Fantasy and Grief Coping in Patrick Ness's A Monster Calls

Anna Valentina[1], Henny Herawati[2*]
Sanata Dharma University, Indonesia

Email: henny@usd.ac.id

Abstract. Literature often portrays complex human feelings and struggles, offering insights into universal experiences of loss and coping. Patrick Ness' A Monster Calls tells a story of Conor O'Malley, a 13-year-old boy confronting the painful reality of his mother's terminal illness. The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to reveal how Conor's emotional reactions to the monster's tales reflect the stages of grief, and (2) to explore how fantasy functions as a coping mechanism for grief. This qualitative research employs a psychological approach, using close textual analysis as its primary method. The analysis is grounded in Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief theory (1997) and Freud's repression theory (1915) as further developed by Akhtar (2020). Findings indicate that Conor's emotional responses align with the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. First, he denies the reality of his mother's approaching death. Second, he expresses his anger and frustration by destroying things, followed with the third stage when he negotiates by believing that the monster can heal his mother. Fourth, Conor falls into a deep sadness, shown through his recurring nightmare. Finally, he acknowledges his real feelings and accepts the loss. His reliance on fantasy-embodied in the monster, its tales, and recurring nightmares- emerges as a mechanism for processing grief and ultimately achieving acceptance. These research results offer a global implication of how narratives, including fantasy literature, may help young readers confront loss and develop coping strategies. In conclusion, the study underlines the therapeutic potential of literature in addressing universal human struggles with grief and mortality.

Keywords: Fantasy, Five Stages Of Grief, Repression, Coping With Grief, A Monster Calls.

INTERFERENCE
Journal of Language, Literature,and Linguistics

E-ISSN: 2721-1835
P-ISSN: 2721-1827

Submitted : 23th August 2026
Accepted : 28th October 2026

INTRODUCTION

Particularly during childhood and adolescence, when emotional control is still developing, grief and trauma are intense emotional experiences that can have an important effect on a person's psychological development (Alvis, Zhang, Sandler, & Kaplow, 2021). Long-lasting emotional consequences, including anxiety, depression, guilt, or emotional numbness, can result from the death of a loved one, parental separation, illness, abuse, or seeing a traumatic event (Cruz et al., 2022).

Many young people find it challenging to express these strong feelings because of some reasons, including emotional immaturity, and inability to express emotions. Children and adolescents who experience trauma often struggle to process their emotions in a linear or rational manner (Warmingham et al., 2023). Instead, they may internalize their grief or express it through behavior changes, withdrawal, or having vivid imagination (Ionio et al., 2018). Since they might not have the ability to fully understand or express their pain, using devices like stories and imagination becomes very important for them (Ionio et al., 2018). In some cases, according to Donfrancesco et al. (2019), fantasy often functions not only for escapism but as a powerful psychological tool, some kind of symbolic language or a way for young people to face their fears, share their sadness, and eventually begin to heal.

This topic is relevant to current concerns about children's and adolescents' mental health. In recent years, among children and adolescents, mental health has become a growing global concern, as shown by data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2025) which reports that nearly one in five children ages 3 to 17 have been diagnosed with a mental, emotional, or behavioral condition, and 40% of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness. According to the World Health Organization (2025), one in seven adolescents globally experiences mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders, yet so many go untreated. Suicide is the third most common cause of death, and these issues can have major consequences. Numerous studies have been conducted on the psychological effects of trauma, particularly in childhood and adolescence.

Reading literary works can support the process of trauma healing by providing a space for readers to feel connected with the characters' experiences, share their painful memories, and learn the process of healing. According to Arindhani et al. (2025), storytelling can help people process their feelings and experiences by reflecting what they have gone through, making them feel understood and less alone. Additionally, stories have the power to impact society by increasing people's empathy and influencing how society views specific issues or values.

Conor O'Malley, the main character of Ness' *A Monster Calls*, is a young child who finds it difficult to express his true feelings, especially in relation to his mother's illness. His emotional repression then manifests into a yew tree monster. Repression means deliberately keeping certain unpleasure thoughts or feelings, such as painful memories, out of our conscious mind (Freud, 1915; Boag, 2020). The story reveals how Conor hides his guilt, suffering and pain related to his terminally ill mother, and how he goes through the process of grief coping.

