



ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0353-3>

OPEN

# “Acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment”: an ecocritical reading of the monstrous in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls*

Mascha Hansen<sup>1\*</sup>

**ABSTRACT** Monster stories, however old they may be, still prove to be very fruitful when read in an ecocritical context. Monsters can be saviours, too: they have not yet lost their warning powers, and they still sneak around in modern retellings of the myths that prove how dire the consequences of wasting resources have long been in our story-telling traditions. Thus, the monstrous clearly offers powerful, anxiety-inducing images that must be of interest in contemporary attempts to revise our story-telling to a more eco-friendly mode. Indeed, Frankenstein’s monster, a vegetarian proud to be able to live without consuming animal food, a being torn between wanting to do good but committing evil instead, may be said to embody contemporary environmental concerns. If we read the monster as a natural “Being” (to use Percy Shelley’s term), however unnaturally created, he takes on a different role, one that ties him to the myth of Prometheus in ways that have not yet been explored. Moreover, he does have overtones of the Green Man, too, and in that shape, he can be connected to a more recent monster, that employed by Patrick Ness in *A Monster Calls*. Monsters, no doubt about it, are scary creatures when they make us face the truth about who we are, and what we do to the earth. This paper considers some of the tensions raised by the paradox of the monstrous ‘saviour’ from an ecocritical perspective.

<sup>1</sup>University of Greifswald, Greifswald, Germany. \*email: [mascha.hansen@uni-greifswald.de](mailto:mascha.hansen@uni-greifswald.de)

## Introduction

“**T**he environmental movement [needs] to tell better stories,” Andrew Simms claims, “because if we can’t find better stories than the ones which keep the world locked on the path of mutual economic and environmental self-destruction hope will flee” (2016, p. 7). Ecocritics, too, call for new stories to convey a new ecological ethics (see Coupe, 2000, p. 4), and to make us realize just how disastrous the human impact on the environment actually is. Humans, it seems, are the real monsters on this planet: our impact on the world is already monstrous, whether it is the plastic pollution of our oceans or the air pollution of our cities. Before we accede to this claim for new stories to save our species, however, it may be useful to take a look at the stories we already have in order to gain a clearer perspective of the ethics they lend themselves to: surely they have something to tell us about what it means to live as monsters. In this essay, I hope to show that being the monster is not necessarily connected to being the devil’s tool, or to living in hell. We can still explore new ways of reading old monster stories, as some of these stories, and some of these monsters, may ultimately be able to point out the path to salvation. Monsters can be saviours, too, and in that function, they can still be very scary: particularly, when they demand that we face the truth.

Given that stories are among our most sustainable “materials” and infinitely recyclable, it seems unlikely that we can either come up with entirely new stories, or that the stories we do tell invariably go by the same pernicious moral precepts. Even if we could get rid of old story-telling patterns, we should not simply discard all the old stories in contemporary hubris: the notion that “new” must necessarily mean “better” is, as well all know by now, an environmentally flawed marketing strategy. Instead, critics such as Jonathan Bate suggest, we should re-read old myths to better understand our ecological predicaments: “we need darker narratives, stories of our fall into knowledge and death, of the expulsion from Eden and opening of Pandora’s box” (Bate, 2000, p. 26). As such, darker narratives show that we already have an abundance of cautionary tales: waste, for instance, has been considered a serious misdeed for much of human history, as is evident in myths as old as that of Hesiod’s Pandora. Many of our cautionary tales, the ones about our monstrous deeds—myths, legends, folk or fairy tales—have been told and retold in accordance with changing values, and even in their seemingly “original” version, they are merely variations of yet earlier tales that have been lost to us. Tales of monsters and monster slayers in particular have changed dramatically: little Redcap used to kill an ogress before she was turned into the hapless maiden killed by the wolf in Perrault’s tale, or into the incautious girl rescued by the hunter presented in the Grimms’ version (Tatar, 2017, pp. 5–18). Previous revisions of old stories, even if we think them deplorable, may have a lot to teach us about the possible functions of the monstrous in both the old and the new narratives we might wish to tell. Previous versions, too, may be re-used and reapplied to innovate today’s notions of the monstrous, as, I think, already Shelley’s monster story proves. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls* (2011) use such dark narratives, or myths—those of Prometheus/Pandora and the Green Man, respectively—as patterns, or indeed as a canvas onto which their modern monsters are projected, and by doing so, both address ecological concerns. Moreover, by juxtaposing myths and monsters in the way they do, Shelley and Ness prove the ethical intricacy already inherent in our story-telling patterns, a complexity we should not lightly discard to gain moral certainty with regard to ecological questions: moral certainties, or so these stories tell us, tend to *create* new monsters rather than putting them to rest.

