

## Transcendence and Belief after Postmodernism: A Performatist Reading of Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011)

*Karima Mohsen*

Teaching Assistant,  
Faculty of Al-Asun, Ain  
Shams University,  
Egypt.

### Abstract

This paper sets out to analyze Raoul Eshelman's notion of Performatism as an epochal heir of postmodernism through providing, first, a brief account of Performatism and its main underlying features, then tracing its imprints on contemporary cultural developments. The paper explores the broad range of art forms, including literature, films, and artifacts that are essential to Performatism, and how various contemporary artworks are open to new methods of critical analyses that

abandon, or even counter postmodern original ideals. The study then approaches Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) from a performatist perspective, with an attempt to spotlight and trace the principal features of Eshelman's proposed theory in the novel, with the aim of proving that the emerging theory qualifies as a successful illustrator of the epochal paradigm shifts in literary studies in the post-postmodern era.

**Keywords:** Performatism, transcendence, belief, ostensivity, double-framing, opacity, theism

## Transcendence and Belief after Postmodernism: A Performatist Reading of Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011)

*Karima Mohsen*

*"Your mind will believe comforting lies while also knowing the painful truths that make those lies necessary".*

(Patrick Ness, *A Monster Calls* 131)

With the dawn of the twenty-first century and the continuous stagnation and increasing marginalization of postmodernism, a wide range of "imaginative proposals for a neologism that would supplant postmodernism" have been generated (Rudrum and Stavris 23). Among the myriad of intriguing new proposals, introduced by theorists and critics in an attempt to find a new label that would best define the era that shall follow postmodernism, surface terms such as Performatism, Remodernism, Hypermodernism, Digimodernism, and Metamodernism. Such coinages are proposed and discussed as terms that attempt to "diagnose or champion ways in which art, literature, and culture of the twenty-first century involve important differences and new departures from the mainstream of postmodernism" (Rudrum and Stavris 12). The aforementioned neologisms are different in their manifestations, yet similar in their departure from Postmodernism. The most prominent of these new labels is Performatism; an epochal concept of Postmodernism, coined by Raoul Eshelman in 2000, which was extended over the years as Eshelman broadened the concept's scope, meaning, and application via conducting studies on contemporary literature, film, art, architecture, and critical theory (Rudrum and Stavris 148).

This paper provides a performatist reading of Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls*

(2011) that endeavors to prove the possibility of applying the principles of the newly-formed theory of Performatism to the analysis of literary works as a substitute to the now-increasingly marginalized theory of postmodernism, focusing particularly on the notions of belief and transcendence in the literary work being the main pillars of Performatism. The paper attempts to answer the question of whether the features of Performatism are present in the literary work, with the ultimate objective being to assess if performatism would emerge as a befitting literary theory that would fill the void left by the pronouncement of postmodernism's demise. Hence, the paper traces the salient features of Performatism in the novel to further develop and establish it as a comprehensive contemporary literary theory supplanting Postmodernism.

### Theoretical Framework

Performatism is defined as "an across-the-board cultural reaction to post-modern-ism that began sometime in the mid-1990s." It is best described as "an epochal development that replaces postmodern irony and skepticism with artistically mediated belief and the experience of transcendence" (Eshelman "What is Performatism"). Eshelman's choice of the term "performatism" goes back to the Latin root "per formam", which means doing things through form (Eshelman "What is Performatism"). A formal definition of the "performance" is that demonstrates, with aesthetic means, "the possibility of transcending the conditions of a given frame" (Eshelman 12). It is noteworthy that performatism is not a revival of organized religion or esoteric belief systems, instead,

performatism means that works of art "use formal means to force the reader to believe in and identify with positive values", such as love, beauty, reconciliation, and transcendence (Eshelman "What is Performatism?"). This tension between believing in such positive values and "the not-quite-voluntary means used to transmit them" gives performatism its special attributes (Eshelman "What is Performatism?").

Performatism marks a genuine shift in contemporary cultural theory that is far removed from the mainstream postmodern values. To clarify, performatism champions authenticity over postmodern irony, which was directed towards the values of modernism. Additionally, it re-emphasizes the significance of the artist or author-figure as creator. It further marks the coming back of the spiritual, or "theistic" to the center of the arts of the new century; thus, works of performatist art, literature, and philosophy force the reader to decide in favour of these values through the disruption of postmodern undecidability (Rudrum and Stavris 148). Furthermore, the theory focuses on the involuntary belief in artistic creation, which is remarkably different from the postmodern focus on disillusionment. For instance, novels like Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* force their readers into believing the fantastical unrealistic stories through offering them a Hobson's choice, where an apparently free choice is offered when there is no real alternative. In *Life of Pi*, although authenticity, morality, and spiritual belief are shown to be imaginary creations, the novel leaves the reader with practically nowhere else to go; there are no alternatives (Rudrum and Stavris 149). Therefore, in performatist works, readers find out that they have been "maneuvered into accepting a performatist 'transcendence', the structure of which superficially resembles that of Moore's Paradox"—the famous philosophical

problem that explores the seemingly absurd statement "I believe [X], but it isn't true".

