

THE SECULAR ANGEL IN  
CONTEMPORARY CHILDREN'S LITERATURE:  
DAVID ALMOND, PHILIP PULLMAN, AND CLIFF MCNISH

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the representation of the contemporary secular angel in children's literature, focusing on the works of three authors: David Almond, Philip Pullman, and Cliff McNish. In the works in question, the secular angel has been removed from all religious frameworks, including its traditional allegiance and obedience to a God or Devil figure. This absence, however, does not negate the existence of a moral compass, nor the importance of free will, which is bestowed upon and used by angelic and human characters alike. Transformation, one of the thesis's key themes, becomes significant as I argue that the angelic figures bring about a transformation in the novels' protagonists. Intertextuality forms an integral part of the analysis as the works of John Milton and William Blake are key reference points. The Introduction traces the angel's trajectory from its scriptural tradition in the Middle Ages, to its progressive secularisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a chapter on each author follows. The thesis concludes by arguing that these angels' role in children's literature is to challenge and complicate notions of religion, innocence and experience, and science vs. faith, as they become representatives of a contemporary, secular philosophy, while retaining and embracing the spiritual.

## DEDICATION

To my family, for their undying love and support,

and to George, for making these three years a dream come true.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I believe this thesis subconsciously began ten years ago in an Italian Literature class at the University of Ottawa, where Dr. Franco Ricci introduced Italo Calvino to a small group of students. By the end of the semester he had succeeded in making each and every one of us equally passionate, not only about Mr. Calvino, but about literature in general. His teaching and overall mentality make him one of the most inspiring and motivating professors and people I have ever met, and I am certain that without him I could never have written this thesis. Thus, first and foremost, I would like to thank him for igniting in me my love of literature.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

*GC*: The Golden Compass

*SK*: The Subtle Knife

*AS*: The Amber Spyglass

*HDM*: His Dark Materials



## INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores the representation of ‘secular’ angels in works for children by three atheist authors, David Almond, Philip Pullman, and Cliff McNish, in their respective works *Skellig* (1998), *His Dark Materials Trilogy* (*HDM*; 1995, 1997, 2000), and *Angel* (2007). In the thesis, a secular angel is defined as one who is not associated with religion or God. This creature is not burdened by religious dogma and does not in any way bear the intermediary status, that is, the responsibilities of the messenger between humanity and God. The secular angel is mostly defined and characterized by its free will: its freedom to choose its own path, make its own decisions and face the consequences, as a human would. This last element, in fact, becomes a key theme throughout the thesis, in that the secular angel comes closer to being human than ever before. This proximity is not only physical, but, most importantly, existential and ideological. Unburdened by the shackles of religion, the twenty-first-century secular angel is free to make mistakes, acknowledge them and even rectify them. Each of the three authors gives rise to a different kind of angelic creature, and through them, they approach and explore themes such as the binaries of innocence and experience, and science and faith; furthermore, the secular angels help bring about a transformation from innocence to experience for the child characters, but at the same time these angels also learn to take responsibility for their own moral actions.

It is of great significance that these secular angels have been created by three atheist authors, whose personal beliefs surface in their works, but not always through anti-religious agendas. Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate write of *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11* where they “trace the literary reception of the New Atheism in the work of four canonical novelists” (Bradley and Tate, 2010, 11), one of whom

is Philip Pullman. “To [these writers],” they write, “the contemporary novel represents a new front in the ideological war against religion ... [and] apparently stands for everything—free speech, individuality, rationality and even a secular experience of the transcendental—that religion seeks to overthrow” (Bradley and Tate, 2010, 11). According to Bradley and Tate, the “Four Horsemen” of this New Atheism—Sam Harris, Daniel Dennet, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens—share “a conviction that religious belief is not simply irrational but immoral and dangerous” (Bradley and Tate, 2010, 1). This notion becomes especially interesting when one considers that “in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, people who behaved immorally were considered atheists” (Lackey, 2004, 80). All three texts analysed in the thesis engage with this notion of morality and explore alternative frameworks for morality than those offered by religion. James Wood’s article about “Secularism and its discontents” states that “many people [...] believe that morality is a deliverance of God, and that without God there is no morality—that in a secular world ‘everything is permitted’” (Wood, 2011). This very misconception is what these three authors wish to contradict and prove wrong in choosing to write of angelic figures whose existence does not depend on or presuppose a God figure, but whose merit and definition—of good or evil—as creatures is now more than ever based upon their actions, thoughts, and character. On the contrary, the authors’ decision to describe and deconstruct such a supernatural and religiously-associated persona within a secular and, some would even say ‘morally-free,’ framework places an even greater burden, for themselves, and responsibility, towards their readers, to be morally candid and scrupulous. Of the three authors analysed in the thesis, Pullman is the only one who actively wages an ‘ideological war against religion’, whereas Almond and McNish moderately advocate secular values for their readers while challenging, at the same time, issues of faith and science in a twentieth-century society. The question of morality becomes paramount in McNish’s work, but instead of adopting an anti- and pro-God ideology, he showcases the difficulty of adhering

to one's morality based on the ethical choices one makes repeatedly on a daily basis. Almond chooses to leave his narrative unburdened by his atheistic beliefs, his notion of morality pertaining to the act of helping and caring for others, as well as accepting others as they are and learning to see beyond their exterior. Pullman, on the other hand, is well known for his critique of religion. In *HDM* he sets about dismantling the foundations of Christianity, claiming in the words of his character Mary Malone that "the Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake" (Pullman, *AS*, 441) and challenges the predetermined ideas of good and evil and innocence and experience.

David Almond presents a part-human, part-angel, part-bird creature whose origins are unknown and, for the sake of the story, unimportant. Afflicted by his loneliness and his physical disease, arthritis, Skellig has forgotten how to be an angel, a human, and a bird. The novel's two protagonists, Michael and Mina, aid him in all three aspects of his existence, and in turn he unknowingly helps them to discover, experience and appreciate the human as well as the magical, the real as well as the unknown or transcendental aspects of life. He enables Michael to see beyond the reality he knows and acknowledge that this otherworldly is, or should be, as much an indispensable part of life as the realistic. In essence, Skellig illuminates a form of compatibility between scientific and faith-based understandings of the world and aids the children in their transition from a state of innocence into one of experience, suggesting, however, that the unknown and the magical is essential and can harmoniously coexist in both states, and in the minds of adults and children alike.

Pullman's approach differs in many respects. Although, like Almond, his focus remains on two sets of William Blake's Contraries—explained later in the Introduction—exploring in depth both faith and science, as well as the falsely assumed 'innocent' state of childhood and its counterpart 'experience', he initially envelops these concepts in the foundations of Christianity and the biblical story of the Fall of Man. This is a deliberate and

carefully crafted strategy, for the author then slowly begins to deconstruct every single religious element—from sin, to punishment, to the idea of heaven—thereby rendering both religion and God obsolete by the end of the trilogy. His angels are agents of free will, able to join the cause they most believe in, whether this is Metatron, the regent of the Authority, or Lord Asriel, a powerful man raging war on the Authority, or abstain from this war altogether, but are also able to love, hate, kill, regret, heal and save. While deconstructing and annihilating the religious, Pullman also succeeds in offering his readers worldly substitutes, and argues that humanity’s primary concern should be to build the Republic of Heaven here on earth, the most important values of this being “a sense that this world we live in is our home. Our home is not somewhere else. There is no elsewhere. [and] Secondly, a sense of belonging” (*Surefish website*, 2002). The trilogy suggests that people should strive to live happily and righteously here on earth, and create a world worth living in, for there is no afterlife.

*Angel* focuses on and unravels two themes: choice and the concept of guardianship, whether it is angelic or human. McNish has willingly and purposefully extracted the religious while retaining, exploring and often challenging the concept of faith and its problematic nature and consequences in a twenty-first-century social environment. Furthermore, he complicates the notion of guardianship by presenting both angelic and human guardians and juxtaposing the two; this does not result in an unbalanced comparison of the seemingly incompatible creatures, but balances the two by suggesting that angels have the same responsibilities as human beings and are equally defined by their moral decisions. In this, McNish humanizes the angelic and suggests that our choices and their consequences bring everyone on a comparable moral footing. The element of transformation—a theme explored in relation to all of the texts in this thesis—is especially prevalent in his narrative, as the protagonist Freya experiences both a physical and an emotional metamorphosis; she becomes

part-angel, part-human, and through the personal trials she faces, she learns how to successfully become both.

This thesis argues that the three authors in question, through their distinct and novel approach towards the depiction of a new angel, represent and shed light on a modern, twenty-first-century outlook on humanity: the authors are moving away from a religious notion of faith to conceptualize human beings who place their faith in one another, and in the possibility of the otherworldly. In essence, they introduce and encourage a secular version of faith, one that is more expansive and inclusive, rather than narrow and close-minded. The angels in the three works are not only there to offer an innovative view of the spiritual or the otherworldly, but also often facilitate and encourage a transformation—whether physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological—that the main child protagonists go through in their transition from ‘innocence’ to ‘experience’. However, they also challenge and trouble the conventional understandings of what innocence and experience actually mean. As will be seen in all three chapters of analysis, each author defines innocence and experience in different ways but all serve a similar didactic function, which is not meant to impart a specific doctrine to child readers, but to encourage independent thought and the ability to critique oppressive ideology. Together, these three works of literature capture a particular secular moment in the evolution of the angel figure, which has for centuries been associated with God and religion, but has now been placed within a modern, atheistic and often controversial, framework. Despite the secularization that the twentieth century has slowly undergone, these three authors have reinstated and given birth to a new kind of angel that can exist without the burden, history, or restrictions placed upon it by Scripture and the Church.

## Angels

The following section will offer a brief outline of how angels were understood and studied from the Middle Ages to the present day, and what their significance was historically within Christianity. It is important to begin the discussion on angels starting from the Middle Ages, as it was an era during which the angelic persona thrived in artistic expression, and representations of angels appeared in literature, visual arts, philosophy and religious writings. I also wish to demonstrate how some of these orthodox preconceptions, ideas and images of angels are reflected in the primary texts of the three authors in question, either directly or indirectly. Finally, I will explain how and why the image of the angel — despite the innumerable changes and alterations to its body and character — has successfully survived through time, and boldly entered into the twenty-first century.

*Time* magazine put an angel on its cover on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1993 and in the article that followed Nancy Gibbs wrote that

If there is such a thing as a universal idea, common across cultures and through the centuries, the belief in angels comes close to it [...] This rising fascination is more popular than theological, a grass-roots revolution of the spirit in which all sorts of people are finding all sorts of reasons to seek answers about angels for the first time in their lives. (Gibbs, 1993, 58)

The magazine also provided the results of a telephone poll for which 500 adult Americans were asked questions such as whether they believe in the existence of angels, or whether they have ever personally felt an angelic presence in their lives (Gibbs, 1993, 63). Although the sample is a relatively small one, and gives little demographic data, the poll revealed that the majority (69%) did believe that angels exist. While this is journalistic rather than academic evidence, the fact that a reputable magazine decided to dedicate almost an entire issue to the

subject of angels, is indicative of the fact that the angelic persona is still prevalent and relevant in popular consciousness, mythology, modern life, and representations of the twentieth century.

Possibly the most interesting fact about angels, and one that may explain their everlasting appeal and timelessness, is that they exist in almost every religion, and go back in time to ancient civilizations where they are even found in “Sumerian carvings, Egyptian tombs and Assyrian reliefs” (Gibbs, 1993, 57). Within Christianity, angels have usually been portrayed as spiritual, heavenly creatures. Their stereotypical portrayal includes large, white wings, anthropomorphic but asexual faces, as well as a radiance that stems from their very bodies, or a light that is shining upon them with no apparent source. Very often there is also a halo over their heads which confesses, in a way, their religious and heavenly status. They are beings of kindness, love, wisdom and above all beauty. They represent everything that humans believe to be associated with God. However, in the three novels to be analysed herein, we witness the presence of very different kinds of angels. The differences lie not only in their appearance or purpose, but most importantly in that very religious and spiritual association that angels have for centuries now been a part of.

The angel is a figure that seems to have withstood the test of time, its religious connotations being the most prevalent and powerful. Within this context, and more specifically within Christianity, they originated in Scripture:

Angels (from the Greek *aggelos*, ‘messenger’) are to be found almost everywhere in the Bible as intermediaries between God and humanity, in anthropomorphic form. From their first appearance as sword-wielding cherubim in the book of Genesis, barring the way to Eden (Genesis 3:24), these

celestial beings carry out God's commands and reveal his will in a multiplicity of ways. (Marshall & Walsham, 2006, 3)

Their appearance, sex, corporeal status (or lack thereof), immortality, power, and indeed, their very origin and nature, are all issues that have deeply troubled and puzzled both theologians and philosophers throughout the centuries. The Middle Ages were a time during which the study of angels—also referred to as angelology—was undertaken by many with great interest. Bernard of Clairvaux, a French abbot of the twelfth century, believed that “both animals and angels need bodies, one to serve us as it is its nature to do, the other to help us because he loves us” (of Clairvaux, ed. Giallan R. Evans, 1987, 228) Aquinas, an Italian Dominican priest specializing in natural theology and philosophy during the thirteenth century, who “would [often] use the nature of the angels to illuminate the nature of human cognition by referring to angels as the extreme of what is possible for an intellectual nature to be” believed them to be “completely incorporeal” (Collins, 1947), while Bonaventure, an orthodox theologian and philosopher of the thirteenth century believed, contrary to Aquinas, “that angels, like everything other than God, were composed of matter and form” (Collins, 1947). These were just a few of the thinkers who attempted to shed light on these celestial creatures and reveal aspects of their existence that had not been examined before.

Possibly the most important and interesting quality of the angel, and the one that has enabled this figure to remain relevant even today, is its intermediary status, that is, its role as a messenger between God and humans. This mediator status is especially prevalent in the figure of Metatron, also known as the angelic vice regent who was once a man named Enoch and was “transformed into a supra-angelic being” (Deutsch, 1999, 9). According to Deutsch, “in one respect, the angelic vice regent symbolizes the gulf between God and humans; between the divine and physical worlds. At the same time, (...) [he] symbolizes the ability of human beings to breach the distance with God” (Deutsch, 1999, 9). The Metatron figure originates in



the *Book of Enoch* (or 1 Enoch) and 3 *Enoch*. Daphna Arbel writes in *Seal of resemblance, full of wisdom, and perfect in beauty: the Enoch/Metatron Narrative of 3 Enoch and Ezekiel* 28 that

the Enoch/Metatron narrative of 3 Enoch presents a dialectical view of both the exaltation and the demotion of Enoch/Metatron. The narrative recounts in detail the translation of the human Enoch, son of Jared, from the earthly to the celestial sphere, his elevation, and his transformation into Metatron, the heavenly divine being who is second only to God. (Arbel, 2005, 122)

The origin of the name Metatron, as well as its etymology and significance, are issues that have been explored and extensively researched. Hugo Odeberg is one of the leading figures in the Enoch/Metatron tradition as he “considered the various possibilities and decided that the most probable explanation is that Metatron is a transcription of μεταθρόνιος, 'signifying the celestial being next to the divine throne' (p. 137)” (Black, 1951, 217). Just as with Pullman’s Metatron in *HDM*, Arbel writes that Metatron’s metamorphosis into an angel included “a gigantic enlargement, [he] was endowed with wings, and became a glorious figure in the divine realm” (Arbel, 2005, 123). Other qualities that further showcased his “quasi-divine” status were “divine wisdom, knowledge, and superior understanding” (Arbel, 2005, 123). Even though Metatron’s name “is a minor mystery”, his role in the kingdom of God “like the earlier Enoch, [the] Enoch-Metatron [figure] was the heavenly scribe” (Black, 1951, 217). As Pullman introduces Metatron as a key character in *The Amber Spyglass*, the angelic vice regent will be discussed further in Chapter 2. His portrayal in the trilogy is not only that of an angel, but of a man who became an angel and was bestowed immense power by the supposed creator, and then turned against him and assumed power.

The role and purpose of an angel was also explored in great detail. In Scripture, angels were both revered and feared and have been presented in a variety of ways, ranging from their somewhat stereotypical guardian angel persona, discussed at length in Chapter 3, to “cold, impassive extensions of the deity”, and finally, to a striking presence such as that “of angels casting the wicked into eternal flames” in the Last Judgment (Keck, 1998, 33). Other aspects of the angels’ existence that were considered ambivalent and controversial in the Middle Ages were their possession of free will (a central concern of this thesis) and how some of them came to defy God and fall; when and how they were created by God; their temporality; their ability to sin and express emotions; and, most notoriously, the fallen angels’ connection to God. Although there seemed to be some agreement among the theologians on some of these issues, significant disputes also arose. For example, “the Cathar heretics preached that Satan was the uncreated source of evil and the creator of the material universe, [and they rejected] the doctrine that God was the sole creator of all things” (Keck, 1998, 22). This view, along with other “heterodox arguments” was attacked and ultimately rejected by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 who declared “God as the sole creator” (Keck, 1998, 22). It is interesting to note that some theologians contemplated angels, demons, and creation under one umbrella, stating as their focal point the fact that the angels are by no means “coeternal with God” (Keck, 1998, 23). The notion that God has always been and will always be, and so even angels were *created* at some point during His eternity, is of the utmost importance to traditional understandings of religion and the theory of creation for Christianity.

