"The World's Full of Amazing Things"

Death and Spirituality Represented to Children in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* and David Almond's *Skellig*

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Pro Gradu Thesis
June 2008

Tampereen Yliopisto
Englantilainen filologia
Kieli- ja käännöstieteen laitos

SALONEN, LAURA: "The World's Full of Amazing Things: Death and Spirituality Represented to Children in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* and David Almond's *Skellig*"

Pro Gradu –tutkielma, 71 sivua
Kevät 2008

Tutkielman tarkoituksena oli selvittää, miten kuolema sekä henkisyys esittäytyvät lapsille kahdessa englanninkielisessä lastenkirjassa, E.B. Whiten teoksessa *Charlotte's Web* sekä David Almondin teoksessa *Skellig*. Kummassakin lastenkirjassa kuvataan kuolemaa yhtenä pääteemana, ja henkisyys sekä uskonnollisuus ovat tärkeitä tutkimusaiheita sekä kuoleman kuvauksessa että kirjojen yleisessä tunnelmassa. Tavoitteena oli tarkastella sitä, kuinka kuoleman vaikeaa aihetta kuvataan lapsille, sekä niitä keinoja, joilla kuolemaan liittyviä pelkoja tai ennakkokäsityksiä joko vahvistetaan tai kumotaan. Tarkastelun pohjaksi paneuduttiin siihen, miten kuolemaan liittyvät käsitykset ja normit ovat muotoutuneet sekä mahdollisesti muuttuneet nyky-yhteiskunnassa 1900-luvulla, erityisesti Yhdysvalloissa sekä Englannissa. Henkisyyden ja uskonnollisuuden osalta olennaista oli tarkastella, kuinka uskonnon tai henkisyyden merkitys näkyy tarinoissa erityisesti kuoleman kuvaamisen yhteydessä, ja kuinka henkisyys erottautuu uskonnollisuudesta tarinan kulussa. Jotta saataisiin asiallinen kuva siitä, millainen kapasiteetti nuorella lukijalla on ymmärtää erilaisia kuolemaan tai henkisyyteen liittyviä käsitteitä, on nojauduttu Jean Piagetin teoriaan lapsen kognitiivisista kehitysvaiheista sekä useisiin muihin lasten ymmärrystä ja oppimista käsitteleviin teoksiin.

Koska Whiten ja Almondin lastenkirjat edustavat hyvin erilaisia aikakausia – *Charlotte's Web* julkaistiin vuonna 1952 ja *Skellig* vuonna 1998 – tarkoituksena oli myös tarkastella, miten teokset eroavat toisistaan tutkimuskysymysten osalta. Suurin huomio oli, että molemmissa teoksissa kuolema saa hyvin samankaltaisen muodon; kuoleman kuvaus on hyvin realistista sekä maanläheistä, ja ennen kaikkea siitä puuttuvat suurimmilta osin uskonnolliset viittaukset ja selitykset. Kummassakaan kirjassa ei esimerkiksi viitata kuoleman jälkeiseen elämään tai ylösnousemukseen millään tavalla, vaan kuolema nähdään elämänkaaren luonnollisena viimeisenä vaiheena, joka kohtaa kaikkia elollisia olentoja.

Henkisyyden sekä uskonnollisuuden osalta teokset osoittautuivat myös hyvin yhteneväisiksi. Vaikka kirjat edustavat hyvin erilaisia aikakausia, jolloin myös uskonnon sekä henkisyyden asema yhteiskunnassa on ollut jokseenkin erilainen, niitä käsitellään kirjoissa pääosin hyvin samankaltaisesti. Uskonnon merkitys jää taka-alalle, kun taas henkisyyden merkitystä ihmisen elämänkäsitykselle korostetaan. Henkisyys esittäytyy molemmissa teoksissa hyvin eri asiana kuin uskonto ja korostaa ihmisen kykyä ymmärtää osuutensa suhteessa sekä toisiin ihmisiin että luontoon ja ympäristöön. Pääteemana molemmissa teoksissa erottautuu kaksi henkisyyteen liittyvää ajatusta. Ensinnäkin, maailmassa on paljon sellaista, mitä tiede ei kykene täysin selittämään, mutta on tärkeää hyväksyä, ettei kaiken selittämiselle ole välttämättä tarvetta. Toiseksi, juuri lapset ovat usein valmiimpia luottamaan henkiseen pääomaansa ja käyttämään hyväkseen sen tuomaa kykyä katsoa maailmaa avoimemmin mielin.

Asiasanat: lapset, kuolema, henkisyys, uskonnollisuus.

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INTRODUCTION

For most people in today's Western societies, death is a very personal issue. It is often seen as an uncomfortable topic to talk about in public, and for many people, it is just as uncomfortable a topic in the familial circle as well. Death is an emotional issue charged with a lot of thoughts that are often difficult to handle thoroughly, and this is particularly so when the death occurs to a loved one in the close family circle. In the instance of death, children are in many cases left outside of what is happening, mostly due to adults' attempts to guard the child from the painful reality. People often believe that death is a topic to be avoided with children because it threatens the innocence of children's lives at an early stage[1]. There are several societal issues that influence the representation of death in today's world, and this thesis will focus on the United States and Britain as good examples of contemporary Western societies. Therefore, when discussing 'Western societies', the aim of the thesis is to denote those of the United States and Britain.

The reason many adults avoid talking to children about death, in addition to the desire to shelter them from the painfulness of death, is that they believe that children do not understand such a complex issue, and that they are not capable of dealing with ideas and thoughts raised by their possible awareness of death. However, it is argued that this avoidance of death can itself cause a lot of damage to children's development, as Eleanor J. Deveau remarks; children who have not been able to deal with thoughts raised by death with their parents or relatives can have serious problems later on in their life to cope with the death of a loved one (55). The idea that children do not understand death can also be questioned depending on how old the child is; their age is a significant factor in realising the idea of death, and this will be examined further in chapter 1, where I explore the different aspects and stages of children's development first introduced by the psychologist Jean Piaget. Although Piaget's study of the stages of development deals with the

[1] Deveau, Eleanor J. "Perceptions of Death Through the Eyes of Children and Adolescents" in *Vol1: Beyond the Innocence of Childhood: Factors Influencing Children and Adolescents' Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Death*. Eds. David W. Adams and Eleanor J. Deveau. Amityville: Baywood Publishing Company, 1995, 55-92.

child's cognitive development in general, it is nevertheless an important theory to look at when considering children's perceptions of death. The psychological approach to the theme of children and death is relevant in mapping out how and when children's understanding of abstract concepts such as death develops, and how they come to understand the different subcomponents that several scholars define as crucial components of the concept of death. As many as seven subcomponents have been outlined in studies of children's understanding of death, while the four most important subcomponents can be defined as irreversibility, universality, inevitability and causality[2]. These will also be discussed in further detail in chapter 1.

This pro gradu thesis will focus on the representation of death in the Western societies of the United States and Britain through two children's novels; E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* which was published in 1952, and David Almond's *Skellig*, published in 1998. These novels were chosen for their individual and perhaps even controversial depictions of death, and therefore they offer plenty of possibilities for contemplating the different aspects of children and death in two different eras in the history of Children's Literature. In addition to the topic of death, another recurring theme in this thesis will be the notion of spirituality; especially in the case of *Skellig*, it is an important aspect of the novel and a major influence on the representation of death as well.

The concept of spirituality itself is a rather difficult issue since many definitions of spirituality implicitly link it with religion. While some scholars argue that spirituality can be seen as an aspect of humanity that is philosophically based on science and reason[3], distinguishing it thus clearly from the definitions with religious allusions, the theme of spirituality continues to be examined together with religious aspects. This is mostly due to the fact that the majority of scholars, despite their efforts, are unable to distinguish these two concepts clearly and therefore it seems relevant to discuss them both in this thesis. Spirituality is often perceived as something private as well as complex to portray without seeming subjective or biased, and referring to the issue can be

[2] Slaughter, Virginia. "Young Children's Understanding of Death". *Australian Psychologist*, Vol. 3, No. 40, 2005, 180.
[3] Crompton, Margaret. *Children, Spirituality, Religion and Social Work*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 1998, 43.

uncomfortable. But for children, spirituality can be a more straightforward issue, owing to the natural openness to new experiences and unknown aspects in their life. But today's Western societies can often be destructive to a child's spirituality, and that is largely due to the individualist and privatised nature of the prevailing culture[4]. Spirituality can also have a strong influence on a person's attitude toward issues related to death, and this aspect is also taken into account in this thesis. The thesis will also look at spiritual and religious education in order to establish a basis for what it is that children learn about these issues at school.

My task in this thesis will be to examine the representation of death and spirituality in the two different eras present in *Charlotte's Web* and *Skellig*, and to identify the ways in which death is portrayed to a child reader. Both novels are quite long; *Charlotte's Web* has 184 pages and *Skellig* 182, and therefore they were clearly not intended for very small children. The estimated age of children at an appropriate reading level for both novels could be 8-12 years, not only because of the length of the novels but also because of the relatively advanced vocabulary and concepts present in them. In my thesis I will aim to demonstrate how, according to previous scholarship, children react to and deal with ideas of death and spirituality, and how this is taken into account in these two representatives of English language children's literature. I shall examine *Charlotte's Web* and *Skellig* in order to find out how death and spirituality are represented in these children's novels, and also look at how and whether these representations differ from each other as products of two different decades, keeping in mind that literature itself is often a representative of the society and culture that prevails. It is also important to note that literature also participates in creating – and sometimes changing – the culture it represents.

When it comes to previous scholarship in the area, death in children's literature has been researched in the past, as has the field of spirituality and religion. Having said that, in my experience neither *Charlotte's Web* nor *Skellig* has been used very thoroughly in these research

[4] Hay, David and Rebecca Nye. *The Spirit of the Child*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006, 63.

purposes, and the main focus when examining these novels has for the most part been on the aspect of friendship and the treatment of nature and animals, magical realism and mystery. Nevertheless, death and spirituality are so evidently and constantly present in the novels that it has not passed completely unnoticed or unexamined from previous researchers, even if the main focus has been on other issues. Thus the aim of my thesis is to bring a fresh point of view to the discussion, for example by comparing these texts' presentations of death and spirituality in two different eras of children's literature.

Elwyn Brooks White (1899-1985) is considered one of the classic children's literature writers, although for most of his life, he worked as an essayist for *The New Yorker*. He was born into a Christian family in Mount Vernon, New York, and spent most of his career living and working in New York. However, in 1939 he moved to a farm in North Brooklin, Maine and this change to a rural environment is said to have been a major influence on his children's literature, especially on *Charlotte's Web*[5]. The novel itself tells the story of a little pig Wilbur, who is born as a runt and therefore in danger of being killed by the farmer. But the farmer's eight-year-old daughter Fern persuades her father to let the pig live and Wilbur is then relocated to a nearby farm. There he feels lonely until he is befriended by a spider called Charlotte. However, Wilbur learns that he is still in danger of being killed and eaten at Christmas, and thus Charlotte sets out to help save her friend by weaving great words about Wilbur into her web. But just as Wilbur's life is secured, Charlotte dies, leaving Wilbur in charge of her sac of eggs. Wilbur takes care of the eggs until they hatch, and while most of Charlotte's offspring leave the farm, three daughters remain in Wilbur's barn and become his friends. Most of all, *Charlotte's Web* is a story about friendship, but death is a constant in the story as well; throughout the novel, Wilbur is in danger of dying prematurely, and then Charlotte dies, having used her time and energy to save Wilbur. However, the

[5] "E.B. White" in *Pegasos.* Available from http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/ebwhite.htm. No pagination. [Accessed 27 March 2008]

way in which death is represented is rather contemporary to its time, and this will be examined further in the following chapters.

David Almond (1951-) is a British writer who started his literary career by writing short stories in adult fiction. However, he became a well-known author only after his first children's novel, *Skellig*, was published in 1998 and received the Whitbread Children's Novel of the Year Award as well as the Carnegie Medal[6]. Almond was born into a Catholic family in Newcastle, and before concentrating solely on writing he worked, among other things, as a primary school teacher[7]. In *Skellig*, a young boy named Michael explores an old shed behind the newly bought family home and stumbles upon Skellig, a mysterious, grumpy human-like creature in ailing condition, and starts to look after this creature with strange, wing-like growths on his back. Michael also befriends his new neighbour, Mina, an outspoken, home-schooled girl roughly of his age, and together they nurse Skellig back to health. At the same time, Michael's prematurely born baby sister is fighting for her life in the hospital, and this causes a lot of distress for Michael in his relationships with school friends as well as his own family. At the end of the novel, Michael's baby sister is about to die, and after a mysterious incident Michael and Mina experience with Skellig, whose strength has been restored, the baby sister survives while Skellig disappears. In the story, several names and situations can be viewed ambiguously, leaving the initial question of what Skellig truly is to the reader to answer. The recurring themes of life and death, fantasy and reality, as well as spirituality but also evolution create an atmosphere that is very controversial in today's secular, humanist world.

[6] "David Almond" in *Wikipedia*. Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Almond. No pagination. [Accessed 27 March 2008]
[7] "Biography by David Almond" in *David Almond Online*. Available from http://www.davidalmond.com/author/bio.html. No pagination. [Accessed 27 March 2008]

1 CHILDREN, DEATH AND CULTURE

Death is a difficult topic for many people, and discussing it can often be uncomfortable. The reasons for the attitudes towards death are often rooted in the society and its prevailing culture, and especially in the modern Western societies death has very often become an unpleasant necessity that is kept at a distance. When it comes to children, death is no longer viewed as a natural part of the life cycle, but something painful and distressing from which children need to be shielded. At the same time, the media and popular culture convey very different and often controversial messages about the nature and relevance of death, and the effects of these phenomena are discussed in more detail in the following chapter. The developmental aspects of children's growing understanding of the reality as well as death are also examined further in this chapter to provide an outline of children's mental development.

1.1 Death in Contemporary Western Society

Culture is an essential factor in explaining how people react and function in the presence of death. In different cultures, death is also perceived in different ways, whether it is seen as a transition to another, better world or life; a moment of judgement for the souls; or a mere ending where all physical as well as mental activity ceases. But death itself is something cultures create as an image, and that image is always a representation of how a culture views it, as Bronfen and Goodwin refer to it: one can never truly know death because it is not possible to die and then return to retell the experience. Therefore no culture can have the true answer, for there is no right or wrong; death is a challenge to all cultures, and "any given cultural construct–from religion and poetry to

psychoanalysis and medical technology–may be construed as a response to the disordering force of death"[8].

No culture is devoid of death as it is such a powerful force, and therefore humans often seek to represent it in ways that make it comprehensible, perhaps even defeatable. But as Bronfen and Goodwin point out, "every representation of death is a misrepresentation" (20), for it is impossible to portray death as something we know. And as people today are seeking to prolong life and manipulate death by means of medical science, they seek to gain power and control over death at the same time. This hardly proves successful, and perhaps this powerlessness in the face of death is one reason for it being such a forbidden subject in the Western society today. Death is a difficult topic to discuss because it is often a traumatic experience, perhaps because death in its powerful force is a challenge to our self-love.

