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Emerging Voices

Real Dragons: Monster Symbolism in Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There*, Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, and Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls*

Kevin Sun

Kevin Sun is a graduate student in the Master of Arts in Children's Literature program at the University of British Columbia. Besides monsters, he is interested in holistic vs. reductionist world views and how literature influences the fixations that define us.

When we think of a didactic children's story, we may summon the cliché image of the all-knowing parent offering the lacking child a lesson on a silver platter, to be consumed humbly and gratefully. In addition to the truism that real children would retch even more at this idea than we do, this image to me symbolizes one extreme on the spectrum that ranges from pure art to pure education, which in this context would likely not teach anyone anything. Literature written for pure education is not popular among scholars; as Clementine Beauvais states in *The Mighty Child*, "[t]he 'didactic' has long been seen, especially in literary studies and in educational philosophy, as an undesirable and obsolete mode of discourse" (71). Yet "there is still very much an educational mission to the children's book," a mission that is worth more than a quick dismissal (72). In *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers*, Maria Nikolajeva "would venture to state that all literature is 'both,' that is, both an art form and a didactic, or rather ideological vehicle" (7). Instead of undermining each other, art and education can and should synergize to create powerful literature.

Didacticism plays a key role in fantasy horror literature for children. In her introduction to *Reading in the Dark: Horror in Children's Literature and Culture*, Jessica R. McCort states that "[m]ost frightening fictions today, especially those of a more literary class, strive to teach some sort of lesson" (20). These lessons are, at least in good fiction, not told by heavy-handed exposition, but instead shown through literary tools. In this paper, I will analyze Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There*, Neil Gaiman's *Coraline*, and Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls* to show how monsters function as one of these tools. The monsters in these three stories are malicious external threats, yet symbolize the internal struggles of selfishness, dependence, and guilt respectively, and in defeating these monsters through the support of adult influence, each protagonist gains insight that reflects the didactic lessons of the stories. These stories are horrific not because they feature monsters, but because they deal with issues that violate fundamental values in the symbolic childhood of Western culture. Monsters, terrifying yet vulnerable, make the horror bearable.

In Sendak's *Outside Over There*, the protagonist Ida's baby sister is kidnapped by "goblins," a disturbing situation complemented by the "nightmare images" of Ida embracing and dropping the melting ice double (Geraldine Deluca 16). Psychoanalytic analyses are utilized by DeLuca (15), Michael D. Reed (176), and Michael Steig (149) in their efforts to make sense of the contentious picture book, with a focus on Ida's supposed oedipal complex as she arguably contends with her baby sister and mother for her father's affection. However, Sendak's story describes Ida as "poor" and "foolish" rather than jealous. Steig asserts that Ida's failure to witness and prevent the kidnapping reflects "deliberate and hostile neglect," yet Ida never explicitly shows such hostility and springs to action in endeavoring to rescue her sister, as flawed as her effort initially is. Ida is thus not resentful, but incompetent. Sendak places heavy emphasis on Ida's "backwards" position, which DeLuca argues shows that "[s]he is still too passive and still looking inward rather than to 'outside over there,' where the world and her responsibility lie" (17). Ida's incompetence comes from her inability to address the needs of her environment and those around her; she is focused too much inwards, too lost on her own horn playing when she should really be watching her sister, displaying a selfishness that reflects not hostility but immaturity. When "Ida symbolically tries to take on her mother's role by donning her raincoat," her

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backwards position betrays that as a child, she is still incapable of assuming an adult's responsibilities (Deluca 17).

DeLuca states that Ida "is anyone feeling abandoned and burdened, needing love, recognition, and time to herself, anyone feeling guilt at not being all she is expected to be" (16). Love, recognition, and the desire for personal time are egocentric desires that are especially necessary for the child that Ida is, and in being forced to take care of her sister's needs, she is put into conflict with her own needs. This conflict illuminates the symbolism of the goblins. The word goblin suggests fantastical creatures, and these creatures are monstrous in their kidnapping of Ida's sister; yet, in actual appearance and even behavior, they are "just babies like her sister" (Sendak). DeLuca again asserts the psychoanalytic perspective in arguing that "Ida's unconscious might well depict the goblins as babies since that is the form that troubles her" (16-17). However, Ida is not far off from being a baby herself; her selfishness in failing to watch over her sister leads to the goblins' selfish kidnapping of the sister for their "wedding" (Sendak). The goblins thus symbolize Ida's selfishness itself.