Most importantly, Performatism's "aesthetically mediated belief", and not Postmodernism's endless ironic skepticism, is the basis of the new epoch (Eshelman 176). The basic goal of Performatist works, thus, is to counter the "Postmodern hard-to-follow" irony, without going back to modernism, by forcing the reader to *believe* through the use of aesthetic devices (Eshelman 39). The emphasis of performatist works is on creating a specific belief within a closed aesthetic frame "rather than generating yet another cycle of open-ended ironic reflection" (Eshelman 39). Additionally, Performatism counters postmodern irony by offering a unified subject trapped inside the work's frame that the reader unwillingly identifies with, and then the author/creator restricts the reader within certain frames so that there is no other choice but to accept such identification (Eshelman "What is Performatism"). To exemplify, in Martel's novel *Life of Pi* (2001), rather than leaving the reader in "an attitude of skeptical undecidability regarding the hero", the work encourages the reader to identify with Pi's beautified story even though it is shown to be false, and its narrator to be unreliable (Eshelman 53). Performatist narratives, then, tend to trick the reader into believing in something unified and transcendent, and such coercion is enacted through form (perforam), and it is through form that Performatist works can isolate its main subject by closing it off formally from others. The crucial element in such narratives, however, is not the separation of the protagonist, but rather whether he or she can transcend such separation.

The following section surveys the four salient features of Eshelman's Performatism, as introduced in his book *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (2008). The first of these features is

ostensivity as a monist concept of sign. In terms of semiotic theory, performatism draws heavily on Eric Gans's generative anthropology, and the notion of the ostensive sign, developed in the early 1980s. Gans treats the ostensive as being universal, while Eshelman treats it as the semiotic key to explaining the coming epoch (Eshelman xiii). Ostensivity means that in order to defer the violence in a situation of hypothetical conflict between two subjects, they intuitively agree on a present sign that "marks, deifies, and beautifies its own violence-deferring performance" (Eshelman 36). Because of its violence-deferring power, the ostensive sign acquires a supernatural quality; its creator ascribes to it "a transcendent origin" (Eshelman 6). The ostensive sign has no meaning on its own, and its main performative function is to postpone the imminent, potentially deadly conflict and to project transcendent qualities onto the sign. To demonstrate, the ostensive scene from Alan Ball's *American Beauty* (1999) centers around a white plastic bag (see Fig. 1), in which the protagonist sees an embodiment of the divine. The performatist work attributes to the flying bag a transcendental dimension that readers are forced to identify with, or else they will 'expose' the work on "a dispassionate level, and miss the aesthetic mixture of pleasure and anguish derived from identifying with central characters and scenes" (Eshelman 7).



Fig. 1. "The flying bag scene," Alan Ball, *American Beauty*, 1999

Secondly, the aesthetic device specific to performatism is double framing,

which is utilized as a means of creating an aesthetic closure. The forced, artificial unification of a work is achieved using double framing, which is divided into two interlocking devices; the outer frame (or work frame), and the inner frame (or originary ostensive scene) (Eshelman 37). The outer frame imposes an arbitrary resolution to the subject's Dilemma, while inner frames have to 'lock' with outer ones, otherwise "no performance—no move by an opaque subject towards transcendence—is possible" (Eshelman 80). To elaborate, in the final scene of *American Beauty* (1999), Lester Burnham is murdered, then he floats over his old neighborhood as an invisible voice. He admires the beauty of his past life and suggests that everyone will come to the same conclusion after death. His ghost, as an opaque subject, moves from the inner frames of his place to the outer frame overlooking his whole neighborhood from a theist or sacral dimension towards transcendence, "breaking out of his incarceration and transcending all frames" (Eshelman 98). Thus, Lester also transcends the intradiegetic narrative frame of the story to become an omniscient commentator residing in the extradiegetic narrative level, and thus he was able to comment on the lives of the characters involved in the story. The film's creator, then, has arbitrarily forced the viewers into accepting his figurative point of view as the film's authoritative forced happy ending (Eshelman 3). Hence, viewers are forced to choose between the untrue beauty of the closed work or the open, fatal truth of its endless contextualization.