Geographical location is a significant aspect in defining death culturally; Scandinavian culture differs greatly from those cultures present in China, for example, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that these cultures also have at least partially different attitudes or approaches to dealing with death. However, the focus of this thesis is on the cultural aspects and views of death particularly evident in the Anglophone societies of Britain and the United States, since the children's novels this thesis examines are by English and American writers, and thus these societies and the cultural aspects widely present within them are considered more closely.

In earlier centuries, death was constantly present in the Western society. Average life expectancy was considerably lower than today and diseases and many kinds of accidents were far more common than today. Death was near in everyday life, and children encountered death as one part of growing up in this kind of environment; the elderly and ill people were cared for at home, and most people died in the premises of their own homes where funerals and wakes were also

[8] Bronfen, Elisabeth and Sarah Webster Goodwin. Introduction. *Death and Representation.* Eds. Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, 4.

predominantly held[9]. Despite the familiarity and presence, however, death was often neither painless nor easy. In most cases in the past centuries when medical science was undeveloped, the lack of appropriate medicines turned even the diseases that today seem most harmless into lethal situations. Faith was also another distressing factor in facing death as the church kept people in constant fear of hell and purgatory, yet faith also provided people with assurance and comfort in terms of the concept of afterlife and resurrection.

In today's modern Western society, death has been moved further from the scope of everyday life. The developments in science have enhanced the quality of life and increased our average life expectancy significantly. With new inventions in medical science, human life can be prolonged to great measures, as Christopher Lewis argues, this "almost infinite future giving a sense of immortality" to people in modern Western society[10]. Owing to scientific developments in medical technology, people may feel more in control of their own lives, but one might argue that this does not result in greater understanding of death in general. It is from adults that children for the most part receive their knowledge on issues related to death, yet even adults in Western society often struggle to understand or deal with death. This situation can be argued to be a creation of our culture, which very often makes death "a forbidden subject, an embarrassment one would like to silence, allowing it to emerge only in ritually determined moments" (Bronfen and Goodwin, 3). When adults are incapable of processing the idea of death in a natural way, it is no wonder that children are left confused.

According to Granot, children's attitudes toward death are very much influenced by the cultural context in which they grow up (37), and the Western society today tends to keep death at a distance from children. Because of nursing homes and hospitals, as well as funeral homes, death is no longer visibly present in everyday life, and therefore, as Granot points out, "children are

[9] Granot, Tamar. *Without You: Children and Young People Growing Up with Loss and Its Effects*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005, 37.
[10] Lewis, Christopher. "Beyond the Crematorium – Popular Belief" in *Beyond Death – Theological and Philosophical Reflections on Life After Death*. Eds. Dan Cohn-Sherbock and Christopher Lewis. London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1995, 199.

not exposed to many of the life passages, primarily those that pertain to sickness, old age, and death"(37). Many adults may believe that children need to be protected from the harsh reality that includes death; childhood is supposed to be innocent of all worries and adult concerns and therefore adults shield children from any painful experiences that might disturb that innocence.

It is, however, worth mentioning that this kind of an analysis is relevant when we consider an average child living in the Anglo-Saxon world, namely Great Britain and the United States. This thesis concentrates on the general cultural patterns prevalent in these societies; nevertheless it is important to acknowledge that in both societies there are always a vast number of children living in conditions that differ greatly from those discussed in this thesis. Especially in the United States, there are regions and communities where violence and death – through drug use and gang fights, for example – are present in children's lives from early on. In these circumstances, Granot remarks, children acquire "an intimate knowledge of "loss realities" from a very young age" (38), and learn to expect death even if it is something of which they do not even fully grasp the idea yet. This thesis will nevertheless focus on the prevailing cultural issues, and concentrates on analysing the aforementioned 'average children', for attempting to analyse all social classes and groups would require a larger study altogether.

1.2 Death and Popular Culture

Children growing up in today's Western society will not, however, stay innocent of death and its many aspects, no matter how strongly adults try to protect them, nor would it even be recommendable to do so. In fact, death is very clearly present in children's lives despite adults' occasional incompetence to introduce the topic in a constructive way; through popular culture[11]. Unfortunately, popular culture such as television shows, films and video games often bring about a

[11] Wass, Hannelore. "Appetite for Destruction: Children and Violent Death in Popular Culture" in *Volume 1: Beyond the Innocence of Childhood: Factors Influencing Children and Adolescents' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Death*. Eds. David W. Adams and Eleanor J. Deveau. Amityville: Baywood Publishing Company, 1995, 95.

very strong and distorted view of death for the child to grasp. Violent death is a frequent occurrence on television and it is portrayed as entertainment, thus diminishing its status as something to be condemned and reprehended. According to Granot, through films and games children can acquire the understanding that death is something that happens only for "the bad guys" and that death can be avoided or reversed by means of science (37).

Violent films or video games are not, however, the only media through which children are exposed to death. News programs are another strong influence in representing death in today's society; positive news items are very rare as most broadcasts are filled with information on wars, terrorist attacks and suicide bombs, assassinations and murder, accidents and diseases. It is also worth mentioning that this kind of information is stemming from real events, as opposed to many fictive films and TV shows, though a child may not necessarily understand the difference between them. It can be argued that the vast representation of death in everyday life can desensitise and numb children to the topic, thus trivialising the meaning of human life to a child. When it comes to death, popular culture creates a stark contrast to the belief system in Western societies today, as Wass (95) points out:

> Contemporary Western societies are founded on the Judeo-Christian and humanistic ideology that affirms the value of life, the dignity and worth of each person, and encourages behaviors of tolerance and peaceful co-existence. These cultural values presumably underlie transactions among individuals and social institutions such as schools and professional groups. For example, care and concern for helping children with death-related issues–the subject of this volume–reflect this ideology. Popular culture, however, does not always reflect traditional ideology, and may, in fact, express attitudes and values that are in direct conflict with it.

A crucial aspect in the influence of popular culture, introduced by Wass, is children's programs and cartoons. In these types of programs, the presence of death and physical violence is very prominent, yet, as Wass remarks, "cartoon characters never stay dead very long" (96). She strongly criticises the argument that children do not take cartoons seriously, reminding us that they provide children with the notion that no matter how badly injured, these characters never die and in the event that they might, it is merely a "temporary condition" (96). She also points out that

cartoons promote violence as the "answer to conflict" (97). This comment is in line with the argument that popular culture can create the attitude of death as a desensitised and trivialised issue to children of Western societies.

Children receive very mixed messages about death and this may confuse them profoundly. The media exposes children to constant images of death and dying, and modern medical science may also distort children's views on issues of life and death. Deveau raises appropriate discussion on the issue of the development of medical technology influencing Western culture in her essay, where she wonders how the debates over manipulating life and death through "genetic engineering, organ transplants, abortion, and euthanasia" affect children's attitudes toward and understanding about life or death (90).

The flow of information from different mediums is immense, and thus it is very important for adults to provide children with appropriate information and basis for understanding the concept of death, rather than leaving it to the mass media to educate the child in its own, often misconstrued way, for as Granot points out, "in the absence of reliable, accurate information from people close to him, the child is incapable of filtering and classifying the distorted information that reaches him" (21). Sian Higgins remarks that in today's society where death is still a taboo, sheltering children from the realities of life often compels children to fill in the blanks by themselves, and in many cases it is possible that "what they imagine is worse than the truth itself"[12]. Therefore, for the sake of the child's mental development, it is far more important to provide the child with an accurate knowledge of death rather than shield him/her from its discomforts and cause additional fear and grief.

[12] Higgins, Sian. "Death Education in the Primary School" in *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, Vol. 4, No.1, 1999, 79.

1.3 The Mental Development of Children

Children's understanding of death develops as they grow older and become more mature, and in order to gain a view of how this process takes place, it is important to look at children's mental development. On a general level, most children gain basic knowledge and develop certain abilities at roughly the same pace, and this idea is developed further by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. According to Piaget, the mental development of a child is cognitive, and before maturing into an adult way of thinking, the child goes through 3 developmental stages[13]. Each stage represents the child's understanding of reality at a given time in the child's life, and each of the three stages before the last mature stage can be seen as incomplete conceptions of reality.

The stage that is valuable to the aims of this thesis is that of the Concrete Operations Stage, which generally occurs between the ages of seven and twelve years. This stage is characterised by the emerging use of appropriate logic as children begin to be more objective in their thinking. Children also start to base their actions and thoughts on concrete objects and events, and approach their environment with a cause and effect way of thinking. However, according to Piaget, at this stage children do not yet possess the ability for abstract thought and reasoning. (in Deveau, 58) After this stage, at the approximate age of twelve, children's cognitive development starts the transition to the last stage, which is considered to be the stage of adult thinking. At this point the child reaches a new level of reasoning, "one that is no longer limited exclusively to dealing with objects or directly representable realities, but also employs 'hypotheses', in other words, propositions from which it is possible to draw logical conclusions" (Piaget 1970, 33).

Children going through the Concrete Operations Stage are approximately in the age group that can be seen as the age at which children might read *Charlotte's Web* and *Skellig*, and therefore the developmental information of this stage is of importance to this thesis. It is, however, necessary to point out that although Piaget's stages are considered one of the cornerstones of

[13] Piaget, Jean. *Science of Education and the Psychology of the Child*. Trans. Derek Coltman. New York: Grossman Publishers, 1970, 32-33.

children's developmental theories, these cannot be seen as ultimate truths, but the stage model is at best a useful approximation and a helpful tool in understanding the functioning of a child's mind. It is also important to notice that cognitive development is not simply a biological process that occurs in the child's mind. As Piaget points out, the mind's "structural maturation" and the child's individual experience as well as the influences of the child's physical and social environment all contribute to the cognitive development of the child, and therefore some variations can occur in the ages at which different children reach a certain stage, and what type of thought content that stage includes for a certain child (1970, 172-173).

Piaget also emphasises that while overall characterisations can be made about which processes and aspects of understanding reality belong to each stage, there are also overlaps in the points in which different children acquire certain processes of a certain stage, but there are always certain elements that the child needs to acquire in order to the following structures to form[14]. The overlaps are very often caused by the child's experiences and environment, and thus it is necessary to keep in mind that "each stage of development is characterized much less by a fixed thought content than by a certain power, a certain potential activity, capable of achieving such and such a result according to the environment in which the child lives" (Piaget 1970, 171-172). It is nevertheless possible to assume that most children that grow up in the modern Western societies are subject to relatively similar experiences and environments when considering their possibilities for mental development, and therefore the Piagetian stages can be seen as useful for this thesis.

1.4 Understanding the Subcomponents of Death

Most scholars agree that the concept of death includes various subcomponents that children need to grasp in order to develop a mature understanding of what death is and what it means. Slaughter has suggested in her studies that there would be as many as seven components that form the concept of

[14] Piaget, Jean. *The Essential Piaget*. Eds. Howard E. Gruber and J. Jacques Vonèche. New York: Basic Books, 1977, 815.

death (180), but many of these can be seen as overlapping sets that can quite easily be presented in broader and clearer sets of components, as most scholars studied for this thesis have done. Therefore I shall also concentrate on these three most widely presented components of irreversibility, nonfunctionality and universality[15]. These three primary elements are presented as the most important ones, while scholars such as Granot (29), Slaughter (180) and Smilansky (in Deveau, 61) also add the fourth component of causality to the concept of death.

The component of irreversibility refers to the child's understanding that death is irreversible and therefore the person or any living thing that has died will not come back, no matter how well the child behaves (Granot, 28). Before children grasp this component of death, they often believe that death is temporary and can be reversed through different kinds of actions or for example praying (Speece and Brent, 1673). Adults sometimes explain death to children as sleeping or simply going away, but this leads to the child imagining that the person can be woken up or can return from wherever they went, and thus prevents the child from fully understanding the idea of irreversibility.

Nonfunctionality refers to the understanding that all mental and bodily functions cease when a living thing dies (Speece and Brent, 1672). Children who do not yet fully understand the idea of nonfunctionality may believe that dead people "do not possess all of the functional capabilities of alive (sic) things", or that they possess "diminished capabilities for specific functions" (Speece and Brent, 1676). This component thus emphasises that once a person dies, s/he is no longer able to see, hear or feel anything, and as Granot points out, this is a concept that can leave children confused when they are for example told that "Mother is looking down on you from heaven", possibly preventing them from fully grasping the finality of the situation (29).

The understanding that every living thing will die is referred to with the component of universality (Speece and Brent, 1672); death is common to all living things and will occur to

[15] Speece, Mark W. and Sandor B. Brent. "Children's Understanding of Death: A Review of Three Components of a Death Concept". *Child Development*, 1984, Vol. 55, No. 5, 1671.

everyone sooner or later. Before understanding this component, children may often believe that death is a punishment imposed on people (Granot, 29); some children may also believe that there are certain actions that can prevent death or that certain kinds of people do not die at all (Speece and Brent, 1676). If a child does not understand the concept of death, s/he may see it as a punishment for bad people or behaviour, and believes that it does not occur if certain actions are taken to prevent it. Speece and Brent also point out that children often understand that other people die before they realise that this also applies to themselves, or the people closest to them (1676).

Along with irreversibility, nonfunctionality and universality, causality of death is viewed as an important component of understanding the concept of death. Causality refers to the understanding that death occurs due to a breakdown of bodily functions (Slaughter, 180). This means that children also understand the causes of death, and realise why it is not possible to prevent death in the circumstances where death occurred (Granot, 29). In order for the child to understand this component, it is important to provide the child with an accurate explanation of what happened, instead of superficial descriptions that are meant to protect the child from the brutal reality. For example, explaining the death of a loved one by telling that they went to sleep and didn't wake up anymore could make the child afraid of going to sleep for fear of dying too while asleep (Granot, 29). While the other components of death are generally seen to be understood by children at the age of 7, Slaughter points out that causality is often one of the last components that children realise in a sufficient way, as children consider "death to be caused by concrete elements originating from outside the body" (180-181). Therefore it is possible for the child to understand the three other components of death at the age of 7, for example, but not yet fully understand causality.

At the age of about 7 to 12 years, children are often naturally very inquisitive in their desire to understand how the world around them works and death is a subject that is bound to raise questions in children. The concept of death is nevertheless complex even for the adult mind, and explaining it to a child can prove even more difficult. However, it is often safe to say that adults do

not feel this difficulty due to an inability to understand the concept, but because of the difficulty to handle their own feelings of death adequately and accept the situation emotionally. The way people are brought up influences the point of view from which to observe everything around them. Slaughter points out that understanding the concept of death incorporates various "social and cultural traditions and beliefs"; thus religious doctrines may also influence this understanding (179), and these can have an impact on how the child comes to understand the components of death.