The case, however, for the three primary texts of the thesis is very different. God is willfully absent in all three narratives, and the reasons differ immensely. In Pullman’s trilogy the one they call God is not the creator but one of the first angels that came into existence. The identity of God is not revealed because according to Pullman, He does not exist — at least not as Christians imagine him. As will be seen in Chapter 2, Pullman replaces the idea of

God with the scientific notion of Dust, conscious, elementary particles whose significance will be explored later on. Almond purposefully leaves out any element or hint of religion altogether, although some critics, such as Susan Louise Stewart, believe that in *Skellig* there are allusions to concepts of religion and the Church. Notions of faith and spirituality, however, are still prevalent, but faith here is meant as an open-minded way of seeing the world without restricting oneself to what is conventional or even perceived as real; spiritualism is concerned with concepts and ideas that exist in the world but are not found within a realistic framework, or are not supported by empirical evidence. Therefore, God has no place in the multifaceted relationship between the children Michael and Mina and the angel figure Skellig. McNish's decision to not include a God figure was also made consciously and was a result of his own atheistic convictions (see Appendix B); but God's absence in the narrative does not negate his existence. McNish offers the freedom of choice to his readers by stating, through the words of the angel Mestraal, that there might be a God, but angels know as little about Him as humans do. Therefore, it becomes obvious that the three authors in question do not only defy the conventions of the angel's appearance or demeanor, but also choose to challenge the angel's relationship with God—that is, the orthodox belief that they are God's messengers and intermediaries.

In the Middle Ages although angels' connection to God was certain, several other of their attributes and characteristics were greatly discussed and often disagreed upon. One such issue was their lifespan, for if the angels were not like God, how could they be described and defined in terms of their temporality? Theologians agreed that although angels are not eternal, “they are not really temporal” (Keck, 1998, 23) either.

The term adopted by thirteenth-century theologians to describe the duration of angels was aeviternity. [...] While they disagreed on what exactly this concept meant, [they] agreed that it was a way of describing the angelic mode of

existence to make it distinct from God and His eternity and the material creation and its temporality. (Keck, 1998, 23)

This very issue of the angels' mortality and lifespan will also be considered in the analysis of the thesis, as it is found, directly or indirectly, in all three of the primary sources. For example, in *Angel* by Cliff McNish, Hestron clearly states that angels live far longer than humans, and are less fragile, although not indestructible; Freya witnesses Hestron's death when he places himself between two cars in order to soften the impact and save the humans involved. At that moment, the grief that all the other angels feel is immense, a clear indication that they are capable of feeling both sorrow and joy (the joy being felt when helping humans). When Freya asks Hestron "Do you die?" he replies 'Eventually. We are not eternal beings. Our presence on your world reduces our lifespan. Physical interventions reduce it further'" (McNish, 2007, 153). Pullman's angels are also considered mortal in that they can die, but can live for thousands of years, and Almond's Skellig is introduced to us as a frail creature in ill health, and his age remains unknown, leaving the possibility of angels' mortality open.

The angels' appearance was yet another topic of discussion in medieval times and an examination that was influenced by both Scripture and the creative imagination, although "there was more scriptural clarity regarding what angels did than regarding what they looked like" (Marshall and Walsham, 2006, 300). Their depictions, which came in a variety of forms through the ages by poets, writers, sculptors, and artists, such as Dante, Milton, and Blake (as I shall discuss), contributed to the ongoing discussion of what these mercenaries and guardians are, and, of course, what they look like. A significant contributing factor to the iconographies of angels was the medieval idea of beauty that was associated with angels, as well as with God. Keck states that "for medieval theologians, beauty itself had ontological and metaphysical status, [...] since God Himself is beautiful, it is not unlikely that his creation, which contains vestiges of the blessed Trinity throughout, would also be beautiful"

(Keck, 1998, 69). McNish's angels do not conform to the scriptural notion of angelic beauty but instead manipulate it in the presence of humans. He also justifies the difference in appearance by saying that humans have a specific image of them in mind, and so they select this so as not to scare them. Almond, on the other hand, presents an angel that has human, angelic, and bird-like features, an unusual combination which evokes evolutionary debates and is explained in greater detail in Chapter 1. Pullman gives a detailed physical portrayal of the five angels he introduces in *The Amber Spyglass*. The first description is of Baruch and Balthamos, and the information offered to the reader covers several aspects of their existence, such as their ethereal nature—the fact that they are weaker than humans because they do not have “true flesh” (Pullman, *AS*, 11)—and the fact that seeing them is especially difficult in broad daylight—the best time being at dusk or dawn. However, the ethereal nature of their bodies is justified by them not being “of a high order among angels” (Pullman, *AS*, 11), which confesses the fact that a hierarchy among the celestial creatures exists in Pullman's narrative.

This alludes to another characteristic that medieval theologians considered crucial in their understanding of angels – the existing system of hierarchies, which for them “provided a way of contemplating and explaining the hierarchical arrangements of the creation” (Keck, 1998, 54-55). The angels were divided into three hierarchies, each consisting of three orders. Theologians believed that the names of these categories were not only indicative of the angels' relationship and closeness to God, but were also specific to their functions, characteristics, administration, and duties. The nine orders of angels are the following in descending order of hierarchy: seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels, angels. For example, while the seraphim are defined by their burning love for God, the cherubim “suggest the perfection of creaturely knowledge” (Keck, 1998, 59). But this hierarchy is also symbolic of each order's imminence to humans, and the

angels whose role is to act as guardians belong to the last order in the third hierarchy, which is angels (Keck, 1998, 62).

Although in *Skellig* the system of hierarchy is never an issue, as Skellig is the only angelic being the reader is presented with, in *His Dark Materials*, and *Angel*, the authors do make allusions to how the angelic order stands and what it consists of. Pullman, for example, differentiates between angels when Baruch and Balthamos state that they “are not of a high order among angels” (*AS*, 2000, 11), and later on Xaphania is said to be “of a much higher rank than Baruch and Balthamos, and visible by a shimmering, disconcerting light that seemed to come from somewhere else” (*AS*, 2000, 201). Furthermore, Metatron is seen to be extremely powerful, despite the fact that he was once a man and was not created an angel. McNish makes fleeting and indirect allusions to his angels’ hierarchy, such as the fact that there are a few thousands of them, and they originate in space, and “only some angels have the power to appear directly to mortals,” Hestron and Mestraal being two of them, while “many [others] cannot” (McNish, 2007, 153). It is also insinuated that the more powerful the angel, the more ‘wards’ he is able to assume responsibility for, the most obvious example being Mestraal who used to have the greatest number of wards. In spite of their shared mention of the order of angels and the distinction between their power, appearance and character, it seems that in Pullman’s narratives, their hierarchy is not directly related to their ability to converse or interact with humans. Finally, the concept of the guardian angel is explicitly stated only in McNish’s work, and more indirectly suggested in Pullman and Almond. When Freya speaks with Mestraal she asks the angel this very question:

‘Are angels here to help us? To ease our way through life? To guard us from harm?’ ” [...] ‘What makes you think you have a guardian angel? [Mestraal replies] Why do so many of you believe we would devote our whole lives to

your small existences?’ ‘But you do, don’t you?’ Freya murmured. Her insight shocked him. (McNish, 2007, 113-114)

The implications of this notion of guardianship and care, both for humans and angels, will be analysed in great detail in the chapters that follow for each author respectively.

One of the central themes of the thesis is intertextuality, and the two historical figures most alluded to are John Milton, by Philip Pullman, and William Blake, who features in both Pullman’s and Almond’s narratives. Milton’s and Blake’s angelic representations have been discussed and analysed by critics both for their historical and ideological significance. Following the rich and multifaceted angelic characterization and categorization of the Middle Ages, Milton’s angels in *Paradise Lost* (1667) presented historians and critics with numerous questions and theories regarding the poet’s decision to present a legion of angels who exhibited several human traits. Michelle Volpe writes that “most eighteenth-century readers [did not feel] comfortable with Milton’s description of angels, specifically, the implication that they are composed of matter” (Volpe, 1998, 144). This very aspect appeared to contradict Milton’s aim to “justify the ways of God to men” (Milton, 2005, Book I, 26), as the angels’ material existence also extended to their ability to fully experience all five senses, feel sorrow and joy, and even make love. Denise Gigante writes in her article “Milton’s Aesthetics of Eating” that the angel Raphael “suggests that [...] eating offers a newfound sense of pleasure [and] explains that angels (who are simply a higher form of humans) enjoy partaking with all five senses” (Gigante, 2000, 96). This is not only indicative of Milton’s ideology, but of the fact that Pullman has drawn on the Miltonic version of angels in *His Dark Materials*, who although are not seen eating, they do possess the ability to feel love, hate, contempt and admiration. Possibly one of the most controversial aspects regarding Milton’s angels, and one that Pullman also explores with the two male angels, Baruch and Balthamos, is homosexual love. Jonathan Goldberg aims, in his book, “to track signs of male desirability and of male-

male desire in Milton. Especially by locating it in the angels of *Paradise Lost*, who in their ability to eat and make love, are embodiments of Milton's monism [...]" (Goldberg, 2009, 181). This challenge, undertaken by Pullman, has earned the author a barrage of negative criticism, as it was viewed by many religious readers and reviewers as sacrilegious.<sup>1</sup> However, as will be shown in Chapter 2, with this relationship the author aimed to show that in love there should be no boundaries, and that each person should be free to be with the person of their choice. The notion that angels are a higher form of human also relates to Chapter 3, on McNish's *Angel*, where I explore the nature and relationships between angels and human beings as well as their ideological and existential proximity.

Harry Morris writes that "After Milton the angel in English literature is never again so important unless it be in Blake, and Blake's iconography is his own" (Morris, 1958, 44). Blake's representation of the angelic persona is multifaceted, and may "often serve more than one symbolic purpose" (Sahm, 2010, 131). In every work, whether it is poetry or painting, the angel, for Blake, may assume a different role. For example, in *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), "Blake's Angels are, satirically, the orthodox, 'good' people, the contraries of the Devils, who are the unorthodox geniuses, the 'evil' upsetters of established orders" (Damon, 1988, 23), while in 'The Angel', one of the poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1794), "the guardian angel served as the speaker's 'leading virtue' before she drove him away" (Sahm, 2010, 131). This motif seems to coincide with Almond's use of his own part-angel creature who does not only assume the role of the guardian, but acts as a symbol for the otherworldly, the unknown, but also possibly even an example of evolution, his origins being both bird and human. In fact, it is important to note that Skellig embodies the principle of the reconciliation of contraries that Blake suggests; one needs both scientific and faith-based understandings to understand who he is. Yet, even this does not stray far from Blake's angelic tradition as "Bird and angel are very closely related in Blake's mind" (Easson & Easson,



1980, 7). In order to grasp Blake and have a clearer understanding of his outlook on the world, nature, angels and the magical, it is imperative that one discovers, or uncovers how his creative mind worked and what processes were involved when creating. Richard O’Keefe explores the mythic archetypes in Emerson through a Blakean reading and argues that while “Emerson’s ‘eyeball’ is ‘transparent’, Blake’s ‘Corporeal Eye’ is like a ‘Window’” (O’Keefe, 1995, 35). The notion of the eye as a window becomes important and relevant in Almond’s work as Michael’s eyes, which see Skellig and his unusual bird- and angel-like characteristics, must essentially make sense of this knowing that based on reality, such a creature cannot exist. Thus, his mind, using his eyes as a window, must process what is in front of him empirically but also be able to go beyond that and imagine a world where Skellig is possible and real. O’Keefe discusses Blake’s passage from “Vision of the Last Judgment” where the poet sees angels in the sun, but according to Northrop Frye

when he sees the angels, he is not seeing more ‘in’ the sun but more of it. [...]  
To prove that he sees them Blake will not point to the sky but to, say, the fourteenth plate of the Job series illustrating the text [...], *That* is where the angels appear, in a world formed and created by Blake’s imagination and entered into by everyone who looks at the picture. It appears then, that there are not only two worlds, but three: the world of vision, the world of sight, and the world of memory: the world we create, the world we live in, and the world we run away to. (Frye ed. Halmi, 1969, 28-33)

This very perspective is not only found in Almond’s narrative, but essentially delineates the novel’s theme and purpose. This distinction between the worlds is mostly evident in *Skellig* as Michael lives in a world where his house is derelict and his sister is ill. He creates a world with Mina when they draw their imaginings and wishes on paper, and runs away to the world

where Skellig exists, along with his wings, his arthritis, and his ability to dance with the children and make their wings visible to them.

Although the abovementioned qualities and characteristics of angels are only a few aspects of their existence that were laboriously and meticulously examined by theologians, philosophers, and poets, the associations that emerge today when we consider angels are even fewer. While the religious implications are often inescapable, the context within which they are placed in our contemporary society—and more specifically, that of the Western world—can vary greatly. Despite the fact that the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed an evident, albeit gradual, secularisation in literature and philosophy—Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God being one of the most powerful examples—the figure of the angel has been successful not only in surviving but, in retaining a pivotal role in many notable works of literature, both for adults and children. Some of the literary authors who have incorporated the angelic figure in their fiction and poetry are John Cowper Powy’s *Lucifer* (1905), D.H. Lawrence’s *Song of a Man Who Has Come Through* (1917), Hilda Doolittle’s (H.D.) *Asphodel* (written in 1921 and published in 1992), Jonathan Daniels’s *Clash of Angels* (1930), Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* (1955), Edward Pearson’s *Chamiel* (1973), Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), Steven Brust’s *To Reign in Hell* (1984), Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988), and most recently, Danielle Trussoni’s *Angelology* (2011), in adult literature. Fallen angels appear in Nancy Collin’s *Angels of Fire* (1998), Harry Mulisch’s *The Discovery of Heaven* (1996), L.A. Marzulli’s *Nephilim* (1999) and Peter Lord-Wolff’s *The Silence in Heaven* (2000). In children’s and young adult literature there is Jan Mark’s *The Lady with Iron Bones* (2001), A.M. Jenkins’s *Repossessed* (2007), Justine Musk’s *Uninvited* (2007), Pat Walsh’s *The Crowfield Curse* (2010), and of course Almond, Pullman and McNish. Hobson states that “the key reasons for its continued appeal [are] the angel’s capacity for reinvention, modernization

and, in the final analysis, its sometimes infuriating ability to appear both revolutionary and reactionary at the same time” (Hobson, 2007, 496). The angels discussed and analysed further in the thesis project revolutionary rather than reactionary idiosyncrasies, as they refuse to adhere to the stereotypical notions and ideas that have for centuries defined and limited their existence. The angels analysed in the thesis defy convention by fundamentally breaking their bond with an obsolete God, and by *choosing* to be who they are and where their loyalties lie. Pullman, Almond and McNish make use of angelic figures, and despite the vast differences in their appearance, demeanor, characterization and function, it will be argued that they are a clear indication and proof of how a figure that has been ‘locked’ within a strictly religious context for so long can reemerge so powerfully and encourage child readers to question notions of faith.

A subject that is of great significance to all three authors, and which will be explored in the thesis, is that of the angels’ ‘inclination’ towards good or evil. Although the theologians of the Middle Ages did not consider the

possibility of morally neutral angels, Dante includes the neutral angels in the Vestibule of the *Inferno*, a region reserved for those who are neither good nor evil in their commitments. In canto III, Dante passes those angels who rejected both God and Satan and their human counterparts as they wail and endlessly pursue a whirling standard. His brief glance at them indicates his disdain. There are creatures who are so directionless as to be unworthy even of condemnation (Keck, 1998, 26).

This idea of rejecting the neutral and viewing it as something worse than evil is also evident in the Bible. In Revelation 3:15 Christ speaks to John about the people of Sardis. Jesus exclaims: “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then

because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth” (3:15). With these words he appears to be suggesting that it is more sincere and less cowardly to stand on either one side or the other (the good or the bad), than be completely unaffected by and indifferent to either and stand in the middle.

