A Monster Calls, Patrick Ness, from an original idea by Siobhan Dowd

CLPE (www.clpe.org.uk) is sharing this educational resource to mark and honour the 2017 CILIP Carnegie Medal 80th anniversary and the CILIP Kate Greenaway 60th anniversary celebrations.

This teaching sequence was designed to support the exploration of the novel in a Year 7/8 class. The approaches advocated are drawn from the principles of our highly successful Power of Reading Programme. The programme is delivered in settings across the country with implementation complemented by our website which includes, a bank of over 150 teaching sequences ranging from Early Years through to Y7 as well as over 1500 examples of practice. To enquire about training or website subscription contact us at por@clpe.org.uk

A Monster Calls is a highly emotive and powerful novel about a boy - Conor O’Malley - dealing with his mother’s battle against terminal cancer. It addresses a young person’s responses to family trauma, loss, dreams and the truths we hide from ourselves. It’s also about the power of stories to help us explore and understand the world, and to reconcile ourselves to its sometimes harsh realities. Ness’s narrative is accompanied by Jim Kay’s striking images, which contribute to the novel’s dark atmosphere and explore some of what is unspoken in this heart-wrenching story.
Overall aims of this teaching sequence.

- To explore a novel which covers complex and profound issues
- To explore the different and complex roles of stories and storytelling

This teaching sequence is designed for a Year 7 class.

Overview of this teaching sequence.

This teaching sequence is approximately four weeks long if spread out over 20 sessions. The book supports teachers to explore with their pupils a powerful, emotive narrative, which deals with challenging and complex life issues and events.

National Curriculum 2014 Links

Reading: (Word reading / Comprehension)

- Develop an appreciation and love of reading, and read increasingly challenging material independently.
- Make inferences and referring to evidence in the text.
- Know the purpose, audience for and context of the writing and drawing on this knowledge to support comprehension
- Check their understanding to make sure that what they have read makes sense.
- Know how language, including figurative language, vocabulary choice, grammar, text structure and organisational features, presents meaning studying setting, plot, and characterisation, and the effects of these.

Writing: (Transcription / Composition)

- Write for a wide range of purposes and audiences, including well-structured formal expository and narrative essays, stories, scripts, poetry and other imaginative writing, notes and polished scripts for talks and presentations, a range of other narrative and non-narrative texts, including arguments, and personal and formal letters.
- Summarise and organise material, and supporting ideas and arguments with any necessary factual detail.
- Apply their growing knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and text structure to their writing and selecting the appropriate form.
- Draw on knowledge of literary and rhetorical devices from their reading and listening to enhance the impact of their writing.
- Plan, draft, edit and proof-read through considering how their writing reflects the audiences and purposes for which it was intended, amending the vocabulary, grammar and structure of their writing to improve its coherence and overall effectiveness.
- Consider how well their writing reflects the audiences and purposes for which it was written.

Speaking and Listening: (Spoken English)

Pupils should be taught to speak confidently and effectively, including through using Standard English confidently in a range of formal and informal contexts, including classroom discussion, giving short speeches and presentations, expressing their own ideas and keeping to the point, participating in formal debates and structured discussions, summarising and/or building on what has been said, improvising, rehearsing and performing play scripts and poetry in order to generate language and discuss language use and meaning, using role, intonation, tone, volume, mood, silence, stillness and action to add impact.

Cross Curricular Links

Art: National Curriculum link - pupils should learn about the history of art, craft, design and architecture, including periods, styles and major movements from ancient times up to the present day.

With the use of Jim Kay’s illustrations integral to the text, *A Monster Calls* could be used as the starting point for an exploration of illustrations for narrative, exploring the illustrations used in novels which use illustrations to complement and extend the narrative, such as David McKean’s illustrations of David Almond’s novels, and perhaps lead into an exploration of illustration for graphic novels and picturebooks for older readers.

History: National Curriculum link – Pupils should be taught about the development of Church, state and society in Medieval Britain 1066-1509

The mysteries surrounding the Green Man - alluded to in *A Monster Calls* - and their appearance in church buildings throughout Britain from the early middle ages, could be used as the focus for a topic on the development of the Church in Medieval Britain.

