the parson’s two beloved daughters fell sick with an infection. Nothing the parson did (praying, going to modern doctors) helped, so he begged the Apothecary to help his daughters. The Apothecary refused, citing the fact that the parson hadn’t allowed him to harvest the **yew tree** and that the preacher had turned the village against him. The parson assured the Apothecary that he would allow him to take the yew tree and would preach sermons in the Apothecary’s favor—thus giving up everything he believed in—to save his daughters. The Apothecary said that there was nothing he could do to help the parson, and the parson’s daughters died that evening. That night, the monster says, it tore down the parson’s house.

THE REST OF THE SECOND TALE

Conor is stunned that the monster destroyed the parson’s house, because he believes that the Apothecary is the bad guy. The monster challenges him, noting that the Apothecary was a healer and the parson should have given the **yew tree** to the Apothecary when first asked. The monster goes on, saying that the parson refused to believe in the Apothecary when times were easy, but threw aside his beliefs “when the going grew tough.” He didn’t actually believe in the Apothecary’s methods, and “belief is half of all healing.”

Even though the Apothecary is bitter and mean, the monster doesn’t necessarily paint him as the “bad guy” in the story. He certainly antagonizes others through high prices and an abrasive attitude, but he’s also a victim, as industry has begun to encroach on his livelihood as an apothecary.



The monster’s description of the yew tree foreshadows the fact that it will play a role in Conor’s mother’s treatment, which causes Conor to believe that she will be able to be cured by it. However, as the novel continues to unfold, it becomes increasingly clear that the yew tree is not a symbol of healing for his mother—it is really a symbol of healing for Conor, as the monster (in the form of a yew tree) tries to help Conor accept and heal from his own pain and grief.



The parson is connected to Conor’s father most explicitly here. Like the parson, Conor’s father is good-hearted, but wrong-headed. The parson selfishly kept the yew tree for himself but then gave up everything he claimed to believe in when it was convenient for him. Likewise, Conor’s father has largely left Conor alone to take care of his mother, and now believes that she is going to die but still refuses to help his own son.



The monster’s second tale, just like the first, avoids a clear moral lesson and highlights the complexities of human nature. Even though the Apothecary was mean and the parson was well-intentioned, the parson’s lack of a strong moral compass and his inability to stand up for his beliefs is what prompted the monster to punish him.



Conor is angry that the monster's story had tricks again. He watches as the monster's mist shows the monster destroying the parson's house. The monster asks if Conor wants to join in the destruction. Conor agrees, and directs the monster to knock over the fireplace, to throw out the beds, and then to "TEAR THE WHOLE THING DOWN."

Conor then joins in the wrecking, "disappearing into the frenzy of destruction." Conor screams and smashes until he falls down in exhaustion. The monster commends him on destruction "properly done." Conor is suddenly back in his grandmother's sitting room—and he has destroyed nearly every inch of it.

DESTRUCTION

The couch is destroyed. The clock is broken into bits. The lamps and the small tables, the bookcase and books, the wallpaper—everything has been torn to pieces. The only thing left standing is the display cabinet. Conor stands in shock and looks at his hands, which are covered in scratches and blood. He turns around: the monster is gone. He doesn't know how he could have done all of this by himself.

Conor hears his grandmother pull into the driveway. He doesn't move. When she walks into the hall, she freezes, taking in the destruction of the room. She lets out a pained groan, which Conor can barely stand to listen to. Then she screams in grief and horror, so loud that Conor puts his hands to his ears. Conor has never been so afraid. Conor's grandmother walks into the room; Conor backs away, waiting for a blow. But she walks right past him and yanks on the display cabinet, sending it crashing to the floor.

Conor's grandmother gives a final groan, not looking at Conor, and then goes to her bedroom. Conor starts to clean the wreckage and works all through the night, but at dawn he gives up on finishing the task. He climbs the stairs, and as he passes his grandmother's room he can hear her, still awake, weeping.