A number of studies have been done to discuss Ness' *A Monster Calls,* yet only a few of these studies look into the role of fantasy in helping the main character, Conor, deal with grief and trauma (Bhattacharjee, 2026; Maesya, 2018; Messaouda, 2024; Ulfa, 2021). Even though fantasy is often used to endure emotional pains and sufferings, it is usually employed without conscious awareness, since traumatic experiences, repressed desires and memories that form behaviors, feelings, and thoughts are held in in the unconscious mind (Cavanna, 2023).

Bhattacharjee (2026) employs a number of theories, namely "attachment theory, grief theory, interpersonal psychiatry, and psychoanalytic dream theory" to explore Conor's repressed emotional conflicts, including trauma and family problems. The findings suggest that *A Monster Calls* novel creates "horror as a restorative genre" and shows "monstrosity as a means of psychological disclosure" (p.95). Messaouda (2024) uses Freud's psychoanalytic framework to analyze the interaction between dreams and reality in Ness' *A Monster Calls*. Using the concept of id, ego, and superego, Messaouda shows that dreams function not only as narrative devices but also as therapeutic tools to allow Conor slowly confront his fear of illness and his mother's death. Findings of his study suggest that "Conor's dreams serve as a therapeutic tool, helping him confront and process his fears and grief" (Messaouda, 2024). Another study is by Ulfa (2021) who analyzed Ness' *A Monster Calls* by combining Wendy B. Faris's characteristic of magical realism with Dr. Arthur T. Jersild's adolescent psychology theory. Her study found that Ness' *A Monster Calls* can be categorized as a magical realism, and that the monster can be interpreted as Conor's alter ego, a projection of his anger and emotional struggles as an adolescent. In addition to the studies on the novel, there are also studies on the film adaptation of *A Monster Calls*, one of which is Maesya's study (2018). His study examines dreams and hallucinations as cinematic reflections of Conor's inner conflict. Using Freud's theory of dream interpretation, he argues that the monster and all of the stories told are projections of Conor's unconscious, revealing not only his hidden desires but also symptoms of melancholia and anxiety. His research highlights how the visual portrays of dreams and hallucinations reinforce the psychological conflict represented in the narrative (Maesya, 2018). The current study attempts to enrich the discussion on Ness' *A Monster Calls* by using Kübler-Ross' the five stages of grief (1997) and Freud's, (1915) and Akhtar's (2020) theory of repression to explore the process of grief coping and how fantasy related to this process.

The five stages of grief is a psychological model introduced by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1997 book *On Death and Dying*. This theory explains how people usually deal with grief. Although originally developed to describe the experiences of terminally ill patients, the model has since been widely applied to individuals facing loss and traumatic life events. The five stages which are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance do not always happen in sequence, and not everyone experiences all the five stages. The model is a useful tool to understand emotional progression in the face of grief (Kübler Ross, 1997).

Another major theory used in this study is Freud's theory of repression, which was then expanded by Akhtar (2020). Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, proposed the concept of repression as a state when the mind pushes away painful or

unacceptable thoughts from the conscious mind into the unconscious (Freud, 1915). Repression happens when the ego blocks impulses from the id that feel too powerful or unacceptable. Although this mechanism may temporarily lessen stress, it also blocks the natural release of emotions. The healing process might be postponed as a result. Otgaar, et al. (2021), state that the term "repressed memories" is often used with a wide and ambiguous meaning, namely to describe the process of losing traumatic memories from consciousness because they are suppressed by the subconscious. Repressed emotions do not just vanish, according to Freud (1915). Rather, they reappear indirectly and impact an individual's emotions, choices and social interactions, often without the person realizing it.

Akhtar (2020), in his reassessment of Freud's theory in 1915, argues that repression has two sides. On one side, it provides temporary protection for individuals from emotional pain, but on the other side, it also blocks the psychological healing process because the suppressed emotions do not actually disappear. Akhtar (2020) also states that repressed feelings remain active in the subconscious and continue to influence behavior, thoughts, and the way a person responds to reality, even though they consciously try to reject them. In addition, Akhtar (2020) expands Freud's concept by distinguishing between repression of ideas and repression of the accompanying emotional energy. In many cases, a person may no longer remember a particular unacceptable or painful thought or desire, but the emotional energy behind that thought triggers indirect forms, such as dreams, symbolic behavior, or fantasy worlds. Akhtar refers to this phenomenon as "the return of the repressed", which is the return of repressed material in a symbolic form that is more acceptable to the conscious mind. These impulses are often desires or emotions so intense that consciousness cannot process them. Repressed feelings are kept in the unconscious, but they still affect a person's emotions, thoughts, and behavior. However, even though it gives short-term protection, it also stops someone from truly dealing with their emotions, which makes healing harder.