In all of the primary examined for this thesis sources the readers witness angels that have had, at some point, to make a decision between one of two sides. None of the three authors take an angel’s purity and goodness for granted, choosing, instead, to bestow upon them the element of free will; and although this appears to be a controversial premise, it is not entirely contrary to what medieval theologians believed:

The early Fathers were uncertain as to exactly when the angelic sin took place and what its precise nature was. Two things were clear, however: that God did create the demons and that He did not create them evil. God created all things visible and invisible, and He created all things good. (Keck, 1998, 24)

Therefore, if all angels were created good, it must mean that at some point in time, Lucifer, along with several other angels, had impure thoughts and fell. This very act of defiance against God (in whichever form it was manifested) must have presupposed the ability to choose between good or evil. But this issue was so multifaceted and profound that some decided to treat it separately; one example of this is Anselm of Cantenbury who “devote[d] an entire treatise to the subject, *De Casu Diaboli*” (Keck, 1998, 25). However, theologians of the time did believe that the angels’ “first free choice would determine forever their orientation towards good or evil, [and] the evil angels are incapable of being redeemed” (Keck, 1998, 24). In McNish’s *Angel*, however, this is not the case. Mestraal is an angel that appears, at first, to be evil. From his appalling dark appearance to his wicked and blunt intimidation of Freya, he primarily assumes the role of a ‘fallen’ angel. Later in the novel the reader discovers that he

was the strongest and kindest of all angels, and because the burden of appeasing human suffering became too intense and sometimes seemed futile, he decided to reject his guardian angel status and become a bystander. But towards the end of the novel, touched by Freya's determination and kindness, he resumes his former role, thus demonstrating that what defines a person, or in this case an angel, is the choices one makes on an everyday basis, as each challenge and each difficulty must be met by a choice. Almond's novel shares some of these elements in that Skellig is first found fragile and broken in a dilapidated garage. Although the reader never learns about his past and what circumstances led him to lie there in such a resigned and sad state, as Michael and Mina begin to take care of him, he slowly and reluctantly regains his strength and his —assumed— former glory. The parallel, of course, in *Skellig* with the angels of Scripture and their representation in the Middle Ages is particularly scarce. Not only is religion completely removed from the idea of the guardian angel's existence, but through the words of William Blake and the philosophies that both Mina and her mother share with Michael, the angelic figure's origin appears to be more closely related to Darwin's theory of evolution than to God's creation of the universe, although for Almond evolutionary science is not incompatible with the possibility of otherworldly beings or wonder in the unknown. Finally, in Pullman's trilogy, the angels' choice is reversed. Their decision to defy God —that is the false Authority who pretends to be the creator— means that they join the 'good' side, while Metatron and the other angels stand by (or keep 'faith' in) a fabricated and deceitful idea based on oppression and lies. As will be seen in Chapter 2, Pullman incorporates in his narrative several familiar aspects of Genesis and the Fall of Adam and Eve but purposefully deconstructs them, thereby annihilating the premises of organized religion altogether. And although his act of killing God towards the end of *The Amber Spyglass* caused considerable controversy, when looked upon more closely, what he truly succeeds in destroying is a corrupt being that has been responsible for nothing but cruelty for centuries.

Hobson argues that in the twentieth century the angel in literature is seen to serve a very different purpose, its representation now being a ‘modern’ one. She raises the question of why the angel was not banished despite the “even partial secularization of the European mind in the twentieth century” (Hobson, 2007, 495) and states that,

First, this figure is often called upon to take up a position in relation to ‘modernity’ understood in liberal humanist terms as technological or social progress; the angel appears to support, or conversely to oppose, the advance of science, industry and even history itself. (...) A second way to approach the newness of the twentieth-century angel is through the lens of debates over sex and gender. (Hobson, 2007, 495)

This angelic modernization has been successfully achieved by all three authors, but the modernity involved is not only related to sex and gender issues, but focuses in more depth on the angel’s relation to science. The relationship between the angel and science is most obviously delineated in *Skellig*, and Almond seems to be entertaining this seemingly opposing idea on several levels. He achieves this by first ‘inflicting’ his angelic figure with arthritis — or the personified Arthur-itis, as it is sometimes referred to in the novel— and secondly by continuously juxtaposing the elements of science and medicine—in the form of “deep injections right into the joint” (Almond, 2007, 64) and cod liver oil capsules— with the doctrine of William Blake and the will to live and keep going by “keep[ing] cheerful, [not] giving up, [and] remain[ing] active” (Almond, 2007, 65), juxtaposing, in essence, science and faith, not in a higher power, but in the unknown, the otherworldly and the seemingly invisible. Although the other two authors do not present such a straightforward juxtaposition between faith and science from the angels’ point of view, they do represent the two as a binary opposition and explore and challenge the ways in which one may either complicate or complement the other.

This reference to Blake points to one of the other key features of the texts, intertextuality. While the reference to angels in some ways makes all the texts intertextual in a casual way, Pullman and Almond engage explicitly with the works of other authors who have written on angels. The following section will go on to explore these intertextual relationships and outline the ways in which the intertexts have shaped the texts of analysis, either through the use of direct quotations or by borrowing and sometimes even adopting others' ideas.

### **Intertextuality**

Allen argues that “Intertextuality is one of the most commonly used and misused terms in contemporary critical vocabulary” (Allen, 2000, 2). Nevertheless, despite the overwhelming number of theories regarding intertextuality and its ideologies throughout the past century, there seem to be two recurring motifs surfacing: the first is the agreement that no text exists in isolation, but that in “one artistic text there coexist, more or less visibly, several other texts” (Plett, 1991, 47). The second point refers to the instability and dialogic nature of texts, which I shall come to shortly. In two of the three primary texts in this thesis, intertextuality plays a pivotal role; Pullman and Almond make extensive use of specific intertexts within their stories, both in the form of direct quotations and by subtly and indirectly drawing upon the work of others. McNish does not appear to have been directly influenced by any one source; instead, his idea of a novel guardian angel — and its modernized and secularized execution — reflects a more general movement towards the secularization and humanization of ‘conventional’ angelic qualities. The strongest and most obvious influences for Almond and Pullman are William Blake and John Milton respectively. The main reason why intertextuality will become a significant part of this thesis, even though it touches directly upon only two of the three authors to be analysed herein, is because any representations of angels are

necessarily intertextual in some way given that representations of angels are ubiquitous throughout history, and every writer is drawing on or revising their received or stereotypical notion of angels. Furthermore, it is interesting to explore the ways in which these two authors present and project angels and their characteristics and purpose and how they have been inspired and often guided by their selected intertexts. This section will focus on the use of Blake and Milton in Almond and Pullman, but will also consider other sources that the authors may have drawn upon. Moreover, it will aim to show how angels are also a powerful manifestation of intertextuality and how all these components put together allow for a distinct and powerful connection to the theme of transformation.

It is important to establish how the above-mentioned concepts of intertextuality are expressed, and, of course, how they manifest within the framework of children's literature. For Peter Hunt, as well as for other critics of the genre, the theory of intertextuality, when applied to children's literature, seems to become problematic due to the unstable writer-reader relationship. Christine Wilkie asserts that this relationship is also "asymmetric because children's intersubjective knowledge cannot be assured. A theory of intertextuality of children's literature is, therefore, unusually preoccupied with questions about what a piece of writing (for children) presupposes. What does it assume, what *must* it assume to take on significance?" (Wilkie, ed. Hunt, 1996, 132) Both Pullman and Almond overcome this issue of prior knowledge by making their intertextual references explicit through quotation. Stephens explains that "the literature written for children is radically intertextual because it has no special discourse of its own, [...] writing for children exists at the intersection of a number of other discourses, and illustrates acutely the extent to which language is both a semiotic system and a product of its own history" (Stephens, 1992, 86). In the end, we find that the concept of intertextuality is both multi-faceted and polyphonic in more than one way. Although a clear and set definition may not exist –even after several decades of analysis and



deconstruction—, its function “is not restricted to the relationship between texts defined in a narrow sense”, but echoes traces of language, culture, and social constructions of any given period (Stephens, 1992, 116). Bobby makes another point, however, which seems to be reinforcing the idea that the reader need not be intimately familiar with the intertexts the author has decided to include in their work either directly or indirectly. She states that “the plethora of references to poetry and Bible verses, particularly in *The Amber Spyglass*, seems a deliberate intention on his part to help the reader understand his vision” (Bobby, 2004, n.p.). This can also be argued for Almond, whose use of Blake succeeds in effortlessly illuminating the points he is trying to make; not only is the reader *not* disconcerted by this extensive use of quotations, but, on the contrary, these inserts may even urge readers to go deeper and research, not only Blake, but ideas on evolution, education, imagination, and angels. Just as “Michael and Mina refuse to make that choice or enter into [the] dichotomy [between science and faith], [and are] as a result released from the constraints imposed by binaries and open themselves to possibility,” so can the readers contemplate the ‘other’ and open their minds to new possibilities (Stewart, 2009, 317).

The abovementioned concepts inevitably allude to ideas of didacticism, a problematic area that has been associated with children’s literature since the genre’s beginning. In the chapters that follow (for each author respectively), this issue is brought forth and discussed in relation to their projection of questions of faith, morality, and spiritualism that are approached outside of a religious framework. Furthermore, as the analysis progresses, it becomes interesting to discover how this secular vision is presented or justified, especially when considering the fact that many child readers may not have prior knowledge of Christianity. Daphne Kutzer asserts that “One standard that has been used to judge children’s literature is whether or not it teaches a child anything. This standard is not usually applied to adult fiction” (Kutzer, 1981, 720). Yet, even if the moral lesson is not explicitly written out for the child to

receive and absorb –either actively or passively– according to Peter Hunt, even the most seemingly simple children’s book will not be “innocent of some ideological freight” (Hunt, 1992, 18). He explains that this ideology may surface in the work of each writer through their social, political or moral beliefs. But even if one acknowledged this to be the rule, there will always be powerful exceptions that seek to overturn the authority of didacticism, the traditional example being Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). Chris Powling writes that “Writing for children has always had an ethical dimension but we must thank Lewis Carroll’s *Alice* for showing us that the moral traffic is by no means all one-way –nor does it need to be confronted head on” (Hunt, 1992, 37). This ethical dimension exists in the works of all three authors as the values they advocate, and the didactic purpose involved in their stories, have to do with helping children to think for themselves, exercise free will, but also learn to take responsibility for their moral actions and choices. This follows Carroll as it challenges traditional notions of authority, but at the same time it empowers children and encourages them to engage in the creation and development of their own identity by making their own choices and deciding on their own moral compasses.

Pullman and Almond use several intertexts both directly and indirectly, with the use of quotations, epigraphs and general concepts and ideas originating in another work. Wilkie states that there are three main categories of intertextuality: texts of quotation, texts of imitation, and genre texts –“those texts that are identifiable, shared, clusters of codes and literary conventions grouped together in recognizable patterns which allow readers to expect and locate them, and to cause them to seek out similar texts” (Wilkie, ed. Hunt, 1996, 132). However, she asserts that “texts of quotation are probably the simplest level at which child readers can recognise intertextuality” (Wilkie, ed. Hunt, 1996, 132). These difficulties are not only a result of the cultural and social backgrounds from which a child may come, but also of the vast differences and characteristics that define children in the different stages of their

childhood. Almond has mainly used direct quotations originating in several of Blake's poems, primarily from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. It is important to note that these are not always spoken by the characters, but sung by Mina and her mother, as if they were lullabies. The element of music and song seem to reinforce the message of Blake's words, despite the fact that Mina's mother sometimes sings them while Michael and Mina are talking. The ideologies behind the quotations, however, are strewn across the narrative, and the children pick them up along the way, followed, of course, by the child readers. Pullman makes use of numerous intertexts, but without integrating them within the texts itself. Instead he introduces each chapter of *AS* with an epigraph: a short quotation which, as will be shown in Chapter 2, demarcates each chapter, offering the reader a preview and a conceptual, as well as a moral and ideological, framework of what will follow.

Intertextuality for Pullman does not cease with his use of the epigraphs. Susan R. Bobby claims that Pullman's most powerful and dominant element in the trilogy is his creation of the daemon; she believes that without this visible manifestation of a person's soul in animal form the story would not have had the same impact. She states that the nature of this creation, as well as the way it is portrayed and analysed in both form and function, enables both children and adult readers to enjoy the trilogy alike, but for different reasons. Pullman has often mentioned that his primary influence for the daemon was the painting "Lady with an Ermine" by Leonardo daVinci. Bobby, however, writes that despite this visual stimulus that facilitated the author in his conception of this other 'self',

there are other sources for the daemon. Research reveals that the daemon is "[...] a concept developed from ancient Greek mythology" (Townsend 416). Socrates, for instance, believed he had a daemon, an entity much like the daemons in Lyra's world, that would warn him of consequences of his actions

and that served as a spirit guide or conscience to him to lead him through his life. (Bobby, 2004, n.p.)

This reinforces the idea that intertextuality is not always intentional or inserted in a text and defined as such. Most often it surfaces unconsciously, instinctively and as a result of the intellectual and aesthetic numerous stimuli an author may have had in the past or while writing. Pullman himself has claimed that “I have stolen ideas from every book I have ever read. My principle in researching for a novel is ‘Read like a butterfly, write like a bee’” (Pullman, *AS*, Acknowledgements).

Although traces of Blake also appear in *His Dark Materials*—“such as the elusive description of Lyra as a ‘little girl lost’, a silent evocation of the title of two poems from Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, featuring the near-homophone protagonist Lyca” (King, 2005, 106)—, *Skellig*’s approach is much more direct, especially in the author’s use of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*; but most importantly, Almond’s text is in a direct dialogue with Blake, entertaining his ideas, testing his philosophies by placing them within the framework of contemporary society, and putting children’s and adults’ ability to imagine and dream to the test (King, 2005, 106). If Blake “saw angels in his garden” (Almond, 1998, 59) and firmly believed they were there, Almond is asking his protagonists to look really hard and determine on their own, based on their experiences, whether Skellig exists in reality or only in their imagination — a fact the reader is never offered, having been assigned the same task as Michael and Mina.

The intertextual challenge does not cease there for Almond. Some of the most important issues he poses in his story — formal education vs. homeschooling, innocence vs. experience, sickness and death, science vs. faith (not necessarily religious) — are all presented as juxtapositions. Each side is fairly accompanied and supported by at least one

argument, and the heroes of the story, as well as the readers, are left to decide, once again, what they would choose. One of the most potent examples of this is the contrast Almond presents between homeschooling and formal education. The reader is being presented with two completely different methodologies to education, but Almond is careful to offer the pros and cons of both situations, thereby allowing the reader to decide which is best; or, even better, to select the elements in each that they believe are the most beneficial. As will be seen in greater detail in the following chapter, Mina and her mother clearly epitomize, and in a way personify, Blake's ideas and idiosyncrasy, projecting a way of life and an ideology that appears to have been eclipsed in today's society but that is nonetheless inspiring and beneficial in many ways: seeing the world as it is, but, at the same time, learning to see beyond what is right in front of them and to use their imagination creatively. Therefore, the intertextuality is not only present in Blake's directly quoted songs and poems, recited and sung by the characters, but it has seeped into the very fabric of the story.

The way Almond presents these juxtapositions is neither coincidental nor irrelevant to Blake's theories. Danielle Sahn states the following:

To Blake, the human mind requires that ideas be separated into opposites, perhaps because we cannot understand our world without making patterns from its chaos. However, to Blake's chagrin, society's understanding of these opposites often impedes intellectual progress rather than furthering it. Instead of conceptualizing contraries as opposite ideas existing simultaneously, society often decides that one side is good and the other bad, valuing one and vilifying the other. Blake calls this a "negation," writing that "The Negation must be destroyed to redeem the Contraries" (142). (Sahn, 2010, 116)

This notion of the contraries is relevant to the work of all three writers in the thesis, and the two binaries that will be thoroughly explored in all three chapters of analysis are innocence vs. experience and science vs. faith. The idea of the Contraries coexisting in a human being, however, stems from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which he writes:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. (Blake, 1988, 66-67)

Pullman has clearly applied this to his own narrative, especially in the way he is portraying and juxtaposing innocence and experience, and good and evil. His approach, however, is very different to Almond's who aims, following Blake, to reconcile the Contraries: when presented with Lyra's transition from innocence to experience, that is from childhood to adulthood and from ignorance to knowledge, the message that the reader is left with is that the latter in each case is always better. The balance between good and evil is also complicated as it is suggested that the line between the two is extremely fine to the point where the two almost merge. The nature of evil is challenged even further through ambivalent figures like Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel, whose motives may be good, but the means used to achieve their goals are often questionable and sometimes plainly cruel. Pullman's intertextual elements delve even deeper in *His Dark Materials*, and are of a more complicated nature, compared to Almond. Pullman has stated that from the very beginning, his plan was to rewrite the story of Genesis. More specifically, "Pullman describes his intent in writing the trilogy as '*Paradise Lost* for teenagers in three volumes' —a comment initially made half in jest, but then converted to reality" (Squires, 2004, 18-19). Therefore, the different and multifarious contexts within which the reader is placed from the very beginning range from Scripture to the Middle Ages and Milton, to Romanticism and Blake, to nineteenth century philosophy in Nietzsche and his

act of killing God, to the slow secularization of the twentieth century; finally, he brings the reader within a contemporary story, albeit influenced by fantasy, of Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man. The most interesting aspect of this, however, is the author's complete inversion of this story, not only as far as the identities and true nature of the figures of God and the Devil are concerned, or the state of Paradise, or the origins of Adam and Eve, but the very idea of original sin and man's predicament after the Fall—a concept that will be thoroughly analysed in Chapter 2. In spite of these inversions, it is important to note that the intertext he drew from the most was not Scripture and the Bible, but Milton and *his* rendition of this foundational story of Western civilization.

Re-creating this ancient story was going to be neither easy nor simple for Pullman. Although its origin lies in Scripture, written many centuries ago, its feel and execution had to be contemporary and modern. The readers had to be offered something they can relate to, recognize and, but most of all, understand. Sims suggests, however, that this was also the case for Milton when writing his epic poem.

Among the many problems Milton faced in composing *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* were two which called upon the highest powers both as a poet and as a man of Biblical learning. These were the problem of making the persons seem real, even those whose otherworldly character removed them from the ordinary experience of the reader, and the problem of giving the stories a prevailing Scriptural authoritativeness even when the poet's imagination took him far afield from actual Scripture. (Sims, 1962, 8)

Upon reading *His Dark Materials*, it becomes clear to the reader that Pullman was just as concerned about the reality within which his characters would appear on the page, if not more. Milton's readers were certainly more familiar with the details that adorn the story of

Genesis, while in 1995, Pullman had to assume that not everyone will be able to easily identify the correlations being made and the morality, nature and background of the story he is retelling. The intertextuality within the trilogy is not only present in the epigraphs placed at the beginning of each chapter in *The Amber Spyglass*, but lies dormant behind every aspect of the story, waiting for the reader to discover it.