In this moment, the line between story and reality starts to blur, as it's unclear if Conor is acting within the confines of the monster's story or in the real-life world of his grandmother's house. Just like at the end of the chapter "Americans Don't Get Much Holiday," Conor's pent up rage is unleashed, reinforcing the idea that denying one's pain and suffering only leads to repressed anger that bubbles up dangerously.



The monster, in a sense, becomes a metaphor for Conor's denial and anger. The more that Conor denies what is happening with his mother, the more "monstrously" he acts.



Conor wreaks havoc on his grandmother's sitting room, which readers may remember is filled to the brim with priceless antiques that no one is allowed to touch. This introduces the idea that Conor is being overtaken by the monster (which represents denial and anger) to the point where he doesn't even know how he could have done all of that damage single-handedly.



In joining in the destruction, Ness also implies that Conor's grandmother is harboring anger and grief as well. Even though she has been more realistic about what has been happening to Conor's mother, she still needs to be given space to grieve and truly acknowledge that her daughter is dying. It also seems that Conor's grandmother's act of destruction in this passage is an act of forgiveness; by sending more priceless antiques crashing to the ground, Conor's grandmother is sending the boy a message that the destruction is not entirely his fault and that she's with him.



Conor again illustrates how he is caught between childhood and adulthood. He is childish enough to cause this kind of damage in a tantrum, but also responsible enough to know that he has to clean it up and try to alleviate some of the pain that he has caused his grandmother.



INVISIBLE

Conor is standing in the schoolyard. He tries to catch Lily's eye but she doesn't look over at him, "as if she could no longer see him." He waits by himself until he sees Harry and Sully and Anton, walking across the yard, their eyes locked on him. Conor feels "weak with relief."

The previous night, Conor slept only long enough to have the nightmare, and woke up screaming. When he came downstairs in the morning, his father was making breakfast for him. His father said then that Conor's mother has "taken a turn," and that his grandmother had gone to the hospital to talk to the doctors.

Conor had asked to go to the hospital too, but his father assured him that he would pick him up from school if he needed to. He said he could see how upset Conor had been, nodding to the sitting room. Conor said that he didn't mean to do it; Conor's father told him that it was okay. Conor was surprised that he wasn't going to be punished, to which his dad replied, "What could possibly be the point?"

Conor hasn't done any of his homework for the day, nor does he pay any attention in his classes. Still, no one scolds for this behavior. He hasn't even spoken to anyone since that morning. But when Harry eventually approaches him, Conor is relieved—"that, at least, felt normal." Harry stops a foot away from him, and Conor prepares for a punch. Harry waits, until Conor says "just do it!" But Harry can see that this is actually what Conor wants, and so he leaves Conor standing alone, as though he is "completely invisible."

In this chapter, as Lily continues to ignore Conor, he shows that he is so desperate for some human connection—so desperate to be seen—that he is happy to see Harry, Sully, and Anton, even though they are coming over to bully him.



The difference in Conor's reaction to these two events is notable: hearing about his mother's worsening condition, Conor is concerned and wants to be with his mother, but he isn't distraught over the news. In contrast, the nightmare—which essentially represents Conor's prolonged grief and suffering—is really what he is afraid of, and what he works so hard to push away.



Conor continues to want to be treated in a normal way, so much so that he asks his father to be punished for what he did to his grandmother's sitting room. This is reminiscent of the moment when Conor contemplated staying out in the schoolyard rather than going back to class, as he knew he wouldn't be punished for it but desperately wanted to be, seeing punishment as a marker that things are normal. It's also significant that Conor specifically wants his father to punish him—and thus take on the traditional fatherly role—as it suggests that Conor longs for his family dynamic, punctuated by illness, divorce, and distance, to be normal as well.



Just as Conor wanted to be punished for destroying his grandmother's sitting room, Conor wants to be routinely beaten up by his usual bullies because that helps Conor feel like everything is normal. Harry picks up on this, though, and instead starts to figure out a more underhanded way to bully Conor, tapping into his fear of being isolated.



YEW TREES

Conor visits his mother in the hospital. She is exhausted, but smiles when she sees him. She explains that some of the treatments she's tried haven't been working, but she's going to try a different kind of medicine that they were hoping not to have to use "this soon." Conor wonders if that means it's "too late." Conor's mother assures him that she believes it's not too late. Conor remembers the monster's story: that "belief is half of all healing."

