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The Evolution of the Portrayal of Trauma in Children's Literature

The Diary of Anne Frank, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *Number the Stars*, and the more recently published *Wonder* are just a few books currently taught in classrooms that portray child protagonists experiencing various forms of trauma. Increasingly, educators and parents are realizing that children do not need to be sheltered from stories of trauma and harsh experiences because these events are realistic and affect thousands of young people every year. These types of books, however, were not always embraced or widely-read. Trauma studies is a relatively new field, and children's trauma literature is a fairly new genre. Kenneth Kidd explores the significance of this in his article "'A' is for Auschwitz: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, and the 'Children's Literature of Atrocity'". Kidd writes, "Since the early 1990s, children's books about trauma, especially the trauma(s) of the Holocaust, have proliferated" (120). Before this time period, children's books that explicitly portrayed trauma were uncommon, and when they did exist they were not seen as 'trauma literature.' There seems to have been a shift from the idea that young readers must be protected from evil at all costs to the belief that they must be exposed to these traumatic stories. For Kidd, the turning point appears to be the occurrence of the Holocaust. He suggests the exposure model "became necessary because we no longer had the luxury of denying the existence or postponing the child's confrontation with evil" (Kidd 121). Through close examination of children's literature from different time periods, the evolution of

the portrayal of trauma in these stories is apparent, and distinctly reflects the changing societal views of childhood and trauma.

The change in European and Western children's literature over the centuries can be attributed to the evolution of the perception of childhood. When Puritanism dominated in the 1600s, humans were believed to be born sinful as a result of Original Sin in the Garden of Eden. Children were not viewed as innocent creatures, but rather as sinners who needed to learn how to behave properly and repent their sins in order to go to Heaven (Reynolds). Consequently, almost all children's books written before the mid-18th century were instructional, and were often religious as well. These texts were not only spelling books and conduct books, but were also books that contained stories of children who lay on their deathbeds due to their neglect of the Sabbath or the various other sins they had committed. Before they die, they renounce their wickedness and tell of how salvation and eternal reward awaits for all those who repent (Reynolds). Children were not supposed to read for enjoyment, as it would take them away from household chores and make them idle. Instead, books about the importance of good manners and the repentance of sins dominated in this society (Grenby).

By the mid-18th century, however, childhood had come to be associated with more positive attributes such as innocence, creativity, and malleability. Important to this change in the perception of childhood was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a philosopher who not only rejected the idea of children being doomed due to Original Sin, but also maintained that children were born innocent and pure (Reynolds). Following these new ideas, children were seen as being especially close to God and were a force of good in an otherwise tainted world. Children could only be corrupted through experiences with the outside world, and so it was important to protect them

from those influences (Reynolds). This change in thinking can be seen reflected in the children's literature of the time. In 1744, John Newberry published *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book Intended for the Instruction and Amusement of Little Master Tommy and Pretty Miss Polly*. This book was one of the first pieces of children's literature intended to entertain as well as instruct. It was a small book that would fit perfectly in the hands of little children and also contained a toy for the child; a ball for "Master Tommy" and a pincushion for "Miss Polly" (Grenby). It was still thought that children needed instruction; their newly-perceived purity meant that they needed to be instructed properly so they were not corrupted by the world, and they were still expected to be model children with good manners. In many ways, they were thought of as pure, miniature adults, who could positively influence their parents and other adults with their unselfish and innocent behavior. Newberry's books were also the perfect embodiment of the educational philosophies of John Locke, an influential English philosopher who thought education was essential, but advocated for teaching through amusement. Newberry's books, combined with Rousseau's and Locke's theories shaped the children's books that were published in the 1700s, and marked a distinct change in the genre of children's literature (Grenby).

Children's literature continued to evolve from that point, and began to become more and more focused on entertaining children (Grenby). In 1865, Lewis Carroll published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a novel filled with child curiosity and wonder that reflects another change in thinking about the nature of childhood. Instead of spending their time being explicitly taught, it was thought that children should be out playing and discovering things for themselves. It was also still believed that children could be a positive influence on the more cynical adults around them by displaying those characteristics of innocence and curiosity. Rather than being

instructional, *Alice's Adventures* was filled with nonsensical characters that were intended purely to delight children. This novel also ushered in the “Golden Age” of children’s literature, with books that focused on imagination in children, including *Peter Pan* and *The Secret Garden* (Reynolds). These ‘imaginative’ novels grew more and more popular, and purely moral or instructional texts began to fall by the wayside.

In the mid-1900s, another shift in children’s literature began to take place that continues to this day. This change is one that leans towards confronting complexity and the deep emotional challenges that children and adolescents face (Grenby). Some examples of these novels are *Speak*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and *A Monster Calls*, which depict traumatic topics such as rape, bullying, depression, and the death of a loved one. Trauma is more explicitly dealt with in these stories, and, as stated above, Kidd attributes this to the change in the perception of childhood that occurred after the Holocaust. After such a destructive event that displayed a total disregard for the lives of children and adults alike, adults were forced to realize that children could not always be protected from traumatic events, and, rather than being kept ignorant, they should be exposed to literature that displays these terrible experiences (Kidd 120). Educators and parents have slowly come to accept this view of childhood, and books that deal with topics such as racism, death, sexual assault, and abuse have been worked into classrooms and libraries. *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl*, *House on Mango Street*, and *Inside Out and Back Again* are just a few books used to support the Common Core Curriculum that portray various forms of trauma. By examining the history of children’s literature, it is clear that society’s evolving understanding and acceptance of childhood trauma is reflected in the texts that are written for and about children.