Admittedly, most tales (stories, films and games) involving monsters still follow a simpler, if equally time-honoured, pattern:

the monster is the inimical Other, the dangerous disruptor of a safe and stable status quo that, in countless variants, must be destroyed in the name of social order, stability and security—whether it is the fairy-tale ogre, Dracula, Godzilla or Voldemort.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, though, it is due to monsters that social patterns *are* disrupted, indeed one might say that our old story-telling patterns are still at work *because* the monstrous offers such powerful, anxiety-inducing images of what it means for societies to be affected by the truly monstrous. Such frightful images must be of interest in contemporary attempts to revise our storytelling to more eco-friendly tales, as they serve to break up the “warm, familiar, unreflective” image of cosy environmentalism in order to highlight “its politically oppressive shadow side” (Morton, 2016, p.145). Yet stories exchanging old bogey figures for new ones, and reiterating the old ‘us-against-them’ stories by setting up the perpetrators of ecological devastation as the new manifestations of the same old enemies, will merely serve to send new scapegoats into the wilderness. So far, the monster’s potentially helpful role in the new stories is far from assured: “[t]he monster, the ultimate Other in humanist culture, serves to deny the existence of ... nonhuman agency, to relegate it to the shadows and the fantastic,” as Helena Feder points out (2014, p. 65). The use of the monstrous is thus both an asset and a danger in contemporary tales designed to present ecocritical concerns: even monster saviours will stubbornly retain their monstrous characteristics, and while monodimensional monsters may be very effective in producing horror, their powers of wreaking havoc in a world clearly ordered into the morally good and environmentally evil should not be underestimated, either.

I  
Ironically, the contemporary iconic status of *Frankenstein’s* creature/monster largely ignores his environmental roots. Ecocritics have dealt with Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a text concerned with the environment, interpreting it as a work debating the Enlightenment’s assumption of human mastery over nature (Bate, 2000, p. 49) in which the nonhuman (or unnatural) creature/monster serves as an indicator of human anxieties (Feder, 2014, p. 61). Yet, as Timothy Morton points out, “ecocriticism has not done much with *Frankenstein*” (2016, p. 144), presumably, Morton surmises, because of the novel’s unusual, almost casual presentation of ecological issues, and its resistance to traditional concepts of referring to nature. “Nature” is a term notoriously difficult to define (Raymond Williams considered it “perhaps the most complex word in the language” (Williams 1983, p. 219)<sup>2</sup>), but it seems even harder to determine what exactly is meant by “*un-natural*”, a term frequently used in association with, or even analogous to, “monstrous”. In *Frankenstein* criticism, the term is frequently applied to the monster’s creation, but for strikingly different reasons, and with different implications. While Mary Poovey claims that the monster is not born but made, the “product of the unnatural coupling of nature and the imagination” (1984, p. 351), Peter Brooks considers *Frankenstein’s* monster to be “both born of nature and supernatural” (1993, p. 370). While his “birth” can only be considered a metaphorical one, his body is natural in the sense that he is made up of bits and pieces found in dissecting rooms and the slaughter house, thus taken from creatures that once were born in an ordinary sense of the term. He is no robot, no computer-animated villain and no artificial intelligence somehow inscribed into a 3D-printed body, but composed of natural, biodegradable material. According to his creator, he can die, too.

Percy Shelley’s *Preface* to the 1818 edition modestly assumes that “[t]he event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed ... as not of impossible occurrence” (p. 5), but he is less modest when he goes on to claim that the story “preserve[s] the

truth of the elementary principles of human nature” (p. 5). If we take his word for it, we can see that the monster is supernatural only in the sense that he turns out to surpass the limits nature imposes on man with regard to size and speed, or in Brooks’ words, that he puts “normal measurements and classifications” to the test (p. 370). This monster is unnatural “in the sense that it defies expectations about what nature is” (Morton, 2016, p. 147). At the same time, as a vegetarian proud to be able to live without consuming animal food, as a being torn between wanting to do good but committing evil instead, *Frankenstein’s* monster embodies contemporary environmental concerns, and perhaps even fantasies: his metabolism shows superhuman, or indeed unnatural, efficiency: with all his height and strength, he needs no more food than a wood nymph—during the first few days, all he eats are some berries. Indeed he can live off acorns for days (p. 72). A shepherd’s breakfast of bread, cheese and milk is a feast to him (p. 73). On coming to a village, he is allured by “the vegetables in the gardens, the milk and cheese that I saw placed at the windows of some of the cottages.” Living next to the de Lacey, he is again able to get by on berries, nuts and roots (p. 77).<sup>3</sup> Not a vegetarian by necessity (he does try meat at least once without any immediate consequences), *Frankenstein’s* monster claims that he is a vegetarian by choice: “I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment” (p. 103).<sup>4</sup> He does kill animals for food when he eventually has to feed his creator in the Northern regions to which he himself is so much better adapted but there is no indication that he partakes of those meals.

