

Exploring Undecidability through Binarism: A Critique of the Novel 'A Monster Calls' using the Derridean Deconstructive Perspective

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- truth

Abstract

The current study sets out to explore the play of binarism in A Monster Calls by Patrick Ness through literary deconstruction. The Derridean lens for deconstructive reading unveils the various binaries undergoing inversion and identifies instances where universality of long-held Western thoughts or absolute truths with regards to these binaries is being challenged. The novel which seemingly presents one coherent meaning, that is the acceptance of the values set firmly as central, is constantly in the process of meaning-making by the differing and deferring of terms in opposition. Keeping in view the analytic principles of a deconstructive reading, the research establishes the ways in which language fails to support the totality of a singular truth by bringing to the surface textual instances where contradictions, ambiguity, metaphors, multiplicity and abruptness of structure render the language unreliable. In turn, the centres of Western thought are displaced while the language fails to achieve one singular meaning resulting in undecidability. This element of undecidability then allows the possibility of generating countless interpretations and demonstrates how these texts, in themselves, challenge power structures within binaries by placing the margin at the centre.



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1. Introduction

Literary criticism involves reading a text, arriving at an interpretation and developing meaning through deliberate study. Up until the post-structuralists came to the scene, the meaning of linguistic terms was assumed to be inherent, and the structure of the text served to reiterate that single meaning. As a reaction against this singularity, Jacques Derrida communicated his philosophy of deconstruction, which later developed as a literary thought. Contributing in the literary field of study as a way of reading a text, deconstruction entails that language is a purely human construct and that linguistic truths are illusionary metaphors. This notion surfaces from Nietzsche's assessment of foundational truths and knowledge as fabrication on part of humans, thereby criticizing the empirical knowledge as only an illusion of the truth.

Derrida (1978) was also swayed by Saussure's study of language as differences, whereby a word secures meaning from the words in relation to it. He says, "for the signification 'sign' has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified" (1978, p. 281). He illustrates that knowledge is conditioned by binaries that are structurally inherent in nature. Words may only retain meaning through their opposition to other words but none in isolation. Furthermore, deferring of meaning proposes that meaning is subjective to every reading, and the text deconstructs itself by its own doing. Every reading to the reader unravels a pathway for a new interpretation, and thus the text allows itself to be explored countless times and in unaccountable ways.

Derrida (1978) declares that in a binary, one term governs the other as being its superior. This establishes a violent hierarchy within a system, where the privileged term is then valued and is responsible for meaning. Mirroring the system of language, humans have constructed their beliefs on this hierarchical divide. Thus, if humankind acts as the producer of his knowledge, then he argues, it is only an assemblage of metaphors aligned to suit the misapprehension of truth (Turner, 2016). Formulated on this principle, deconstruction works to explore the tranquillity of structure in language and to examine it thoroughly by interrogating the elusive aspects of language; to destabilize the established and publicised certainties of truth (Da Silva, 2017). One signifier, in an arbitrary relation, signals towards several signified depending upon the text. This spawns an ambiguity of meaning and many interpretations can be drawn from a single unit creating confusion and a multitude of meanings rather than a solitary, universal truth (Bolaños Cuellar, 2008).

Now, *A Monster Calls* follows the story of a boy, Conor, who awakens from a nightmare to find a tree monster pressing him to repeat a truth which he is afraid to embrace. In the course of the novel, the reader finds Conor struggling to fit in society, owing to either being constrained by the pressure of societal structure or the invisibility of his own self, both psychologically and practically. The text of the novel advocates the play of binary oppositions, with not only subversion of hierarchies in one pair but also yet another reversal of the binary. Such a process involves a deconstructive reading of the text, whereby the established centres of society are decentred and the contradictions in the text are highlighted. The language of this text and this method of reading leads one to explore elements that render the text undecidable, leaving it open to several varying interpretations and ultimately to open-ended assumptions.

