

The Loneliness and Heaviness of Life – Analysis on the Movie *A Monster Calls*

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ABSTRACT

Based on the novel *A Monster Calls* by British writer Patrick Ness, from an original idea by Siobhan Dowd, the movie of the same name tells the story of a boy who grows up through hardship and overcomes trauma under the inspiration of a tree monster. This Hollywood blockbuster, which has won worldwide acclaim, brings audiences refreshing experience with its creative narrative techniques, peculiar picture styles, grand audio-visual effects, and far-reaching plot connotations, so that it triggers people's thoughts on how to face growth and death.

Keywords: *A Monster Calls, Life, Death, Growth.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Based on the novel *A Monster Calls* by British writer Patrick Ness, from an original idea by Siobhan Dowd, the movie of the same name, with J.A. Bayona as the director and Lewis MacDougall as the leading role, was released in the U.S. in January 2017 and then successively released around the world, winning nine awards and three nominations at the 31st Goya Awards. This Hollywood blockbuster, which has won worldwide acclaim, brings audiences refreshing experience with its creative narrative techniques, peculiar picture styles, grand audio-visual effects, and far-reaching plot connotations, so that it triggers people's thoughts on how to face growth and death.

This movie tells the story of a boy Connor who grows up through hardship and overcomes trauma under the inspiration of a tree monster. Connor has a melancholy childhood filled with pains and nightmares. During that time, his father left the family, his mother suffered from a terminal illness, and his dominant grandmother was incompatible with him. At school, Connor was isolated and timid, subjected to bullying and neglect. Thus, his life was once plunged into despair and darkness. Until one night he discovered a colossal monster outside his window: a yew tree turned into a monster. The tree monster told him three stories, followed by the fourth one told by Connor himself, which symbolized Connor's rich inner world,

demonstrating his journey from confusion, struggle to enlightenment.

2. CONNOTATION OF MOVIE THEME

The four stories in the movie are filled with brutality, coldness, and nightmares, intertwined with opposition, conflict, and contradiction, conveying the values of the real world: people must identify the truth, hold on to faith, experience loneliness, and learn to let go, in order to ultimately comprehend the meaning of life.

2.1 Identifying the Truth

The first story – The old wise king ruled his kingdom peacefully and prosperously. However, one day the king suddenly passed away, leaving behind the only heir – his grandson. According to the country's law, the prince was too young to ascend to the throne, so the queen, the old king's new wife, had to serve as regent for a year. Immediately, rumors spread throughout the kingdom, and the people believed that the queen was a vicious witch who poisoned the king to death. The righteous prince fell in love with a farmer's daughter and they eloped to escape the queen's clutches. One morning when the prince woke up, he found that his beloved girl had been murdered, so he publicly accused the queen of killing her. With the support of the enraged people, he overthrew the

regime and became a respected monarch. However, the truth was not as it seemed. The old king died of natural causes, and the queen was innocent. It was the prince who killed the girl, sacrificing his lover and framing the queen, who monopolized the power.

The world is not simply black or white, and human nature is not wholly good or evil. Many things in life are not as simple as they may appear on the surface, and everyone is complex and multifaceted. The adult world is full of thorns and thick fog, which can sometimes make people confused and unable to see the road ahead. In Connor's eyes, his mother was optimistic, grandmother indifferent, and father irresponsible. However, this is not all of life. The story of the tree monster is meant to make him treat the world rationally and dialectically, not only to accept the cruel truth, but also to believe in beautiful lies. Well-intentioned deception can make life less heavy and oppressive. Connor finally faced his inner self. In fact, he knew the truth all along but he just refused to believe it. The truth was that his mother was tormented by illness, his grandmother's stubbornness stemmed from her concern for her daughter, and his father couldn't shoulder the burden of taking care of Connor because of his newly-built not-so-rich family.

2.2 Holding on to Faith

The second story – A skilled pharmacist in the village who mixed herbs, tree bark, and fruits together to make medicine, cured the villagers and amassed a great fortune. A devoted priest who preached to the people with sincerity, despised the pharmacist's greed and rudeness, and constantly denounced him and his treatment, resulting in a sharp decline in his business. Later, when the priest's daughter unfortunately fell ill and he couldn't find a cure, he had no choice but to turn to the pharmacist he had vehemently criticized for help. He agreed to cut down the yew tree that could be used for medical purposes, sacrificing his principles for the sake of his daughter's life. But the pharmacist believed that someone who had abandoned his faith was not worthy of rescue and refused his request, ultimately failing to save the priest's daughter.

