

# **Spirituality and Death from a Child's Perspective in David Almond's *Skellig***

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Tutkielman tarkoituksesta oli selvittää, miten kuolema ja henkisyys esittäytyvät lapsille David Almondin teoksessa *Skellig* (1998). Lähestyn aihetta lapsen kognitiivisen kehityksen kautta pohjaten näkemyksiäni ennen kaikkea Jean Piaget'n teorioihin. Tarkoitukseen on selvittää, millä tasolla kirjan noin 12-vuotiaat päähenkilöt pystyvät käsittämään kuoleman ja henkisyyden kaltaisia, käsitteellistä ajattelua vaativia aiheita.

Noin 12 vuoden iässä lapsi aloittaa kognitiivisen kehityksen neljänneksen ja viimeisen vaiheen. Tämän vaiheen aikana hän oppii käsitteellämään asioita. Sekä kuolema että henkisyys ovat hyvin monitahoisia käsittelyitä. Niitä voi jopa pitää mystisinä asioina, koska nykyihminen ei ole vielä täysin pystynyt selittämään niitä. Vaikka kuolema on fyysisen tapahtuma, mutta se esittää ihmiselle metafyysisen ongelman ennen kaikkea siinä, että me emme voi varmuudella tietää, mitä ihmiselle kuoleman jälkeen tapahtuu. Henkisyyden kautta ihmisen pyrkii ymmärtämään elämän merkitystä ja tarkoitusta. Tällaisen ymmärryksen saavuttaminen vaatii ihmiseltä kykyä nousta itsensä yläpuolelle. Huipussaan henkisyys onkin itsensä kokemista erottamattomana osana toista tai joitain suurempaa yhteyttä.

Sekä kuolema että henkisyys ovat länsimaisissa varsin vaikeaa puheenaihe. Lastenkirjallisuudessa nämä kaksi teemaa ovat kuitenkin – tavalla tai toisella – varsin yleisiä aiheita. *Skellig*-kirjassa niitä käsitetään kuitenkin poikkeuksellisella tavalla. Kuoleman käsittely ei pyritä vääristämään tai pehmentämään. Henkisyys ei puolestaan tarkoita tietyn uskonnollisen opin saarnamista. Pikemmin nämä kaksi teemaa voidaan nähdä kirjassa asioina, joiden kautta ja joiden avulla lapsi voi kasvaa kokonaisvaltaisesti toimivaksi nuoreksi.

Tutkielmassa päädyin siihen päätelmään, että kirjan 12-vuotiaat päähenkilöt pystyvät ymmärtämään kuoleman käsitteen älyllisesti, mutta vanhempien ihmisten tavoin he voivat pitää kuolemaa tunteellisesti vaikeasti hyväksyttävänä asiana. Toinen keskeinen päätelmäni on se, että 12-vuotiaan käsitys henkisyydestä ja uskonnollisuudesta on monesti vastavuoroinen. Tästä johtuen hän saattaa pyrkiä tekemään hyviä tekoja ansaitakseen vastapalveluksen. Tämä voi johtua myös siitä, että tässä kognitiivisen ja hengellisen kehityksen vaiheessa lapsi ymmärtää, että elämä on sellainen, minkälaiseksi hän itse sen tekee.

Asiasanat: lapset, lastenkirjallisuus, kuolema, henkisyys, uskonnollisuus

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## 1 Introduction

In this thesis I am going to study how spirituality and death are represented in David Almond's novel *Skellig* (1998). In today's world the concepts of spirituality and death are two of the few concepts that could still be considered as some sort of mysteries. Essentially, these two concepts are something that science has not yet been able to explain fully. Even though I study these concepts in their respective chapters, it is worth emphasising that a person's spirituality strongly affects his/her attitude to death. It might be fair to say that in the face of approaching death (either with old age or terminal illness) a person's attitude to spirituality can also change distinctly. Thus it is obvious that the two concepts are interconnected on a profound level. Although both spirituality and death are concepts that are universal and human, both of these concepts can be regarded as taboo to some extent.

In no other situation is the dread of death more evident than with adults who often try to protect children from the unpleasant fact that eventually, either with terminal illness, accident, old age or something else, we will all face death. It is understandable that adults think that such a revelation might be too much for a child to handle and might result in anxiety and fear of death. With the media feeding us different, often either the most brutal or the most fantastical images of death, children's eventual questions about death will have to be answered honestly. Most importantly, it is crucial that adults would not try to make our society seem deathless to children, because it is not. After all, research indicates that children can learn to understand death even at a young age, as long as it is presented to them in terms and language they can understand. Adults should not excessively simplify, let alone fable or anthropomorphise the concept, however. Unless children are given a truthful presentation of death, they can develop misconceptions about death which can lead to anxiety or even fatal

misconceptions.<sup>1</sup> In addition to death, spirituality, too, is a concept which is often considered too delicate and complex for children to understand. In the largely Christian Western world where children are often baptised at a very young age, spirituality and religion, as regards children's capability to understand them, would seem to be a difficult subject to discuss. Understanding spirituality in general terms, as well as experiencing a religious awakening, calls for a certain level of cognitive development, because one has to be capable of thinking in abstract terms and to make assumptions without tangible evidence.

*Skellig* is David Almond's first novel for children. The book is set in England and it tells a story about a 12-year-old boy named Michael who moves into a new house with his family. When the family is settling into their new home, which is in great need of repair, Michael's mother goes into labour prematurely. Soon afterwards Michael's newborn baby sister is diagnosed with a serious heart condition and has to fight for her life. Back at home Michael finds a strange human-like creature in their derelict garage. This creature is also in a bad shape and at first not even willing to participate in his own possible recovery. With his new neighbour, a home-schooled girl named Mina, Michael spends most of the book trying to help and nurture this creature who eventually tells the children to call him Skellig. In one of the novel's fantastical turns, the children find out that there are something like wings on Skellig's back. As Skellig recovers and Michael's sister survives a difficult heart surgery, both the child characters of the novel and the readers are left wondering about the question we often ask, amazed by existence: Isn't life strange? David Hay (2003, 1) asks a relevant question: "Compared with what?"

First and foremost *Skellig* is a story about growth. The novel's 12-year-old protagonist Michael stands on the threshold of becoming something new. Not only is a child<sup>2</sup> at the beginning of puberty experiencing many physical changes, but their thinking also changes.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the euphemism "eternal sleep" may lead to a child becoming afraid of sleeping, whereas watching a tv-series where a person is shot but returns back to life may lead to a child thinking that death can be reversed.

This is why I am going to approach the text from the angle of development psychology. The cognitive development from concrete to abstract understanding serves as a backdrop for the main themes of the thesis: development of spirituality and understanding of death. Chapter two, which deals with cognitive development, rests largely on the theories of Jean Piaget.

If the main theme in the novel is growth, one of the novel's two key concepts is death, which will be discussed in chapter three. With the help of cognitive development theories, I will try to answer the question of how children's understanding of death develops as they become older. In order to understand the concept of death more profoundly, I will divide it into four subcomponents. I will also discuss how death is perceived in Western societies, because to a great extent the way children will perceive death depends on how people around them perceive death. Death is not an unusual topic in children's literature, but I would argue that there is something unusual about how death is represented in *Skellig*. Therefore representations of death in children's literature will also be discussed. As we approach chapter four, which deals with spirituality, I will briefly discuss the ways children perceive different healing powers and the possibility of afterlife.

The second of the two key concepts in *Skellig* is spirituality<sup>3</sup>. In chapter four I will study how Michael and Mina, the approximately 12-year-old child characters of *Skellig*, represent spirituality. With the help of theories on spiritual development, especially theories by Jean Piaget<sup>4</sup>, I will also discuss how children's spirituality tends to develop. This will lead us to the important question of how and why the spirituality represented by the children differs from the spirituality of adults. First we need to answer the question, what spirituality is. This proves to be no easy task. Holmes (2007, 24) states that spirituality is a concept which "by its very

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, the word 'child' will be used to refer to the pre-teen main characters of the novel.

<sup>3</sup> Religion will be dealt as a subordinate concept for spirituality. It will be argued, however, that in *Skellig* the line between these two concepts is as fine as it can be.

<sup>4</sup> Piaget does not explicitly talk about *spiritual* development. Rather, the concept of cognitive development is used. This is a field of particular interest, as it includes the theory on the development of a child's abstract thinking, which is essential to spiritual development.

nature” might well defy “any single definition.” This is why Hyde’s (2008, 23) notion of “describing rather than defining spirituality” becomes important for this thesis. Sperry (2001, 21–25) sees that human experience has five basic dimensions: psychological, social, moral, somatic, and spiritual,” with the spiritual dimension at the very core of human experience. Levitt (2005, 62) divides spirituality into cognitive, experiential and behavioural aspects. An important cognitive aspect is the search for meaning and purpose. Experiential aspects refer to human emotions such as love, connection and inner peace. Behavioural aspects include the ways a person manifests his/her spiritual beliefs and inner spiritual state – for example by subscribing to a specific, dogmatised spiritual view, i.e. an organised religion. However, Levitt (2005, 62) emphasises that “spiritual awareness is not necessarily associated with a belief in a supreme being.” Hyde (2008, 32) separates the spiritual into five competencies, which largely crystallise into the notion of transcendence, the ability to surpass the self. Most of the writers would also seem to agree with David Hay (paraphrased by Martin W. Ubani 2003, 19) in that spirituality is innate rather than learned or developed. Indeed, Hyde (2008) maintains that spirituality is a natural human predisposition. It is argued that the “spiritual history of the human species is at least 70,000 years old” (Hyde 2008, 24). This thesis largely focuses on how children view and express spirituality. Like with the concept of death, I would argue that also the ways in which children perceive spirituality are to a great extent affected by the society. Therefore I will study how spirituality tends to be perceived in the Western world. At times, the way *Skellig* represents spirituality could be said to border on the religious. Even though I would argue that, in the traditional sense, *Skellig* is not a religious children’s book, I will discuss the possibility of stories like *Skellig* having a propaedeutic effect on children’s capability of receiving Biblical stories and even on children’s indoctrination into religious institutions.

It could be asked, in fact, whether *Skellig* is a conventional children’s book to begin with. The complex angel-like character of Skellig invites a lengthy discussion of the history of

angels in this thesis. In an unusually complex way, the poetry and esoteric views of William Blake are also incorporated into the story. Maria Nikolajeva (1998, 233) points out that the classic way of reading traditional children's literature is to look there for morals and educational values. With some of the children's literature from past decades it would seem, however, that we need a new way of approaching children's literature. According to Nikolajeva (1998, 233) "we see clearly a shift in recent children's literature from mimetic toward the symbolic approach to artistic representation." Taking into consideration the number of intertextual references and the use of symbolism and metaphor in *Skellig*, it would seem obvious that the novel is not trying to preach moral and educational guidelines to its readers like a traditional children's book. By the end of the book the readers – children as well as adults – are likely to have learned something, however. Like for Michael, I would argue that the lesson the readers learn from the book is the one of learning to know themselves a bit better – perhaps even learning self-transcendence.

Since its publication *Skellig* has received some academic attention. A study which comes closest to mine is Laura Salonen's recent MA thesis "'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*" (University of Tampere, 2008) which deals with some of the same topics that I will be discussing in my thesis, but approaches the topics from a different perspective. Salonen's thesis also lacks any significant discussion on religious myths, the angel myth, in particular. Unlike my thesis, Salonen's thesis is a comparative study which includes *Skellig* and E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. Despite the differences, however, I owe the discovery of some useful secondary sources to Salonen's work. It is likely that there are other MA level theses on *Skellig* written elsewhere, but unfortunately it is rather difficult to track them. Salonen's thesis aside, I was able to find out that academic research has been done on *Skellig* focusing on the inter-relationship between the real and imaginary (Joan Webb 2006),

the themes of children and salvation (Michael Levy 2003), the novel as a response to the debate between Christian views of creation and Darwin's theories of evolution (Susan Stewart 2009), intertextuality (Don Latham 2008), magical realism (Latham 2006b), and the novel as a representation of contemporary risk society (Elizabeth Parsons and Elizabeth Bullen 2007). Unfortunately I was not able to get hold of Webb, Levy and Stewart's works, as they might have helped me to a better understanding of the novel's spiritual and fantastical aspects.

## 2 The development from concrete to abstract understanding

In this chapter I am going to discuss the cognitive development of a child, especially the development from concrete to abstract understanding. This phase in the child's development is crucial to this thesis, as I am interested in seeing how a child of approximately 12 years of age will understand the concepts and experiences of spirituality and death, two rather abstract concepts. Before moving on to studying those concepts, I will try to give a brief yet accurate summary of the theory of cognitive development, which will largely rest on the theory developed by Jean Piaget.

As pointed out in the introduction, *Skellig* is a novel about growth. It is also about threshold and learning experiences. In the following chapters, chapter 4 in particular, I am going to discuss the sort of learning and development that includes the more intuitive element of a 'leap of faith,' but in this chapter I will focus on the more theoretical side of child development psychology. Resting largely on theories developed by Jean Piaget, I will show that the protagonists of *Skellig*, Michael in particular, represent accurately the sort of changes and behaviour one should expect from a child of approximately 12 years of age. For example, after Michael has been caught on one of his nightly wanderings to see Skellig – the outing for which Michael makes up the excuse of sleepwalking – his inner changes, the more physical ones and perhaps also the cognitive ones, are acknowledged by the character Michael refers to as Dr. Death: "'It's a difficult time,' he [Dr. Death] said. 'Everything inside you's changing. The world can seem a wild and weird place. But you'll get through it'" (*Skellig*, 124). It is not surprising that it is Dr. Death, a man of science, who makes this comment after raising his eyebrows when hearing the explanation about sleepwalking, because as a doctor he would know about and have strong faith in physiological and psychological development theories. The more spiritual and non-scientific side of human development does not fit into his thought patterns, which is why he tries to explain Michael's behaviour in terms of physiological

changes, and even in terms of the adolescent's sexual development: “‘Is there anything you'd like to tell me?’ he asked. I shook my head. ‘Don't be shy,’ he said. ‘Me and your father [i.e. all men] have been through everything you're going through’” (*Skellig*, 123). I would argue that here Dr. Death is attempting to talk to Michael ‘man to man’ in order to find out whether the boy has had some kind of an experience (perhaps a sexual one) during that night that would have made him leave the house. As far as I can see, however, this might in fact be the only allusion to sexuality in *Skellig*, which is interesting taking into consideration that the novel represents a very close relationship between a boy and a girl (Michael and Mina) at the beginning of their puberty.

However, this is just one point in the novel that reveals the fact that *Skellig* is a novel which concentrates much more on the mental and even spiritual side of human development than physical or physiological development. In all these respects Michael is on the verge of becoming something new. According to the late theorist of cognitive development, Jean Piaget (1970, 33), the “fourth and final period [of cognitive development, Formal Operations (from 11 to 15 years)] characterized in general by [...] a new mode of reasoning” begins at “about eleven to twelve years of age.”<sup>5</sup> This “new mode of reasoning” means, in part, that when a person reaches this stage, he/she becomes capable of making hypotheses, and also capable of dealing with objects and realities that are not “directly representable” (Piaget 1970, 33). The ability to understand the metaphysical aspect of death, the character of Skellig and spirituality, in general, is crucial to *Skellig*. Michael and Mina could almost be referred to as ‘adolescent philosophers,’ the term that Dorothy A. Austin and John E. Mack (1986, 60) use in their essay “The Adolescent Philosopher in a Nuclear World,” which also draws on Piaget:

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<sup>5</sup> The three earlier periods of cognitive development are: 1) The Sensorimotor Period (0 to 2 years), during which the child performs only motor actions and eventually develops, for example, an elemental understanding of the constructions of the permanent object and reversibility; 2) Preoperational Thought (2 to 7 years), during which the “symbolic function” appears in the form of language and, in more general terms, in the “internalization of actions into thoughts”; and 3) Concrete Operations (7 to 11 years), during which the child develops an understanding of

In cognitive terms, adolescence is the time when young people experience a shift from concrete operational thinking to formal operational thinking. In the Piagetian scheme (Piaget, 1955), this means that adolescents now have the capacity to “abstract” and to think reflectively. [...] For the adolescent philosopher, this means that it is now possible to consider many different perspectives on life, including the imagined nonexistence of oneself and the world, the imagined feelings of another’s point of view, and a certain ultimate questions about the nature of life and death, good and evil, and the meaning of life. (Austin & Mack 1986, 60)

In general, it is this capability of understanding “object permanence, symbolic representation, logical thinking, and formal operational thought [which is] involved in increasingly advanced cognitive abilities for representing the presence of an unseen God” (Sperry 2001, 54). Even though a god figure is not explicit in *Skellig*, this is precisely the sort of abstract thinking that is represented in *Skellig*: abstract thinking that sometimes comes close to what could be labelled as imagination.

However, we should probably make a distinction between imagination and abstract thinking as such for at least one important reason. As Piaget himself (1970, 171–172) states, a certain level of development a person achieves is not only “characterized [...] by a fixed thought content,” but rather varies “according to the environment in which the child lives.” Thus it might not be too brave an assumption that a certain level of development cannot be strictly attributed to a certain age either. Similarly, Sian Higgins (1999, 88) emphasises the role of the environment in a person’s cognitive development and points out that if a 10-year-old “can discuss the abstract then surely it must follow that they are capable of abstract thought; for how can a child discuss something that they cannot think about.” Even though Higgins (1999, 88) points out that age is not “the only indication of a child’s development [but rather] Vygotsky (1986) and Donaldson (1983) [are] right to suggest that experience and social context have an important role to play,” she is not saying that the ability for actual abstract thinking would extend to very early childhood. To draw on Piaget’s (1970, 33) words, being

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more intricate actions such as “combining, dissociating, [and] ordering”, providing these operations are carried out on concrete objects (Piaget 1977, 456–461).

able to imagine a bogeyman in the closet is one thing, and employing “propositions from which it is possible to draw *logical conclusions*” is another thing altogether [emphasis mine].

The ability to think in abstract terms that entails understanding of concepts such as death and spirituality at a more metaphysical level – evinced, possibly even developed by both Michael and Mina in the course of the novel – has probably in part been triggered by their personal experiences with death and the angel-like creature that calls himself Skellig. As Robert Coles (1990, 23) states, the research that explores the capacities a child possesses at a certain age is usually conducted in structured situations and is characterised by “a researcher’s predetermined line of questioning.” The questions asked in these kinds of situations may very well be too theoretical to leave much room for deducing answers from one’s own experiences. Piaget (1970, 172–173) recognises this when he notes that “the child’s thought (though no more so than that of the adult) cannot ever be captured in itself and independently of the environment.”

