

A Monster Calls
Written by Patrick Ness based on an original idea by Siobhan Dowd
and Illustrated by Jim Kay
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Use the double page spread depicting the yew tree inside Conor's grandma's sitting room.

Working in pairs, encourage children to explore the picture, discussing their responses and working together to make meaning of what they see. Ask them to jot down words and phrases which reflect their responses to looking.

The aims of this activity are:

- to increase the interaction with and enjoyment of picture books for children of all ages
- to develop children's confidence and vocabulary to respond to what they see – to observe and describe
- to encourage them to build on their previous experience, imagination and understanding to make sense of visual information – to interpret
- to consider a variety of graphic forms and their interaction with a text in order to convey layers of meaning – to appreciate
- to recognise different styles and techniques used and developed by a variety of illustrators – to analyse
- to begin to recognise and appreciate visual metaphor, irony, puns and jokes etc. – to participate
- to use drama and role play techniques to engage more fully with the picture – to comprehend

The following questions have been designed to help children to look more closely at the illustrative work of Jim Kay, moving from the whole picture to the smallest part and to search for and use all available clues given by the artist to make meaning. Please select and adapt the questions to make them appropriate for your setting.

TELL ME ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATION...

What is your immediate and emotional response to this page?

Describe how it makes you feel.

How do you first read this picture?

How easy has the illustrator made it for you to understand what is going on?

In what ways does this contribute to the atmosphere of chaos?

How would you describe the monster's presence in the room?

How do your eyes travel across the page?

What are you drawn to?

How would you describe the monster's eyes? By giving emphasis to them, how is the illustrator depicting the nature of this character?

What do you notice about the way that this monster has been created, do you find any features particularly disturbing?

Can you draw on your knowledge of other tree monsters or similar mythical creatures to try and understand this one?

Yew trees were historically found in graveyards and have some pagan significance.

Why do you think this tree was used to create the monster?

How would you describe the facial expression and body language of the monster?

What is the effect of the hair-like braids which have started to creep across the ceiling?

As you look at this picture, where are you? Are you an outside observer, a bystander in the picture or one of the characters portrayed?

What do you notice about the way that Conor has been portrayed?

Why do you think he is shown as a white silhouette?

How would you describe his stance? If you were confronted by a monster would you be still and calm?

What is Conor holding in his hand? Why do you think he has that with him?

How easy is it to decipher what is real and what is imagined in this picture?

What is the effect of the ghost-like images of the chair in the foreground?

How does its delicate structure contrast to the dimensions of the monster?

In what ways does the illustrator remind us we are in a sitting room?

Is the setting significant?

As an observer, does your viewpoint change as you look at different elements of the composition?

How would you describe what's going on in this picture? What do you think the monster is trying to achieve?

What can you hear as you look?

What can you smell as you look?

How would you describe the ways in which the illustrator has applied the colour? What do you notice about the textures and tones he has achieved?

Where is the darkness most intense? How does this impact on you?

Why do you think the palette has been restricted to black and white?

There is a strong sense of movement on these pages – where is it coming from and how has the illustrator achieved these effects?

In what ways do these illustrations extend the text and enhance your understanding of Conor and his life?

WRITE IT DOWN

Harvest children's responses and record their descriptions and comments on an IWB or flip chart. Are there any aspects of the picture that they find particularly interesting or puzzling? How do these pictures interact and work with the rest of the book?

PLAYING THE BOOK

Role on the wall

This activity is appropriate for use with all age groups and is designed to activate prior knowledge, and through shared ideas and comments extend children's knowledge and understanding of the character studied. It is an effective way to generate children's own questions, which can be used later in hot seating. It creates an opportunity for children to focus on one character in the picture and use all the evidence and clues they can find to build up a character profile.

You will need:

An enlarged image of the picture on either an IWB or flip chart
Pens to scribe children's feedback

Working in small groups or with the whole class, start by asking:

Question 1

What do you know about Conor from this illustration?

- Annotate around the illustration recording children's comments and observations.
- Use this as an opportunity to encourage further clarity of their expression and to extend their descriptive language.
- Insist that during this stage children stick to telling you what they can actually see rather than inferring meaning. For example: Conor is standing still, you cannot see his features.

Question 2

What do you think you know about Conor from the illustration?

- Focus on children's personal interpretations and inference.
- Listen and record children's ideas as accurately as possible.
- Promote dialogue and debate between the children to encourage consideration and respect for other people's interpretations of the same picture.
- Encourage children to draw freely on their prior knowledge to interpret this new experience and to use contextual cues to make their own meaning.

Question 3

What more would you like to find out about Conor?

- Use shared writing to model open ended questioning.
- Children compose their own questions to further pursue their interest in the character.
- Follow their interests in the character. For example: "Why don't you appear to be afraid of the monster?"

Use “hot seating” of the character/s to answer the children’s questions

Hot seating is a device for getting inside the character’s head and utilising the viewpoints of children.

- Ask class: Who could best answer the questions you have?
 - Conor?
 - The monster?
- Ask a child to volunteer to be Conor for example. Ask them to leave the room and quickly get into character, thinking about how Conor may be feeling, how old he is, how he might move and talk and to consider how he might enter the room.
- Ask the child to knock on the door when they are ready.
- Conor enters and sits on a chair in front of the class.
- The children take it in turns to ask him questions using the questions from the “role on the wall” activity as a starting point.
- Encourage children to respond to Conor’s replies in order to develop their questioning.