

## **Death, Angels and Football – Blake’s Visions and Almond’s England.**

Sandra J. Williams  
University of Brighton

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### **Abstract:**

**With reference to *Skellig* by David Almond, I discuss how the secondary world is interwoven with that of the primary through William Blake’s visions which are embedded in the narrative with dreams playing an important role. Drawing on significant aspects of the child reader implied in the text, I will identify Almond’s construction of the child in contemporary England.**

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As it is likely *Skellig* is unknown, a brief synopsis is offered first. A contemporary novel, *Skellig* is in the form a first person narrative told by Michael, a pre-adolescent boy, whose family have recently moved to an old house in need of restoration. However, the problem concerns not the house as such, but Michael’s premature baby sister who is very sick and because of this takes up all of Mother’s energy and much of Father’s. As the novel progresses the baby is taken back to hospital, is put on a ventilator and finally has to have a life-saving operation. As such the possibilities of a death pervade the novel. All these events clearly is in a primary world that the reader would recognise.

But there is another dimension to the novel. In the garden of the house is a crumbling old garage which Michael enters, in spite of being warned it is dangerous. In there, in the dark, he finds a strange creature in a state of collapse who says he is ‘Sick to death’. He appears to be human but has non-human habits such as eating flies, is surrounded by owl pellets and appears to have something growing from his shoulder blades. When asked who he is, at first he replies ‘nobody’ but later he reveals that he is: ‘Something like you, something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel.’

As Michael’s relationship with Skellig (for that is his name) grows, he becomes more and more aware of his strangeness. While Michael concentrates on helping him move to safer quarters, supplies him with aspirin for his arthritis and feeds him Chinese take-aways, Skellig’s health and the recovery of the baby appear to be bound up together.

There is another significant character in the novel, a girl called Mina, who is Michael’s new neighbour. Unlike Michael, who goes to the nearby state school, Mina is educated at home by her Mother, a great admirer of the 18<sup>th</sup> century artist, William Blake. It is Mina, more open to sensation, who unlocks Michael’s spiritual side, encouraging him to observing nature closely and shares the friendship with Skellig. She is the bridge between fantasy and realism.

In a final stage, it is revealed that growing from Skellig’s shoulder blades are wings. In a profound spiritual moment they dance and Michael is swept off his feet. Skellig, having gained his strength, then flies away. The baby recovers and is given the same of Joy. The nature of Skellig remains ambiguous leaving the reader to wonder about this figure from a secondary world.

From this account it can be seen that *Skellig* is set a primary world framed by a secondary. Hence the text combines reading as both mimesis and metaphor. However, it should be emphasised at this point that Almond asserts that he doesn’t write fantasy:

‘People ask me to speak about fantasy. I’m a realist. I don’t write fantasy.  
I can take you to places and point out: Look – that’s where that happened.’  
(Stephenson 2005:25)

But what he does assert is: ‘Children still read through their senses. I try to write through the senses’ (Stephenson 2005:25). He was brought up a Catholic and his sense of spirituality pervades his writing. It could be argued that when Almond says he doesn’t write fantasy, he is using the term to mean mere escapism. And he is right for Almond writes profoundly about the human condition as indeed did William Blake.

The ideas of William Blake pervade the novel. Blake (1757-1827) poet, painter, visionary mystic and engraver, lived at a momentous historical time in English history. It was a time of religious dissent with movements to break away from the Established church. The French Revolution was taking place and there were groups who looked back to the English Revolution and the ideas of the Puritans. He had links with the Muggletonians, the Moravian Church and the Behemenists whose founder, Jacob Boehme lived on the Bohemian border. He also lived through a change to a new millennium which, as we have experienced, invites reflection and doomsday scenarios. Blake wanted to make religion a strong force in British society. His aim was to build ‘[...] Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land’ (‘Jerusalem’ 1804). The poem, which is now sung as a hymn in church, may become England’s national anthem – it is played before international cricket matches and may replace the British anthem ‘God Save the Queen’ at football matches in the near future.)

Blake experienced visions of angels, saw and conversed with the angel Gabriel. Blake was engaged in a struggle for the soul to free its natural energies from reason and organised religion. According to A.P. Thompson, Blake’s thinking was:

‘Without divine spirit or ‘poetic genius’ in humanity, expressed in the affections and not in the understanding, man could never transcend his own material nature’ (Thompson 1994:131).