As regards the protagonists’ age and the level of cognitive development they seem to represent, the situation in *Skellig* would seem to be fairly clear. That is, Michael and Mina both represent the sort of mental capacities that Piaget’s and others’ theories on cognitive development would make us expect of the two pre-adolescents. I feel, however, that it has been important to establish the grounds for what is at the core of this thesis: what it takes to understand the abstract concepts and experiences of death and spirituality, and that Michael and Mina are sufficiently developed to deal with this level of abstract thinking. Next I will move on to studying the concept of death.

### 3 The concept of death

Death is one of the most central themes in *Skellig*. Not only does Michael's family move into a house the previous owner (Ernie Myers) of which has just died, but Michael's prematurely born baby sister is also fighting for her life because of a heart condition. Moreover, there is of course Skellig, who Michael first thinks is dead. There are also petrified remains of dead birds, dead insects and rodents which the owls feed to Skellig, and then there is the idea of Skellig as an angel of death. Death and its bleak shadow are very much present in the novel. The different aspects of death will be discussed in this chapter.

In addition to death as cessation of vital functions, and as something carnal so to speak, death is also present on a symbolic level in the novel. As Kallistos Ware (1995, 30) states, a person's growth process also involves and even requires what could be referred to as tiny deaths in the sense that "something in us has to die so that we pass on to the next stage of living." I would argue that this is exactly what happens in *Skellig* and with the character of Michael, in particular. Ware (1995, 30) adds, moreover, that "these transitions, particularly in the case of the child becoming a teenager, can often be crisis-ridden and even acutely painful." Ware is joined in his opinion by both Mwalimu Imara (1975, 148), who says that "living without change is not living at all, not growing at all," and Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1975, 145), who is of the opinion that "[t]hrough a willingness to risk the unknown, to venture forth into unfamiliar territory, you can undertake the search for your own self – the ultimate goal of growth." In *Skellig*, Michael is very much treading unfamiliar territory – both symbolically (his growth and cognitive development) and concretely (new neighbourhood).

In addition to being symbolically present in a person's growth, death is also a concept – and fairly abstract at that – which a child must learn to understand in order to grow into a functioning member of the society. In 3.1 I am going to divide death into subcomponents and try to determine which of these are the easiest and which the hardest for a child to

understand. In 3.2 I will discuss the somewhat changed role of death in the society and also take a peek at how it is dealt with in children's literature. With the help of the preceding paragraphs, in 3.4 I will discuss how a child perceives death. I will try to include both reality-based research and instances from *Skellig* in that chapter.

### 3.1 Death and its subcomponents

When it comes to defining and representing death, we should bear in mind that “[e]very representation of death is a misinterpretation” (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993, 20 [emphasis in the original]). Like Bronfen and Goodwin (1993, 4) point out, death is, essentially, “always only represented.” No human knows death to the extent of having experienced it and “then returning to write about it” (*ibid.*).

Even though death is a fairly elusive concept, some kind of a definition or description of death is in order. With the help of the subcomponents of death, I will try to answer briefly the question of what death is. Firstly, it should be pointed out that “[a]lthough death poses a metaphysical problem, it is a physical event” (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993, 20). To elaborate on that, Sian Higgins (1999, 82), Mark W. Speece and Sandor B. Brent (1984, 1671), and Eva L. Essa and Colleen I. Murray (1994, 75–76) have established that the subcomponents of death include notions of finality (or irrevocability, or irreversibility), inevitability (or universality), nonfunctionality (or cessation of bodily functions) and causality. This is not the case in many tv-series or children's stories, where death can be reversed by means of magic or medicine, for example. Death is also something that will eventually happen to all living things, it is not only something that happens to old people – thus death's finality and inevitability. Moreover, death is not – and should not be dealt as analogous with – a form of sleep. Rather, death brings an end to all bodily functions, not only movement but also thought, as well as all other concrete and abstract abilities. That is why one of the subcomponents of death is

nonfunctionality. Finally, death is always caused by something – thus its causality. As Essa and Murray (1994, 75–76) point out, it is easier for younger children to realise that death can be caused by “external causes, such as guns or accident, while older children recognize internal causes, such as old age, illness, or some other biological factor.” Although one could probably divide death into further subcomponents, I would consider the aforementioned as the most essential four.

Throughout the novel, Michael in particular tries to define Skellig. Who is he? What is he? At first, Skellig seems dead. That is primarily because he does not move at all. While Speece and Brent’s “Review of Three Components of a Death Concept” (1984, 1671) introduces the components irreversibility, nonfunctionality and universality, Mitchell (1967, 53) emphasises the notion of immobility, equivalent to Speece and Brent’s term nonfunctionality:

They called her [a dead girl of six or seven years in whose death chamber the observer was invited as a child] a doll, and a doll is immobile, and *immobility is the most fearful thing about death*. [my emphasis]

It is partly for the same reason that Michael is afraid for his little sister; because she seems to move so little.

Her face was dead white and her hair was dead black.<sup>6</sup> (*Skellig*, 11)

“Sometimes I think she stops breathing,” I said. (*Skellig*, 35)

“It looks like she’s going to bloody die,” I said. (*Skellig*, 40)

THE WIRES AND THE TUBES WERE in her again. The glass case was shut. *She didn’t move*. She was wrapped in white. Her hair was fluffy, dead straight and dark. [my emphasis] (*Skellig*, 96)

I will return to the subcomponents of the death concept in 3.4 where I will also look more carefully at how children react to and perceive death and the imminent prospect of death, both

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<sup>6</sup> The word ‘dead’ is also used to represent Michael’s childish limited vocabulary where ‘dead’ is an intensifier and equivalent for ‘complete’ and ‘absolute’. According to Ronald Macaulay (2006, 270-271) the word ‘dead’ was frequently used by adolescents in 1997. However, the word was used to denote positive or neutral affect in 74% of the examples. I want to thank Juhani Klemola for bringing this study to my attention.

in real life and in *Skellig*. Before that, however, I will take a look at how death is viewed in the society in general, and how it is portrayed in children's literature.

### 3.2 Death and society

Taking into consideration the universality of death, it would be only logical that death had a central role in the modern society as well. In reality the role is somewhat different, however. It could be said that in the modern (Western) society, death is increasingly dreaded and marginalised in the sense that our culture is making it a forbidden subject, “allowing it to emerge only in ritually determined moments” (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993, 3). Like most things in the world, death is also something the modern human wants to have control over. To this end, as Tamar Granot (2005, 37) quite correctly argues, “[t]wentieth-century Western culture has largely removed death from the context of home and family,” which is why children can live to be adolescents and even young adults before they encounter death, or even life-threatening disease, personally for the first time, often through the death of a grandparent (see also Esmonde 1987, 34–35). Even though death is as integral and predictable a part of life as birth, it has become “a dreaded and unspeakable issue to be avoided by every means possible in our modern society” (Kübler-Ross 1975, 5). Since the science of medicine has not yet invented a way to make us immortal, people have to control death in other ways. It is interesting that we often forget the fact that compared to our prehistoric ancestors, who had a life expectancy of as low as 18 years<sup>7</sup>, it could be said that we enjoy what to them would have felt like everlasting life. In addition, the people of that era would have been, in general, much more aware of death, because it touched their lives on a daily basis – if not through the deaths of people close to them, then at least through hunting and other actions meant to give them a livelihood (Lewis 1995,

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<sup>7</sup> This estimation is from Lewis (1995, 199), but even more generous estimations do not give a life expectancy of more than 30 years to people of prehistoric times. See for example Wikipedia: “Life Expectancy” [Internet] Available at: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life\\_expectancy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_expectancy)>. [Accessed January 30, 2010.]

199). All in all, it would not be unfair to state that “[i]n earlier ages, man was on better terms with death,” and, in part, it is actually the Judeo-Christian heritage which is to blame for the development (Esmonde, 34). That is to say, ancient phrases such as “memento mori” that one may have been frightened by have always been balanced with promises of a place where there is no more death. In the course of time, even religions – religious leaders, that is – have lost their ability to deal and connect with the bleaker side of life. In addition to the advances of medical science, Christianity has probably done its share to estrange people from death.

### 3.3 Death in children’s literature

The role of death in contemporary children’s literature could be said to be much the same as its role in society in general. In contemporary children’s literature, death is often marginalised or sanitised, sometimes to the point of making the concept of death ever more difficult for the children to understand (e.g. the sleep analogy which might mislead a child). Another way of treating death is what Esmonde (1987, 35) refers to as “the great fertilizer” approach by which she means a tendency to over-emphasise the aspect of *new life* springing from death which, in Esmonde’s opinion trivialises death. It would seem that, as regards death, many authors have difficulties dealing with both the aspect of loss and the question of the hereafter. Historically, the theme of death in children’s literature has changed throughout the years. As Avery and Kinnell (1995, 46) state, starting from late 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was “much less insistence on the child’s need to prepare for an early death,” because child and infant mortality was starting to decline significantly. Although some writers were still writing about illness and early death, the primary focus shifted to themes such as good Christian life (Avery & Kinnell 1995, 46). By mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, death had become taboo, “except in history and war, and to dispose of inconvenient parents” (Hollindale & Sutherland 1995, 259). Esmonde (1987, 34–35) points out

that death became taboo largely because of the “desire to protect children from all unpleasantness.”

With the change in the treatment of the theme of death, the treatment of the hereafter also changed. Especially when it comes to realistic novels, “[i]n this totally secular age, the hereafter, so familiar to our ancestors, has become a *terra incognita*” (Esmonde 1987, 35) [emphasis in the original]. Esmonde (*ibid.*) states that for some decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, children’s books dealing with death were fairly few, but even with the newly awakened interest of the late-20<sup>th</sup> century in children’s books representing death, there are few books that are not “either ‘problem-solving’ books which can pass only as bibliotherapy or ‘mediocre, soap operatic’ sermons.” Death is often depicted as “the great fertilizer,” in that “[d]ead pets (and dead relatives?) ‘help flowers grow.’” Esmonde (1987, 35) argues that books, which treat death as the great fertilizer, do not have “lasting value as literature because death is part of the story not merely the *raison d’être* of the book.” Moreover, Esmonde (*ibid.*) perceives it as desirable for a book to mention (the possibility) of an afterlife. Considering the idea of death as the great fertilizer “soul-shrinking,” Esmonde (*ibid.*) does not see it as problematic to offer the child reader the idea of an afterlife, even though we cannot know whether there is such a thing. After all, death may as well be the end of all things, not a glorious new beginning.

For Esmonde (1987, 42), “[r]ealistic fiction is a most unsatisfactory medium for expressing a truth which is beyond reason, beyond mortal knowledge,” and therefore the genre of children’s literature that best deals with death as well as metaphysical realities in general, is fantasy. Quoting Ursula LeGuin, Esmonde (1987, 42) states that “Fantasy is the natural, the appropriate, language for the recounting of the spiritual journey.” She also views rather critically the so-called death education, which I will briefly touch upon below, saying that, children “may lie in coffins indeed, but until educators and writers overcome their fear of the metaphysical aspect of death, children will be denied true insight into the function of death as

part of life” (*ibid.*). Esmonde argues that in the fantasy stories that best deal with the land of death, no attempt is made to disguise or diminish the feelings of grief, sadness and loss, nor is there a sense of easy comfort present. In this sense, fantasy should not be viewed as an escapist genre of literature (Milner & Milner 1987, 33: Foreword to Esmonde’s essay). Rather, it should be viewed as something that gives children a model of grief they need when they have life-changing negative experiences (such as the death of a relative) for the first time.

*Skellig*, which has been characterised as magical realism (e.g. Latham 2006b), does have aspects of fantasy in it. The novel does not shy away from dealing with the transcendent and metaphysical aspects of life and death, and I would argue that it can, in some respects, “expand the child’s comprehension of metaphysical reality,” which Esmonde (1987, 42) says is the aim of certain fantasy authors. I will come back to this later, when I deal with the question of how a child perceives death, but in brief I could point out a couple of instances of how death is treated in *Skellig*. Firstly, as a 12-year-old boy, Michael probably has already formed a fairly good picture of what death is and what happens at death. He understands that death happens to all humans, but he would seem to think that old age is the primary cause of death, as was the case with Ernie Myers, the previous tenant of Michael’s current home (*Skellig* 2, where Michael sees Ernie Myers with his mind’s eye lying dead under the kitchen table). Primarily he would seem to attribute death to nonfunctionality and the idea of irreversible separation. This is shown not only in Michael’s fear of his sister’s immobility (*Skellig* 35, 96), but also in that Michael seems to think that old people, too, become less mobile as they are approaching death (e.g. *Skellig* 2, where it is said that “toward the end Ernie couldn’t manage the stairs”). Even though Michael would seem to have a realistic picture of the physiological aspects of death, he still needs help with dealing with certain metaphysical questions of life and death, because the answers given his parents feel unsatisfactory. His own experiences, however, can be said to guide him towards an expanded comprehension of metaphysical reality. Michael learns not to

pay too much attention to appearances. Even though Skellig's appearance is almost beastly, for example, his nature is in fact angelic (compare *Skellig* 8–9 with 118–120, 165–168, for example). As already stated in chapter 2, Michael also learns that something does not need to be physically tangible in order for one to believe in it (*Skellig*, 163). I will now move on to dealing with a child's perception of death in more detail.

### 3.4 How a child perceives death

As has been discussed above, the concept of death is not easy for a child to grasp, because it includes both concrete and abstract dimensions, the understanding of which requires not only intellectual and emotional development, but also “an ability to conceptualize at the abstract level” (Granot 2005, 28). It is this ability that will enable a child or adolescent to comprehend the four subcomponents of the death concept, which have been discussed above: finality, inevitability, nonfunctionality and causality. We should also note that, “[e]ven when children understand the concept of irreversibility at the intellectual level, there remains the issue of its acceptance at the emotional level” (Granot 2005, 28). In other words, even though a child has an ability to understand the somewhat abstract concept of death, he may not *want* to understand it. To some extent at least, the case is similar with adults, too.

As has been discussed above, on average the fourth and final phase of a child's cognitive development starts around the age of 12 years. In the course of this period the child will develop an ability to make logical conclusions on abstract topics. These include an ability to understand the concept of death. A child who has personally had significant death-related experiences – such as a death of a parent or sibling – might reach this awareness earlier, however (Gordon 1986, 16). A child as young as four years old may know that death means separation although the child may not realise that it is something permanent. Developing an understanding of the primary four subcomponents of death is a gradual process, and again the

child will first come to understand the more concrete aspects (e.g. cessation of movement before cessation of thinking) (Higgins 1999, 82; see also Bering & Bjorklund 2004, 217–218). Colerte Hume (1998, quoted by Higgins 1999, 84) states that one can explain death to a child of just three years old, providing this is done in a way the child can relate to. Hume (quoted by Higgins 1999, 84) is also of the opinion that explanations of death should not be overly simplistic: “Fairy-tale anthropomorphism is not helpful for [the child’s] conceptual development.” In fact, the same conclusion was already drawn above where I discussed representations of death in children’s literature.

### 3.4.1 Reactions to death and the prospect of death in *Skellig*

The overall atmosphere of *Skellig* is rather bleak. In fact, there are probably fewer passages that convey light or hope than there are passages that give forth darkness, filth or death. In the course of the novel, Michael has to define his attitude to death, as well as to the (imminent) prospect of death, perhaps for the first time in his life. What is death? What happens to people when they die? In *Skellig*, we are mainly talking about the prospect of death, but also about death in actuality. Michael’s family has just moved to a house, the previous owner of which, an elderly man named Ernie Myers, had been found dead in the house. Dead birds and rodents also feature in *Skellig*. Then we have Michael’s prematurely born baby sister who is fighting for her life. As Robert Kastenbaum (1986, 6–7) argues, “confrontation with death in adolescence – in actuality or in prospect – overwhelms the fragile defensive structures at this time of life, often leading to extreme reactions.” Indeed, Michael’s reactions to death could be said to be extreme at times. In the very least it can be said that death is on Michael’s mind a lot more than the adults around him seem to realise.

All the way round the house I kept thinking of the old man, Ernie Myers, that had lived here on his own for years. He’d been dead nearly a week before they found him under the table in the kitchen. That’s what I saw when Stone [the real estate agent] told us about seeing with the mind’s eye. (*Skellig*, 2)

Although Michael does not actually name Ernie Myers often, various things about and in the house – the toilet in the dining room, for example – could be seen and read as reminding him of the dead old man. While Michael does not seem to consider this image particularly horrifying, it would seem to be something that he is preoccupied with. It is as though Michael is trying to understand what might have happened to Ernie Myers before (i.e. biology of death) and after he had died (possible afterlife). It might also remind Michael of his own mortality.

In the novel Michael's parents do not seem to understand Michael's unpronounced need for help in processing Myers' death. At the same time Michael is learning to live with the possibility that his newborn sister might die. Calvin and Smith (1986, 215) point out that “‘Help me, I hurt’ is a plea expressed in many ways.” Michael’s behaviour does not indicate the more serious symptoms – such as substance use and promiscuity – of being in need of help, but it could be argued that Michael becomes close to truancy and belligerence.<sup>8</sup> The aforementioned symptoms are listed by Calvin and Smith (1986, 215). Rather, Michael’s symptoms are more disguised and withdrawn, although it could be argued that his reactions include almost all of Essa and Murray’s (1994, 80) list of “[y]oung children’s behavioral reactions to the death of someone close”: “guilt, sadness, anger, fear, hostility, clinging, regression to earlier behaviors, physical complaints, and what may appear to be inappropriate outbursts.” Of these it is clinging, Michael’s desperate need to be noticed – which is indicated by Michael’s tendency at one point to ask the wrong questions at the wrong time – which should clearly speak for the need of help and support from his parents, and from adults in general. After all, this might be the first time in Michael’s life that he realises death is not only related to old people, but people might die at any moment, regardless of their age. Puolimatka

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<sup>8</sup> In the film version of *Skellig*, Michael’s father sits his son down and tells him that alcohol is not the answer, when he discovers that Michael has been taking bottles of beer from the fridge. Actually Michael takes the beer to Skellig.

and Solasaari (2006, 210) also emphasise that realising the fact that death may occur regardless of a person's age may come as a shock to a child:

It might be relatively easy for a child to face the general fact that human beings are mortal, since this fact does not touch her personally if she thinks that death is related to old people but not to children. Were the child to become deeply conscious of the fact that she might die at any moment, however, coping with the anguish involved might be impossible.