For Pullman one of the most important elements, and one of his most powerful inversions, within the trilogy is the concept of original sin: what it is, how it came to be, what it means, and what its consequences are for humanity. A detailed analysis of this issue can be found in Chapter 2, but the author's main premise, and one that is firmly based on his atheistic beliefs, is the fact that original sin—the biting of the apple, tasting from the fruit of knowledge, succumbing into temptation—was “the best thing, the most important thing that ever happened to us” (Parsons and Nicholson, 1999, 119). In Pullman's story the Fall is not bad for humanity, it is not a fall from grace but a liberation, the first step towards the acquisition of knowledge. On the contrary, in Genesis, and in Milton's epic, when Eve tasted the fruit and offered it to Adam it signalled the beginning of the end: the end of life in Paradise, the end of a carefree and harmonious existence, and the birth of feelings such as shame and fear.

One of the most significant scenes of the story of Genesis is, of course, the Fall; the moment when Eve, tempted by the serpent, succumbs and dares to take the fruit from the Tree and taste it. Both Milton and Pullman place great significance on the description, as well as the feel of the scene and how it unravels; however, each author approaches it very differently. Finally, another example of how these two texts interact on a more profound level, showing subtle similarities, is when Adam and Eve are cast out of Eden and are required to enter Earth, a land that will present them with great difficulties and will make them work hard for what they always took for granted, or were generously offered, in Paradise. As previously



mentioned, the intertextual elements in *His Dark Materials* are not all straightforwardly projected and laid out for the reader. Sims asserts that Milton was inspired by Scripture while writing this scene. “Biblical allusion adds dramatic power to the action of the closing lines of *Paradise Lost*. [...] There is amplified re-telling here, of course, of the expulsion scene in Genesis in which God ‘drove out the man; and he placed at the East of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keepe the way of the tree of life’ (3:24)” (Sims, 1962, 127-128). Although Pullman does not make use of this scene as such, having already killed the Authority and freed humanity of the selfish tyrant, there is one scene in *The Amber Spyglass* that appears to have striking similarities. In the end it seems that Pullman is ‘punishing’ the children, taking them out of a world where they are together, and tells them, through Xaphania—a knife-yielding angel—that there is a chance they will see each other again, and acquire the ability to travel between worlds, like angels do, but it will take years, and it will be hard.

“And is it like the alethiometer?” said Will. “Does it take a whole lifetime to learn?”

“It takes long practice, yes. You have to work. Did you think you could snap your fingers, and have it as a gift? What is worth having is worth working for.” (Pullman, *AS*, 294-295)

With these words Pullman achieves two things: first, he advocates the value of hard work towards the acquisition of one’s goals, and secondly he places great emphasis on the merits of experience over innocence. The ability to actually know how to work the alethiometer through work and dedication surpasses the childish gift and ability to read it solely by instinct. In the end, it will be a conscious choice and a result of a long process that will enable Lyra to acquire this ability, and *that* is “worth working for.”

All the aforementioned issues, however, cannot be considered in isolation and unavoidably illuminate concepts of knowledge, experience, and how they stand against innocence, ignorance and naivety. But these issues are not exclusive to *His Dark Materials*, and can also be found in both *Skellig* and *Angel*. Pullman says that “Blake said Milton was a true poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it. I am of the Devil’s party and know it” (de Bertodano, 2002) and believes that God did not want humans to eat from that tree so that they would continue to live in blissful ignorance (Squires, 2006, 119). As previously mentioned, Pullman places great significance on the acquisition of knowledge of a person as they grow up and become self-aware, the transition from ignorance to experience being the focal point. This idea is clearly personified in Lyra, Michael, and Freya: the three protagonists of the three primary texts respectively.

Having considered these examples, it becomes clear that the act of placing a part, however small, of a text into another is not without consequence. Plett claims the following:

A quotation does not only include a single (isotopic) but two or more (polyisotopic) levels of meaning that need to be interrelated by the recipient. This interrelationship, or, to use Bakhtin’s term (1981), this “dialogue” extends well beyond the quoted elements and covers its primary and secondary contexts as well.” (Plett, 1991, 10)

This polyphony is closely related to Bakhtin’s theory and belief that language, and linguistic communication in general, is “of historical and social significance” and is immediately linked with social conditions and situations of any given time period (Allen, 2000, 17). The second recurring motif within intertextual writing suggested by Allen, a possibly less agreed upon belief, is that as a result of the social and cultural context within which a text is found, “texts do not present clear and stable meanings; they embody society’s dialogic conflict over the

meaning of words” (Allen, 2000, 35). This is especially true for the three works in question, and this ‘dialogic conflict’ that Allen is referring to will become very apparent in the following chapters. Pullman uses the references to Milton directly in order to question, challenge, and often even undermine notions of the Fall and of experience. Intertextuality transforms our understanding of concepts, or words in Allen’s terms, like innocence, experience and sin, and to a certain extent, this is exactly what these texts are doing on a macro level, whereas on a micro level they enact this through the transformation of their child protagonists.

The notion of intertextuality can also be explored through a wider range of intertexts which are not necessarily purposefully or even consciously inserted in a work of literature. These intertexts may, in fact, not even be texts but social, cultural, or political influences. Everything one has ever read, heard, or seen which has had an impact (either positive or negative) on the way one thinks or acts and which has consequently been ‘stored’ in one’s brain —the conscious or unconscious part—automatically becomes an intertext when one writes.

Almond’s and Pullman’s intertexts are more transparent possibly because the authors wished them to be so. Certainly, there might be intertexts within *Skellig* or *HDM* which are only recognizable or visible to certain readers and not to others, always based on these readers’ experiences and stimuli. McNish’s intertextual elements are much subtler in that his characters do not mention any literary, religious, or other text or source; nevertheless, this does not negate their existence. For example, the idea that when an angel manifests to a human he takes a form that is familiar or stereotypical (e.g. from religious iconography) is not novel. Angels are not human but our perception of them (usually based on cultural and religious preconceptions) is always anthropomorphic. When McNish describes the angels as they truly are, and not as Hestron first appears to Freya, he attempts to go beyond the

stereotype and introduce a creature that is very far removed from a human's expectations or imagination. Even Hestron's true appearance, however, may be a subconscious amalgamation of angelic and other images the author has been exposed to throughout his life. "Society's dialogic conflict over the meaning of words" (Allen, 2000, 35) will never cease to exist, and a text will never be able to hold just one fixed, permanent and clearly-defined meaning, just like its intertexts will never be unquestionably determined. The parameters and contributing factors in the process of producing a literary work are so multifarious and volatile that a fixed meaning would be as difficult to determine as a one true source of inspiration.

What emerges, however, through these three texts are also particular angelic figures that are transmitted through a tissue of cultural representations: the guardian angel, and the vengeful angel. The guardian angel is a very recognizable icon and notion, present in several cultures, sometimes even appearing as independent of religious agendas. The most flawless and complete representation of the guardian angel, which epitomizes this iconic figure, is materialized in the character of Hestron, in *Angel*, who is kind, patient, and expresses an unyielding love of humans. On the other hand, the representation of Mestraal, as well as that of Metatron, draw on the figure of the vengeful angel in some ways. While Pullman's inspiration is more straightforward or direct, McNish does not seem to be engaging directly with other sources in order to embody and characterize Mestraal, but he does make use of familiar concepts. This is, in fact, particularly accessible to child readers, for although they may have heard of guardian angels, they are unlikely to have read the book of Enoch.

The theme of transformation stems naturally from the use of angels in the three works, and is greatly influenced by the two major intertexts, Milton's and Blake's.

## **Transformation**

Transformation is a concept to which many different meanings can be attributed. According to the context and framework within which it is placed, it can easily serve many purposes and be used, or even misused, in a multitude of ways. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines transformation as: 1a) the action of changing in form, shape, or appearance, metamorphosis; 1b) a changed form, a person or thing transformed; 2) a complete change in character, condition (OED, online). In this thesis, the term transformation will be used to describe both a physical change, as in the case of Freya in *Angel*, and a change in character, and especially condition. While the former is more obvious and straightforward in that Freya transforms from a human to a human-angelic being—she grows wings, acquires supernatural physical strength, and perceives the world like the angels in the narrative do— the latter is more complicated as it refers to the child protagonists’ very different movements from a state of ‘innocence’ to one of ‘experience’. These two notions are complicated and challenged by the three authors in question as each defines them differently based on their ideology and the purpose these need to serve for their narratives. For example, while Lyra’s innocence is defined as ideological ignorance, Freya’s is characterized by a lack of or disregard for responsibility. Through the analysis, it will become evident that one of the most important elements contributing to this transformation is the angels; they facilitate this change by helping the characters evolve and grow, and aid them in the acquisition of experience in different forms that will prepare them to live more ethical lives.

The concept of transformation, as opposed to transition, was used in this thesis consciously and purposefully as it denotes and more accurately characterizes a process that is complex and multifaceted in more ways than one. Whereas transition suggests a more ‘natural’ or predictable movement from one state to another, transformation comprises of a more profound, and unprecedented change. In the thesis, this more fundamental change is a

direct result of the children's encounter with the angels, as they are seen going beyond the ordinary physical or psychological developments. The changes that a child experiences in its progression towards being an adult are physical, emotional, psychological and behavioural. This is a result, firstly, of a new-found awareness and understanding of the world around them, and, secondly, of the way in which the world around them begins to behave and perceive them in a different manner. This process of transition becomes even more complicated due to the fact that as the child becomes a more active participant and member of society, and therefore assumes more responsibilities, other adults surrounding the child begin to have increasingly higher expectations. However, this shift in perspective does not necessarily bring about a more mature 'treatment' of the child. This newly-acquired knowledge of the world is also closely accompanied with an equally novel understanding of the self that is both physical and psychological. All these changes, in conjunction with the main characters' interaction with the angels slowly build up to ultimately create a complete transformation of the young child into a teenager, and eventually into a young adult. The children eventually come to new understandings about the world, and take on responsibilities that might seem to be beyond their years, such as taking care of someone and feeling responsible for their well-being and return back to health, as in the case of Michael and Skellig. While the term transition does share some of the features described in transformation, and although the person undergoing this process remains the same (in that they do not become someone else entirely), the term transformation was selected because it carries with it a more substantial and powerful quality that more precisely defines this rite of passage.

A theme that was focal to the previous section and continues to retain equal importance in this one is the transition from innocence to experience, from ignorance to knowledge, and ultimately from childhood into adolescence and eventually adulthood, as these are all forms of transformation. This change takes place in all three texts, but in each

narrative the process is set into motion by different triggers and brings about diverse results. The three central characters of each work, Michael, Lyra and Freya, slowly evolve and change; this very change takes several forms (physical, emotional, moral, psychological, social) and once it has been successfully completed, the state of being each character achieves is different yet equally significant. For transformation does not only include a skin-deep or shallow alteration in appearance and demeanor, but actually necessitates a profound change which is usually elicited or stimulated by one or more external factors. The change in question can be associated with (religious) belief, spiritual orientation, or even a shift in understanding towards different aspects of life. Finally, in the three books in question, this process of transformation from innocence to experience—especially in Almond and McNish—differs from ordinary processes of childhood maturation because of the encounter with the angel as an agent of transformation. In *His Dark Materials*, although it is not one angel in particular that elicits this process, the Authority's angelic nature plays a significant role in the story's evolution and, consequently, in Lyra's role as Eve, and all angels create a certain framework for the texts and the changes that take place in *The Amber Spyglass*.

In the previous section, the connection between angels, intertextuality and transformation was noted, and in the next few pages it will become apparent how they interact and to what degree they complement each other. Especially in the case of Almond, the connection between the thesis's three main themes is particularly strong. The presence and importance of the angelic figure in the narrative is not only achieved through Skellig, but also by the angels Blake writes about in his poems, whose lines Mina and her mother often recite or sing. Michael is therefore surrounded by angels that are both real (literal) and literary. The issue of intertextuality is, of course, pivotal for it not only adds to Michael's education and learning in the more general sense, but his growing knowledge of Blake and his angels, along with his 'exploration' of Skellig, significantly influence Michael's transition from his

childhood ignorance to a state of newfound experience and knowledge and a greater understanding of the world. Unable to care for his sick newborn sister, he assumes responsibility for Skellig, and in getting to know him and learning how to heal him, he evolves in the process and transforms into a young adult who has had both his eyes and mind opened to new and exciting possibilities of existence. Although towards the end of the story when dancing with Skellig both Michael and Mina are seen to have wings on their backs, the transformation cannot be considered physical because the wings are ghostly, as if they are dreaming or hallucinating; in fact, this very occurrence could most accurately be seen or described as a spiritual transformation. Blake's visionary ideas about seeing angels, which Michael experiences first-hand, are echoed throughout the novel, and in some ways the entire journey moves Michael from innocence to experience, and causes him to have a proactive role in caring for others deeply and feeling the need to heal them, whatever their ailment. Therefore, for *Skellig*, the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* provide a literary framework for Michael's transformation. Apart from Blake, Almond has also been greatly influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, and there are numerous examples in the narrative that showcase this. One of the strongest examples tying transformation and evolution is Michael's question about the purpose and origin of our shoulder blades. Evolution in this case is literal, the example being Skellig himself, and metaphorical, in that the children as well as Skellig evolve and change throughout the story. This theory of evolution, however, does not exist without its seemingly apparent contrary which is faith or religion. However, in Almond's narrative, the children learn to have faith in themselves, in their own powers and courage, as well as in the possible existence of the otherworldly and the magical.

One of the most interesting aspects of McNish's *Angel* is the ways in which faith and science clash. This juxtaposition becomes significant for two reasons: first it illuminates the way faith is perceived in the novel and how science complicates and challenges it, and



secondly, it bears testament to Freya's transformation which is directly proportionate to, and dependent on, the amount of faith she has in herself. For both Freya and her friend Stephanie their belief in angels has resulted in nothing but alienation, seclusion, embarrassment, and even more importantly, the conviction that they are delusional verging on insane. Freya ultimately suppresses her belief and begins to live a 'normal' life, that is, an angel-free one. Her transformation in the story is two-fold as she experiences both a physical and an emotional metamorphosis. The first one involves acquiring wings, certain supernatural powers, such as the ability to fly extremely fast, to see and hear to a far greater extent than humans do, the ability to heal, as well as the sometimes painful gift of always being able to sense her wards, all those people in need of her angelic assistance. The second aspect of her transformation involves her evolution as a human being and the ability to shed her childish nonchalance in order to acquire a sense of responsibility for her actions, as well as acknowledge the fact that these actions are followed by consequences she must be able to face and deal with. Both transformations prove to be difficult both to accept and achieve. Mestrael plays a pivotal role in her character development as he is there to remind her that her choice in becoming an angel does not resemble the magical tale she had imagined it to be, but comes with a sometimes overwhelming amount of responsibility, much like choosing to be a good human being and learning to be compassionate, encouraging and helpful to others who are weaker and in need of support. In this sense, Freya resembles the notion that angels share the responsibilities and moral decisions of human beings.

In the case of Pullman the role the angels play is significantly more indirect. Although each angel Lyra and Will come in contact with offers a different perspective on the current situation the worlds are in, and despite the fact that overall they do learn from these creatures, the influence and ultimate nudge towards this transition is the sum of numerous sources, both people and creatures (witches, bears), circumstances and predicaments. The road that both

children travel on, until the point they reach their final destination, which is the Fall, has been paved with plentiful and grueling difficulties and obstacles. The angels' most crucial role is possibly the way in which they represent and denote the divine aspect of the story of Genesis, and in this Pullman presents one of the greatest inversions (which will be analysed in Chapter 2), in that the angels who stand against the Authority and disobey him are not daemons, or evil, but simply brave enough to defy and attempt to dethrone a tyrannical liar of an angel who has only enabled and often encouraged human suffering. In this sense they are central to the trilogy's reconceptualization of morality and important to the books' didactic messages about standing up against oppressive religious authorities. The element of intertextuality comes in, however, when we consider that in *His Dark Materials* the ultimate transformation in character or condition is the Fall, which would ultimately make Milton's *Paradise Lost* not only an intertext, but a substantially active one. Furthermore, if the reader is familiar with either Milton's epic or the story of Genesis, they are more than likely to predict, or simply expect, that at some point in the story some kind of a Fall will take place, whichever form or whichever framework the author chooses to place it in. The Fall, of course, represents a transition from innocence to experience in Scripture, Milton, and Pullman; the greatest difference lies in the fact that in *His Dark Materials*, contrary to the other two texts, it is framed in a positive way, and directly contradicts the traditional perception of the act of biting the apple. It is not a crime against humanity that Will (Adam) and Lyra (Eve) commit, but a brave and necessary act that will free humans from the false and corrupt dominion of a lying monarch who was never interested in the well-being of his 'children.' Therefore, Lyra's transformation in the trilogy is intricately woven within the fabric of the story of Genesis, considering she assumes the role of Eve; nevertheless, as a child of eleven who undergoes great difficulties, she grows and transforms both as an individual and as a symbol. The most obvious manifestation of her transformation is evident in her loss of ideological ignorance and

the crude awakening of the fact that the world around her is driven by forces of good and evil whose distinction is not always clear and straightforward.