Monstrosity is not generally associated with the consumption of acorns and berries, but then, we tend to react to visual monstrosity first, and to infer behavioural monstrosity from that. Thus, when little William defies the “hideous monster,” all he sees is an “ogre” who wants “to eat [him] and tear [him] to pieces” (p. 100). Clearly, William has been primed by fairy tales to consider monsters to be not only carnivorous but even cannibalistic (cf. Morton, p. 50). In the context of monstrosity, a vegetarian monster seems an anomaly. How can a monster that refuses to kill even for his personal sustenance be remotely frightening? Within the story, the creature blames his monstrosity on his appearance, his “miserable deformity” (p. 79), and no one sees him eat, after all. Yet we as readers know his eating habits, and even if we do not pay attention to them, this may unconsciously direct our sympathies: contemporary readers tend to redirect their projections of monstrosity onto Frankenstein once they have “swallowed” the creature’s story. Vegetarians, in twenty-first century ethical assumptions at least, are the good guys, not the monsters. Even with regard to Shelley’s contemporary surroundings, her decision to present a monster that combines the coldness of a killer of humans with a vegetarian’s care for animals is worth investigating. Ecocritics such as Timothy Morton (1994) and Onno Oerlemans (2002) have re-traced the 18th and early 19th century discussions concerning the necessity for a “vegetable diet” that sparked Percy Shelley’s radical ideas of social change. Percy Shelley advocated vegetarianism as a more humane way of life, as well as a healthier one, and while it seems likely that Mary sympathized with his views, her novel seems to contradict Romantic assumptions concerning the moderating effect of a “frugivorous” diet on the passions of human beings.

Nevertheless, to understand Mary Shelley’s eco-conscious monster, it is necessary to have a closer look at Percy Shelley’s vegetarianism: indeed, as Timothy Morton complains, their shared intellectual interests and collaborative work have not yet received adequate scholarly attention (1994, p. 10).<sup>5</sup> Thus, in *On the Vegetable System of Diet* (1814–1815), Percy Shelley, echoing earlier writers such as George Cheyne, claimed that a vegetarian diet served to prevent diseases (Shelley, 1993, pp. 150–151).<sup>6</sup> The

monster’s dictum that he does not “destroy the lamb and the kid” (p. 130) moreover clearly echoes Percy Shelley’s poem *Queen Mab*, published in 1813, in which future man is envisioned as a vegetarian:

And man, once fleeting over the transient scene

Swift as an unremembered vision, stands Immortal upon earth: no longer now

He slays the lamb that looks him in the face,

And horribly devours his mangled flesh,

Which, still avenging nature’s broken law,

Kindled all putrid humours in his frame,

All evil passions and all vain belief,

Hatred, despair and loathing in his mind,

The germs of misery, death, disease and crime

(Shelley, 2002, book 8, ll. 209–218, p. 65)

Percy Shelley was convinced that more than any other, “a reform in diet” was necessary to assuage man’s evil propensities, a position he outlined in *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (1813; here: 1993, p. 82). Yet diet alone does not turn a monster into the new, the future man: “The system of a simple diet promises no Utopian advantages,” Shelley admitted. Nevertheless, he was convinced that “[i]t strikes at the root of all evil [...] Is it to be believed that a being of gentle feelings, rising from his meal of roots, would take delight in sports of blood?” Mary Shelley may have taken up this very point to criticize Percy’s theories: the monster’s temper does not seem to be mitigated by his diet, as Percy Shelley thought it should be (1993, p. 83). Perhaps the monster’s dietary choices do not affect him as much as they would an ordinary man because he simply is not human, or not human enough. In creating him, Victor Frankenstein had hoped that “[a] new species would bless me as its creator,” or so he reminisces to Captain Walton about his motives in creating what he claimed was nevertheless “a human being” (p. 33), though largely composed of animal parts. The creature, too, sees himself as someone akin to a human being, but of a different species—certainly he does not conceive of himself as a man, not as a part of mankind, not as endowed with “human senses” (p. 102). On first considering his personal identity, he claims:

I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded their’s... was I then a monster ...? (p. 83)

Clearly, he associates his monstrosity with his ugliness (p. 79), but at the same time, he is fully capable of appreciating his uniqueness, his strength and agility. Being a monster, to him, means being one of a kind, differing from the rest in various ways, good and bad, but at this point, being a monster is clearly not a moral issue to him. A little later, after having been abandoned by the De Lacey and shot by the father of the girl he rescued, he frames himself as the racial Other and “declare[s] everlasting war against the species [of men]” (p. 95). Until he commits his first murder, it is the humans who are morally deficient, not the monster.

