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## Analysis Of The Main Character's Anticipatory Grief In Patrick Ness's Novel A Monster Calls (2011)

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### Abstract

*This study examines anticipatory grief experienced by Conor O'Malley in Patrick Ness's A Monster Calls (2011) through a literary psychology perspective. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the analysis focuses on narrative events, characterization, dialogue, monologue, setting, dreams, and symbolic elements associated with Conor's response to his mother's terminal illness. The findings show that Conor's anticipatory grief is constructed through changes in family life, social isolation, emotional suppression, symbolic encounters with the monster, and increasing awareness of impending maternal loss. His responses can be interpreted through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, yet these categories do not occur in a fixed or linear sequence. Instead, they overlap, recur, and change according to Conor's emotional condition and the progression of his mother's illness. The monster and the yew tree function as symbolic mechanisms that externalize suppressed fear, guilt, hope, and inner conflict. Ultimately, Conor's journey reflects psychological adaptation and meaning reconstruction, showing that acceptance involves acknowledging loss while maintaining emotional attachment to his mother. The novel therefore demonstrates literature's capacity to represent the complex emotional realities of children confronting anticipated parental death.*

**Keywords:** *anticipatory grief, A Monster Calls, literary psychology, parental loss, psychological adaptation.*



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## INTRODUCTION

Grief is a multidimensional psychological response to significant loss that may involve emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social, and physical changes in an individual's life. Contemporary studies emphasize that grief should not be understood as a uniform or predictable reaction because individuals may respond differently according to their relationships, circumstances, developmental stages, and perceived meaning of the loss (van Schaik et al., 2025). The process may involve recurring feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, guilt, and uncertainty that fluctuate rather than develop through an entirely linear sequence (Stroebe et al., 2017). Accordingly, grief represents a dynamic process of psychological adjustment through which individuals attempt to interpret changing circumstances and reconstruct meaning after confronting the possibility or reality of loss (Neimeyer, 2019).

Although grief is commonly associated with bereavement following death, psychological responses to loss can emerge before death actually occurs. This phenomenon is generally conceptualized as anticipatory grief, referring to emotional and cognitive reactions arising when an individual becomes aware that the loss of an important person is increasingly probable or unavoidable (McCarroll & Yan, 2024). Studies involving families of patients with incurable illnesses demonstrate that anticipatory grief may involve fear, emotional distress, uncertainty, and attempts to psychologically prepare for an impending separation (Paulsen et al., 2025). Consequently, anticipatory grief illustrates how individuals may begin adapting to loss while simultaneously maintaining emotional relationships with loved ones who are still present (Sun et al., 2024).

The experience of anticipatory grief can become particularly complex for children and adolescents because their emotional regulation and understanding of illness, death, and permanent separation are still developing. Children confronted with serious parental illness may experience anxiety, insecurity, sadness, behavioral changes, and difficulties interpreting the possible

transformation of their family environment (Alexander et al., 2023). Research on children and young people further indicates that grief-related experiences may influence social relationships, emotional expression, daily functioning, and their capacity to communicate distress effectively (Blackburn et al., 2024). These developmental conditions make the psychological experiences of children facing parental illness particularly important because anticipated loss may affect both their present emotional stability and their perception of future life without the parent.

Parental illness can also disturb the emotional security created through parent–child attachment and alter everyday roles within the family. Children whose parents experience serious illnesses may encounter increasing responsibilities, changes in family routines, uncertainty regarding treatment outcomes, and difficulties expressing fears about death or separation (Geertz et al., 2023). Effective communication about illness has therefore been identified as an important component in helping children understand parental health conditions and manage the psychological consequences associated with possible loss (Liénard et al., 2022). Psychosocial interventions for children with parents affected by cancer similarly demonstrate the importance of providing spaces in which children can recognize, communicate, and process difficult emotions rather than facing uncertainty in isolation (Phillips et al., 2022).

Literary works provide an important medium through which such complex psychological experiences can be represented from the perspective of fictional characters. Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) portrays this issue through Conor O'Malley, a thirteen-year-old boy who struggles with the progressive deterioration of his mother's health while confronting the possibility of losing her. The novel combines realistic experiences of illness and family disruption with supernatural imagery, particularly the monster, to represent emotional tensions that Conor finds difficult to articulate directly (You, 2023). Through fantasy, dreams, interpersonal conflicts, and symbolic encounters, Conor's psychological struggle can therefore be interpreted as a literary representation of the fear, resistance, anger, guilt, and emotional uncertainty associated with anticipated loss (Alkış, 2024).