Conor's mother mentions that the new drug is made from **yew trees**, like the tree behind their house. She says she read about this treatment when she was first diagnosed, and that it seemed "incredible" that all that time, there was a yew tree that could save her right behind their house. Conor asks if she thinks the drug is going to save her. She says, "I believe so."

COULD IT BE?

Conor thinks to himself that perhaps this is why the monster has come: to cure his mother. Conor walks down the corridor and sees his grandmother and his father arguing. Conor asks what's going on; his father says that he has to fly back home that night, because his baby daughter is sick. He's sure that the baby is fine, but his wife Stephanie gets very worried about her and asked him to come home immediately. Conor's father says he'll be back within two weeks.

Conor's father takes Conor to a park across from the hospital. He tells Conor that the new medicine his mother is taking probably won't heal her. Conor contradicts him, saying that he knows it will cure her. Conor's father says that the boy's grandmother is angry because she believes that neither of his parents have been honest with him about what's happening. Conor is still adamant that the new medicine will work.

Conor's father says that "stories don't always have happy endings," which stops Conor in his tracks. Conor's father admits that what is happening is unfair and cruel, and assures him he'll be back soon. Conor points that his father will just leave again, though, because he has another family. As Conor walks off, leaving his father, he is certain that the treatment work—it has to be the reason that the monster is coming.

This exchange offers an explanation for why Conor is so set on denying that anything is wrong, or that things might turn out badly in regards to his mother's fragile health. He thinks here that simply believing that things will turn out well will help his mother in healing. But even if this is true, he still needs to be able to acknowledge and release some of the pain that he has been holding onto as well, otherwise he will not heal from it.



It seems that the connection to the yew tree makes Conor believe that the monster is here to cure his mother; however, since the monster's stories resist easy explanations, it's likely that the monster's overarching purpose in visiting Conor does too. Meanwhile, although Conor's mother doesn't know about the monster, she too sees the yew tree as a symbol of her own healing.



Conor's father clearly understands the responsibility of being a parent and taking care of a child, but it is also clear that he is prioritizing his new family over his old one and pushing off a lot of his responsibility onto Conor.



Conor's father is trying to be realistic with Conor, but at the same time he is not allowing for hope or a belief that the treatment might work, which seems reminiscent of the parson, who didn't believe in the Apothecary's methods. This lack of belief deeply upsets Conor, who is still trying to maintain that everything will be okay and go back to normal.



Conor is so taken aback by his father's comment because he realizes that this is what the monster has taught him, more than anything else up to this point. Life, like the monster's stories, doesn't always have happy endings, or clear-cut protagonists or antagonists—an idea that Conor has been struggling with.



NO TALE

Conor's grandmother, who has barely been speaking to him since the sitting room incident, drives him back to her house. After dropping Conor off, she then turns around and goes back to the hospital. At 12:07 a.m., the monster appears, and Conor asks if it can heal his mother. The monster says that if his mother can be healed, "the **yew tree** will do it." Conor asks, "is that a yes?"

The monster leans forward, asking Conor, "you still do not know why you called me, do you?" Conor says that he didn't call the monster, and if he did, it would be for his mother. The monster says that Conor is not yet ready to hear the third tale. And after the third tale, the monster says, Conor will tell his story.

A mist gathers around Conor and the monster, and Conor realizes that he is inside his nightmare. Conor begs to leave, and the mist recedes. Conor says that that's not his story, it's just a nightmare, and there are "more important things going on" than him telling a story. The monster says that stories can be "more important than anything. If they carry the truth." The monster turns to go, and Conor asks what's going to happen with his mother. The monster asks if Conor doesn't already know what is going to happen.

I NO LONGER SEE YOU

The next morning, Conor asks his grandmother to go to the hospital instead of going to school. She doesn't answer. He asks if the new medicine is helping his mother, and she is silent for a long time before saying that it's too soon to tell. When he asks when his mother is coming home, she doesn't answer that question, either.