Based on earlier studies, Slaughter argues that the effects of different socio-cultural traditions or experiences are often seen as minimal to the child's overall development of the understanding of the concept of death, whereas personal experiences and religious beliefs, for example, can accelerate the understanding of a particular subcomponent (181). It is, however, possible that religious beliefs especially can hinder the child's development when it comes to the component of irreversibility, for example, because the child may believe that god will bring the person back. Similarly, for children from highly religious backgrounds, the idea of afterlife can be confusing when it comes to developing an understanding of death as a biological event. This is, in fact, supported by Cotton and Range, who in their research on children's death concepts found out that a religious belief in afterlife may cause children to develop misunderstandings about the inevitability of death, and also its cause[16].

Most scholars studying the development of children's understanding of death refer to Piagetian research and the stages of cognitive development, although Piaget's research is not specifically addressing the development of children in terms of understanding death. Victor and Edith Lombardo have developed a framework for the stages of understanding death that correspond with the Piagetian stages (in Deveau, 58-59), and according to their model children from age five to nine years are in the "Stage of Refined Misconceptions", where children are beginning to use logical thought patterns and see things as based on cause and effect. From this stage children

[16] Cotton, C. Randy and Lillian M. Range. "Children's Death Concepts: Relationship to Cognitive Functioning, Age, Experience with Death, Fear of Death, and Hopelessness". *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 1990, Vol. 19, No. 2, 125.

develop to enter the “Stage of Mature Conceptions” around the age of nine years, and in this stage children gradually develop a mature understanding of all the components of the concept of death (in Deveau, 58-59). It is interesting to note that according to the Lombardos, children may understand some but not necessarily all subcomponents of death in this stage of development, however Speece and Brent point out that most children come to understand the subcomponents in a sufficient way at the age of five to seven years (1679). This small difference in views may be due to the varying research studied for these conclusions, for several scholars have arrived at slightly different results depending on their modes of examining and interviewing children.

Another important influence in developing children’s understanding of the concept of death is the development of reasoning about biological concepts, and this is seen to occur in time with the shift in thinking on death concepts (Slaughter, 182). When children begin to understand phenomena such as growing, diseases and illness, and the human body, they are also more able to conceptualise death in a more detailed way, and according to Slaughter, this is the moment when children “move from a fundamental misunderstanding of death as a behaviour (sleeping, going away) to an initial understanding of death as a biological phenomenon, governed not by what people want or plan to do, but by a different set of principles, namely biological ones” (183). When children come to understand the biological facts of death, they are also more apt to understand the entire concept of dying as a whole.

2 SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is an important concept in this thesis, and therefore needs to be examined in more detail. Defining spirituality as a concept proves to be a relatively hard task, especially when considering spirituality as distinguished from religion, and this will be examined in the next chapter. The following chapter will also concentrate on the role of spirituality in the modern Western society along with the ways in which it is represented in the schools of the United States and England in order to present a clear background to the analysis on *Charlotte's Web* and *Skellig*.

2.1 Definitions

Spirituality is a concept that a lot of scholars claim to struggle with in defining it. Spirituality and religion are often seen as homogenous concepts, but it is important not to view them as such. But how can one attempt to define spirituality? The Cambridge Dictionaries Online defines spirituality as "the quality of being concerned with deep, often religious, feelings and beliefs, rather than with the physical parts of life"[17]. The Oxford English Dictionary in turn views spirituality as "the quality of being concerned with religion or the human spirit"[18], while the Merriam-Webster defines it as "something that in ecclesiastical law belongs to the church or to a cleric as such" and as "sensitivity or attachment to religious values"[19]. From these definitions it is easy to note the religious aspect clearly present in the idea of spirituality. The Cambridge Dictionaries Online is, however, somewhat closest to the idea this thesis aims to promote; that spirituality does not necessarily have a religious undertone, though very often that is seen as the case.

[17] Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Available from http://dictionary.cambridge.org/define.asp?key=76612&dict=CALD. [Accessed 24 March 2008]
[18] The Oxford English Dictionary. Available from http://www.oup.com/oald-bin/web_getald7index1a.pl. [Accessed 24 March 2008]
[19] Merriam-Webster Online. Available from http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spirituality. [Accessed 24 March 2008]

While dictionary entries provide a relatively clear idea of the meaning of a word, the concept of spirituality in modern Western society also has several other, extensive dimensions to it, and plenty of scholars have attempted to define these further in their studies. Hay and Nye conclude that personal spirituality is a matter of "self-transcendence", where humans aim to be aware of other people as well as the environment around them, in order to understand themselves in relation to the reality that surrounds them (157). This definition encourages the idea that spirituality does not necessarily entail religion, and in Crompton's (43) work the same notion is given reinforcement with a definition provided by the British Humanist Association:

> [Spirituality] comes from our deepest humanity. It finds expression in aspirations, moral sensibility, creativity, love and friendship, response to natural and human beauty, scientific and artistic endeavour, appreciation and wonder at the natural world, intellectual achievement and physical activity, surmounting suffering and persecution, selfless love, the quest for meaning and for values by which to live.

According to this definition, spirituality is the core of human morals, values and appreciation of the surrounding world, as well as the concern for the future of this world that leads humans to actions that contribute to the well-being of generations to come. This is a definition that is the most accessible to all people regardless of their religious beliefs. However, Crompton continues that spirituality can also be viewed as "the dominance of emotional over intellectual aspects of the personality, positively and based on scientific/reason-based philosophy" (43). This further remark, supported by many secularists, clearly wipes away the religious connotations from the idea of spirituality, for it states that the dominating emotional aspects are all based on science and reason, when most scholars studying spirituality would argue that it is religious ethics that provides humans with the principles of moral values. This definition is perhaps the one that would get the most opposition from religious scholars.

Another definition, given by Robert Twycross in L.L. DeVeber's essay[20], provides a transitional aspect to the core problem of spirituality and religion as overlapping ideas:

> The spiritual component of a personality is the dimension or function that integrates all other aspects of personhood. This relates to a concern with the ultimate issues in life principles and is often seen as a search for meaning in a person's life (why me, why him). Not to be confused with religion or religious, which is the practical expression of spirituality through a framework of beliefs often actively pursued in rituals and other religious practices. Everyone has a spiritual component, but not everyone is religious.

Twycross' definition is rather similar to that provided by the British Humanist Association, but it also points out the crucial aspect of spirituality in relation to religion. He states that religion should not be confused with spirituality, while several sources, such as the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, implicitly handle them as intertwined concepts. And surely there are overlapping aspects in the definitions. In Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude's article, Koenig, McCullough and Larson define religion as "an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed (a) to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power, or ultimate truth/reality) and (b) to foster an understanding of one's relationship and responsibility to others in living together in community"[21]. In this regard, spirituality has the same goal of providing understanding of the surrounding reality as religion does, but the core aspect distinguishing these two is the fact that religion is an organized and institutionalized system that stresses these morals and values. Spirituality could be seen in this light rather as an inbred quality in all humans whereas religion is something humans are conditioned to from the outside. However broad the explanations provided by scholars, these definitions evoke another question about spirituality as a concept; is it not, ultimately, merely a matter of humans contemplating their existence in relation to others, and the morals and values by which to live in a way that provides welfare also for the future

[20] DeVeber, L.L. "The Influence of Spirituality on Dying Children's Perceptions of Death" in *Volume 2: Beyond the Innocence of Childhood: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Life-Threatening Illness and Dying*. Eds. David W. Adams & Eleanor J. Deveau. Amityville: Baywood Publishing Company, 1995, 296.
[21] Benson, Peter L., Eugene C. Roehlkepartain and Stacey P. Rude. "Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence: Toward a Field of Inquiry" in *Applied Developmental Science*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 2003, 209.

generations. When defined by scholars, the concept of spirituality appears to take on a far greater meaning, yet it seems to be such a simple concept when stripped of its fancy façade.

There is also an important point apparent in Twycross' statement about spirituality as an idea not to be confused with religion, and the same is apparent in the definition of religion by Koenig, McCullough and Larson; religion is in many cases viewed as the major means for humans to express their spirituality as most religions provide humans with clear, concrete rituals, practices and other modes of action. The same issue is brought out by Hay and Nye who remark that for centuries, Western people expressed their spiritual experiences through "the terminology of Christianity" (25). Nevertheless, based on these definitions it can be argued that while spirituality is the underlying human condition to seek understanding and fulfilment in the world in relation to both others and the self, religion only provides humans with a channel to express this in a meaningful way.

2.2 Spirituality and Culture

Just as the modern Western society has changed in the last decades when it comes to attitudes toward death, it is reasonable to assume that it has changed in relation to the theme of spirituality and religion. Here the thesis incorporates the theme of religion to that of spirituality because most scholars do not handle them separately when discussing cultural aspects, mostly because the religious culture of a society is often what defines and influences the spiritual culture as well. After all, as has been seen in many scholarly definitions about spirituality, despite numerous efforts it has not been completely distinguished from the concept of religion.

In modern Western societies, the economic developments and wide-spread globalism has had its influence on culture, and this phenomenon includes the spiritual and religious culture as well. Increased materialism has brought about secular, rationalist views that befit as well as warrant the materialist ways of living, and individualism is highly esteemed over interest toward the

community in the Western world. Western culture has changed and is in many ways still changing rapidly, and this has its influence on the ways in which people perceive traditional religion and spirituality. In modern society where the mobility of people and ideas is fast, the quest for individuality has perhaps made people less concerned for the traditional community as the focal point of their culture. Therefore people also lose connection to the religious traditions provided by the society (Hay and Nye, 45).

Traditional sources of religious and spiritual experience have lost their importance to many Western people, making religious institutions less and less popular. Hay and Nye suggest several reasons for this phenomenon in recent history: the traumas of the Second World War left people with a strong disbelief in the power of religion (47); mainstream religion has also suffered from numerous "discomforts" such as cases of child molestation by clergy and controversial attitudes towards homosexuals, contraception and abortion as well as even women (161). In addition to these, the aforementioned fast-paced values of modern mass society have created a culture of individualism and disconnectedness from community that distances people from institutionalised religion. The old-fashioned, unchanging views may cause people to feel, as Hay and Nye suggest, that even Western formal religions no longer provide their spiritual roots with the confirmation they need (36).

However, it can be argued that this trend of secularisation and loss of interest to institutionalised religion is mostly a European phenomenon. Both Hay and Nye (162) as well as Richard Dawkins acknowledge that the United States, which was founded on secularism and the constitutional division and distinction of the state and church, is one of the most religious Western societies today, whereas Britain, with an established church headed by the monarch, is one of the least religious societies in the Western world[22]. Dawkins goes so far as to claim that in Britain, the "established church has become little more than a pleasant social pastime, scarcely recognizable as

[22] Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. London: Transworld Publishers, 2006, 61-63.

religious" (62), while "religious fanaticism is rampant in present-day America" (63). Despite Dawkins' distinct claims, it is also evident in the United States that people have lost their interest in mainstream religion on a larger scale. In fact, Hay and Nye point out that Americans have recently shown a similar interest in private spirituality distanced from institutional religion (162).

The decline of religious institutions in today's Western world, whether in the United States or in Britain, has not, according to Hay and Nye, prevented people from nurturing their spirituality. The public notion of spirituality may be that of a silenced, possibly even an embarrassing topic, but people are nevertheless concerned with their private spirituality, clearly favouring "personally adopted and eclectic" forms of spirituality that express their views and values and satisfy their need for spiritual experiences (161). This direction emphasises the striving for individuality in today's world, and shows that people are interested in spiritual matters despite the possible disappointments of mainstream religions. Indeed, Reinhold Niebuhr points out in Robert Coles' work that religious tradition may "successfully stifle a good deal of valuable and suggestive spiritual introspection"[23]. In today's modern world, people may feel best equipped for spiritual reflection without the distractive intervention of religious practices.

Despite the changes in modern society discussed above, there still remains the question of why is it so difficult to distinguish spirituality from religion, when people clearly seek ways to express their spirituality outside mainstream religious practices. When asked from an Evangelical Christian, for example, a spiritual experience could be explained as a moment of understanding or clarity that enhances their closeness to the spirit and to God; for an atheist, one kind of spiritual experience could happen for example in a situation where s/he goes through an understanding, or a change of perspective that improves his or her quality of life. Even if these portrayals of spiritual experiences might have similarities in them, it is likely that these people

[23] Coles, Robert. *The Spiritual Life of Children*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990, 278.

understand their experiences in a different way; both views are similar in a way, yet present different cultural and contextual perspectives.

One reason for the difficulty in distinguishing the concepts of spirituality and religion can be found in the way every-day life is presented by its cultural context; each culture has its own ways of explaining reality and, as Hay and Nye point out, Western culture has for centuries been explained via the language of Christianity (50). Spirituality is a concept that is relatively hard to explain, and therefore, when religious practice has been the prevailing mode of expressing spirituality, religious vocabulary has also provided people with an appropriate medium for conveying their thoughts about spirituality. Another reason for the close ties between religion and spirituality could be the importance of moral values and morality implicit in both concepts; a lot of people still associate morality with religion, perhaps owing to the abundance of references of religious literature to "the importance of love of one's neighbour, justice, honesty, and care for the poor" (Hay and Nye, 47). According to Coles, it is religions that are known best for "their insistence on upholding various moral principles and standards, for the reinforcement they offer to their adherents' consciences and to the culture of various nations" (109).

While it is true that many nations today are governed with strict religious conviction, it is just as important to remark that these nations are often internationally seen as controversial in terms of human rights, for example. When looking at the nations this thesis focuses on, namely the United States and Britain, the situation is very different. It is true that the United States often ignores its constitutional division of the state and church, but these moral values have existed and will continue to do so outside religious practices and communities as well, and are not by any means tied to the level of religiosity the citizen expresses. The established and esteemed morals and values present in human societies throughout history would be valued as such most likely even without the consolidating effects of religious literature.

2.3 Spirituality and Education

Spirituality, with its extensive definitions as well as its difficult relationship with religion, is an important characteristic of modern Western society's educational culture. In the United States, religious education is not allowed in public schools, whereas in England religion is a subject of which only private schools are allowed to decide for themselves. It is worth mentioning that when it comes to religious or spiritual education in Britain, the system is mostly similar. However, as the school systems differ somewhat in England and Scotland, this thesis will be referring to England as the main object of study in order to avoid misunderstandings. In many cases, however, religious education does not mean the indoctrination of certain religious beliefs and practices it still used to mean in the mid-twentieth century, but rather an overview of different world religions and their philosophies. It is nevertheless worth remarking that in most English state schools, religion is taught from a predominantly Christian viewpoint, emphasising the Christian tradition, with some state schools providing education from a Catholic or Jewish point of view[24]. In addition to that, there are of course private schools that teach religion according to their chosen beliefs and doctrines.