Although Michael's sister does not die, it is a possible scenario he has to learn to live with. In addition to the lack of help Michael experiences from adults, they – his parents in particular – also make a mistake in that they do not show their own feelings openly when Michael is present. This is something Essa and Murray (1994, 78) say that parents should try to avoid. Rather, their open reactions to the prospect of death should “model grief and give validity to the sadness” both the parents and the child are feeling (*ibid.*). Obviously both of Michael's parents try to hide their true feelings from Michael, thinking that expressing emotions truthfully would only add to Michael's sadness. By doing so, they fail to provide Michael with a model of grief and an “environment in which questions and feelings can be expressed” (Essa & Murray 1994, 78).

We should not, however, jump to conclusions that any of this is exclusively a bad thing for Michael's growth. Packman et al. (2006, 828) discuss the possibility of “[g]rowing through adversity” and note that it “is not unique to siblings who experience the death of a brother or sister; their growth may begin even before the death, and may be a pattern that is set earlier in the course of the sick child's illness.” I would argue that, to some extent, this is what happens with Michael. Although Michael has some clear psychosomatic symptoms<sup>9</sup>, it could be perhaps said that, when his sister is recovered, the whole process, though difficult, leaves Michael with a far better understanding of self, and of his limitations as human (e.g. his mortality). Puolimatka and Solasaari (2006, 206) argue that

Becoming more aware of one's mortality can inspire a person to live more fully and awaken a passionate interest to find the best way to live one's life. It can

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<sup>9</sup> These symptoms culminate in Michael fainting (*Skellig*, 149), but he also experiences symptoms such as trembling (*Skellig*, 45) which are probably caused by anxiety.

awaken a passion to understand life's fundamental questions and live life intensively, not merely to inspect life theoretically with a cool and dispassionate attitude.

Don Latham (2006a, 7) also points out that at some point children need to "confront their own mortality and successfully negotiate the passage from childhood to adulthood." Although it is not clear whether Michael actually becomes more aware of his *own* mortality, it could well be argued that, with the help of Skellig, Mina and his own experiences, he finds a new way of looking at life more closely, less theoretically and more passionately.

As was noted above, the process of trying to learn to cope with the possibility of his sister dying is very difficult for Michael. Although the writers I will quote in the following paragraphs mostly deal with actual bereavement, I would argue that these ideas can be extended to include situations such as that in *Skellig*, the prospect of death and possibility of bereavement. After all, as Packman et al. (2006, 828) argue, the mental growth of a child possibly begins before the death of a sibling. It could also be stated that the death of a sibling can be compared to the death of a spouse. In some respects it is even more difficult and problematic from the bereaved sibling's point of view, because many times the bereaved sibling faces what Packman et al. (2006, 825) refer to as "a double loss":

After a child's death, just when surviving siblings most need the stability and security in their family, parents may not be able to support them. [...] A number of authors [...] refer to sibling loss as a double loss – not only the death of the sibling, but also the loss of their parents' support. Overwhelmed by their own grief, parents' capacity to look after the needs of the surviving children is sorely limited even though they remain concerned for their children. They often just do not have the emotional energy to adequately reach out to them.

In similar terms, Granot (2005, 130) explains that events such as losing a child may deprive parents of their energy, which is why the remaining siblings will feel abandoned. She even argues that for a child the worst thing is not the death of a member of family but the abandonment by the parents, who are consumed by grief and do not function as parents (*ibid.*).

This is clearly the case with Michael and his parents, even though his sister eventually survives.

We had bread and cheese and tea. The baby lay there in a little carrier beside us. Mum went upstairs to put together the things the baby would need in the hospital. I put the skeleton picture on the table and looked at it but couldn't concentrate on it. "That's good," Dad said, but he wasn't looking at it properly either. [...] "What are shoulder blades for?" [Michael asked his mother] "Oh, Michael!" she said. She shoved past me like I was really getting on her nerves. (*Skellig*, 38)

Mum and Dad were sitting holding hands, gazing down at the baby. "Hello," said Mum. She tried to smile, but her voice was flat and I could see she'd been crying. (*Skellig*, 68)

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!" (*Skellig*, 142–143)

To use Granot's (2005, 130) terms, as a consequence of their newborn daughter's condition, Michael's parents invest "much less emotional effort" in their son.

As discussed above, Michael does not always verbally express his concern and feelings about his sister being ill, which fits into a typical behavioural pattern of bereaved pre-adolescents. On the one hand, Michael tries to remain strong for his parents. On the other hand, he does not seem to know how and when to express his feelings. One important reason for the latter was already mentioned earlier in this chapter. As Michael's parents do not show their feelings truthfully themselves, they deprive Michael of a model of grief. To some extent Michael seems to process his sister's condition by trying to start conversations with his parents about things seemingly irrelevant and unrelated to his sister's condition, which again is not something his parents are willing to invest energy in. These conversation initiations, which could reflect Michael's self-centredness to some extent<sup>10</sup>, are many times rejected by his parents who are also sometimes short-tempered with Michael. After he asks his parents "what

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<sup>10</sup> Michael has been the only child in the family for a fairly long time, and the birth of a baby sister may make him feel jealous, especially when his parents invest a lot of energy in the baby who is in a fragile state. It is the art of

was going to happen to the garage now,” his father answers that “[i]t’s not important, son. Not now” (*Skellig*, 12). A bit later, a similar thing happens with his mother.

I went up and sat on the landing. I watched Mum throwing undershirts and diapers and cardigans into a little case. She kept clicking her tongue, and going, ‘Agh! Agh!’ like she was mad at everything. She saw me there and tried to smile but started to click her tongue again. [...] ‘What are shoulder blades for?’ I said. ‘Oh Michael!’ she said. She shoved past me like I was really getting on her nerves. (*Skellig*, 38)

Although she comes back to Michael and gives an answer to his question, it would not be too brave an assumption that, at times, Michael feels that he “is not enough” and that he “does not belong,” which are two of the four general responses of a bereaved sibling, according to Packman et al. (2006, 829).

The surviving sibling often feels inadequate compared with the sibling who has died. Everyone always asks about how their parents “are doing,” not recognizing or validating their own grief or needs. (Packman et al. 2006, 831)

They [bereaved siblings] may feel as if they are not part of it [e.g., the family and the experience they are going through], they are in the way, and they don’t belong. (Packman et al. 2006, 830)

In *Skellig*, too, there are situations where adult characters ask Michael how his parents are doing, or say that they are thinking about them. Although Mrs. Dando also asks Michael if he is okay, she usually concludes their conversations with something like “[t]ell your parents I was asking” (*Skellig*, 14). Mina’s mother, while otherwise different from the other adults in *Skellig*, also asks Michael about the baby and asks him to tell his parents she is “thinking of them” (*Skellig*, 70). Packman et al. (2006, 826) discuss this in the following terms:

Bereaved siblings are often “the forgotten or invisible mourners” receiving overt and covert messages from significant others to repress and deny their grief. [...] Bereaved adolescents, for example, are frequently given messages to ignore and/or postpone their own grief and “remain strong for their parents.” These teens reported being told “The death must have been really difficult for your parents.”

This is also something Granot addresses. She states, echoing Packman et al. somewhat, that “[o]lder siblings are often given a message by society that it is now up to them to take care of

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self-sacrifice and self-denial, “move away from self-love” (Sperry 2001, 70), which Michael learns through his

their parents. They are not given permission to grieve because they are expected to ‘be strong’ and ‘be good’ for their parents” (Granot 2005, 185). As pointed out above, Michael receives a lot of this kind of mostly implicit messages from the adults around him. For Michael, this might be the first time that ‘the society’<sup>11</sup> demands something from him without his parents being there to shield and cushion these demands. He is also struggling with himself, especially as regards his own feelings and how he feels those should be recognised by ‘the society.’ As Granot states, on the one hand children want the people around them to recognise their difficult situation, but on the other hand they do not want compassion or to be labelled ‘different’ because of their difficulties. This creates a dilemma for the children “regarding their expectations of society” (Granot 2005, 146–147). In Michael’s case this leads to understandable confusion, the best example of which is probably his discussions with Mrs. Dando.

While I was standing there, Mrs. Dando, one of the yard ladies, came over to me. She’d known my parents for years. “You okay, Michael?” she said. “Fine.” “And the baby?” “Fine too.” “Not footballing today?” I shook my head. “Tell your parents I was asking,” she said. She took a gumdrop out of her pocket and held it out to me. A gumdrop. It was what she gave the new kids when they were sad or something. “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)

Mrs. Dando came again when I was standing by myself at the side of the field. “What’s up?” she said. “Nothing.” “And how’s the little one?” “Fine.” I looked at the ground. “Sometimes I think she stops breathing,” I said. “Then I’ll look at her and she’s fine.” [...] She touched me on the shoulder. For a moment I wondered about telling her about the man in the garage. Then I saw Leakey looking so I shrugged her off and I ran back, yelling, “On me head! On me head!” (*Skellig*, 35)

These excerpts show how Michael’s feelings as to how he would like his difficulties to be recognised are somewhat ambivalent. They are also an example of how Mrs. Dando, inquiring after Michael, always wants to extend her regards to Michael’s parents as well. An argument could be made that Mrs. Dando is primarily concerned with how Michael’s parents are coping with their newborn daughter’s condition.

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<sup>11</sup>spiritual development. I will return to this in the next chapter when I deal with spirituality.

Packman et al. (2006, 829) use the words ‘emotional’ and ‘psychophysiological’ when they discuss the bereaved sibling’s “four general responses,” which they characterise in “the words of the siblings themselves.”<sup>12</sup> One of the responses is “*I Hurt Inside*” [emphasis in the original]. This could be seen as one possible explanation for Michael fainting.

I found myself falling forward. I gripped the windowsill tight. I touched my heart. “Oh, Mina!” I said. “What is it?” “My heart’s stopped. Feel my heart. There’s nothing there.” She caught her breath. She touched my chest. She called my name. And then there was just blackness. (*Skellig*, 149)

Rather than calling Michael’s fainting a psychosomatic symptom, we might also suggest some more esoteric explanations for it – just like Mina does by explaining that “‘William Blake used to faint sometimes,’ [...] ‘He said the soul was able to leap out of the body for a while, and then leap back again’” (*Skellig*, 151). It is probably easier – and more *rational*, to say the least – to attribute this to psychosomatic causes. Nonetheless, it would seem that Michael is feeling someone else’s pain (his sister’s, that is) physically. At least on a symbolic level, “[b]ereavement, the loss of a loved one, involves equally a death in the heart of the one who remains alive. We feel that a part of ourselves is no longer there, that a limb has been amputated” (Ware 1995, 31). This could be, in a sense, what Michael is feeling throughout the novel, like the instance of him feeling his sister’s heart beating next to his own (*Skellig*, 154).

### 3.4.2 Introducing the reality of death and the possibility of afterlife to children

The fourth and final of the “four general responses” which Packman et al. (2006, 830) say manifest “[t]he impact of a child’s death on siblings [is] ‘*I Don’t Understand*’” [emphasis in the original]. Somehow adults would have to help the child to understand death, and give answers to his questions ‘why’ and ‘what now.’ In *Skellig* it is Mina who explains to Michael that sometimes things happen that we just cannot understand, and “we just have to accept there

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<sup>11</sup> By society I am referring to Michael’s social connections rather than society as an institution.

<sup>12</sup> These general responses are “*I Hurt Inside*,” “*I Don’t Understand*,” “*I Don’t Belong*” and “*I’m Not Enough*.” (Packman et al. 2006, 829–830)

are things we can't know" (*Skellig*, 140). As has been argued throughout the thesis, in the Western world adults tend to go extreme lengths in order to protect their children from all unpleasantness. However, Puolimatka and Solasaari (2006, 201) argue that "[s]ince it is impossible to hide the reality of death from children, they have to be prepared to confront the fact in one way or another."

However, since death is a topic that causes extreme emotional stress to many human beings, it has to be approached with great sensitivity. This holds especially true for children who have a spontaneous joy for life that ought not to be endangered by gloomy facts about human existence. (Puolimatka & Solasaari 2006, 201)

Thus, as has already been established above, the approach should be a truthful one, but it should also convey a sense of hope. One thing the adults should also be ready to discuss with their children is the possibility of afterlife. Regardless of the child's age and maturity, and even regardless of the adult's own religious views, many adults would probably give religious answers to a child's questions about death, as well as questions regarding what happens to the dead person, for example.

In answering a questionnaire in 1963, which included 'How would you answer a direct question from a child (a) aged 6–7 years, (b) 11–12 years, "What happens when you die?"' a small selected group of 105 third-year training college students returned answers. About half (56) gave religious answers. They are now teaching. To the sevens they would say such things as 'You go to live with Jesus' and to the elevens 'the earthly body decays but the spirit lives on'. (Mitchell 1967, 18)

Unfortunately, Mitchell only states "about half [...] gave religious answers," but does not specify what answers the other half gave. As we are talking about a study that was conducted more than 40 years ago, it might follow that in the more secular society of today religious answers would be fewer. Michael seldom pronounces his concern and feelings, which is probably why he is not given comfort through answers like the ones in Mitchell's study above. In *Skellig*, the adults do not really introduce the comforting (religious) idea of an afterlife, for example. To begin with, the novel includes fairly few explicit references to religious/spiritual concepts, especially as regards the adults' remarks in the novel. A reference is made by

Michael's mother, however, to the chance that "shoulder blades are where your wings were, when you were an angel [and] *where your wings will grow again one day*" [my emphasis] (*Skellig*, 38–9). Then there is Mina's remark that her mother and she "often think of him [Mina's father] watching us from Heaven" (*Skellig*, 50). I will study the spiritual and religious aspects of the novel more closely in chapter 4.

To conclude this passage on how children perceive death and at which age they will come to understand the concept of death, I would like to go back to Essa and Murray (1994) and Gordon (1986) who argue that a child who has had personal death-related experiences can earlier arrive at an understanding of the concept of death. At one stage in *Skellig* Michael says to Mina that "You get better at playing football by playing football [...] You get better at drawing by drawing" (*Skellig*, 136). I would argue, then, that a child can only learn to cope with death by having to cope with death. Some precursor 'death education' courses have indeed been organised, where parts of the course have been about putting children to situations where they have to think about death-related issues (see e.g. Moore 1989, 4–6). Aspects of the course Moore describes include "Death as a Part of Living," "Reaction to Loss," "Coping and Helping Others to Cope with Loss," "Preparing for Death" and "Suicide and Depression." But as Esmonde (1987, 42) states, the experience of visiting a funeral home or lying in a coffin will hardly prepare anyone for dealing with death in personal life. One of the aims of these kinds of courses is lessening children's fear of death. In today's 'deathless society,' however, I find the idea somewhat contradictory – meaning that for this sort of education to work it would seem to necessitate personal death-related experiences. Although bringing this topic to education is about breaking a taboo, and for that the idea is laudable, teaching children to cope with loss and telling them about the concept of death is nothing new. Namely, there are a lot of stories and fairytales about death that children find soothing. For example, Mina's mother tells the children a story about the goddess Persephone who was trapped inside the earth for a long time.

The days shrank, they became cold and short and dark. Living things hid themselves away. Spring came when she was released and made her slow way up to the world again. The world became brighter and bolder in order to welcome her back. It began to be filled with warmth and light. The animals dared to wake, they dared to have their young. Plants dared to send out buds and shoots. Life dared to come back. (*Skellig*, 146)

Mina's mother's words about how "spring made the world burst into life after months of apparent death" must be soothing to Michael whose little sister has appeared to be nearly dead for so long (*ibid.*). Of course the story about Persephone is far from being the only one in the tradition of soothing stories about death. The story about Jesus, the son of God, who rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion, is arguably one of them. Although these stories come close to representing death as a form of sleep, as temporary, they may help children to the optimistic understanding that death is not necessarily the end. Rather, it might be the beginning of something new. Out of death comes life. Without death, there would be no life, let alone joy of life.

### 3.5 A child's understanding of healing powers

Before moving on to dealing with the spiritual aspects of the novel properly, I would like to discuss something that, in a sense, touches both spirituality (or even superstition) and death. I am talking about 'healing powers,' and in particular about the ways a child perceives them and comes to understand how they work. As Brown (2005, 191–195) notes, "[r]eligion and medicine find their common roots in ancient understandings of disease and healing." Although the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages began to think that the study of medicine gave way to mundane temptations, it is no wonder "that clergy are continually drawn to the care of the sick. [...] It is as if some primitive force drives each of these modern and separated professions towards a 'reunion of the estranged.'" In *Skellig* we have to pay attention not only to the means medical science has to make people healthier, but also to the possibility of supernatural or miraculous cures and the healing effect of concrete (human) touch.

When it comes to the means of healing medical science has, they are also something the function of which a child will come to understand during the last phase of cognitive development. Alongside other domains of knowledge, such as understanding of logic, language, mathematics and physics, medical science is understandably something that requires a well-developed understanding of abstract ideas, and an ability to hypothesise on possible scenarios (Piaget 1977, 705). This means that children start to become cognitively aware of the possibilities, and also limitations, of medicine around the age of 12 years. In *Skellig*, the modern medicine is portrayed as having a fairly limited power over people's well-being. Michael, in particular, is somewhat sceptical towards doctors.

He [Dr. Death] tried to smile again. “Sleepwalking?” he said. He raised his eyebrows. “And this is true?” I stared at him. “Yes. This is true.” He watched me. He was cold, dry, pale as death. Wings would never rise at his back. (*Skellig*, 123)

There are also other passages (see e.g. *Skellig* 37–38, 64) where it would seem that it is difficult for Michael to trust doctors; either the doctors' words about the baby getting better, their actions such as smiles and winks, or their capability of curing the baby. Latham (2006a, 43) also acknowledges this, arguing, that Michael considers the medical establishment “a formidable institution of adult society that represents [...] the most immediate threat to his sister.”