Several studies have previously examined the psychological and literary dimensions of *A Monster Calls*, demonstrating the analytical richness of Conor's character and the novel's symbolic elements. Kumanau (2021) approached the monster from a psychoanalytic perspective by interpreting its role in relation to Conor's unconscious, whereas Utami (2021) investigated Conor O'Malley's behavior through processes of internalization and externalization. Ulfa (2021) examined the characteristics of magical realism in the novel and connected its fantastic elements with adolescent psychological experience, while more recent scholarship has explored self-empathy and psychological reconciliation within children's fantasy fiction (Alkış, 2024). In addition, You (2023) positioned *A Monster Calls* within young-adult liminal fantasy and demonstrated how fantastic creatures and genre crossing can contribute to representations of psychological experience.

Despite these scholarly contributions, the specific representation of Conor's anticipatory grief before his mother's death remains comparatively underexplored as the central psychological problem of the narrative. Previous studies have predominantly emphasized psychoanalytic interpretation, behavioral processes, magical realism, fantasy structures, or self-empathy rather than systematically examining how Conor responds to an impending maternal loss (Kumanau, 2021; Ulfa, 2021; Alkış, 2024). This distinction is significant because contemporary research conceptualizes anticipatory grief as a complex experience involving emotional upheaval, fear, coping attempts, cognitive appraisal, and adaptation before an expected death occurs (Najafi et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2024). Examining these processes in Conor's characterization can therefore provide a more focused explanation of how psychological responses to anticipated loss are transformed into narrative behavior, internal conflict, symbolism, and interpersonal interaction.

Accordingly, this study analyzes the representation of anticipatory grief experienced by Conor O'Malley in Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) through a literary psychology perspective. The analysis employs denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as interpretive categories for identifying changes in Conor's thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and responses to his mother's deteriorating condition, while recognizing that grief responses do not necessarily occur in a fixed chronological sequence (Stroebe et al., 2017). Such an approach enables the analysis to connect Conor's narrative development with broader psychological understandings of anticipatory grief as a fluctuating process shaped by uncertainty, attachment, fear of separation, and gradual confrontation with impending loss (McCarroll & Yan, 2024; Paulsen et al., 2025). Therefore, this study seeks to

explain both the forms and dynamics of Conor's anticipatory grief while demonstrating how literary narratives can illuminate the emotional complexity experienced by young individuals confronting the anticipated death of a parent.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method within a literary psychology approach to examine the representation of anticipatory grief experienced by Conor O'Malley in Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011). The qualitative design was selected because the study focuses on interpreting psychological meanings embedded in narrative events, characterization, dialogue, monologue, and symbolic representations rather than measuring variables statistically. Literary psychology was used to connect the psychological dimensions of grief with the characterization and narrative development presented in the novel, particularly Conor's emotional and behavioral responses to his mother's deteriorating health. The primary data therefore consisted of textual units describing Conor's thoughts, statements, actions, interpersonal interactions, internal conflicts, dreams, and symbolic encounters that were relevant to anticipatory grief, while the analytical framework employed the five grief categories of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

Data were collected through close reading and textual documentation by identifying passages that represented Conor's emotional and psychological responses to the anticipated loss of his mother. The selected data were subsequently organized, coded, and classified according to the five grief categories, after which each textual unit was interpreted in relation to its narrative context, characterization, and contribution to the development of Conor's anticipatory grief. The analysis was conducted iteratively because the categories were not treated as a fixed chronological sequence; instead, attention was given to the possibility that particular responses could recur, overlap, or shift according to changes in Conor's emotional condition and narrative circumstances. Finally, the interpretations were synthesized to explain the forms and dynamics of anticipatory grief represented in the novel and to demonstrate how Conor's psychological responses develop throughout his confrontation with the prospect of maternal loss.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Narrative and Symbolic Construction of Conor's Anticipatory Grief

Conor O'Malley's psychological conflict in *A Monster Calls* begins before the actual death of his mother, positioning his emotional experience within the conceptual boundaries of anticipatory grief. As a thirteen-year-old child confronting his mother's progressively deteriorating condition, Conor experiences the possibility of loss as an ongoing psychological reality rather than as a single event occurring after death. Contemporary studies characterize anticipatory grief as a process in which individuals cognitively and emotionally respond to an expected loss while the loved person is still alive, often involving fear, uncertainty, emotional distress, and attempts to prepare for an unwanted future (McCarroll & Yan, 2024; Paulsen et al., 2025). Conor's circumstances correspond to this pattern because his daily activities are increasingly structured around his awareness that his mother may not recover despite his persistent desire to believe otherwise. His experience consequently demonstrates how anticipated loss can gradually transform a child's emotional world before bereavement itself takes place (Alexander et al., 2023).

The recurring appearance of the monster at 12:07 a.m. represents one of the earliest narrative manifestations of Conor's suppressed psychological distress. The monster originates from an ancient yew tree situated near his home and initially appears to Conor as a frightening supernatural presence that disturbs his sleep and confronts him with experiences he attempts to avoid consciously. Within the psychological structure of the novel, this recurring nighttime encounter can be interpreted as an externalized representation of fears that Conor is unable or unwilling to communicate directly, particularly his fear of his mother's approaching death. Kumanau (2021) similarly interprets the monster in relation to components of Conor's unconscious, whereas Alkış (2024) emphasizes the importance of self-confrontation and self-empathy in understanding the protagonist's psychological development. The supernatural encounter therefore performs more than a fantastic narrative function because it gives symbolic form to emotional conflicts that remain largely inaccessible to Conor in ordinary social interaction (You, 2023).