The study addresses the issue of indecisiveness among individuals in social contexts. Taken as a transparent medium for the expression of our thoughts, the language we use is meant to present the world we live in as it is. However, this confidence placed upon language for the stability of meaning is undermined by the idea of difference proposed by Derrida (1976, 1978). Since the process of meaning-making is now regulated by the

interplay of binary pairs, the notion of singularity is called into question. Texts need to be exposed as being constructed upon the opposition between these two concepts in the pair which may be explicit or hidden in the text. Through the inconsistencies and contradictions presented in the language that forms our context (Davies, 2012), the play of these binary pairs in the novel *A Monster Calls* requires exploration to reveal how they constantly subvert or complicate the meaning to reach undecidability (Riffaterre, 1981; Schults, 2010).

The current work of investigation is significant. The intensive inspection of marginalised concepts indicates how the stability of a centre is challenged by deceiving the readers in their attempt to grasp a definite interpretation. Through an investigation of binary pairs in opposition, the study sheds light upon how privileging of one term results in negative stereotyping, discrimination, social injustice and ill conceptions regarding these terms as undesirable practices. It also portrays binary pairs as less oppositional and more supportive of each other in the meaning-making process. Furthermore, theoretically, this study stands as a rejection of the misconception of deconstruction as a destructive mechanism. In an attempt to explore the inner contradictions of a text, this article demonstrates how perceptions regarding the institution of language have evolved and matured.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

- I. To demonstrate the element of undecidability in *A Monster Calls* by locating the binaries within the text.
- II. To investigate undecidability through the structural analysis of a binary term in *A Monster Calls*.

1.2. Research Questions

The study tries to answer the following questions:

- I. How does the text contribute to undecidability by the play of meaning using binary pairs in opposition?
- II. How does the structural analysis of a binary term in *A Monster Calls* contribute in yielding undecidability?

2. Literature Review

In a language, words are the carriers of meaning, where the meaning of one word is considered stable, traditionally. However, Derrida (1967, 1976) along with many modern theorists esteems an utterance to possess the capability of being applied to varying contexts in numerous ways; in the presence of unknown speakers, references and co-texts (Cohen, 2001). He believes that a single structure needs to be rethought and evaluated from altered positions to acquire new interpretations. Since language cannot part with human subjectivity (Tyson, 2006), he encourages the reader to investigate and judge a text from his own understanding and experience. Consequently, several different interpretations may arise which result in the ambiguity of meaning (Norris, 2002).

Derrida (1967, 1976), however, tries to account for this ambiguity within texts by introducing *deconstruction* as a process of reading in the 1960s. Silverman (1989) accordingly explains *deconstruction* as a way of tracing the unidentifiable particulars

of any text. It brings to the surface what is hidden in a text by studying what is obvious and readily distinguishable.

Deconstruction, as a reading strategy, following the post-structural patterns of analysis, serves to take apart and break down the conceptions or truths that exist as predetermined rules in an institution (Zima, 1994, 2002). Pioneered on the philosophy of Nietzsche, the art of deconstructive reading is a systematic decomposition of meaning in a text, by questioning the objectivity of assumed preconceptions (Syrotinski, 2007). Glenn (2004) claims that Nietzsche recognizes unchanging truths to be a falsification. However, since ancient times these long-lived traditions saturated with reason formed the basis of our knowledge to emerge as a stable centre.

Culler (2007) adds that *deconstruction* sheds light on the interplay of binaries within a text, producing an antithesis necessary for comprehending their thematic significance. They serve to emphasize how the dominant ideology in a binary pair governs the language (Derrida, 1981).

Summarising the Derridean argument, we conclude that meaning is not retained in a single word, rather it is unreliable and subject to change with time, where meaning may defer and differ, hence, rendering a signified inherently unstable (Bertens, 2014). Keeping this in check, *deconstruction* promotes reading of the text as an isolated body that produces its own meaning by manipulating the language of the text which is presently under observation (Güney & Güney, 2008). For this reason, there is always another undiscovered meaning present which surfaces with each new reading.

Deconstruction originates as a philosophy but later traverses into the study of literature as an influential literary perspective, using which literature is read to highlight self-deconstructive elements. One function of deconstructive reading of literature is to challenge the traditional notions of the external world and human self (Habib, 2005). Firstly, this has been carried out extensively to study the logo centrism in the dramas of Samuel Beckett. Akhter (2015) in *Waiting for Godot*, shows how the desire displayed by the tramps to seek the presence of Godot, who remains absent throughout the play, is reminiscent of the Western philosophy's insistence on a stable centre. Secondly, the plurality of meaning emerges from the twofold play of differences in a relational pair. One, when the characters find themselves entrapped within an internal struggle for truth, and then by the interplay of meaning and language for the reader in the external world.