At school, Conor passes another morning without saying a word to anyone. He sits alone at lunch, his classmates "yelling and fighting and laughing" around him. Conor is staring at his lunch tray, not eating any of the food, when Harry comes over and knocks Conor's orange juice into his lap. Anton and Sully mock him for wetting himself.

In contrast with Conor's father, who essentially abandons Conor in his time of need and pushes more responsibility on him even as he claims it's "unfair," Conor's grandmother is trying to lighten his load and works harder than ever to take care of the boy's mother.



The monster acknowledges that Conor doesn't even realize that he needs to be healed because he is so busy trying to push away his own suffering.



The monster highlights two key things: first, in using the word truth, the monster suggests that Conor must acknowledge the truth of what he is feeling and experiencing. Second, the monster accuses Conor of already knowing what is going to happen. Given Conor's stubborn denial, it seems that the monster is implying that Conor's mother is, in fact, going to die, and that Conor knows this deep down. Indeed, Conor later reveals that he always knew his mother was going to die, but he just couldn't bring himself to admit it.



His grandmother's verbal and non-verbal cues imply that Conor's mother is not doing very well, yet at the same time she doesn't want to disappoint Conor or make him upset. Even though she has criticized his mother and father for not being honest with Conor, she, too, is trying to deny the sharp downward turn that his mother has taken.



There is a particular tragedy in Conor's isolation as his mother's condition begins to worsen, because he is so alone and vulnerable and needs support from his peers. He can't experience the more innocent joys of being thirteen in part because all of his friends are actively avoiding him—thus, he doesn't even have a distraction from the hardship of his home life.



Harry tells Conor that he is going to do the worst thing he can do. Conor can't see any teachers around, and waits for the blow. But Harry simply shakes his hand and says, "I no longer see you." Harry, Sully, and Anton then walk away. None of them look back at Conor. The clock on the wall of the dining hall ticks to 12:07 p.m. The monster arrives, saying that it is time for the third tale.

Harry, Sully, and Anton make Conor feel even worse in telling him that they no longer see him. They realize that the isolation that other students have forced upon Conor has actually been detrimental to him, and thus in trying to bully him and make him feel worse, they decide to ignore him as well.



THE THIRD TALE

The monster begins a tale about an invisible man as Conor starts to walk after Harry. The monster narrates: "it was not that he was actually invisible. It was that people had become used to not seeing him." Conor calls after Harry, Sully, and Anton, but they don't turn around. The monster then asks Conor, "if no one sees you, are you really there at all?"

The third tale that the monster tells is most directly related to Conor's life: Conor is an invisible man whom people have become used to not seeing. Conor essentially enacts the story as the monster tells it, reinforcing his connection to the character.



Conor calls Harry again. The cafeteria falls silent. Conor grabs Harry and twists him around. Harry pretends not to see Conor. The monster continues, saying that one day the invisible man decided to *make* other people see him. Conor asks how, breathing heavily in fury. The monster says, "He called for a monster."

Harry's bullying is heartbreaking as he plays cruel psychological games with Conor. All Conor wants is to regain the connection and support from his peers that he has lost.



The monster reaches its hand past Conor and knocks Harry across the floor. Harry gets up, his head bleeding, and shouts that no one sees Conor. Conor can feel the room watching him, but when Conor faces the students, they avert their eyes.

Conor is so desperate to end his feelings of isolation that he resorts to violence, even though he is normally a very gentle boy.



Harry taunts Conor, saying that everyone is sorry for him because of his mother, that Conor acts like no one understands his suffering, and that Conor wants to be punished. Harry wonders why Conor feels like he needs to be punished so badly. But, Harry continues, when he looks at Conor, he sees nothing. Conor asks the monster what it did to help the invisible man. The monster says that it made others *see*. The monster then leaps forward at Harry.

Once again, Conor uses the monster as an outlet for his anger and sadness. He believes that the monster is beating Harry up, but given the sitting room incident, it's implied that Conor is the monster, consumed by his grief and channeling his rage into violence.