Even though people in today's Western world seem to be more secular than the people of any other era before, many of them still turn to religion, or to spirituality in general, when the situation becomes bleakest. In *Skellig*, Michael's newborn sister's condition is an obvious representation of such a situation. As evinced by the aforementioned excerpts from the novel (i.e. *Skellig* 37–38, 64, 122–125), in addition to Michael, some characters in the novel express feelings that imply their crumbling faith in science, more precisely doctors and the medical science. Another indication of this is that at no point do Michael's parents, for example, comfort him by saying that his sister is ‘in good hands’ when she is taken to the hospital. Rather,

they say that there is nothing they (i.e. Michael and his parents) can do (e.g. *Skellig*, 143). As Michael finds out in the course of the novel, however, there are other ways than science that can help a person get better. For example, he sees that as his little sister is stroked, fed and nurtured, she seems to get a little better. This is what Michael and Mina try to do to Skellig, too. They feed, stroke and nurture him. We would not even need Michael's explicit question: "Can love help a person to get better?" to tell us that it is indeed love that helps both Skellig and Michael's little sister to get better (*Skellig*, 161). When a person is in need of medical care, a child sees that person taken care of: doctors and nurses (and people in general) touch him, monitor him and perhaps even feed him. The fact that Michael's sister does not seem to get better regardless of the treatment and care she is given, makes him feel skeptical about doctors and about the whole medical institution/science. It could be said, however, that his belief in nurturing (e.g. touch) does not falter. In fact, it is interesting that a small child might think that all one needs to do to keep someone alive is to keep stroking and nurturing him.

[A student from a group of 50 eighteen-year-old students] made the interesting observation: 'I also spent at least two weeks trying to bring five dead (drowned) puppies back to life. I had been told that if you stroked them you could get them alive – I dressed them up and spent fourteen days in secret with them talking to them – keeping them warm.' (Mitchell 1967, 49)

Nurturing, or healing with touch, is something even a small child can understand because it is something concrete and at least seems to happen causally in that a person who is touched and nurtured gets (at least may get) better. Of course we should not forget that Michael's sister undergoes an operation on her heart, which is carried out by medical professionals. For Michael the operation would seem to be only one co-effect in his sister's getting better. Latham (2006a, 20) states that unlike in some other books by David Almond, in *Skellig* "there are no priests, only ineffectual doctors." While it eventually turns into some sort of a balance of having faith in both science and the more spiritual cures, it could be said that at first Michael is very sceptical about doctors and the medical science. This is not least because of his dream

where the doctors urge Michael's sister to fly out of the nest even though her wings are not yet fully developed (*Skellig* 82–83). According to Latham (2006a, 43), “[t]his dream also reveals Michael's distrust of the medical establishment, a formidable institution of adult society that represents to Michael the most immediate threat to his sister.” Michael also realises that there are certain things that are beyond us humans – sometimes death is random, and life unjust. Eventually Michael gains some trust in the medical establishment as well, and while he can still say that love helped Skellig and his little sister get better, he also acknowledges the effect the heart operation had on his sister's recovery.<sup>13</sup> I will now turn to discussing the spiritual aspects of the novel.

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<sup>13</sup> Latham (2006a, 43) does not seem to acknowledge this. Rather, he emphasises Michael's instinctive “distrust of the medical establishment.”

## 4 Spirituality

In this chapter I will discuss the spiritual dimensions of *Skellig*. I am going to use sources varying from cultural studies (i.e. the angel myth) to developmental science (i.e. the development of children's spirituality). I have already discussed the concepts of spirituality and religion to some extent in this thesis, but it is not until now that I really come to define these two concepts. According to a number of writers (e.g. McCarroll et al. 2005, Wright 2000, Hyde 2008, Holmes 2007), spirituality may be a concept that by its very nature defies an all-embracing definition. As one guideline, therefore, I will use Brendan Hyde's (2008, 23) words: "The notion of describing rather than defining spirituality is important." When we read *Skellig*, it is sometimes difficult to say whether we are talking about religion or spirituality as such. In fact, Benson, Roehlkepartain and Rude (2003, 208) point out that the words 'religiousness' and 'spirituality' tend to be used inconsistently even in academic contexts. According to them, scholars have not really been able to reach consensus as regards the meanings of these two terms. For the purposes of this thesis at least, it might be sufficient to rely on a fairly basic distinction between the concepts of religion and spirituality. As Koenig, McCullough and Larson (2001, 18: quoted by Benson et al. 2003, 209) state, one way of seeing religion is as "an *organized* system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols designed [...] to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power, or ultimate truth/reality)" [my emphasis]. In somewhat simpler terms, the *OED* defines religion as "A particular system of faith and worship." Spirituality is not necessarily dogmatised like religion is, which is why the term spirituality could be seen as a less loaded term compared to religion. Being spiritual does not, moreover, necessitate belief in an external deity. According to Watson (2001, 96), "[t]he 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.'" In other words, the word 'spirituality' can be seen as something slightly more

neutral compared to the word ‘religion.’ Spirituality and religion are not, however, two different words for one phenomenon. Rather, spirituality can be considered as a superordinate term to religion. This is also what Hyde (2008, 25) states, saying, that institutional religion is a secondary phenomenon to spirituality, as it is a codification, communication, interpretation and/or action upon the original spiritual experience. Having made the important distinction between religion and spirituality, I will now discuss the concept of spirituality further.

#### 4.1 Defining spirituality

Perhaps the most difficult question this thesis has presented me with is: What is spirituality? A search with the *OED* returns a number of definitions for the word ‘spirituality’, some of which are given here:

The quality or condition of being spiritual; attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests. [first attested in 1500–20]

An immaterial or incorporeal thing or substance; a spirit. [first attested in 1628, now obsolete]

The fact or state of being spirituous or of consisting of pure spirit; volatile state or quality. [first attested in 1644]

The fact or condition of being spirit or of consisting of an incorporeal essence (ecclesiastical things, non-corporeal...) [first attested in 1681–6]

However, these do not take us very far if we want to understand the concept behind the word better.<sup>14</sup> More than anything, these definitions only shift our problem to the word’s root (‘spirit’), which is another word defying any single definition. The English word ‘spirit’ derives from the French ‘esprit’ and Latin ‘spiritus’ denoting soul, courage, vigor, breath and is related to Latin ‘spirare’ (“to breathe”).<sup>15</sup> According to the *OED*, ‘spirit’ was first attested in English circa 1250, which is approximately 170 years earlier than the word ‘spirituality’

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to these the *OED* returns, for example, the definition “A spiritual society” [first attested in 1854] where the definition comes very close to that of ‘religion’, as it takes notice of the social dimension of the concept.

<sup>15</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*. [Internet] Available at: <<http://www.etymonline.com>>.

(which was attested in 1417, although not yet quite in the meaning we are studying here).

Andrew Wright (2000, 7) makes an interesting observation, stating that also the “Hebrew and Greek words for ‘spirit’, *ruah* and *pneuma* respectively, are rooted in the notion of the intangible movement of air.” Both linguistically and conceptually, we therefore face a major challenge in trying to capture the essence of spirituality.

According to Peter R. Holmes (2007, 25), spirituality is sometimes compared to emotional phenomena like love, hate, trust and forgiveness. While this characterisation is somewhat general, we may understand that like love and hate, spirituality, too, is a thing closely and universally related to humans. Hyde (2008, 24–29) paraphrases Diarmuid O’Murchu who argues that spirituality “is a natural human predisposition,” and that “the spiritual history of the human species is at least 70,000 years old.”<sup>16</sup> Hyde (2008, 30–31) argues that “studies in the fields of biology, neurological science and evolution support the case that spirituality is [...] an attribute that has been selected in the evolution of the human species [and] has evolved through the process of natural selection because it has survival value for the individual.” Speaking about spiritual intelligence, Sagar (2005, 286) is on the same lines, saying that it is spiritual intelligence that “drives human evolution through its ability to transcend dogma and stagnant ideas. It is not to be confused with religion that, in contrast, is based on a foundation of dogma. Spiritual intelligence is a source of creativity.” It is probably fair to conclude, then, that “[s]pirituality is [...] a complex and multi-dimensional part of human experience” (Levitt 2005, 62). Levitt (*ibid.*) gives “cognitive, experiential, and behavioural” as the aspects of what she calls human experience. She specifies that

Cognitive aspects are the search for meaning, purpose, truth, beliefs, and values that guide individual lives; experiential are emotions one feels, love, connection, inner peace, equanimity, and relationships; and behavioural aspects are the way a person externally manifests his/her spiritual beliefs and inner spiritual state. (Levitt 2005, 62)

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<sup>16</sup> This estimation dates the emergence of spirituality to the approximately same era (Middle Paleolithic) with the emergence of fully developed human language. O’Murchu states that by comparison, “organized religions have been in existence for only 4,500 years” (Hyde 2008, 24).

Spirituality should be regarded as something that touches all corners of human existence. We can elaborate this idea with the help of Sperry (2001, 21) who lists “psychological, social, moral, somatic, and spiritual” as the five basic dimensions of human experience. In fact, Sperry (2001, 24–25) sees the spiritual dimension as “foundational to all the other dimensions of human experience.” In a diagram in Sperry (2001, 24), the spiritual dimension is placed at the core to illustrate the belief that the spiritual dimension is central to and integrally related to the other four dimensions. I will now discuss the spiritual dimension in more detail.

McCarroll, O’Connor and Meakes (2005) have done extensive research in order to find an all-embracing definition for spirituality. The writers have gone through 68 articles (from the field of health care) and found 27 explicitly articulated definitions of spirituality. There would seem to be little agreement among these definitions, however. The eight most popular themes that emerge in the articles are (in order of popularity): 1) meaning and purpose; 2) connection and relationships; 3) God/god(s)/Transcendent Other; 4) transcendent Self; 5) vital principle; 6) unifying force or integrative energy; 7) personal and private; and 8) hope (McCarroll et al. 2005, 44–47). Hyde (2008, 32) and Sperry (2001, 4) use partly the same terms when they talk about what spirituality is about and what competencies it consists of. Below I will briefly introduce the elements of spirituality. In 4.3 I will discuss how these elements come to play in *Skellig*.

Meaning and purpose can be understood as something towards which humans consciously and unconsciously yearn. At its most explicit, this theme can be articulated in the simple existential question ‘why are we here?’ (Holmes 2007, 25). This theme includes both the everyday and extraordinary (cf. material and spiritual) aspects of life where we search for meaning and purpose (McCarroll et al., 2005, 45). With the theme connection and relationships McCarron et al. (2005, 45–46) refer to multiple levels of connection and sometimes rather complex relationships. These include, for example, those within the self, with others, and with

a “Transcendent Other” (*ibid.*). This theme is obviously closely connected with that of God/god(s)/Transcendent Other. In some definitions found by the writers it is even emphasised that “a relationship with God/god(s)/Transcendent Other is not only the primary manifestation of spirituality [...] but is also the *origin* of spirituality” (McCarroll et al. 2005, 46) [emphasis in the original]. They point out that some definitions “equate spirituality with religion” (*ibid.*). Reading Sperry, who writes in the American context, this comes extremely clear, which is not surprising, considering that according to Sperry’s studies about 94 per cent of Americans believe in some sort of a deity.<sup>17</sup> In such contexts it is only more convenient, and understandably so, to treat religion and spirituality as synonyms. In some respects I have already accounted for this discrepancy, essentially arguing that every human has spirituality but every human does not necessarily express their spirituality through organised religion. Therefore it could be stated that organised religion is a secondary phenomenon to spirituality, as it is an action upon the original spiritual experience, placing it into the social and communal reality (Hyde 2008, 25). Even though the theme of God/god(s)/Transcendent Other is recurrent in definitions of spirituality, Levitt (2005, 62) argues that “spiritual awareness is not necessarily associated with a belief in a supreme being.” The theme of transcendent Self can be understood as depicting a person who is capable of identifying with the experience of another person (McCarroll et al. 2005, 46). In more general terms, “[t]ranscendence is the process by which a dimension of being ‘climbs beyond’ its normal limits of existence” (Brown 2005, 194). This theme is closely connected with the themes of connection and relationships, and unifying force or integrative energy. Vital principle is the creative, animating force in self. It can be associated with the “Conscientious Conformist Stage” of spiritual development, at which stage “we begin to learn that our lives are what *we* decide to make of them” (Sperry 2001, 63) [emphasis in the original]. According to McCarroll et al. (2005, 47), unifying force or

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<sup>17</sup> Sperry (2001, 3) actually uses the more explicit expression “believe in God.” Even though the United States would appear to be one of the most religious countries in the world, it sounds almost unbelievable that 19 out of 20

integrative energy is incorporeal energy that unifies reality. Hyde (2008, 34) paraphrases de Souza, stating that spirituality is “a journey towards Ultimate Unity.”

At one pole of the continuum, a person may interact with the world and with others, but may experience this interaction as something from which he or she is apart. As that person progresses along the unitary continuum, the sense of separateness becomes less distinct, and could lead to individual experiences of sacredness, and experiences of unity with Other. (Hyde 2008, 33–34)

The theme of personal and private emphasises what has already been stated throughout this paragraph: that spirituality is essentially a subjective experience and therefore cannot be standardised (McCarroll et al. 2005, 47). Finally, in the context of spirituality, the theme of hope is understood as a “will to live and as an ability to come through a crisis and loss of health” (*ibid.*). For a summary of spirituality, I would like to turn Sperry (2001, 4):

Spirituality is about one’s search for meaning and belonging and the core values that influence one’s behavior. Spirituality is ‘harmonious interconnectedness – across time and relationships’ (Hungelmann, 1985), ‘the human capacity to experience and relate to a dimension of power and meaning transcendent to the world of sensory reality’ (Anderson, 1987), and ‘the experience of consciously striving to integrate one’s life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives’ (Schneiders, 1986).

It was pointed out that the belief in a higher being is strong in the United States, for example. Holmes (2007, 26) argues that in the Western world, spirituality is developing along two lines: the first is a metaphysical approach focusing on the supernatural and incorporating belief in god/gods, while the second is also metaphysical in character but dismisses a creator god. Below I will briefly discuss spirituality in the Western world.

## 4.2 Spirituality and the Western world

It is not unfair to argue that a Christian reading is available of almost any fairytale told in the Western world. This might be one of the key reasons why children, and adolescents to a relatively late age, will essentially draw a parallel between Biblical (or other explicitly

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people in the US would believe in God.

religious) stories and fairytales, and thus between religion and mythology. It should also be noted that the regulations, laws and provisions in the whole Western world are, to a great extent, based on Christian dogma and its idea of morality, in general. Whether we are Christians ourselves or not, we still deal with and are influenced by its dogma in our everyday lives. In this light it is perhaps even expectable that children cannot make the difference between Biblical stories and fairytales and their respective teachings. In her book, *The Child's Attitude to Death*, Marjorie E. Mitchell (1967, 85) asks a relevant question: "How far is it justifiable to bring up children on [Christian] myths and on beliefs no longer held by the adults who are concerned with him?" As Mitchell notes, many children are brought up on Christian beliefs, even though their parents might not want to do so. This is because in most British schools, morning assemblies, chapel and compulsory religion classes are still a fact (*ibid.*). Despite the fact that Mitchell's book was published already in 1967, what Mitchell says about bringing up children on "myths and on beliefs no longer held by the adults who are concerned with him" still holds true in Britain today, for example. In Britain, requirements for worship are slightly different in different parts of the country. According to the School Standards and Framework Act from 1998, in England, "each pupil in attendance at a community, foundation or voluntary school shall on each school day take part in an act of collective worship."<sup>18</sup>

The majority [i.e. more than 50 per cent] of acts of collective worship in any given school term should [...] be "wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character." [...] A "broadly Christian" act of worship must contain some elements which relate to the traditions of Christian belief and which accord a special status to Jesus Christ. (British Humanist Association: "'Collective Worship' and school assemblies: your rights," no pagination)

Parents have the right to have their children excused from worship in any state-funded school. However, many decide not to, fearing that their child may feel different from classmates, and may miss important elements of assembly if the worship element is not kept clearly apart from secular spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects, and from notices. (British Humanist Association: "'Collective Worship' and school assemblies: your rights," no pagination)

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<sup>18</sup> British Humanist Association: "'Collective Worship' and school assemblies: your rights." [Internet] Available at: <<http://www.humanism.org.uk/education/parents/worship-your-rights>>.

In other words, pupils themselves do not have the right to choose not to take part in collective worship. In general, not attending these assemblies would seem to be fairly difficult and inconvenient for the pupils (having to miss notices at the same time, for example), so even though parents have the choice of opting out their children from the assemblies, it is probably a choice few parents make.

In the modern world, more and more people tend to favour science over spirituality and intuition, over narratives, and even over common sense. However, Stephen Happel (in Jasper et al. 1993, 94–95) and Paul Ricoeur (1995, 63) argue that the antagonism between science and the more spiritual side of life appears to be largely fabricated. In Ricoeur's (1995, 63) words, the “scientific ideal [which earlier] served as an absolute measure for evaluating the overall progress of modernity has itself become problematic.” He states that many “critical thinkers” who applaud themselves for being limitlessly suspicious, adopt technology and science as an all-encompassing ideology “in a most naive fashion” (*ibid.*). Ricoeur seems to imply that spirituality and science or, for that matter, science and narrative are not mutually exclusive things. In fact, both science and spirituality can easily be seen as sorts of narratives – stories “to live by in order to make sense of the pastiche of one’s life” (Mark I. Wallace’s introduction to Ricoeur 1993, 11). Otherwise a person’s life is just a “random sequence of unrelated events” (*ibid.*). It should be noted that I am not trying to argue that the function of both spirituality and science would necessarily be the same in a person’s life, as for many people, science and religion can also live side by side quite happily. However, to some extent their functions resemble each other, as a person may try to find meaning and purpose through both. It is clear that both science and spirituality (or religion) try to answer the question ‘why are we here,’ for example, which might be regarded as McCarroll et al.’s theme “meaning and purpose.” Although the world is changing, people in general still seem to consider spirituality important. In the rational-scientific world of today, however, there are many people who

choose not to believe in God, and one prominent reason in their decision is that God cannot be scientifically and empirically proved. The rest have their own reasons and criteria either to believe or not to believe in God.

The classic way of reading traditional children's literature is to look there for morals and educational values (Nikolajeva 1998, 233). Referring to my argument about the Western world being very much influenced by Christian dogma, it may be argued that the undertone in many a children's story is the one resembling Blaise Pascal's famous line of reasoning about believing in God: "Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is... If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is."<sup>19</sup> This suggests that God either does or does not exist. The probability of gain and loss is thus the same. However, by wagering for God, one can have infinite gain (albeit a human can only appreciate it finitely), if God exists. If God does not exist, one loses nothing. The rational-scientific modern human might disagree, however. He might argue that by believing in something that does not exist, one loses, among other things, oneself. The question with children's literature is whether we lose or miss something – whether we somehow harm children – by handing them the same set of values in both a Biblical story and a fairytale, but keep insisting that only one of those two is true, while the other one is made-up, imaginative.