Although children's trauma literature may be a relatively new phenomenon, that does not mean that children in the past did not experience trauma. Childhood may have been viewed as an innocent and wondrous time, but at the same time as *Alice in Wonderland* was gaining popularity, orphanages were overrun, children under the age of seven were working 12 hour days in factories and sweatshops, and poor families often turned their sons and daughters over to mill or factory owners because they could not support them ("Child Labor"). For most of history, children's literature was a way to portray the perfect childhood, rather than a realistic one. When children's literature did portray childhood trauma, it was not labeled as 'trauma literature'. Some such novels include *David Copperfield* (1853), *A Little Princess* (1905), and *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883). These characters experience beatings, neglect, and mental abuse from the adults around them. The trauma of the children in these stories is often described less vividly and more objectively, and characters are able to recover from the trauma relatively quickly. So, although these novels were never explicitly stated to be trauma novels, and although the trauma is never directly addressed, it is still present and affects the lives of the child protagonists. In contrast, the trauma portrayed in more recently published books is described in great detail and with emotion, designed to make the reader feel the impact of the trauma as well. Characters take longer to recover from such experiences, if they are ever able to, and it often leaves a lasting impact on them. This shift in the portrayal and acknowledgement of trauma is significant as it shows not only how the view of childhood has changed but also how society's understanding and acceptance of trauma has evolved as well.

Two books that display this shift in the portrayal of trauma in children's literature are *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett, and *A Monster Calls*, by Patrick Ness. These books

were written exactly 100 years apart; Burnett's story was first published as a book in 1911, while Ness' novel was published in 2011. Both of these stories portray a child dealing with the loss of a parent and the resultant trauma, but how the trauma is depicted and how the characters recover from it varies significantly. These novels are products of their time periods and reflect the perception of childhood that was popular at the time. Comparing these two novels highlights how drastically the thinking surrounding trauma and children has evolved, and how the portrayal of such trauma in children's literature has changed over the years.

The novel *The Secret Garden* features Mary Lennox, a spoiled and sickly 10-year-old girl who lives in India with her English parents. Her father is an army captain, and he and his beautiful wife rarely, if ever, spend time with their child. Mary is instead looked after by her Ayah, a native nurse who has been told to give the child anything she wants and that Mary's mother does not want to be bothered by her. A sudden outbreak of cholera kills much of the household, including the Ayah and Mary's parents. The other members of the household flee in a panic, forgetting all about the spoiled child. This saves Mary's life, as she is untouched by the disease, and she is eventually found by two guards. She is sent to live with her uncle, a rumored hunchback who is still grieving from the death of his wife 10 years prior. While living in his dark and isolated mansion in England, she discovers a secret garden hidden behind a locked wall. As she spends more time in the garden and begins to care for it, she becomes stronger and healthier and her selfish ways begin to cease. Eventually, Mary discovers that her cousin, Colin, also lives in the mansion. He has been confined to his bed since birth because everyone, himself included, believes he is sickly and will die an early death. When Mary takes Colin into the garden, he too begins to recover and even learns to walk again.

In the more recently published *A Monster Calls*, Conor O'Malley is a 13-year-old boy who lives in England with his mother. Although never explicitly stated, it is understood that Conor's mother is suffering from terminal cancer and has been undergoing various treatments for the past year; however, none of them are working, and his mother is spending increasingly more time in the hospital. Conor feels a sense of abandonment throughout the novel as he is bullied and isolated at school, he has to stay with his cold and controlling grandmother, and, although his father comes for a brief visit, he soon returns to his new wife and child in the United States. Conor is also afflicted with a recurring nightmare that he refuses to speak or think about. After waking from one of these nightmares, he looks out his window and sees the old yew tree, which sits in the nearby church graveyard, has taken on a human form and is walking towards his window. The monster explains that it will tell Conor three stories, and then Conor must tell the fourth story and reveal the truth of his nightmare. If he refuses, he will die. When the time comes, the monster forces Conor to show it his nightmare. In the dream, he is holding his mom's hand to stop her from being pulled off a cliff into darkness by a terrifying creature. Eventually, however, Conor's grip fails and his mother falls. Although Conor resists, he finally reveals the truth of his nightmare and admits he let her go on purpose: he couldn't stand the pain of holding on and wanted it to finally be over. The tree comforts Conor, revealing that its true purpose was to heal him of his guilt and grief and to help him through the pain of losing his mother. The story closes with Conor's mother passing away in the hospital at 12:07 a.m., the same time the monster first came to Conor's window.

By examining the values that were popular at the time of *The Secret Garden's* publication, it is clear how the characters of Mary and Colin reflect the era's perception of

childhood. Mary is a spoiled child, but as she spends time in the garden she is able to overcome her selfish behavior and becomes an imaginative, kind, and curious girl who enjoys being out in nature; in short, she becomes the model of a perfect child that was prized during this time.