Thirdly, performatist works tend to depict opaque or dense subjects. Eshelman explains how performative prototypical characters "consolidate their position by appearing opaque or dense to the world around them" (Eshelman 37). Such opacity forces the viewer to experience the whole of the work as a mixture of beauty and sublimity

(Eshelman 215). Eshelman traces this feature in the works of Tim Eitel, whose paintings depict people with their backs turned away, or facing the horizon. Because of Eitel's use of flat, rich expanses of monochrome paint in his depictions of nature, his pictures take on an abstract quality despite their apparent realism (Eshelman 221). Eitel's painting *Reflections* (2010) is a typical example of the performatist concept of opacity (see Fig. 2), with its depiction of a human subject caught up in an aesthetically simplified space, and whose emotional state remains opaque and enigmatic. Eitel's paintings radiate an enigmatic combination of the theist and the human, luring the observer into their space. Such ontological representation radically reverses the values of postmodernism; we are no longer dealing with an anti-image demonstrating the failure of the visual sign to represent reality, but with "a unique, original construct that reshapes the apprehension of reality in a 'divine' aesthetic way" (Eshelman 215).



Fig. 2. Tim Eitel, *Reflections*, 2010

The last of the features of performatist works is that the spatial and temporal relations are presented in a theist mode. To demonstrate, time and space are framed in such a way that subjects have a real chance to orient themselves within these frames, and transcend them in some way. This frame causes the viewer to assume the existence of an implicit author, forcing his will in a kind of an undeciphered paradox (Eshelma 38). In terms of plot, there is a basic conflict between the forced spatial and

temporal theist frames and the human subjects struggling to overcome them; the theist frame is always accompanied by a human, limited one. One of the most radical exercises of this feature can be found in Nolan's *Memento* (2000), where Leonard Shelby, who has only a short-time memory due to a blow to the head after his wife's murder, can remember his life before the attack, yet he forgets everything else within minutes. The story unfolds itself in the form of a series of twenty-two overlapping temporal frames, and the movie is split up into two main temporal frames: Leonard's framed dysfunctional human time and chronological time, which, in an act of theist/authorial force, "has been set to run backward" (Eshelman 113). In terms of the spatial frame, Leonard finds himself trapped in a limited spatial frame, that of the motel room, and the viewer becomes "as confused as Leonard is as to what is going on" (Eshelman 113). This feeling of absolute bewilderment, caused by a cruelly limited and manipulated temporal and spatial frames, lures the viewer into a close identification with the hero; both experience a need to overcome the theist frames confining them (Eshelman 114).

## Literature Review

Many scholars have attempted to analyze the prominent features of recent literary works in the post-postmodern era in light of Eshelman's proposed theory of Performatism. To elucidate, in a research entitled *Man and His Identity: David Foster Wallace's Trilogy and the End of Modernism and Postmodernism*, the authors investigate the notion of Man and his identity in David Foster Wallace's trilogy *The Broom of the System* (1987), *Infinite Jest* (1996), and *The Pale King* (2011) through the critical insights of some prolific critics as Raoul Eshelman, Stuart Sim, and Fredric Jameson. They noticed a remarkable deviation from

postmodern strategies, for the dullness that prevailed in postmodern writings has been replaced by hope and unity. Such a shift from melancholy to hope is yet another powerful indicator of the paradigm shift from postmodernism to performatism (Goudarzi & Lak 1). Moreover, Bunnell and College (2015) also conducted research on one of David Foster Wallace's novels, *Lyndon* (1998), and concluded that a "culture of negative idealism is poised to displace postmodernism as the dominant cultural paradigm" that is marked by a "resurgence of sincerity, hope, romanticism, affect, and the potential for grand narratives and universal truths" (Bunnell & College 7).

In 2021, Badra's research entitled *Towards an Aesthetics of Belief in COVID-19 Pandemic Time: Performatism in Brian Friel's Dancing at Lughnasa* was the first to systematically apply the principles of Raoul Eshelman's newly proposed theory to a literary work, introducing it as a possible post-postmodern paradigm that might serve to explain the new epoch. Friel concluded that the application of Eshelman's performatist assumptions to the theater "allows a new and perfectly plausible artistic venue for the new theory" (Badra 44). Another study conducted in 2022 under the title *Epochal Changes in Contemporary Narratives: A Performatist Analysis of Trust Exercise by Susan Choi* poses that the 2019 novel does seem to have some of the major features of performatism, yet there are also some deviations from performatism in the novel. The play offered the ostensive semiotic signs of trust that are carried forward monistically till the end, yet it does not provide the aesthetic closure of the outer frame that is a main characteristic of performatist works (Ammar and Ahmed 88).

Most recently, George Kowalik's study conducted in 2023 under the title *Post-Postmodernism, the "Affective Turn," and Inauthenticity* looks into a constellation of

novels published by the end of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century. He analyzed David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001), and Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), and noticed a turn in the style of these novels that offers a "corrective or counter to postmodernist suspicion towards subjective emotion," which corresponds to the premise of post-postmodernism. He explains that the authors of these novels "respond to, challenge, and react against postmodern irony and the license of post-postmodernism, inauthenticity that comes with this" (Kowalik 1). Therefore, this research paper delves into Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) with the purpose of proving the viability of Raoul Eshelman's theory of Performatism as an effective method of illustrating the paradigm shifts in contemporary literary studies. The primary objective of the study is to determine whether Performatism can establish itself as a suitable literary theory that would fill the literary gap left by the announcement of the inadequacy of postmodernism in illustrating the current paradigm shift. Hence, showcasing the key elements of Performatism in the novel would further develop and establish it as a comprehensive contemporary literary theory superseding Postmodernism.