I would argue that a recognition of what is beyond the material is precisely what Almond encourages the reader to see in *Skellig*. References to Blake’s philosophy and quotations from his poetry are woven into the narrative. Mina explains why she is educated at home by quoting ‘The School Boy’ in *Songs of Innocence*:

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.  
.....  
How can a bird that is born for you  
Sit in a cage and sing?

The Moravian Church advocated home tuition and in *Skellig*, Almond, echoing Blake, contrasts the more open ways that Mina learns by following her interests, which is in sharp opposition to the more restricted and categorised curriculum that Michael experiences. One exception is his English teacher who reads myths and legends to her class and encourages Michael to write. Significantly, the myths are: *Icarus* which has links to Skellig’s wings and *Persephone* concerning life triumphing over death. In addition Michael hears the episode concerning the Cyclops in *The Odyssey* where Odysseus calls himself ‘Nobody’ just as Skellig does. Through these stories Almond opens a portal into a metaphorical world.

While Michael waits for news of the operation, Mina and her Mother sing Blake’s ‘Night’ from *The Songs of Innocence*:

‘The evening star does shine  
The birds are silent in their nest  
And I must seek for mine.

Birds feature strongly in Blake's poetry and Mina is observing a blackbird's nest when Michael first meets her. The fate of the young chicks is mirrored in the fate of the baby.

Angels feature strongly in Blake's world and these too are a strong thread in the narrative. There are a number of quotations from Blake's poem 'The Angel.' Mina's mother sings:

'I dreamt a dream! What can it mean?  
And that I was a maiden queen.'

After the final spiritual dance with Skellig, Mina recites:

'So he took his wings and fled  
Then the morn blush's rosy red.'

Mina's Mother talks about Blake and informs the children that he said we were surrounded by angels and spirits. Michael's Mother tells him: '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'.

Michael is intrigued by the lumps on Skellig's back. Finally the wings are revealed:

'When they were released, the wings began to unfurl from his shoulder blades....they were wider than his shoulders, higher than his head'

Mina, Michael and Skellig form a circle:

'We looked deep into each other's eyes. We began to turn. Our hearts and breath were together. We turned and turned until the ghostly wings rose from Mina's back and mine, until we felt ourselves being raised, until we seemed to turn and dance in the empty air.'

After that the children leave the house and step out into '[...] the astounding night'.

Meanwhile at school in Science Michael is learning about evolution, the skeleton and then the major organs of the body. He wonders whether humans will eventually evolve into angels.

Blake did not distinguish between daily life, visions and dreams and dreams are an important aspect of Skellig. Michael's dreams mirror the angst over the baby and Skellig and incorporate, as dreams do, elements that have happened in the day. Michael dreams after meeting Skellig that he comes into the house and stands over his bed. Later when Michael wakes up in the early hours of the morning, he does the same to his baby sister. In a second dream Michael dreams his bed is a bird's nest and in a third he sees his baby sister in the nest as a fledgling. Below are men trying to catch her. In all these dreams, Michael's angst, which he cannot articulate is manifested. Mina sleepwalks and like Blake has less of sense of difference between waking and sleep: 'I dream. I walk in my sleep. Sometimes I do things really and I think they were just dreams. Sometimes I dream them and think they were real.'

When Mina and Michael move Skellig to a safer environment he observes: 'I told myself that anything was possible in a dream'. Later after the 'dance': 'It was like we were looking into the place where each other's dreams came from'

On the day of the operation: 'It was like walking in a dream. The houses tilted and swayed'. The baby dreams and Mother's dream while the baby is recovering from the operation involves a strange man who comes to take the baby: 'He was filthy. All in black, an ancient dusty suit. A real hunch on his back. Hair all matted and tangled. His face as white and dry as chalk.'

Then she sees: '[...] wings on the baby's back. Not solid wings. Transparent, ghostly, hardly visible, but there they were. Little feathery things.'