Before the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in particular, there was some trepidation amongst the more religious people as regards teaching children to read. A book which was not true was considered "the worst thing that a boy can read" (Avery 1995, 7–12). The most important goal of early reading books was to teach children enough about their letters for them eventually to be able to read the Bible. This was "a long time before we find child-centred narratives" (Avery 1995, 7). Later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, story-books started to recognise the need to give children delightful and entertaining stories, even though their key purpose still was to

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<sup>19</sup> Pascal's Wager in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager>>.

“teach children their religious and social obligations” (Kinnell 1995, 26). This trend continued well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as fiction became an ever more acceptable vehicle of religious teaching (Avery & Kinnell 1995, 48). The strongest religious and moralistic undertone of children’s literature started to fade away late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as publishers realised people – and that includes children – “want to be amused, not preached at” (a line from Louisa May Alcott’s *Good Wives*, quoted by Avery et al. 1995, 228). As pointed out, however, even many contemporary children’s books have religious traits in them. At least it would seem fair to argue that a Christian reading is available of almost any fairytale told in the Western world.

When it comes to contemporary children’s literature, it is interesting that both Ann Donovan (1987, 26) and Bruce Vogel (1987, 114) seem to argue that a writer of children’s literature cannot be successful unless he chooses to endorse either a humanist or a spiritual/mythic view of the world. Donovan (1987, 26) says that “a fairly basic tenet of children’s literature holds that some world-ordering system be evident and, furthermore, be benevolent and thus ensure an ending which is positive and good regardless of the traumas en route.” In the previous chapter I argued that although the favoured world-ordering system in *Skellig* would seem to be the spiritual/mythic one, the ending of the novel would not be as positive as it turns out to be without input from the humanist/scientific sector. That is, even though Michael considers love to have been the primary cure for his sister and *Skellig*, he does not seem to discredit the effect of the doctors entirely. Therefore we can perhaps state that *Skellig* does not follow Vogel and Donovan’s argument on the exclusivity of either the religious or humanist worldview.

#### 4.3 Representations of spirituality in *Skellig*

Just like Elizabeth Parsons and Elizabeth Bullen (2007, 129) argue, “*Skellig* rejects the notion that a single epistemological system or tradition can provide the knowledge children need to

cope with the anxieties that distinguish risk society.” This makes *Skellig* interesting in many respects and, essentially, leaves us multiple ways of reading it. Even though the favoured world-ordering system in *Skellig* seems to be a spiritual or even a Christian one, there are fairly few references to religious institutions, such as the church or any specific Christian traditions, in the novel.

It is therefore worth pointing out that *Skellig* is not the kind of religious novel that would dictate one certain message to its readers. As said, there are very few explicit references to specific religions in the novel. Praying, (religious) belief and Heaven are mentioned, but often in a fairly vague way (see e.g. *Skellig*, 11, 39, 50, 158). Perhaps it is the same vagueness why Michael is left dumbfounded by his parents’ words such as “You just keep believing [...] And everything will be fine” (*Skellig*, 145, also see 11 and 143). Keep believing in what, one might ask. Michael’s parents’ words seem more like jargon of sorts in that they fit into the situation, but there seems to be little emotional attachment in the words. In a way, the novel can be seen to criticise the pompous message often conveyed by religious children’s stories: just keep on believing and good things will happen to you. There are a number of instances like this in the novel. In the following two passages Michael’s father tries to reassure Michael in a way typical of adults in this novel.<sup>20</sup>

“You could come with me,” he said. “But there’d be nothing you could do. We just have to wait and pray and believe that everything will be all right.” (*Skellig*, 143)

“You just keep believing [...] And everything will be fine.” (*Skellig*, 145)

In a way, Christianity – like most religions – encourages people to passiveness.<sup>21</sup> This happens in *Skellig* as well, when Michael’s parents “told [him he] had to keep praying for [his little sister] but [he] didn’t know what to pray” (*Skellig*, 11). According to Antti Räsänen’s (2003, 43) essay “Kurkistus 12-vuotiaan sielun maisemaan” [transl. “A peek into the mindset of a 12-year-old”], as a rule, a 12-year-old no longer prays for material things, yet there is still a

strong belief in God's capability to help people. On some level Michael thinks that in addition to – or perhaps even instead of – praying, he must *do* something. It is also possible that Michael does not yet recognise the potentially remedial effect of prayer. In other words, praying does not necessarily give Michael the sense of hope, meaning, purpose and/or connection, all of which McCarroll et al. label as key elements of spirituality. It could be argued, then, that at this stage of the book Michael's spirituality is not yet developed as far as it will be by the end of the book. It is worth noting, however, that in the novel Michael does not pray, at least not explicitly. His pleas to Skellig can, of course, be regarded as some sort of prayer. Another reason why Michael feels he must *do* something in addition to praying is the fact that a 12-year-old's religious thinking is typically reciprocal: God's favour must be earned by doing the right things (Räsänen 2003, 42). Michael's parents, on the other hand, take a more passive stance on the situation. They think that their daughter's life is first and foremost in the hands of God and doctors – in other words, out of their own hands – and all they can do is have faith in things ending on a positive note. I would argue that, to a certain extent, it is this passive 'nominal Christianity' that *Skellig* criticizes. In other words, Michael's idea of *doing something* is a natural and intelligent one. *Skellig* conveys a positive message of active spirituality/religiousness, active Christianity, which is what Michael and Mina's (i.e. children's) religiousness represents.<sup>22</sup> If anything, the fact that Michael acts upon his beliefs would seem to suggest that he has reached what Sperry (2001, 63) calls "The Conscientious Conformist Stage" of spiritual development.<sup>23</sup> It is at this stage children "begin to learn that our

<sup>20</sup> We should note, however, that Mina's mother can be seen as an exception to this rule.

<sup>21</sup> It might be argued that for some believers religious faith becomes just another expression for fatalism.

<sup>22</sup> By 'active Christianity' I mean the sort of religiousness the Bible would seem to try to establish. For example, 1 Cor. 12:27 says: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." I would argue that this means that every member of the Church should be a representative of Jesus Christ, which means taking an active role, and showing one's faith not only through words but also through deeds.

<sup>23</sup> The stages of spiritual development, according to Sperry (2001, 63–64), are: 1) Conformist Stage, 2) The Conscientious Conformist Stage, 2) The Conscientious Stage, 4) The Compassionate Stage, and 5) The Cosmic Stage. Sperry does not assign these stages to specific ages. Sperry (2001, 48) sums up spiritual development as the "process of developing integrity, wholeness, self-responsibility, and self-transcendence."

lives are what *we* decide to make of them” [emphasis in the original]. In the end, however, it could be said that both the children’s (Michael and Mina’s active) and the adult’s (Michael’s parents’ passive) faith is rewarded, so in a sense the novel does not represent one approach as more preferable than the other.

As noted above, a 12-year-old seldom prays for material things anymore, and it could be argued, perhaps, that at the same age he stops asking for visible/concrete proof of God’s existence. Sperry (2001, 54) also comes to this conclusion:

Piaget’s theory of cognitive development forms a heuristic basis for understanding how object permanence, symbolic representation, logical thinking, and formal operational thought are involved in increasingly advanced cognitive abilities for representing the presence of an unseen God.

Thus, Michael realises it does not matter whether Skellig is a physical, metaphysical or a totally abstract (even imaginative) entity – as long as it brings him hope and meaning to think that *Skellig exists*. When Michael reaches this understanding, it is a clear indication of the kind of spirituality that has been above described in several of the themes which are popular in definitions of spirituality (e.g. meaning and purpose, connection and relationships, Transcendent Other, and transcendent Self). That Skellig exists would seem factual for Michael, but his level of existence may be slightly more debatable. At a fairly early stage we are given a hint of Skellig’s possible level of existence: “It was like she [Mina] was calling Skellig out from somewhere deep *inside me*” (*Skellig*, 99) [emphasis mine]. At this point Michael does not yet understand that it does not matter on which level of being Skellig exists. Michael recognises that his conception of Skellig is something his parents, or adults in general, would not accept, which is why he does not tell about Skellig to any adults. In a sense Michael coordinates Skellig (who he does consider a divine entity of some sort) with imaginative, fairytale-like figures, which a 12-year-old knows his parents do not believe in. According to David Hay and Rebecca Nye (2006, 33), it is this kind of adult behaviour – these norms in the adult world – that may be destructive to children’s spirituality. That is to say, the way a

12-year-old projects his spirituality is significantly different from an adult's. For instance, when Michael returns home in the middle of the night from one of his Skellig adventures, and his father has been afraid that Michael has gone missing, Michael comes up with a white lie of sleepwalking, because he knows his father would consider the whole Skellig story a big bad lie (*Skellig*, 121).

In order to account for the character Skellig, I am going to discuss the angel myth at some length below. With the help of Hyde (2008) and Sperry (2001), in particular, I have already established that spirituality is a natural human predisposition. It would seem obvious, however, that the ways people project their spirituality can be very different from one another. Above I have already considered the differences in the ways children and adults project their spirituality. David Hay (2000, 82; paraphrased by Ubani 2003, 19) considers that, compared to an adult, a child is more receptive to spiritual experiences, because a child has spent a shorter time in the societal climate of today which understates spiritual/religious values.<sup>24</sup> This difference is probably due to the development of the cognitive aspect of spirituality. Hay (*ibid.*) would seem to suggest that, as a child becomes older, the cognitive aspect of spirituality often comes to dominate over the experiential aspect of spirituality. It is also a common assumption that compared to adults children are probably more receptive to certain sensory information, such as colours and sounds. While these are not, as such, reasons for why children may be more aware of angels than adults, it implies that children seem to rely more on their initial impression than adults when they perceive the world. For example, it is easy to understand that a really “screaming” colour of neon green or pink may seem much more remarkable to a child than it would to an adult. The same could probably be said about the sound of a bird singing. Children may also take adults’ (often symbolic) stories about angels even more seriously and concretely than expected, and the more religious (i.e. Christian) the society, the more likely it is

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<sup>24</sup> It may be important to note that David Hay is British. It would seem that in European countries, religious values are indeed currently much more understated than in the US.

for children to interpret (or re-interpret) some of their experiences as having something to do with angels. After all, it is natural for human beings to seek the approval of people close to them, so it is natural for children at least to claim to have had experiences which they may feel adults in some ways expect from them.<sup>25</sup> Even in less religious societies, experiences including strong sensations of light, colour and sound, which adults would probably explain in rational-scientific terms, may occasionally be associated with angels by children. It could be regarded as a child's way of absorbing hope and meaning (McCarroll et al.'s themes) from an experience which he/she may intuitively find life-affirming yet difficult to explain. Bloom (2007, 4–5) and Woolmer (2003, 153) also acknowledge the notion of children being more aware of angels than adults are. Like spirituality, angels are a very central concept in *Skellig*. The angel theme is also one important reason for why *Skellig* can be said to border on the religious at times.

#### 4.3.1 The angel myth

As Enid Gauldie (1992, 13) puts it in her article on the history of angels, “[t]here have been angels, or flying spirits of some kind, in the culture and mythology of every civilisation.” In a way people seem to need angels to make the universe seem more logical – they need something between themselves and their god/gods. For example those who believed in the God of the Old Testament – in the “concept of one awesome and terrible God” – required an intermediary of some kind “to soften the anger, make possible the plea” (*ibid.*). Moreover, they recognised the need of having a species which could move between the corporeal and spiritual planes, between earth and heaven. It is this intermediary role, the role of the “‘messenger’ or ‘minister’ of the word of God,” that is the denotation of the word’s (‘angel’) “strict translation from Greek” (Gauldie 1992, 14). Another way of seeing the intermediary role is to think that, if there

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<sup>25</sup> “From the intellectual point of view, he migles his own fantasies with accepted opinions, whence arise pseudo-lies (or sincere lies), syncretism, and all the features of child thought.” (Piaget 1977, 183)

should be angels, it might feel logical if they were a humanlike species that could fly, a human bird of sort. This is hinted at interestingly in *Skellig* as well, when a strange elderly man on the bus tells Michael<sup>26</sup> about his circus memories: “And there was the loveliest lass on the trapeze. You could swear she could nearly fly” (*Skellig*, 36).

In other words, it is not only the angel’s ability to *move* between the two planes, but also its supposed ability to *fly*, that has inspired and interested people about angels.<sup>27</sup> It is this idea that *Skellig* plays with when Michael’s mother tells Michael a story about what shoulder blades are for: “They say that shoulder blades are where your wings were, when you were an angel [...] They say they’re where your wings will grow again one day” (*Skellig*, 38–39). Mina also confirms this, saying, “It’s a proven fact, common knowledge. They’re where your wings were, and where they’ll grow again” (*Skellig*, 52). Interestingly, Harold Bloom (2007, 23) states that “[a]ngels – unfallen or fallen – make sense to me only if they represent something that was ours and that we have the potential to become again.” David Brown (1995, 50) notes that art critics such as John Ruskin saw the wing being “attached at the shoulder [as] an anatomical impossibility.” One could ask, of course, whether it is somewhat arrogant to think that, should angels exist in the appearance of winged humans, would it not be possible that they transcend the rules of anatomy? For Michael the theory of shoulder blades seems totally believable, even though he first says it is a “fairy tale for kids. Isn’t it?” (*Skellig*, 39). Moreover, when Michael asks his mother if she thinks the baby had wings, she replies: “Oh, I’m sure that one had wings. Just got to take one look at her. Sometimes I think she’s never quite left Heaven

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<sup>26</sup> In Hebrew Michael (Mîkha’el) means “one who is like God,” “Who is the image of God?” and Michael is also the name of one of the archangels, a warrior angel, who is the leader of the Heavenly armies. It is probably not a coincidence that Almond has used this name in *Skellig*. Skellig Michael (from Seelig Mhichíl in the Irish language, meaning Michael’s rock) is also a rocky island in the Atlantic off the Irish coast. For centuries, the island was a centre of monastic life for Irish Christian monks. (*Wikipedia: “Skellig Michael”* [Internet] Available at: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skellig\\_Michael](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skellig_Michael)>. [Accessed May 10, 2010])

<sup>27</sup> The ability to fly is also what fascinates humans about birds, and birds are essential to *Skellig* both symbolically and as characters. It is also said of the chicks in the blackbird’s nest that the “tiny squeaking sound, far off, [sounded] like it was coming from another world” (*Skellig*, 60). This is yet another reference to the possibility of moving between two “worlds,” at least metaphorically.

and never quite made it all the way here to Earth” (*Skellig*, 39).<sup>28</sup> In a way, the state the baby is in could be seen as a sort of intermediary state as well. Another character that is possibly in an intermediary state is the man on the bus that I just mentioned above. When Michael has a conversation with the man, Michael sees that “he [the man] wasn’t all there” (*Skellig*, 36). This can be read to imply, not necessarily that the man lacks intelligence, but that the man is in another world – a world of his own, so to speak, and can possibly move between that world and the “ordinary” world.

In this thesis I am first and foremost interested in how angels are – and have been – used as symbols, and how angels are represented in literature and art in general. As Gauldie says, “[t]he angel is the most potent of symbols, standing for strength, purity and the possibility of redemption<sup>29</sup> from earth-bound miseries” (Gauldie 1992, 13). The word ‘redemption’ used here continues the train of thought initiated by Bloom above, that angels represent something that once was ours and yet something we have the potential to attain again. This is just one reason, why, even if “[r]eligious belief in angels might falter, [the] delight in their decorative qualities” does not (Gauldie 1992, 19). In other words, the aesthetic and symbolic appeal of the angel figure has not lost its glow, and with all the references to angels in both New Age beliefs and popular culture (see e.g. Woolmer 2003, 10), it is easy to argue that the ideas the angel represents to many people are not likely to disappear either. Most importantly, the idea of angels would seem to give people a sense of hope and meaning, and angels may also remind people of the ideas of self-transcendence and transcendent Other (McCarroll et al.’s themes of spirituality). Brown (1995, 49–50) sees that there has been a decline in believing in angels, and

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<sup>28</sup> Alongside Mina’s words, “We often think of him, watching us from Heaven” (*Skellig*, 50) and a few references to praying, this is one of the few somewhat more explicit references to religious concepts. It should be noted that the idea of a soul existing in Heaven before being born does not come from Christianity. However, this idea of a sort of reincarnation can be found in Classical Greece, more precisely in Plato’s *The Republic* (Book X).

<sup>29</sup> *Redemption*, from Latin *redemptionem*, means “a buying back, releasing, ransoming” [emphasis mine] *Online Etymology Dictionary* [Internet] Available at: <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=redemption>>. *Oxford English Dictionary* also lists “The action of saving, delivering, or restoring a person or thing; deliverance or restoration” as one meaning for the word ‘redemption.’ [Internet] Available at: <<http://oed.com>>.

that “is due to two principal causes, twentieth century arrogance and lack of imagination.” He makes a valid point of how “human beings are now placed more at the centre of our world than was ever the case in the Middle Ages,” because unlike the people in the Middle Ages, the modern human beings see themselves as superior to any other beings, even to those we hardly believe in (e.g. angels).

Whereas the role of angels in religious beliefs has varied between key and almost non-existent in the course of time, the way artists and painters, in particular, have represented angels could be said to have gradually taken more and more anthropomorphic shapes. The most important developments were probably the study of perspective and anatomy, and together with the revived interest in pagan myth, in the time of and after Leonardo da Vinci, this “encouraged not only a more human, but a more sensual portrayal of the body” (Gauldie 1992, 17).

What becomes noticeable in this period, however, is that without any apparent religious or philosophical discussion angels have become female and it is this image, of the ‘beautiful’ feminine angel figure which has lived on in the imagination of succeeding generations. (Gauldie 1992, 18)

It is this feminine portrayal of the angel that to this day has retained its popularity, at least in the more conservative art. Of course we also have the Hollywood version of angels, including angel character played by Nicholas Cage (*City of Angels*, 1998) and Brad Pitt (*Meet Joe Black*, 1998). The fact that films tend to present angels in such anthropomorphic appearances is probably due to two major factors: practicality and appeal. It is both more appealing for the viewers and more practical for the filmmakers to present angels as close to humans as possible. In the film version of *Skellig* the filmmakers have decided to portray Skellig as being close to a “tramp.”<sup>30</sup> Traditionally the most common representation of the angel – probably equally

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<sup>30</sup> The film version, directed by Annabel Jankel, was released in April 2009. In the actor interviews on the DVD, Tim Roth who plays Skellig says he saw Skellig as a tramp but also as an “atheist angel.” (*Skellig* [film version] DVD, 2009)

common with the untouched female figure – has been that of a child. Reasons for this have been many.