By referring to the aforementioned theories, this study explores first, how Conor's emotional reactions to the monster's stories reflect the five stages of grief, and second, how fantasy assists Conor in overcoming his inner fear and grief. The purpose of this study, hence, is to gain an understanding of Conor's emotional responses to his mother's terminal illness, and to explore the role of fantasy as a mechanism in helping Connor deal with his grief and repressed emotions.

This study offers novelty by integrating Kübler Ross' five stages of grief theory and Freud's and Akhtar's theories of repression in the analysis. For global readers and educators, this research also demonstrates the therapeutic potential of fantasy as a grief coping mechanism.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study employs a psychological critical approach to examine the issue of grief coping in Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls*. This criticism uses the lens of psychological theories in understanding the behaviors, emotions, mental conditions, and motivations of characters in a literary work (Mulatsih & Suharjanto, 2024). It also connects fictional events in novels with real psychological concepts that explain human behavior and emotions (Wellek & Warren, 1956). Psychological

critcicism analyzes a text by looking closely into the inner life of a character in a literary work, and "is often strongest in stories about identity, trauma, and self-discovery" (Fiveable, 2026, "Key things to remember about psychological criticism" section).

The main character of Ness' *A Monster Calls* undergoes a psychological conflict that arises from the inner experiences, emotional struggles, and defense mechanisms. Therefore, a psychological criticism is the most suitable lens and framework to be used in this study. It helps reveal how the protagonist's fear, guilt, and grief are described through his conscious actions and unconscious responses. Using this framework, the analysis does not just look at what happens on the surface of the story but also explores the psychological aspects that influence the growth and changes of the main character (Khan & Wakeel, 2025). This approach makes the interpretation deeper and more complete, because literature can be understood not only as art, but also as a mirror of real human psychological experiences (Sandbæk, 2022).

The method of this study is close textual analysis, with a textual evidence coding sheet as the main instrument. The primary data source is Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* (2011); this study uses close reading to examine the main character's emotional responses to grief and the role of fantasy as a coping mechanism found in the novel *A Monster Calls*.

Following Leavy's (2022) systematic procedures, the data analysis steps are as follow. The first step was iterative immersion through repeated readings of the novel, Ness' *A Monster Calls*, to capture patterns of emotional responses and fantasy elements. The second one was identifying and extracting textual passages that illustrate reactions to grief and fantasy elements. The textual evidence was coded manually and organized into thematic categories aligned with Kübler-Ross's stages, namely denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The fourth step was interpreting the categorised data based on Freud's theory of repression (1915) and Akhtar's (2020) development of the theory, focusing on how fantasy functions as a coping mechanism. The final step was to relate the findings with broader existing discussions of grief coping.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This first part of this study identifies Conor's emotional responses that reflect the stages of grief he has gone through. Connor O'Malley is the main character of Patrick Ness' novel *A Monster Calls*. He is described as a thirteen-year-old boy who struggles to face the reality of his mom's terminal illness.

The following discusses each stage based on Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief theory (1997).

Denial

When grandma comes to Conor's house, Conor always has to let her grandma use his bedroom. Meanwhile, Conor has to sleep on the settee. Conor never likes the way she talks to him, especially about a possible future which requires Conor to live with his grandma. At that moment, Conor always denies any bad things that might

happen. He believes good treatment will make his mother better and they will not need the help from her grandmother anymore.

Conor's denial stage can be seen in the following conversation:

> "Conor," she said more firmly, "we need to talk about what's going to happen." "No, we don't. She's always sick after the treatments. She'll be better tomorrow." He glared at her. "And then you can go home." (Ness, 2011, p. 20).

Another Conor's denial stage can be found in the first tale when Conor wakes up and the clock shows exactly at 12.07 AM. This is the third time he meets the monster, and at that moment Conor does not see or hear anything as he thinks he will. Yet, when Conor goes into the kitchen the monster is standing in his back garden waiting to tell the first story to Conor. At first, he does not want to hear the story because Conor hopes that the monster will have his back when things get tough but finally, he is willing to listen to the first tale. The first tale is about a small, peaceful kingdom ruled by a wise king. However, all his sons die in wars, leaving behind a single infant grandson as heir. After the king remarries a young queen that is accused as a witch, he dies and the queen becomes the regent of the kingdom. When the prince grows up, he falls in love with a farmer's daughter, but then she is found dead. The prince accuses the queen of murder, causing the people to revolt and destroy the palace. But it turns out that it is the prince who has killed his own lover to seize the throne. A monster who knows the truth saves the queen from the chaos.