The three sections in this Introduction, on angels, intertextuality, and transformation respectively, form the essential threads of the argument of this thesis which involves the analysis of a novel, secular, twentieth-century angel created by the three atheist authors in question, David Almond, Philip Pullman and Cliff McNish. Each chapter will use these three notions as the key parameters in the analysis and development of the main argument—except for Chapter 3, where intertextuality is not an active participant in McNish’s narrative. The first chapter of analysis looks at Almond’s *Skellig*, whose focal elements are the hybrid creature Skellig, Blake’s ideas of the Contraries and evolution, and Michael’s transformation as he learns to see beyond the real to the transcendental. Chapter 2 will delve into Pullman’s deconstruction of the story of Genesis—both the Scriptural and the Miltonic— and the angels’ role in its achievement, as well as their involvement and interaction with the human characters and how they facilitate Lyra’s transition from a state of ideological ignorance to a state of experience and knowledge. Finally, Chapter 3 will analyze a new breed of secular guardian angels who resemble humans on several levels, and whose free will makes them as vulnerable to emotional and physical suffering and possible lapse in judgment as humans. McNish’s angels also possess the ability to rectify their wrong moral choices and start being defined by their good ones. The story’s focal theme is choice, a notion that is explored by the author to a great extent especially from the point of view of morality, both through its human and angelic characters. This is an element that essentially delineates the thesis, as all secular angelic creatures presented in all five books possess free will by default. The order of the three following chapters aims first to introduce the reader to “the secular experience of the transcendental” (Bradley & Tate, 2010, 11) with *Skellig*, then show how Pullman annihilates the fraudulent God-figure thereby allowing the now secular angel to roam free in *His Dark*

*Materials*, and finally to observe the humanized angel as he treads between right and wrong, and chooses the path he will follow, aiding and being aided in the process by a half-human half-angel. What I aim to show and argue through the analysis of the following three chapters is the fact that the three authors in question have selected a stereotypically religious figure, but placed it within a secular, albeit still spiritual, framework. Within it, they complicate and challenge ideas of religion, responsibility, and good and evil, while emphasizing, through their characters, that morality and ethical codes can and do exist outside religion and in the absence of a God figure.

## CHAPTER ONE

### DAVID ALMOND'S *SKELLIG*

#### Introduction

*Skellig* is a work of magical realism written for children and young adults in 1998 by David Almond. The book has three protagonists: two humans, Michael and Mina, and a creature that is “something like a beast, something like a bird, something like an angel...” that defies definition and raises many questions pertaining to both religion and science (Almond, 2007, 167). Apart from these three characters, there is one more figure who dominates the story and actively influences the characters and their actions, and that is William Blake. As briefly discussed in the Introduction, Blake provides an intertextual framework for the story and assumes the role of an active participant in the narrative, for it is not only his songs that are sung and his poems recited; certain ideologies and beliefs that the poet and artist held also become vital to the novel and, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Almond uses the story to explore Blake’s ideas and show how they are still relevant in the secular contemporary world. Therefore, the first issue to be analysed and discussed in this chapter is intertextuality in *Skellig* and the work of William Blake. I will look at the collection of poems *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* more closely, and through them I argue that Almond’s engagement with Blake is not only used aesthetically or in a supplementary manner to simply construct and complete the characters of Mina and her mother, but the characters are identified most closely with Blake’s ideologies—which will be explored later in the chapter. Instead, his poems, as well as some of his more general convictions towards several issues, such as education and the natural world, are organically fused within the narrative. Mina and her mother personify and teach these beliefs, what their benefits are, and the extent to which embracing them can be radical and eye-opening. *Skellig*, on the other hand, appears to be a

manifestation and a proof of this entire philosophy which speaks of faith in the unknown and seeing beyond what we experience every day in our natural world. He serves as a means through which Michael's eyes are opened, but also through which he will experience his emotional and spiritual transformation.

*Skellig* is narrated in the first person by Michael, an 11-year-old boy who has just moved with his family into a new house and a new neighbourhood. It is clear from the beginning that Michael is not happy about the relocation. Although his parents allow him to stay in his old school, he is now far away from his old life; the only life he has known. The situation is made even worse by the fact that his baby sister is very ill and the new house is in ruins. The story begins when Michael walks, on a Sunday afternoon, into the dilapidated garage of the new house in which he is not allowed to go for safety reasons. There he finds a man lying on the floor, unable to move and unwilling to speak and explain who he is and what he is doing there. As the story progresses, the reader becomes a witness as Michael's life changes forever through his family ordeal, his meeting and friendship with Mina —his new neighbour— and the discovery of who and what Skellig is. From the first-person narrative and the book's structure the reader can clearly see fractions of Michael's personality. Throughout the novel, the reader experiences everything through Michael's perspective. He is the only narrator and so every point of view, thought and concern is his. This becomes significant because the reader is required to trust Michael's perspective and put faith in the unknown. The reader's belief in Skellig is therefore dependent on Michael's, as readers have to accept the magical aspects of the story that are blended with social realism.

It is primarily of great significance to introduce the character Skellig, both in appearance and meaning, so as to clearly delineate his role and illuminate the process by which he aids and facilitates Michael's transformation, but is also transformed himself. Skellig is a very unusual, atypical magical character. Both his appearance and behavior are

appalling at first. His first meetings with Michael are scary and unpleasant. He looks like a homeless, dying man who has forgotten how to eat, live, and has neglected himself, his body, and everything that makes him “human”. Although Michael does not know at first that Skellig is not human, he does sense something peculiar about him. In the first page he blatantly confesses that 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 be another creature like him in the world” (Almond, 2007, 1). It is remarkable how Michael reacts to Skellig, and how despite his filthy appearance and rude behavior he does not abandon him. He does not tell anybody else about him, yet he does not neglect him; in fact he does not even try to throw him out or send him away. Michael’s kindness and concern, as well as his desperate need to help and become useful, surface when he meets Skellig. Although the creature seems abrupt and rude at first, resigned to his doomed situation and sickness, Michael keeps returning to the garage and begins to take care of him. Michael is not discouraged by his rude behavior nor does he get angry or regret his decision to bring him food and medicine. He seems, in fact, unaffected by his words and insults; he deliberately ignores them and approaches him to get the food closer. He desperately tries to find out who and what he is and what brought him there. After a few futile efforts, Michael tells him that his baby sister is ill. “Babies!’ ‘Is there anything you can do for her?’ ‘Babies! Spittle, muck, spew and tears.’ I sighed. It was hopeless” (Almond, 2007, 28). Skellig’s statement is, in effect, somewhat ironic in that he himself is behaving like a baby and is just as fragile and needy. The first thing that a reader will wonder at this point is why would Michael even conceive of, or even suggest, that Skellig could help his sister in any way.

Michael never discovers where Skellig came from, when he came to live in this garage, what circumstances brought him there or what he was doing before. The terrible condition in which Michael finds him is not only physical—weakness, malnourishment, arthritis,

calcification and ossification—but also psychological in that he has given up on life and is simply waiting to die. This element of Skellig’s unknown nature and origins, however, is not coincidental. Despite this, the reader is not left unsatisfied or wondering, because, by the end of the tale, it has become insignificant. This choice by the author allows not only the main characters, but, most importantly, the readers to construct their own ideas and exercise their power of imagination about where Skellig came from, what he is, and even if he is real or simply a figment of the children’s subconscious. Most importantly, however, this uncertainty enables the two children to exercise their faith in the creature, and sometimes even question it, an issue that will be explored further in the chapter. This becomes more evident when Michael asks Skellig if Ernie—the house’s previous resident—ever saw him. Skellig’s ambivalent and unreliable answer means that Michael has to decide for himself and cannot so easily depend on fact. By the end of the story, the readers share this with the two protagonists, in that they too must look at the ‘evidence’ and either believe that Skellig is real, consider him a hallucination, or reject him altogether.

Skellig’s nature presents the reader with a conundrum. Even though his angelic nature has not been confirmed until this point, it is clear that Skellig is not purely human, but something more, something that both Michael and Mina believe following many indicators that have led them to that conclusion. However, if Skellig is indeed a magical creature, and the reader is ready to accept this, hesitation is again induced by the thought that a magical being may be suffering from conditions or diseases that afflict animals—calcification and ossification— and humans—arthritis. Yet, this is not left unexplained by the author. Skellig’s disease is an integral part of the story and of who he is, or rather, who he has become because of it, and so his transformation ultimately depends on his determination to overcome this, with the help of the children, and ‘shed’ his earthly woes in order to regain his otherworldly grace and attributes. Bullen and Parsons argue that Skellig’s arthritis confesses even more about



him, and serves as a mirror through which to explore the current state of medical science which

reduces the patient to tissue and bone. [...] Skellig is not only physically immobilised by his pain, but also by a pessimism which translates into an inability to think or imagine. [...] If he is an angel, then he is an earthbound angel. He has given up, he no longer has the will to fight his suffering and this is manifest in his flightlessness. By solidifying into “Arthur”, he is caught between life and death, heaven and earth, flesh and spirit. (Bullen & Parsons, 2007, 132)

The author’s choice to allow for a more vague interpretation of Skellig’s nature is indicative of his desire to give as little information about Skellig as possible; and this decision seems to be beneficial to the readers, for they can exercise their imagination and draw their own conclusions. The author thus offers them the element of surprise and wonder. Had Michael not clearly referred to Skellig as a ‘creature’ in the very beginning, the reader would probably have assumed that he is a bitter, homeless man who has somehow ended up in this garage, worn, decayed and dying. However, the word ‘creature’ changes the reader’s perspective and forces them to consider other possibilities.

Magical realism can be defined as a genre that merges the real with the imaginary in an effortless and subtle manner, yet succeeds in presenting, through this interaction, certain realities of our world. The term “magical realism” was coined by Franz Roh in the early twentieth century to describe a new style in German painting that demonstrated an altered reality; it was later applied to Latin American Literature by Arturo Uslar-Pietri, a Venezuelan essayist and literary critic and has since been used to describe many literary works. According to Faris “magical realism maybe be considered an extension of realism in its concern with the

nature of reality and its representation at the same time that it resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism” (Zamora & Faris, 1995, 5-6). Amaryll Chanady asserts that Roh considered the term as “an aesthetic category”; for him “magical realism was a way of reacting to reality and pictorially representing the mysteries inherent in it” (Chanady, 1985, 17). David Almond has employed many elements of the genre, thus creating a narrative that is both original and enthralling. In the book, realism dominates most aspects of the story; the world described is the one we live in, and the laws of nature and the world are all the same, except for the unexplained presence of Skellig. Despite Skellig’s supernatural characteristics, the author delivers a story that deals with everyday issues such as death, illness, compassion, and resilience. Latham argues that “a key element of magical realism is the realism, for the impact of the magic depends in large part on how convincing and realistic the context is in which that magic appears” (Latham, 2006, 62). Almond’s novel is a perfect example of a magic realist tale, in which everything except one single element abides by the rules of reality. However, it is this non-realistic exception that brings everything together and creates the air of uncertainty and doubt for both readers and characters. Through the analysis it will be elucidated how this mode aids the author to successfully merge the real and the otherworldly, thus reinforcing Michael’s, as well as the readers’, hesitation and doubt and encouraging reflections on the existence and function of the inexplicable and otherworldly in a contemporary era characterized by secularism and empiricism.

Throughout the chapter the theme of transformation, as was briefly described in the Introduction, will be explored while the characters are unraveled one by one. Transformation shares a common element with Blake’s analysis: the notion of the transition from innocence into experience, what that entails, and how it is portrayed in *Skellig*. In the first section about Intertextuality, the discussion will focus on Blake and how he saw and expressed this pivotal moment in a child’s life —moving from a state of innocence to one of experience— and what

are some of the parallels that can be drawn with Michael and Skellig. The description of each character's transformation will delve deeper into the analysis of the book and will demonstrate what kind(s) of transformation the protagonists go through, if any, and what brings about this sometimes emotional or psychological, and other times physical or spiritual transformation. In this section, I also aim to show how this transition, or metamorphosis, is achieved through a series of turning points and is slowly completed and accompanied by a number of seemingly extraneous factors, such as doctors, science, nature, teachers, friendship, family, and most importantly, a strange creature that becomes, by the end, the evidence of all of Michael's new-found beliefs and convictions, the most significant being his belief in the unknown and the acceptance of the possibility that something may exist outside the boundaries of what we know and see.

As discussed in the Introduction, transformation is a notion that can easily be generalized or misunderstood. For the purposes of this thesis, transformation is defined as a process by which a character's emotional, psychological and/or physical attributes are changed to a great extent, designating a visible shift in perspective and a realization of certain aspects of this character's life of which they were unaware. Finally, this transformation can also be described as a maturation, or the formation of their identity, as in the case of Michael. It will be shown that for each character this process is different, not only in the results that it yields, but also in the elements that trigger it. I argue that, for Michael, the transformation he goes through is directly linked to his relationship with Skellig, his friendship with Mina and consequently the intertextual framework built around William Blake. In turn, Skellig's own transformation, which is both emotional and physical, is the result of his relationship with the two children and the support and care that they offer him. Skellig's metamorphosis is particularly significant due to his metaphysical nature and the fact that it is the children who enable and facilitate his recovery and his return to his former power and form. Mina's

transformation is the least evident or substantial, for her character—her strengths, opinions and beliefs—are firmly set within her from the very beginning. Mina’s role in the story does not parallel Michael’s, in that, through this adventure, her primary purpose is not to change but to aid Michael in his transformation, even though in the end their joined experiences contribute to her learning, and reinforce her existing beliefs.

Intertextuality in Almond’s work, however, is not exclusive to Blake. The author also makes use of Darwin’s work on evolution, without directly quoting him. Most of the theories and notions are brought forth by Mina, but it is evident that Michael’s curiosity, triggered by Skellig’s peculiar physical attributes, leads him to ask his own questions about our origins as a species and the boundaries of reality and the otherworldly, and eventually come to his own conclusions. The section of the chapter dedicated to Darwin aims to bring forth some of the naturalist’s most prevalent ideas regarding the origins of the species and natural selection, reveal how some of them subtly surface in *Skellig*, and in what ways they influence the children’s, as well as the reader’s, perception of the angelic creature. Part of the argument pertaining to Darwin’s work in conjunction with Almond’s narrative concerns the issue of science as an alternative to faith. As will be seen later in the chapter, Almond is constantly juxtaposing the two, and part of Michael’s struggle throughout the story is deciding which framework to trust more. It should be noted that the aspect of faith does not necessarily relate to or imply questions of religion or God. Instead, most references to faith allude to the spiritual, the mystic, and that which cannot always be sufficiently explained with conventional rules, physics, or even reality. In this section I argue that Almond explores Blake’s idea of contraries primarily through Michael, making him question new ideas and perceptions. After he has been exposed to both aspects, he is then able and willing to draw his own conclusions and keep elements of both. In this, as my argument will show, Skellig and Mina play a pivotal role in that they embody and personify both contraries—science and faith—simultaneously.

## **Blake & Intertextuality**

William Blake was everything but conventional and ordinary, both as a person and as an artist. In fact, “many of [his] contemporaries thought he was mad, [while] in our own time belief in this notion would see entirely dispelled. [...] Most critics accept Blake as a mystic pure and simple” (McQuail, 2000, 121). He has often been described as being ahead of his time and not appreciated enough while he was alive, but he himself was “aware that innovative thinkers—himself among this class—are often labelled insane” (McQuail, 2000, 122). From an early age he was well aware of his gift and inclination towards the arts, in many of its forms: poetry, painting, sketching and colouring. Despite his innate sense of artistic creation he, as many other artists, evolved through time with practice and patience. But this was only a way of perfecting a technique that already distinguished him from others. Along with his talent, his strong personality also grew and evolved, and, as Keynes states, “his mind was developing an unconventional and rebellious quality, acutely conscious of any falsity and pomposity in others” (Blake, 1970, 9).

Blake’s artistic and personal preoccupations and concerns touched upon many subjects that were of both social and religious, material and spiritual, nature, and the manifestation of these were clearly depicted in his poems and paintings. Sir Geoffrey Keynes states that “by 1788 [...] he knew that poetry and design are the same thing in different forms, and he possessed the originality and craftsmanship needed for the practice of both, separately and simultaneously” (Blake, 1970, 11-12). This marriage of the two art forms would become extremely significant for the future of his work and would define him as an artist. *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* took Blake five years to complete, and it is unclear if when writing *Innocence* he had already conceived of a second set of poems that would complement and complete the first. Regardless, however, of his initial intent, when both sets of poems were complete “it is believed that he did not issue any separate copies of these poems, always

combining them with the *Songs of Innocence* in a single volume, ‘Shewing’, as he asserted on the general title-page, ‘the two Contrary States of the Human Soul’” (Blake, 1970, 13). The notion of the Contraries becomes significant throughout the thesis as they are central to my analysis, especially in regards to *Skellig* and *His Dark Materials*.

The importance of this visual interpretation in the form of drawing or sketching, which serves to accompany and complement verse or writing, is unmistakably present within *Skellig* and exercised by both Michael and Mina. Mina is often seen observing the birds in her garden and drawing them in her notebook while writing down their behavioural patterns. She encourages Michael to do the same and teaches him in the process. The most accurate parallel with Blake occurs when Michael is asked to produce a piece of creative writing in school, and he begins to tell the tale of him, Skellig, and Mina but changes some of the facts. “The man teaches the boy and Kara how it feels to fly, and then he disappears, flapping away across the water” (Almond, 2007, 121). After school he visits Mina and joins her in painting pictures while her mother is singing Blake’s verses. After Mina tells him that Skellig will be leaving them soon, Michael grabs some paper and draws “Skellig flapping across a pale sky” (Almond, 2007, 124). What is also of great significance at that point within the story is the verses that Mina’s mother is singing from Blake’s poem ‘The Angel,’ which are the following:

So he took his wings and fled:

Then the morn blush’d rosy red.