PUNISHMENT

Conor is in the headmistress's office. She says she doesn't know what to do or say to Conor: he put Harry in the hospital after breaking his arm, his nose, and several teeth. She explains that his parents are threatening to file charges against him, but Miss Kwan interjects to say that she explained Harry had been regularly bullying Conor.

The headmistress's description of Harry's extensive injuries shows just how "monstrous" Conor has become as a result of his own pain and anger.



Conor thinks about how he had felt what the monster was doing to Harry in his own hands—could feel Harry resisting as the monster twisted his arm. He remembered the other students running and screaming, and the monster repeating “never invisible again” over and over. When the monster was finished, it turned to Conor. “There are harder things than being invisible,” it said, and then vanished. And as Conor looked around, he understood that everyone could see him.

The headmistress asks Conor what he has to say for himself. Conor says it wasn’t him—it was the monster who did it. Miss Kwan says that an entire dining hall saw Conor beat Harry and heard him yelling about being seen. Conor flexes his hands, and realizes how sore they are, like after the destruction of his grandmother’s sitting room.

Miss Kwan says that she understands how angry Conor must be, but the school rules dictate that Conor should be expelled. Conor feels relieved that he is finally going to be punished, because “everything was going to make sense again.” But then the headmistress says that she could never expel him, given his current circumstances.

Miss Kwan walks Conor back to class. Students in the halls back against the wall to let him pass. The students fall silent when he opens the classroom door. No one speaks to him for the rest of the day. Conor realizes the monster was right: there are worse things than being invisible. Conor is no longer invisible, but he is “further away than ever.”

A NOTE

Days pass. Conor’s grandmother doesn’t talk to Conor in the mornings before school, and no one at school talks to him either. Whenever he visits his mother, she’s often too tired to talk to him. His father calls occasionally, but he never has anything to say. The monster hasn’t returned since the attack on Harry.

Conor spends the weekend in the hospital. His mother has developed an infection in her lungs, and her pain has gotten worse, too. Conor spends hours wandering around the hospital. Lily and her mother come to visit on the weekend as well, but he makes sure that he spends the whole duration of their visit in the gift shop reading magazines.

Again, the monster avoids a clear “lesson” for Conor, but highlights human complexity. Even though Harry might be the quintessential “bad guy,” what Conor did was also horrendous, and he quickly learns the negative ramifications of his actions.



Conor starts to understand and accept the fact that other people can’t see the monster, and that it might be simply a representation of his own distress. But regardless of whether the monster is real or not, part of growing up is that Conor has to take responsibility for the damage he has caused.



Even though Conor wants to take responsibility for his actions—and would gladly welcome punishment, because it would mean that people are treating him normally again—the headmistress refuses to do so.



Conor understands that even though he has gotten himself noticed, his violent outburst has only caused him to be even more isolated from other students, who have shifted from being uncomfortable around him to being outright afraid of him.



Ness explores how, following Conor’s attack on Harry, he slips further and further into isolation. Even his parents and grandmother slip away from him as well. His father starts to exhibit the same behavior that the other students at school do—they don’t know what to say to Conor, and therefore they simply don’t say anything.



Conor demonstrates how some of that isolation is self-imposed, however. He doesn’t want to have to be the one to reach out to Lily, because he still blames her for causing the bulk of his isolation in the first place.



The next day, in English class, Lily passes Conor a note. In the note, she apologizes for telling everyone about his mother, says she misses being his friend, and asks if he's okay. In the last line, she writes, "I see you." Conor looks up, and Lily looks him right in the eye. He starts to say something to her, but just then he is called out of class.

Finally, Lily's ability to reach out to Conor and apologize for the mistakes she made helps alleviate Conor's isolation. Through this gesture, Ness suggests that when someone is going through a hard time, the impetus is on others to understand when someone is hurting and to reach out to them—because ignoring them will actually add to their pain.



100 YEARS

Conor's grandmother takes Conor to his mother's hospital room. Conor had never been pulled out of school before to visit her. Conor finds his mother smiling, but he can also see in her eyes that she is frightened and sad. Conor feels himself "slowly starting to get very, very angry." She tells him that the new treatment isn't working. Her voice is thick, and her eyes are wet. Conor asks how it could not be working, "almost like he [is] asking someone else."