Teaching Approaches

- Tell me – booktalk
- Reading aloud
- Debate and discussion

Visual approaches

Drama and role-play

Writing in role

Writing Outcomes

- Diary entries
- Poetry
- Life writing

Report writing

Notes (for use in discussion and debate)

Narrative

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The Knife of Never Letting Go, The Ask and the Answer, and Monsters of Men - Patrick Ness. In this trilogy, also by Patrick Ness, a boy is forced to confront the issues of the adult world, though in a very different context to A Monster Calls. The sci-fi setting for this novel could be used as a contrast to the predominantly ‘real world’ setting for A Monster Calls.

The Savage – David Almond. Another powerful story about the power of stories to explore grief. There are additional parallels with A Monster Calls in the use of illustration to complete the narrative, in this case, by David McKean.

Bog Child – Siobhan Dowd. Read one of Dowd’s novels and explore further Dowd’s style as compared to Ness’s. Compare and contrast novels written by the two writers and discuss why Patrick Ness might have been chosen to complete an idea started by Siobhan Dowd.

Pig Heart Boy - Malorie Blackman. A powerful family drama (which also has a teaching sequence in The Power of Reading) about a boy dealing with a trauma, though in this novel, it is about coming to terms with a threat to his own life that provides the focus.

Weblinks
Download and watch the video trailer of A Monster Calls from Candlewick Press (this page also includes an audio book reading, a sample chapter and a page of discussion notes).

The Scholastic biography of Patrick Ness.

Cancer Research UK – the UK cancer research charity. Includes lots of facts and figures about different forms of cancer, information about what cancer is, preventing cancer and the search for cancer cures.

The Green Man Enigma and Mike Harding’s Green Man resource – two of many web resources for researching and further exploring the mythology of the Green Man.

Teaching Sessions

Sessions one and two: Tell me – book talk, visual approaches, reading aloud, role on the wall

Learning objectives:
• Pupils are able to participate in discussion about a text that is read to them
• Pupils are able to draw inferences, justifying these with evidence
• Pupils are able to explore characterisation and use evidence to support their opinions
  • Display the front cover for A Monster Calls with the title and author details obscured. Ask your pupils to discuss in pairs what they think this novel will be about. What sort of a story do they think it will be? What genre is it likely to be? What makes them think that? Show the pupils the cover with the title and author visible and ask them whether either of these two details changes their opinions of what the story will be about and the probable genre. Discuss the various answers as a class before reading, and note down the pupils answers (for use in the final Tell Me session, after you have finished reading the book).
  • Read aloud to the pupils the first two pages of chapter 1, A Monster Calls, up to the line, ‘Someone was calling his name. Conor.’
  • As your pupils, ‘Tell me was there anything you liked/ disliked about this opening?’ ‘Was there anything that puzzled you?’ Ask them what they know about Conor from this introduction.
  • Ask your pupil in groups to predict what is going to happen in the story and to give reasons for their answers? Does the beginning of this story remind them of any other stories they have read or films they have seen? What sort of genre do they think this story is going to be now?
  • Continue reading the rest of the first chapter and at the end of the session ask pupils to note of aspects they liked, disliked and puzzled them or any further connections they make with anything they have heard or read.
• Ask the pupils what they think is going to happen in this story. *What do they make of the appearance of the monster? Do they think it is 'real' or in Conor’s imagination?*
• In session two, reread the section from p18 ‘And then the monster spoke.’
• Ask the class to think about what they make of the monster itself. What sort of a character is the monster? Does he act in the way they would expect a monster to act
• Split the class into groups of three or four, and give each of the groups a copy of the text for chapter 1, *A Monster Calls.*
• Give half the groups the task of creating a role on the wall for the monster and half a role on the wall for Conor. Ask them to text mark to find evidence from the text about their chosen character.
• As a whole class, share the roles on the wall for each of the characters, and discuss any of the aspects about either character the pupils find surprising and unusual.
• Before session three, find time to read aloud *Breakfast.*