Faith is the most beautiful virtue of human beings. No matter what circumstances we face, we should keep good intentions, uphold our faith and principles, and adhere to our moral bottom line. Connor's mother was terminally ill and modern

medicine was helpless, but Connor still believed in medical treatment, believed in the future, and believed that "everything will be fine." Faith can't save the dying mother, but can give Connor the courage and confidence to continue living and overcome his inner demons.

2.3 Experiencing Loneliness

The third story – An invisible person, who has been neglected in life for a long time, explodes with great power and fights against it in order to attract attention. As a result, the invisible person is seen but still ignored, and he feels even greater loneliness.

Loneliness is a necessary stage in a person's life. If you can't change it, accept it, learn to be alone, and talk to yourself. Without friends in school, without real concern and understanding, Connor was not accepted and recognized by everyone. He lived in his own world all the time, unwilling to reveal his heart to people. The story of the invisible man is actually a reflection of Connor's own experience. The tree monster wanted him to understand that he should never underestimate himself and never ignore the meaning of his own existence.

2.4 Learning to Let Go

The fourth story – This is a nightmare, also the most secret pain in his heart, which has been suffocating Connor for a long time. In the raging storm, the house collapsing, the ground shaking, and the life hanging in the balance, Connor clutched his mother's hand, crying and yelling in fear but he was unable to stop his mother from falling into the abyss.

Under the instigation, threat and even intimidation of the tree monster, Connor finally spoke his mind and let go. On the one hand, he felt his mother's life force gradually weakening, and he was afraid of losing his loved one. On the other hand, he saw his mother being tormented by illness but felt powerless to ease her pain. He could not bear the endless spiritual agony and hoped that his mother and himself could be released from their suffering, so he felt ashamed of his own thoughts. In his dream, his mother eventually left him, and he always believed that it was his letting go that caused her death, and he felt guilty. This is Connor's secret that he cannot easily confess. In the face of separation or death, people will feel vulnerable and fragile. Temporary avoidance may

bring momentary peace, but it cannot solve the problem. Only by bravely facing reality, facing one's own innermost feelings, can one face life's cruelty and tragedy with strength and independence. At the end of the story, Connor took his mother's hand and snuggled into her arms, expressing his deepest love for her, "I don't want you to go". At that moment, his mother was very content, passing away without concerns and regrets. Connor finally let go and became relieved, completing his spiritual transformation from a little boy to a mature man.

3. ANALYSIS OF ART STYLE

The narrative techniques, colors and representation of metaphors in the movie demonstrate a distinctive art style, which makes the audiences feel emotional tension.

3.1 *Unique Narrative Techniques*

Narrative techniques are the skills and strategies used by the director to tell a story. The movie creates a thrilling atmosphere through the treatment of images, structure and characters, leading the audiences to unlimited associations and thoughts.

3.1.1 *Applying Fantasy Elements*

It is a magical movie, full of fantasy elements – fairy tale-like fables, surreal dreams and a tree monster with supernatural powers. Animation and reality are intertwined. The whole story is rendered like an ink painting, seemingly poetic, but in fact it is tearing open the bloody wounds little by little. What people see is not a warm and loving fairy tale, but a cruel and dark anti-fairy tale. This is an adult world disguised in children's clothing, with a horrific life philosophy concealed under the exquisite images. The strong contrast gives people a huge visual impact and emotional shock. The whole movie uses a black style of themes such as pain, loneliness, and death, emitting a strong Gothic atmosphere.

3.1.2 *Setting Suspense*

The director uses conventional linear narration, with several short stories interspersed, pushing the plot forward gradually. Each story looks bizarre, but seems reasonable and has some kind of wonderful connection with Connor's life. What is the truth of life? Does Connor finally believe it or not? Why does Connor keep having the same nightmares? What is Connor running away from

and afraid of? And what is the special meaning of the small details that flash by and appear seemingly unintentionally in the movie, such as the photo of his mother and the time when the tree monster appears? All these questions linger in the audiences' mind, triggering their strong desire for inquiry and mystery of the unknown, with expectations in tension, with worry in anxiety.