Soon my Angel came again;

I was arm’d, he came in vain...

For the time of youth has fled,

And grey hairs were on my head. (Almond, 2007, 124-25)

With these verses she is signalling both Skellig's departure and the fact that the children's adventure is slowly coming to an end, heralding, in fact, the conclusion of a part of their great journey from innocence to experience.

The notion of the Contraries is possibly one of Blake's most significant and central ideas, one that is thoroughly analysed both in the *Songs* and in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake takes great care, in the latter, to note the error in distinguishing between body and soul, energy and reason, good and evil. According to Blake, a human being possesses all of the above at the same time, suggesting that one cannot exist without the other. "Without these contraries there could be no progression, that is, human thought and life need the stimulus of active and opposing forces to give them creative movement" (Blake, 1975, xvi). Furthermore, he believed that only when a person embraces all contraries together they are then able to find balance. It is not simply that we need both elements to become whole, but that we *are* both, and so we need to embrace and accept these contrasting qualities within ourselves. These ideas are found within *Skellig* in abundance, even though they may not always surface with great clarity, and will be discussed in greater detail later in this Chapter.

In an article on *Skellig*, Don Latham argues that "Explicit intertextuality is evident in the numerous quotations from William Blake's poetry. [...] and most fall into one of two thematic categories that parallel themes in the novel: those describing the stultifying effects of formal education and those describing the protective presence of guardian angels" (Latham, 2007, 216). The theme of education is analysed in a separate section of the chapter and looks closely at the parallels drawn between Blake and Almond's narrative, while the theme of the guardian angel is touched upon and explored throughout the chapter, but especially through the analysis of Skellig himself. Blake's impact lies not only in the way these verses tie in with multiple elements in the story, but also in the way that the story itself is so elaborately entwined around Blake's poems and songs, as well as the poet's own personality and

characteristics. Natov states that the first allusion to Blake in the novel is when “the real estate agent who sold Michael’s family their house (named Stone to suggest his lack of feeling), had told [them] that they needed to see the house “in your mind’s eye” (Natov, 2006, 234). The idea of using one’s imagination, or one’s eye as a window, as mentioned in the Introduction, is another focal element in *Skellig*, as the focus on visual observation and empiricism is complemented by one’s ‘power’ of internal vision and metaphysical interpretation. However, Blake’s voice in the novel resonates primarily through Mina, and also through Mina’s mother, who is responsible for teaching her about the poet.

Latham, in fact, argues that meaning in the novel “thus derives from the interplay between Blake’s poems (reflecting Mina’s view) and Almond’s narrative (reflecting Michael’s)” (Latham, 2007, 216). As previously mentioned, the work is written in first-person narration, thus enabling the reader to see, experience and understand Michael’s world only through *his* eyes. However, Latham’s argument suggests that the author has succeeded in clearly incorporating the view of another character through the use of Blake, or intertextuality. Warner states that “in the fullest sense, Blake’s work is “re-visionary,” expressing his own startling vision but doing so primarily through the audacious transformation of preexisting icons taken from widely (and wildly) divergent sources” (Warner, 1982, 220). This could, in fact, be said for all three authors analysed herein, in that they have consciously and purposefully chosen to work with a ‘preexisting icon’, the angel—one that is almost exclusively associated with organized religion and God— but have decided to place it within a secular, and even atheistic, framework, thereby reinventing it and transforming it. In Almond’s case, the distancing from God, or anything religious, appears to be the most obvious, for he makes no mention of the Church, God, or anything pertaining to the afterlife. His use of Blake actually seems to be aiding and facilitating this detachment, in spite of the fact that the artist’s body of work, in its majority, is significantly religious in content. The



Blakean passages that Almond has incorporated into his narrative, as will be seen later, pertain only to the spiritual, the educational, the mythical, and the naturalistic.

### **Innocence & Experience**

Innocence and experience is one of the most prevalent themes in the novel, and Mina, as Blake's 'voice', is the focal conveyor of the elements that allude to it. Although she and Michael are of the same age, her unconventional upbringing and home-school education have contributed to her becoming a free-spirited, imaginative and creative child. Michael is at first bewildered at her forthrightness and opinionated assertiveness, not having met anyone like her before, and soon considers her to be smart and knowledgeable. Her level of experience, as compared to Michael, is tested for the first time when Michael takes her to see Skellig. After a brief moment of surprise and awe she immediately begins to understand what is wrong with the strange creature and diagnoses him with ossification and calcification, a disease that afflicts birds. Contrary to Michael, Mina does not question Skellig's existence, nor does she struggle with questions pertaining to his origin or nature. Whether he is a product of evolution, an angel, or simply a man with wings and bird-like characteristics, it does not matter to Mina; his presence alone is sufficient evidence of his reality. One of the main arguments of this section is that, in the novel, Mina is not only responsible for introducing William Blake to Michael, but for asking him questions that awake unknown and never-before felt concerns within him; questions that ultimately contribute to his maturation and transformation. Robyn McCallum writes that,

The preoccupation with personal maturation in adolescent fiction is commonly articulated in conjunction with a perceived need for children to overcome solipsism and develop intersubjective concepts of personal identity within this

world and in relation to others. Solipsism is the inability to distinguish between one's own self and the otherness of the world and of other people. (McCallum, 1999, 7)

In *Skellig*, Michael's emotional journey resembles this need to overcome solipsism; that is, to slowly begin to understand the world as it operates outside himself. The difficulties he faces daily, of accepting his new life in the new house and realizing the dangers and consequences of his sister's illness—which could at any moment lead to her death—, as well as discovering novel approaches to life and education with Mina's and Skellig's help, gradually enable him to open his mind. This very process moves him from innocence and his childhood naivety and allows him to take his first steps towards experience.

The first overt mention of William Blake occurs when Mina explains to Michael about home schooling and the reasons behind her mother's choice to educate her. She tells him that the choice to be home schooled is based on their philosophy and conviction that “schools inhibit the natural curiosity, creativity and intelligence of children” (Almond, 2007, 47). She goes on to say that “our motto is on the wall by my bed [...] ‘How can a bird that is born for joy/Sit in a cage and sing?’” (Almond, 2007, 48). Both Mina and her mother seem to live by Blake's ideas and the principles that are embedded in his work. It is unclear whether Michael had ever heard of home schooling, but even if he was aware of this method, it becomes evident that the parallel between school and a cage, which Mina suddenly brings forth through Blake's words, is a notion that he had never contemplated, having been brought up to consider the organized institution of education as fact, or even as the norm. Regardless of whether he enjoys school, until this point he never questions or thinks about its advantages or disadvantages as compared to another alternative. As the story progresses, however, his observation of Mina's lifestyle and, most importantly, the close look that he now takes at his own educational experience, enable him to weigh the benefits and drawbacks of both systems,

a process which ultimately leads him to an evaluation of the two contraries and a formation of an individual opinion.

A noteworthy observation is the fact that most of the excerpts by Blake that Mina and her mother use throughout the story come from *Songs of Experience* and not *Innocence*, such as ‘The Tyger,’ ‘The Angel,’ and ‘The School-boy’; the only one that belongs to *Innocence* is ‘Night,’ which is the last poem they sing and which speaks of nature, birds, and angels, drawing a trajectory of Michael’s journey. The choice to draw from the songs of *Experience* could be described as somewhat prophetic and symbolic. While the songs of *Innocence* hold an air of nonchalance, naivety, and, in fact, innocence of thought and spirit, the poems of *Experience* are characterized by concerns and anxieties of the soul, and questions that allude to issues of faith, sorrow and loss. It is not coincidental that in ‘The Angel’ the character is emotionally and spiritually aided by an angel to whom she cries. Finally, the most evident parallel to Almond’s narrative occurs when one day the angels flees and so the character in the poem is forced to “[dry her] tears and [arm her] fears/with ten thousand shields and spears.” Upon the angel’s return, that is after Skellig has visited the baby, as if in answer to Michael’s request and ‘tears’, Michael is “arm’d” and ready to face such dreads on his own, “for the time of youth has fled.” (Blake, 1970, 47).

Keynes states that “the *Innocence* poems were the products of a mind in a state of innocence and of an imagination unspoiled by stains of worldliness. Public events and private emotions soon converted Innocence into Experience, producing Blake’s preoccupation with the problem of Good and Evil” (Blake, 1970, 12). Although issues of good and evil are not as visible in *Skellig* as they are abundantly found within *Angel* and *His Dark Materials*, a clear distinction exists between Michael’s state of innocence in the beginning, as opposed to his newfound experience and maturity towards the end. Unlike Pullman, whose rejection of childhood innocence I discuss in Chapter 2, Almond is not so quick to dismiss and reject

childhood, or consider it a necessary evil that must be experienced but is not particularly significant or beneficial. On the contrary, he explores both states and attempts to present arguments that favour each one for different reasons. Furthermore, he demonstrates two sides of each state. It should be noted that the transition from a state of innocence to a more experienced one is not clear cut for Michael, in that it does not follow a specific event but is, instead, slowly built up, triggered, and influenced by Skellig, Mina, and the unpleasant situation he experiences at home which involves the new house as well as baby Joy's sickness. As far as the children are concerned, Almond seems to compare and contrast Mina and Michael with Michael's school friends Leaky and Coot. While the former pair are in the process of attaining a deeper understanding of the world, of nature, and of life and death, the latter pair seem to be standing many strides behind, by not only being mildly insensitive or awkward to their friend's troubles, but also by insulting Mina without even taking the time, or caring about, getting to know her better before criticizing her. Representing "experience", the author presents Mina's mother and Michael's mother. Although the latter does show signs of this otherworldly sensitivity—for example, when she tells Michael about our wings once being where our shoulder blades are now, and when she almost believes that she was awake when Skellig appeared in the hospital room—it is clear that she is not ready to truly accept magic—or anything magical—as fact.

On the other hand, Mina's mother is proof of the opposing side of adulthood, the side that still retains the ability to believe and hope, and will therefore never cease to do so. Latham argues that "innocence and experience [...] parallel Michael's and Mina's growth from childhood to adolescence. However, Almond's narrative, like Blake's poems, suggest that both states characterise all human beings—children and adults—and, moreover, that loss and corruption are not inevitable aspects of adulthood" (Latham, 2007, 218). Latham's argument brings us back to Blake's idea of the contraries and reinforces the idea that even

Michael's mother, who faces a certain difficulty in accepting Skellig's visit as something real, experiences doubt and for a second contemplates what his existence could mean. Her description of Skellig reveals her struggle in deciding whether he was truly there or whether she simply dreamt the entire scene.

He was filthy. All in black, an ancient dusty suit. A great hunch on his back. Hair all matted and tangled. [...] His face 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...' [...] 'And then he reached right down with both hands and lifter her up. She was wide awake. They stared and stared into each other's eyes. He started slowly to turn around...' 'Like they were dancing,' I said. 'That's right, like they were dancing. And then the strangest thing of all...' [...] 'there were wings on the baby's back. Not solid wings. Transparent, ghostly, hardly visible, but there they were. Little feathery wings'. (Almond, 2007, 149-150)

For Roni Natov, these "vestigial wings signify our fragility and spirituality, [and] the baby is symbolic of our personal childhood and the childhood of the human race" (Natov, 2003, 236). Michael's mother's unwillingness to believe that this was real contradicts her lucid perception of Skellig's kind intentions. Furthermore, her description of him, along with the vivid detail of the ghostly wings that were visible on the baby, greatly resembles Michael's when he sees the same wings grow faintly on Mina's back, signifying her ability to transcend the real and experience the otherworldly. While Mina's mother may possibly have blatantly accepted this, Michael's mother falters; nevertheless, the way she expresses this dream suggests that she, despite being an adult, still retains this ability to see, her reluctance being simply a result of her having had no 'practice.'

Dreams in the text serve to problematize the relationship between innocence and experience by setting up parallels between the adult and child characters, and reversing their relationships. Wendy B. Faris writes that

magical realist narratives almost seem to bring up the possibility of interpreting what they chronicle as a dream in order to forestall that interpretation, after having first aided it as a possibility. That strategy, while allaying the reader's doubts, also calls them into being, causing the reader to hesitate. (Faris, 2004, 18)

Faris' statement seems to resonate throughout the novel, as in *Skellig* there are many references to dreams whose role is to emphasize this ambiguity between dream and reality and confuse both Michael and the reader. Although it may seem as if Michael's dreams are simply allegorical and serve as symbol of his thoughts and concerns, when looked at more closely, it becomes evident that they also function as a means through which he processes what he has just experienced in real life. Because the boundaries between dreams and reality are often muddled in the story, they become all the more powerful in aiding Michael in his maturity. Following Mina's words and 'teachings', and the moments he spends with Skellig, Michael's dreams are a medium of contemplation, a vessel in which the day's events coalesce in seemingly peculiar combinations to reveal something that was there all along, but only existed in his mind's eye. The first dream Michael has is very early in the story, and is of Skellig, an indication that he is still unsure about what it is that he saw and how real it truly was. In his second symbolic dream, the baby is portrayed as a bird in the blackbird's nest, and is fed by the birds until she is strong enough to fly away; when she does leave she flies 'over the rooftops and on to the garage roof' (Almond, 2007, 25), as if signaling Skellig's location, as well as his relation to the birds, an issue that will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. The dreams that Michael has almost every night after his first encounter with Skellig

are not only symbolic and allegorical of the things that are to come and of the connections that his mind makes with the reality that surrounds him, but they are also a link to his relationship with Mina and, consequently, her own 'relationship' with Blake and his own visions and dreams. Finally, they are, ironically enough, a 'wake-up call' for Michael and contribute to one of the ways in which he slowly begins the process of leaving his childhood innocence behind in order to enter into a more experienced state of understanding.

Loss, or the fear of loss of his baby sister, is yet another emotion that Michael is introduced to and forced to deal with for the first time, and which contributes to his growth. In this case it is Skellig who unknowingly aids this process of coping with an unpleasant and emotionally crippling situation. This particular journey also brings about feelings and notions of faith, as I shall discuss later in the chapter. Michael's sister's illness is undoubtedly a focal element of the story which creates a chain reaction of events that ultimately influences not only Michael and his family but also Skellig. On the one hand, Michael feels slightly neglected by his parents because of their continuous care and concern for the baby. This feeling of loneliness, in addition to the derelict state of the house, produces feelings of despair and anger within him. On the other hand, his own concern for his sister's well-being creates a need for him to contribute somehow, despite the fact that he does not know how to deal with this emotionally or practically. His discovery of Skellig presents him with the opportunity to replace the care he cannot provide his sister with caring for this strange man. At first he reacts instinctively, in that despite Skellig's appalling appearance, he does not throw him out or abandon him, and with time, he begins to see through what is outside to the perplexity and wonder that lies within Skellig. Therefore, this fear of loss is temporarily appeased by the care he provides, and, at the end, when he realizes he must now let Skellig go, his sister begins to recover and so the balance is once again restored.

Michael has a dream where Skellig has wings and is seen later to be fed by owls as if he is a bird himself, a scene that the children later witness in reality and which reveals the part of him that is “something like a bird” (Almond, 2007, 167). However, it is *baby* birds that are fed by their parents because they are still weak and unable to fly on their own and look for food. Bullen and Parsons write that “These paired descriptions of Skellig and the baby can be read as indicating Michael’s psychological as well as intellectual needs, specifically his self-directed movement toward the formation of a resilient self through understanding – both of himself and of external physical phenomena” (Bullen & Parsons, 133). Both in the dream, and in reality, the boundaries between adult and childhood are problematized here. Although Skellig is an adult male, he is taken care of by the children and the owls as if he were a baby; in fact, there is a strong parallel between him and the baby within the story. Furthermore, this inversion also relates to the guardian angel role, which is at first assumed by Michael and Mina, for they do not only feed him and bring him medicine, but they also physically carry him to a safer place of residence.<sup>2</sup> Once Skellig is strong enough to fly away and leave the nest they have created for him, only then is he able to resume his role as the guardian angel and not only save the baby, but also reveal to them his power of flight and grant them their own wings. A bird leaving the nest is a sign of achievement, growth, and overcoming obstacles and difficulties, and in the novel this process of maturation and growth is a mutual one. Skellig’s rehabilitation to the point where he can become the children’s guardian angel is only possible after the children have completed their own task of taking on the responsibilities and caring duties of adults themselves.

Skellig seems to share this element with Michael in that he has to be helped in believing in the magical nature within him. The difference is that Michael is shown that for

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<sup>2</sup> The guardian angel role is also reversed and significantly complicated in *Angel*, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.



the first time, whereas Skellig has simply forgotten or resigned himself to his current existence and needs to be reminded, as well as shown, how to accomplish it. The first significant sign of change within him occurs when the children take him to the old house that belonged to Mina's grandfather and he asks them to be moved higher up. "'You moved,' I said. 'All on your own, you moved.' He winced with pain. 'You want to go higher,' said Mina. 'Yes. Somewhere higher,' he whispered" (Almond, 2007, 88). Although until now he had allowed the children to bring him food, drink and medicine, he himself was not an active participant in their efforts, but a passive recipient. It is at that moment that he accepts this challenge and decides to fight the disease with their help, and finally let them help him while assuming an active role in their attempt.