### **Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011)**

*A Monster Calls* (2011) is a novel written by Patrick Ness, an American-British novelist, lecturer, journalist, screenwriter, and winner of the Carnegie Medal, the Costa Children's Book Award, the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, and the Booktrust Teenage Prize. He also wrote the screenplay of the 2016 film adaptation of the novel. *A Monster Calls* originated with the Irish writer, Siobhan Dowd, who had been diagnosed with

cancer and was unable to complete the book before her death in 2007. Dowd and Ness shared the same literary editor at Walker, who, after Dowd's death, arranged for Ness to complete the story based on her notes (Masters). Ness describes the process of writing out Dowd's idea stating "I wasn't trying to guess what she might have written, I was merely following the same process she would have followed"; letting the story grow and take its own shape (Ness).

Giskin Day notes that the past decade has witnessed a surge in "bereavement literature" in the Western young adult book market (1). Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) falls under the category of bereavement literature since it fits the genre conventions by dealing with the indirect, unspoken, and unspeakable effects that cancer has on the children of the afflicted parent from the perspective of a 13-year-old boy, Conor O'Malley, who is struck by grief and doubt as he watches his mother succumb to cancer. His grief and fear manifest themselves in his recurrent nightmare, which takes the shape of a monstrous vortex pulling his mother into darkness while Conor clutches his mother tightly. At 12:07, a yew tree monster came walking to tell him three tales, and in return, Conor would tell him a fourth story that would hold the truth he has been hiding all along. The monster's three remedial fantastical tales ultimately represent Conor's psychic burden caused by his mother's impending death, his father's absence, his stringent grandmother, and school bullying. The stories were essentially a reenactment of his struggle in the context of a fantastical narrative, with the objective being to establish "a sense of familiarity that helps to balance the emotional stress of the story" (Day 1). Transforming a bereavement journey into completely fictitious prose is an empowering tool that enables the character to transcend his grief and trauma.

To study Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) from a performatist perspective, one must look for the main principles that underlie it, mainly belief and transcendence, ostensivity, double framing, opacity and density of subjects, and theism. First, incredible acts of belief and transcendence can be spotted all over the novel, since the characters willingly believe in lies that would only defer the violence of the situation at hand, which is an underlying feature of performatism. Such belief is an "indispensable element by which the traumatic imagination rearranges, reconstructs, and re-presents reality when mimetic reality-testing hits the wall of an unassimilated—and unassimilable—event" (Arva 5). Conor's mother, for example, states that she did believe at some point that there was hope for her, and this hope she describes as probably what kept her "here so long, believing it so you—Conor—would" (Ness 114). Hence, her belief was the reason she kept going, for she thinks that "belief is half of all healing. Belief in the cure, belief in the future that awaits" (Ness 91). In case the mother did not believe that she had a chance, she most probably would not fight her illness, and by choosing to do so, she, even if temporarily, managed to "transcend life-threatening unbelief" (Eshelman, "Performatism" 112).

Moreover, in the same way Pi from Martel's novel decided to believe in the beautified lie to defer the violence of the situation he had been caught in, the prince from the first tale also did the same. To illustrate, after killing the farmer's daughter to infuriate the people to topple the queen's throne, he slept, red-handed, right next to her corpse, and in the morning he threw out a performative pantomime to fool the people, yet unexpectedly, "when he said that the queen had murdered his bride, he believed, in his own way, that it was actually true" (Ness 46). The prince, unconsciously and

genuinely, believed in the beautified lie he had told himself, for he could not stand the truth of his awful deed. Through this story, the monster was able to show Conor that "sometimes people need to lie to themselves most of all." (Ness 46).

In the same vein, Conor keeps making various claims throughout the novel that he is convinced that his mother is going to survive, while also knowing that it is not the truth. Particularly, when his grandmother attempts to talk him into moving to live with her since his mother's condition is deteriorating, he replies furiously, claiming that "the treatments are making her better" (Ness 34). Similarly, when his father asked him how he was doing, he reassuringly replied that his "mum's on this new medicine. It'll make her better" (Ness 64). However, by the end of the novel, the truth is revealed, as Conor utters "the truth of him" by the time he is forced to tell the fourth tale, saying, "I can't stand knowing that she'll go! I just want it to be over! I want it to be finished" (Ness 128). The readers come to know the origin of O'Malley's sense of guilt that haunted him throughout the narrative and had him yearning for punishment: the fact that, deep down, he wants his mother to die, and then he attempts to obscure this wish by convincing himself that he is sure about her survival. The monster explains to Conor how it is possible for a person to know the truth of something and then believe the opposite of it, convincing him that he was "merely wishing for the end of pain," which corresponds to Eshelman's idea of conflict deferral through aesthetic means (Ness 130). At some point, even the readers, now completely identifying with Conor, would find themselves manoeuvred into believing that there is hope for Conor's mom that lies in the yew tree, as a healing tree, and they would believe that something fantastical is likely to happen by the end—that the healing monster would save the day. Yet, the monster, like Pi in "*Life of*