Having selected the eight-foot creature’s features so as to be beautiful, and his limbs to be in proportion, Victor, too, rejects

the “demoniacal corpse” at first sight: once it is animate, all he can see is a “miserable monster” (p. 36).<sup>7</sup> Yet, as the creature himself admits to Victor: “thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine; my joints more supple” (p. 68). Victor sees him climb and descend mountains with the speed of an eagle in flight (p. 104), and the monster acknowledges that his constitution is made “for the endurance of cold” (p. 92), though without claiming animal powers. Victor Frankenstein did create a new species, both he and his creature agree on this, and it is important to keep in mind that rather than being a one-of-its-kind *lusus naturae*, the monster is created as the prototype of a new humanoid species that is hardier than human beings, a species that, as Victor later fears, might come to endanger ordinary human existence (p. 119; cf. Morton, 2016, p. 152). Indeed, the new species is eminently superior to man, and seems immune to disease, presumably—to adopt Percy Shelley’s view—due to his vegetarian diet. However, it has already been infected by evil: the new species, too, has fallen, and its first specimen, too, is (now) mortal. There is a telling moment in the story of the creature (who is not yet a monster): during the very first days of his life, he discovers fire, noting that roasting nuts and roots makes them tasty while it spoils berries. He even tries some “offals” that other travellers have left behind, roasted over his fire, he finds them “savoury” (p. 72). This is all we ever hear about his eating meat, but it may already be enough: “Prometheus,” Percy Shelley writes, “applied fire to culinary purposes; thus inventing an expedient for screening from his disgust the horrors of the shambles. *From this moment his vitals were devoured by the vulture of disease*” (1993, p. 78, my emphasis). To Shelley, this is the story of the fall of man, and it is directly connected to what he considers to be the real transgression of Adam and Eve:

The allegory of Adam and Eve eating of the tree of evil, and entailing upon their posterity the wrath of God, and the loss of everlasting life, admits of no other explanation, than the disease and crime that have flowed from unnatural diet (1993, p. 77).

It is quite conceivable that in *Frankenstein*, a novel peppered with references to *Paradise Lost*, one bite is enough to cause the fall (cf. Morton, 1994, p. 47; p. 65). No matter that the monster from then on eats most of his scanty food rations raw: the travellers who carelessly left some offal have already infected the new creature—not, until then, proven a monster—with the germ of “misery, death, disease and crime.” By abandoning his New Man, the new Prometheus, Victor Frankenstein may well be indirectly responsible for his creature’s subsequent corruption by means of animal food.

## II

Percy Shelley gives an interesting ecocritical spin to his personal interpretation of ancient myths such as that of Prometheus:

The language spoken ... by the mythology of nearly all religions seem to prove, that at some distant period man forsook the path of nature, and sacrificed the purity and happiness of his being to unnatural appetites. The date of this event, seems to have also been that of some great change in the climates of the earth, with which it has an obvious correspondence (1993, p. 77).

Man has become his own monster, at least in Percy’s view. Victor Frankenstein, however, is both Prometheus and Epimetheus (cf. Bate, 2000, p. 26). He is Prometheus when he forms a new man of “clay” (a term he uses as a euphemism for whatever it is that he actually does use [33]) but Epimetheus when it comes to ignoring the consequences of his actions. The story of Prometheus and Epimetheus is based on Hesiod’s two poems

(*Theogony* and *Works and Days*) referring to Prometheus (“forethought”), his brother Epimetheus (“hindsight”) and Pandora, the gifted, another old story that is important in the context of sustainability.<sup>8</sup> In Hesiod’s works, Prometheus is not actually punished by disease and death, but by a woman given as a gift to Epimetheus, the one who is unable to consider what the consequences of his actions might be. Pandora—his wife—does not, in the original tale, open a box to let out all evils: it remains quite unclear what exactly she does let out. Immanuel Musäus has pointed out that the Greek text is frequently mistranslated: the assumption that she scatters “all evils” is at best implied here (Musäus, 2004, p. 36). In a detailed linguistic analysis, Musäus outlines that she must in fact be scattering their food, and that this leads to the evil of waste and the threat of starvation: she gives away all that is in a storage jar (*pithos*), consuming everything but the hope that it may again be filled one day. Hesiod never explicitly said what was in that jar. Famine and all kinds of evil now enter the world, and Prometheus is the one who warns his brother not to marry a beautiful but wasteful woman.

Jungian psychiatrist Anthony Stevens shares Percy Shelley’s conviction that the story of Prometheus is the story of the Fall, and thus ultimately a story of climate change, arguing that “[b]y defying the gods, man becomes conscious of the laws of nature and subjugates them to his will. Emerging from the hunter-gatherer state, he seizes all the goods of the world for his own gratification.” To Stevens, Prometheus’ brother Epimetheus has become “an ecological psychopath, and in our world he rules” (1996, pp. 44–49). The story of the “modern Prometheus” thus links up with the concern voiced in Andrew Simms’s collection of environmental tales: the fear that due to our squandering of all resources, one day soon the storage jar will be empty, and “hope will flee.”