Readers can also see how the perception of children as a force for good, especially to the adults around them, is portrayed in this novel. At the beginning of the novel, Colin is a whiny, self-centered character; however, he also overcomes these negative characteristics by spending time in nature and becomes a healthy, energetic child who helps his father recover from his trauma as well. Colin's father spent ten years trying to forget his son existed, and had instead "let his soul fill itself with blackness and had refused obstinately to allow any rift of light to pierce through" (Burnett 366). However, on the very same day that Colin first sees the garden and declares that he will get better, his father also experiences a change in his feelings of mortality. He is drawn out of his melancholy and depressive thoughts for the first time since his son was born: he says to himself, "I almost feel as if- I were alive!" (Burnett 368). The change in Colin's attitude create a transformation in his bitter and cynical father, helping him overcome the trauma of his wife's death which has haunted him for ten years. This reflects the perception of childhood that was present at the time; children were seen as a force of good that helped the adults in their lives recover as well. The values of the period are also reflected in the fact that neither Mary nor Colin are explicitly stated as victims of trauma; they are instead viewed by the adults around them as spoiled and selfish children. It is only by looking at their experiences through the lens of trauma studies that readers can clearly see how trauma influences the children's lives and actions.

When looking at *A Monster Calls*, it is clear that Conor is a product of the more modern perception of childhood and the current genre of children's literature. Conor's emotions and struggles are much more complex and painful than Mary and Colin's, and his trauma is also acknowledged within the text. While Mary and Colin were seen as inherently self-absorbed and aggressive, when Conor acts out and physically attacks a bullying classmate his behavior is attributed to the trauma that he is currently going through. His headmistress tells him that his actions dictate immediate expulsion, but then she sighs and says, "How could I do that and still call myself a teacher?...With all that you're going through" (Ness 185). Although Conor broke the arm and nose of another student, his actions are seen as reasonable results of the trauma he is going through. Mary and Colin overcome the impact of their neglect and abuse by spending time in nature and thinking positive thoughts, a very gentle process. Conor takes much longer to confront his trauma, actively avoiding thinking about it and refusing to speak to anyone about what he is feeling. When he finally is forced to confront it, it is incredibly painful for him to do so. Conor's story is written with his trauma clearly displayed, rather than discounted, which shows that Conor is a product of current perceptions of childhood. Children are no longer viewed as solely innocent creatures who do not have complex feelings, and they are no longer expected to be unerring, pure influences on the adults in their lives. Instead, it is acknowledged that children go through real hardships and have intense emotions, and it is essential that society validates their trauma.

In both stories, the adult characters play a role in the trauma that the children go through. In *The Secret Garden*, the way Mary's neglectful parents treat her creates the trauma that plagues her for most of the novel. Her father worked for the English government and was stationed in

India, and Mary's mother is described as a young, beautiful woman who did not want to have a child. As soon as Mary was born, she was handed over to an Ayah, "who was made to understand that if she wished to please the Memsahib, she must keep the child out of sight as much as possible" (Burnett 1). As a result, Mary hardly ever saw her parents except from a distance, and the result of this neglect is evident. Mary's parents are so dismissive of their only child that Mary does not appear to even consider them her parents. On the rare occasions when Mary sees her mother from afar, she stares at her "because the Memsahib- Mary used to call her that oftener than anything else- was such a tall, slim, pretty person and wore such lovely clothes" (Burnett 4). Mary does not call her 'Mother' or even her given name; instead, she uses the same title of respect that the native servants use; a 'Memsahib' is a married white woman of high social status, and the term is most often used as a respectful form of address by non-whites ("Memsahib"). After arriving in England, Mary begins to wonder "why she had never seemed to belong to anyone even when her father and mother had been alive" (Burnett 16). Mary's parents did not neglect her through malnourishment or outright abandonment; however, they refused to see her and thus failed to ensure she was growing up in a healthy environment. Mary's servants cared for her, but they did not care *about* her. They only "obeyed her and gave her her own way in everything because the Memsahib would be angry if she was disturbed by [Mary's] crying" (Burnett 2). The servants simply tolerated Mary to avoid punishment, causing her to grow up in an environment built on fear and devoid of love or true kindness. This neglect and emotional trauma at the hands of adults caused Mary to develop into a selfish child who is unable to feel sympathy or emotion for anyone other than herself.

This trauma that Mary goes through affects her ability to show emotion or affection for those around her. Mary's relationship with her Ayah is a complex and interesting one. As her parents wanted little to nothing to do with her, Mary "never remembered seeing familiarly anything but the dark faces of her Ayah and other native servants" (Burnett 2). Although her servants are the people she sees most often, it seems that Mary feels no affection for her Indian nurse and considers her nothing more than a servant to do her bidding. When the cholera outbreak hits, Mary's nurse is one of the first to die, but Burnett writes, "[Mary] did not cry because her nurse had died. She was not an affectionate child and had never cared much for anyone" (Burnett 6). However, Mary's actions in England seem to hint that Mary did feel affection for her nurse; she simply did not know how to show it. After she first meets Colin, he asks Mary to stay with him until he falls asleep. Mary offers, "I will do what my Ayah used to do in India. I will pat your hand and stroke it and sing something quite low" (Burnett 176). Although the Ayah may have done this simply to keep Mary quiet so as not to disturb her mother, this is still an affectionate gesture and clearly one that Mary found comforting. This does not fit with the disgust that Mary is said to hold against her servants. She also excitedly retells her Ayah's stories of 'Magic' to Colin to cheer him up. These stories make such an impact on the boy that he believes there is Magic in the garden, and asserts, "The Magic in this garden has made me stand up and know I am going to be a man" (Burnett 309). It is only after Mary is removed from the abusive environment in India and finds someone who truly cares about her that she is able to express affection and emotion towards her Ayah.