The family home constitutes another important space through which Conor's anticipatory grief is represented. Before his mother's illness became severe, the house functioned as a familiar and emotionally secure environment, but her declining health gradually changes its psychological meaning for Conor. He must increasingly complete ordinary activities independently because his mother becomes too physically weak to perform routine household responsibilities, including preparing breakfast and managing daily needs. Such changes resemble the disruption of family routines reported among children whose parents experience cancer or other serious illnesses, in which uncertainty and altered family roles may create considerable psychosocial pressure (Alexander et al., 2023; Geertz et al., 2023). Consequently, the house becomes both the place where Conor remains closest to his mother and the environment in which he repeatedly encounters visible evidence that she is becoming weaker.

The grandmother's house produces a different but equally significant form of psychological pressure. Its large, orderly, and highly regulated environment contrasts with the familiarity of Conor's own home and therefore intensifies his sense that his ordinary life is being displaced by circumstances beyond his control. More importantly, staying there forces Conor to recognize a possible future in which his mother is absent and his grandmother becomes responsible for his care. Anticipatory grief frequently involves mentally projecting oneself into a future shaped by an expected death, creating distress not only about losing the loved person but also about the life changes that may follow that loss (McCarroll & Yan, 2024). The grandmother's house thus operates as a spatial representation of an unwanted future, transforming an ordinary domestic setting into a persistent reminder of the possibility that Conor's relationship with his mother may soon end.

School further expands Conor's anticipatory grief from a private family experience into a social problem. After other people become aware of his mother's illness, Conor perceives changes in how teachers and classmates interact with him, including pity, avoidance, differential treatment, and bullying. Instead of functioning as an environment where he can temporarily escape the pressures surrounding his mother's illness, school becomes another space in which that illness determines how others see him. Research concerning childhood and adolescent grief indicates that serious illness and bereavement-related experiences can affect social interaction, emotional expression, school participation, and feelings of belonging (Blackburn et al., 2024; Pirskanen, 2024). Conor's increasing sense of isolation therefore demonstrates that anticipatory grief does not remain confined to his relationship with his mother but begins to reorganize his broader social world.

**Table 1. Narrative Settings and Symbols Associated with Conor's Anticipatory Grief**

| <b>Narrative element</b> | <b>Data represented in the novel</b>                                                                           | <b>Psychological significance</b>                                         | <b>Relation to anticipatory grief</b>                                                   |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Conor's home             | His mother becomes increasingly weak, the house becomes quieter, and Conor assumes more daily responsibilities | Loss of security and disruption of familiar family routines               | Conor encounters continuous evidence that his mother's condition is deteriorating       |
| Grandmother's house      | Conor temporarily stays in a highly ordered and unfamiliar environment                                         | Anxiety regarding an unwanted future and altered family structure         | The setting reminds Conor that he may have to live without his mother                   |
| School                   | Teachers and classmates treat Conor differently, while bullying and social isolation increase                  | Alienation, emotional suppression, and reduced sense of belonging         | His mother's illness influences areas of life outside the family                        |
| The monster              | The supernatural creature repeatedly appears at 12:07 a.m.                                                     | Externalization of suppressed fears and unresolved psychological conflict | The monster gradually forces Conor to confront emotions connected with anticipated loss |
| Ancient yew tree         | The monster takes the form of a yew tree associated with                                                       | Hope, uncertainty, bargaining, and                                        | Conor associates the monster with the                                                   |

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|         |                                             |
|---------|---------------------------------------------|
| healing | confrontation with the possibility that his |
|         | limits of cure mother might still be        |
|         | saved                                       |

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Source: Analytical synthesis of the narrative data in *A Monster Calls* (2011).

The monster and the ancient yew tree acquire particularly important symbolic functions because they connect Conor's psychological distress with his continuing hope that his mother can be saved. The yew tree is associated within the narrative with medicinal and healing possibilities, causing Conor eventually to expect that the monster may possess the ability to reverse his mother's worsening condition. Such hope is psychologically significant because anticipatory grief can coexist with continued attachment, efforts to preserve the loved person, and difficulty integrating medical deterioration into one's expectations about the future (Sun et al., 2024). The monster consequently functions simultaneously as an object of fear, a possible source of rescue, and a force that eventually challenges Conor's attempts to avoid emotionally threatening realities. This symbolic complexity supports Ulfa's (2021) interpretation of magical realism in the novel while extending it toward anticipatory grief as the psychological process underlying Conor's relationship with the supernatural.