*Pi*," brings both Conor and the reader back to reality by capturing the truth and putting it out as the literary equivalent to Moore's paradox, that our "mind will believe comforting lies while also knowing the painful truths that make those lies necessary" (Ness 131). Therefore, what the monster wants Conor to believe is that there will always be complexity within morality, and that humans are of dualistic nature, and once he fully embraces such belief, he will be able to transcend his sense of guilt.

Another important feature of performatism to be traced in the novel is the existence of an ostensive sign. To illustrate, there is a situation of hypothetical conflict between cancer, represented by the dark vortex of Conor's nightmare, and Conor himself, where both the yew tree monster and his stories take the role of the ostensive sign that acquires a supernatural valence that facilitates the achievement of equilibrium between Conor and the monster he is most afraid of. First, the yew tree monster "performed" the roles of a storyteller, a healer, and a destroyer to defer the violence of the truth that would be revealed when Conor tells his true story, which would hold "the aristotelian notion of the therapeutic value of catharsis" (Day 12). Then, the monster's character is created by its own artist, in this case, Conor, "to help him release his emotion without no one realizing it" (Ulfa 90). The appearance of the yew tree monster as a projection of Conor's inner turmoil and anger is imperative as an indirect method to facilitate the process of accepting the truth, as G. Couser notes that "the more serious an illness is, the more it demands to be interpreted as a life event" (283). Dealing with cancer as a fantastical life event in the form of a mythical creature by means of ostensive signs allows the thirteen years old Conor to properly heal and transcend his fear.

Furthermore, although the stories, as ostensive signs, made no meaning to Conor



at first, he started to ascribe meaning to them, interpreting them in light of the events he was going through. His grandmother becomes the evil queen, his father is the greedy apothecary, while the invisible man is Conor himself. Using the three stories as a formal means to deliver his message, the monster forced Conor to identify with the characters of his story and ultimately believe in the truth the monster is trying to convince him of: that it is possible for people to have opposite characteristics, simply because "humans are complicated beasts" (Ness 130). He helped Conor transcend his grief by making him believe this truth by showing him how a person can be good and evil, murderer and savior, wrong-thinking yet good-hearted, all at the same time, and how "an invisible man can make himself more lonely by being seen" (Ness 130). Thus, Conor is forced to question his previous definitions and perceptions of the world to be able "to address his own fears and desires" (Cohen 17). Conor could identify with the characters of the stories, knowing that he is no different than them and that it is fine to both want his mother to live and to want to let her go so that the pain would stop. Drawing on the concept of the ostensive sign, Ness puts forth evidence of how belief and transcendence are achieved to reach an ultimate catharsis, and by doing so, he closely follows the pattern of performatist works as described by Eshelman.

The aesthetic device specific to performatism that has been employed in Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) is double framing. As Eshelman puts it, "the double frame is based on a lock or fit between an outer frame (the work's construct itself) and an inner one (an ostensive scene or scenes of some kind)" (36). To elucidate, Gerard Genette's narrative levels have proven to be particularly useful for explaining the double framing feature of the performatist work. To illustrate, fig. (3) gives a visual representation of the three narrative levels of

the novel. The first is the extradiegetic level, where Conor exists in his immediate reality. The second is the intradiegetic level, which encompasses the reality where the yew tree monster is in direct contact with Conor to provide him with the metanarrative—the stories—that would help him heal. Finally, the third level is the metadiegetic one, which contains the metanarrative stories told by the monster.

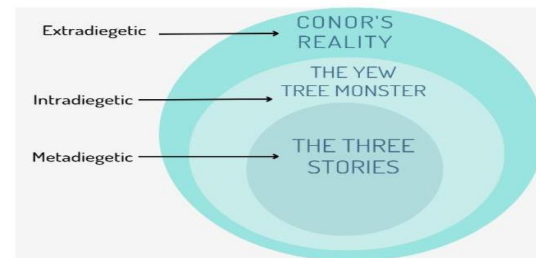


Fig. 3. Framing based on Narrative Levels

Each narrative level corresponds to a frame within the work, and the scenes, consequently, oscillate between these frames. For example, in the story of the apothecary and the parson, Conor can be seen within the extradiegetic or outer frame of his reality, in the living room, then in direct contact with the monster in the intradiegetic frame, and then caught up within the realm of the second story, destroying the parson's home, in a metadiegetic frame or the inner frame of the ostensive scene, and then back again to the extradiegetic frame, only to find out that he has been actually destroying his grandmother's living room (Fig. 4). Therefore, the boundaries between the three frames get blurred, in what might be called a metalepsis, as Conor gets so involved in the stories, especially the second and third ones, that it affects his reality at 'the extradiegetic level' through the empowerment of the monster that resides in the second frame of 'the diegetic level'. This intermingling of inner and outer frames creates the aesthetic closure much needed in performatist works. Jorgensen comments on this act of blurring