The factors that aid Michael's maturation and ability to cope with trauma and the potential loss of his sister are not only based on personal experience and learning. His sister's illness and the possibility of her death is not his only concern and fear; moreover, the new house and the condition it is in, is not, in itself, highly problematic, and his mother's absence from the home as a result of the baby's condition is not expressed —by him—as difficult. However, all these factors together make up for his anxiety, his fears and his difficulty to grasp and resolve them. Yet, through Mina, and through his encounter with Skellig, he discovers an entirely different worldview, and experiences first hand just a fraction of what is out there, and what is available to him, if only he unearths it and embraces it. Latham suggests that "In each of these works [including *Skellig*], magic serves not only as a catalyst for identity transformation, but also as a means for questioning the established social order" (Latham, 2006, 67), and the following section will reveal this as the narrative clearly poses issues of education and socialization in today's society.

## Education

One of the themes that seems to question a current social issue is that of education, and the debate between state school education and homeschooling. Blake plays a pivotal role in this discussion and appears to be standing on Mina's side, being a supporter of free thinking and free schooling. Blake left ordinary school at a very young age and joined a drawing school, being fully aware of the path he wished to take (Blake, 1970, 7). Despite his abandonment of formal education at the age of ten he never abandoned intellectual exercise and thought. As in the case of Mina, Blake did not turn his back on education out of frivolity or laziness, but because he believed that school inhibited curiosity and weaved a net around the child's mind, disabling it from escaping the mundane and seeing beyond the empirical. In his poem 'The School-Boy' he writes:

But to go to school on a summer morn,  
O! it drives all joy away;  
Under a cruel eye outworn,  
The little ones spend the day,  
In sighing and dismay. (Blake, 1976, 154)

Almond juxtaposes the two methods of education and describes the type of learning that each child receives and experiences. However, he does not wish to impose, or openly favour, one side over the other. In order to present arguments on both sides, the author places Michael on one side and Mina on the other. Although the scale seems to sometimes shift towards Mina's free-spirited, Blakean temperament, it is ultimately implied that both sides have as many merits as they have disadvantages. A scene in the novel where this distinction is openly accentuated is when Michael goes over to Mina's garden to sit with her while he completes the homework that his teacher has just dropped off:

Mina read the sentences out loud. She said, 'Blank, blank, blank,' in a singsong voice when she came to the dashes. She stopped after the first three sentences and just looked at me. 'Is this really the kind of thing you do all day?' she said. [...] 'But what's the red sticker for?' 'It's for confident readers,' I said. 'It's to do with reading age.' 'And what if others want to read it?' 'Mina,' said her mum. 'And where would William Blake fit in?' said Mina. (Almond, 2007, 84)

Mina mocks this systematised and unimaginative piece of homework that Michael is given, and seems to imply that it is narrow-minded and constrictive. Furthermore, it favours the acquisition of knowledge through memorisation and a standardised formula which lacks, or possibly inhibits, the use of creativity and imagination. Her question regarding the category in which Blake would fit in could also be a reference to the labelling that is often imposed on works of literature, not only in schools—alluding to linguistic or other difficulties and censorships—but also in the general book market where books for children and young adults are often assigned specific age groups to which they belong. The text is therefore encouraging the child reader to think critically about the way knowledge is imparted to them or withheld from them.

The opposing view is presented later in the novel when Michael's friends, Leaky and Coot, go to his house after school one day and start teasing him about Mina. They ask what school she attends and he replies that she doesn't because "her mother teaches her" (Almond, 2007, 100). "'Bloody hell,' said Leaky. 'I thought you had to go to school.' 'Imagine it,' said Coot. They imagined it for a while. 'Lucky sod,' said Leaky. 'What'll she do for mates though?' said Coot. 'And who'd like to be stuck at home all day?'" (Almond, 2007, 100). It is noteworthy that Coot, at this point, is being more perceptive than Michael who had never, until now, considered the difficulty of socialising and making friends outside of school. On the other hand, unaware of what Mina does 'all day,' it is natural to assume that such a routine

can become monotonous. However, in the same page, Almond seems to shift back the scale when Michael tells his friends that Mina and her mother have been teaching him about William Blake and Coot says, “‘Who’s he?’ [...] ‘That bloke that’s got the butcher’s shop in town?’” (Almond, 2007, 100). Although the lack of conventional socialisation and friends, as well as the fact that a person not attending school would stay at home all day is stated, Coot’s ignorance regarding Blake could also be seen as an attempt by the author to suggest that children in schools should be introduced to more creative teaching methods, such as the ones that Mina experiences daily. However, he is clearly posing these matters so that the readers will address them, ponder them, and finally arrive at their own conclusions, or alternatively see the value in both options so be less judgmental of other’s life choices.

In the few words that they speak, Leaky and Coot seem to be expressing a personal dilemma about which type of education they would choose. Their question to Michael about how Mina meets friends if she does not go to school denotes an opinion and conviction on their part that school is not only an institution that a child attends to learn, but also to socialise, play and escape the boundaries of home, which is, however, well-meant in that they escape boredom. On the one hand, without any prior knowledge of how homeschooling would be conducted or exercised by the state or the parents, they consider it as a way out of compulsory homework; on the other hand, they contemplate that such a daily routine could also be lonely and detached. On the other end of the spectrum, Mina clearly considers conventional schooling to be limited and limiting, and Michael realizes this when he tells her the following: “You know nothing about it. You think you’re special but you’re just as ignorant as anybody. You might know about William Blake but you know nothing about what ordinary people do” (Almond, 2007, 102).<sup>3</sup> Michael, however, has now had the opportunity to

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<sup>3</sup> In the recently published prequel *My Name Is Mina* (2010) the reader is given a more detailed background of Mina’s upbringing and schooling, and we discover that although Mina attended school, her inability to conform to its rules and conventions and fit in with the other children led her mother to the decision to homeschool her.

see and closely observe the two methods and can appreciate the benefits of both; this binary representation is thus complete, allowing Michael to experience both Contraries and realize that despite their seemingly contradictory nature, they can in fact be reconciled or complementary. It is important to note that throughout the story he is seen, at different times, to crave both his friends' company and Mina's calm environment. Furthermore, although one day his father tells him that he does not have to go to school if he does not feel up to it, he chooses to leave, thereby escaping his derelict house, which still does not feel like a home.

Bullen and Parsons write that

Michael regards Mina as both intelligent and well-informed, but she is an anomaly in contemporary child culture. [...] The novel suggests that [Mina] is not only more knowledgeable than other children her age, but enjoys a sense of passion and wonder at the world which Michael and his schoolmates are losing in the process of socialization via institutionalised education. This process threatens their emotional survival when faced with social risks, as much as it limits their intellectual ability.<sup>4</sup> (Bullen & Parsons, 2007, 140-141)

Although this is true to a great extent, under this light, Michael can then be seen as an exception to this rule, in that despite having always attended school, he easily succeeds in learning from Mina and engaging with her in intellectual activity and contemplation. Another of Mina's attributes which could be viewed as either negative—naivety— or positive—innocence— is when she tells Michael that she has been writing a diary about herself and Skellig. Michael, almost instinctively, asks her whether she is afraid that someone will find it

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<sup>4</sup> The analysis of Chapter 3 reveals a completely different perspective on homeschooling given by Cliff McNish. In *Angel*, Stephanie is a girl who has been unable, in the past, to integrate into any school environment, which leads to her highly conservative parents' decision to homeschool her. This results in the girl's further social isolation, as well as a poor level of education which the state considers inappropriate and lacking, thereby re-immersing her into the school system, which rejects her once again. The issues raised are peer rejection, bullying, acceptance of one's personality and faith, conformity and guardianship.

and read it. She replies “why would they read it? They know it’s mine and it’s private” (Almond, 2007, 85). Her homeschooling, combined with her mother’s way of upbringing have greatly contributed to and influenced her personality, always placing her confidence in the goodness of others and trusting that they will do the right, as well as the logical thing. Furthermore, it is significant to note that Mina has already experienced the absence of her father and the death of her grandfather at a very young age, while Michael seems to be going through this ordeal for the first time. Mina comes across as knowledgeable and assertive from her first meetings with Michael, who sometimes seems intimidated by her: “Do you like drawing?’ ‘Sometimes.’ ‘Drawing makes you look at the world more closely. It helps you to see what you’re looking at more clearly. Did you know that?’ I said nothing” (Almond, 2007, 24). Her unconventional education, as well as her eagerness and excitement to learn as much as possible about nature, evolution and the human body, have transformed Mina into an eleven-year-old girl who is considerably more mature and ‘advanced’ than Michael, or in fact, any of his friends or classmates. Proof that Michael acknowledges that is the fact that she is the only person he trusts enough to introduce to Skellig after only two meetings; moreover, as previously mentioned, he is certain that she will be able to help him figure out how to best help Skellig.

Mina’s mother talks to the children about spring, recounting the story of the goddess Persephone “who was forced to spend half a year in the darkness deep underground. Winter happened when she was trapped inside the earth. [...] Spring came when she was released and made her slow way up to the world again” (Almond, 2007, 137). Michael seems slightly unconvinced by the story at first and dismisses it as being an old myth; at that, Mina’s mother urges him to look around him and wonder if what he sees is the “whole world welcoming Persephone home” (Almond, 2007, 138). Spring does not only bring joy and colours, it speaks of hope, light, of a new beginning –a rebirth possibly– and of endless possibilities. Although

Mina is the one who teaches Michael about William Blake and Charles Darwin, her mother also contributes to his knowledge, and as an adult, her words carry a certain authority and weight. This is more strongly emphasized when Michael urges his parents to name his baby sister Persephone, having been mystified by the goddess's tragic yet beautiful story of rebirth, which visibly resembles Joy's life so far.

As previously mentioned, to Blake school represents a cage within which he must sit and wallow in the loss of a world that lies only outside it. As he writes in 'The School-boy', when in school, where "the little ones spend the day/in sighing and dismay," he can take delight, neither "in his book, nor sit in learning's bower" (Blake, 1970, 53). The constraints of school, the ones he may have possibly witnessed during his life, did not only hinder and limit his joy, but also his freedom. Comparing himself (or a child) to a bird, he paralleled school, and possibly the institution's rules and guidelines, to an institution that takes away a person's wings and traps them within designated boundaries, and this is, in fact, the construction of school that both Mina and her mother adhere to. 'The School-boy' was first included in songs of *Innocence* but then placed within *Experience* as if Blake wished to emphasize the "destruction of innocence and youthful joy in life by the dreary round in school, where fears and sorrows cause dismay" (Blake, 1970, 154). Of great significance is also the drawing that accompanies and complements the poem, in which a boy can be seen sitting on top of a tree reading a book, just like Mina is seen doing often in *Skellig*, while other children are gathering fruit that fell from the tree, which may allude to the 'ready-made' knowledge that children are offered and taught at school—the curriculum—from which teachers do not often stray. To this, Almond cleverly presents an antithesis when Mrs Clarts gives Michael an assignment to write a story, which is described as "no real homework" (Almond, 2007, 83). With this Almond simultaneously expresses two contrasting realities of school: first he implies that, even within the limits of state-organized education, it ultimately depends on the teachers to

include and encourage creative thinking, and second, that creative thought and indeterminate assignments fall within the category of non-homework, meaning that they may not belong or should not exist in school. Finally, by renaming the task, the teacher might actually encourage the children to free their imagination as the parameters of the assignment are not strictly set and so they do not have to conform to what they expect of schoolwork.

### **Darwin, Evolution, and Science vs. Faith**

Another significant intertextual reference in *Skellig* is to Darwin and his work on evolution. Although Darwin is not quoted within the novel, or used to the extent that Blake is, some of his most basic and well-known arguments in *On the Origin of Species* do surface through Mina's words and serve as evidence of both Skellig's existence and our own nature. This section will explore and demonstrate how Darwin's theory of evolution fits within the story's framework and what issues it brings to the surface. The first part will briefly describe Darwin's work, focusing on the fact that despite his extensive work on plants and animals over a span of several years, "man and his evolution do not figure in *The Origin*" (Anonymous, 1989, 139). The second part will look closely at issues of faith within *Skellig* and analyse the juxtaposition between science, in the form of doctors, medicine, and evolution, and faith in the unknown, in the form of spiritualism, dreams, and the unexplained. The novel's recurring themes of dreams and birds will be explored further and put into perspective by illuminating their direct link to this juxtaposition.

Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859 for the first time, and by 1872 the book had reached its sixth edition. This work of scientific literature was considered controversial, especially in regards to the Church and its doctrines. Nevertheless, it quickly acquired popularity which did not only derive from the scientific community. *The Origin*,



however, does not constitute the epitome of Darwin's work, nor the end of his theories on evolution and natural selection. "Considered from our vantage point 150 years after the *Origin's* publication in 1859, telescoped by time, it is often unappreciated that key elements of Darwin's thinking unfolded over a dozen or more years—with even his central mechanism of species diversification, his "principle of divergence," not coming to him until well into the 1850s" (Costa, 2009, 886).

James T. Costa writes that the

*Descent of Man* (1871) and *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) constitute Darwin's statements on human evolution and the fundamental relationship between humans and other animals—the touchiest of evolutionary topics, which he had long avoided in his public writings. Darwin realized the philosophical implications of his theory for humans from the beginning. (Costa, 2009, 892)

Mainly through Skellig, Almond creates a complex and multifaceted relationship between the human, the animal and the angelic. Yet, throughout the narratives, these elements are constantly being linked, compared, juxtaposed and intimately investigated by Michael and Mina who learn by inspecting and respecting nature and the animal kingdom around them by taking care of Skellig—whom they believe to be living proof of evolution, and maybe even a preview to humanity's future—and finally, by caring for each other.

Evolution in *Skellig* is introduced by Mina. After Michael has returned from the hospital he visits Mina and finds her looking at an encyclopedia studying dinosaurs and the archaeopteryx. She tells Michael that there is a theory suggesting that dinosaurs were not extinct, but

their descendants are with us still. [...] The little archaeopteryx survived, and began the line of evolution that led to birds. [...] ‘There’s no end to evolution,’ said Mina. [...] ‘We have to be able to move forward, [...] ‘Maybe this is not how we are meant to be forever.’ She took my hand. ‘We are extraordinary,’ she whispered. (Almond, 2007, 93-94)<sup>5</sup>

The theory of evolution, which Mina claims is simply fact, is mentioned a few times and is used not only to explain Skellig but also nature, animals, and, most importantly, humans. There is a certain contradiction found in Mina’s character in that she seems to equally and effortlessly embrace both the spiritual and the scientific, at the same time, thus embodying Blake’s theory of contraries. On the one hand, she is convinced that evolution is fact, and that people, just as animals, change, evolve and adapt through the centuries, in an effort to propagate but also in an attempt to live harmoniously and effectively at any given time. On the other hand, her absolute belief in Skellig’s existence could also be a result of her belief in Blake’s ideas, and focal premise, that the world does not only consist of the elements we can observe with our eyes. Therefore, for Mina, Skellig could just as easily be either proof of evolution—an evolved being or a descendant of an older species—or a guardian angel, one that lives on the edge of the boundaries between dreams and reality. The notion of the guardian angel will be explored in greater detail further in the chapter, and I return to the notion of guardianship in Chapter 3. It is possible that her fascination, which began before she met Michael and Skellig, holds a sense of premonition and was essential in preparing her for what lay ahead: being able to more effectively grasp Skellig’s existence, and so compare it to that of the birds, and diagnosing him with calcification and ossification. Finally, she believes

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<sup>5</sup>This species is still causing controversy regarding categorisation. “A controversy is brewing over the type specimen for *Archaeopteryx lithographica*, one of the most famous of all fossils. The animal first named in 1861 by the German palaeontologist Hermann Meyer, is widely accepted to be the “first bird” [...]. Discovered and named just two years after Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, Archaeopteryx has been touted for a century and a half as a transitional fossil: Although it has some reptilian features” (Dyke, 2010, 668).

that such a change in our nature and the way we look, that is an actual transformation, could one day happen to humans, just as she suggests that once we might have had wings. Michael, on the other hand is found to be in the very process of acquiring this ability to see both possibilities with the same lucidity and ease. Bullen and Parsons also assert this in their article on Almond's novel, stating that "Mina, however, never sees a contradiction in accessing modes of knowledge in order to interpret Skellig's extraordinary nature. She is confident that both Darwin's theory of evolution and the old wives' tale that shoulder blades are where humans had wings are 'proven fact' (50, 52)" (Bullen & Parsons, 2007, 141). This fact, however, also succeeds in placing both intertextual personas, Blake and Darwin, next to instead of opposite each other.