Kermany (2008) dedicated his thesis to studying the decentral narratives and elements of misconception in the dramatic works of Beckett, Stoppard and Churchill. The researcher unveils how words fall short of effectively communicating stable concepts, demonstrating that meaning remains unattainable in the quest for truth by a character or a text. This futile search for a missing entity which refutes all attempts to be defined (Akhter, 2015), acts upon the principle of *différance* as proposed by Derrida (1967/1976). It specifies that meaning is derived, understood and achieved, from what is absent and constantly deferred (Gontarski, 1985).

Likewise, Muhammad and Naz (2015) similarly explore the excluded and invisible meaning from what is present in the text of *Oedipus Rex*. They assess that the deferral of meaning portrays the manipulative power of language structures that conform to the social constructions of the Grecian era. Therefore, these investigations highlight how self-presence of meaning has no fixed ground.

Moreover, *deconstruction* is also employed to study the subversion of binaries in a literary work. In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's transformation into an insect aligns him with the animal species as opposed to human beings, functioning in opposition to the conventional hierarchy (Price, 2018). This deviation from the norm is

impossible to comprehend for the other characters in the novel, resulting in a struggle for identity and truth. As *deconstruction* expresses not only a reversal but coexistence of two polarities in a text, Price's (2018) examination shows how Kafka favours the other in the hierarchy and works to destabilise the centre.

In a case where binarism is not evident, Masroor et al. (2019) unearth their opposition by noting Hosseini's use of deviation as a linguistic device. They explore and favour his use of indigenous vocabulary as loan translations without which a proper representation of his native culture would escape the reader. In their course of investigation, the binary is reversed by displacing the Western culture and language that is English, from the centre to the periphery as inadequate.

A deconstructive reading of *King Lear* by Shakespeare argues for the elusiveness of language. The invisibility of meaning calls for the reversibility of binaries that operate in relation to each other, like those of the king and the fool or of wisdom and tomfoolery (Zimbardo, 1990).

It can be noted from these researchers that *deconstruction* uncovers the ways in which texts refuse to provide a definite answer at the end. This undecidability of the text is its failure to justify the Western centre. Hossain (2017) discovers this pattern in Camus' novel *The Outsider* by questioning the protagonist's conflicted emotions and actions, as he battles between establishing his individuality and following traditions of society (Hossain, 2017).

Qin (2018) provides a similar deconstructive reading for *The Great Gatsby*, in which Gatsby recognises that as a single identity he requires the unification of his personal conceptions and the social uniformity. However, he is unable to meet these responsibilities of self, struggling to discern between the worlds of reality and imagination. Fitzgerald goes on to depict the present and the past as disillusioned by the inventiveness of Gatsby's dreams yielding ambiguity in structure (Qin, 2018).

In fact, *deconstruction*, as a surveying tool for binarism, equally extends across works of non-fiction. Discourse is scouted for evidence of binaries in opposition with hidden agendas that are, then, brought to the surface. As, in an intensive inspection of numerous newspaper advertisements, Dar et al. (2019) deconstruct the print media's advancements in promoting the Western capitalist ideals. The papers, which are aimed at audiences ranging popularly from the middle and lower strata of society, usually contain advertisements outwardly propagating the Western image and principles.

So, Schwalm (1997) suggests that a surface analysis of certain texts reveals their characteristic ability to demonstrate themselves as inherently self-deconstructive texts. However, literary pieces may implicitly exhibit ambiguity of meaning, where each new reading demands new interpretations, despite an author's authoritative resolution of a text. One such novel is *A Monster Calls* in which Ness portrays a boy struggling to come to terms with his identity and the universal truth. Capps (2000) defines truth as a necessary tool, only after the realization of which man may determine his way and experience in life (Carlin, 2014). Conor is caught in the complexity of ambivalence by being conflicted between wishing for what is bad and trying to accept what is good.