When discussing children and education, religion can raise heated debate over its appropriateness in the school environment. Often it is seen that spiritual education equals religious education, and this can be true in case the teacher does not view them as separate or at least two overlapping concepts. However, the term 'spiritual education' is widely used, for as Jacqueline Watson argues, "the words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' are thought to be useful in education because they suggest a quality shared by all humanity and not necessarily tied to that more disputatious word 'religion'"[25]. This term provides a better description of what this kind of education involves; it is not merely concerned with different religions, but also deals with the many aspects of humanity and what it is to be part of this world in a broader sense.

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[24] Office of Public Sector Information. "Education Reform Act 1988" c.40, 8(3). Available from http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/ukpga_19880040_en_2. [Accessed 29 March 2008]

[25] Watson, Jacqueline. "Whose Model of Spirituality Should Be Used in the Spiritual Development of School Children?". *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, Vol. 5, No.1, 2000, 96.

When it comes to spiritual education in England today, Watson argues that it is based in "naturalistic and humanistic understandings of spirituality" (97), and this is well in line with the notion of today's English society being a secularised, humanistic society in which traditional religion has less foothold. As Watson points out, the educational model in England is labelled secular and humanist for clear reasons: the themes of God and the supernatural are not widely discussed, and the model "values and celebrates humanity in and for itself" (98). This is certainly a model that elicits concern from different religious groups, but is nevertheless the most practical and acceptable model on a larger scale, especially in a society as multicultural as England is today. In the United States, debates over which model of education to use are irrelevant as the constitution prohibits all education concerning religions in public schools and therefore religious instruction is not part of the curriculum[26]. In public schools, theories of evolution are widely taught in several states, but religious teaching lies wholly in the hands of either private schools run by religious groups, or those parents who choose to home school their children.

Spiritual education is not, however, a straightforward concept when it comes to providing children with a means of making sense of their own spirituality, let alone that of others. According to Watson, the English model of education, being secular and humanist, is based on the assumption that spiritual development occurs outside all religious context, and therefore universal methods can be used to develop the spiritual side of any student regardless of their faith, as faith does not matter in this regard (100). This is, however, an interesting claim considering the fact that religious education in England is by law based on Christianity. Watson's suggestion is hard to confirm without closer knowledge on the English educational issues, but it is worth considering whether she means the entire educational system or merely the current mode of spiritual and religious education. If we look at a definition provided by Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude (205-

[26] U.S. Department of State. "A Diverse Educational System" in *InfoUSA*. Available from http://usinfo.state.gov/infousa/education/overview/ch6.html. [Accessed 29 March 2008]

206), it is evident how they appoint the notion of spiritual development a slightly more mediating task:

> Spiritual development is the process of growing the intrinsic capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental "engine" that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices.

Whereas Watson concludes that spiritual education in today's English schools overlooks the idea of the religious cultural context of the child playing a part in the child's general spiritual development, Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude include the religious traditions and beliefs of a person in their idea of how spiritual development is shaped. But they also note that it is not only through religious practice that spirituality should be introduced in education; it is a good median between Watson's findings and those of Andrew Wright. Cited in Watson's essay, he claims that the task of spiritual education is to nurture the child "into the specific spiritual tradition they bring with them to the classroom" (99). He therefore states that since there are several different nuances of spirituality owing to, for example, differing religious beliefs, all these must be represented and taken into account in the practices of spiritual education. Wright's view is a stark contrast to the aforementioned view currently favoured in England today, for it is nearly impossible for the teacher to specifically take into consideration all the different attitudes and traditions that children in today's multicultural English classroom express. On the one hand, it does not seem plausible to overlook the fact that different children entertain different spiritual and religious beliefs that affect their learning and understanding of the spiritual aspects of education, yet on the other hand it seems equally impossible to try and accommodate all these different beliefs in the education situation in one classroom. Nevertheless, the key task would be to find a median between the two extremes rather than to decide on which one to use.

There have been several attempts at defining the concept of spirituality so far, but none of the explanations have offered to specify the origin of spirituality in humans. Where does

spirituality come from, or is it something humans possess from the beginning, as an innate quality? As has been stated earlier, spiritual as well as religious development, is context-bound, that is, the cultural and social context people live in shapes their understanding, attitudes and views. In this light, it is clear that children's spirituality is also a characteristic shaped by the society, but in which way? Hay and Nye argue that children are born with an "innate spiritual potential", deciding that spirituality is a characteristic biologically built into all humans (63). Therefore spirituality must be a completely different concept from that of religion, as religion is not innate in humans; it is an idea with specified beliefs and practices that is learned in the socio-cultural environment, mostly through one's own parents. Many children grow up in close contact with religion and thus learn to live according to it, but it is by no means a quality or a characteristic they possess right from birth.

Children are often naturally open to experiences and ideas, and thus spirituality can be something a child potentially absorbs easily. Children are not initially prejudiced or narrow-minded, at least not before the social context they grow up in turns them into such people. Crompton raises the question whether children start their lives as "spiritually complete" human beings or whether they are "blank sheets" on which the society writes their ideals and attitudes, wondering whether the child is most open to spiritual experiences precisely because s/he has not yet developed the inhibitions that humans learn through their social context (36-37). The same idea is presented by Hay and Nye, who claim that the attitudes and views of today's modern society are destructive to a child's spiritual awareness (63).

Is it then that children are spiritually aware from early on, just closing off this quality as they grow older, or is it that children start as empty canvases on which the society paints its ideals? It is however important to keep in mind that both Crompton and Hay and Nye discuss religious awareness in the same context, which would make the theory of children as blank spaces more valuable, despite the rather more alluring idea of children's innate ability to embrace spirituality. For example, Hay and Nye state that due to the secular nature of Western culture,

children receive vast scientific education from early on and this fuels their religious scepticism, inhibiting their spiritual awareness (57). Here again spirituality is closely linked to religion, leaving the difference between them vague as is the case almost throughout the literary sources examined for this thesis. But if one looks at the definitions that do see these as mostly separate concepts, it would thus be noteworthy that even if a child embraces his or her spiritual side, it does not mean that the child also embraces or practices religion.

As has been mentioned earlier, Western societies have witnessed a decline in institutionalised religion and along with it the reluctance to publicly expressed spirituality. This pattern of cultural condition has also influenced children, for they are often sensitive to their environment and thus can feel that their "emerging spirituality is unwelcome or thought to be of little value" (Hay and Nye, 122). In studies and research on children's spirituality conducted by Hay and Nye, they found that many children turned inwards with their spirituality for fear of being ridiculed or embarrassed, and children also recognised their spirituality having changed as they grew older. The growing knowledge and experience base of children meant that they felt less "gullible" and less likely to "entertain all kinds of extraordinary ideas", and therefore their interest in spiritual matters lessened considerably (125). Naturally, many children can also feel that gaining knowledge and experience on life strengthens their confidence in their spiritual side, regardless of the social pressure.

The problem in looking at studies on children's spirituality is the point of view and research taken by the researcher, that is, whether the researcher entertains religious or secular views of the world him/herself. This is relevant because religious as well as atheist views tend to show through from otherwise academic writing. In Coles' studies on children's spirituality, the value of his studies is undermined by the fact that he does little to distinguish religiousness from being spiritual, perhaps due to his own religious conviction. Indeed, he himself states that he did not intend to include in his studies children from families with agnostic or atheist background (278),

and this inevitably lessens the influence of his research, for it seems to be done with a specific, premeditated outcome in mind. Though he attempts to describe spirituality, it is clearly connected to religion as he seems to talk about religious aspects of children's lives most of the time. For example, he points out that "the entire range of children's mental life can and does connect with their religious and spiritual thinking", claiming thus that all children consider religious teachings when contemplating moral issues in their life.

3 *CHARLOTTE'S WEB*: CONCENTRATING ON THE SECULAR

> "Where's Papa going with that ax?" said Fern to her mother as they were setting the table for breakfast.
> "Out to the hoghouse," replied Mrs. Arable. "Some pigs were born last night."
> "I don't see why he needs an ax," continued Fern, who was only eight.
> "Well, "said her mother, "one of the pigs is a runt. It's very small and weak, and it will never amount to anything. So your father has decided to do away with it." (*CW*, 1)

The attitude towards death in *Charlotte's Web* is remarkably realistic right from the first page. Life on the Arables' farm is like on any other farm in the United States in the 1950s with hard work, feeding and taking care of animals and living close to nature. Farm animals are needed not only for labour, but also to provide food and nourishment, and therefore it is natural that some of the animals are killed in this purpose. Despite Fern's strong opposition to killing the runt pig and the later outcome of this resistance, this course of action is provided for the reader as a normal and reasonable part of life on the farm. And indeed it is seen as normal in life; many animals are considered helpful to humans in many ways, but they are still only animals, and therefore their death is not as significant as a human death would be. However, in *Charlotte's Web*, death seems to take on an attitude of more universal importance, whether it had to do with humans or animals, and this is perhaps meant to show children that all living things live and die, irrespective of their role in the society.

The importance of death in *Charlotte's Web* is tied closely with the importance of life in a sense that death is portrayed very much as a final rest after succeeding in tasks that life provided. Charlotte is getting old and weary, but she wants to help her friend so that she will be able look back at her life and know she did something meaningful:

> "You have been my friend," replied Charlotte. "That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what's life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that." (*CW*, 164)

Charlotte portrays a very easy attitude to death, as Sue Misheff demonstrates: "Charlotte's earthy and realistic explanation of life and death is a tribute to the way she has prepared Wilbur for her demise"[27]. Charlotte understands the natural cycle of life and death, and is wise enough to educate Wilbur in this matter as well. An important part of the natural life cycle is also communicated to the child reader in that Charlotte is growing old and therefore nearing death, while Wilbur is still a very young pig and thus his time to die is not supposed to arrive yet. In this respect *Charlotte's Web* presents death as an event that occurs only to the old and weary, and does not deal with the idea that death can really happen prematurely. The fact that Wilbur is saved only shows the reader that premature death can be avoided by taking necessary measures, but this does not prepare the child to the reality where these measures are not always possible at all.

Although a spider's natural life span is shorter than that of a pig or a human, Charlotte is shown to live a full life and die simply because she has grown old and weak. But her calm attitude in facing imminent death conveys another issue present in *Charlotte's Web*; that of making one's life useful in order to be able to die peacefully:

> Up overhead, in the shadows of the ceiling, Charlotte crouched unseen, her front legs encircling her egg sac. Her heart was not beating as strongly as usual and she felt weary and old, but she was sure at last that she had saved Wilbur's life, and she felt peaceful and contented. (*CW*, 151-153)

Charlotte's contentedness in the face of her approaching death shows the child reader that dying need not be scary, and that dying is a natural part of completing the task people as well as animals have on this planet, no matter what that is. Gilbert Meilaender argues for this same approach to death, saying that "there comes a time when one is satiated with life, and at that point death is the natural culmination of life"[28]. This feeling of completing one's task in life comes to Charlotte in saving Wilbur from premature death, and therefore she is not afraid of dying, knowing she did

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[27] Misheff, Sue. "Beneath the Web and Over the Stream: The Search for Safe Places in *Charlotte's Web* and *Bridge to Terabithia*". *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol.29, No.3, 1998, 136.
[28] Meilaender, Gilbert. "Mortality: The Measure of Our Days". *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life*, Vol.2, No.10, 1991, 18.

something meaningful during her life. Charlotte is also shown to fulfil her biological role by delivering the eggs and therefore ensuring the continuation of her species. As she has saved Wilbur and also produced the next generation of spiders, she has fulfilled her role both in spiritual and biological terms and can thus die contented.

3.1 Death as a Fact of Life

In many ways, *Charlotte's Web* represents a very secular, humanist approach to the difficult issue of death, and this can be seen as a slightly surprising take on the issue – which in itself was often seen as a taboo – considering that the novel was written in 1952. At that time, religion was still much more clearly present in the society than it is today. But as Peter Hunt points out, the fact that difficult issues such as death were brought out in children's literature was "paralleled by a decline in the influence of religion", and this decline was evident in the field of children's literature especially in the 1950s and 60's[29]. Although the decline was most likely not as steep in the more rural small-town America, the society was nevertheless witnessing changes in the general attitudes, and this gives an interesting framework for White's approach on the difficult topic. The Second World War was also still in recent memory, and at this time children were much more informed about the war than they were during and after the First World War[30], and this affected children's views on death profoundly. According to Mitchell, after the war children had a powerful desire for "the wild joys of living", and there was no place in their thoughts for death as a release from the earthly suffering or as a gateway to immortal life (149). This attitude is also present in *Charlotte's Web*, where death is uncommon and frightening for the young but understandable and acceptable for the old.

Although the general, everyday presence of religion can be found from the text, it has no role in the way death is introduced to the reader, and this provides an interesting topic to look at

[29] Hunt, Peter. *An Introduction to Children's Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 35.
[30] Mitchell, Marjorie Editha. *The Child's Attitude to Death*. New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1967, 145.

more closely. It is important to bear in mind that literature is always a product of its time and culture and vice versa; Hunt also argues for this in saying that "the printed word inevitably plays a part . . . in shaping as well as reflecting society" (164). The way death is depicted conveys the attitudes toward and customs of a certain era involving death, and White wrote *Charlotte's Web* right after the Second World War, when the brutal realism of the war certainly must have influenced the importance of religion and faith on a general level. However, *Charlotte's Web* has a strong sense of fantasy in it in the sense that Fern is able to enter this realm where she can understand the animals talking to each other, and according to John Rowe Townsend (in Hunt, 167), realistic children's writing has been the "dominant mode" in American fiction since the Second World War. In this respect, *Charlotte's Web* can be viewed as differing from the mainstream children's literature, but it is still worth mentioning that notwithstanding the fantastical element of talking animals, *Charlotte's Web* is very realistic in its tone.

The post-war realism can be seen clearly present in the novel and the need for security and hope springs from the small details, as from the early portrayal of the barn: "It smelled of the perspiration of tired horses and the wonderful sweet breath of patient cows. It often had a sort of peaceful smell – as though nothing bad could happen ever again in the world" (*CW*, 13). This peaceful barn is far from the horrors of war, but the humanist approach to death is nevertheless clearly influenced by it. In fact, death is also approached from the point of view of taking a life, as Charlotte explains how she feeds herself. At first, Wilbur is shocked to learn that Charlotte kills other insects in order to eat, but as he learns to know Charlotte more, his view changes:

> Wilbur liked Charlotte better and better each day. Her campaign against insects seemed sensible and useful. Hardly anybody around the farm had a good word to say for a fly. Flies spent their time pestering others. The cows hated them. The horses detested them. The sheep loathed them. Mr. and Mrs. Zuckerman were always complaining about them, and putting up screens. (*CW*, 48)

This is a rather interesting representation of the justification of killing and death, as it seems to argue that causing death is acceptable when taking the life of an unpleasant nuisance. To some

extent, this could also be associated with the post-war attitude where the killing of enemies is explained and justified in this way to a child. It is also, perhaps first and foremost, a portrayal of how nature functions; how other animals need to die in order for other animals to get nourishment and survive.