*Frankenstein’s* monster is not wasteful, nor does he particularly lust after women, but the fact that he wants to be given a *female* companion is a problem, since Victor, the new Prometheus, suspects her of becoming a second Pandora. A female creature made by Victor Frankenstein could only ever be a parody of the gods’ beautiful creature—but he nevertheless fears that she might be the means for the monstrous new species to propagate all kinds of evil; she might even turn out to be a new “pest” to scourge mankind. It is unclear whether the monster is able to have children with ordinary women: he considers himself to be so ugly that no woman would want to mate with him, and concludes that “the human senses are insurmountable barriers to our union” (p. 102). He demands that Victor creates a female of the new species who would, like her mate, be a vegetarian, able to live in remote places where lesser humans cannot live: “My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare” (p. 103). The new woman would also be shunned by mankind: “It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world” (p. 102). These two vegetarian monsters alone would be no threat to human food supplies, yet able to live in horrid climate zones, barely in need of much food, they would multiply and people the earth, eventually invading the habitat of mankind. Mankind might ultimately be driven out even if the new species was not intent on their destruction. Victor foresees, if not as much, then at least a similar result: “a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (p. 119). Victor’s savage destruction of the female monster has been read in various ways, but while it might be seen as his attempt to salvage the species of mankind, he ignores just what the earth actually needs: a (by and large) vegetarian human species careful about its ecological footprint.

## III

As Peter Brooks has pointed out: “We are always led back, in *Frankenstein*, to the peculiarity that this cultural creation [...] has

become part of nature—that the idea or concept of the monster, which at first has no referent in the natural world, gains one.” (p. 390). To Brooks, it is via the body that Frankenstein’s monster becomes part of nature, and the fact that there is no witness to his actual death at the end of the novel, he argues, makes the monster immortal in imagination. Yet it is also Victor himself who makes the monster immortal by presenting him as larger-than-life to his audience: he thanks “a spirit of good [which] followed and directed [his] steps,” apparently sustaining him in his quest (p. 146), when clearly that sustainment, the “coarse” food he is given on occasion, is provided by the monster—not being a vegetarian, most of the time Victor himself subsists by killing wild animals (p. 147). In Victor’s memory, even the clouds aided him by shedding a few drops when he was thirsty (p. 147). If that “rain”, too, is part of the monster’s efforts to sustain him, the monster has indeed become part of nature—visible only as “a slight cloud” that dims the sky and sheds some drops, at least in Victor’s hallucinations. Yet Victor stubbornly refuses to recognize the cautioning voice of nature in his creature. He hears only the threat to himself in the monster’s words, but the monster has no interest in killing Victor: clearly, he is not even talking about Victor, but about mankind. The monster aligns himself with nature: “Beware, for I am fearless, and therefore powerful. I will watch with the wiliness of a snake, that I may sting with its venom.” (p. 121). The serpent is now generally associated with Satan, with whom Frankenstein’s monster identifies. Yet in Western mythology, the snake is also a chthonic God, a creature of the earth, associated with fertility and the spirit of nature. If, as Anthony Stevens maintains, the psychological function of monsters is to warn (Stevens, 1996, p. 322), then *Frankenstein’s* monster sends Victor—whom he likes to address as “man”, thus making him the representative of mankind—some dire warnings: first, he cautions him not to “sport with life” (p. 68), and later, after Victor has destroyed the female creature, he warns him that he “shall repent of the injuries he inflicts” (p. 121).

To read the monster as a “spirit-of-nature” character may entail the charge of ventriloquism (and go beyond Mary Shelley’s intentions), yet if nature is speaking through the creature, it is an eloquent voice indeed (cf. Brooks, 1993/2012, p. 371). If we do read this monster as the monstrous voice of nature, as the Green Man uttering dire warnings about man’s lack of ecological foresight, the novel once more takes on new shades of meaning. According to Marilyn Butler, Frankenstein’s monster stands for “primitive man” (p. 414), but as Shelley claimed that she first envisioned the monstrous creature in a kind of waking dream, it might be better to understand Butler’s “primitive man” as a version of Carl Gustav Jung’s “two-million-year old self”: a cautionary voice from the collective unconscious, the voice of mankind that cares above all for animate nature, for life. To ecologically minded readers, thus, Victor may be the real monster: for much of the story, he is not Prometheus but Epimetheus, who “has no time for the eternal cycles of nature or for a civilized adjustment to them: he subverts everything to his own selfish needs in the here and now, with no concern for ecology or the morrow” (Stevens, 1996, p. 49).<sup>9</sup>

#### IV

Based on the myth of the Green Man, Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls* is one of the few tales for younger readers that involve a similarly complex monster saviour. This monster is a yew tree come alive, “the thin, needle-like leaves weaving together to make a green, furry skin that moved and breathed” (p. 5). When he first sees the monster, the 13-year-old protagonist Conor O’Malley is not frightened at all. Even when the monster threatens to eat him, Conor is not impressed by old-fashioned fairy-tale malignity: this monster is not the one Conor expected (p. 8). There is a “real” monster in his life, that is, death, and it has taken shape in his

dreams: “formed of cloud and ash and dark flames” and with “real read eyes,” who tears his mum out of his hands and into the abyss in his nightmares (p. 179). Not much is made of this evil monster in the story, and we never hear whether it is simply a different manifestation of the story-telling, healing, shape-shifting one presumably addressed in the book’s title. This monster, though, claims that Conor has called *him* because there is something that the boy needs from him (p. 30; p. 36), a claim Conor finds hard to believe, though he does admit to hoping for a monster slayer, someone to help him fight his nightmares (and his grandmother).