Conor's anger is born of the fact that he thought the monster (in the form of a yew tree) would heal his mother, since the doctors' last-ditch effort to save Conor's mother comes in the form of medicine made from yew trees. Conor has been using the yew tree as a way of assuring himself that his mother was going to get better, but this moment suggests that he can't remain in denial for much longer.



Conor's mother tells Conor that there are no more treatments to try. She apologizes profusely. Conor accuses her, saying that she said this treatment would work, which means that she lied. She says that she *did* believe it would work, and that that belief is probably what kept her alive so long. She reaches out to Conor, but he moves his hand away.

Conor's mother shows why her son's denial is so heartbreaking and complicated. Conor's ability to believe that she would get better kept her alive, but at the same time it only prolonged their pain as she slowly died.



Crying, Conor's mother says that she understands if Conor is angry, and that if in the future he looks back and feels upset with himself for being angry, she wants him to know that it was okay to be angry. He nods. She apologizes again and takes more painkillers. She says that she wishes she had a hundred years to give to him. As the drugs enter her system, Conor's mother falls asleep. Conor's grandmother pokes her head in the room and Conor demands to be taken home—to his home. His eyes are red "with grief, with shame, with *anger*."

Conor's mother understands the cost of Conor's denial—that it has caused him to be angry with her when he finally had to accept that she wouldn't get better. Conor has spent so long holding in his sadness that those emotions have become a kind of misdirected rage. This was also the case when Conor destroyed his grandmother's living room and beat up Harry.



WHAT'S THE USE OF YOU?

Conor's grandmother drops Conor off at his home and then returns to the hospital. Conor realizes, looking at the place he has lived his entire life, that it will probably never be his home again. He hops the fence in his backyard and climbs up the hill to the graveyard behind the church. He kicks the **yew tree** several times, yelling at the monster to "WAKE UP!"

Conor is finally coming to accept that changes (and his mother's death) are imminent, inherent in the acknowledgement that he will probably never live in his home again.



The monster wakes, stepping out of the way of Conor's kicks. Conor asks the monster why the **yew tree** didn't heal his mother. He asks what the use of the monster is if it can't heal his mother. The monster "pluck[s] [Conor] into the air," saying that it did not come to heal his mother; it came to heal *him*.

Conor starts to protest that he doesn't need healing, but he can't finish his sentence. He is "crying furiously," and knows that he still can't admit that his mother is dying—even though he knew all along that it would happen and denied it. The monster says that it is time for the fourth tale, and conjures a mist around them.

THE FOURTH TALE

Conor is in the middle of his nightmare—the nightmare he's been having since his mother first complained about her exhaustion and how sick she felt, even before she was officially diagnosed with cancer. He begs the monster to get him out of the nightmare, but the monster insists that Conor must tell the fourth tale.

In his nightmare, Conor sees his mother on the edge of a cliff, and begs her to run away from what is coming. He strains to move toward her, but he feels so heavy and weighed down. He hears a booming from below the cliff: the "real monster." Two giant fists reach up to grab her, and she is too weak to run. The fists start to pull her over the edge of the cliff, and Conor runs, his hands just catching hers.

Conor's mother begs Conor to hold on. He promises not to let her go, but she starts to slip. He turns back to the **yew tree** monster, which stands there not moving. Her hands continue to slip, and she gets heavier and heavier as the nightmare monster pulls harder and harder. The yew tree monster tells Conor that he must speak the truth, but Conor refuses. His mother continues to slip, and Conor continues to refuse, until his mother falls.

Conor's confrontation with the monster again demonstrates his misplaced pain. Just like Lily, his grandmother, his father, and Harry, Conor looks to the monster as someone that he can blame for what is happening to his mother—even though the monster was never the cause of nor the cure for his mother's illness.



Conor finally begins to realize the damage that all of this pent-up anger and grief has had on him. Even though he has known for a long time that his mother is going to die, it was still too painful to admit that to himself. Yet because he avoided confronting his feelings, they have only grown in intensity.