Various approaches have been adopted to interpret the dreams and the stories narrated by the yew-tree monster in *A Monster Calls*. Firstly, by applying a theological lens, Carlin (2017) draws upon instances from the text, which reflects the Western religion and he highlights the events or symbolic features of the text which resonate with the life of Jesus. The interpretation of the three parables shed light on the ambivalent nature of reality: between good and bad.

Secondly, Maesya (2018) concentrates his study on the psychoanalytic characterization of Conor as directed by dreams. Freud's extensive work on dreams is about the

resurfacing of the intrinsic desires of an individual from his subconscious in the form of dreams. The re-emergence of these repressed desires as hallucinations penetrate the boundary of fantasy and reality in the novel. Drawing his analysis from Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, the researcher argues how the sufferer refuses to accept his loss, whereby his ego splits into two, attaching itself to the lost object.

As cited by Day (2012), Kubler-Ross's (1997) model, which was later on modified in 2015, elaborating on the stages of dealing with death has also been considered for reading *A Monster Calls* (Day, 2012). The character initially denies death, feels anger and depression, and then finally comes to accept it as the last stage of the model. Thus, Wilkinson and Goshal (2019) deduce that the monster per se may be considered as a coping mechanism designed by Conor's imagination to account for his emotional loss and angst. They also study the psychological growth of the protagonist by analysing the bereavement in Conor's childhood owing to his sense of dissociation from the world around him.

Cavanagh (2017) further widens the scope of the novel by illuminating the character's toxicity resulting from the Western society's insistence on control and power. Destruction stems from the vulnerability of being dependent upon someone, in this case, the constructs of society held control over Conor, which he needed to break.

In this way, Conor, his dreams, his internal battle and the figure of the monster have been interpreted psychoanalytically, theologically and emotionally. Such varying interpretations suggest an ambiguity that does not allow the reader to conform to one singular meaning of the word truth. While this truth has been considered as his spiritual or psychological awakening or realization of the inevitability of death (Carlin, 2017), the interplay between language and truth leads towards further ambiguity. Derrida (1967, 1978) suggests that the absence of this uniform truth results in the extension of the domain of signification and decentres the established structure (Macksey & Donato, 2007). The purpose of this current research is to highlight the undecidability in the text of *A Monster Calls* by studying the arbitrariness of language that renders it ambiguous.

3. Research Methodology

In terms of analysis of data, a qualitative approach for reasoning is in practice for the thorough investigation of *A Monster Calls*. The research employs exploratory design to arrive at an understanding of the text as one that yields undecidability. To achieve this goal, the researcher endeavours to scan the text of the novel *A Monster Calls* for instances that demonstrate the failure of our language to convey one coherent meaning. In exploring the gaps and contradictions between words and their meaning, the researcher applies the philosophical assumptions of the postmodern paradigm, most specifically the Derridean deconstructive lens analysis.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

Elaborating upon his strategy for critiquing philosophical texts, Derrida (1967, 1978) inadvertently hinted towards the aspects that later became the grounding framework for a deconstructive reading. To validate a text as one that encourages a self-deconstructive reading, the researcher seeks textual evidence to expose the dominant idea the text is designed to convey. As he envisions that this dominant idea needs to be dismantled, he firstly directs a reader to locate instances of binarism in text as they allow us to concentrate on the ideas that are at play. To achieve this purpose, this research gathers textual references where one part of the binary is being explicitly

favoured in *A Monster Calls*. Next, the research couples those instances with ones that hint towards or favour the other term of the binary pair, one which is apparently underprivileged. The research discusses the opposition between good and evil, supported by secondary binaries (conformity/resistance, real/imaginary, pardon/punishment, belief/disbelief, truth/deception).

Derrida propounds that a text never ceases to lose its ability to present itself up for *deconstruction* and singular terms of these binaries can be further decentred by scouting for textual references where language renders itself ambiguous as a consequence of contradictions or rhetorical means. Eloquently defining the reading process, Derrida in *Writing and Difference* says that it is “the deconstitution of diaphanousness lays bare the flesh of the word, lays bare the word’s sonority, intonation, intensity-the shout that the articulations of language and logic have not yet entirely frozen, that is, the aspect of oppressed gesture which remains in” (1978, p. 240).