Rather than viewing Mary's selfish attitude as a result of the trauma she suffered, she is more often blamed for her behavior as if it is an inherent characteristic. Mary's mother never

spent time with her daughter and so the fact that Mary does not miss her is reasonable as she was a parent in name only. Interestingly, the reason given for Mary's dismissal of her mother's death is that because Mary "was a self-absorbed child she gave her entire thought to herself, as she had always done" (Burnett 10). Mary's mother threatened to punish the servants if they did not give Mary anything she wanted and thus is responsible for the development of her daughter's selfish ways. However, the blame for her spoiled nature is placed on Mary herself, and she is disdainfully described "as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived" (Burnett 2). Rather than having sympathy for what Mary has gone through, the adults in her life believe she is inherently selfish and do not want to be around her, resulting in her suffering even more neglect.

This neglect is seen in the fact that almost every adult Mary encounters finds her highly unpleasant and ugly, and they are consistently eager to hand her off to someone else. During the journey from India to England, Mary is entrusted to an officer's wife who "was rather glad to hand the child over to the woman Mr. Archibald Craven sent to meet her in London" (Burnett 14). Mr. Craven, Mary's uncle, cares little for his own son and feels no different towards Mary. He tells her that although he will give her toys and books, "I cannot give you time or attention" (Burnett 151). Mrs. Medlock, the housekeeper of Misselthwaite Manor, also does not care for Mary. The first time she lays eyes on the child, she thinks to herself, "A more marred-looking young one I never saw in my life", with 'marred' being a Yorkshire word that means "spoiled and pettish" (Burnett 17). Her opinion of Mary does not improve with time, and she is pleased when Mr. Craven tells her to let Mary run around and not look after her too much. She "had felt [Mary] a tiresome charge, and had, indeed, seen as little of her as she dared" (Burnett 154). The neglect that Mary suffered at the hands of adults in India has left a lasting impact on her, one that

follows her to England and causes more trauma. Rather than being treated with kindness and viewed as a product of neglectful parents, the adults she meet in England also want little to nothing to do with her as they consider her to be an inherently spoiled girl.

This neglect at the hands of adults is reflected in Colin's life as well, particularly in Mr. Craven, Colin's father. Martha confides to Mary that after Colin's mother died giving birth to him, his father "raved and said it'd be another hunchback like him and it'd better die" (Burnett 180). Colin's father cannot stand to look at his son and although he tries to keep his feelings of contempt hidden, it does not work. Colin admits indifferently, "He thinks I don't know, but I've heard people talking. He almost hates me" (Burnett 164). The hatred that his father holds for him internalizes itself in Colin and causes intense mental trauma in the boy. Dickon tells Mary that Mr. Craven is "afraid he'll look at [Colin] one day and find he's growed hunchback" (Burnett 209). In response, Mary acknowledges that "Colin's so afraid of it himself that he won't sit up...He says he's always thinking that if he should feel a lump coming he should go crazy and scream himself to death" (Burnett 209). Due to his father's hatred, fear, and neglect, Colin is both convinced and terrified that he will turn into a hunchback and will die an early death, highlighting how Mr. Craven's mental and emotional abuse cause profound trauma in the boy.

Colin's doctor and nurse also do not hold any affection for the child that has been placed in their care. The nurse is blatantly uninterested in Colin's health, and when Mary asks her if Colin is going to die, she responds with disturbing ambivalence, "I don't know and I don't care" (Burnett 220). Colin reveals that Dr. Craven is his father's cousin and will inherit Misselthwaite Manor if Colin died. Colin admits that the doctor "always looks cheerful when I am worse" (Burnett 188). After one of Colin's tantrums, Mary tells him about the secret garden and

convinces him that he will live to see it. This cheers the boy greatly and when the doctor comes Colin tells him that he is ready to go outside and get better. This causes Dr. Craven to feel “rather alarmed”, and he thinks, “If this tiresome, hysterical boy should chance to get well, he himself would lose all chance of inheriting Misselthwaite” (Burnett 249). While Mary believes Colin is simply trying to invoke pity by telling her the doctor does not want him to get better, and although Colin is portrayed as a spoiled child, it is clear that he is correct about the doctor. The very person who is responsible for his health wants him to stay sick and possibly die. Similar to Mary, the people who have been charged with caring for Colin do not feel any real affection towards him, and he has spent his entire life shut in a dark room, abandoned by his father and unloved by the adults around him. This neglect causes Colin’s consuming thoughts of death, and yet he is still spoken of as an inherently tiresome and spoiled child rather than one shaped by the trauma he suffered.