> "When he said that the queen had murdered his bride, he believed, in his own way, that it was actually true." (Ness, 2011, p. 29).

The above quotation shows a correlation between the prince and Conor. The lie that the prince tells does not only convince people, but also himself as he ends up fully believing that the murder was committed by the queen, so his denial of the crime distorts all his own memories of the events. Same with Conor's denial, he can lie about his belief that his mom will get better but, deep down he is tired of watching his own mother suffer and slowly die, and he wishes it will be over soon.

Anger

Conor's suppressed anger is already seen before the second tale. He comes home after spending some time together with his dad, which ends up having a tough conversation. Conor feels satisfied when kicking the settee over and over, feeling the anger rushing to his body. This can be seen from the following lines.

He jumped off and gave the settee a kick to push it back even further. He was barely aware that he was breathing heavily. His head felt hot, almost like he had a fever. He raised a foot to kick the settee again (Ness, 2011, p. 42-43).

After that the monster suddenly appears behind him. The monster comes to tell the second tale. The second tale is about an Apothecary and a Parson. The Apothecary makes medicine in a traditional way by using a yew tree, but the parson is against it and tells people that it is wrong and a really old-fashioned way to cure people. Because of that, the villagers never use the Apothecary's treatment again. One day, two daughters of a parson were sick. All modern treatments fail so his last

option is to go to the Apothecary, but the Apothecary decides not to help him because of past grudges and then the two daughters of the parson die that night. Then, the monster comes to the parson's house to destroy it. It is because the monster thinks the parson is selfish, he only believes in things he wants to believe when everything is fine but when everything is tough, he loses his beliefs. While the monster destroys the parson's house, he invites Conor to destroy it together, he convinces Conor that it will be satisfying.

"TEAR THE WHOLE THING DOWN!" Conor roared, and the monster roared in return and pounded at the remaining walls, knocking them to the ground. Conor rushed in to help, picking up a fallen branch and smashing through the windows that hadn't already been broken.

He is yelling as he does it, so loud he cannot hear himself think, disappearing into the frenzy of destruction, just mindlessly smashing and smashing and smashing.

The monster was right. It was very satisfying.

Conor screamed until he was hoarse, smashed until his arms were sore, roared until he was nearly falling down with exhaustion. When he finally stopped, he found the monster watching him quietly from outside the wreckage. Conor panted and leaned on the branch to keep himself balanced.

> Now that, said the monster, is how destruction is properly done.
> And suddenly they were back in Conor's grandma's sitting room.
> Conor saw that he had destroyed almost every inch of it (Ness, 2011, p. 49).

This second tale lets Conor meet the anger stage as soon as denial fades, where he lets go of all of his suppressed anger by smashing everything and anything to make him feel satisfied. Conor is at the point where he feels abandoned and no one understands him. The tough conversation he had with his father makes him feel so.

Another Conor's anger is portryed in the third tale. It happens during lunch time in school while Conor is zoned out thinking about whether the yew tree will heal his mom or not until Sally, Anton, and Harry come to bully him again. Yet, it turns out Harry just wants to shake hands with him, as seen in the following quotation.

Conor responded almost automatically, putting out his own hand and shaking Harry's before he even thought about what he was doing. They shook hands like two businessmen at the end of a meeting.

> "Goodbye, O'Malley," Harry said, looking into Conor's eyes. "I no longer see you."
> Then he let go of Conor's hand, turned his back, and walked away (Ness, 2011, p. 62).

For Conor "I no longer see you" really triggers him, because it means Conor is socially invisible. People treat him differently because they feel sorry for him and people start to give him some space and it makes him feel isolated. Right after that the monster comes to tell the third tale, which is about the invisible man. In fact, he's

not actually invisible, yet because people ignore him, he feels non-existent. Until one day, he decides to make people see him, and for that he calls for a monster. That is exactly like what Conor feels. Conor can feel the monster close behind him, knowing that it is kneeling, knowing that it is putting its face up to his ear to whisper into it, to tell him the rest of the story.