Both Ida and her sister are selfish, which again comes not from intent but from immaturity. Immature children should be watched over by parents or guardians, not only because they need to provide for the dependent children, but also because the children's immaturity can cause behavior dangerous to themselves and others. There are no parents or guardians present to keep the children safe, and while Ida tries to fill that role for her sister, her own immaturity prevents her from doing a proper job. Without a watcher, the potential for danger becomes real. Just as the goblins put her sister into a dangerous situation by kidnapping her, they also put Ida herself into one by forcing her to venture beyond their home to confront the goblins. This seemingly hopeless situation devoid of adult presence is ironically resolved through adult influence in the form of Ida's "sailor Papa's song":

> If Ida backwards in the rain
>
> would only turn around again
>
> and catch those goblins with a tune
>
> she'd spoil their kidnap honeymoon! (Sendak)

Ida's father thus teaches her to face forward, and in doing so, transfers his maturity as an adult onto her. This is paralleled by the use of her "hornpipe" in subduing the goblins. A psychoanalytic analysis is useful here as the horn represents the "penis" and therefore the masculinity and responsibility of the father (Reed 177); that the tune "makes sailors wild" also implies that Ida learned it from her sailor father (Sendak). Ida's horn-playing here furthermore juxtaposes her horn-playing earlier. Whereas before, she played the horn with her back to her sister, she maintains a forward stance to her sister in all three page-spreads of this second attempt, turning her back to the goblins—her own selfishness—in the process. When faced with the adult influence of the tune, the goblins "must to bed" and transform "into a dancing stream" that leads Ida and her sister back "to her Mama . . . with a letter from papa." Child selfishness is thus brought back into harmony with adult protection. With the conflict resolved, Ida now "must watch the baby and her Mama / for her Papa," making her the functional father in a family where the actual father is away. To assume this role, "[w]hich is just what Ida did," Ida learns to face forward and take the responsibility of meeting her sister's needs.

Like Sendak's picture book, Gaiman's *Coraline* features a protagonist who must mature to conquer symbolic monsters. The novel begins by establishing that Coraline is mostly ignored by her parents and bored without their attention. With an appearance resembling Coraline's real mother, the other mother offers Coraline a life that seems better than her current one (117); however, Coraline knows that her love is shallow, like love for a "possession" (104). Whereas Sendak's goblins symbolize selfishness through the manifestation of monstrous children, Gaiman's other mother symbolizes dependency through the manifestation of a monstrous parent. This monster attempts to influence Coraline by taking advantage of her "doubt" (61). As Richard Gooding asserts:

> [A]lthough Coraline imagines the game as a struggle against a hostile antagonist, it is more fundamentally a struggle against her own desire for dependency and identification, a desire

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not far beneath the explicit demands Coraline makes of her real parents. To lose the game
would be to accept perpetual childhood. (397-398)

The other mother thus reflects Coraline's desire for love and recognition from her parents. She must
mature past her childhood dependence to defeat the monster.

Like Ida, Coraline faces the monsters without adult presence but is ultimately supported by adult
influence. This is shown by her recounting of the wasp incident in which her father protected her:
"[H]e knew he had to give me enough time to run, or the wasps would have come after both of us . . .
if [my parents] noticed I was gone I'm sure they would [come] for me" (Gaiman 56-57). Coraline thus
uses her father's commitment to protect her to justify her commitment to protect her parents, gaining
the determination to confront the other mother despite her fear. Like Ida, she becomes the functional
parent in a family where the real parents are dependent on her, the child, to resolve the conflict. Like
Ida, her maturation is marked by her triumph over the monster: "The act of closing the door on the
other mother confirms the resolution of Coraline's conflicts with her parents and her successful
integration into a web of social relationships" (Gooding 399). Coraline's need for dependence causes
her emotional pain from her parents' lack of attention towards her. After rescuing her parents, she is
able to close the emotional gap herself, as demonstrated when she takes the initiative to connect with
her father: "I just miss you sometimes. That's all" (Gaiman 138). This initiative succeeds: "[F]or no
reason at all, he picked Coraline up" (138). Coraline grows from unsuccessfully seeking connections
from others to successfully establishing connections with others through her own actions, thus
transforming from a passive victim to a proactive agent.

In Ness' novel, the symbolism of the monster is more explicit and the triumph over it more personal.
Faced with a cancer-stricken mother who will inevitably die, Conor struggles against the monster of his
nightmare that symbolizes his guilt from wanting "it to be over" (188). Navigating this contradiction
between his genuine love for his mother and his implicit wish for her death, which results from the
pain and weariness of witnessing her inevitable decline towards it, forms the central conflict of Ness'
novel. Whereas Sendak's monster kidnaps Ida's sister and Gaiman's monster traps Coraline's parents,
the monster of Conor's nightmare only directly influences Conor. It is never even made clear whether
the other monster—the one that tells Conor the stories—is physically real; when Conor claims that it
had beaten his bully, the teacher explains that "[t]hey [only] saw you" beat him (156). Even the
illustrations serve more to reinforce the "ambiguity" of the other monster's existence than prove it
(Jen Aggleton 238). While this makes Ness' monsters more phantasmal than Sendak and Gaiman's,
they are nonetheless real to Conor. He sees his nightmare's monster as "formed of cloud and ash and
dark flames, but with real muscle, real strength, real red eyes" (179). The torture that the nightmare's
monster inflicts on him is real, as is the insight taught to him by the other monster's stories.