Conor's intense psychological response is also inseparable from the attachment relationship he maintains with his mother. Parent-child attachment contributes significantly to emotional security, particularly when children encounter threatening or uncertain circumstances, and serious parental illness can destabilize this sense of security (Ali et al., 2021). In the novel, Conor's affection and loyalty toward his mother coexist with fear, exhaustion, frustration, and an increasing awareness that he may eventually be separated from her. These apparently contradictory feelings do not indicate an absence of attachment; rather, they demonstrate the emotional complexity that may emerge when a child remains deeply connected to a parent whose illness creates prolonged uncertainty. Studies involving families affected by life-threatening illness similarly show that anticipatory grief may contain simultaneous experiences of love, fear, hope, sadness, and emotional upheaval rather than a single dominant emotional response (Najafi et al., 2022).

The limited communication surrounding Conor's distress further contributes to the intensification of his emotional burden. He repeatedly keeps his fears and anxieties to himself, while adults and peers around him frequently respond to his circumstances without providing a sufficiently secure space in which he can articulate what he is actually experiencing. Research involving families affected by parental cancer emphasizes that communication about illness can substantially influence how children interpret changing family circumstances and cope with uncertainty (Liénard et al., 2022). Interventions designed for children of parents with cancer likewise emphasize opportunities for emotional communication because unexpressed fears may contribute to isolation, confusion, and psychological distress (Phillips et al., 2022). Conor's silence is therefore not merely a personality characteristic but a narrative mechanism through which the novel demonstrates how emotional suppression can intensify anticipatory grief.

This emotional suppression is also reflected in Conor's increasing independence and altered everyday behavior. Because his mother is progressively unable to perform ordinary tasks, Conor becomes more self-reliant than would ordinarily be expected of a child his age, even while remaining psychologically dependent on the security represented by his relationship with her. Family-centered palliative research indicates that parental life-limiting illness can transform the organization of family life and create circumstances in which dependent children must negotiate both practical changes and emotionally difficult knowledge concerning illness and death (Weber Falk et al., 2022). Conor's behavioral adjustment therefore contains a fundamental contradiction: externally, he performs tasks that suggest increasing independence, while internally, he becomes increasingly fearful of the separation that would require him to live without his mother. This tension reinforces the depiction of anticipatory grief as a process that simultaneously affects behavior, emotional regulation, relationships, and perceptions of the future.

From a literary-psychological perspective, the settings and symbols surrounding Conor transform internal psychological processes into observable narrative structures. The house embodies the gradual disappearance of familial normality, the grandmother's house represents an unwanted future, school reveals social alienation, and the monster materializes emotions that Conor cannot initially articulate. Such a pattern supports literary-psychological approaches that understand

characterization and symbolic structures as mechanisms through which psychological conflict can be represented in literary texts (Minderop, 2018). Recent analysis of *A Monster Calls* likewise demonstrates that fantasy enables psychological experiences to be externalized through extraordinary creatures and liminal narrative situations, thereby allowing the protagonist to encounter dimensions of himself that are difficult to address through ordinary discourse (You, 2023; Alkış, 2024). The novel thus converts anticipatory grief from an abstract psychological condition into a sequence of spaces, relationships, behaviors, and symbols that readers can observe throughout Conor's development.

Taken together, these contextual elements demonstrate that Conor's anticipatory grief is established well before the narrative reaches the final prospect of his mother's death. His changing home environment, temporary residence with his grandmother, experiences of isolation at school, increasing practical independence, recurring encounter with the monster, and emotional attachment to his mother collectively construct an atmosphere in which anticipated loss becomes inseparable from everyday life. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary perspectives that view anticipatory grief as a multidimensional and fluctuating response shaped by attachment, cognitive appraisal, environmental change, uncertainty, and attempts to cope with an expected death (Dehpour & Koffman, 2023; Trucco et al., 2024). The findings also extend earlier analyses focused on Conor's behavior, unconscious processes, and magical realism by positioning these narrative characteristics within the more specific framework of grief occurring before actual bereavement (Utami, 2021; Kumanau, 2021; Ulfa, 2021). These contextual and symbolic manifestations provide the foundation for examining how Conor subsequently expresses denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as overlapping rather than strictly sequential responses to his mother's impending death.

### **Nonlinear Manifestation of the Five Grief Responses in Conor O'Malley**

Conor's anticipatory grief becomes increasingly visible through a series of emotional responses that can be interpreted through denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, although these responses do not develop in a fixed chronological order. The novel repeatedly presents Conor as moving between hope and fear while his mother remains alive, indicating that his psychological struggle concerns both the possibility of death and the uncertainty surrounding when that loss may occur. Contemporary grief scholarship likewise emphasizes that grief responses may overlap, recur, and change according to the individual's circumstances rather than progressing through a rigid sequence (Stroebe et al., 2017; American Psychological Association, 2024). This nonlinear pattern is particularly appropriate for understanding anticipatory grief because the threatened loss is simultaneously imagined, resisted, and emotionally experienced before it becomes final (Seabra & Oliveira, 2025).