This uncannily accurate description of Skellig plus the reference to wings links Michael and Mina's experience to his Mother's dream thus offering further imaginative possibilities for the reader. For Almond is carefully weaving a metaphorical understanding into the material world. Both Michael

and the implied reader are encouraged to open their eyes and Mina advises: 'We have to allow ourselves to see what there is to see, and we have to imagine'

While dreams mirror Michael's angst another monitor of his mental state is offered more concretely through the way he plays football. His interest is marked at the beginning when describing the renovations: 'There were going to be goal posts painted on one of the walls by the house'. At school, Michael plays football in the playground with his friends Leaky and Coot. On good days when the baby seems to be recovering he tackles well: 'I ran back and did a brilliant sliding tackle on Coot' and when he is concerned, when the baby is poorly his friends cry 'What's wrong with you?' There is a final triumph when the health of the baby is secure:

Nobody could get the ball away from me. I did body swerves and dribbles and flicks. I skipped over tackles, back-heeled the ball to my team mates, scored with diving headers and with long shots curled into the corners of the net.

It is interesting to see how gender is constructed. Michael conforms to the stereotype of a typical boy when playing football with his friends. But, while he can get rid of frustration with his male friends, he cannot talk to them about his fears. In sharing the needs of *Skellig* with Mina, and with her 'artistic' frame of mind, then a more feminine side is drawn out. Almond is constructing a 21<sup>st</sup> century masculinity. It is the girl, Mina who encourages Michael to think the impossible and importantly to be brave: "'How brave are you? As brave as me?' I stared at her. How could I know? 'You are,' she said. 'You have to be.'"

The bravery required in this case is dealing with the potential loss of the baby, as well as caring for Skellig who is being moved by the children to an abandoned house where there are owls nesting. As mentioned earlier, there are hints that Skellig leaves owl pellets and later they witness him being fed dead mice by the owls.

Another significant aspect of the text is the inter-weaving of two bi-polar oppositions which are interconnected. The first: life and death, is clear as the baby's life hangs on a thread and Skellig appears also to be highly vulnerable. The action takes place in the Spring, the re-birth of the earth after the death of Winter. The second are two opposing colours that permeate the text: black and white echoing Persephone as she emerges from darkness into light. Here are some examples:

Skellig is described as having a white face and a black suit. The baby has a dead white face and dead black hair. In the hospital there is a cluster of doctors 'in white coats gathered around a man in black'. Michael draws Mina: 'with her pale face, her dark eyes, the black fringe of her hair cut dead straight across her brow'. When Father returns from hospital 'The door was open behind us, letting a wedge of light out into the dark.' Michael looks at Mina and sees: '[...] her silvery face, her ink-black eyes.' Mina tells Michael: 'Listen to the deepest deepest places of the dark'. During the dance Michael sees the faces 'turning through the light and the dark'.

It is interesting to note how Almond creates a tension through on one hand blurring the binary opposition of primary and secondary worlds by merging realism with fantasy while on the other hand creating a powerful visual image of the stark oppositions of black and white, light and darkness, life and death.

Clearly *Skellig* is a complex, polysemic text which challenges readers of all ages raising profound questions concerning the human condition.

It will now turn to a brief exploration of Englishness which will lead on to focus on the reader implied by the text. On a surface level Englishness is marked in the doing up of old property, eating Chinese take-aways, a passion for football, the school system. On another level there is dissent which is a significant aspect of Englishness. Throughout *Skellig* Almond is critiquing a contemporary emphasis on materialism and invites the reader to engage with the world spiritually. In this he echoes Blake, the iconic English artist, who can be placed amongst the great dissenters in English history.

Another significant aspect of Englishness in the text is the construction of the implied child reader. It is clear that Almond implies a reader who is able to cope with ambiguity and is willing to engage with Michael and make discoveries with him. Peter Hollindale in *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* (1997) argues that children's books not only reflect childhood but actively construct childhood for the reader. If we accept this, then it is interesting to consider how the child reader is

constructed in *Skellig*. They are certainly encouraged to think about difficult issues such as life and death, having to be brave and dealing with the unknown. As Michael is introduced to Blake's ideas by Mina, so is the reader. They are invited to imagine, to reflect and to hold with ambiguity. In *Skellig* a child, male or female, is constructed who is able to take responsibility, to question and to try to find answers. I have argued elsewhere (Williams: 1998, 2002) that such a reader is a significant feature of English children's literature. The text invites the reader to see beyond the material and to engage in other ways. In Mina's words they: '[...] just have to accept there are things we can't know.'

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