Although it is referred to as a monster, the other monster is not monstrous in the way that Sendak's
goblins, Gaiman's other mother, and Ness' nightmare is; it is not malicious, but instead supports the
protagonist in resolving the conflict. Like Ida and Coraline, Conor cannot defeat the hostile monster by
himself; he needs the other monster, who ultimately fills the same role that Ida and Coraline's fathers
do. Like those fathers, the other monster is a symbol of maturity: "*I have had as many names as
there are years to time itself! . . . I am this wild earth*" (34). In telling Conor the stories, it directly
transfers its wisdom onto him: "*How can a queen be both a good witch and a bad witch?. . . How can
invisible men make themselves more lonely by being seen?*" (191). Conor believes that the
contradiction of loving his mother and wanting her to die makes him "deserve the worst," but the
monster shows him that such contradictions are a natural part of human existence (189). It finally
teaches him how to face his truth: "*What you think is not important. It is only important what you **do***"
(192). Conor takes the action of holding his mother on her deathbed to show the truth of his love,
thus overcoming his guilt and accepting that her death is not his fault (205).

Just as "[t]he removal of parents is the premise for children's literature" because proper parental
protection prevents meaningful conflict for the children, the monsters of these three stories are able to
threaten the child protagonists due to parental failures (Nikolajeva 16). On Sendak's picture book,
Deluca asserts that "[t]here is something suspect about the parents, the profoundly passive mother so
wrapped in missing papa she can hardly move, the father so unattainable and beyond reproach" (16).

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If Ida's father and mother were present to watch over her and her sister, then the goblins would never have exposed them to danger. If Coraline's parents gave her the attention that she desired, then she would not have opened the door to the other mother. If Conor's mother was not dying, then Conor's nightmare would never have existed. Ness' novel especially highlights the point that these failures do not necessarily implicate the parents as morally suspect; they instead reflect points of violation in symbolic childhood: "an enmeshment of beliefs, values and fears associated with the perception, both by adults and by children, of what it means to be a child" (Beauvais 7). While symbolic childhood is always in a state of flux, the values violated in these stories are fundamental to contemporary Western culture—parents should be physically present to keep their children safe, receptive to their need for love and attention, and alive to support them.

Because the parents fail to uphold fundamental values in symbolic childhood, the children are forced to adapt beyond it. Steig describes *Outside Over There* as a story "which demonstrate[s] just how fine the line is between being a child and being an adult" (151). However, it is not that symbolic childhood has encroached into symbolic adulthood, but rather that to survive the violation in symbolic childhood, Ida must step out of that and into symbolic adulthood. Ida, Coraline, and Conor thus develop adult sensibilities while remaining physically children. They do not achieve this solely by their own powers, but are instead supported by adult figures, be it their parents or an ancient creature, who transfer these sensibilities onto them. Even with their support, however, crossing the line remains a momentous task. To succeed, they require another source of support—the very monsters that they face.

Nikolajeva notes that "[w]hile much of fantasy can be viewed as mere entertainment, the best examples of fantasy for children use the fantastic form as a narrative device, as a metaphor for reality" (42). Sendak, Gaiman, and Ness use fantasy in this way. In his epigraph to *Coraline*, Gaiman provides a paraphrase of a quote from G. K. Chesterton[1] that illuminates the didactic purpose behind his monster: "Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten." McCort asserts that "[t]he fantasy of horror offers young readers and viewers a dreamscape that parallels their reality, sometimes making it easier to cope with the monsters they must face in the real world" (22). The knowledge that your selfishness has put your sister into danger, the loneliness of being neglected by everyone around you, the guilt of wishing your mother's death—these are monsters of the real world. They are truly horrific because they are not outside threats, but inner struggles. For those suffering under them, they are difficult to describe, to understand, and therefore to overcome. However, "[t]he spiritual growth of the protagonist can be presented more tangibly when depicted in terms of struggle with external magic forces than in terms of inner tension" (Nikolajeva 42). The antagonistic monsters of the three stories are physical manifestations of these inner tensions, "translating those things into a fantasy world where fear is rendered manageable" (McCort 14). Abstract horrors are transformed into concrete monsters, entities that can be observed, analyzed, and defeated. These monsters are therefore lessor horrors, yet still symbolic of the true horrors. They ultimately grant their enemies—the child protagonists—agency over their greatest fears.

Outside Over There, *Coraline*, and *A Monster Calls* utilize monsters as literary tools that, along with the transference of adult sensibilities through the support of adult figures, allows their child protagonists to overcome true horrors—horrors born from the failures of their parents to keep them within the confines of symbolic childhood. Ida learns to face her responsibilities; Coraline learns to use her own agency rather than depend on others; Conor learns that no matter what thoughts he has, it is his actions that truly matter. Despite the didacticism in these stories, they are far from the spoon-

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[1] **Editor's Note**: Chesterton's actual quote, paraphrased by Gaiman, is :

> "Fairy tales, then, are not responsible for producing in children fear, or any of the shapes of fear; fairy tales do not give the child the idea of the evil or the ugly; that is in the child already, because it is in the world already.
>
> Fairy tales do not give the child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon."
>
> — **G.K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles***

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feeding cliché. The children in these stories are not obedient, but observant. They take the experiences of the adult figures, offered or not, and interpret them through their own agencies. These are didactic stories done right, showing how children can defeat real dragons.

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