The explanation of how nature and animals function provides, however, a small contradiction when it comes to justifying death. When Wilbur learns that the humans are going to eat him at Christmas and questions Charlotte about the truth, Charlotte answers that killing Wilbur is "also the dirtiest trick I ever heard of. What people don't think of!" (*CW*, 51). This seems confusing, since Charlotte's killing insects is presented as acceptable whereas humans killing pigs would not be, even when both are used for nourishment. These contradictory justifications can be confusing to a child reader trying to form an understanding of what is right and wrong, especially when it comes to a subject as difficult as causing death. However, it is worth mentioning that Charlotte needs to eat insects in order to survive because spiders are constructed that way, whereas humans do not need to eat pigs to survive, only to accommodate a desire for a certain kind of nourishment.

Religious aspects are missing from the depiction of death in *Charlotte's Web* also in a sense that death is viewed purely in secular means, without the religious vocabulary and beliefs intended to bring comfort and relief. Charlotte's death is, in fact, shown to be quite the opposite of comforting:

> She never moved again. Next day, as the Ferris wheel was being taken apart and the race horses were being loaded into vans and the entertainers were packing up their belongings and driving away in their trailers, Charlotte died. The Fair Grounds were soon deserted. The sheds and buildings were empty and forlorn. The infield was littered with bottles and trash. Nobody, of the hundreds of people that had visited the Fair, knew that a grey spider had played the most important part of all. No one was with her when she died. (*CW*, 171)

Charlotte dies alone, at a deserted fairground. In this depiction of Charlotte's last moments, as Meilaender points out, "we do not fail to hear the loneliness, the sadness, and the drabness of death"

(14), and this is a rather discomforting picture to convey to a child reader whose understanding of the world can still be somewhat limited. Death is stripped of all the alleviating imagery and euphemisms, and instead it is shown to be lonely and sad. Euphemistic explanations at a moment like Charlotte's death might relieve some of the emotional impact for the child, but as Slaughter argues, such comments and imagery are harmful for children's understanding since "it is clear that they would serve only to reinforce a non-biological understanding of death as sleeping or as living on elsewhere, and therefore they would be likely to generate confusion and concern in young children" (184). Although Charlotte's death may seem distressing to the child reader, it is nevertheless a realistic portrayal of how death often occurs, and therefore it is far more important to give the child accurate information in order to ensure that the child develops a healthy understanding of an issue as grave as death.

Some passages in the text can, however, be rather confusing to a child reader in the sense of developing this healthy understanding of death, despite the overall attention paid to the portrayal of death. For example, as Charlotte is reassuring the agitated Wilbur, she says: "Wilbur – nothing to worry about. Maybe you'll live forever – who knows?" (142). In another example, Wilbur is desperate about the fate of Charlotte and cries out "I will die of a broken heart" (167). These kinds of remarks can potentially be very confusing if the young reader does not fully comprehend the concepts such as of the universality and causality of death, as Slaughter pointed out in the previous paragraph. However, according to Piagetian scholarship concerning the age at which children develop a sufficiently mature understanding of the different components of the concept of death, most children should be able to grasp the idea of the universality of death around the age of 7 (Speece and Brent, 1679), and causality is likely to be understood roughly at the same age. Therefore it can be assumed that most young readers of *Charlotte's Web* should be able to understand the underlying idea behind these remarks, but as the process of cognitive development is

still very individual, some children may not have the mental tools needed to understand what they read, therefore possibly being misled by these remarks.

Another slightly puzzling passage in *Charlotte's Web* is the beginning of the novel, when Fern learns that her father is about to go end the life of the little pig which later receives the name Wilbur, and she tries to prevent his father from doing this:

> Tears ran down her cheeks and she took hold of the ax and tried to pull it out of her father's hand.
> "Fern," said Mr. Arable. "I know more about raising a litter of pigs than you do. A weakling makes trouble. Now run along!"
> "But it's unfair," cried Fern. "The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? If *I* had been very small at birth, would you have killed *me*?"
> Mr. Arable smiled. "Certainly not," he said, looking down at his daughter with love. "But this is different. A little girl is one thing, a little runty pig is another."
> "I see no difference," replied Fern, still hanging on to the ax. "This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of." (*CW*, 3)

This might convey a very confusing message to the child reader, being told that causing the death of a little animal is different from causing the death of a little girl. Of course, this was part of the reality on a rural farm in the 1950s and still is for the most part today, but nevertheless the passage informs the child that the importance of the lives of animals and humans can be distinguished in one way or the other. In their research, scholars have found that children whose understanding of the components of death was still in the process of developing were not always consistent in their notions of human life when compared to animal life[31]. Therefore this kind of remark in the novel might lead the child readers into misconstruing their ideas about the importance of life, whether it was that of animals or humans.

In addition to the confusing distinction between animals and humans, there is another interesting point visible in the previously quoted passage. Fern, as an eight-year-old, portrays remarkable maturity in her defensive argument; being able to reason in the way she does shows the ability to develop abstract thinking, and when it comes to the theories of cognitive development, this kind of ability is often seen to appear in children clearly older than her. According to Piaget's

[31] Bering, Jesse M. and David F. Bjorklund. "The Natural Emergence of Reasoning About the Afterlife as a Developmental Regularity". *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2004, 217.

research, children do not develop the ability to employ abstract thought and reason before the approximate age of eleven or twelve years (in Deveau, 58), and in this light Fern's argument is a special kind for a girl of her age.

The humanist approach to death is further reinforced with the fact that there is no realisation of any kind of an afterlife in *Charlotte's Web*, nor is there any information given about what happens after death. This is a rather unexpected view adopted in a children's novel in the 1950s, despite the decline in the importance of religion present in the post-war era. Although faith was generally self-evident in American families of the time and this is also visible in *Charlotte's Web*, it has not been extended to cover the concept of death or afterlife in the novel. Margaret P. Esmonde claims that "no realistic novelist has attempted to describe "what happens next." In this totally secular age, the hereafter, so familiar to our ancestors, has become a *terra incognita*"[32], and in this respect White's novel is no different[33]. But as there is and can be no ultimate or proven truth about what happens after death, it seems far-fetched to even try and formulate an answer to a question like that in humanistic terms. Esmonde also argues that "the secular mainstream has either kept death off limits for children's books or trivialized it" (33), but here *Charlotte's Web* differs significantly from Esmonde's views with its clear and forthright take on death.

Lacking the notion of the afterlife, *Charlotte's Web* nevertheless presents a comforting idea of Charlotte's children and grandchildren continuing her legacy:

> As time went on, and the months and years came and went, he was never without friends. . . . But Charlotte's children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, year after year lived in the doorway. Each spring there were new little spiders hatching out to take the place of the old. Most of them sailed away, on their balloons. But always two or three stayed and set up housekeeping in the doorway. (*CW*, 183)

[32] Esmonde, Margaret P. "Beyond the Circles of the World: Death and the Hereafter in Children's Literature" in *Webs and Wardrobes – Humanist and Religious World Views in Children's Literature*. Eds. Joseph O'Beirne Milner and Lucy Floyd Morcock Milner. Boston: University Press of America, 1987, 35.

[33] Astrid Lindgren, whose children's novels were for the most part very realistic, has portrayed a version of an afterlife in her novel *The Brothers Lionheart* (1973) and in this respect Esmonde's claim can be questioned. However, Lindgren's vision of an afterlife cannot be accredited with being realistic in a humanistic sense as it is based on fantasy.

This idea of Charlotte living on in her descendants is a rather comforting view and something that is easy to understand even to a young reader. The memory of Charlotte is kept alive with her offspring, and even without any implications about resurrection or the afterlife, this provides the reader with a sufficient basis for feeling comforted in the face of her death:

> Wilbur and the reader are offered solace in the ongoing essence of Charlotte in the five-hundred-odd newborns that Wilbur awaits so longingly and greets so lovingly. Wilbur himself is a part of Charlotte's eternal life in that he carries her memory and, even more essentially, replicates in his loving gesture, the most basic character of their relationship. This very human perpetuation and the prospect that Charlotte is, in the decay of death, returning to a more fundamental relationship with the eternal quality of Nature, are the best hopes White offers for a life beyond life.[34]

This is a sufficient way to treat death and the afterlife in a humanistic and realistic manner, and in accordance with the rest of the novel. Providing the young reader with a more religious reading at the end, for example, would have been in stark contrast with the basic tone of the novel, and despite most likely rousing heated discussion in the United States when it was published, *Charlotte's Web* has perhaps remained popular exactly for this reason. Lewis notices this same notion of the continuation of life, pointing out how "an individual sees himself as continuing in his children; they not only continue his life in a genetic sense but they also remember him" (202). In this sense, the detail of Fern becoming interested in Henry might be important in the novel; even if the child readers would not yet understand the details of reproduction, they have realised that a man and a woman is needed to produce babies. Fern and Henry's evolving interest in each other in the novel is thus a suggestion that the next generation will arrive in due time.

The essential aspect of *Charlotte's Web* is growing, and with this comes the maturing understanding of death as well. Wilbur starts as an immature, innocent little pig in the novel, much in the same way as his initial caretaker, Fern who is eight years old. During the course of the novel, the child reader can experience the same kind of maturing along with Wilbur who grows up and develops a better understanding of life and especially death under the supervision of Charlotte, who

[34] O'Beirne Milner, Joseph. "When Worlds Collide: The Humanist-Religious Ethos in Children's Literature" in *Webs and Wardrobes – Humanist and Religious World Views in Children's Literature*. Eds. Joseph O'Beirne Milner and Lucy Floyd Morcock Milner. Boston: University Press of America, 1987, 5.

takes on the parental role in the novel. She is also the educator, especially when it comes to interpreting to the child reader how nature functions, as in the passage where Charlotte explains to Wilbur the way she survives:

> I am not entirely happy about my diet of flies and bugs, but it's the way I'm made. A spider has to pick up a living somehow or other, and I happen to be a trapper. I just naturally build a web and trap flies and other insects. My mother was a trapper before me. Her mother was a trapper before her. All our family have (sic) been trappers. Way back for thousands and thousands of years we spiders have been laying for flies and bugs. (*CW*, 39)

This is an important lesson for the child reader about the workings of nature, and at the same time provides an explanation for causing death in the animal world in a way. Although Wilbur begins to understand this, he is not able to deal with the information that he might be killed for Christmas, for he is still young and immature, and death is a frightening idea to him:

> Wilbur burst into tears. "I don't *want* to die," he moaned. "I want to stay alive, right here in my comfortable manure pile with all my friends. I want to breathe the beautiful air and lie in the beautiful sun."
> "You're certainly making a beautiful noise," snapped the old sheep.
> "I don't want to die!" screamed Wilbur, throwing himself to the ground.
> "You shall not die," said Charlotte, briskly.
> "What? Really?" cried Wilbur. "Who's going to save me?"
> "I am," said Charlotte. (*CW*, 51)

To Wilbur death is a frightening idea, but just as the young reader, he understands that because he is still very young, he should not be facing death in the near future. For most children death is very much unknown, and therefore it can also be frightening, and this is manifested in Wilbur's character. Although children may have experienced death in their lives by losing, for example, a grandparent or a family pet, it is nevertheless a topic that can never be fully known.

3.2 Spirituality and Religion in *Charlotte's Web*

As has been mentioned earlier, *Charlotte's Web* has a very secular point of view when it comes to representing death. Despite this lack of spirituality when it comes to death, there are still moments where aspects of religion and spirituality are evident, and therefore it is also interesting to look at

the overall attitude to religion and spirituality present in the novel, and consider this in retrospect as a product of the 1950s. Having said that, it is again important to note that in most cases, scholars have found it extremely difficult to distinguish religion and spirituality in a sufficient way. However, a very clearly differentiated definition was documented in Crompton's work, and this provides hope that religion and spirituality can be treated as different concepts. In fact, in *Charlotte's Web* there are occasions when religion is not manifested although there would be perfect opportunity for that. For example, when Charlotte's words start appearing on her web and people come to see it, it is seen as a miracle but there is absolutely no mention of it being a sign from God. In fact, at the county fair it is looked at from an almost scientific point of view:

> "Many of you will recall that never-to-be-forgotten day last summer when the writing appeared mysteriously on the spider's web in Mr. Zuckerman's barn, calling the attention of all and sundry to the fact that this pig was completely out of the ordinary. This miracle has never been fully explained, although learned men have visited the Zuckerman pigpen to study and observe the phenomenon. In the last analysis, we simply know that we are dealing with supernatural forces here, and we should all feel proud and grateful." (*CW,* 157)

The writing on the web has been analysed as a scientific phenomenon, and as this has provided no answer to the mystery, the conclusion is that supernatural forces must be behind this event. In the United States of the 1950s, a religious reading of the situation could have seemed like the most presumable course of action. However, as White's novel represents a very non-religious attitude otherwise, it might have been dangerous to claim an animal's work to be God's work. So when Mr. Zuckerman has told the minister about the first word appearing on the web, he assumes a slightly more cautious view: "Don't tell anybody else," said the minister. "We don't know what it means yet, but perhaps if I give thought to it, I can explain it in my sermon next Sunday." (82) Later on, the minister has come to a conclusion: "On Sunday the church was full. The minister explained the miracle. He said that the words on the spider's web proved that human beings must always be on the watch for the coming of wonders." (85)

There is a more spiritual feeling to this passage, and this reflects the general attitude of the 1950s in a more pronounced way than the rest of the novel. Reading and interpreting literature is naturally a very subjective experience, so it is also possible that White had intended to convey a completely different message with his words, especially since he has not incorporated religious aspects in his representation of death in the novel. However, in this part of the novel it is more evident that White did not wish to take a risk with his otherwise advanced views. In the United States of the 1950s, religious education being prohibited in public schools was a topic that generated plenty of discussion in the society. American education in the 1950s created a lot of turmoil because of opposing views on cultural norms and ideological conflicts over religion and spirituality[35], and while he was rather cautious with the religious allusions in that particular passage of the novel, White's general non-religious take on death is most likely one reason for *Charlotte's Web* being so popular in schools both in the 1950s and during the following decades.

In a way, *Charlotte's Web* can be seen as an example of how religion started to lose ground in the society especially after the World Wars. Realism was prevalent in the everyday life of those affected by the wars, but nevertheless White clearly wanted to maintain a positive attitude of hope for the future for the children to see. Although institutionalised religion was declining, White presented in his novel a world where spirituality was still an important part of life, and he saw this as most evident in children. However, it is interesting that this realisation in the novel comes in the form of an adult, when Mrs. Arable is sceptical about the sign on the web:

> "Still, I don't understand how those words got into the web. I don't understand it, and I don't like what I can't understand."
> "None of us do," said Dr. Dorian, sighing. "I'm a doctor. Doctors are supposed to understand everything. But I don't understand everything, and I don't intend to let it worry me."
> Mrs. Arable fidgeted. "Fern says the animals talk to each other. Dr. Dorian, do you believe animals talk?"
> "I never heard one say anything," he replied. "But that proves nothing. It is quite possible that an animal has spoken civilly to me and that I didn't catch the remark because I wasn't paying attention. Children pay better attention than grownups. If

[35] Wright, Elliott A. "Religion in American Education". *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 81, No. 1, 1999. No pagination.