**Session three: drama and role-play, discussion and debate, reading aloud**

**Learning objectives:**
• **Pupils can explore characters’ differing reactions to the same situation**
• **Pupils can explore complex characterisation and discuss characters’ motivations**
  • Recap on the events from *Breakfast,* and discuss with your pupils what is happening in Conor’s home life. *What is the situation he is dealing with? And does this have any bearing on what they think about the events of the first chapter?*
  • Read aloud the chapter *School.*
  • Explain to your pupils they are going to be rewriting this short chapter as a play in small groups, and then acting out the events. Split the class into groups with enough people to play Conor, Harry, Lily, Miss Kwan, Anton and Sully.
  • Ask your pupils, as they writer their short dramas, to consider carefully the actions and reactions of each of the characters, especially Conor, Harry, Lily and Miss Kwan.
  • After the pupils have written out their playscripts, give them time to rehearse their plays and each group acts out their play for the rest of the class. After each performance, give the rest of the class time to ask questions of each of the characters about why they act in the way they do. If necessary, ask questions of the different groups including, ‘Why does Conor react in the way he does to Lily’s intervention?’ ‘What does Miss Kwan really think happened, and does she believe Conor’s answer about falling?’ ‘Why does Conor act to protect someone who has attacked him?’ and ‘Why does Lily intervene and how does she feel by the end of the chapter?’
  • Read aloud *Life Writing* and ask the pupils if anything in this chapter changes their opinions about why Conor acts the way he does with the bullies and the teacher.

**Sessions four to five: reading aloud, poetry, research**

**Learning objective:**
• **Pupils can investigate intertextuality in a fictional narrative to understand a key character**
• **Pupils can prepare a short presentation**
  • Read aloud the chapter *Three Stories.*
  • Reread p44, in which the monster tells Conor who he is.
  • In groups, recreate the monster’s speech as a group performed poem, focusing on the physical actions to accompany the monster’s words, as well as the ways in which a group can give emphasis to particular phrases, through timbre, volume, pitch, speed, the number of voices, interweaving different sections, repetition etc.
  • In session five, give your pupils research projects, individually, to explore, respectively, the history, stories, and characters of the mythological Herne the Hunter, Cernunnos and the Green Man. Give your pupils choice over how they present back, whether as a written piece, a verbal telling, an annotated diagram, a poem, a fact book etc.
  • Each pupil to present back to a group of four other pupils, and following the presentations, to share as a class, the information gathered about the three mythical characters. Ask your pupils whether this information gives them insight into the character of the monster, and why he might be appearing to Conor.
  • Find time to read aloud the chapter *Grandma* before the next session.
Sessions six and seven: reading aloud, retelling, research

Learning objective:

- Pupils can explore the oral tradition of storytelling
- Pupils can give a short presentation
  - Read aloud the chapter *The Wildness of Stories* and *The First Tale*.
  - Discuss the orality of the story the monster tells, and explain that this fits into a long tradition of oral storytelling that stretches back centuries, and covers stories such as myths (including those of the Green Man, Herne and Cerunnos), fairytales, morality tales and fables.
  - Explain to the pupils they are going to investigate fairytales, morality stories and (pick a selection of short moral stories and fairytales for the pupils to investigate (with the fairtales, consider using the Grimm versions).
  - Give small groups of pupils different fairytales to investigate and ask them to prepare an oral retelling of their stor for the next session.
  - In session seven, ask some of the pupils to orally retell their chosen story.
  - Discuss whether these stories have clear messages for the reader. What are the messages they can pull from these stories?
  - Compare these stories with the stories the monster tells.
  - Read aloud *The Rest of the First Tale* and discuss as a class whether they think there is any moral in the story and if there is, what is that moral. As them to what extent they believe they believe the monster’s statement ‘There is not always a good guy. Nor is there always a bad one. Most people are somewhere in between.’

Session eight: reading aloud, retelling, shared writing, writing in role

Learning objective:

- To explore the same events from another character’s perspective
  - Read aloud *Understanding*.
  - Discuss as a class the character of Lily. Ask your pupils ‘What sort of person do you think she is and what evidence from the text can you find to support our understanding of her?’
  - Ask the pupils ‘should Lily have told more people about Conor’s Mum? Why do you think she told other people, after Conor had asked her not to? To what extent is she breaching his trust in her? What are her responsibilities in this situation?’
  - Shared write the beginning of the chapter from Lily’s perspective.
  - Hand out copies of the full chapter and ask pupils to rewrite the rest of the chapter from Lily’s perspective, considering how she feels and why she acts in the way she does.
  - Read aloud *Little Talk, Grandma’s House, Champ* and *Americans Don’t Get Much Holiday* before the next session.