The researchers locate one term of a binary pair that they think is the most important and suppose the text to deconstruct. Firstly, at the linguistic stage, the text is searched for apparent inconsistencies. Next, the verbal stage supports further decentring of the term under study. The researcher then employs Derrida’s (1967, 1978) own concept of difference, which refers to the deferral as well as the difference of meaning, as adding to ambiguity. Ultimately, undecidability has been supported by locating rhetorical devices such as metaphors and later performative stops that add in creating discrepancies in meaning. The content analysis presently makes use of this theoretical framework for an explorative screening of *A Monster Calls* in light of its linguistic structure.

4. Data Analysis

A Monster Calls by Patrick Ness follows the journey of a boy, Conor, who amidst bullying, betrayal and loss of affectionate relations must accept the fact that his mother will soon depart, and he will let her go. “*You will tell me the fourth tale. “You will tell me the truth”*” (Ness, 2011, p. 53. From these lines, we assess that the novel tries to present an understanding of the aspects of our worldly reality by the word *truth*. As throughout history, from the ancient Platonic deductions to modern understanding, assumptions have been made about the good life, reality of our universe and truth. Plato, among other philosophers, argued in favour of generalised and naturalistic explanations of the universe, since in a scenario where meaning is relativistic, there would be no firm ground to settle between any two matters (Shand, 1993).

“*You must speak the truth and you must speak it now, Conor O’Malley*” (Ness, 2011, p. 219, original italics and emphasis). When reading such instances from the text, one ought to arrive at the straightforward interpretation which centres upon the concept of mortality and acceptance of the human vulnerability to this inevitable consequence. From his environment at school among teachers and colleagues to his relationships with his family, the appearance of the tree monster, its three tales, and the ultimate break from self-imposed denial depicts how his world and the structure has a unified, dominant concept at its centre. This ultimate truth prevails over the heart’s longing to deny the encroaching death and his emotions about parting with the beloved. Conner cries “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. 220) the dilemma within his heart, thus, ends as he accedes to the truth propagated by the monster.

Derrida (1967/ 1978) argues, as explained by Bressler (2011) in his book *Literary Criticism*, that with this objective truth at the base, our thinking never truly becomes

independent of the concepts pertaining to our universe which have been inherited and ingrained. We accept one term by negating the presence of the other. This dualistic approach sustained in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, as elaborated by Shand (1993), asserts that no two opposing qualities may simultaneously coexist at one formal instance. In any such circumstance, rational knowledge will become unreliable. Resulting in the creation of a binary operation, Derrida (1967/ 1978) holds that both terms of the opposition do not conform to a hierarchical order, rather they are constantly involved in subversion of meaning as a form of a play within language.

The lines "*How can a queen be both a good witch and a bad witch? How can a prince be a murderer and a saviour?*" (Ness, 2011, p. 224, original italics) present the main moralistic conflict which sets the tone for the existence and function of all binaries in *A Monster Calls* is the opposition between good and evil. Western thought lays bare the attributes of virtue that any object, action or thought may possess in order to be considered good and hence better. Qualities like being heroic, brave, or obedient, to name a few, are classified as good. Conor is always expected to behave well, conforming to the standards set by his parents, grandmother and school. Even the first established impression of the boy is of his mother repeatedly praising his being good and always keeping everything in check.

However, the text deconstructs this hierarchical order of good over bad when Conor's nightmare reveals that he wishes his suffering to end though it meant that he would let his mother go. His guilt and his fear of preserving this fact from the world depicts how such an instinct in a character makes him bad. The monster comforts Conor by letting him know that wanting the pain and isolation he was suffering to end "*is the most human wish of all*" (Ness, 2011, p. 223, original italics) and it made him neither selfish nor a beast.

The binary of good is further decentred by introducing a monstrous being of supernatural might that is expected to be the source of help and justice. Magical beings have been scorned by people of rational thought as illogical, fairy-tale-like and evil. But by presenting the monster as the source of comfort and voice of reason, evil becomes the centre. Following whom, Conor engages in acts of violence involving destruction and fights bringing him some internal peace, in turn, reversing the binary to assert how the path of misconduct is soothing. Even the monster's three tales represent an ambiguous account of the qualities that define good and evil, and through the play of characters reveal how these two do not stand in a hierarchy but rather coexist. For instance, the apothecary was greedy and bitter; however, not a non-believer, on the other hand, the chaste parson "*was a man who lived on belief, but who sacrificed it at the first challenge*" (Ness, 2011, p. 135, original italics). His belief was not in his religion but was invested in worldly fears.