> He called, it said, for a monster.
> And it reached a huge, monstrous hand past Conor and knocked Harry flying across the floor.
> Trays clattered and people screamed as Harry tumbled past them.
> 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 (Ness, 2011, p. 63-64).

From the statements above, Conor expresses his anger by hitting Harry over and over, because he really feels like he will get isolated by society. He does not want to be invisible; he just wants people to truly see him and eventually understand him. When Conor hits Harry, Conor finally feels 'seen' because at that time people actually see him.

Bargaining

The third stage is bargaining. Conor begins to think about the existence of a monster in a form of a yew tree, because in the second story the monster also mentions about the yew tree used by the Apothecary as one of the ingredients in the healing medicine. This can be seen in the following quotation.

The monster looked surprised. 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. (Ness, 2011, p. 46)

Conor holds the belief that the yew tree can heal his mother. The monster also said "Belief is half of all healing" (Ness, 2011, p. 48). By that Conor clings to the hope that there is still a deal to be made with miracles. Therefore, in this stage Conor really shows his effort to hold on to the belief in the middle of the painful truth. He tries to negotiate with fate through his belief that the monster in the form of a yew tree will heal her.

Depression

At this stage, Conor realizes that he does not have much time left with his mother because the new treatment is not working and there will not be any other treatment for his mother, as can be seen in the following conversation between Conor and his mother.

> "I spoke to the doctor this morning," she said, her voice weak. "The new treatment isn't working, Conor."
> "So what happens now?" Conor asked. "What's the next treatment?"
> She didn't answer. Which was an answer in itself.
> Conor said it out loud anyway. "There aren't any more treatments."
> "I'm sorry, son," his mum said, tears sneaking out of her eyes now, even though she kept up her smile. (Ness, 2011, p. 71)

After having a little talk with his mom before the painkiller sends her to sleep, Conor wants to go home, his own home, not the grandma's home. When he arrives at his home, he runs straight to the back garden, crosses the tracks, and finally makes it to the cemetery where the yew tree, that sometimes turns into a monster, is located. Conor shouts loudly toward the tree and he also kicks the tree harder and harder to wake the monster up with the hope the monster can save his mom. Yet, this time "hope" already turns into despair and a fear of loss.

> He'd had a nightmare. Well, not a nightmare. The nightmare. The one he'd been having a lot lately. The one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming. The one with the hands slipping from his grasp, no matter how hard he tried to hold on (Ness, 2011, p. 6).
>
> …

With the wind roaring and the ground shaking and the hands holding tight but still somehow slipping away, with Conor using all his strength but it still not being enough, with the grip losing itself, with the falling, with the screaming–

> "NO!" Conor shouted, the terror following him into waking, gripping his chest so hard it felt as if he couldn't breathe, his throat choking, his eyes filling with water (Ness, 2011, p. 22).

From the statements above, Conor's nightmare that keeps happening actually portrays the depth of his depression. The hand that keeps slipping from his grasp refers to his mother's hand. Through this nightmare Conor actually feels trapped in a cycle of guilt and loss where he keeps blaming himself for what happens as if his failure in his dreams is proof that he also fails in real life. The trait of depression is also shown when Conor never talks about the nightmare to anyone. It shows that Conor is already drowning in his own sorrow and withdrawing emotionally.

Acceptance

In the final stage, acceptance appears in the fourth tale which is the truth that Conor has to tell by himself. The fourth tale drags Conor into his own nightmare where he is in the middle of nowhere but it is cold and dark. In there Conor meets his mom. It turns out the hand that Conor was always holding tightly was his mom's hand. While Conor is busy trying to save his mom from falling, the monster whispers to Conor demanding him to tell the fourth tale. At first, Conor is still busy holding his mother's hand tightly. However, afterwards, his mother falls. At that point, Conor finally gets to the acceptance stage, which can be seen below.

> He spoke the truth.
> He told the rest of the fourth tale.
> "I can't stand it any more!" he cried out as the fire raged around him. "I can't stand knowing that she'll go! I just want it to be over! I want it to be finished!" (Ness, 2011, p. 79).

The statement above shows that he already realizes and accepts that his mother's death is inevitable. He no longer denies the painful truth and the nightmares finally end. Yet, after acknowledging the painful truth he has to be ready to live with it, so when Conor goes back to the hospital and meets her mom, Conor is ready to live with that painful truth-that his mother is going to die.

> 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 (Ness, 2011, p. 85).

By saying this, the acceptance stage was fully faced and Conor finally lives with the painful truth.