the boundaries between reality and imagination, stating that Conor becomes powerful and visible "through the joint destruction when he and the monster act as a cooperative unit of organisms" (Jorgensen 4). Hence, as Eshelman puts it, "the work is constructed in such a way that its main argumentative premise shifts back and forth" between the frames provided to create an aesthetic closure (37).



Fig. 4. "Conor within the realm of the apothecary story," Juan Antonio Bayona, *A Monster Calls*, 2016.

The depiction of opaque and dense subjects is an additional feature of Eshelman's theory of performatism that can be traced in Ness's novel. To explain, the most prominent opaque and dense subject that represents the unknown future of his mother is cancer, which is portrayed as an invisible enemy, in the shape of a dark vortex pulling his mother into her inevitable death. Choosing to portray the cancer monster as an opaque object intensifies the fear it emits, as the depiction of an incarnate antagonist that can be physically fought would not evoke the same amount of horror. This explains why Conor was not startled at the sight of the yew tree monster during their first encounter; he has dealt with worse. Moreover, Conor himself is an opaque subject, as a troubled thirteen-year-old boy hiding a very dark secret. The density of the character is intensified, for he is an unreliable narrator by virtue of his youth and consequent misjudging of events, and overlapping between reality and dreams. Moreover, the

readers never get a chance to know who he really was before cancer hit his mother; he is only defined in terms of his reaction to his mother's near death, and how others react to him is guided solely by this fact, as they "treated him like he was the one who was ill" (Ness 51). Additionally, in the nightmare scene, when Conor is about to tell his story, the reader can sense that he is more afraid of himself than the dark vortex. He never allows the reader to get inside his mind and really know what he is afraid of or discover the reality of his nightmare until it is revealed by the monster, who spelled out Conor's conundrum, stating "You could have held on for longer ...but you let her fall. You loosened your grip and let the nightmare take her" (Ness 127). This truth is what Conor is ultimately afraid of; "that he himself is the monster because he is the one that causes her death" (Cavanagh 10-11).

The density of the characterization in the novel can also be traced in the pictorialization of the yew tree monster as an anthropomorphized character by adding human-like attributes to it. He combines the characteristics of a tree and a human being. Such combination is depicted vividly in the description of the physical appearance of the monster, as Ness writes, "Conor could hear the creak of wood, groaning and yawning in the monster's huge body... the monster's arms... connected to a massive trunk of a chest, topped by a head and teeth" (Ness 27). Additionally, though the yew tree monster is depicted as powerful and "untamed and untameable," still it is dependent on Conor. Yarova notes that "only in a contact zone with Conor does the tree become the monster; it exists only as long as Conor lets it" (Yarova 474). For instance, in the second story, the "untamed" monster awaits for Conor's permission to continue destroying the parson's home, declaring, "I await your command, boy" (Ness 78). In the same vein, the monster is sometimes depicted as a

ferocious character who, at the beginning, asked Conor to run from him to his mother, saying "I've come to get you, Conor O'Malley" (Ness 10). However, he is depicted as a benevolent character as well, who, by the end, helped Conor sleep as it "changed the shape of its hands even further, making the nest of leaves Conor was lying on even more comfortable" (Ness 132). Additionally, though it is implied that the monster is a creature of Conor's imagination, the monster still leaves traces in the real world as hints that he is happening in reality, from yew tree leaves and red yew berries to leaving "little trees growing out of the floor" of the grandmother's house (Ness 65). This density and opacity in the monster's character further accentuates the notion of the complexity within morality that is at the heart of what the monster wants Conor to believe.

Analogously, as opaque and dense as the character of the monster is, it is his stories that enabled Conor to recognize the complexity and density of human nature. To illustrate, the characters depicted in the monster's stories do not fit into any clear category; a character can be both a hero and a villain within the same narrative. For instance, in the first story, a right-thinking prince performs evil actions, but his intentions are good: to save the kingdom from the queen they thought was a witch. In the second story, a good-hearted priest caused the deaths of his daughters through unintended selfishness and breaching against the old ways while resorting to them when out of his depth. In this regard, Cavanagh notes that "the monster is aware that his stories and his motives bring pain and alleviation together" by depicting those dense and opaque subjects (10).