While the narrator avoids having to assign a gender to the monster, and uses the pronoun “it”, Conor is sternly reminded that even a monster is not a “what” but a “who.” In a poetic rodomontade, the monster goes on to explain who he—as well as it—is, using, as Roni Natov puts it, “incantatory images” (Natov, 2018, p. 83):

*I am Herne the Hunter! I am Cernunnos! I am the eternal Green Man! [...] I am the spine that the mountains hang upon! I am the tears that the rivers cry! I am the lungs that breathe the wind! I am the wolf that kills the stag, the hawk that kills the mouse, the spider that kills the fly! I am the stag, the mouse, and the fly that are eaten! I am the snake of the world devouring its tale” (p. 34).*

Indeed, the monster claims to be “this wild earth” (p. 35), and as such refuses to be relegated to the shadows (Feder, 2014, p. 65), demanding due respect instead (p. 48), and temporarily at least, a prominent place in Conor’s life. Like the creature does when face to face with Frankenstein, or Walton, this monster insists that Conor listen to his stories. He moreover stresses the importance of story telling (as Shelley’s creature does implicitly, too, when recounting his “education”, and presenting his “tale” and his vision of life in South America to his “maker”<sup>10</sup>). If this monster is the wild earth, then “[s]tories are wild creatures, [...] When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?” (p. 51). Reaching beyond the stories that the monster tells, the novel evokes British myths and legends: Herne the Hunter is first mentioned in Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and although he originally seems to have been part of the local folklore of Windsor Forest, his legend has been expanded beyond that of a local ghost story. Due to depictions of the Hunter with antlers on his head, he is now associated with Cernunnos, a Celtic god—as is the Green Man.<sup>11</sup> In a study published in 2009, before *A Monster Calls* appeared, Peter Bramwell noted that in order to stress environmental issues, contemporary children’s literature frequently has recourse to fashionable folklore and modern paganism, both of which have “absorb[ed]” the mythical Green Man, and tend to link other legendary figures, such as Herne, Cernunnos or the Green Knight, to that of the Green Man (2009, p. 1; p. 79).<sup>12</sup>

*A Monster Calls* is no exception to this trend, and indeed the myths surrounding the Green Man seem to provide the most fruitful amplifications of the stories that the monster tells, especially, it seems to me, if read in connection with the medieval tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This tale, rediscovered and first published in 1839, underlines the notion that stories are worth telling, and worth listening to (Borroff and Howes, 1839, I, ll. 90–99, p. 5), and does not shy away from giving moral lessons, either. The Green Knight is himself a monstrous creature, “half a giant,” but unlike Frankenstein’s monster, “formed with every feature in fair accord” (I, ll. 140; 145, p. 9). His skin, hair, bread, clothes and gear are green, symbolizing “the endless vegetative cycle of death and rebirth,” according to the editors (p. 9n1), but his eyes are red, associating him with serpent-monsters, or indeed the devil (I, l, p. 304, p. 11).<sup>13</sup> Having acquired magical powers

from Morgan le Fay, he has come to King Arthur's court to punish the pride of the Round Table, and teach the knights a lesson in humility (IV, ll. 2457–2458, p. 62). Sir Gawain is the one who answers to the Green Knight's challenge, and swiftly beheads the monstrous knight, only to find that the monster is not slain, but now has gained the right to use his own axe on Sir Gawain's neck in a year's time. After a year has passed, during the latter part of which the doomed Sir Gawain has searched for the Green Knight through winter and wilderness, and has successfully overcome all environmental as well as moral trials but one, they meet again, and the Green Knight points out that this last trial, a moral one, has proven that Sir Gawain loves his own life better than telling the truth (IV, l. 2368, p. 60). This is a slight on the knight's honour that Sir Gawain finds hard to accept but cannot deny. The twist to the tale is similar to that of the monster's stories in *A Monster Calls*, and even to that told by Frankenstein's creature: not only is Sir Gawain, like Frankenstein, and like Conor, made to accept the truth, he is moreover taught not to despise himself for not being perfect: "But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either/But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame" (IV, ll. 2367–2368, p. 60). The Green Knight laughs, and urges the humiliated Sir Gawain to partake of a cheerful feast instead of berating himself. Sir Gawain, however, refuses to be merry, and keeps a green girdle, token of his shame, and on his return, the merry folks at Arthur's court adopt a similar fashion, if not in quite the similar spirit of penitence.