Overall, the yew-tree monster's stories finally help Conor face the painful truth and go through the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. To finally get to the acceptance stage it is necessary to understand that it is not about avoiding or forgetting pain but it is about acknowledging it as part of healing.

Fantasy as Grief coping

As Conor goes through the five stages of grief, Conor actually also shows an act of defense mechanism, namely repression. Repression is when the mind pushes away painful thoughts from the conscious mind into the unconscious (Freud, 1915). Conor pushes away the thought that her mother is terminally ill and her death is approaching, as there is no further treatment for her. His repressed emotions, as Freud (1915) points out, do not just vanish. As developed by Akhtar (2020), the painful repressed thoughts can trigger a phenomenon that he refers as "the return of the repressed", and can take the forms such as dreams, symbolic behaviors, or fantasy worlds. The monster and the nightmare are the form of Conor's repressed emotions. The monster's stories and other fantasies that happened became his way to cope with the unbearable reality of his mother's illness. Therefore, here fantasy is the way of the return of the repressed. The following part will discuss how fantasy functions as a coping mechanism that helps Conor express his internal struggle and finally heals.

This study found three fantasies, namely the monster, the monster's tale, and the nightmare. The following is the discussion of each.

The Monster

The monster is described as a gigantic creature in a form of a big yew tree. Its trunk and branches make a figure of a huge human-like body. The first time the

monster came, it was right at 12.07 o'clock and at that moment Conor was not even afraid of the monster.

> Then the monster paused again.
> You really aren't afraid, are you?
> "No," Conor said. "Not of you, anyway." (Ness, 2011, p. 8).

Conor is afraid of the real nightmare monster that is made of cloud, ash and dark flames, but he does not expect a big yew tree monster to come. The fantasy of the monster that comes to tell stories distract Conor, lessen his anxiety and make him focus only on more manageable tasks, such as listening to the monster's story, rather than facing the unbearable truth at that point.

> It had been a dream. What else could it have been?
> Every inch of his bedroom floor was covered in short, spiky yew tree leaves.
> He put another bite of cereal in his mouth, definitely not looking at the rubbish bin, where he had stuffed the plastic bag full of leaves he'd swept up this morning first thing (Ness, 2011, p. 9).

From the quotation above, although Conor constantly tells himself that the monster is "just a dream", there is a proof of scattered leaves. This is an act of denial; Conor denies the unpleasant truth by repressing the proof of many leaves. This sustained act of denial indicates a continued expenditure of energy to keep the unpleasant content at a distance.

The Monster's Tales

The first tale is told after Conor has an argument with his grandma. He thinks the monster will show up and help him but it does not. Instead, unconsciously Conor summons the monster to slain the enemy, which is his grandma. Instead of slaining the enemy, the monster tells him the first tale, which is about a young queen that is also known as an evil witch (the prince's stepmother) who is accused by a wise prince of murdering a farmer's daughter, which he did to seize power. This tale comes with Conor's need to categorize the people around him into easy moral boxes. His grandma is cold and annoying; therefore, Conor wants her to be evil so he can hate her without guilt. Even though his mother is kind and loving, she's been lying to Conor constantly about her recovery. Thus, in the first tale the monster forces Conor to confront the idea that good people can do bad things and the hated person can do the right thing, like his grandma who always tries to help.

> Conor walked around the garden a bit, thinking. Then he did it a bit more. "I don't understand. Who's the good guy here?"
> There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere in between (Ness, 2011, p. 29).
> …

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. Quite often, actually. You'd be surprised.

Conor glanced up at his bedroom window again, imagining his grandma sleeping in his bed. "So how is that supposed to save me from her?" (Ness, 2011, p. 29).

The second tale happens right after Conor feels so angry towards his dad. Conor's dad actually has the ability to heal Conor's emotional wounds by moving with him, but Conor's dad chooses to abandon him because in America, his house is small and barely has enough room for another person. Conor's anger is expressed in the second tale when in his fantasy he destroys the parson's house. In reality, he is destroying his grandmother's living room, a place where he feels trapped after his father left. This indicates an uncontrolled outburst of unrepressed anger.

The settee was shattered into pieces beyond counting. Every wooden leg was broken, the upholstery ripped to shreds, hunks of stuffing strewn across the floor, along with the remains of the clock, flung from the wall and broken to almost unrecognizable bits. So too were the lamps and both small tables that had sat at the ends of the settee, as well as the bookcase under the front window, every book of which was torn from cover to cover. Even the wallpaper had been ripped back in dirty, uneven strips. The only thing left standing was the display cabinet, though its glass doors were smashed and everything inside hurled to the floor.