Artists [...] expressed a longing for an ideal, pure, virtuous and essentially untouched woman in their paintings of angels. These nineteenth-century angels tend to be pale, sad and bloodless figures drooping over a miserable humanity or innocent, healthy, childlike cherubs of a round rosiness [...]. (Gauldie 1992, 19)

So the implication seems to be that the angel was preferably represented as a female, a child or both: pure as snow or innocent as newborn babies. It is interesting that the person to whom Gauldie, in part at least, attributes the change in the fashionable angelic representation in the early nineteenth century, is William Blake – the poet of such a huge importance to *Skellig*, and consequently this thesis.

William Blake, writing in his *Songs of Innocence* ‘White as an angel is the English child’, decorated his pages with such baby angels with plump bodies and little sprouting wings. (Gauldie 1992, 19)

As Gauldie (1992, 20) points out, Blake often painted his angels “far removed from the carnal humanity of the Renaissance.”<sup>31</sup> With “white as an angel” Blake may have referred to the story of Pope Gregory I who had allegedly decided to send a mission led by Augustine to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity because he had seen some children being sold as slaves in Rome and asking where those beautiful fair-haired children came from he had been given the answer that they were Angles. According to the story he had answered that “they looked like Angels not Angles and should be Christians.”<sup>32</sup> After Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites “the depiction of angels in the nineteenth century [declined] into a kind of hypocritical sentimentality” (Gauldie 1992, 20). Sensuality would gradually give way to the sentimentality of the Victorian age, as regards angels in art. It is, to a large extent, this “sickly-sweet figure” that has to this day retained its position as the most popular representation of the angel (*ibid.*). So the angel

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<sup>31</sup> Blake’s take on angels, and Christian religion in general, was a rather esoteric one, and this is attested in many of his poems and paintings, including quite a few paintings of the fallen angel, Lucifer. I will discuss Blake in more detail in chapter 4.2.2.

character has taken multiple bodies in artistic representations, but at no stage has its anthropomorphic appeal gone away.

Although Gauldie gives us some invaluable information on the history of angels, perhaps the most important of our questions she helps with is, whether Skellig is a typical representation of an angel. The answer is no. I will now discuss the characteristics of Skellig given in the novel. At first, the impression the novel gives of Skellig is of a hostile, short-tempered, apathetic and isolated man.

“Got an aspirin?”

“An aspirin?”

“Never mind.”

(*Skellig*, 18)

“You got an aspirin?”

“No.”

“Thanks very much.”

(*Skellig*, 19)

“Something you’d like to eat?” I said.

“27 and 53.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Go away. Go away.”

(*Skellig*, 19)

These extracts from the novel almost portray Skellig as someone suffering from schizophrenia, at least Skellig behaves in a way that is close to people’s popular conception of schizophrenia. However, it should be stated that it is a common misconception that such a quick temper or sudden changes of heart, as those presented in the extracts from *Skellig* above, are representative of average schizophrenia symptoms. Typically, a person suffering from schizophrenia does not contradict him/herself in the way that Skellig does in the above extracts. However, very common schizophrenia symptoms such as psychic breakdown, isolation, apathy and inconsistency are well represented by Skellig in the first half of the novel, so it is

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<sup>32</sup> Harding, Samuel B. “The Story of England” *Heritage History*. [Internet] Available at: <<http://www.heritage-history.com/www/heritage.php?Dir=books&MenuItem=display&author=harding&book=england&story=christianity>>. [Accessed March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2010]

possible that Skellig does suffer from schizophrenia.<sup>33</sup> What makes the possible allusion to schizophrenia more interesting to this thesis is what Bloom (2007, 23) says about past uses of the word ‘angel’:

The people we call schizophrenics once were called angels; perhaps they still should be, which certainly does not imply that mental illness is a myth, or that cures for such illness ought not to be found.

We should note that the second and third example (of the three referred to above) from *Skellig* are clear instances of Skellig’s refusal to communicate. In the second example Skellig is being sarcastic and in the third example he clearly breaks the Gricean conversational maxims: quality, quantity, relation and manner. This is interesting if we consider the role of the messenger traditionally assigned to angels. If we take Skellig as an angel, in him we have an angel who refuses to communicate, to get across a message. Considering the word ‘angel’ from an etymological perspective (meaning “messenger”), it is very interesting, almost bizarre, that people who refuse to communicate have once been called angels. In the course of the novel, Skellig’s manner of communication of course changes a great deal, and at the end of the novel he no longer breaks the conversational maxims, for example. One could argue that at the end of the novel the character of Skellig has become quite close to what could be considered a conventional angel character: someone who provides humans with meaning, guidance, protection and safety.

It is not difficult to find passages in the novel that support the view of Skellig as an untypical angel. When describing Skellig, Almond does not spare adjectives and images that allude to death and dead things. Thus, the picture we get of Skellig is anything but an angelic one.

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

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<sup>33</sup> Clinical features of schizophrenia from Muhonen, 2003 (doctors’ database CD-ROM).

shoulders. I shined the flashlight on his white face and his black suit. (*Skellig*, 8) [emphasis mine]

His breath stank. Not just the Chinese food, but the *stench* of the other *dead* things he ate: the bluebottles, the spiders. (*Skellig*, 31) [emphasis mine]

As Latham (2006a, 35–36) argues, there is even an indication in the novel that Skellig might be an angel of death, because he “initially appear[s] to be close to death” himself. Another factor that supports the reading of *Skellig* as an angel of death is that Ernie Myers, the previous owner of the house Michael’s family moves into, is also implied to have seen Skellig (*Skellig*, 124). Yet, if Skellig is intended to be an angel of death, in the course of the novel he is actually transformed into an angel of healing, as Michael’s sister survives the difficult heart surgery. According to Latham (2006a, 35–36), it seems that Skellig’s original purpose changes because of the kindness shown him by Michael and Mina. The story’s young protagonists find out that Skellig has wings, and it could be argued that even before that Michael and Mina have some sort of idea of Skellig’s unique character and his goodness.

He was filthy and pale and dried out and I thought he was dead. *I couldn’t have been more wrong.* I’d soon begin to see the truth about him, that *there’d never been another creature like him* in the world. [emphasis mine] (*Skellig*, 1)

Michael’s words, “that there’d never been another creature like him in the world,” might suggest that either Skellig is one of a kind, even though it is strongly implied that he is at least part angel (in particular *Skellig*, 167). Almond takes good care that at no point is Skellig unambiguously referred to as an angel. Even when Skellig has regained his strength and (implied) ability to fly,<sup>34</sup> readers are reminded of his beastly side.

He hooked his long curved finger into the food, lifted out a string of sauce and pork and bean sprouts. He licked it from his finger with his long pale tongue.” (*Skellig*, 166)

“He was standing over the baby. He was filthy. All in black, an ancient dusty suit. A great hunch on his back. Hair all matted and tangled. I was terrified. I wanted to reach out to him. I wanted to push him away. I wanted to scream, Get away from our baby! I wanted to shout for the nurses and the doctors. But I couldn’t move,

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<sup>34</sup> One of the aspects the film version of *Skellig* makes a lot more explicit is Skellig’s ability to fly.

couldn't speak, and I was sure he was going to take her away. But then he turned and looked at me. His face was as white and dry as chalk. And there was such tenderness in his eyes. And for some reason I knew he hadn't come to harm her. I knew it would be all right..." (*Skellig*, 159: Michael's mother's description of Skellig)

"Something," he said. "Something like you, something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel." He laughed. "Something like that." (*Skellig*, 167: Skellig's description of himself)

In other words, in *Skellig* we have a continuing sense of an ambiguous character, and this is also supported by Skellig's description of himself when Michael asks him what he is.

With the help of Gauldie, I have discussed above which forms angels have traditionally taken in (artistic) representations and come to the conclusion that the character of Skellig is not a traditional representation of an angel. I will now briefly discuss some historical (e.g. Biblical) representations and claimed actual sightings of angels with the help of John Woolmer's book *Angels* (2003). Although Woolmer (2003, 271) himself admits that "[n]either angels nor demons fit a rational world-view, and such experiences will be discredited as naïve, medieval, or simply unbelievable," he thinks there is a possibility that angels really do exist – that it actually is very likely that they exist. This is why it might be difficult for a person with a rational-scientific or atheist worldview to find a way to agree with or believe what Woolmer says. There is also the problem of language, which is a crucial one, especially when we are talking about experiences that might well be impossible to put into words. As Paul Ricoeur (1995, 35) states, "whatever ultimately may be the nature of the so-called religious experience, it comes to language, it is articulated in a language, and the most appropriate place to interpret it on its own terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression." In most cases, the experiences described in *Angels* are not first-hand experiences for Woolmer, but have been told to him by various acquaintances. Nevertheless, I would say that Woolmer is a useful source for this thesis, regardless of what truth values we give to his writings, because at the very least many of his characterisations of angels can also be viewed as representations of angels.

People often ask me in what forms angels appear. There seem to be three main categories of experiences. Some people have seen visions of “traditional angels”, dressed in white, accompanied by very bright light; others have experienced help and protection from apparently “real people” who have come and gone so quickly, and acted so efficiently, that often an angelic explanation seems by far the most likely; a third group of experiences involve unexpected protection from serious danger. In these cases, like the servant of Elisha in 2 Kings 6, those protected have been unaware of angelic help until after the event. (Woolmer 2003, 11)

This is a very good summary of the kinds of angels we have in books, films and art in general as well. In a way, Skellig fits into all these three categories. At one point Skellig’s face reflects the moon’s light (*Skellig*, 119), and it could easily be argued that he also fits the description of “apparently ‘real people.’” The third case is attested when Michael’s mother sees Skellig in the hospital ward (*Skellig*, 159). Although she accounts for the event as though it had been a dream, it could be argued that she just says that because angels do not fit the modern rational world-view of an adult.

One of the most obvious questions with Skellig is: if Skellig is an angel to begin with, why does Almond represent him in such a bad condition, in ragged clothes and so on? One possible answer is that if angels did exist, they would probably not look anything like their popular depictions.<sup>35</sup> Another question would then naturally be, whether the forms angels might take would be conceivable to people in the first place. As Brown (1995, 50) states, however, “if [angels] are to make themselves known to human beings whether on earth or in heaven they would need to assume some temporary appearance, but that does not mean that the appearance in any sense constitutes their real being.” The question regarding which appearances angels might take is slightly too ambitious for this thesis, however.

In his fine little book *Fallen Angels*, Harold Bloom (2007, 4–5) asks two relevant questions which can be discussed in the scope of this thesis: “Whom do they [angels] choose to visit? Why do they appear more often to children than to adults?” In *Skellig*, too, children are

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<sup>35</sup> Let us make the following question: How *likely* is it that angels would take one of those few forms people have given them in artistic representations, when there is an infinity of forms (both conceivable and inconceivable to people) they could take?

definitely more aware of angels, and as pointed out in 4.3 that would seem to be the case with children and spiritual experiences in general. In his essay “Defining Children’s Literature,” Peter Hunt gives a rather good summary of a child’s characteristics:

[Children] have the tendencies to [...] have less of a concentration-span than adults, and to be at the mercy of their immediate perceptions. *As a result they tend to be more adaptable than the mature person (whose ‘schemas’ of the world tend to be set)* [...]. (Hunt 1996, 11–12) [emphasis mine]

Children who have not yet been influenced by their surrounding society for that long are understandably more open to what they may regard as supernatural experiences. It would seem that to deal with such experiences, many adults need to rely on rational-scientific reductions. This is the case with Michael’s mother, for example, when she sees Skellig and thinks she has seen a dream. Obviously that is an easy way of explaining something that cannot be explained or said aloud in the adult world, in particular (*Skellig*, 158–160).

Woolmer (2003, 153), too, says that “[e]xperience suggests, and this seems to accord with Jesus’ teaching, that children are particularly aware of angels.” One immediate answer that many can probably think of is the one in Matthew 18:3–5.<sup>36</sup> I would argue that this passage from the Bible serves as foundation for what Bloom refers to as “a popular reduction” of seeing little children as angels.

In a popular reduction, we frequently feel that little children are angels, reflecting Victorian conventions. Since we grow up, we fall, or, more simply, are fallen. (Bloom 2007, 27)

Indeed this is what we have in *Skellig* as well: Michael and Mina, as well as the baby, are seen as angels (see e.g. *Skellig*, 120, 132, 158, 166, 167, 171<sup>37</sup>). In fact, with *Skellig* this idea can be elaborated even further: one person can be an angel to another. If we want to take this road,

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<sup>36</sup> “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me.”

<sup>37</sup> The example from 171, “Little Devil,” is given here alongside with the “normal” angel references. As Bloom (2007, 13) states: “‘Fallen angels,’ though theologically identical with ‘devils’ and sometimes with ‘demons,’ retain a pathos and a dignity and a curious glamour. Somehow the modifier does not cancel out the substantive: however fallen, they remain angels.” In other words, both *devil* and *angel*, as well as *demon*, are often used in similar contexts to express endearment.

*Skellig* is actually full of angels. For example, it would be fairly easy to argue that many characters in *Skellig* serve angel-like functions for Michael. Two such characters are the elderly lady in the hospital who is suffering from arthritis herself (*Skellig*, 65–66, 97) and Dr. MacNabola (especially *Skellig*, 160–161).<sup>38</sup> Both give advice and even comfort to Michael, although in different ways, when he is having a tough time: they are almost like incarnations of reassurance and hope for him. If we think about one of Woolmer's (2003, 11) characterisation of angels – the apparently real people who “come and [go] so quickly and [act] so efficiently” – it is interesting that Dr. MacNabola disappears right after Michael's situation has been solved: “I used to look for Dr. MacNabola, but I never saw him again” (*Skellig*, 171).

Above I have tried to answer the question whom angels visit. Now I would like to turn to the question, why do angels visit humans – what is their assumed function in this world. Hebrews 1:14 asks, “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” In Psalm 34 it says, “The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.” Woolmer (2003, 39) says that these passages from the Bible, quite simply, “suggest that one of the *normal* functions of angels is to help believers” [emphasis in the original]. As stated above, believing in angels may help some people to a deeper sense of meaning, hope and connection, in particular. If we are to regard the spiritual dimension central to human experience, then the notion of angels may be regarded as helping to deepen this experience. Woolmer (2003, 34) also gives examples of angelic interventions where the person receiving help from an angel was not a believer, which implies

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<sup>38</sup> The role of the old lady is actually brought a lot more to the centre in the film version of *Skellig* (2009). In the film she is called Grace, and although she is depicted as a real person (she dies in the hospital at the end of the film), the film also alludes to the possibility that she either is an angel or will at least be able to *fly* soon. This is reminiscent of the novel's passage: “They say [shoulder blades are] where your wings will grow again one day” (*Skellig*, 38-39).

that angels may appear to all people regardless of their religious background: angels can “protect, guide, and guard the human race.”<sup>39</sup>

In the end, we have fairly little to say definitively about Skellig. We do not have an absolute answer to the question whether he is an angel or not. It can be said, however, that Skellig is not a conventional representation of an angel. For example, we have little evidence to prove that Skellig would be a messenger of any sort, or that he was a character who takes orders from a god figure of some kind. It might be hard to see Skellig as attesting to Gauldie’s (1992, 20) argument<sup>40</sup> that there is a “tendency to create the right kind of angel to fit the needs of the moment,” because his appearance at the beginning of the novel is more likely to be characterised as scary rather than angelic or amiable. It is unlikely that Skellig is the sort of angel Michael – or any child for that matter – would spontaneously create in his mind. I would say that the fact that it takes Michael quite some time to even start considering the possibility that Skellig is an angel proves this argument. However, an argument could be made that the way in which Skellig allows Michael to grow is precisely what Michael needs in his life situation. The way Skellig behaves forces Michael to take an active role, a real responsibility, which might be something he is not trusted with by his parents, for example. Skellig also gives his (seemingly reluctant) ear to Michael, when the boy wants to talk about his fears and concerns. Just talking to someone about his concerns would seem to help Michael a great deal. As regards Michael’s spiritual development, moreover, his experiences with Skellig arguably lead him to the understanding of the different key aspects of spirituality (e.g. hope, meaning and purpose, transcendent Self, vital principle, and unifying force). These factors would seem to support the argument that Skellig is the right kind of angel to fit the needs of the moment.

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<sup>39</sup> It should be noted, like Woolmer does himself, that the history of mankind is the obvious proof for the fact that, assuming that God exists, he does not always choose to send his angels to our assistance. Woolmer’s example of this is the Holocaust.

<sup>40</sup> See also Woolmer 2003, 153–154.

#### 4.3.2 *Skellig*, symbolism and William Blake

One could say that it would be a waste of many good modern children's books, if we only read them in search for didactic content. With *Skellig*, for example, there are issues with symbols and intertextuality we need to take into consideration when trying to analyse it. As regards intertextuality,<sup>41</sup> we should pay closest attention to William Blake who, in a very interesting way, becomes an important character in *Skellig* himself. With all the intertextuality, some critics might actually argue that *Skellig* is not a children's book at all. If we consider the following argument by Nikolajeva (1998, 227), however, we might conclude that, at least to an extent, *Skellig* follows the conventions of children's literature:

[M]odern novels [unlike traditional children's books] are seldom concluded in a psychologically satisfactory way; that is, the restoration of the original order, an elimination of lack, or a reparation of damage.

I would argue that the ending of *Skellig* is happy in almost every imaginable way, and it ties up the most important threads of the story. Skellig himself goes away, which does sadden Michael, but at the same time Michael realises that, in a way, Skellig will never leave him (*Skellig*, 163). The ending does not perhaps so much restore the original order rather than it is an improvement on the original order. The ending also eliminates lack and repairs damage. With its sense of adventure, exploration and imagination, the plot – the actual happenings of the novel – is also reminiscent of classical children's literature. In many ways, the sophistication that has gone into the writing process of *Skellig*, all the symbols, metaphors and intertextuality, feels unusual for a children's book.