As the adults in Colin’s life view him as a spoiled child, they are unaware of the suffering Colin is enduring due to their actions. During one of Colin’s tantrums, he screams that he felt a lump on his back. Mary forces him to let her see and declares that there is not a single lump to be seen. The nurse seems surprised that this is the reason for Colin’s hysteria. She says, “I didn’t know...that he thought he had a lump on his spine. His back is weak because he won’t try to sit up. I could have told him there was no lump there” (Burnett 230). However, the reason why Colin has been thinking about a lump is because the adults around him constantly remind him that he is sick and whisper that his father thinks he will become a hunchback as well. It is also revealed that Colin throws tantrums not because he is spoiled and upset about not getting his way, but rather because the adults in his life have made him terrified of dying: “Something he

had heard Mrs. Medlock whispering to the nurse had given him the idea, and he had thought it over in his mind in secret until it was quite firmly fixed in his mind...He had never told anyone but Mary that most of his 'tantrums,' as they called them, grew out of his hysterical hidden fear" (Burnett 223). This 'something' occurred when Colin had typhoid. In front of the sick child, Mrs. Medlock told the nurse, "He'll die this time sure enough, an' best thing for him an' for everybody" (Burnett 181). Thus, the mental trauma that the adults inflict on Colin is increased by the fact that the adults rarely speak to Colin about his illness, instead speaking to each other, sometimes in front of him, and treating Colin as an ignorant child. When Mary asks Colin how he knows he is going to die, he tells her crossly, "Oh, I've heard it ever since I remember...They are always whispering about it and thinking I don't notice" (Burnett 188). Colin screams and works himself into hysterics because he has no other way of expressing the terror of dying that has been instilled in him by the adults in his life, none of whom are willing to actually speak to him about it. Instead, Colin is blamed for his tantrums and is viewed as a spoiled, arrogant boy rather than a child who is the product of neglect and mental abuse at the hands of adults.

The adults in *A Monster Calls* also exacerbate the trauma that Conor is going through. Conor does not like his grandmother, his mom's mother, because he thinks that she does not act like a 'normal' grandmother. Instead of being "crinkley and smiley, with white hair and the whole lot" like his friends' grandmothers, his grandma "wore tailored suits, dyed her hair to keep out the grey...She emailed birthday cards, would argue with waiters over wine, and still had a job" (Ness 56). Her distant and rather abrasive demeanor are part of the reason Conor dislikes her; however, the main reason Conor resents her is because he does not want to admit to himself that there is even a possibility that his mother will not make it through her sickness. His

grandmother begins to visit more often as his mother grows sicker, and he feels almost hatred towards his grandma because she represents a future that Conor refuses to acknowledge. Her presence and insistent unwelcome discussion of the future increase the anger and grief that Conor feels.

This tension between the two is further intensified because Conor's grandmother does not know how to properly help him deal with the trauma he is going through. His grandmother genuinely wants to help her grandson and tells him, "it's vitally important for you to know that when this is all over, you've got a home, my boy. With someone who'll love you and care for you" (Ness 62). Even though she cares about him, she does not know how to help him through the pain of losing his mother and her actions increase the trauma he is going through, ultimately adding to his neglect. Conor is often left alone in his grandmother's spotless, antique-filled house while she goes to visit his mom, causing Conor to feel bored, out-of-place, and even more isolated than usual. During one of his grandmother's long absences, the monster tells him the story of a conflict between a greedy apothecary and a parson, creating an illusion and convincing Conor to help it destroy the parson's house. Conor disappears into "the frenzy of destruction, just mindlessly smashing and smashing and smashing. The monster was right. It was *very* satisfying" (Ness 137). Suddenly, they were back in Conor's grandmother's sitting room, which he has completely destroyed. He has torn up the settee, smashed lamps and the glass doors of a display cabinet into tiny pieces, and even ripped the wallpaper off the wall. Conor is terrified for his grandmother to get home. When she finally does and sees the destruction that has occurred, she makes a

single ongoing groan...She put her palms over her mouth as if that was all that would hold back the horrible, groaning, moaning, *keening* sound flooding out of her...She took away her hands, balling them into fists, opened her mouth wide and screamed... She wasn't looking at him, she wasn't looking at *anything*, just screaming into the air. Conor had never been so terrified in all his life (Ness 143).

After that day, she hardly speaks to her grandson at all, even when he tries to ask questions about his mom's health and recovery. He is barely able to visit his mother in the hospital, his father is in America, and Conor is left alone to his thoughts and grief. His grandmother is so wrapped up in her own grief and anger that she has no time for Conor's, and adds to the trauma he is experiencing. The main difference between this neglect and the one that Mary and Conor suffer from is that Conor is not blamed for his feelings of aggression and anger that result from the actions of his grandmother. Rather than portraying Conor as a one-dimensional, sullen child, his actions are clearly shown to be caused by the actions of the adults around him, thus validating his trauma and portraying him as a sympathetic character throughout the entire novel.

Another adult that increases Conor's sense of abandonment is his father. Conor's father moved to America with his new wife when Conor was nine years old and now has a baby daughter. Although he calls occasionally, he is not actively involved in his son's life. He flies over when Conor's mom takes a turn for the worse and spends the day with him, but it becomes clear that his father is not planning on staying for long. Conor does not want to think about a future without his mother, but he attempts to hint to his father that he would rather live with him in America than with his grandmother. Conor's father hurriedly tried to dissuade him, telling him, "We barely have room for the three of us, Con. Your grandmother has a lot more money

and space than we do. Plus you're in school here, your friends are here, your whole *life* is here. It would be unfair to just take you out of all that" (Ness 115). Realizing that his own father does not want Conor to live with him, Conor feels abandoned and alone yet again. As his father drops him off at his grandmother's empty house, he tries to cheer Conor up by telling him they'll arrange for Conor to visit America at Christmas. Conor angrily responds, "In your cramped house where there's no room for me" (Ness 118). Again, Conor's trauma and his emotions are validated as the author clearly connects the actions of his father to Conor's thoughts and feelings. The absence of his father from his life, and the abandonment Conor feels when he realizes that his father does not want to be involved in his life, deepens the trauma he is suffering due to the inevitable loss of his mother. Through close examination of these two novels, it is clear that the portrayal of the children's trauma varies significantly, and thus reflects the changing societal view of childhood and trauma.