The "suspense" refers to people's expectation of the fate of characters and the development of plots in literary and artistic works [1]. As an important structural skill, suspense is set up to throw out problems, create contradictions, and firmly grasp the audiences' attention, so that they can't stop and get stuck in it until the answer is finally revealed. Everything is reasonable and unexpected, and the audiences gain a dual experience of cognition and emotion.

3.1.3 *Switching Perspectives*

The director expounds the adult philosophy from the perspective of children, concentrates the pain of adults and the cruelty of society on a child, observing and examining the adult world through the child's way of thinking and psychological feelings. Children are simple-minded, immature, not good at rational thinking, and they often view things in an emotional way. In the movie, Connor knew the hardships of life and the fact that his mother was seriously ill and was about to leave him, but he didn't have the strength to face this heavy pressure. At a loss, he summoned the tree monster, hoping that the magical power could help him drive away his grandmother and cure his mother. However, the plot does not follow the traditional fairy tale path, and does not lead to a perfect happy ending. Instead, it pierces the beautiful fantasy like a bubble and relentlessly vents the repressed emotions and complex human nature of the real world. The tree monster led Connor step by step out of his immaturity and inspired him to ponder a series of profound questions: How could the prince be both a murderer and beloved? How can a drug doctor have a bad temper and a reasonable mind? Why do invisible people still feel invisible after they are seen by others? The tree monster appeared before Connor in a terrifying image and a tough attitude, forcing him to face death and accept reality, which allowed Connor to become mature and independent in the pains of growth. By narrating from a child's perspective, the movie evokes nostalgia, sentimentality, intimacy, and excitement, setting aside biases and constraints, putting down

the evaluative and critical attitude in opposition to the outside world, and opening oneself to accept others [2]. This new angle of expression endows the movie with richer artistic charm, presenting familiar life in a childlike and poetic way, revealing fresh and unfamiliar aspects, and thus leading life and themes to a deeper and more profound level [3].

3.2 *Dark Colors*

Color represents language, emotion, and thought [4]. As a cinematic language and emotional medium, color is used to render the atmosphere of scenes, enhance the characters' images, connect the narrative fragments, and advance the plot, providing the audiences with profound visual experiences and rich aesthetic values. The movie is dominated by cold colors, presenting the audiences with black skies, gray houses, brown trees, a green-gray cemetery, and dark blue school uniforms at the beginning, all of which convey a sense of oppression and terror. The strong presence of black and gray, just like Connor's inner world, is bleak and desolate. On the verge of Connor's isolation and emotional collapse, the tree monster knocked on his door. The golden eyes, bright and striking, seemed to emit flames that brought a glimmer of light to the dark night and a lamp of hope to Connor's heart. In the subsequent fables, the colors become richer, with large blocks of highly saturated red, yellow, and blue, seemingly gorgeous, but actually gloomy and bloody. This tone does not make people feel relaxed and pleasant. On the contrary, it triggers deeper thinking under the strong visual impact, which implicitly reflects Connor's hesitation and struggle in the face of death. In the end, the movie returns to a deep gray. Connor's life is still dark, but his mood has changed. The meaning of "gray" becomes diversified, from the initial "depression" to the later "peace". Connor became more mature, stable, and tolerant, no longer confined to his narrow perspective and temporary paranoia, and lived bravely with his love for his late mother. The gray colors in the movie strengthen the emotional expression of the protagonist and effectively stimulate the audiences' imagination, generating empathy and resonance.