Next, in the novel, we find instances where Conor expresses how he is told that, "You can't touch anything or sit anywhere" (Ness, 2011, p. 115) creating a supporting binary, this time between conformity and resistance. The structure of our universe favours the individual who suppresses his right of self-expression and blends in with the beliefs of the larger community. This conformity with norms of society meant that Conor must abstain from acting out and quietly follow the orders as expected of him. In his grandmother's house he is expected to keep it spotless and orderly. She would address him miserably "like he was an employee under evaluation" (Ness, 2011, p. 30). He also must accept that his father will never provide for him and that he must follow the arrangements his mother's declining health entailed, including the callous attitude of his colleagues and teachers. The text resists this hierarchy when Conor smashes his grandmother's house and beats up the school bully. These acts of rebellion and resistance against cruelty toward him show how peace of mind requires dislocating conformity, thereby, associating violence with good rather than bad.

The spirit of magical realism in lines like, “*Who is to say that it is not everything else that is a dream?*” (Ness, 2011, p. 49, original italics and emphasis) prompts readers to realise the conflict between the real and the imaginary in the text. Objects and entities that are realistic are considered more authentic and accurate than those that are imaginary constructs. The word imaginary, in fact, is often associated with terms like impure, distorted, evil and fictitious. In the novel, elements and the world of the imaginary seems to take precedence over our natural world and our human form. The tree monster provides Conor with a sense of moral and spiritual direction, as well as peace of mind. It is the monster which is characterised as “a powerful shape, one that looked somehow strong, somehow *mighty*” (Ness, 2011, p. 20, original emphasis). The monster commands authority and superiority over the human beings that look towards it for its justice and rationality.

The text of *A Monster Calls* inverts the image of the imaginary by giving a humanistic description to the tree monster. Its body grows into a man-like figure and the abilities it showcases are those expected of a rational being. Just when Conor forces himself to see the monster as nothing but a simple tree, it appears calling out to Conor with “a giant face to look at him in the sunlight, its arms reaching out” (Ness, 2011, p. 44). The most striking description to be noted with regards to the tree is its position by the church. This repeated association with the church hints towards the monster’s connection with the essence of being human. The good qualities of virtue and faith are linked to religion which, in this case, a monstrous being holds more firmly than humans. Conor had been hearing about the tree since childhood, like a belief narrated to him, solidifying faith in its unprecedented capabilities. So much so, that its existence was ancient enough “to be made of the same stone as the church” (Ness, 2011, p. 18) and represent the church’s values.

On the other hand, the stories which the monster tells about humans all show the monstrous qualities of passions, obsessions and misconducts of a man. By the end of his story, Conor tunes into his monstrous side by thrashing his grandmother’s house and his bully. In this manner, the novel inverts the good for something monstrous and imaginary while the bad is humanistic and real. The interplay also becomes free at the point where the real and imaginary seem to coexist when a boy and monster become one entity. One controls the mind and body of the other in their violent frenzy. Indeed, at such an instant the boundaries of real and unreal become structurally and textually thin. Conor could well feel the sensation with his own hands of “what the monster was doing to Harry” (Ness, 2011, p. 181).

From the lines “He welcomed it with relief, because it was, at last, the punishment he deserved” (Ness, 2011, p. 220) we find that there is a conflict working within the structure between pardoning the follies of an individual for the goodwill of seeing him learn and amend and awarding them with a grave punishment as a cruder form of revenge. On account of his mother’s ailing health, Conor is regularly pardoned for his actions; he dodges warnings at schools, any rebuke for destroying his grandmother’s home and expulsion for maiming a fellow student. The only punishment he receives is to openly address his nightmare and the self-disgust he felt for letting go of his mother’s hand. This eases his mind of the guilt that had been clawing at his insides since the beginning. Thus, the structure of the text seems to favour punishment for wrongdoings over pardoning.