The portrayal of nature as a healing factor also differs in *The Secret Garden* and *A Monster Calls*. Both stories use nature as a way for the children to overcome their trauma, but the physical description of that nature and the method of healing vary greatly between the novels. In terms of physical description, the nature in *The Secret Garden* is almost always portrayed as bright, invigorating, and colorful. The only negative description of the English landscape comes from Mary's first view of the moor when she arrives at Misselthwaite Manor. When she asks Mrs. Medlock about it, she is told, "it's just miles and miles and miles of wild land that nothing grows on but heather and gorse and broom...It's a wild, dreary enough place to my mind" (Burnett 27). Mary agrees with her, and makes up her mind that she hates the moor; however, once she begins to spend more time in nature, she comes to see the moor and the once dead

gardens as beautiful. At the end of a prolonged rainstorm, Mary is astonished by the change that has come over the moor. She sees:

the grey mist and clouds had been swept away in the night by the wind. The wind itself had ceased and a brilliant, deep blue sky arched high over the moorland. Never, never had Mary dreamed of a sky so blue... a deep cool blue, which almost seemed to sparkle like the waters of some lovely, bottomless lake, and here and there, high, high in the arched blueness, floated small clouds of snow-white fleece. The far-reaching world of the moor itself looked softly blue instead of gloomy purple-black or awful dreary grey.

(Burnett 76)

These drawn-out, incredibly descriptive passages about the nature that surrounds Mary grow more frequent as the story progresses, reflecting the blossoming that occurs within Mary as she begins to heal from the trauma she has suffered. Mary grows along with nature, indicating a reciprocal relationship. Mary and Colin turn to caring for the garden and each other due to the neglect and mental abuse they have gone through at the hands of the adults around them. The importance of companionship is shown when Burnett writes, “if [Colin] had had childish companions and had not lain on his back in the huge closed house, breathing an atmosphere heavy with the fears of people who were most of them ignorant and tired of him, he would have found out that most of his fright and illness was created by himself” (Burnett 230). A garden, and a secret one at that, provides the perfect sanctuary for the two isolated children and allows for a reciprocal relationship with nature to develop. Just like Mary and Colin, the garden has been abandoned and neglected for 10 years, and in order for it to recover and grow, the children need to care for it. As they do so, the cousins begin to recover and blossom as well.

Throughout *The Secret Garden*, nature heals Mary and Colin primarily by filling their minds with good and bright thoughts, rather than dark and ugly ones. Burnett seems to be advising readers that the best way to overcome trauma is not so much to recover from it as to ignore it and thus move on. This is evident in Mary's changing attitude throughout the novel. Nature is portrayed as a way for her to overcome her spoiled ways and become a 'model' child. When Mary first came to Misselthwaite Manor, she had been so isolated from anyone other than her servants that she did not see that her behavior was not normal. However, she begins to become more self-aware as she spends time in England. After speaking to Ben Weatherstaff, the gardener, Mary "began to wonder also if she was 'nasty tempered'. She felt uncomfortable" (Burnett 52). She is later asked by her maid, Martha, if she likes herself. Mary pauses, then answers, "Not at all- really...But I never thought of that before" (Burnett 79). Thus, the effects of Mary's trauma are evident not only in her behavior and interactions but also in her perception of herself. As soon as she begins to spend time outdoors, however, she begins to overcome these negative effects. Burnett says of Mary, "So long as Mistress Mary's mind was full of disagreeable thought about her dislikes and sour opinions...she was a yellow-faced, sickly, bored, and wretched child" (364). When Mary begins to go outside, however, and when "her mind gradually filled itself with robins, and moorland cottages crowded with children, with queer crabbed gardeners and common little Yorkshire maids...there was no room left for the disagreeable thoughts" (Burnett 364). Mary overcomes her spoiled nature and inability to consider others' feelings, all effects of the neglect she suffered for most of her life, simply by focusing on nature rather than herself. Within the novel Burnett invalidates the trauma Mary has suffered and utilizes it as a way for Mary to evolve over the course of the story. In this way,

Mary clearly reflects the attitude surrounding childhood in the early 1900s. By characterizing her as a spoiled and selfish child while in India, regardless of the reason she behaves this way, Burnett allows for Mary to develop into a 'model' child throughout her time in England, providing a role model for the children reading her novel.