Manipulation of space and time in a theist frame, outside the range of the characters' control, is an underlying feature of performatism that is found in *A Monster Calls*. The theist frame, Eshelman explains,

is understood as a temporal or spatial limit "imposed on someone from without," and that person, in return, attempts to transcend this imposed frame ("Performatism" 98). The most prominent evidence of temporal domineering in the novel can be traced in the clocks that always read 12:07, just before the monster appears; such as the clock beside Conor's bed, his grandmother's fancy clock, the clock at the school's lunchroom, and the one in his mother's hospital room. Since the monster always shows up at 12:07, Conor surrendered to the theist power controlling the events and believed that this is the exact time he will lose his mother, as Ness writes that "he knew it would come, and soon, maybe even this 12:07. The moment she would slip from his grasp, no matter how tightly he held on" (Ness 138). There is no clue as to why this happens, and when Conor, who is caught in this temporal determined frame, attempts to question it, he is left with no answer, as he asks the monster, "Why do you always come at 12.07?" and then the theist power had to intervene, and readers are told that Conor "was asleep before the monster could answer" (Ness 132).

Conor attempts to transcend this temporal frame he is caught in when, for example, he smashes his grandmother's expensive clock in a futile attempt to stop the marching of time from advancing towards his mother's end. He attempts to challenge time, which is indifferent to his suffering, for he has observed his grandmother's clock "getting on with its own, private life, not caring about Conor at all" (Ness 69). This indicates his feeling that time is going on normally for everyone else but him; he will always be stuck in the nightmare and at 12:07. Conor only managed to transcend this temporal frame when his mother died at 12:07, setting him free from his nightmare, the monster, and the temporal trap he had been caught in.

In terms of spatial restrictions, the "fear-evoking authority" of the theist frame places Conor in a space that is rather dim, limited, and fearsome. Most of the events take place, mainly, at Conor's isolated and quiet house, which is located in a small town in England and which has a graveyard as its background, creating a sense of entrapment. Having a graveyard as the background of the house and the setting of the nightmare is indicative of the imminent death that would definitely befall the mother, as already determined by the theist power. Moreover, the shifting back and forth between the real space and the cognitive one can be viewed as a theist authorial coordinative act. To illustrate, Ness describes how Conor and the monster enter the realm of the story and how the scene suddenly and forcibly fades away, to be replaced theistically by the new one, stating that "the mist surrounded them again suddenly, and his grandma's garden faded away. The world changed to grey and emptiness, and Conor knew exactly where he was, exactly what the world had changed into. He was inside the nightmare" (Ness, 96-7). Ness, thus, renders this scenic automation using the "Avista" theatrical technique, where the change of setting/scenery is unhidden from the audience and the entire set change can be accomplished in seconds. He describes the forced change in the spatial position by detailing how "the hill, the church, the graveyard were all gone, even the sun had disappeared, leaving them in the middle of a cold darkness" (Ness 120). The fact that once the nightmare was over, "the mist retreated and he was back in his grandma's garden again" marks a total control of spatial coordinates by a theist authorial power (Ness 97).

## Conclusion

Performatism, as conceptualized by Raoul Eshelman, has emerged to establish itself as a successor to Postmodernism, with its emphasis on all different media and art works

and the methods it offers to facilitate the analysis of the new aesthetics. Performatism's authenticity is set against Postmodernism's irony, while its artistically mediated belief stands in contrast to the postmodern focus on disillusionment. Performatist works encourage the readers to believe in the lost positive values of love, beauty, and transcendence and to turn their backs on the undecidability of the postmodern. The paper argues that the features that characterize performatist works, such as the use of the ostensive sign, the forced construction of temporal and spatial frames, and the opacity of the subjects, are currently the primary sources of innovation in various contemporary cultural and literary products. Conducting a close examination of Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011) with the aim of testing the practicality of Eshelman's newly introduced theory proves the applicability of the theory in explaining the new features of contemporary literature. As observed, the novel adheres, to a great extent, to the principles set forth by Eshelman. It follows Conor's journey towards transcending his fear and anger to achieve catharsis through believing in the duality of human nature. The novel, moreover, employs ostensive signs, namely the yew tree monster and his stories, to be the channels through which Conor could express his anger and frustration. As a manifestation of the concept of double framing, the novel consists of an outer frame, that of Conor's reality, and an inner frame, that encompasses the monster alongside his tales, while the oscillation or interlocking of these frames creates the aesthetic closure much needed in a performatist work. Moreover, the dualistic essence of human beings is further mimicked by the density and opacity of the characters depicted in the novel. Finally, drawing upon the notion of theism, as per Eshelman, a theist authorial power is oppressively framing the temporal and spatial coordinates of the novel,

## **TEXTUAL TURNINGS**

Journal of English and Comparative Studies

trapping its main character, and setting his aim to be transcending such frames. That being so, the paper has attempted to ascertain the viability of Raoul Eshelman's newly coined theory as a potential frame of analysis for the works of the post postmodern era.