The Green Knight is not only in colour a Green Man, he is also associated with both the splendour and the horrors of hunting: the poem outlines three successful hunts but shifts between the perspective of the hunters and that of the hunted animals, even detailing their disembowelment in a subtle parallel to Sir Gawain's struggle to accept his (fear of) death, and the lesson given by the monstrous Other. "Stories chase and bite and hunt," as Patrick Ness's monster claims (p. 35, my emphasis). The monster saviour's function in both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *A Monster Calls*, and arguably even in *Frankenstein*, is to teach a lesson of life-and-death importance: Sir Gawain as well as Conor (and Frankenstein) have to see themselves as they really are, and to accept not only their own limitations in order to mature individually, but at the same time a wider call for honesty, mercy and humility to improve their social relations (a feat that Victor Frankenstein never manages). Unlike *Frankenstein*, however, *A Monster Calls* is a children's book, and story and history are occasionally conflated to somewhat simplistic claims, such as that during the time of Industrialisation, "people began to live on the earth rather than within it" (p. 99, emphasis in the original). As Roni Natov argues, the novel still has a tendency to enlist the help of binary oppositions, especially in its ecological implications, "marked by boundaries between the natural and the unnatural, the pastoral and the industrial" (2018, p. 82). Nevertheless, the monster's powers are put to good use: monsters are the creatures we conjure up in times of need, as does Conor—he even calls up two very different monsters, and so does Walton in *Frankenstein*. The saviour monsters, the green men, to which Frankenstein's creature may be related, though his colour is yellowish rather than green, are part of our story world, even if their "lessons" are not always as easily understood as that of the Green Knight, as Conor finds out (one day, he may yet have to deal with that other monster). "The green things of this world are just wondrous," Conor's mother observes, "We work so hard to get rid of them when sometimes they're the very thing that saves us." This, or so *A Monster Calls* suggests, may be true of monsters too: we create them as the monstrous Others, projecting and externalizing our fears, our greed and our destructiveness. Yet being part of us, they stubbornly refuse to stay out of our lives,

returning to force us to see and accept the truth about ourselves, and about the consequences of our words and deeds. They do offer solutions if we listen, but, as Frankenstein, Conor and the parson in the second tale of *A Monster Calls* experience, monstrous solutions may work in ways that we do not anticipate. Stories, and monster stories in particular, are wild things indeed.

Received: 12 July 2019; Accepted: 28 October 2019;

Published online: 19 November 2019

## Notes

- 1 Few contemporary stories bother with options other than killing the monstrous Other. J.K. Rowling, for one, actually dodges the question of Harry's potential guilt by having Voldemort conveniently, if inadvertently, kill himself. The novels somehow downplay the fact that the monster is part of Harry, too, and even suggest that Harry can somehow be purified by getting rid of his monstrous self. Voldemort's death, however, is the end of Harry's story: the epilogue serves to prove that a purified Harry is nothing more than an ordinary middle-class parent.
- 2 In this essay, I will mostly use the term "nature" according to the third definition provided by Kate Soper (2000, p. 125), that is, "in reference to ordinarily observable features of the world" (cf. Bate, 2000, pp. 33–34). However, as her first definition outlines, we also use "nature" as "the concept through which humanity thinks its difference and specificity. It is the concept of the nonhuman—a definition that aligns the concept of nature with the concept of monstrosity, as I hope to show.
- 3 The de Laceys own a pigsty but seem to live entirely on vegetables: their "coarse" food is nevertheless "wholesome" (p. 79). For a broader discussion of the distinction between coarse and/or wholesome diets see Morton 1994, p. 49.
- 4 Timothy Morton reads the monster's claim as a re-imagining of the human body: "the monster will be more human than man" (1994, p. 29). The monster sees himself as more humane than man, too, and within the novel's confines, he is certainly right.
- 5 Shelley began to adhere to a vegetarian diet already in 1813, though he was never a strict vegetarian since his doctors advised occasional lapses for his health (Morton, 1994, p. 64). It is not clear whether Mary, too, adopted a strict vegetarian diet (in her carefully researched biography of Mary Shelley, Miranda Seymour barely mentions Percy's vegetarianism, and only implies that Mary followed suit, 2018, p. 128).
- 6 Shelley claimed that a vegetarian diet alone would only gradually lead to better health, since disease was also hereditary (p. 153). Throughout the 18th century, physicians like George Cheyne argued that human beings ate too much meat, and that their diet made them vulnerable to diseases (see, for instance, Oerlemans, 2002, p. 102). Compare also Oerleman's discussion of Percy Shelley's view on disease and the vegetarian diet (pp. 112–113): he reads Percy's argument within a wider discussion of social evils and a system of persistent violence.
- 7 Victor seems to have based his creature's proportions on Marcus Vitruvius Pollio's *De Architectura*, in which Vitruvius determines that the ideally proportioned man would have to be eight heads high, an idea taken up in Leonardo da Vinci's so called *Vitruvian Man* (dated to around 1490). Mary Shelley may have slyly disagreed with mathematical theories of proportion here.
- 8 Mary Shelley knew Hesiod's tales, she quoted from English translations in various of her works (see Morrison and Stone, 2003, p. 130; p. 199).
- 9 Reflecting on the changes Mary Shelley brought to the 1831 edition, Anne K. Mellor writes: "Mary Shelley replaces her earlier organic conception of nature with a mechanistic one, She now portrays nature as a mighty machine" (2012, p. 210). In the new version, Mellor continues, even Clerval, "who had functioned in the first edition as the touchstone of moral virtue" has become a "future colonial imperialist," exploiting the resources provided by nature (2012, p. 210).
- 10 I am grateful to Sibylle Erle for pointing this out to me.
- 11 For Cernunnos, who is associated with primarily a stag and with snakes, but also with other animals (see Green, 1992, pp. 39–41). The antlers are a feature the book's illustrator, Jim Kay, does not include in his depiction of the monster, whose looks are reminiscent of a straw man, or perhaps a willow tree, rather than a yew. Compare the first picture drawn by Mary Fedden for Jane Gardam's *Green Man* (Gardam, 1998, p. 6).
- 12 "The Green Man has proved more of a blank sheet on which to inscribe current ecological preoccupations," Bramwell points out, noting that there are certainly tensions between the rather patriarchal hunter-figure and feminist depictions of pagan goddesses in contemporary children's stories (2009, p. 2). J. R. R. Tolkien's Ents, and Tom Bombadil, are other examples of the "recycling" of this myth.
- 13 In Gardam's *Green Man*, the Green Man meets the devil, and thinks he looks into a mirror. Yet the devil, he decides, is not truly himself but only his "shabby self" (Gardam and Fedden, 1998, p. 27).