The same use of nature, and the consequent invalidation of trauma, is also seen in Colin's character. The garden provides the boy with the chance to think about nature and other people rather than always thinking of himself and his fear of death. Burnett writes, "So long as Colin shut himself up in his room and thought only of his fears and weakness and his detestation of people who looked at him and reflected hourly on humps and early death, he was a hysterical, half-crazed little hypochondriac" (Burnett 364). Just like Mary, however, as soon as Colin is taken out into the garden and breathes fresh air, "new beautiful thoughts began to push out the old, hideous ones, life began to come back to him, his blood ran healthily through his veins, and strength poured into him like a flood" (Burnett 365). He is so overcome with the 'Magic' of nature that within minutes of being outside he declares, "I shall get well! I shall get well!...And I shall live for ever and ever and ever!" (Burnett 275). Colin has spent almost his whole life laying in bed and hardly sitting up, let alone walking or running around; however, when he is in the garden for the first time, the gardener asks if he has crooked legs, which Colin considers a great insult. Colin is so determined to prove the gardener wrong that he is able to stand for the first time in his life: "Colin was standing upright- upright- as straight as an arrow and looking strangely tall- his head thrown back and his strange eyes flashing lightning" (Burnett 290). Again, the trauma and suffering that Colin has gone through is overcome with minimal effort and invalidated. Although Colin has spent ten years doing little more than thinking about his father's

hatred of him and contemplating his own death, it only takes positive thoughts of nature to overcome those long years of traumatic, harmful thoughts caused by the neglect and mental abuse at the hands of the adults around him, as well as the physical neglect his body has suffered.

The description and use of nature as a healing factor in *A Monster Calls* is quite different. It is darker, more ominous, and has a feeling of violence about it, which seems to represent Conor's painful struggle with his own trauma. The monster, which takes the form of an ancient yew tree, physically assaults Conor during their first encounter. When Conor says he is not afraid of it, the monster

smashed an arm through Conor's window, shattering glass and wood and brick. A huge, twisted, branch-wound hand grabbed Conor around the middle and lifted him off the floor. It swung him out of his room and into the night, high above his back garden, holding him up against the circle of the moon, its fingers clenching so hard against Conor's ribs he could barely breathe. (Ness 22)

This description of nature is full of violence and anger, unlike the calm and healing nature that surrounds Mary. This dark depiction of nature does not change throughout the novel; the monster encourages Conor to unknowingly destroy his grandmother's sitting room and is consistently described as "terrifying" (Ness 217). The scene of Conor's nightmare is also out in nature; he stands in a dark clearing, bordered on three sides by thick woods, and ahead of him is a cliff, "flying off into even further blackness" (Ness 209). As opposed to the calm and beautiful nature portrayed in *The Secret Garden*, Conor is surrounded by violent and dangerous nature that he is completely powerless to control, which reflects his struggle to control his own trauma.

In *A Monster Calls*, the approach to healing after trauma also differs greatly from *The Secret Garden*. Rather than helping Conor ignore his trauma, the monster actually assists Conor in healing, but does so in a very direct and aggressive manner. The monster is formed out of a yew tree, which is consistently referred to as a healing tree throughout the novel. The final treatment Conor's mother tries is made from the bark of a yew tree. After watching so many treatments fail, Conor takes this as a sign that the monster "had come walking to heal Conor's mother...Conor felt suddenly light, like he was somehow starting to *float* in the air" (Ness 131). Ultimately, this new medication also fails, and Conor furiously attacks the tree, demanding why the monster came if not to heal his mother. The tree tells Conor, "*I did not come to heal her...I came to heal you*" (Ness 171). Conor does not understand what it means and does not see how he needs to be healed; however, the tree understands that Conor has been suffering greatly, isolated from his classmates and the adults in his life. In order to overcome this trauma, the monster must help Conor speak the truth of his grief and therefore confront it.

The monster takes Conor into his recurring nightmare and forces him to not only relive the trauma of watching his mother slip from his fingers, but also makes him tell the truth of this dream, to admit that he let his mother fall even though he could have held on longer. The monster says, "*You must tell the truth or you will never leave this nightmare...You'll be trapped here alone for the rest of your life*" (Ness 216). The monster is speaking metaphorically; if Conor does not admit the truth to himself, does not face the guilt that has been traumatizing him, he will never be able to move on, and will be stuck with his trauma forever. Although Conor knows he must, it physically pains him to speak the truth. He cries desperately, "It'll kill me if I do" (Ness 219). However, the monster refuses to allow him to stay silent, and finally "the fire in

Conor's chest suddenly blazed, suddenly burned like it would eat him alive. It was the truth, he knew it was. A moan started in his throat, a moan that rose into a cry and then a loud wordless yell and he opened his mouth and the fire came blazing out...as Conor yelled and yelled and yelled, in pain and grief" (Ness 188) At long last, Conor speaks the truth of his nightmare, finally admits to the shame and guilt he's been feeling, and confesses, "I couldn't *stand* it anymore!...I can't stand knowing that she'll go! I just want it to be over! I just want it to be *finished!*" (Ness 188). The tree forces Conor to admit that he let his mother go, to face his trauma and grief so he can recover from it.

Rather than taking the same stance as Burnett and allowing Conor to ignore his trauma, Ness instead asserts that in order for Conor to heal from his trauma he must first confront it. Dori Laub, a Holocaust survivor and one of the most prominent scholars of trauma studies, wrote about the importance of the role of testimony and witness to trauma. He writes, "The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story...One has to know one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life" (Laub 63). The significance of having a witness is highlighted through Conor's interaction with a school bully who has been tormenting him ever since his mother fell ill. Harry constantly insults and physically beats Conor, but Conor welcomes it because it means someone has taken notice of him. Then one day Harry says, "Here is the hardest hit of all, O'Malley...Here is the very worst thing I can do to you" (Ness 173). He looks into Conor's eyes and declares, "I no longer see you" (Ness 173). The loss of this witness is so devastating that Conor attacks him, beating him so violently that he breaks Harry's arm. The absence of Conor's father, the lack of attention

from his grandmother, and the overall feeling of being invisible have all been increasing the suffering Conor has been going through as he has no one to act as a witness to his trauma. The monster is the one who finally takes on this role as a witness; when Conor admits the truth of his nightmare and the truth of his trauma to the monster, he is also admitting it to himself and is finally able to control it. It is only after this experience of witnessing and testifying that Conor is able to heal from his trauma.