"The Fourth Tale," is actually Conor's nightmare. As the monster has stated again and again, Conor has to tell his own story—his own truth. He must learn to accept the reality of what is happening to his mother and how he feels about it, even though it deeply scares him.



Conor's nightmare becomes a clear metaphor for her death. The real monster, which represents cancer or death, comes for Conor's mother. Conor desperately tries to hold onto her, even though he knows that there is very little he can do to save her.



The metaphor of Conor's nightmare extends even further: even though Conor cannot possibly save his mother, he is trying to hold onto her for as long as he can. Still, he is weighed down more and more by the emotional pain, and by the responsibility that has been placed upon him, of trying to keep her alive.



THE REST OF THE FOURTH TALE

Conor usually wakes up from his nightmare right about now—but he doesn't. Conor asks the monster to take him back to reality; he needs to see his mother. The monster replies that Conor let his mother go. Conor says that she fell—he couldn't hold on to her because she got so heavy. The monster reiterates: "And so you let her go." Conor is adamant that she fell—he didn't let go. The monster says that Conor must admit the truth or he will be trapped alone in this nightmare forever.

The monster tells Conor to "speak the truth." Conor knows the truth, "he ha[s] always known," but he says that he can't speak it. The monster insists that he can, and there is a change in its voice—a note of kindness. The monster says that Conor let his mother go, even though he could have held on for longer. Conor *wanted* his mother to fall.

Conor insists it'll "kill [him]" if he tells the truth. The monster says that it will kill him if he does not tell the truth. Conor feels himself choking, the fire and anger in his stomach burning "like it would eat him alive." He yells "in pain and grief," feeling the fire of his anger "blazing out to consume everything" around him. He speaks the truth: he "can't stand knowing that she'll go," that he just wants it to be over. The fire "[ate] the world, wiping away everything."

LIFE AFTER DEATH

Conor opens his eyes. He is lying on the hill above his house. He asks the monster why the fire didn't kill him; he believes that he deserves the worst. Conor admits that he's always known that his mother wasn't going to make it. His mother told him that she was getting better because that's what he wanted to hear. And he believed her, but he also didn't believe her. Conor explains that he started to think that he just "wanted it to be over." He "couldn't stand the waiting," and he "couldn't stand how alone it made [him] feel." The monster adds that Conor wished the pain and isolation would just end, even if that meant losing his mother. Conor admits that he let his mother go, even though he could have held on for longer.

Conor is forced to confront the pain of watching his mother die, but the metaphor of the nightmare extends even further. Conor blames himself for her death, and for letting her go even though he could have held on longer. As the monster implies, the isolation and grief brought on by this burden is something Conor has to accept so that he can learn to move past it.



The monster proves itself once again to be a representation of Conor's denial. As Conor starts to recognize "the truth" of what happened, as the monster says, the monster becomes kinder. It seems that the more that Conor faces his suffering, the more supportive the monster is.



Conor finally acknowledges the truth that he has always felt: that he just wants the pain and suffering to end, even if it means having to say goodbye to his mother forever. But because he could not face these feelings, the "pain and grief" stewed inside him. Thus, Ness, like the monster, argues that it is important to acknowledge these feelings, but also to recognize that it is natural to want the end of pain.



Conor's thoughts show the complexity of his denial: he wanted to believe that his mother was going to be okay, even though deep down he understood that this was unlikely—a fact that only added to his ultimate grief when faced with the prospect of her death. Conor also ties in the fact of how his pain and grief isolated him, because his friends and teachers no longer knew how to treat him. This lack of support only added to his grief, because he had no one to turn to for support.



Conor cries that he didn't mean to let his mother go, and that now she's going to die and it's his fault. The monster comforts Conor, taking him into its arms and forming a little nest to hold him. The monster assures Conor that it is not his fault—that he merely wished for the end of pain, and an end to how that pain isolated him. That is “the most human wish of all.”

Conor repeats that he didn't mean it; the monster says that Conor did and did not mean it. Conor asks how both things can be true. The monster says that humans are “complicated beasts,” referring back to the stories it told. “How can a prince be a murderer and a saviour?” it asks. “You wanted [your mother] to go at the same time you were desperate for me to save her,” it tells Conor.