> Fern says that the animals in Zuckerman's barn talk, I'm quite ready to believe her." (*CW*, 110)

Mrs. Arable seems like a typical adult, with the attitude that all things in life have to be explained in some reasonable terms, and therefore she feels uneasy about those that cannot be explained. Naturally, the fact that animals talk in *Charlotte's Web*, and also the fact that Fern seems to be the only human who can hear them, can always be discredited on the assumption that children often have a vivid imagination, and talking animals are barely an aspect of fantasy that feeds this imagination. O'Beirne Milner argues along these lines in his article on *Charlotte's Web*, claiming that "the humanist world feels that the imagination is the "necessary angel" which has had to hold the ground left by faltering religion in a world of science" (3), and therefore the fantasy aspects in the novel would only serve to fuel children's imaginations when religion no longer provides faith in and marvel at things that cannot be explained.

It is, however, also possible to see the events in *Charlotte's Web* in the light of White crediting children for being more open to things unknown and unexplained; although Wilbur is afraid of death and learns to accept it through maturing, the attitude throughout the novel seems to be that children are more in touch with their spiritual side. Hay and Nye argued for this in stating that children often "emerge from infancy with a simplicity that is richly open to experience, only to close off their awareness as they become street-wise" (33), claiming that children are naturally more spiritual before this side in them is often suppressed by the society around them. White seems to have realised this ability in children to accept even the things they cannot understand, but also shows the reader that it is possible to maintain the same view on life even as an adult:

> "Do you understand how there could be any writing in a spider's web?"
> "Oh, no," said Dr. Dorian. "I don't understand it. But for that matter I don't understand how a spider learned to spin a web in the first place. When the words appeared, everyone said they were a miracle. But nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle." (*CW*, 108-109)

Dr. Dorian is an example of an adult who has not lost his spiritual side in a world of science and reasoning, even as a highly educated person; he understands and accepts that there are things

science cannot explain, and especially that nature will always provide these unsolved mysteries. This is a clear example of the "appreciation and wonder at the natural world" as a core aspect of spirituality as defined by the British Humanist Association in Crompton's work (43). Children reading a novel such as *Charlotte's Web* will be most likely to appreciate the mysterious wonders of nature, and perhaps in some instances adults will as well.

Spirituality can also be seen to be present in Charlotte and Wilbur themselves. Hay and Nye offer a definition of spirituality where they state that spirituality is a matter of "self-transcendence", which means that we are required to "go beyond egocentricity to take account of our relatedness to other people, the environment and, for religious believers, God" (157). In this respect, both Charlotte and Wilbur demonstrate their spiritual maturity; Charlotte saves Wilbur from an imminent death with her own actions, and therefore shows that she is capable of self-transcendence as she puts her own comfort aside to care for Wilbur. In much the same way, Wilbur shows that he has grown to be a mature spiritual being and follows Charlotte's example as he looks after her egg sac and makes sure that the descendants have a good place to enter the world after Charlotte's death.

4 *SKELLIG*: COMBINING THE SPIRITUAL AND THE SECULAR

In *Skellig*, death is present everywhere. From the first page onwards, the word *death* is used very frequently, and it is used to describe everything around Michael, from plants and insects to the mood and people's appearances. Michael, experiencing a lot of anguish for his baby sister who is close to dying, seems to be so preoccupied with death that it has taken over his mind, and death dominates the way he sees things around him. There are also several allusions to death in the form of symbols, such as the constant portrayal of blackbirds and owls. In some mythologies, owls are considered a sign of wisdom and good luck, whereas some see it as a sign of imminent death and disease. The same applies to blackbirds, which are also seen as symbols of either good or bad luck[36]. For a more educated reader, the allusions introduce a deeper viewpoint as s/he wonders whether the birds bring good or bad news to the sick baby and Skellig. However, an average child reader will most likely not make the connection between death and the bird symbols in a broader sense, and therefore these will not be discussed further in the thesis.

The incessant use of the word *death* in various idioms and phrases is an interesting feature in the novel. Phrases such as "dead quiet" (4), "dead white" and "dead black" (11), "sick to death of everything" (18), and "dead hours" (142) all make use of the ambiguity of the word *dead*: for example, *dead black* hair is at the same time *completely black* and *dead white* face looks like death literally, making Michael seem like in awe of the little baby while at the same time very preoccupied with her possible death. In the other phrases, the literal meaning of *death* is present as well, while also been used to signify for example a certain kind of quietness or the nature of the hours during the night. The word in itself is clearly brought closer to the child reader, perhaps to

[36] "Blackbird" in *Wikipedia.* Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackbird#In_culture
"Owl" in *Wikipedia.* Available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Owl#Relationship_with_humans [Accessed 28 April 2008] The symbolic value of the owl has been utilized for example by Margaret Craven: The title of her novel *I Heard the Owl Call My Name* (1967) refers to the West Coast Indian belief that hearing the owl call one's name informs of one's own impending death.

introduce *death* as simply a word and thus to alleviate the frightening notion of it. But there are certain passages in the novel that may also confuse the young reader: Mina tells Michael that her father has died, and says that he is now watching them from Heaven (50). In another passage, Skellig is in pain and pleads with the children to let him sleep, and let him go home (94).

Both of these situations recall a religious reading, and both notions – watching from heaven and going home as an allusion to dying – are very abstract as well. Most children in the age of the assumed reading audience are, according to Piagetian studies, not yet in the stage of their cognitive development where they would understand abstract expressions. Therefore the notions of watching from heaven and going home meaning dying are most likely to cause confusion in the child reader, as they are not in line with the rest of the novel's attitude on death and dying. Slaughter, for example, warns that ambiguous and abstract comments often serve only to fuel the children's misunderstanding of death and prevent them from fully realising the concept as a biological phenomenon (184). The idea of someone watching from heaven, for example, can prevent the child from realising the finality of the situation. For this reason it is an interesting detail in *Skellig* that these notions are included in the otherwise relatively realistic depiction of death; perhaps Almond included them in order to again blur the boundaries of spiritual and secular worlds present in the novel.

Another interesting aspect about the concept of death is presented on page 54. Michael has brought food and medicine for Skellig, and tells Skellig that he does not know what he is, asking him whether he is dead. "Yes. The dead are often known to eat 27 and 53 and to suffer from Arthur Itis", Skellig answers sarcastically. This provides an interesting question of why Almond depicted this conversation in *Skellig*; as Bering and Bjorklund also state, the idea that dead people do not perform concrete actions such as eating or drinking is one of the first parts of the nonfunctionality component of death that children grasp (218). Michael appears to be old enough to understand that, and thus this kind of a remark seems rather confusing. However, this dialogue

might simply represent Michael's puzzlement in front of this creature which he cannot explain in the scope of his own understanding, and he is asking such incoherent questions because he cannot make sense of what he sees.

4.1 Death as Unnatural

Naturally, Michael is very afraid that his baby sister might die. He is old enough to understand the possibility that she might not survive because of her condition, and yet at the same time he seems confused about the seriousness of the situation:

> I wondered if she was going to die. They'd been scared about that in the hospital. Before they let her come home she's been in a glass case with tubes and wires sticking in her and we'd stood around staring in like she was in a fish tank.
> I took my hand away and tucked the covers around her again. Her face was dead white and her hair was dead black. They'd told me I had to keep praying for her but I didn't know what to pray.
> "Hurry up and get strong if you're going to," I whispered. (*Skellig*, 11)

The hospital conditions clearly confuse him, and even when Michael looks at the baby, he sees death in how she looks like. The baby seems to represent death to Michael in all its scariness and unfairness, when it concerns someone of such a young age that they are not meant to die naturally. In his moments of despair he is almost certain that the baby will die, perhaps trying on several occasions in the novel to somehow make the entire situation seem easier for himself:

> "You're unhappy," she said. I stood there looking up at her.
> "The baby's back in the hospital," I said.
> She sighed. She gazed at a bird that was wheeling high above.
> "It looks like she's going to bloody die," I said. (*Skellig*, 40)

The fact that the baby is back in the hospital is in Michael's eyes a sign that the baby will die, and the way he announces this shows how the confusing feelings he has about death make him angry as well; perhaps for not being able to handle the situation in the scope of his understanding, but perhaps also for feeling inadequate for not being able to do anything to help. The illness and possible death of a young person – and especially a sibling – is a difficult task for a child

to understand, when often they believe that only old people die. After all, if the sibling dies young, the child may start to think that s/he might die young too, and become distressed and afraid of dying soon as well. To prevent this, Granot emphasises that it is vital that the child is provided accurate and clear explanations about the illness and the circumstances that lead or might lead to death (184).

For the child reader, death has not been made easy to handle. Michael's great distress over the situation is present everywhere, and the numerous allusions to dead plants and animals keep the topic constantly in the reader's mind. In addition to the close presence of death, it is made neither easy nor pleasant: there are dead pigeons turned to fossils after a long time inside the chimney (16), and Michael imagining Ernie Myers lying dead in his kitchen for a week before being found (2). Even if the child reader would understand the different components of death sufficiently, the realistic yet uncomfortable images might definitely confuse or bring distress to the reader. Michael's mood during the baby's operation brings no relief: "I closed my eyes. I wanted to imagine nothing. The baby was dead. Skellig was gone. The world that was left was ugly, cold, terrifying" (155). Michael sees the world after his sister's possible death as a sad and frightening place, and the child reader will most likely relate to his feelings throughout the novel and thus here as well. Michael is able to see how his life would change were the baby to die, and the reader is very likely to draw the same conclusions when perhaps looking at their own life.

At the same time as Michael's sister is fighting for her life in the hospital, Skellig is lying in the garage and refuses any help from Michael. When Michael tries to help him and keeps asking what he can do, Skellig wants nothing and tells him to go away (30). This different take on death clearly confuses Michael, as when he is working in their garden:

> Then I saw how close to the garage I had crawled and I thought of the man in there, how he just sat there, how he seemed to be just waiting to die.
> I stood up and went to the garage door. I stood listening. There was nothing but the usual scuttling and scratching.
> "You can't just sit there!" I called. "You can't just sit like you're waiting to die!" (*Skellig*, 47)

To Michael, Skellig's attitude on death seems very unnatural; while everything revolves around the doctors and nurses taking care of his sister and everything is done to prevent her death, at the same time Skellig does not want help and seems to wish for death. Here, the reader is shown a reality where not all people share the same ambition for life, and how different situations create different kind of appreciation for life and death. However, a child of perhaps 10 years old might not be able to understand why someone would want to die, and therefore be very confused about Skellig's initial attitude toward his own life. Skellig is badly crippled because of arthritis (56), and this makes him want to die, but the reader is shown a different, more positive take on illness and dying as well: the old lady Michael meets in the hospital is also suffering from arthritis, but her attitude is very positive and hopeful (65). Therefore the reader is provided with alternative options on how to look at life, and of course it is crucial to note that Skellig's view changes with the children's help as well.

In addition to feeling helpless in front of his sister's illness, there is another reason for Michael to feel angry about the baby sister being seriously ill and in danger of dying. Despite being older, he is also still a child and unable to accept the attention being only on his sister, and therefore he feels rejected:

> And then we fought, my dad and I, while we crunched burnt toast and swigged tepid tea.
> "No!" I yelled. "I won't go to school! Why should I? Not today!"
> "You'll do as you're bloody told! You'll do what's best for your mum and the baby!"
> "You just want me out of the way so you don't have to think about me and don't have to worry about me and you can just think about the bloody baby!"
> "Don't say bloody!"
> "It is bloody! It's bloody bloody bloody! And it isn't fair!" (*Skellig*, 143)

Michael's behaviour shows that he is not only angry at life being unfair for his sister, but also because he feels jealous for the baby getting all the attention of his parents. This kind of behaviour, however, is very common in families where a sibling has died or is gravely ill. As Elisabeth Kübler-Ross points out; many children can respond in a very negative way to the lavish attention their parents give only to the sick sibling, and "many brothers and sisters have wished their sick sibling

dead, just to get back to 'normal' life as they used to know it before the illness struck"[37]. Michael is clearly angry for the same reason, and is trying to communicate his anger and frustration to his father.

Another aspect of the fear of losing his sister is the anxiety Michael feels for his parents. He is afraid he is going to lose his sister, but also fears that his parents will abandon him as a result of the illness and possible death. In her work on bereaved children, Granot remarks that children who have lost a sibling often feel as they have also lost their parents who are distraught by their grief, and therefore "investing much less emotional effort in the remaining children" (130), and thus the siblings feel abandoned. The same situation can be applied to Michael's distress although the baby has not died, but she is in danger of dying and her serious condition cause the same kind of situation to the family's emotional life.

The uncomfortable closeness of death also causes Michael to ponder about it more than a normal boy of his age would most likely otherwise do, and he understands that this situation makes him very different from all the other children at school. For example, at school his teacher offers him a gumdrop, saying she gives them to new students when they feel sad:

> "Just for you," she whispered, and she winked.
> "No," I said. "No, thanks."
> And I ran back and did a brilliant sliding tackle on Coot. (*Skellig*, 14)

The teacher is making Michael feel special, and in this situation he does not want to be special perhaps because it reminds him of the ominous death looming above the family. An explanation for this kind of behaviour is provided by Granot: she argues that although children want people to recognise their suffering, they do not always want to be pitied or regarded as different by treating them specially (146), perhaps because this would prevent them from getting back to their normal life:

[37] Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Children and Death*. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1983, 68.

> I sat down in the lane with my back against the boarded-up garage. I just wanted them to go away. I wanted them to stay. I wanted to be able to play like I used to, I wanted things to be just the way they used to be. (*Skellig*, 102)

For Michael, his friends' treating him differently at school seems a constant reminder of how his life might change and already is changed because of the possible death of his sister, and he is not able to handle the changes he has already had to go through. Despite his understanding that death might occur, it is nevertheless an event that causes great distress for him because he is not able to process the feelings he has in an adequate way. This becomes clear in the various dreams he sees:

> I was with the baby. We were tucked up together in the blackbird's nest. Her body was covered in feathers and she was soft and warm. The blackbird was on the house roof, flapping its wings, squawking. Dr. MacNabola and Dr. Death were beneath us in the garden. They had a table filled with knives and scissors and saws. Dr. Death had a great syringe in his fist.
> "Bring her down!" he yelled. "We'll make her good as new!"
> The baby squealed in fright. She stood at the edge of the nest, flapping her wings, trying for the first time to fly. I saw the great bare patches on her skin: She didn't have enough feathers yet, her wings weren't strong enough yet. I tried to reach for her but my arms were hard and stiff as stone.
> "Go on!" the doctors yelled. They laughed. "Go on, baby! Fly!"
> Dr. MacNabola lifted a shining saw. She teetered on the brink. (*Skellig*, 82-83)

Michael clearly feels hopeless because his sister might die and he is not able to help her, yet at the same time he seems unable to trust in modern science and the doctors to cure her either. These kinds of feelings of frustration and helplessness are also common in addition to the jealousy and anger children may feel during a sibling's serious illness or death.