Conor stood there in shock. He looked down at his hands, which were covered in scratches and blood, his fingernails torn and ragged, aching from the labour (Ness, 2011, p. 50).

The third tale also happens because Conor represses the deep pain of isolation and the need for attention and recognition. Conor wants people to acknowledge his existence, but when Harry delivers his final bow by saying "I no longer see you", Conor's repressed emotions are expressed through the fantasy of the third tale by the monster and it finally makes them see him.

Conor had felt what the monster was doing to Harry, felt it in his own hands. When the monster gripped Harry's shirt, Conor felt the material against his own palms. When the monster struck a blow, Conor felt the sting of it in his own fist. When the monster held Harry's arm behind his back, Conor had felt Harry's muscles resisting (Ness, 2011, p. 65).

The Nightmare

Conor's recurring nightmare is actually the hidden truth that is feared to admit. In his nightmare, the ground is shaking and the hands he is holding tightly always slip away. This is the representation of the fact that Conor has indeed let his mother go by letting her fall on the edge of the cliff. That feeling is repressed into the subconscious and returns in the form of the nightmare. The purpose of the monster is to make Conor acknowledge that feeling by telling the truth, and by doing so Conor finally heals.

The answer is that it does not matter what you think, the monster said, because your mind will contradict itself a hundred times each day. You wanted her to go at the same time you were desperate for me to save her. Your mind will believe

comforting lies while also knowing the painful truths that make those lies necessary. And your mind will punish you for believing both.

> "But how do you fight it?" Conor asked, his voice rough. "How do you fight all the different stuff inside?"
> By speaking the truth, the monster said. As you spoke it just now (Ness, 2011, p. 81)

Fantasy enables Conor to articulate emotions that are unspeakable in his real life. The fantasy itself helps him express emotions that he cannot express easily in reality, such as his anger, guilt, and fear, in a safe way. It becomes his way of coping with the pain of losing his mother without being completely broken by it, where repressed feelings are transformed into understanding. In the end, Conor gradually faces the truth he has long avoided.

Although grounded in different theoretical frameworks, these findings are aligned with Bhattacharjee's (2026) study, which identifies the recurring nightmare, and the yew-tree monster with his tales as mechanisms for Conor O'Malley to confront and cope with his grief. Similarly, Messaouda's (2024) interprets Conor's dreams as "a therapeutic tool" to help him deal with his fear and grief. The current study also supports Ulfa (2021) and Maesya (2018) that the monster and the recurring dreams are projections of Conor's emotional stuggles and psychological conflicts.

CONCLUSION

This study found that Conor's emotional reactions to the monster's tales reflect the five stages of grief, but they do not occur in a sequential order. Through his interactions with the monster and the tales, as well as his interactions with other people, Conor shows a complex emotional process. Conor's psychological journey can be seen through the five stages. First, he denies the reality of his mother's impending death, which appears in the first tale and outside the tale. Then, he expresses his anger and frustration by destroying things, as shown in the second and third tales. After that, he tries to negotiate by believing that the monster's existence can bring healing, which appears in the second tale and outside the tale. He later falls into deep sadness, shown through his recurring nightmare. Finally, he acknowledges the truth of his feelings and accepts the loss, which is shown in the fourth tale told by Conor himself.

The second finding reveals how fantasy works as a grief coping, which helps Conor in regulating his emotions and accepting the painful reality of losing his mother. The emergence of the monster, as a fantasy figure, results from Conor's repressed emotions, especially the feelings of guilt, fear, isolated, and grief; emotions that Conor fails to face consciously at first. The presence of the monster functions as an escape from the painful reality but also helps to reach the acceptance stage through the tales it tells. In the end, fantasy becomes a coping mechanism that helps Conor face the painful truths, and accept his grief and other repressed emotions.

This study contributes to the literary study field by offering a viewpoint how fantasy can function as a grief coping and a mechanism to release repressed emotions. It offers novelty by integrating Kübler-Ross' five stages of grief theory and

Freud's and Akhtar's theories of repression in analyzing the novel. It also shows that literature can be a bridge to understanding the emotional state and struggle of young adults. Hence, reading literary works that portray human struggles, conflicts, and efforts to cope with various repressed emotions is an invaluable experience.