Sessions nine and ten: reading aloud, conscience alley, poetry

Learning objective:

- To explore characters’ responses to an event in the narrative
  - Read aloud the chapters *The Second Tale*.
  - Ask your pupils if they can predict the monster’s reasoning for destroying the parson’s home.
  - Read aloud *The Rest of the Second Tale* up to p120, where the monster says ‘I await your command, boy’ and create a conscience alley, with pupils on one side urging Conor to complete the destruction, and pupils on the other trying to convince him to stop, to calm down and walk away. Ask the pupils who has walked the alley to explain to the class what it is they are going to ask the monster to do at this point if they are Conor.
  - In session ten, read aloud *Destruction* (up to the point the Grandmother enters the room). Ask the pupils for their personal reactions to Conor’s destruction of the room. Are they shocked by his actions and what do they consider the reasons behind his actions?
  - Gather on a central board words and phrases they associate with Conor’s destruction of the room.
  - Create a group poem for the events around Conor’s actions.
  - Split the class into smaller groups of four or five and each group to decide on how they are going to perform the poem (discuss the ways in which they might perform – actions, tone, choral speaking, sound effects, volume, timbre, adding ‘special effects’ etc).
  - Each group to perform their group poem. Discuss the ways in which the performances differ and question to pupils about their choices.
  - Read aloud to the end of the chapter *Destruction* and discuss as a class the grandmother’s response. Did they
expect that would be what she would do? Can they explain why does she act the way she does? Do they see the grandmother in a different light because of the way she acts here?

**Session 11:** drama and roleplay, reading aloud  
**Learning Objective:**  
- **Pupils can explore a character’s complex emotional state**  
  - Read aloud the chapter *Invisible.*  
  - Ask the pupils to prepare questions they would like to ask Conor about his feelings, especially those around Lily, Harry, Sully and Anton shunning him, his response to his father’s lack of reaction to his destruction of his grandmother’s house, and his classmates responses to him. Can they find an answer to Harry’s supposition that ‘I guess we’ll never find out... what it is O’Malley wants.’  
  - Ask one or more pupils to roleplay the character of Conor, and take turns asking the character the prepared questions.

**Session 12:** reading aloud, visual approaches  
**Learning Objective:**  
- **Pupils can explore the interplay between text and illustration and explore the aspects of a narrative that are impossible to include in written text.**  
  - Read aloud the chapter *Yew Trees.*  
  - Display the illustrations used up to this point in *A Monster Calls.* Ask the pupils how the style and materials used in the illustrations (as noted on the novel’s back inner sleeve ‘His images... use everything from beetles to breadboards to create interesting marks and textures’) match the mood and tone of the novel. Ask pupils what elements of the illustrations capture this mood.  
  - Pupils to use similar art techniques to illustrate one of the scenes (a scene of their choice), with the only stipulation that is not one already illustrated in the novel, perhaps a scene that stands out to them as a particularly powerful one.  
  - Ask your pupils ‘Is there anything that can be achieved through illustrations that can’t be through text? Is there a reason this is a particularly good novel to illustrate? And why?’

**Session 13:** reading aloud, writing in role  
**Learning Objective:**  
- **Pupils can write from the perspective of a key character**  
  - Read aloud the chapter *Could it be?*  
  - Remind your pupils about the school project on life writing and explain they are going to be taking Conor’s role as he decides to write some of his experience down as a piece of life writing.  
  - Explain they can take any part of this short, but packed chapter as their starting point, whether his feelings about his mother, about his father’s return to America.  
  - The only stipulation for the writing is it should be based on Conor’s experiences and what is happening at this point in the story, that it is told in first person and that it contains a detailed, personal account of events. Model and shared write a short section of life writing narrative as a starting point, and ask pupils either to continue the account, or to begin one of their own, from a different starting point.  
  - Read aloud the chapter *No Tale* and find time before the next session to read *I No Longer See You* and *The Third Tale.*

**Session 14:** reading aloud, writing in role, shared writing  
**Learning Objective:**  
- **Pupils can explore a character’s feelings and decisions**  
  - Read aloud the chapter *I no longer see you.*  
  - Discuss with the pupils why is this the worst thing Henry can do to him?  
  - Hotseat Henry to explore why he acts as he does. Why would he pick on someone who was already suffering? What do Henry’s actions tell the reader about his character, and his understanding of Conor’s situation and inner feelings?  
  - Read aloud *The Third Tale,* in which Conor attacks Henry before the next session.
**Session 15:** debate and argument, reading aloud  
**Learning Objective:**  
- **Pupils can debate a key issue in a narrative**  
  - Read aloud the chapter *Punishment.*  
  - Discuss the three stories and the role of the monster as a whole class. What is the monster’s role? Is he helping or hurting Conor.  
  - Split the class into two groups, one group which finds evidence of the monster’s damaging effect on Conor, and the other to defend the point of view he is helping him.  
  - Explain the rules of formal debate. Discuss with your pupils the need to back up arguments with evidence from the text, the use of quotation from the text.