Denial constitutes one of Conor's most persistent responses to his mother's deteriorating condition. At the beginning of the narrative, he attempts to interpret the monster's appearance at 12:07 a.m. merely as a nightmare and resists acknowledging that the creature may be connected with the fears he suppresses concerning his mother. His rejection of the monster's psychological significance parallels his broader resistance to recognizing the seriousness of the illness, because acknowledging either would bring him closer to confronting the possibility of maternal death. Anticipatory grief can involve difficulty accepting an expected loss even when the individual possesses information indicating that the condition is worsening, particularly because attachment and hope continue to coexist with awareness of mortality (Gallio et al., 2024; McCarroll & Yan, 2024).

Conor's denial becomes even more explicit when his mother's treatment begins to fail. Although his father and grandmother indicate that her condition is becoming more serious, Conor continues to place hope in the possibility that another medication or treatment will restore her health and return their lives to normal. This conviction does not simply reflect lack of knowledge; rather, it functions psychologically as a temporary defense against the implications of accepting that the person most central to his emotional security may die. Research on families confronting incurable illness demonstrates that anticipatory grief frequently develops alongside fluctuating expectations regarding treatment, recovery, and deterioration (Paulsen et al., 2025). Conor's insistence on a future cure therefore illustrates the tension between cognitive recognition of illness and emotional unwillingness to accept its possible outcome.

The growing failure of denial is followed by increasingly intense anger. Conor suppresses his feelings for an extended period while simultaneously coping with his mother's worsening health,

altered family routines, differential treatment at school, and bullying from classmates. Eventually, his accumulated emotional pressure develops into aggressive and destructive reactions, suggesting that anger becomes an indirect means of expressing fears he cannot communicate openly. Children experiencing grief-related distress may exhibit irritability, behavioral changes, aggression, withdrawal, or difficulty adapting to changes in their surroundings, particularly when their emotional vocabulary and regulation remain developmentally limited (Behm, 2024; Martino, 2022). Conor's anger can therefore be understood not simply as misconduct but as an external manifestation of psychological overload produced by prolonged uncertainty.

The social environment intensifies this anger because Conor perceives himself as increasingly disconnected from those around him. His teachers treat him cautiously because of his mother's illness, classmates respond to him differently, and bullying further reinforces his perception that school no longer provides normality or social security. Grief among young people may influence interpersonal relationships and generate feelings of social disconnection when others are uncertain about how to communicate with the grieving child (Marie Curie, 2025; Blackburn et al., 2024). Conor consequently directs anger not only toward specific individuals but toward a social reality in which his mother's illness has altered how everyone perceives and interacts with him. His angry outbursts therefore emerge from the convergence of anticipated loss, loneliness, helplessness, and a perceived loss of control.

**Table 2. Five Grief Responses Represented in Conor O'Malley's Anticipatory Grief**

| Grief response | Narrative evidence in the original analysis                                                                        | Psychological interpretation                                    | Anticipatory-grief significance                                                         |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Denial         | Conor dismisses the monster as a nightmare and continues believing that a new treatment can cure his mother        | Resistance to acknowledging threatening reality                 | Preserves temporary hope while postponing confrontation with possible maternal death    |
| Anger          | Suppressed emotions develop into violent outbursts amid bullying, uncertainty, and altered treatment by others     | Externalization of fear, helplessness, and accumulated distress | Shows the emotional pressure created by prolonged uncertainty                           |
| Bargaining     | Conor asks and later demands that the yew-tree monster heal his mother                                             | Search for control and an alternative outcome                   | Attempts to prevent or postpone the anticipated loss                                    |
| Depression     | Conor becomes isolated, overwhelmed, guilty, and emotionally exhausted                                             | Internalization of helplessness, sadness, and guilt             | Reflects increasing recognition that the loss may be unavoidable                        |
| Acceptance     | Conor admits the truth of his nightmare, acknowledges his fear of losing his mother, and holds her hand at the end | Integration of painful reality without eliminating attachment   | Represents willingness to face the impending loss while remaining emotionally connected |

Source: Analytical synthesis of the narrative evidence.

Bargaining becomes particularly apparent when Conor begins to associate the monster with the possibility of curing his mother. Because the monster takes the form of an ancient yew tree associated with medicinal properties, Conor gradually shifts from fearing the creature to expecting that it might possess the power necessary to restore his mother's health. When the monster refuses to provide the cure Conor desires, his requests become increasingly urgent, revealing an attempt to negotiate against circumstances over which he has no actual control. Psychological research on anticipatory grief identifies coping efforts and cognitive appraisal as important mechanisms through which individuals attempt to manage threats of impending loss (Sun et al., 2024). Conor's bargaining therefore represents an effort to create agency within a situation characterized by medical uncertainty and personal helplessness.