Approaching the final fundamental binary, the reader acknowledges the tension between belief and disbelief. Throughout the novel, the text reiterates the importance of Conor’s belief in the healing of his mother’s illness. The mother constantly reminds Conor of the presence of the yew tree and affirms at every instance the certainty of her recovery. As in the monster’s own words “*Belief is half of all healing*” (Ness, 2011, p. 135, original italics). In fact, the second story which the monster narrates shows the

destruction and chaos of a man who disbelieves. The parsonage is demolished, and the parson is met with calamity after another, including the death of his beloved daughters. The structure fails to support the hierarchical superiority of belief over disbelief when the mother is wasting away, and Conor's belief in healing falls short of actualising.

Apart from the oppositions between concepts, there are moments in a text when language itself becomes an unreliable mode of communication. One of such instances in the text can be sought in the linguistic stage of deconstructive reading, as illuminated by Barry (2002) in *Beginning Theory*, where something which is spoken, performed or believed is refuted, contradicted and rejected in the following lines of that text which is being read and interpreted. Focusing on this linguistic contradiction in *A Monster Calls*, the text reveals the explicit conflicts within the novel which add to the ambiguity of the overall tone. The monster declares that he came walking out of the earth to tell Conor stories to assist him but derisively declares that stories do not carry lessons but "*are the wildest things of all*" (Ness, 2011, p. 51, original italics). However, each story he tells conveys a message to ease Conor into accepting his nightmare. Then, when the monster encourages Conor to speak the truth to his mother, he ventures to do so but never actually utters it verbally.

One other conflict exercising command over meaning within the novel and also majorly supporting its structure is the self-sufficient term truth. The existence and acceptance of this term, which is universal and objective, sets it apart as a transcendental signified in the novel. The addition of *the* along with truth further grounds its position as authoritarian and absolute. The monster visits Conor only to make him speak the truth which he refuses to acknowledge. This truth is established in the novel as a powerful and central concept when the monster declares, "*You must tell the truth or you will never leave this nightmare*" (Ness, 2011, p. 216, original italics). He would stay in a world of uncertainty, fear and denial until he accepts the final truth. Not accepting it would leave him to suffer alone and forever. When provoked with accepting the truth, Conor feels as if he has known the truth forever before he even came to terms with it, owing to the fact that the nightmare had always been the same as a definite reality. And the strength of this truth can be ascertained by the monster's claim that not speaking would only kill him gradually. In these ways the text supports truth as a transcendental signified, albeit, the novel allows itself to be deconstructed by allowing the transcendental signified to be displaced and become subject to varying interpretations.

Truth per se, presents itself for *deconstruction* by challenging its objective superiority over deception. Purity and absoluteness of truth is brought into question when a text implicitly blends some element of deception into the truth. In *A Monster Calls*, the monster's first tale narrates the story of a prince who falls prey to his own fabricated version of the truth, in other words the obvious truth, and desires to rid the queen of her throne. The villagers are more susceptible to this version of the truth founded on a deception simply because it appears more enchanting.

Instances of reversal of meaning allude to the process of differing and deferral of meaning. This process, known as *différance* (Derrida, 1967/ 1976), maintains that meaning is only established from the difference between two entities. Additionally, their constant reversal and substitution allows no single meaning to be held at one instant, rendering the text dependent upon context for signification. Without reference to any text, the truth discussed in the novel avoids a clear or accessible definition.

To support the deconstructive application from context, it can be noted how Derrida (1967, 1978) following Saussure's theory of signs, extends that like two signifiers, the signified also takes meaning based on its difference from another signified. Since, meaning is never permanent but arbitrary and relative, a signified can function as a

signifier for another signifier. This leads to the first assessment that the truth in discussion may act as a signified when the monster keeps referring to Conor's dream, while truth may be a signifier for the signified reality. The principle of transcendental signified is breached, no longer remaining absolute rather dependent upon differences between two signs. These differences are supported through a series of structural deconstructive applications.