By comparing *The Secret Garden* to *A Monster Calls*, it is clear how the portrayal of trauma in children's literature has changed over the years. Mary, Colin, and Conor go through very similar traumas; all three of them deal with the loss of a parent, are neglected or abandoned in some way by the adults around them and display characteristics and actions that are results of the trauma they have been through. Even so, the portrayals of their trauma and how they overcome it vary greatly between the two novels. Mary and Colin are blamed for the tantrums and spoiled behavior that result from their trauma and recover simply by spending time in nature. After overcoming the effects of the neglect they have experienced, Mary becomes kind and gentle and Colin declares, "I shall be a Scientific Discoverer", thus becoming the model of the curious, imaginative child that was so prized in the early 1900s (Burnett 318). Through this portrayal, the trauma they experience is invalidated. Children who were neglected and abandoned during this time period who could have found a sympathetic character in Mary or Colin at the beginning of the story are ultimately unable to because of the unrealistic recovery from this trauma. Thus, the novel also invalidates the trauma of real children; if those children were not able to overcome the actions that resulted from the neglect or trauma that had been inflicted upon them, then they were not as 'good' as Mary or Colin because they did not fit the

era's idea of a 'model child'. In contrast, Conor's experience and struggle with his trauma is significantly darker and more realistic. Conor wrestles with his trauma for the majority of the novel, and the grief and isolation that he feels are portrayed as valid and acceptable reactions to have to the trauma he has gone through. Ness also explores the importance of having a witness to one's trauma in order to overcome it, and in a way makes the reader a witness to Conor's trauma as well. This witnessing allows both child and adult readers who have experienced similar traumas to identify with Conor and thus their trauma can be validated as well. Thus, the different portrayals of trauma and recovery from trauma in *The Secret Garden* and *A Monster Calls* clearly show the evolution of these themes in children's literature over the past 100 years.

This evolution has interesting implications for modern day society and the education system in particular. Increasingly, educators and adults in general are realizing that children do not have to be sheltered from stories of trauma because these events are realistic and affect a devastatingly large number of children. Nearly 700,000 children are abused in the United States annually, and in 2015 an estimated 1,670 children died from abuse and neglect in the United States (National Statistics on Child Abuse). Even more children around the world experience traumas in the form of famine, war, child labor, prostitution, or refugee camps. Additionally, 1.5 million children live in a single-parent household due to the death of one parent, and 1 in 20 children under the age of sixteen will suffer the loss of one or more parents (Owens). This statistic does not include the number of children who lose a parental figure, such as a grandparent or other relative. Reading about children who experience these traumas can provide readers with a way to discuss their own trauma. Carolyn Polese, a college professor who taught Children's Literature at Humboldt State University, decided to conduct an informal study to

explore the role children's literature played in the lives of abuse survivors, both as children and as adults.

Polese found that many participants, who were adolescents and older, had used books and their characters in one of two ways: either as an escape from reality, or as a friend to identify with. One student explained, "Judy Blume's books gave me a peek at some of the normal things kids do and - more importantly - feel", and thus the student was able to mentally escape her abusive situation by reading about 'normal' kids (Polese 156). Another participant who experienced traumatic amnesia from repetitive abuse remembers loving the book *From Anna* by Jean Little. She writes, "Anna was visually impaired, but this is not discovered until halfway through the book. Once she gets the right kind of help, she begins to blossom. I always felt I had a hidden problem and I hoped that someday it would be identified so that *I* could heal and blossom" (Polese 156-157). These testimonies highlight the importance of providing children with books that portray relatable characters suffering from trauma, as it provides an outlet for readers to confront and speak about their own experiences. Creating 'literature safety zones' are a way to help children understand and cope with trauma. These zones are created by adults "for children to explore feelings and affirm notions of acceptance, safety, and well-being" (Stolzer 47). In addition, through carefully selected and appropriately delivered books and illustrations, "adults help children to recognize that they will be protected, their feelings will be valued, and the routines of their lives will continue in the aftermath of stressful events" (Stolzer 47). Providing children with literature portraying traumatic events allows children to be exposed to these situations in a safe and controlled environment, and also gives support to children who have experienced similar traumas in their own lives.

Through a close comparison of the novels *The Secret Garden* and *A Monster Calls*, it is clear how the evolution of the portrayal of trauma in children's literature reflects the evolution of society's acceptance and understanding of trauma. Childhood was previously viewed as an innocent and wondrous time, and adults believed that that innocence needed to be preserved for as long as possible. However, as Kidd explains, parents, educators, and adults in general are realizing that children can not always be sheltered from terrible and traumatic experiences, and introducing children's trauma literature into the classroom allows students to read about these events in a safe environment. Close readings of these texts provide insight into the changing societal views of childhood and trauma and help shape our future understanding of these important topics. Future studies could explore how the indirect portrayal of trauma in historical texts could be used in classrooms, and could further investigate how to effectively use both previous and modern children's literature to help readers recover from traumatic experiences.

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