Depressive features become increasingly visible as Conor realizes that neither denial nor bargaining can prevent his mother's deterioration. He withdraws emotionally, experiences profound

loneliness, and becomes burdened by guilt concerning the disturbing truth contained in his recurring nightmare. Conor believes that his unconscious wish for the prolonged suffering and uncertainty to end means that he is a bad son who does not genuinely love his mother, causing him to judge himself harshly. Anticipatory grief may involve sadness, helplessness, guilt, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion because relatives can simultaneously desire continued life for the ill person and relief from prolonged suffering (Najafi et al., 2022; Paulsen et al., 2025). The monster's explanation that such conflicting feelings can emerge under prolonged psychological strain eventually helps Conor reinterpret his guilt as part of his grief rather than as evidence that his attachment to his mother is inadequate.

This guilt is particularly significant because it demonstrates that Conor's depression is not limited to sadness about his mother's condition. His recurring nightmare—in which his mother is positioned at the edge of a cliff and he ultimately releases her hand—symbolically expresses a thought that Conor finds morally unbearable: part of him wants the endless fear, uncertainty, and suffering to stop. Physical and emotional manifestations of grief may become intensified when individuals suppress distress or interpret their own reactions as unacceptable, particularly when guilt becomes attached to thoughts they cannot easily control (Raymond, 2026; van Schaik et al., 2025). Through the monster, the narrative separates the desire for suffering to end from the desire for the loved person to die. This distinction allows Conor to begin recognizing that exhaustion and love can coexist within anticipatory grief.

Acceptance emerges only after Conor confronts the truth he has persistently attempted to conceal from himself. He eventually admits that he knows his mother may die and acknowledges that his most distressing nightmare reflects both his desperate wish to hold onto her and his exhaustion from living under continuous fear. Acceptance in this context does not mean that Conor stops feeling sadness or suddenly becomes comfortable with death; instead, it reflects his growing capacity to recognize a reality that he can no longer alter. Grief theories increasingly caution against interpreting acceptance as emotional closure because adaptation may coexist with continued sadness, attachment, fear, and renewed distress (Neimeyer, 2019; Stroebe et al., 2017). Conor's acceptance is therefore better understood as the beginning of psychological integration rather than the termination of grief.

The final interaction between Conor and his mother reinforces this interpretation of acceptance. When he holds her hand, he no longer does so under the belief that determination alone can save her, but as an expression of love at a moment when he has begun to acknowledge that separation may be unavoidable. The gesture transforms his relationship with impending loss: rather than escaping reality through denial or attempting to reverse it through bargaining, Conor remains emotionally present with his mother despite knowing that he cannot control the outcome. Studies concerning children facing parental life-limiting illness emphasize the importance of emotional communication and opportunities to remain relationally connected even when cure is no longer possible (Weber Falk et al., 2022; Liénard et al., 2022). Thus, Conor's acceptance preserves rather than eliminates attachment, demonstrating that confronting loss can coexist with continued love.

Taken as a whole, the five grief responses in *A Monster Calls* function as overlapping psychological states rather than as five separate and sequential phases. Conor repeatedly moves between resistance, anger, hope, despair, guilt, and partial recognition as new information about his mother's health changes the emotional meaning of his circumstances. This pattern corresponds with contemporary understandings of grief as a dynamic adaptive process in which reactions can recur and interact rather than unfold according to a universally fixed order (Stroebe et al., 2017; Neimeyer, 2019). It also clarifies why Conor's anticipatory grief cannot be reduced to a single emotional category, because his experience develops while the feared loss is still approaching and while hope remains psychologically active. The five responses therefore provide useful interpretive categories only when they are treated flexibly, allowing the novel to portray anticipatory grief as an unstable process of resisting, negotiating, emotionally experiencing, and gradually confronting impending maternal loss.

### **Psychological Adaptation, Meaning Reconstruction, and the Literary Significance of Conor's Anticipatory Grief**

Conor's anticipatory grief ultimately develops beyond a sequence of emotional reactions into a broader process of psychological adaptation. Throughout the novel, he must negotiate the

contradiction between wanting his mother to survive and gradually recognizing that her illness may lead to death, a tension that continually reshapes his thoughts, behaviors, and relationships. Contemporary grief research suggests that adaptation does not require the elimination of painful emotions but involves learning to integrate the threatened or actual loss into an altered understanding of oneself and one's future (Neimeyer, 2019; McCarroll & Yan, 2024). Conor's development therefore reflects a movement from emotional avoidance toward an increasingly conscious engagement with the reality that has structured his fear from the beginning.

A central factor in this process is the intensity of Conor's attachment to his mother. His reluctance to imagine life without her is understandable because the parent-child relationship functions as an important source of emotional safety, security, and developmental support (Ali et al., 2021). Popular medical explanations similarly emphasize the strong emotional bond that can develop between mothers and children and its importance in shaping a child's sense of security (Halodoc, 2021). In *A Monster Calls*, the anticipated disruption of this relationship threatens not merely the loss of a family member but also the emotional structure through which Conor understands home, daily life, and his own place within the family.