Because of the complex period in Michael's life, he is forced to reflect on the more serious issues of life and death. Despite his occasional manifestations of inexperience and inability to process these difficult issues, during the novel Michael shows his development and more mature ways of thinking, very much in the same way as Wilbur is seen to grow in *Charlotte's Web*. The child readers are rather inclined to relate to Michael during the reading process, and therefore are also invited to growing and developing their understanding of difficult issues such as death as they follow Michael's progress into a more mature adolescent. Kallistos Ware has compared this pattern of becoming more aware of death with the process of growing up; he is of the opinion that in order

for people to grow and develop into maturity they must accept the need for past things to die, because "it is precisely the death of the old that makes possible the emergence of fresh growth within ourselves, and without the death there would be no new life"[38]. In order for Michael – as well as the young reader – to understand the difficult period as an important part of his growing up, he must say goodbye to his child ways of thinking and accept the reality of death as part of life.

4.2 Spirituality and Religion in *Skellig*

Spirituality and religion are far more clearly present in *Skellig* when comparing to *Charlotte's Web*, but in a way that is neither preaching nor overtly subjective. At the beginning of the story, Michael is like any average school boy interested mostly of football and nothing else. However, in the course of the novel he begins to develop his views on life and the environment around him and this is greatly due to his new friend, Mina, whose background is very different from Michael. Mina is home-schooled, and this seems to form the essential part of the spiritual aspect in the novel. As has been stated earlier in this thesis, the curriculum in English schools includes religious education, but this does not entail a very religious point of view in teaching in general.

Michael's education in the novel focuses on the evolutionary theories, and he has learned to look at the world through the eyes of science. However, Mina's education – provided by her mother – has taught her about evolution but at the same time, she has been allowed to venture beyond that and search for other sources of understanding as well. As a result, she displays impressive maturity for a girl of her age:

> "My mother educates me," she said. "We believe that schools inhibit the natural curiosity, creativity, and intelligence if children. The mind needs to be opened out into the world, not shuttered down inside a gloomy classroom." (*Skellig*, 49)

[38] Ware, Kallistos. "Go Joyfully": The Mystery of Death and Resurrection" in *Beyond Death – Theological and Philosophical Reflections on Life After Death*. Eds. Dan Cohn-Sherbock and Christopher Lewis. London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1995, 30.

As memorised as this phrase sounds coming from a girl of approximately ten years old, she nevertheless portrays great maturity compared to her fellow children when it comes to her world views and the ability to assess her thinking. Later in the same conversation, she tells Michael that her father has died before she was born, and that he is now watching her and her mother from heaven, just to continue into further musings about the nature of human life:

> "Do you believe we're descended from apes?" I said.
> "Not a matter of belief," she said. "It's a proven fact. It's called evolution. You must know that. Yes, we are."
> She looked up from her book.
> "I would hope, though," she went on, "that we also have some rather more beautiful ancestors. Don't you?" (*Skellig*, 50)

Mina presents a remarkable ability to combine the two often clearly distinguished worlds of science and spirituality in a way that initially perplexes Michael.

However, Mina or her mother does not seem overtly religious; the idea that her father is in heaven is in fact one of the very rare occasions she portrays a clear allusion to religious thinking, in addition to the fact that both Mina and her mother seem to believe in angels. Despite angels being an essential part of Catholic faith, they are not represented in such an obvious way; Mina's mother refers to the poet William Blake who, according to the mother, "said we were surrounded by angels and spirits" and that perhaps all people could see them if they were more open and paid better attention (131-132). This does not evoke the feeling of strong religious belief, but more a spiritual awareness that allows for different readings. The fact that the novel brings in both Darwin and Blake represent the different angles of science and spirituality that are often found very incompatible in the modern Western society.

David Almond's rather clear take on formal school education and home-schooling is an interesting part of the novel. Elizabeth Bullen and Elizabeth Parsons also point to this aspect in their article, claiming that Mina epitomises Almond's critique towards mainstream school education: "In contrast to the strictly defined learning areas of conventional education systems, there is no separation between her learning of art and science, fiction and fact, faith and

empiricism"[39]. Mina seems to represent the desired outcome of schooling at its best, while Michael is the representative of a child whose spiritual potential would be repressed by the conventional school system were he not to find Skellig or befriend Mina. Almond's view of the educational system is supported by Hay and Nye, who point out that "for the older child, the explanations provided by education may imply that there are answers to everything, and displace or even repress the true mysteriousness of experience" (72). Michael has lost touch with the mysteriousness of life, and is only able to rediscover it with the help of Mina and Skellig.

Just as Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web*, Michael also grows up during the course of the novel, and his ability to view the world around him matures, and this is also a chance for the child reader to develop along with the characters as s/he reads the novel. For Michael, the major influence in his development is Mina, who is "not only more knowledgeable than other children her age, but enjoys a sense of passion and wonder at the world which Michael and his schoolmates are losing in the process of socialization via institutionalized education" (Bullen and Parsons, 141). But much to Michael's fortune, Mina's open-mindedness and willingness to accept the mysteries of life and nature eventually transform into his attitude as well. Because of her upbringing, Mina has been able to develop her spirituality and therefore is not overwhelmed by the unclear identity of Skellig:

> "What is he?" I said.
> "We can't know. Sometimes we just have to accept there are things we can't know. Why is your sister ill? Why did my father die?" She held my hand. "Sometimes we think we should be able to know everything. But we can't. We have to allow ourselves to see what there is to see, and we have to imagine." (*Skellig*, 140)

For Mina, like for Dr. Dorian in *Charlotte's Web* life is full of things science cannot explain, nor does she need these explanations in order to enjoy them. Her spirituality is very much in line with Twycross' ideas about spirituality, where humans share "a concern with the ultimate issues in life principles" (in DeVeber, 296): she contemplates the ultimate issues of life and accepts the

[39] Bullen, Elizabeth and Elizabeth Parsons. "Risk and Resilience, Knowledge and Imagination: The Enlightenment of David Almond's *Skellig*". *Children's Literature*, Vol.35, 2007, 140-141.

explanations science has to offer, but also considers other views for issues that cannot be explained rationally.

Michael starts to show his own spiritual development during the course of the novel, as in the passage where Michael tries to explain Mina's home-schooling and the ideas of William Blake to his schoolmates Leakey and Coot:

> "He said school drives all joy away," I said. "He was a painter and a poet."
> They looked at each other and grinned. Leakey couldn't look me in the eye. I could feel my face burning and burning.
> "Look," I said. "I can't tell you anything. But the world's full of amazing things."
> Coot sighed and shook his head and bounced the ball between his knees.
> "I've seen them," I said. Leakey stared at me.
> I imagined taking him through the DANGER door, taking him to Skellig, showing him. For a moment I was dying to tell him what I'd seen and what I'd touched. (*Skellig*, 108)

Because of Mina, Michael is starting to understand the spiritual side of life, but at the same time he is aware that his school friends would not understand. This is a very normal aspect of children's spirituality, as Hay and Nye point out; according to their studies, many children described keeping their spirituality private and hidden as a "protective reaction to avoid ridicule and embarrassment (125). Michael may be learning to embrace his spiritual side, but he is just as certain that his school friends would not comprehend and would therefore most likely make fun of him. However, at the end of the novel even Leakey shows that he might be open to change by sincerely asking Michael to explain some day what it is that has been going on in his life, and Michael notices that he is keen to listen and understand (*Skellig*, 170).

Michael's maturing spirituality is also evident in his behaviour in the same way as Charlotte and Wilbur demonstrated in *Charlotte's Web*. With Mina's help, he takes care of Skellig and nurses him back to health while he is greatly distressed by his baby sister's condition. In this way, both children and especially Michael show the ability to transcend their own selves and demonstrate the kind of spiritual potential that Hay and Nye pointed to in their work (157). Through caring for another being, Michael in a sense saves his sister by transcending his own pain and worry

in helping Skellig. Bullen and Parsons also argue for the same idea, stating that Michael "can act out his anxieties about the possible death of the baby through Skellig and, importantly, achieve a positive resolution with Mina's help" (132). Just like Charlotte and Wilbur, Michael learns that he needs to put aside his own distress and help Skellig, and in this process shows his spiritual maturity.

Despite Leakey and Coot for the most part showing lack of spiritual potential, the novel concentrates mainly on children's special ability to view the world from a larger perspective than adults, very much in the same way as White did in *Charlotte's Web*. The way both novels incorporate fantasy into an otherwise realist story is a relatively common feature in children's literature, although not all scholars agree on their adequacy. For example, Bruce Vogel argues that science and magic in literature are meant for very different purposes: "They relate to fundamentally different views of the universe. The two principles clash when mixed together in the same story. An author with real insight into either magic or science does not try to combine the two principles"[40]. But when it comes to both *Charlotte's Web* and *Skellig*, fantastical elements are well incorporated in the story, and can serve the function of stirring the traditional ideas about reality.

Vogel also goes on to claim that "it can readily be demonstrated that most *good* books will exhibit a distinct bias toward humanism or else toward a religious/mythic view of life. A good author has little choice but to make clear his attitude toward the supra-natural" (114). *Skellig* especially raises questions with the nature of the story being both secular and religious to some extent; this is clearly intended to cause contemplation in the reader and question the idea that secular world views and spiritual or religious philosophies could not merge. Vogel's idea about the clear distinctions between humanist and religious or mythic world views seems outdated, and Almond's intelligent covering of both worlds is a good counterpart for this statement. Although the modern Western world has witnessed the decline of institutionalised religion, people are increasingly aware of alternative world views and also more open to discussion. Therefore

[40] Vogel, Bruce. "Science, Magic, and the Test of Luck" in *Webs and Wardrobes – Humanist and Religious World Views in Children's Literature*. Eds. Joseph O'Beirne Milner and Lucy Floyd Morcock Milner. Boston: University Press of America, 1987, 112.

Almond's approach does not appear to be bad writing at all, but an appropriate representative of the changing societal conditions.

Despite the various allusions to religious themes such as heaven and angels and of course, the ambiguous nature of Skellig himself, there are no clear indicators of the story being written from a religious point of view. Although Mina announces her father being in heaven (50), Almond does not make religious faith the central view of the novel and the idea of an afterlife is not present in any other visible way. Quite on the contrary; even the idea of angels is brought into different perspective with Mina's explanation for shoulder blades, one of the most recurrent issues in Michael's quest to understand:

> I said, "Do you know what shoulder blades are for?"
> She giggled.
> "Do you not even know that?" she said.
> "Do you?"
> "It's a proven fact, common knowledge. They're where your wings were, and where they'll grow again." (*Skellig*, 52)

Michael's mother has earlier given the same explanation to Michael, saying that shoulder blades are where wings used to be when people were angels, and that they will grow again one day (38-39). Mina's explanation, saying that it is a proven fact, brings in a Darwinian angle, as if wings were part of the human evolution. In addition to that, there are no allusions to resurrection of any kind despite the sometimes angelic qualities of Skellig; without the children's help, it seems that he would have died like any other living being. The aspects in the novel that might be read as religious by some readers are incorporated in the more secular narrative in such an intelligent way that it is impossible to ascertain the philosophical nature of the novel, and this has most likely been Almond's intention in the first place.

Although the main focus when it comes to spirituality is on children, *Skellig* shows that there are also adults who have preserved their spiritual awareness and openness. Much in the same way as Dr. Dorian in *Charlotte's Web*, Mina's mother represents an adult character who is seemingly well-educated and intelligent but also aware of the mysteries of life that are inexplicable,

and Mina has inherited the same way of thinking from her mother. Because of her awareness, she is able to encourage Mina to explore different views and expand her understanding. However, Mina's mother seems to be the only adult character with this kind of spiritual awareness, just as Dr. Dorian is the only one in *Charlotte's Web*. It is therefore far more common, if we are to take note from these two children's authors in question, that people lose contact with their spirituality as they become adults and conform to the social and cultural environment of their society, and only very few adults escape this spiritually repressing cultural atmosphere and are thus able to maintain their awareness to life's wonders. Perhaps this is precisely why there are so many references to Blake in *Skellig*: he retained his child-like belief in spiritual experiences. William Wordsworth expresses the same idea of how children lose their spirituality as they grow in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood"[41]:

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting,
> And cometh from afar:
> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory do we come
> From God, who is our home: Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy,
> But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;
> The Youth, who daily farther from the east
> Must travel, still is Nature's priest,
> And by the vision splendid
> Is on his way attended;
> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day.

The majority of adult characters in *Skellig* represent the average Westerner who approach everything in life from the scientific point of view and ignore the elements that would require any spiritual abilities. The doctors in the novel represent the scientific approach to life with their unshakeable faith in the omnipotence of medical science, as Dr. MacNabola testifies in

[41] Abrams, M.H., Stephen Greenblatt et al. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1482.

advising Michael about arthritis: “Tell your friend to come to me. I’ll needle him, saw him, fix him up and send him home nearly as good as new” (*Skellig*, 67). Michael’s father is too preoccupied with the baby sister’s condition to notice anything else except the doctors’ views on the situation, and the teachers at school seem to focus only on evolutionary theories. There are nevertheless a few characters in the story that are shown to be in between these two extremes. Ernie Myers, the previous owner of the house Michael lives in, had also been visited by Skellig, but Ernie only looked straight through him like he was only “a figment” (54). However, later on Michael questions the family doctor about treating Ernie, and whether he ever spoke of seeing Skellig:

> “Mr. Myers was very ill,” said Dr. Death. “He was dying.”
> “I know that.”
> “And as the mind approaches death it changes. It becomes less…orderly.”
> “So he did?”
> “He did speak of certain images that came to him. But so do many of my people.” (*Skellig*, 124)

This conversation shows that Ernie Myers was perhaps able to see Skellig, but lacking spiritual awareness, he did not possess the ability to understand what he saw. It is hinted that since Ernie Myers was old and near death, his mind did not work properly and therefore his words are explained in medical terms and taken to be a product of dementia. However, Bullen and Parsons term Ernie “a contemporary child” (138) because of his condition, thus giving his behaviour and partial ability to witness Skellig a plausible explanation in terms of the better spiritual abilities accredited to children.