**Session 16:** reading aloud, shared writing  
**Learning Objective:**  
- Read aloud *A Note.*  
- Explain to the pupils they are going to be writing a series of diary entries from Lily’s perspective, at key points in the text.  
- As a class, recap on the key events Lily would have observed of Conor’s story, and pick two events in addition to her sending Conor his note to explore in more depth. Explore how her understanding of Conor’s situation changes over the course of the book, and explore in more depth what were the key reasons pupils think she would send Conor the note, and what she hoped would happen as a result of sending it.  
- Shared write the opening section of one Lily’s diary entries from events earlier in the novel, and ask your pupils to continue and complete two other episodes in the story from Lily's perspective, leading up to her sending the note.  
- Before the next section, read aloud *100 Years* and *What’s the Use of You?*

**Session 17:** book talk, reading aloud, visual approaches  
**Learning Objective:**  
- **Pupils can investigate the motivations of a key character**  
  - Read aloud *The Fourth Tale* up to ‘The real monster was coming.’  
  - Before showing them Kay’s illustration on the next page, ask your pupils to discuss in small groups the nightmare, and to create, using the techniques they have used in the previous session on the illustrations, a picture to represent the nightmare, considering which subjects they will include, which details from the nightmare.  
  - Read aloud the remaining portion of *The Fourth Tale* and *The Rest of the Fourth Tale.*  
  - Use the tell me questions to explore Conor’s truth and your pupils’ reactions to it, exploring in particular the questions on puzzles. Was there anything that surprised them about the ‘truth’? Was there anything they found strange about it? Can you think of a reason why Conor had been hiding this truth from himself? Does the ‘truth’ change the way you feel about Conor?  
  - Find time to read *Life After Death* and *Something in Common* before the next session.

**Session 18:** book talk, reading aloud  
**Learning Objective:**  
- **Pupils can investigate the motivations of a key character**  
  - Read aloud *The Truth.*  
  - Ask the pupils some of the Tell Me questions you asked at the start of the sequence, about their likes and dislikes of the novel, and their emotional reactions to it. Ask them would they recommend it to a friend, and if a friend asked them what it was like and what it was about, how would they answer.  
  - Ask your pupils to discuss in groups and verbally present on their impression of the character of the Monster. Do they think the Monster was ever ‘really’ there, or was he a product of Conor’s imagination?  
  - Ask them to consider again what role the Monster plays in the novel – what does he do for Conor?

**Sessions 19 to 20:** Tell me – book talk, debate and argument  
**Learning Objectives:**  
- **Pupils can consider the effects of an inconclusive ending in a narrative**  
- **Pupils can reflect on issues raised in a text**  
- **Pupils can explore different perspectives on a contentious issue raised in a text**  
  - Remind the pupils of the monster’s quote on p62, ’Stories are wild creatures... When you let them loose, who knows what havoc they might wreak?’.
• Discuss with your pupils the role of stories in *A Monster Calls* – make a list on the board of all the different stories that are told within the novel. Ask your pupils to annotate the list with the different reasons stories are used in the novel, what the effect of them is (on both the characters and the reader). Ask them again about the moral aspect to stories – are they always clear cut in terms of what they are saying to the reader? And is *A Monster Calls* imparting a message to the reader? If so, what is that message?
• Read the Author’s Note at the beginning of the novel and ask the pupils to consider their personal reactions to the note.
• Ask them what does the knowledge Patrick Ness took the idea for the novel after Siobhan Dowd’s death do to their understanding and appreciation of the story? Ask them does it matter that this was the case?
• Ask the pupils to consider whose story it is? Dowd’s or Ness’s?
• Prepare a short debate with the class taking two sides and defending the point of view that *A Monster Calls* is either Patrick Ness’s novel or Siobhan Dowd’s.
• An extension activity could be to create a book trailer for *A Monster Calls* in which the pupils have to decide how much of the story to give away, what is going to entice the reader in without spoiling the story?