3.3 *Symbolic Representation of Metaphors*

Metaphor is a rhetorical device commonly used in movies, which produces cultural behavior through mutual implications between things [5], applied directly to one thing, not literally, but

imaginatively applicable [6]. As an ideographic element with metaphorical significance, the tree monster visualizes abstract and invisible things, with rich emotional expressions, providing the audiences with unlimited imagination space. In the movie, when Connor was lonely and helpless, he drew the big tree in front of the house again and again, so as to relieve the depression. Finally, the tree responded to his emotions, and transformed into a huge and fierce monster, which appeared in front of Connor and opened a series of soul tortures. The dialogue between the tree monster and Connor is actually a collision between Connor's two thoughts – "id" and "superego." He kept telling himself that his mother would be okay, but he knew it was impossible, so another "he" stood on the opposite side to tell the truth that his mother would not recover. Instead of living in pain and suffering, it was better to get rid of it. Connor is entangled in this kind of self-deceptive fantasy and extremely shameful thought. The tree monster is another personality of Connor. Its image is fierce and powerful, but it has a gentle and delicate heart. When Connor was most confused, the tree monster accompanied him and enlightened him, so that he could see himself, forgive himself, heal his heart and save his soul. The image of the tree monster is not imaginary, it has been hidden in Connor's subconscious. When Connor was very young, his mother taught him how to draw. The tree monster and three fables appeared in his mother's picture book. The last page depicts a little girl smiling and sitting on the shoulder of the tree monster. The little girl is the young mother, while the tree monster is the mother's trusted friend, who gave her warmth and strength in her childhood. When his mother was about to leave this world, she didn't have time to wait for him to grow up slowly, so she must make him mature as soon as possible. At the moment of her death, when she looked into the tree monster's eyes, she knew that her friend had completed his mission. At 12:07 midnight, she peacefully closed her eyes and passed away without regret. The tree monster symbolizes the mother's teachings and love. When Connor read through the picture book, he finally completely understood his mother's good intentions. The tree monster appears at 12:07 every time, which is the time point of his mother's death, suggesting that Connor experienced death and rebirth in this period of time and completed a life cycle.

Why did the tree monster appear in the mother's childhood? It has something to do with Connor's grandfather. Several details in the movie implicitly

give important hints. The first time the mother mentioned Connor's grandfather, she took out his projector to show the movie King Kong, a giant beast of huge size, kind-hearted but ugly-looking, which brought fear and uneasiness to people and was finally shot down on the roof. For people, King Kong represents the unknown. People often doubt, escape, and feel helpless when facing real difficulties. They do not know what will happen and they are afraid of potential threats. Only by hiding their inner desires and truths, can they protect themselves. Grandfather once told his daughter to learn to face up to reality with the help of King Kong, and now he tells his grandson not to be afraid and to face his heart. This plot foreshadows the subsequent story development. There is also a close-up shot in the movie, presenting a picture of Connor's mother and grandfather in mother's childhood on the wall of Connor's house. This is the only time when his grandfather's image appears in front of the camera. It can be inferred that his grandfather passed away a long time ago, and his mother also experienced the same emotions as Connor. It was the tree monster in the picture book that comforted her heart. Interestingly, the voice actor for the tree monster and the actor who plays Connor's grandfather are the same person, Liam Neeson. This is the director's deliberate arrangement, skillfully suggesting that the tree monster is actually the incarnation of Connor's grandfather. When the camera captures the eyes of both the tree monster and the grandfather several times, they reveal the same look. His mother deeply loved and missed his grandfather and turned this longing into the tree monster in her drawings. Thus, the tree monster became a flesh and blood life. In fact, Connor's mother had told him the story of the tree monster when he was a child, sowing the seed of the "tree monster" in his mind. When she saw that Connor was about to suffer the same loss of loved ones, she summoned the tree monster, making this seed sprout and grow, awakening the dormant memory. Finally, when the monster knocked on the door, three generations had a spiritual exchange. Now the audiences feel the continuation of life and experience the greatness of love.

4. CONCLUSION

A Monster Calls is a healing movie that allows people to return to calm and feel warmth after urgency and depression. It allows children to see the cruel helplessness of the adult world and also allows adults to see the delicate sensitivity of

children's hearts. Separation and death are unbearable in everyone's life, which we cannot foresee and perceive in advance, but we know they will happen. Anger, sadness, and regret are all useless. They can only push us into an abyss of no return. Only compromise, letting go, and facing it calmly can lead us out of the darkness. On the way of growth, we are destined to lose constantly, leaving only the loneliness and heaviness of life in the end, but fortunately, we still have courage and strength to continue moving forward.

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