This threatened attachment is accompanied by persistent anxiety regarding what will happen after his mother is gone. Conor worries not only about her suffering but also about how he will continue his own life, where he will live, and how his relationships will change, making the future itself a source of psychological distress. Guidance concerning anticipatory grief in children identifies similar fears, including anxiety about the loved person's suffering, uncertainty about death, and concerns about being unable to live without the person who is expected to die (Kaplow, 2025). Such fears help explain why apparently ordinary changes, including staying at his grandmother's house or being treated differently at school, become emotionally threatening because they function as evidence of the future Conor is trying not to imagine.

Conor's difficulty communicating these fears further intensifies the psychological burden of anticipated loss. Rather than openly discussing his fear of his mother's death, he repeatedly suppresses disturbing thoughts until they appear indirectly through nightmares, aggression, isolation, and interaction with the monster. Mosher (2018) observes that grief within child and adolescent clinical populations can manifest in diverse ways because children may not possess the same emotional language or coping resources as adults. Research on children whose parents have cancer similarly demonstrates the importance of age-appropriate family communication, particularly because uncertainty and silence may leave young people to interpret threatening circumstances largely on their own (Alexander et al., 2023; Liénard et al., 2022). The monster consequently becomes a narrative substitute for communication that Conor cannot initially achieve with the people around him.

The recurring nightmare is especially important because it condenses Conor's emotional conflict into a single symbolic scene. In the nightmare, he tries to prevent his mother from falling but eventually releases her hand, an action that generates intense guilt because he interprets it as evidence that he secretly wants her death. From a psychological perspective, however, this scene can be interpreted as the collision between attachment and exhaustion: Conor wants his mother to remain alive while simultaneously wanting the prolonged fear, uncertainty, and suffering to stop. Studies of anticipatory grief describe comparable emotional upheaval in which love, helplessness, guilt, relief, sadness, and fear may coexist rather than appearing as mutually exclusive experiences (Najafi et al., 2022; Seabra & Oliveira, 2025). The nightmare therefore exposes the complexity of Conor's grief more clearly than any single stage-based label could do.

**Table 3. Psychological Adaptation and Meaning Reconstruction in Conor's Anticipatory Grief**

| Psychological dimension | Narrative manifestation                                                | Interpretive meaning                                        | Adaptive significance                                                |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Attachment insecurity   | Fear of losing his mother and anxiety about future living arrangements | Threat to Conor's principal source of emotional security    | Explains his resistance to imagining life after maternal death       |
| Emotional suppression   | Conor conceals fear, sadness, and guilt from others                    | Difficulty verbalizing psychologically threatening emotions | Causes grief to emerge through nightmares, aggression, and isolation |

|                        |                                                                         |                                                                           |                                                                  |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Guilt and ambivalence  | Conor feels guilty for releasing his mother's hand in the nightmare     | Conflict between love for his mother and desire for suffering to end      | Requires reinterpretation before self-acceptance can develop     |
| Symbolic confrontation | The monster repeatedly forces Conor to acknowledge the truth            | Externalization of thoughts that Conor cannot initially admit consciously | Creates a narrative space for emotional recognition              |
| Meaning reconstruction | Conor recognizes that exhaustion does not negate love                   | Reinterpretation of his own morally troubling thoughts                    | Reduces self-condemnation and enables psychological integration  |
| Relational acceptance  | Conor holds his mother's hand while recognizing that he cannot save her | Continued attachment without denial of impending death                    | Marks movement toward realistic engagement with unavoidable loss |

*Source: Analytical synthesis of the narrative evidence in A Monster Calls (2011).*

The monster's most important psychological function is therefore not to remove Conor's grief but to force him to reinterpret the meaning of his own emotions. Initially, Conor evaluates his secret wish for the suffering to end as proof that he is morally deficient, whereas the monster teaches him that contradictory feelings can coexist without invalidating his love for his mother. This process closely resembles meaning reconstruction, in which grieving individuals attempt to reorganize interpretations of themselves, their relationships, and painful events in ways that allow an altered reality to become psychologically comprehensible (Neimeyer, 2019). Alkış (2024) similarly identifies self-empathy and reconciliation with the self as important dimensions of Conor's psychological development. Conor's progress thus depends less on suppressing difficult thoughts than on developing a more compassionate interpretation of why those thoughts emerged.

The nonlinear character of this development is especially significant because Conor does not simply move from distress to recovery. Moments of recognition are repeatedly followed by renewed anger, fear, hope, or sadness whenever his mother's condition changes or the possibility of death becomes more immediate. Studies of anticipatory grief likewise demonstrate that emotional responses vary according to disease progression, appraisal of the situation, caregiving pressures, and changing perceptions of the expected loss (Dehpour & Koffman, 2023; Sun et al., 2024; Trucco et al., 2024). Conor's repeated emotional shifts therefore support a dynamic interpretation of grief rather than a rigid developmental progression. The five grief responses remain analytically useful only when understood as intersecting manifestations within this broader adaptive process.