Discussing mainstream literature, we speak about symbols, metaphors, or mythical structures. Discussing traditional children's literature, we speak about issues and messages and educational values. However, we see clearly a shift in recent children's literature from mimetic toward the symbolic approach to artistic representation. (Nikolajeva 1998, 233)

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<sup>41</sup> As regards intertextuality, I have chosen not to discuss Gabriel García Márquez' short story "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" (1968), which Almond considers a major influence on *Skellig* (Latham 2006a, 8–9). For a brief discussion on the parallels between *Skellig* and "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," see Latham (2006a, 35–37).

This is something we can clearly see in *Skellig*. Below I will try to account for some of the novel's symbolic dimensions.

One of the things that fascinates me about *Skellig* is the way it draws parallels between characters; much like it draws parallels between mythology and reality.<sup>42</sup> Keeping in mind one of the genres that might be assigned to the novel, magical realism, this is the important mechanism the book muddles truth and dreams with. For example, it could be argued that there are parallels in the stories of Michael and the bird fledglings; that Michael is going through a similar development process spiritually as the bird fledglings are going through physically (*Skellig*, 142–156). Michael must find in himself the courage to take a leap of faith, whereas the bird fledglings will eventually need to take the leap out of their nest. Indeed, symbolically, one of the most important aspects to the reading of *Skellig* is the prominence of birds. In his *Dictionary of Symbolism*, Hans Biedermann (1994, 39) describes birds in the following terms.

[T]hese creatures that use their WINGS to approach the HEAVENS often embody the human desire to break free of gravity and to attain higher spheres like the ANGELS [...] In FAIRY TALES those who understand the language of birds are often privy to special knowledge; people are also transformed into birds, and *birds bring food to good or holy persons*. [emphasis mine]

It is very interesting, though not surprising, that Biedermann should compare birds and angels, because for people the most fascinating thing about both birds and angels is their ability to fly. I would argue that birds – their ability to fly and thus to rise above the human world, in particular – can also symbolise (self-)transcendence which, as a key aspect of spirituality, is one of the novel's most important themes. In *Skellig*, birds feed Skellig and bring food (a dead mouse and a baby bird) to Michael and Mina (*Skellig*, 173). Based on what happens in *Skellig*, it would be easy to argue that Michael and Mina are indeed “privy to special knowledge,” to use a phrase by Biedermann. After having fainted and seen how, “[m]iles above [them], a great

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<sup>42</sup> By *reality* here I mean, first and foremost, what the characters in *Skellig* perceive as reality.

heavy bird flapped across the blue,” Michael’s “mouth was dry and sour, like [he had] swallowed owls’ leavings from the windowsill” (*Skellig*, 152). The baby, too, “tasted of milk and salt and of something mysterious, sweet and sour all at once” (*Skellig*, 180). To account for the mysterious taste of sour in their mouths, one might suggest that both Michael and his sister have been – at least on a symbolical level – fed by birds. Further, it would not be too brave an assumption that the “great heavy bird” mentioned is Skellig himself (*Skellig*, 152).

A discussion of the spiritual and religious dimension of *Skellig* without mentioning William Blake would feel incomplete. Indeed I have already mentioned Blake’s significant role in the novel. In the course of the novel, William Blake and his poetry become more and more intertwined with the story. Actually, it is rather difficult to unravel this tight connection between Blake and *Skellig*. In the novel it is Mina’s character which is the mouthpiece for almost all of the novel’s many Blake references.<sup>43</sup> As said, it is not just Blake’s poetry, but Blake as a person that the novel incorporates into the story. It might be interesting to the reading of the novel that some biographies say Blake was sometimes labeled “an eccentric or worse, insane or demented.”<sup>44</sup> So we could say that to many of his contemporaries Blake seemed like a person who is “not all there”: perhaps not someone who lacks intelligence, but who is living in a world of his own at times. Some of Blake’s opinions also went against the grain of the contemporary deistic<sup>45</sup> view of Christianity. Therefore it is probably not surprising that during his lifetime Blake did not garner a great following. Much like most people in the rational-scientific world of today, many of Blake’s contemporaries based their doctrines on

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<sup>43</sup> “It is even possible, given Mina’s mother’s fondness for Blake, that she named her daughter after the poet, ‘Mina’ being short for ‘Wilhelmina,’ a feminized version of ‘William.’” (Latham 2006a, 38)

<sup>44</sup> *Online Literature*: Blake. [Internet] Available at: <<http://www.online-literature.com/blake/>>.

<sup>45</sup> Deism is the belief, “based solely on reason, in a God who created the universe and then abandoned it, assuming no control over life, exerting no influence on natural phenomena, and giving no supernatural revelation.” *The Free Dictionary* [Internet] Available at: <<http://www.thefreedictionary.com>>.

According to the *OED*, deism is “usually, [a] belief in the existence of a Supreme Being as the source of finite existence, with rejection of revelation and the supernatural doctrines of Christianity; ‘natural religion.’ *Oxford English Dictionary* [Internet] Available at: <<http://oed.com>>.

rationalistic and materialistic speculation. Blake's criticism toward the deistic view is voiced, for example, in his text "There Is No Natural Religion."

For Blake, Christianity seems to be a religion of revelation; something that the *Catholic Encyclopedia* refers to as a religion of "mysteries, which even when revealed, the intellect of man is incapable of fully penetrating."<sup>46</sup> I would argue that this view of religiousness is very close to that of Michael and Mina's in *Skellig*, even though the two children might have a slightly more concrete take on their spiritual/religious beliefs. As argued earlier, Michael and Mina's religiousness is of an active kind. It is the old Catholic theory that makes "faith and good works co-ordinate sources of justification, laying the chief stress upon works."<sup>47</sup> One could argue that Michael and Mina believe this to be true, whereas Michael's parents' take on religion is more of the "Sola Fide" (justification by "Faith Alone") kind. It should be emphasised that I am not saying that Michael and Mina's spiritual views necessarily represent Catholicism in *Skellig*. However, it is interesting that David Almond himself grew up in a Catholic family.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to influencing the overall atmosphere of the novel, Blake can also be read in a more literal sense through his poems, which are quoted in the novel. Often quoted by Mina, the poems many times serve as encouragement to Michael on his path of spiritual growth. That is to say, many of us would probably argue that the undertone Blake's poems give to the novel is that of not being afraid of embracing good things even if we cannot fully understand them. In chapter 34, Mina quotes passages from Blake's poem "The Angel." At this time Michael is still uncertain whether he can believe in Skellig whole-heartedly (*Skellig*, 132–4).

Soon my Angel came again;  
I was arm'd, he came in vain...

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<sup>46</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*: Revelation. [Internet] Available at: <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13001a.htm>>.

<sup>47</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*: Justification. [Internet] Available at: <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08573a.htm>>.

<sup>48</sup> David Almond's website: <<http://www.davidalmond.com/author/bio.html>>.

I would argue that, in the context of the novel at least, this passage could be read as saying that if we hold our reserves – if we are armed, so to speak – we will never be blessed with the state of true belief. Another reading we can get through Blake’s poems is that we should never be afraid of letting go of something oppressive, even if we had become used to it. In *Skellig*, school is seen as an oppressive authority. This is depicted most straightforwardly when Mina quotes the poem “The Schoolboy” (*Skellig*, 59).

But to go to school in a summer morn,  
O! it drives all joy away!  
Under a cruel eye outworn,  
The little ones spend the day  
In sighing and dismay.

Mina’s more open environment of education – the fact that she is not trapped inside four walls – is clearly represented as bringing about more active and receptive children who do not have as many hindrances in their thinking as the children who are taught in normal schools.<sup>49</sup> The fact that Mina is home-taught is probably also one of the novel’s most fascinating and inspiring things for child readers – just like it is something new for child characters in the novel (especially Leakey and Coot: *Skellig*, 107). In an unorthodox way *Skellig* is therefore also a school story and represents some typical characteristics of this popular children’s literature subgenre. In addition to themes of friendship, romance, bravery and loyalty, *Skellig* includes “rivalry over games” (football), a bully character (Coot, although his bully-like behaviour is not very central to the story) and the depiction of English state schools, in general (Briggs & Butts 1995, 153–159).

In *Skellig*, Blake and his poetry emphasise what Nikolajeva (1998, 233) points out about how the boundaries between mainstream and children’s literature are no longer as clear-cut as they used to be. This is depicted in the passage where Mina questions the labels for

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<sup>49</sup> The book’s ethos also reflects the words of Plato: “The most effective kind of education is that a child should play amongst lovely things.” *The Freethinkers’ Guide to the Educational Universe: A Selection of Quotations on Education* Compiled by Roland Meighan [Internet] Available at: <<http://thebluecrane.com/college/tfgeu.htm>>.

different reading ages. “And where would William Blake fit in,” she soundly asks, before quoting the first two lines of Blake’s “The Tyger” (*Skellig*, 89–90). Much like the language in “The Tyger,” the language in *Skellig* is relatively simple. What the assigned reading age of Blake and *Skellig* would be, then, is difficult to say. At any rate, both Blake’s poetry and *Skellig* demand their readers to open their “eyes a little wider, look a little harder” (*Skellig*, 131).

There are yet at least two more direct references to Blake and his poetry. The first is to the poem “Night,” parts of which are quoted in the novel (*Skellig*, 137, 165). It is this passage “The birds are silent in their nest, / And I must seek for mine...” where Michael joins in with Mina in song, and she says “See? [...] I told you we’d get you singing” (*Skellig*, 165). I would argue that both singing and believing take special courage, they require a person to ‘open up,’ so to speak, and at that time Michael has gained that courage. This courage could be seen as representing the aspect of transcendent Self in Michael’s spiritual development. The remaining direct Blake reference is the name of Michael’s baby sister, Joy, which might refer to Blake’s poem “Infant Joy.” While many critics have read the poem as reassuring, idyllic or as glorification of conception,<sup>50</sup> the reading closest to my reading of Blake’s poetry in *Skellig* is suggested by Walter Minot (“Blake’s Infant Joy: An Explanation of Age”<sup>51</sup>). Minot “sees the piece as primarily a glorification not of conception, but of a newborn’s pre-baptismal innocence, the period before indoctrination into institutionalized religion when, he argues, Blake believed children were free from spiritual self-consciousness.” As a newborn baby is yet to develop spiritual self-consciousness, the stage he/she is at as regards spiritual development could be seen as the first apex of the aspect of unifying force or integrative energy. Instead of seeing him/herself as separate from other people, he/she feels a very close unity with his/her

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<sup>50</sup> One could read Blake’s poem “Infant Sorrow” (from “Songs of Experience”) as a sort of counter poem to “Infant Joy”: conception is not always joyful or happy but can bring sorrow and pain. In a way Michael’s little sister’s birth also brings these feelings to the family.

<sup>51</sup> John Murphy: Blake’s “Infant Joy” An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism. [Internet] <<http://www.english.uga.edu/wblake/SIE/25/25murphy.bib.html>>. No pagination.

mother, in particular.<sup>52</sup> I will return to this briefly below when I discuss the passage where Skellig goes to meet the baby at the hospital ward.

There is also one reference to Blake which is a debatable one. That is a poem Dr. MacNabola quotes: “Love is the child that breathes our breath / Love is the child that scatters death.” Even though it is implied that this quote is from Blake, it is unsure whether it is really written by Blake or is just imitating his style. In his article “The First Printz Award Designations: Winners All,” Jean Pollard Dimmitt (2001, no pagination) states that “[w]hether the lines are Blake’s or an imitation of his style, they encapsulate the theme of the novel: the power of love.” There probably would have been a number of real Blake quotations to choose from, even though the intended statement behind the quote had to have been about the power of love. At any rate, it is difficult to account for why this supposed quote from Blake is put alongside many real Blake quotations.

Another of the slightly more debatable Blake references can be seen on the cover of some of the editions of the novel. It is probably no accident that the style in which the angelic creature is painted on the cover of the Hodder Children’s Books edition is fairly similar to Blake’s style of painting. On the other hand, the cover of the Yearling Books edition, for example, depicts Skellig as closer to a normal human. In any case, in the novel Mina draws Skellig and her mother comments that it is “[t]he kind of thing William Blake saw,” suggesting that Blake, too, saw angels (*Skellig*, 131). The same idea is actually already introduced earlier in the novel: “He [Blake] painted pictures and wrote poems. Much of the times he wore no clothes. He saw angels in his garden” (*Skellig*, 59). Later in the novel it is also implied that Ernie Myers, the man who previously lived in the house Michael’s family has moved into, also saw angels, or more precisely, Skellig. At least Ernie Myers spoke to Dr. Death “of certain images that came to him,” although this is accounted for by Ernie’s serious illness: “as the

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<sup>52</sup> “Every observer has noted that the younger the child, the less sense he has of his own ego. From the intellectual point of view, he does not distinguish between external and internal, subjective and objective.” (Piaget 1977, 183)

mind approaches death it changes. It becomes less... orderly" (*Skellig*, 124). In a manner typical to the rational-scientific world view, Dr. Death sees this as an anomaly of sorts, as a symptom he and other doctors should do something about (*Skellig*, 124). When Michael thinks "of the baby. [He] wondered what she would see, if she were near to death" (*Skellig*, 132). There is, then, an idea that a person on the verge of death is able to see something that the rest are not, and perhaps what they see is something the rest could not even conceive or understand. It is these sorts of more esoteric views that William Blake and his poetry serve as a useful platform for in the novel.

#### 4.3.3 Dance of life: the apex of spiritual development in *Skellig*

It feels fitting to conclude my discussion of the spiritual aspects of *Skellig* with two important passages from the book. The first could be considered an important event in Michael's spiritual development, while the second is the passage where Skellig "cures" Michael's baby sister. I am going to quote both passages at some length.

He [Skellig] took my hand and Mina's hand, and we stood there, the three of us, linked in the moonlight on the old bare floorboards. He squeezed my hand as if to reassure me. [...] He squeezed me again and smiled again. He stepped sideways and we turned together, kept slowly turning, like we were carefully, nervously beginning to dance. The moonlight shined on our faces in turn. Each face spun from shadow to light, from shadow to light, from shadow to light, and each time the faces of Mina and Skellig came into the light they were more silvery, more expressionless. [...] For a moment I wanted to pull away from them, to break the circle, but Skellig's hand tightened on mine. [...] I didn't stop. I found that I was smiling, that Skellig and Mina were smiling too. [...] I felt Skellig's and Mina's hearts beating along with my own. I felt their breath in rhythm with mine. It was like we had moved into each other, like we had become one thing. (*Skellig*, 119–120)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> My initial reading of this passage included the idea of eurythmy (the movement in art known from Steiner philosophy/pedagogy), which is used for a person to come more deeply acquainted with his/her soul, perhaps with extension, his/her spiritual side. The word stems from a Greek root and denotes beautiful or harmonious rhythm. This reading, I would argue, is supported by the notion that *Skellig* seems to support a school-free pedagogy – the idea that a child learns best in a natural, free environment. The role of artistic expression in a child's development is also key in both *Skellig* and Steiner pedagogy. Although the idea is interesting, it seems somewhat difficult to pursue this reading forward as the parallels between *Skellig* and Steiner pedagogy are not many.

Although there may be more probable reasons than his incomplete spiritual development why Michael feels he “does not belong” and is an outsider to things happening within his family, it is worth noting that spirituality is sometimes considered a journey towards Ultimate Unity (e.g. Hyde 2008, 34). The feeling of connectedness is arguably what a human being is continuously striving for. As pointed out above, Hyde (2008, 31) argues that spirituality has “survival value for the individual.” It could be argued that the survival value stems from the fact that spirituality, even if the initial spiritual experience was a private one, encourages people to deeper interconnectedness. In other words, there is strength and safety in numbers: A human being is a pack animal. It is clear that the passage from *Skellig* I quote above represents an experience where “the sense of separateness becomes less distinct, and [this leads] to individual experiences of sacredness, and experiences of unity with Other” (Hyde 33–34).<sup>54</sup> This experience has elements of most of the aspects of spirituality described in McCarroll et al. (2005, 44–47). The aspect of connection and relationships should be obvious, as the experience intimately includes two other beings. The aspect of unifying force or integrative energy is closely connected with connection and relationships. The experience clearly transcends the subject-object dichotomy, as Michael feels the three of them “become one thing.” The aspect of transcendent Self is also evident, as during the experience Michael clearly climbs beyond his normal limits of existence. There are also elements of the aspect of personal and private, as the experience is subjective in that it is not standardised. Yet another possible aspect is that of God/god(s)/Transcendent Other, because Skellig may be considered an angel or, in more general terms, a transcendent other. This is why the passage which was quoted above may be considered a very deep spiritual experience. Even though Michael still asks for visual confirmation of Skellig’s existence later on in the novel, I would argue that it is this experience

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<sup>54</sup> This is probably also the aim when people of certain religious beliefs join hands when they pray.

which solidifies Michael's spiritual development. The dance-like experience between Michael, Mina and Skellig is repeated for a second time later in the novel (*Skellig*, 167).

This passage is also important because it is probably the most explicit reference to the idea that Michael and Mina are angels. While Michael sees "ghostly wings at Mina's back" and he feels "the feathers and delicate bones rising from [his] own shoulders" as well, he, together with Mina and Skellig, is "lifted from the floor [and turn] circles together through the empty air" (*Skellig*, 120). Another slightly more debatable factor is that in this passage the faces of Michael, Mina and Skellig shine. In fact, it is the moonlight which shines on their faces (*Skellig*, 119). Woolmer (2003, 11) also presents the idea that angels can sometimes be distinguished from an ordinary human being because their faces shine. A similar reading is available of the passage where Skellig visits Michael's baby sister at the hospital ward.