Firstly, on a purely verbal stage, as Barry (2002) explains in *Beginning Theory*, internal contradictions testify to the slippery and unreliable nature of language. *A Monster Calls* presents such slipperiness with the use of *your* against truth. The monster announces that "*You know that your truth, the one that you hide, Conor O'Malley, is the thing you are most afraid of*" (Ness, 2011, p. 52, original italics). The presence of '*your*' establishes the existence of other truths (his, mine, our) which not only show subjectivity but also dislocate truth from the centre since it loses its universality. This implies not only the lack of one singular truth but that there are manifestations and personal truths. The text strengthens this decentring by supplementing terms like "*Here is the truth of Conor O'Malley*" (Ness, 2011, p. 213, original italics) and "truth from the nightmare" (Ness, 2011, p. 217).

Secondly, Empson (1949) in *Seven Types of Ambiguities* explains metaphor to be the result of multiple observations collected to form one profound image. Languages contain words that blend with others and are so taken for granted as giving direct meaning while they hold implied comparisons for readers. In *A Monster Calls*, truth alludes directly to Conor's act of letting go of his grasp, however, the reader may well assume that it concerns the truth of mortality, the psychological truth encouraging him to search for self and grow out his fears and guilt or the spiritual truth which begs him to look beyond words and thoughts and consider his actions or the psychoanalytic truth which shows the workings of an unconscious mind ridden with repressed desires. Thus, metaphors allow the summing up of varied interpretations in a single word leaving the reader with a statement that animates the intellect (Davidson, 1984).

In *A Monster Calls*, structures like "As the truth came all of a sudden-" (Ness, 2011, p. 214) use hyphens at the end of sentences indicating abruptness and discontinuation in the structure. These structures hint that apart from the figurative language of metaphors, another way is to note the instances where the text makes implicit use of performative structures as to create tension and contradiction in the developing meaning. This harsh stop creates an open gap for the substitution of meaning, most effectively by creating deference.

The results of the data analysis reveal that a deconstructive reading looks to dislocate the centre within a binary pair by exposing inconsistencies in the language. This displacement of one term in the pair by the other, and an inversion of that reversal, shows how the text continually unbuilds itself. Thus, the findings presented are, collectively, the conflicting elements of all the binaries which allow the reader to oscillate between establishing definite opinions, while these destabilised centres open the text up for multiple interpretations.

5. Conclusion

Various binary operations at conflict within the text are traced to locate where they are overturned. Morally and socially underprivileged perspectives and conceptions displace the privileged ones. This reversal hints at a modern text's ability to challenge and invert long-held views of objective ideas. In this light, *A Monster Calls* associates the sense of achieving inner satisfaction with punishment, firm belief in anything is discredited as an unfruitful investment, hostility is ranked above compliance and

imaginary entities are evidently worldlier than real entities. All these binaries collaborate in negating the predetermined ideas regarding good and evil. Since, the text constantly re-inverts the binaries, at any point the text may contextually give rise to more meanings, thus, no objective association with one term of the binary can be drawn.

By permitting the text to undergo structural analysis of a binary pair, parts of the text which fail to support the authority of the binary that has been highlighted. The transcendental signified in *A Monster Calls*, truth as opposed to deception, is brought into uncertainty by linguistic, verbal and textual interrogation of the language. Such interrogations expose the play of words in the context, difference between two *signifieds* or the occurrence of metaphors and other performative devices. In doing so, the novel enables truth to hold comparisons and contradictions within the structure, thereby, losing its unified meaning. In short, this deconstructive reading opens the text to scrutiny and unearths how the authoritative ideas are contradicted and overthrown when language fails to substantiate their universality.

Deconstructive reading, in accordance with its theoretical liberty, opens a gap to allow originality and creativity to flourish, without halting the process of interpretation by declaring only one interpretation as the absolute. *A Monster Calls* ends with Conor accepting the monster's narrative and the truth of the nightmare, complying with the monster's provocation. However, this research gives the novel a status to challenge power structures within society, in turn, permitting readers to locate other instances where the structure becomes compromised. In this manner, as opposed to general belief, *deconstruction* does not render a text incapable of signification; rather, on the contrary, it allows multiplicity of meaning.

By examining a bildungsroman novel from this perspective, this research furthers the scope of assessing ambiguities in varying texts, widening the parameters across areas of child psychology, social behaviour and education. It may provide an insight into the study of the major disciplines of social sciences of philosophy, philology and sociology most significantly among others..

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