The novel also demonstrates that adaptation is shaped by the availability—or absence—of social support. Conor experiences substantial isolation at school and struggles to communicate within his family, while much of his psychological processing occurs privately through encounters with the monster. Studies on bereaved and grieving adolescents emphasize the importance of accessible psychosocial resources that allow young people to express difficult emotions and develop coping strategies suited to their developmental needs (Geertz et al., 2023; Rhodin et al., 2024). Similarly, structured interventions for children affected by parental cancer indicate that emotional support and opportunities for communication can reduce the burden of confronting illness in isolation (Phillips et al., 2022). Conor's loneliness therefore highlights not only an individual psychological struggle but also the importance of social environments in shaping how children process anticipated loss.

From a literary perspective, this psychological adaptation is represented through the integration of realism and fantasy rather than through direct clinical explanation. The realistic elements of maternal cancer, altered family responsibilities, school isolation, and fear of separation are combined with the supernatural monster, recurring dreams, the ancient yew tree, and symbolic storytelling. Previous research has interpreted this combination through psychoanalytic, behavioral, and magical-realist perspectives, identifying the monster as connected with Conor's unconscious and the novel's fantasy as closely linked to adolescent psychological experience (Kumanau, 2021; Utami, 2021; Ulfa, 2021). More recent literary scholarship similarly argues that the fantastic elements of *A Monster Calls* provide a liminal space through which psychologically difficult experiences can be confronted

indirectly (You, 2023). The novel's literary form therefore enables anticipatory grief to be represented simultaneously as lived experience and symbolic psychological confrontation.

Conor's eventual acknowledgment of the truth marks a transformation in the meaning of his relationship with his mother rather than an end to grief. When he finally holds her hand without insisting that he can prevent her death, he recognizes both his desire to keep her and the limitation of his own ability to change the course of her illness. This moment is compatible with research emphasizing that adaptation to anticipated death involves maintaining relational connection while gradually confronting the possibility of separation (Gallio et al., 2024; Paulsen et al., 2025). It also corresponds with evidence that young people may benefit when illness and death can be acknowledged rather than treated as subjects that must remain emotionally inaccessible (Weber Falk et al., 2022). Acceptance in the novel therefore represents a changed relationship to reality rather than emotional detachment from the mother.

The findings consequently demonstrate that anticipatory grief in *A Monster Calls* operates as an interconnected psychological and literary process involving attachment, anxiety, emotional suppression, guilt, symbolic confrontation, meaning reconstruction, and gradual adaptation. Conor's grief affects his body, behavior, social relationships, perception of home, expectations of the future, and interpretation of himself, confirming that grief-related experiences can extend far beyond sadness alone (Raymond, 2026; van Schaik et al., 2025). His development also illustrates why childhood grief must be interpreted within its developmental and relational context, because children may express distress through behavioral changes, symbolic narratives, withdrawal, or fluctuating emotional reactions rather than through direct verbal disclosure (Pirkanen, 2024; Blackburn et al., 2024). Accordingly, Patrick Ness's novel presents anticipatory grief not as a simple progression toward acceptance but as a complex process in which a child gradually learns to acknowledge impending loss without abandoning attachment, thereby reinforcing the value of literary psychology for understanding emotional experiences that are difficult to articulate through ordinary language.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Conor O'Malley's experience in Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* represents anticipatory grief that develops before the actual death of his mother. His psychological responses are manifested through changes in family life, social isolation, emotional suppression, recurring nightmares, aggressive behavior, guilt, and symbolic encounters with the monster. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are all present in Conor's experience, but they do not appear as a fixed chronological sequence. Instead, these responses overlap, recur, and shift according to changes in his mother's condition and Conor's growing awareness of the possibility of loss. The findings therefore demonstrate that anticipatory grief is a dynamic psychological process shaped by attachment, uncertainty, fear, helplessness, and the gradual recognition of an unavoidable separation.

The study also shows that the monster, the yew tree, Conor's home, his grandmother's house, school, and his recurring nightmare function as important narrative devices that externalize psychological conflicts that Conor cannot initially express directly. Through these symbolic and spatial elements, the novel portrays Conor's movement from avoidance and emotional suppression toward self-recognition, meaning reconstruction, and a more realistic acceptance of his mother's impending death. His final willingness to acknowledge his fear and remain emotionally connected to his mother indicates that acceptance does not eliminate sadness or attachment but enables him to confront reality without continuing to deny it. Thus, *A Monster Calls* demonstrates the capacity of literary narratives to represent the complex emotional experiences of children facing anticipated parental loss. The study further reinforces the relevance of literary psychology for examining how grief, attachment, guilt, and psychological adaptation are represented through characterization, symbolism, and narrative conflict.

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