**Department of English**

Still, more scholarly analytical insights into similar literary works are needed to extend the scope of the theory and pin down its manifestations, with the aim of stabilizing and territorializing the new paradigm shift.

## Works Cited

- Ammar, Ali, and Munawar Iqbal Ahmed. "Epochal Changes in Contemporary Narratives? A Performatist Analysis of Trust Exercise by Susan Choi." *Journal of Arts & Social Sciences (JASS)*, vol. 9, no. 1, June 2022, pp. 83-89., <https://doi.org/10.46662/jass.v9i1.223>. Accessed 21 Feb. 2023.
- Arva, Eugene L. "Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 38 no. 1, 2008, p. 60-85. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/jnt.0.0002. Accessed 20 Feb. 2023.
- Badra, M. "Towards an Aesthetics of Belief in Covid19 Pandemic Time: Performatism in Brian Friel's Dancing at Lughnasa". *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, June 2021, pp. <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.21.2.2>. Accessed 1 Mar. 2023.
- Bayona, Juan Antonio. *A Monster Calls* [Motion Picture]. United States: River Road Entertainment. 2016. <https://m.imdb.com/title/tt3416532/>. Accessed 10 Jan. 2023.
- Bunnell, N., and College, C. "Oscillating from a Distance: A Study of Metamodernism In Theory and Practice". *Undergraduate Journal of Humanistic Studies*, vol 1, 2015, pp. 1-8., [http://carleton-wp-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/111/2019/07/ENGL\\_Bunnell\\_FINAL.pdf](http://carleton-wp-production.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/sites/111/2019/07/ENGL_Bunnell_FINAL.pdf). Accessed 8 Jan. 2022.
- Cavanagh, Natali. "Toxicity in Themes of Control: An Analysis of the Anglo-Western Cancer Rhetoric in A Monster Calls". *Digital Literature Review*, vol. 4, Jan. 2017, pp. 117-29, doi:10.33043/DLR.4.0.117-129. Accessed 8 Jan. 2023.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, 2018, pp. 43–54., <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781942401209-008>. Accessed 30 Dec. 2022
- Couser, G. Thomas. *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Day, Giskin. "Good Grief: Bereavement Literature for Young Adults and a Monster Calls." *Medical Humanities*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2012, pp. 115–119., <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2012-010260>. Accessed 8 Jan. 2023.
- Eshelman, Raoul. *Performatism, or, the End of Postmodernism (PEP)*. Vol. 1, The Davies Group Publishers, 2008.
- . "What Is Performatism?" *Performatism.De*, 28 Dec. 2020. <https://performatism.de/What-is-Performatism>. Accessed 12 Jan. 2023.

- Goudarz, Abdolreza, and Morteza Lak. "Trilogy of Identity Transformation: Reading David Foster Wallace's Novels". *Critical Literary Studies*, 3, 2, 2021, 143-158. doi: 10.34785/J014.2021.945. Accessed 1 Jan. 2023.
- Jorgensen, Sven Erik. "A Tentative Pattern of Ecosystem Theories". *Integration of Ecosystem Theories: A Pattern*, 1992, pp. 325–347., [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-2682-3\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-011-2682-3_12). Accessed 3 Jan. 2023.
- Kowalik, George. "Post-Postmodernism, the 'Affective Turn', and Inauthenticity." *Humanities*, vol. 12, no 7. 10, Jan, 2023, pp. 1–11., <https://doi.org/10.3390/h12010007>. Accessed 22 Feb. 2023.
- Murfin, Ross C., and Supryia M. Ray. *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. 4th ed. Macmillan Learning, 2017.
- Masters, Tim. "Patrick Ness: Why I Wrote a Monster Calls." *BBC News*, BBC, 5 Aug. 2011, [www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-14308543](http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-14308543). Accessed 25 Sep. 2023.
- Ness, Patrick. *A Monster Calls*. Walker Books Ltd, 2011.
- Ness, Patrick. "How We Made a Monster Calls." *The Guardian*, 22 Feb. 2018, [www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2012/jun/14/a-monster-calls-patrick-ness-jim-kay](http://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2012/jun/14/a-monster-calls-patrick-ness-jim-kay). Accessed 27 Sep. 2023.
- Rudrum, David and Stavris, Nicholas. *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*. Bloomsbury Academic. 2015.
- Ulfa, A. K. "A Concept of Characteristics of Magical Realism in Patrick Ness' *A Monster Calls*: A Merger of Objective and Adolescent Psychological Approach". *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)*, Vol. 6, no. 5, Sept. 2021, <https://journal-repository.theshillonga.com/index.php/ijels/article/view/4112>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2023.
- Yarova, Aliona. "I Am the Eternal Green Man": Holistic Ecology in Reading Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls*. *Children's Literature in Education*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2019, pp. 466–479., <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-019-09388-3>. Accessed 3 Jan. 2023.