## References

- Bate J (2000) *The song of the earth*. Picador, London, Basingstoke and Oxford.
- Borroff M, Howes L (1839) *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Norton (Norton Critical Editions), New York, London.
- Bramwell P (2009) *Pagan themes in modern children's fiction: Green Man, Shamanism, earth mysteries*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Brooks P (1993/2012) What is a monster? (according to Frankenstein). In: Hunter P (ed) *Frankenstein*. Norton, New York and London, p 369–390 (reprint).
- Coupe L (2000). General introduction. In: Coupe L (ed) *The Green studies reader: from romanticism to ecocriticism*. Routledge, London and New York, p 1–12.
- Feder H (2014) *Ecocriticism and the idea of culture: biology and the Bildungsroman*. Ashgate, Farnham and Burlington.
- Gardam J, Fedden M (1998) *The Green Man: an eternity*. The Windrush Press, Morton-in-Marsh.
- Green M (1992) *Dictionary of celtic myth and legend*. Thames and Hudson, London.
- Mellor A (1990/2012) Choosing a text of Frankenstein to teach. In: Hunter P (ed) *Frankenstein*. Norton, New York and London, p 204–211 (reprint).
- Mellor A (1988/2012) Possessing nature: the female in Frankenstein. In: Hunter P (ed) *Frankenstein*. Norton, New York and London, p 355–369 (reprint).
- Morrison L, Stone S (2003) *A Mary Shelley encyclopedia*. Greenwood Press, Westport and London.
- Morton T (1994) *Shelley and the revolution in taste: the body and the natural world*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Morton T (2016) *Frankenstein and ecocriticism*. In: Andrew Smith (ed) *The Cambridge companion to Frankenstein*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Musäus I (2004) *Der Pandoramythos bei Hesiod und seine Rezeption bis Erasmus von Rotterdam*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Natov R (2018) *The courage to imagine: the child hero in children's literature*. Bloomsbury Academic, London, etc.
- Ness P (2011) *A monster calls*. Candlewick Press, Somerville/Massachusetts.
- Oerlemans O (2002) *Romanticism and materiality of nature*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo and London.
- Poovey M (1984/2012) My hideous progeny: the lady and the monster. In: Hunter P (ed) *Frankenstein*. Norton, New York and London, p 344–355.
- Seymour M (2018) *Mary Shelley*. Simon & Schuster, London.
- Shelley M (2012) *Frankenstein*. Ed. P Hunter. Norton, New York and London.
- Shelley P (2002). *Shelley's poetry and prose*. Eds DH Reiman, N Fraistat. 2nd edn. Norton Critical Edition, New York and London.
- Shelley P (1993) *The prose works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Ed. EB Murray. Vol. I. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Simms A (ed) (2016) *There was a knock at the door: 23 modern folk tales for troubling times*. The Real Press/the New Weather Institute.

- Soper K (2000) The idea of nature. In: Coupe L (ed) *The green studies reader: from romanticism to ecocriticism*. Routledge, London and New York.
- Stevens A (1996). *Private myths: dreams and dreaming*. Penguin, London, etc.
- Tatar M (2017) *The Classic Fairy Tales*. 2nd Ed. Norton & Company, New York and London.
- Williams R (1983) *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, 2nd edn. Fontana Press, London.

## Acknowledgements

I acknowledge support for the Article Processing Charge from the DFG (German Research Foundation, 393148499) and the Open Access Publication Fund of the University of Greifswald.

## Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

## Additional information

**Correspondence** and requests for materials should be addressed to M.H.

**Reprints and permission information** is available at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>

**Publisher's note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2019