Conor asks how a person can combat their internal conflict. The monster replies that all one has to do is speak the truth. The monster then tells Conor that it came to help Conor heal, and it assures him that his thoughts are not important, only his actions. He does not have to be guilty for his thoughts. Conor, exhausted, then falls asleep in the monster's nest.

SOMETHING IN COMMON

Conor's grandmother wakes Conor up at the foot of the **yew tree**, thanking God that she found him. She pulls him into an embrace, and then starts yelling at him, saying that she's been frantically looking for him for hours. She quickly pulls him to the car, saying that they have to go to the hospital.

In the car, Conor apologizes. Conor's grandmother notes that they're “not the most natural fit,” but that they're going to have to learn how to live together. Conor says he knows. His grandmother starts to cry, grateful that Conor understands. She also says that they have something in common: his mother. Conor recognizes what she means: his mother is the most important person to either of them, and “that was a lot to have in common.”

THE TRUTH

Conor and his grandmother burst into his mother's hospital room at 11:46 p.m. Her eyes are closed, and she is breathing heavily. They take her hands: behind Conor, the monster places its hands on Conor to help hold him up, and tells him that all he has to do is tell the truth. Conor feels “his throat choking again and his eyes watering,” knowing that telling the truth will be hard.

The monster's comfort is key here. In contrast to Conor's family members, who either treat him like a kid (his mother and grandmother) or like an adult (his father), the monster allows Conor to both grow up and remain a child. It gives him the tools to accept his mother's illness, but it also protects and comforts him after that difficult recognition.



The monster then reveals the purpose of its stories: to demonstrate the complexity of human nature and emotion. Just like the various characters of its stories, Conor had a set of contradictory emotions and feelings concerning his mother's illness, but that does not make him a bad person.



In this exchange, Ness highlights the idea that in order to alleviate one's pain and suffering, the first step is to acknowledge it. Only by confessing what has been bothering Conor is the monster then able to comfort him.



The fact that Conor's grandmother is frantically looking for him shows how much she truly cares about Conor, and that she will serve as a parent going forward when his mother can no longer be.



One of the benefits of the monster's stories is that they have allowed Conor to realize that there's no one to blame: not the monster, not himself, not his father, and certainly not his grandmother. Conor understands more fully that his grandmother is going through the same things that he is, which allows them to form a bond.



Conor has one final thing to accept: the fact that his mother's death will be excruciatingly painful. Up until this point he has been trying to push this fact away, but now he acknowledges that the right thing to do is to tell his mother how he really feels.



Conor understands that there is “no going back”—that his mother is going to die. He knows that it will be terrible, and he also knows that he will survive. “It was for this that the monster came,” Conor realizes. The monster assures Conor that it will stay with Conor until the end.

Conor speaks the final truth. “I don’t want you to go,” he tells his mother, tears spilling from his eyes. She says, “I know, my love.” He puts his arms around her and holds her. He knows that the end will come soon, maybe even in a few minutes. “But not this moment,” the monster whispers. Conor holds tightly onto his mother, “and by doing so, he could finally let her go.”

Again, the monster helps Conor to grow up, but also serves as a way of supporting him. It is worth noting, too, that the monster is an extension of Conor’s own mind, and therefore it represents Conor’s ability to support and comfort himself when times are hard.



In finally telling his mother that he doesn’t want her to go, Conor avoids the future that she predicted: that someday he might not forgive himself for being angry with his mother in his precious final moments with her. The monster, in helping Conor to accept the truth about his mother’s death, prevents this from happening. It helps Conor to acknowledge his pain and grief, but it also enables him to be able to move past that grief someday.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Emanuel, Lizzy. "A *Monster Calls*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 27 Apr 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Emanuel, Lizzy. "A *Monster Calls*." LitCharts LLC, April 27, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-monster-calls>.

To cite any of the quotes from *A Monster Calls* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Ness, Patrick. *A Monster Calls*. Candlewick. 2013.

CHICAGO MANUAL

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