A similar situation occurs with Michael’s mother, when the baby sister is at the end of her battle against her illness. In the hospital following the night that the baby was operated on, Michael’s mother explains a dream she had that night about a filthy man dressed in black in the baby’s room:

> “And then he reached right down with both hands and lifted her up. She was wide awake. They stared and stared into each other’s eyes. He started slowly to turn around…”
> “Like they were dancing,” I said.

> "That's right, like they were dancing. And then the strangest thing of all…" She laughed at us, and shrugged.
> "And the strangest thing of all was, there were wings on the baby's back. Not solid wings. Transparent, ghostly, hardly visible, but there they were. Little feathery things. It looked so funny. The strange tall man and the little baby and the wings. And that was it. He put her back down, he turned and looked at me again, and it was over." (*Skellig*, 159-160)

Michael's mother has seen Skellig visit the baby and perform the same dance he did with Michael and Mina earlier in the novel, but she believes it was only a dream despite feeling sure she was wide awake (159). But Michael's mother has no medical condition to justify her vision like Ernie Myers might have had; her spiritual experience might be explained with the emotional turmoil caused by her child being in danger of dying, and therefore she has employed all her mental capacities from the belief in medical science to the possibility of a miracle in order to cope with the desperation. At a moment if crisis, she has temporarily been able to reach her spiritual side, but is still unable to understand it properly.

In *Skellig*, a few adults are able to see Skellig, but they are not enough spiritually aware to understand what they see, compared to the children. Therefore it is left to the children, Michael and Mina, to solve the problem and prevent Skellig – and to some extent, the baby sister – from dying. This is also a very common feature in children's literature, where adults are not granted the same courageous qualities as children. Vogel also points out that "one of the facts about the supernatural which is repeated over and over in folklore is that children are more entitled to a helping hand from the world of magic than are adults" (113), pinpointing precisely the core of *Skellig*'s most apparent message on spirituality: children possess the special ability to recognise and appreciate the mysteries of nature and life. Don Latham credits Almond for the same idea; he states that *Skellig* shows "the presence of the magical amid the mundane" and that Almond is most concerned with "the special ability of young people to recognise and respond to that presence"[42]. For adults, the world of science has often suppressed this ability, but as Mina's mother – as well as

[42] Latham, Don. "Magical Realism and the Child Reader: The Case of David Almond's *Skellig*". *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children's Books*, Vol.10, No.1, 2006. No pagination.

Ernie Myers and Michael's mother to some extent – prove, this ability is not impossible to restore and maintain with the right kind of attitude.

Skellig, the extraordinary being that lent his name to the novel, is the core element in the discussion on spirituality, as there are occasions in which the reader most likely defines him as an angel. However, his true character is never explained in the novel, and therefore it is left to the reader to decide what he is. But his appearance is described in the novel on many occasions, and one of them is Michael's first encounter with him:

> I thought he was dead. He was sitting with his legs stretched out and his head tipped back against the wall. He was covered in dust and webs like everything else and his face was thin and pale. Dead bluebottles were scattered on his hair and shoulders.
> "What do you want?" he said.
> He opened his eyes and looked up at me. His voice squeaked like he hadn't used it in years. (*Skellig*, 8)

At this point, Skellig seems like any food-deprived, homeless person who is in bad condition, and later on Michael continues to observe this mysterious character as he visits him in the garage:

> I put the tray down on the floor beside him and shined the light on him. There were hundreds of tiny creases and cracks all over his pale face. A few fine colorless hairs grew on his chin. The red sauce below his lips was like congealed blood. When he opened his eyes again, I saw the tiny red veins like a dark net across the whites of his eyes. There was a smell of dust, old clothes, dry sweat. (*Skellig*, 29)

If he is considered an angel, Skellig is by no means a beautiful one, nor does he behave in a manner that most people would expect angels to be like according to biblical representations; initially, Skellig is very irritated by Michael's presence and only tells him abruptly to go away (18-19). However, there is an interesting moment early on in the novel, when Michael is still wondering what this man in the garage is. When he visits him only the second time to bring him food and aspirin, he first asks Skellig who he is, but then goes on to tell about his sister:

> "My baby sister's very ill."
> "Babies!"
> "Is there anything you can do for her?"
> "Babies! Spittle, muck, spew, and tears."
> I sighed. It was hopeless. (*Skellig*, 30)

Michael has only met Skellig twice at this point, and has not gotten any answers from him considering his identity, but nevertheless he goes on to ask whether Skellig could help his sister. At some level, Michael must thus be aware that this is not an ordinary homeless person, and perhaps this is an indicator of his potential spirituality that only needs to be coaxed out. This would certainly be backed up by the views of Hay and Nye who argue that spirituality is an inbred quality in humans, and that the society usually represses this potential for children to explore their spiritual side as they are growing up (63). In Michael's case, his spiritual potential is released as he learns different views from Mina, and he is also able to accept Skellig's mysterious character.

Despite Skellig's human-like appearance and non-angelic behaviour in the typical sense, he unquestionably has wings on his back. He also performs a dance-like ritual with Michael and Mina, where they seem to be floating in the air as they dance with a vision of wings appearing in the children's backs (*Skellig*, 120). Also in Michael's mother's dream-like experience, Skellig is shown to hold the ill baby and wings appear on both characters' backs again as they dance (159). These moments seem to reinforce the idea of Skellig being an angel, although Michael's mother's experience is presented as a dream. However, the mystery of Skellig's character is given natural, bird-like qualities as well with the owls feeding him (118), Michael and Mina finding owl pellets all around Skellig and later seeing him fly in from the window of the attic (165). All these characteristics along with the moment when Mina describes the archaeopteryx, the evolutionary ancestor of birds (98), serve to create an image of Skellig as a natural wonder, a species created by advanced or perhaps backward evolution. Skellig describes himself as "something like you, something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel" (167), and it is therefore up to the reader to decide whether to draw conclusions based on a natural, humanist or a religious view on his appearance, or whether to adopt a more integrated and perhaps more spiritual reading of Skellig.

5 CONCLUSION

Death in Western societies is a rather private matter, and most people often avoid talking about it both in public and in the family circle. The difficult and painful emotions attached to the death of a loved one make the subject uncomfortable to broach even for adults, and thus it is even harder to discuss the elements of death with children. However, children often have plenty of questions about the unfamiliar issue, and adults should always aim at answering these questions with as much honesty and clarity as possible to avoid any misunderstandings and to alleviate distress. The modern Western society provides children with such an abundance of information through different media that the concept of death can become misconstrued but also trivialised in children's minds were they not to receive proper information from the adults around them.

Death is no longer close to those children living in Western societies as the advances in medical science have made possible the manipulation and prolongation of life; hospitals and nursing homes take care of the ill and the old, and children do not have to witness the realities of the human life cycle in their home environment. Thus death is no longer considered an everyday subject, and children have become alienated from the reality that all living things die because they do not have to witness it in a normal human way. When adults are unable to provide adequate, no-nonsense information for the child, the result can be a child who has a misconstrued image of death that causes distress, fear and anxiety.

The mental development of children is a crucial issue in the understanding of the concept of death, as children begin to realise several aspects of death during the early years of childhood; generally it is thought that children grasp the different components of death at approximately the age of seven years old. This means that children learn that death is irreversible and thus those who die will not be able to come back; that death means the end of all mental and bodily functions; that death is universal and will therefore occur to all living things sooner or later;

and that death occurs due to a breakdown of bodily functions, meaning that children also understand the causes of death in a biological sense. This understanding occurs generally at the same time as children start to view the world more logically and objectively and to approach their environment with a cause and effect way of thinking. However, children do not usually possess the ability for abstract thought and reasoning at this age. The mental developments as well as all of the components of death are always affected by the experiences and the environment the child grows in, but nevertheless it is possible to generate some approximate rules when it comes to children's development.

Charlotte's Web presents death to the child reader in a surprisingly realistic and secular way, considering that the novel was written and published in the United States of the 1950s. Death was at that time a very factual part of life on a farm, especially when it came to animals. However, through Wilbur it is shown that while death can be a frightening and unknown concept, it is nothing to be feared of. Wilbur shows that while children are often afraid of death because it is such a powerful and unfamiliar subject, a child can learn to understand it as a natural part of the life cycle of all living things. However, as it is only Charlotte who eventually dies in the novel despite Wilbur's life being threatened, death appears natural only when concerning the old and weary; those who have fulfilled their task in life are thus content and fearless in the face of death. The horrors of the Second World War were still fresh in the nation's memory, and death was closer to people than it is in the present-day world. Therefore E. B. White perhaps wanted to create a positive image of a world were death does not touch those in the peak of their youth.

In a similar way, *Skellig* presents a child being in danger of dying, but also an adult character being close to death. Although in the end, nobody dies in *Skellig*, death is the main topic of the novel and follows the reader on every page. Just as in *Charlotte's Web*, death is represented in a very realistic manner with plenty of allusions to modern medical science including hospitals, arthritis patients, tubes and wires. Initially, Michael is unable to process the painful feelings created

by the serious condition of his baby sister, but through personal growth and maturing he begins to understand how to articulate his feelings. The realistic, no-nonsense portrayal of death in the novel familiarises the child reader with the concept of death and shows that the painful experiences are also an essential part of life and growing up. Today's Western world witnesses death and pain mostly through the media, and as the advanced medicine has taught people to feel almost immortal, it is important to show children that illness and death still occurs to even the best of people.

The theme of spirituality – and religion as well – is also an important part of the thesis, and therefore it was crucial to look at the developments that have taken place in the modern Western society in the past and the present. Most scholars seem to struggle when defining the concept of spirituality as it is often closely tied to the ideas of religion. This is most likely due to the influence of Christianity in the society; as the morals and norms of the society have been strongly based on Christian religion, it is not surprising that the language and vocabulary used to express the idea of spirituality has been strongly influenced by it as well. However, some distinction between the two concepts can be found, and therefore spirituality can be adopted as a useful term for this thesis in a broader sense without the religious affiliations.

The notion of spirituality has gained further ground in the Western society as a result of the decline in the importance of institutionalised religion; the harsh realism brought about by the Second World War had their effect on people's beliefs, and more recently the uncomfortable attitudes of the church towards issues such as sexual minorities, contraception and abortion have alienated people from the conservative ideas of mainstream religion. In addition to that, the modern society with its fast-paced and individualist lifestyle has driven people to search for alternative, more convenient ways of expressing their personal beliefs, and thus many people claim to be rather spiritual than religious. Although the Second World War already influenced people's attitudes towards mainstream religion, it is safe to say that the general public was most likely more religious in an everyday sense than their present-day counterparts. Today, religion and spirituality is seen as a

more private matter, and therefore it is not publicised the way was more customary in the 1950s for example.

In *Charlotte's Web*, the everyday religiousness is evident in the background; people go to church on Sunday and view the minister as a source for help and information. But these are all very general social actions that people maintained in the society without much contemplation; it was customary and could be interpreted as not so strongly religious. Spirituality is far more overtly present in *Charlotte's Web*; Fern's ability to appreciate the wonders of the nature; and Wilbur and Charlotte showing their self-transcendence through taking care of one another selflessly both show how spirituality can be expressed without religious deeds. For the most part, *Charlotte's Web* seems very nonreligious in a sense that death is viewed only in terms of the natural life cycle, and in addition there is no mention of an afterlife notwithstanding the idea of Charlotte's memory living on in her descendants, which is a very secular notion. Death is seen as the end, and it is not depicted through any religiously associated euphemisms or symbols. As religious education is prohibited in the United States' public schools, the ideologically very allowing attitude of *Charlotte's Web* is perhaps one of the reasons why the novel has remained popular in the American school curriculum throughout the decades.

The idea that spiritual and secular views can go hand in hand is the most recurrent theme of the ideological side of *Skellig*. David Almond has combined plenty of ideas on the evolutionary theory with a more spiritual idea of humans not necessarily being able to always see the mysterious side of the world. He presents a reality where everything cannot always be explained through means of science, but this should not faze people; *Skellig* encourages the reader to be more open to the mysteries of life and nature while also holding on to the proven facts about mankind. Spirituality is manifested as the ability for people to transcend themselves for the sake of others even during very difficult times, and religion itself is not given a clear role in this process. In fact, *Skellig* portrays very few overtly religious aspects or symbols, but remains rather diplomatic in the

field of ideological indoctrination. Through *Skellig*, the child reader is presented with the idea that the secular and spiritual world views do not necessarily need to compete against each other, but can be used side by side to make more sense of the world.

This is clearly in line with the more individual and private nature of people's beliefs in the modern Western society, but also shows the change from the 1950s; in today's world it is easier to present an idea as controversial as this, while in the 1950s there needed to be more caution in how especially nonreligious views were presented. Almond also raises questions about the influence of state schooling when it comes to encouraging children to explore their spirituality and broaden their ways of thinking. The attitude in the novel seems to suggest that the state school system – at least in England – inhibit children's natural curiosity and ability to view the world from different perspectives. Mina is a clear example of a child who has been given the chance to explore and search for answers from more sources than just one during her home-schooling, and therefore represents the ideal child whose spirituality has not been repressed. This is not to say that Almond suggests in *Skellig* that home-schooling is the answer to a better understanding of the world, but he is clearly concerned with the current educational system and its influence on the spiritual awareness of children in today's heavily scientifically oriented world.

Spirituality is present in both of the novels in a rather identical way, especially in the way children and adults are distinguished from each other. In both novels, children are the key characters provided with the ability to see the wonders and the mysteries of the world; for some of them, it requires a learning process to find this awareness in them, but nevertheless children are shown to be more open-minded and willing to perceive. This is naturally an aspect that is expectable from a children's novel, as it is important that the child readers are given role models to whom it is easy to relate. However, both novels also portray an adult character that is shown to have maintained their spiritual awareness and the ability to accept that there are mysteries in the world that science cannot explain; Dr. Dorian in *Charlotte's Web* and Mina's mother in *Skellig* represent

the ideal persons who are both intelligent and educated but also spiritually open-minded and curious. These characters – however few they are in the novels – serve to testify for the child reader that it is indeed possible to preserve this spiritual awareness while growing up in today's world that so easily stifles this feature in people.

In their depiction of death, *Charlotte's Web* and *Skellig* are also remarkably similar despite the very different eras they were written on; both novels adopt a very realistic and secular view in presenting the facts of life and death as well as the difficult emotions brought about by the subject. Neither of the novels brings forth the idea of an afterlife, and although *Skellig* introduces the theme of angels to the novel, there is no reference to resurrection in any form. Death is a frightening concept in both novels, but through the main characters the readers are shown that it is possible to learn how to deal with this unfamiliar and uncomfortable topic. Growth and maturing are the key aspects in both novels when it comes to understanding death, and the child reader is invited to follow the same learning curve during the reading process. Despite the occasional passages possibly causing confusion when it comes to the concept of death and its components, the young reader is given a rather thorough insight on the idea of death and everything that comes along with it.

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