REFERENCES

Akhtar, S. (2020). Repression: A critical assessment and update of Freud's 1915 paper. *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *80*(3), 241–258. https://doi.org/10.1057/s11231-020-09261-z

Alvis, L., Zhang, N., Sandler, I. N., Kaplow, J. B., & Alvis, L. (2021). Developmental Manifestations of Grief in Children and Adolescents : Caregivers as Key Grief Facilitators. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *0123456789*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-021-00435-0

Arindhani, A., Homan, D., & Witabora, J. (2025). Visual symbolism in 2D animated film on the traumatic impact of child abuse. *Jurnal Desain*, *12*, 800. https://doi.org/10.30998/jd.v12i3.26868

Bhattacharjee, S. (2026). Healing through horror: Psychological trauma in *A Monster Calls*. *ShodhPatra: International Journal of Science and Humanities, 3*(7), 95. https://www.shodhpatra.org. https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i7.45843

Boag, S. (2020). *Repression (Defense Mechanism) BT - Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences* (V. Zeigler-Hill & T. K. Shackelford (eds.); pp. 4425–4428). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-24612-3_1423

Cavanna, S. (2023). Psychoanalytic Theory : Exploring the Depths of the Unconscious. *Neuropsychiatry Journal*, *13*(1), 1–2. https://doi.org/10.37532/1758-2008.2023.13(2).651

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025). *Data and Statistics on Children ' s Mental Health*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html#print

Cruz, D., Lichten, M., Berg, K., & George, P. (2022). Developmental trauma: Conceptual framework, associated risks and comorbidities, and evaluation and treatment. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *13*, 800687. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.800687

Donfrancesco, R., Vezzani, C., Pinto, G., Bigozzi, L., Dibenedetto, A., Melegari, M. G., Gregori, P., Andriola, E., Di Roma, F., Renzi, A., Tambelli, R., & Di Trani, M. (2019). The validation of the free fantasy Questionnaire for children and adolescents: From imaginary playmate to "Dreamtime." *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*(JUN), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01343

Fiveable. (2026). *Psychological Criticism – Intro to Contemporary Literature*. https://fiveable.me/introduction-contemporary-literature/key-terms/psychological-criticism

Freud, S. (1915). *Repression* (Standard E). Hogarth.

Ionio, C., Camisasca, E., Milani, L., Miragoli, S., & Di Blasio, P. (2018). Facing Death in Adolescence: What Leads to Internalization and Externalization Problems? *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma*, *11*(3), 367–373.

https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-017-0166-8

Khan, S., & Wakeel, M. (2025). LITERARY DEPICTIONS OF MENTAL HEALTH AND TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH FICTION. *In Journal of Media Horizons*. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15728426

Kübler-Ross, E. (1997). *On Death and Dying*. Scribner.

Leavy, P. (2022). *Research Design: Quantitative, Qualitative, Mixed Methods, Arts-Based, and Community-Based Participatory Research Approaches.* The Guilford Press.

Maesya, B. (2018). *Dreams and hallucinations analysis in a monster calls film*. Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta.

Messaouda, B. (2024). *Master dissertation Examining Dreams versus Reality in Patrick Ness ' s A Monster Calls Through The Lens of Sigmund Freud*. University Mohamed Khider Biskra.

Mulatsih, M. V. E., & Suharjanto, L. (2024). *Approaches to literary criticism*. USD.

Ness, P. (2011). *A Monster Calls*. Walker Books.

Sandbæk, L. (2022). The relationship between literature and psychoanalysis : reflections on object relations theory , researcher ' s subjectivity , and transference in psychoanalytic literary criticism literary criticism. *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, *00*(00), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/01062301.2022.2047490

Ulfa, A. K. (2021). A Concept of Characteristics of Magical Realism in Patrick Ness ' A Monster Calls : A Merger of Objective and Adolescent Psychological Approach. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 6(5), 89–94. https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels

Warmingham, J. M., Duprey, E. B., Handley, E. D., Rogosch, F. A., & Cicchetti, D. (2023). Patterns of childhood maltreatment predict emotion processing and regulation in emerging adulthood. *Development and Psychopathology*, *35*(2), 766–781. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579422000025

Wellek, R., & Warren, A. (1956). *Theory of Literature*. Harcourt, Brace & World. https://books.google.co.id/books?id=gfBYAAAAMAAJ

WHO. (2025). *Mental health of adolescents*. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health