"And I saw this man [in a dream], that's all. Another dream, though I was sure I was wide awake. He was standing over the baby. He was filthy. All in black, an ancient dusty suit. A great hunch on his back. Hair all matted and tangled. I was terrified. [...] I wanted to push him away. [...] But then he turned and looked at me. [...] And there was such tenderness in his eyes. And for some reason I knew he hadn't come to harm her. [...] 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 [Michael] said. (*Skellig*, 159)

Michael's mother, who reports this story, also says that "there were wings on the baby's back" (*Skellig*, 159). As in the passage with Michael, Mina and Skellig above, the dance here can be interpreted as both a remedy and a celebration. Dance has certainly had a great ritual and ceremonial role in religion and spirituality throughout the history of mankind. Even the Bible has numerous references to dance, either as celebration or in worship (e.g. 2 Samuel 6:14, Psalm 30:11, Matthew 11:17). Perhaps even more importantly, I would argue that, in *Skellig*, dance signifies a deep interconnectedness between characters. It signifies a state of feeling unifying force or integrative energy, which has already been established as a key element of spirituality. It may also be a state where one person can feed off another person. This is what

happens in the passage at the hospital ward, in particular. When Michael wants to thank Skellig for making his little sister strong, Skellig says that it “was her that gave strength to” him (*Skellig*, 166). This may be difficult to understand in rational-scientific terms, as the baby is yet to undergo the heart operation. I can offer two possible explanations for Skellig’s statement, however. Firstly, when I discussed William Blake’s poem “Infant Joy,” which may have given the baby her name Joy, I quoted Walter Minot (in Murphy 1995) who suggests that the poem may be seen as glorification of “a newborn’s pre-baptismal innocence, the period before indoctrination into institutionalized religion when [...] Blake believed children were free from *spiritual self-consciousness*” [my emphasis]. Considering that spirituality may be seen as a journey away from self-love (Sperry 2001, 70), the state of a newborn baby when she does not even yet recognise herself as apart from others (her mother, in particular) may be considered the “most blessed” spiritual state. Another possible explanation why Skellig states the baby gives strength to him, and not the other way around, may be seen as a more rational one. It is that when we are born, we are, like Skellig says, “glittering with life,” and as life goes by, we somehow lose some of that glitter in the course of time (*Skellig*, 166). However, I would see that there is more evidence in *Skellig* to support my first reading of this passage.

#### 4.4 Religious fairy tales – means to an end?

In the introduction, I did not characterise *Skellig* as an explicitly religious story. Although many non-religious fairytales, too, convey a similar moral message, on the scale of religiousness, *Skellig* falls at the more religious end. There are indeed some, although few, explicitly religious (Christian) passages in the story, such as Skellig’s words “Come to me,” which echo the words of Jesus (e.g. Luke 18:16<sup>55</sup>). Praying, (religious) belief and Heaven are also mentioned a few times (e.g. *Skellig*, 11, 39, 50, 158), whereas the name of God is not

explicitly mentioned. For the most part, however, the story is implicitly Christian. Of David Almond's novels, *The Fire-Eaters* (2003), for example, has a more explicitly Christian ethos to it. Although even explicit religiousness is not by any means an uncommon theme to occur in children's literature, the subtle cover of magical realism makes *Skellig* an uncommonly versatile and appealing religious children's book – a religious book that can even be taught in secular schools.<sup>56</sup>

*Skellig* can be seen as the sort of story/tale that has a propaedeutic effect on a child's capability to receive Biblical stories. In his essay "Kertomus – uskon äidinkieli" [transl. "Narrative – the mother tongue of faith"], Pertti Luumi (2003, 47–70) says that because of their propaedeutic effect, fairytales have become more acceptable among the people in the field of religious education. Of course different sorts of narratives and fairytales have been used in that field for a long time, but here Luumi probably refers to narratives of a more secular nature. Luumi (2003, 64–65) sees that to serve a religiously educative function, a text, a fairytale for example, must fulfill certain qualifications: firstly, the condition of understanding must exist and, secondly, the fairytale must function as a narrative of trust. *Skellig* obviously fulfills these conditions. It also matches the following qualifications:

Fairytales help us overcome angst. They have their own way of showing that the antithesis of belief is not disbelief or doubt, but distrust and distress. [...] It is this basic conception of trust that fairytales produce in children that our trust in God is also founded on. (Luumi 2003, 65) [transl. by A.K.]

If we read *Skellig* in search of educational values, I would say one of the primary ideas of the novel is to suggest that spirituality/religion and faith are not useless. Faith, be it religious faith or not, should never be forgotten "lying dry and dusty and useless on the garage floor" (*Skellig*, 135). The mission of most religious movements is to congregate as many people as possible, and that makes children their most precious target audience. Sperry (2001, 59) writes about the

<sup>55</sup> "But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God" [emphasis mine].

<sup>56</sup> *Skellig* is taught widely in British schools (Caroline Horn 2008, 21).

stages of faith development and names the stage, which ranges from age seven to puberty, the stage of “Mythic-literal faith.”<sup>57</sup> At this stage

individuals begin to take on for themselves the stories, beliefs, and observances that symbolize belonging to their community. Beliefs and symbols are understood literally, and anthropomorphic stories are the major way of understanding faith content. (Sperry 2001, 59)

This makes fairytales and narratives such as *Skellig* especially attractive, because they can clearly execute an important religious function. Luumi (2003, 65), quoting G. Lange (1979), insightfully observes that, in a time when spiritual life has become rare, something rather remote, and the mind’s demand exceeds the supply of spiritual stimuli, fairytales become the allies of religion. Maybe Christianity has once served as psychological soil on which other myths may flourish, but in the modern world the relationship probably works the other way around.

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<sup>57</sup> The stages of faith development, according to Sperry (2001, 59–60), are: 1) Intuitive-projective faith (ages 3–7), 2) Mythic-literal faith (age 7 to puberty), 3) Synthetic-conventional faith (adolescence to early adulthood), 4) Individual-reflective faith (no age mentioned), 5) Conjunctive faith (no age mentioned), and 6) Universalizing faith (only very few persons achieve stage six).

## 5 Conclusion

Although the themes of spirituality and death are no strangers to children's literature, it is not usual that they are discussed in the way they are represented in *Skellig*. When Michael pictures Ernie Myers, the previous tenant of the house Michael's family moves into at the beginning of the book, lying dead on the kitchen floor for almost a week before being found, there is nothing beautiful or unrealistic about the way death is represented. The more subtle and even beautiful ways in which children's literature often represents death – such as anthropomorphisation, marginalisation, sanitisation or not representing death as final – do not become central in *Skellig*, although there are also passages that hint at the religious idea that death is not the end (e.g. the idea that shoulder blades are where wings were when you were an angel, and where they will grow again one day; in *Skellig*, 38–39). To some extent at least, death is brought back to the familial circle and back to the household from the nursing homes and hospitals in which many people die in the modern age. This is done perhaps in order to show that death is something natural, something that happens to all of us. It is not, therefore, something that we should be afraid of, let alone something we should try to avoid in our conversations. Children will always have questions about death, which is a difficult topic for adults as well. No one can say anything absolute about death, as no one can die and come back to tell about it. Every interpretation of death is therefore misinterpretation. Even though it is impossible to say anything about death with absolute certainty, adults' answers to children's questions about death should be as honest as possible. Adults should not try to protect children from the unpleasantness of death to the extent of making society seem deathless to children. It will only make it the more difficult for a child when he/she has the inevitable first encounter with death.

In the course of the book Michael may have to deal with questions about death for the first time in his life. It might not be too brave to argue that before Michael has to deal with the death of Ernie Myers and the prospect of his little sister's death, society may have seemed

almost deathless to him. We are not given information about whether his grandparents are still alive, for example, but it would seem that this is the first time Michael has to deal with the issue of a person's death in such close proximity. While dead birds found in the chimney can be discussed quite leisurely, it would seem that Michael is profoundly preoccupied with images of the dead Ernie Myers in the back of his mind. Moreover, Michael is clearly having difficulties in dealing with the possibility that his baby sister might die. Entering the fourth and final period of cognitive development, at the age of 12 Michael would be able, at least mainly, to grasp the concept of death and its four main subcomponents – finality, inevitability, nonfunctionality and causality – at an intellectual level. Death is a physical event but it presents people with a metaphysical problem. Therefore it is understandable that Michael still has questions about death and about his little sister's condition.

These questions would seem to be more spiritual, philosophical and emotional in nature. In fact, it could be argued that even after people have reached the level of cognitive development where they can intellectually understand the subcomponents of death, the way they perceive death (especially its finality) depends greatly on how the society around them has "taught" them to perceive death. Spiritual and/or religious beliefs are one major factor in people's perception of death, because beliefs affect their perception of afterlife, in particular. While at times bordering on religious (with references to angel's wings and praying), the answers Michael's parents give to his questions would not seem to be sufficient. The primary motive for the sort of answers Michael's parents give to his questions would seem to be an attempt to try to protect Michael from the unpleasant reality. This can also be seen as a more wide-spread problem in the Western world, as it would seem that as long as educators, writers and adults in general do not overcome their own fears of death, and its metaphysical aspect especially, it will be impossible for them to educate children to see death as a natural part of life. An attempt of trying to shelter children from the reality of death can in fact lead to different

sorts of misunderstandings. The primary effect for Michael is also probably the most painful thing about the situation with his sister. It is the feeling that people – not only his parents but other adults as well – are trying to cut him out of the whole situation, so to speak. Michael becomes the so-called forgotten and invisible mourner. A situation where a child dies is referred to as a double-loss from the remaining sibling's perspective, because at that time the bereaved parents are overwhelmed by their own emotions to the extent that they cannot take care of the remaining child and his/her needs well enough. Even though Michael's sister eventually pulls through, at times Michael feels that he is just an inconvenience to his parents and is told in a discreet manner that his own grief and other potential problems and needs will now have to be put on hold, as though he had the responsibility to look after his parents now. This could lead to Michael protesting against his parents, but for the most part he finds a world of his own instead where it would seem he is needed and where he can still make a difference.

This is the world of life-changing mystical and spiritual experiences where Michael and his new friend Mina are transported with their discovery of the complex character of Skellig. Their experiences, while fantastical and complex, help them grow mentally as human beings. Even the experience of seeing his newborn sister in such a fragile condition arguably turns out to be a positive experience for Michael when his sister recovers. Experiences like this one can be referred to as growing through adversity, possibly as “tiny deaths” we all have to experience from time to time. In other words, something in us has to die so that we can pass to the next stage both mentally and physically. It would seem to be greatly soothing for Michael to realise that new life can be breathed into, and metaphorically also born from, something that appears to be dead. Most importantly this happens with Skellig and Michael's sister, but also with the goddess Persephone in the allegorical story Mina's mother tells the children. When Michael realises this, it gives him hope, which is a key element of spirituality. The idea of something new being born from something that appears to be dead is a

fairly usual one in children's literature, but in *Skellig* death is not represented as "the great fertilizer."

Throughout the thesis I have argued that one central theme in the novel deals with the fact that Michael is on the verge of becoming something new. Writing about contemporary children's literature, Sheila A. Egoff (1981, 105) argues that in both old and new fantasies "the protagonists change inwardly because of their adventures [but] in these new fantasies the inner landscape of the mind is explored much more deeply and sensitively." This is indeed what the novel's first person narration does: it traces Michael's mental, physical and spiritual development deeply and sensitively. It shows how Michael learns something new all the time about things such as spirituality, medical science (and its limitations) and humanity (and its ultimate limitation of mortality). The last one, in particular, is an important lesson all children must learn on their path into adulthood. As Latham (2006a, 6) points out, in many of his books Almond focuses on the "development of identity as an on-going process that occurs in a series of borderlands – between childhood and adulthood, the natural and supernatural, between life and death, and between past and present." It could also be argued that in addition to the borderlands mentioned by Latham, the novel blurs the distinction between mainstream and children's literature (especially with symbolism and intertextuality). All these characteristics of the novel make it a less conventional children's book. Even though *Skellig* is not a traditional children's book, it obviously is a story about growth, which is probably the most archetypical themes in children's literature. As Jill P. May (1997, 84) states, "the common motifs often found in children's literature – including gates, doors, roads, tones of light and dark – [...] signify thresholds of experience and imply social change for the real and literary child." The contrast of light and dark, in particular, is very much present in *Skellig*. It is through these gates and doors we must all pass through, mind our steps and, finally, take a daring look into the farthest corner – just to find something that is not even necessarily there. This analogy

comes valid especially when we discuss the development of spirituality. It is this threshold of experience – development of identity and the development of a child’s abstract thinking, and consequently development of spirituality – that *Skellig* so beautifully represents.

According to Latham (2006a, 121), some of Almond’s writing can be viewed as partly autobiographical, because “the adolescent Almond also struggled with his religious beliefs, finally rejecting organized religion but never letting go of the Church’s rich imagery and powerful stories.” Further, in all of his children’s books Almond “is concerned with the presence of the magical amid the mundane and, moreover, with the special ability of young people to recognize and respond to that presence” (Latham 2006b, no pagination). It is through the guise of magical realism that *Skellig*, too, introduces its spiritual – if not religious – elements. At first Michael and Mina desperately want to know what Skellig is – whether he is a human, an angel, a bird or something else entirely. From a fairly early stage in the novel, it is hinted that there is something extraordinary with Skellig – in fact, something like “thin arms, folded up. Springy and flexible” can be detected beneath his shoulders (*Skellig*, 31). Despite this fairly obvious reference to angel’s wings I would argue that Skellig is not a traditional representation of an angel figure. At the end, we still have little to say definitively about what Skellig is and what he is not. Eventually Michael realises that for Skellig to be meaningful to him it does not matter whether Skellig is even ‘real’ or not. This goes to show that in the course of the book Michael becomes capable of thinking in abstract terms. He would seem to learn that he does not need to be able to touch something for it to “be there.” In a way he becomes sensitised to the spiritual aspects of life, perhaps most importantly, self-transcendence. This is something that Michael would seem to learn from his experiences with Skellig, which is why we should probably read *Skellig* as teaching the children to know themselves better, to become more complete human beings through the ability of self-transcendence. Skellig also teaches the children about belief, not only in terms of believing in themselves and caring for one another,

but possibly also in terms of (spiritual or even religious) belief. Michael and Mina's perception of religion is one of mysteries and about active rather than passive faith. This is the result of two major factors. Firstly, a child of approximately 12 years of age typically thinks about his/her religious beliefs reciprocally. Secondly, it is at this age that children realise that life is what they make of it themselves.

Although the spirituality that is represented in *Skellig* probably borders on religion at times, it would be fair to argue that religion as an institution does not become an important concept in the novel. Earlier in the thesis I established that religion and spirituality should not be used synonymously. Many writers argue that spirituality may defy any single definition, which is why I have maybe rather described than defined the concept in this thesis. In short, spirituality is about one's search for meaning and belonging. It is the ability to transcend self in order to see things from other perspectives and feel harmonious interconnectedness. The initial personal spiritual experience can be expressed through means of organised religion, which is why religion can be considered a secondary phenomenon to spirituality. Spirituality, and religion as a subordinate concept, is a human quality which has survival value, because it encourages people to find safety in the feeling of unity. It is this feeling of unity, the state of surpassing subject-object dichotomy, which Michael and Mina achieve, and which the baby would seem to possess innately, as a newborn child does not yet recognise herself as other from people around her and her mother, in particular. This important sensation of unity takes place through dance, which resembles a ceremony or a ritual, and is depicted in the novel's two key passages. The passage where Skellig, Michael and Mina dance is extremely important, as it is perhaps the clearest example of a representation of spirituality in the novel. The passage can be read to include at least five of the eight most popular concepts linked with spirituality. These are connection and relationships, unifying force or integrative energy, transcendent Self, personal and private, and Transcendent Other.

As Latham (2006a, 121) states, in *Skellig* Almond indeed holds on to the rich religious imagery but lets go of the somewhat useless religious institutions. The fact that the novel represents spirituality as a private matter – essentially, as something both universal and deeply personal – is one explanation for why the novel is read widely in British schools, for example. What makes the representation of spirituality so interesting in *Skellig* even for adult readers, in my opinion, is partly because of the way the novel incorporates William Blake's poetry and his more esoteric spiritual views into the story. In fact, the way in which the children represent their spirituality may even be similar to William Blake's spiritual views. At the least it is very different compared to the way the adults represent their spirituality. With the help of Hay, for example, I have come to the conclusion that spirituality is innate in human beings. The fact that the ways in which children and adults project their spirituality and religiousness are different can be explained with the cognitive aspect of spirituality, which can indeed develop through time. Again, one of the most important factors in the development of a child's or an adult's spirituality is the society. That is why many countries still have a distinct majority religion which, in one way or another, indoctrinates people to this faith. The majority religion and its dogma also have an inevitable effect on the everyday life in the country, as the religion affects its laws and the people's idea of morality, for example. This is the key reason why a Christian reading is available in almost any fairytale told in the Western world.

The way the novel represents some of the more abstract aspects of life – spirituality, in particular – is also one of the reasons why the novel can be seen as having a propaedeutic effect for children to receive more explicitly religious stories later in life. However, I would not characterise *Skellig* as an explicitly religious book, as it would seem to suggest that a single epistemological system cannot provide the knowledge people need to cope in the world. That is to say, the novel does not support the idea, which is becoming well-founded in the modern world, that science – or in more general terms, rationality – could take the place of religion in

people's lives. The way we see the ending of the novel through Michael's eyes – his sister surviving the difficult heart operation – suggests that we need both spirituality and science, and that they can quite happily live side by side. At the beginning of this thesis I presented the idea that the teachings of secular and religious children's stories are often the same as a problem. I would argue that with *Skellig* we do not really have this problem. Even though *Skellig* does have religious inclinations, it can help readers find their own philosophical and spiritual paths, even if these paths are not Christian. It can help the readers, like Skellig and Mina help Michael, to get to know themselves a bit better, to learn to transcend themselves. If we were trying to define the lessons the readers learn from the book, this would arguably be the most important one.

If this thesis was to be taken further, it would be critical to find more secondary sources, not only on the topics of death and spirituality but also on the novel itself. A lot has been written on how a child perceives death and spirituality and in this thesis I have only scratched the surface. At the beginning of the thesis I list some of the academic studies on *Skellig* which I unfortunately was not able to get hold of. I would also like to expand on the reading I did on cognitive development theories, as I feel that the foundation for the main themes of the thesis lies in a child's cognitive development. It would also be important to study the ways a child perceives death and spirituality not just intellectually but also emotionally. Another two areas which would require additional attention are the symbolical and intertextual aspects of the novel. In order to keep the main focus on how the novel represents death and spirituality, I did not want to pursue these two topics as far as they could have been. It is possible that delving further into symbolism and intertextuality would not have shed new light on the concepts of death and spirituality. However, as both death and spirituality are concepts that are surrounded and even filled with symbols and symbolic acts, studying the novel's symbolism more closely might have brought up interesting readings and interpretations. To

that end, the role of William Blake's poetry in *Skellig* could also have been studied much more closely. Approaching the text from the perspectives of symbolism and intertextuality would require very close reading of the novel. A very interesting characteristic in the novel is its liminality – the way the novel blurs the distinction between childhood and adulthood, natural and supernatural, life and death, past and present, and mainstream and children's literature. It is this liminality – the feeling of something happening on the edge of awareness – which is also characteristic to the metaphysical aspects of death and spirituality. This aspect would probably be the most interesting one to begin with, if this thesis was to be taken further.

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