Mina recites a stanza by Blake and then asks Michael if he has ever heard of him, which Michael has not. Mina describes Blake as follows: "He painted pictures and wrote poems. Much of the time he wore no clothes. He saw angels in his garden" (Almond, 2007, 57). Although seemingly random, these few sentences confess many of the poet's attributes and also denote one of the novel's central themes. Blake believed that angels were present in his garden, something that Michael and Mina experience first-hand; however, this is also a notion that Mina's mother —although an adult— is open and receptive to: "Maybe we could all see such beings, if only we knew how to,' she said" (Almond, 2007, 122). The idea that extraordinary things occur daily, and that there are things in this world that cannot be easily explained or rationalised, is something that the children learn in the novel, and that William Blake accepted as fact. Mina's mother tells Michael that Blake said that we are "surrounded by angels and spirits. We must just open our eyes a little wider, look a little harder" (Almond, 2007, 122). This very concept of the eye like a window is, of course, a version of faith, although one that is clearly unrelated to religion, but strongly nuanced throughout nonetheless. It is faith in the otherworldly, the things that we cannot empirically explain, faith

in one another, faith in ourselves, and even faith that science, in conjunction with belief in our strength and perseverance, will heal us. Most of all, it is faith in the extraordinary aspect of all things and all individuals. This aspect of faith, however, also needs to be considered alongside the author's own atheistic beliefs. In an interview for Nicolette Jones he said:

When you stop being a Catholic you have no religion to fall back on, but you do have a sense of possible transcendence. And it seems to me that this is the transcendence. Heaven is here. The more I live, the more gorgeous and wonderful the world is, but it is also terrifying and constantly endangered.

(Jones, 2008)

This worldview seems to be reflected in Mina's words, who is in turn influenced by Blake's work. It is interesting to note that Almond's words "Heaven is here" are powerfully reminiscent—as will be discussed in detail in the following chapter—of Pullman's own philosophy to build the Republic of Heaven here on earth (*AS*, 2000, 522).

Contrary to Mina's certainty of the two harmoniously coexisting contraries, Michael's journey of knowledge throughout the book is intimately connected to his attempt to know and understand both sides to such a degree that he will then be able to assert what he believes in and what makes sense to him. Although he admires Mina and acknowledges the level of her education he does not blindly accept everything she says, but questions things first. One of magical realism's defining characteristics, as described by Wendy B. Faris, is the fact that the magical element will neither stun the reader, nor surprise the character that discovers it. On the contrary, the feeling induced might even be one of relief. In *Skellig*, Michael is slightly afraid when he discovers the creature, but it is made clear that the fear stems not from the man himself but Michael's concern that what he witnessed might not be real. However, despite his

trepidation, there is no surprise when he accidentally touches the bulges on Skellig's back, but a sense of wonder:

I put my hand beneath his shoulder to steady him. I felt something there, something held in by his jacket. [...] I reached across his back and felt something beneath his other shoulder as well. Like thin arms, folded up. Springy and flexible. [...] 'What's on your back?' I said. 'A jacket, then a bit of me, then lots and lots of Arthur.' (Almond, 2007, 29)

The following day, during a science class, Michael asks his teacher if our shape will keep changing. Although Michael unconsciously realises what the things on Skellig's back could have been, he does not deny it, nor does he try to ignore the possibility of a *supernatural* phenomenon. Instead, he attempts to explain it and make sense of it. In many ways Michael's method resembles Darwin's observation and analysis. He mentally takes note of all that concerns him and by acquiring and collecting the knowledge and opinions of the adults that surround him, his teachers, his mother, and Mina's mother. He assesses the situation and finally accepts that Skellig's wings are real. Later in the novel, when he has confirmed the existence of the atypical or irregular protuberance, he asks both his mother and his science teacher what shoulder blades are for. His teacher, perplexed, confesses that he does not know; his mother, however, tells him that our wings were there once. Michael not only accepts this as a rational explanation, but seems content and excited at the prospect of having discovered and experienced something so extraordinary. The fact that his mother's unlikely and non-empirical answer satisfies him, and he does not further question what these things on Skellig's back are, signify firstly that Michael is now ready to accept this man who is something like an angel and something like a bird. Secondly, and this is the most significant part, he is willing to also believe, at the same time, that he might be a 'product' of evolution, the fact that he can find no concrete evidence to support this notwithstanding. This, in conjunction with his

surprisingly immediate acceptance of Skellig, could indicate an emotional and spiritual openness, which might be a result of his vulnerable state.

As was stated in the previous section, throughout the novel, the references to dreams and birds are numerous and reveal several aspects of Michael's perception of Skellig, and his subconscious anxieties about the health and predicament of his baby sister. There are two, seemingly unimportant, elements that hint at the importance of birds within the novel, the first one being the fact that Michael's new home is on Falconer Road, and the second being Mina's name –written Myna– which is an Asian starling. Michael's dreams are primarily populated by birds and Skellig, emphasizing the strong link between the two, but also of baby Joy and Michael himself, who are often seen to have become birds themselves, suggesting a vulnerability of body—for Joy—and spirit—for Michael. One such dream is when Michael sees that his bed has been turned into a nest with “twigs and leaves and feathers” (Almond, 2007, 30). Another such dream which more evidently elucidates Michael's angst for his sister as well as his concerns and fears over the baby's well-being and the effectiveness of doctors and science, is when he dreams that he is in the blackbird's nest with the baby, which has wings and is covered in feathers but is too weak to fly away. Doctor Death and Dr. MacNabola are standing beneath them in the garden yelling “‘Bring her down!’ [...] ‘We'll make her good as new!’” (Almond, 2007, 78). The baby is desperately trying to fly away but is “teeter[ing] on the brink” unable to leave the nest. Michael is extremely worried about the baby, knowing that she is still fighting for her life, while the doctors project a feeling of insecurity (Almond, 2007, 78). Michael's view of ‘Doctor Death’ in reality —based on his frail and displeasing physical appearance—suggests feelings of mistrust for the profession in general, and an uncertainty regarding their effectiveness and helpfulness. Relating back to the question of faith and science, the reader may also consider this dream to reveal a lack of trust in science and, consequently, the fear of loss of Michael's sister in the hands of the very

doctors whose responsibility it is to make her better and offer her another, and a healthier, chance at life. Bullen and Parsons state that “Michael’s distrust of Dr. Death is intuitive rather than rational, but the images of the doctor’s grey pallor, his age-spotted hands, and the fact that he smokes all contradict his status as a healer. He is patently unhealthy; indeed, he is engaged in risky behavior that contradicts, and therefore undermines, the knowledge he personifies” (Bullen & Parsons, 2007, 131). This uncertainty, however, is another indication of faith, or more specifically, the difficulty and challenge of keeping the faith in something or someone when what you *see* does not inspire positivity or hope. Unable to express the faltering of his faith in regards to the medical professionals who have science on their side, Michael’s frustration is released and harnessed by his subconscious. Furthermore, the dream of Michael in the nest and his fears about flying away are about his own transformation from innocence to experience, and consequently responsibility.

The struggle to understand, however, does not end there for Michael. When he contemplates the fate of both his baby sister and Skellig, the scale between the scientific and the spiritual—the humane and the unknown—shifts continuously without settling on one or the other, possibly suggesting, as Blake often did, that both contraries are necessary. Skellig’s health and gradual healing simultaneously depends on Dr. MacNabola’s suggestion of cod liver oil capsules, which help him overcome the personified Arthritis; aspirin, which helps alleviate his pain; the owls who bring him food and put it in his mouth, which further accentuates Skellig’s half-bird and half-human existence; and the children’s care in the form of food, ale, and spiritual and emotional support. Michael’s sister, Joy, is at first completely dependent on the tubes and wires that the doctors have plugged in her at the hospital, but at the end, Skellig’s visit at the hospital to see her appears to be of great significance, despite the fact that the reader cannot know with certainty if he has actually contributed to her recovery. This very uncertainty is a recurring motif within the novel and it presents and possibly even

encourages the faith in the unknown and the open-mindedness to accept such perplexities and ambiguities as possible; for to have faith necessitates and presupposes the earnest acceptance of the unknown and the unexpected.

The parallels between Skellig and the baby are neither coincidental nor trivial. Despite Michael's involvement in this comparison —when he offers Skellig the care he cannot give his sister— the two characters' connection is obvious. Skellig's erratic behavior in the beginning of the novel, paired with his utterly fragile state, urges the reader to compare him to an infant that is unable to take care of itself and is unaware of its predicament. Not knowing what is right for it and unable to properly communicate, the care given must be enforced, and the caregiver must assume full responsibility. Similarly, Skellig does not ask for help, and even when he receives it, his first reaction is always a request to be left alone; Michael, and later Mina, as true caregivers ignore his pleas and continue to do what they believe is best for him. During one such instance, Michael cries and seems to be enraged at Skellig's refusal to accept their help. "There were tears in my eyes. 'He just sits there,' I said. 'He doesn't care. It's like he's waiting to die. I don't know what to do'" (Almond, 2007, 72). This becomes for Michael a significant turning point in which his compassion, love, care and persistence in what he believes is important are accentuated. Although he could have, at that point, given up on him, he chooses instead to see his commitment to the end, and not turn away from the responsibility he has assumed. This is another indication of how the characters' roles and reactions are contradictory to their nature. The children, who are supposed to be more fragile, show incredible resilience and courage in carrying Skellig in their arms, while Skellig has forgotten his angelic —or simply adult— nature and is seen as too sick, weak and powerless to save himself or others. The idea of children undertaking impossible tasks or missions in order to save the world from an evil force is extremely popular; however, what the reader witnesses in Almond's narrative is a feat far more powerful and profound. For the children



have ultimately learned and exercised compassion, not only towards an angel, but a man. Even if one excludes the book's supernatural elements, what remains is a story of kindness and sympathy towards another person. Furthermore, it is defined by reverberations of sensitivity and friendship and the measure at which these very elements can elevate a human being.

Birds in the novel, whether seen in dreams, in reality, or through Blake's poetry, may also symbolize a sense of entrapment. This entrapment in Michael's case is both physical and emotional: "Michael's sorrow and foreboding at his sister's illness is mingled with resentment at the attention she is absorbing and the disruption to his own priorities –investigating the presence of the mysterious Skellig and, later, curing his ills" (Reynolds, Brennan, McCarron, 2001, 98). This feeling of being trapped is also accompanied by emotions of despair and helplessness, and so Michael feels angry about not being able to help his little sister except for holding her heartbeat next to his, and listening to it so it—or she—does not fade away. Michael's baby sister is sometimes playfully called a 'chick' by his father, and indeed the baby is often portrayed as a baby bird that is 'trapped' in the nest and attempts to fly away. However, her illness has rendered her unable to acquire the strength that she needs in order to flee the nest. In this case, however, the ones providing the help are not necessarily the parents, but the doctors, the machines helping her breathe, and ultimately Skellig—who is part bird himself. Birds in *Skellig* represent the fragility<sup>6</sup> that characterises every human being, whether it is emotional and/or physical; furthermore, it is emphasised that this vulnerability or frailty defies the boundaries of age and may be found as easily in children as in adults.

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<sup>6</sup> Fragility here refers to the birds' inherent physical weakness.

## Transformation

In order to more fully understand what drives Michael and illuminate the circumstances and situations that cause him to question both the scientific and the mystic, but also what enables him to almost blindly believe in Skellig and Michael's own effort to 'fix' him, his process of transformation must also be considered. It is important to note that this metamorphosis or change does not include or presuppose a change in personality and of who he is. Michael is, at first, emotionally distant and almost vacant, and his tone signifies that: "Then the baby came too early. And here we were" (Almond, 2007, 2), and "Then I went back into the wilderness we called our garden and she went back to the flaming baby" (Almond, 2007, 4). Michael's comments almost sound ironic, and even bitter. It is clear that he does *not* want to be there in that old-new house with a jungle for a garden and a toilet in the living room: "The garden was another place that was supposed to be wonderful" (Almond, 2007, 5). He dreams of being back in his old neighborhood with his friends, having nothing to worry about; he wishes that everything could go back to normal.

Kimberly Reynolds underlines the correlations that exist between the magical realist mode and the subject of identity and transformation:

At a primary level, magic(al) realism, with its emphasis on transformation, corresponds closely to the conditions of childhood and adolescence, which are intrinsically about change, metamorphosis, and growth of body and mind. Magic(al) realism's requirement that readers accept the improbable—even what is held to be impossible—also mirrors the constant mental adjustments the young make as they undergo new experiences and encounter new ideas. (Reynolds, 2007, 20)

This very process of change, of both body and mind, that Reynolds describes is especially important in all five books discussed in this thesis, as will be seen further in the analysis; but in *Skellig* the use of magical realism facilitates this “acceptance of the improbable”, rendering it almost natural when considered as an extension of reality, rather than an impossibility made magically possible. When one afternoon Michael goes over to Mina’s garden, he finds her drawing and reading. He tells her that the previous night, just after dawn he was awake and he was making the hooting noise. He asks her if she was also awake and whether she was also making the sound as well. She replies that she cannot be certain.

‘Can’t?’ ‘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.’ She stared at me. ‘I dreamed about you last night,’ she said.’ ‘Did you?’ ‘Yes, but it’s not important.’ (Almond, 2007, 59-60)

Although she could be reaffirming what Bullen and Parsons believe to be an indication of Skellig’s ambiguous existence, she is also contemplating the fragility of what we perceive as reality. Therefore, the reality of Skellig is just as ordinary and possible as the muddling of truth and dreams, reality and fantasy; for in the end, the truth is in the eye of the beholder. Furthermore, it is also a question of faith, but not in a guardian angel that has descended from the heavens or has been sent by God; but faith in the existence of a creature that might defy what we perceive to be real or ordinary.

In the first instance where Michael speaks about the baby there is evidence of compassion and love, but these feelings seem somewhat vacant and void of true understanding. He thinks of, but does not realise, what the baby’s illness and fragility could mean and lead to, in that he does not allow himself to think what the possible consequences are and what they could mean for his family. He hears her rasping and sees his mother worry

but on the surface he does not seem to be aware of the possible outcome. This, of course, could be a certain defense mechanism which obstructs the entire view of this situation and also allows for hope and a possibility of a ‘happy ending’. Natov claims that

at the heart of this story is Michael’s hurt and resentment, the complexity of feeling that accompanies the birth of the new baby, as well as her lingering illness. Because his parents are utterly preoccupied, understandably, with the life of their new child, nothing he was promised with the move to the new house has materialized. (Natov, 2006, 235)

One other element that is somewhat surprising is the fact that he is *not* afraid to admit to himself that things have changed, and there is a chance they might not improve: “It was strange being at school again. Loads had happened to me, but school stayed just the same. [...] I couldn’t be bothered with it all” (Almond, 2007, 12-13). He does not choose to live in denial, but simply tries to make sense of the things he is experiencing and allows himself time to work out the rest through self-reflection, the discovery of Skellig’s secret and his encounters with Mina, which, to his surprise, keep getting more and more interesting and entertaining.

Michael’s perspective and general outlook begins to change dramatically when he meets Mina, and although the transformation is gradual, in that he does not change over the course of their first meeting, it is nonetheless fast. The issue of innocence and experience is inescapably linked to that of identity formation, this being a very common motif in books written for children and young adults. This transition and progress in the child’s character and psychology can be achieved by different means; however, it is usually of great significance that the child undergoes a series of ordeals and tribulations on its own, without the help of adults —be they parents, relatives, or teachers. Although some assistance or encouragement

may be offered along the way, this is usually in the form of an old, trusted friend, or a new acquaintance that becomes a great companion in this long journey. For this reason, the element of secrecy is essential: “Secrecy is often the child’s method of declaring and developing his or her individuality and independence” (Egoff et al., 1996, 39). The secrecy that is employed could be described as a defence mechanism against adults. It is usually selected by the protagonist because it allows them to move freely and make their own decisions towards the resolution of the problem or issue at hand. However, it is also employed as a result of the fear or uncertainty that the character may feel when considering the adult’s reaction upon the discovery of the situation. In Michael’s case, he deliberately hides Skellig’s existence from his parents and even from Leaky and Coot, because he is afraid that they might not believe him, especially considering the fact that at times he is dubious himself. He often questions Skellig’s reality and wonders if this could all be a dream, or a hallucination. Furthermore, his troubled dreams are a contributing factor to his hesitation, as well as the ambiguity of the entire situation. Mina does not always help in the clarification of this, for on the one hand she urges him to see beyond what is widely acceptable as real, and on the other hand, she states that “truth and dreams are always getting muddled,” alluding to the fact that this may indeed be a dream, yet, even if it was, neither of them could be certain. This element of secrecy is often facilitated by Mina and it soon becomes evident that it also contributes to the way in which she helps Michael overcome his emotional struggle with his baby sister. She supports him and is there for him in a way that his parents are unable to at that moment in time, being themselves burdened by with both the house and the baby:

‘You’re unhappy,’ she said. I stood there looking up at her. ‘The baby’s back in hospital,’ I said. She sighed. She gazed at a bird that was wheeling high above.

‘It looks like she’s going to bloody die,’ I said. She sighed again. ‘Would you

like me to take you somewhere?’ she said. ‘Somewhere?’ ‘Somewhere secret. Somewhere nobody knows about’. (Almond, 2007, 38)

Her secret ‘somewhere’ is enough to distract Michael, even for a limited time, and it offers him a welcome escape from the reality he faces at home.

Bullen and Parsons argue that Almond’s novel describes how “children can become resilient in the face of risk” (Bullen & Parsons, 2007, 127). It could also be argued that the child protagonists in *Skellig* also succeed in overcoming basic human fears, and making sense of everyday realities through their imagination and suspension of disbelief. The dominant feelings that Michael expresses throughout the novel, but especially at the beginning, are anger, fear, desperation, and concern. His anger is manifested in different ways but is never aggressive. It resembles more an internal struggle to accept his predicament and not crumble in the face of the loss of his sister. “I wondered if she was going to die. [...] They’d told me I had to keep praying for her but I didn’t know what to pray. ‘Hurry up and get strong if you’re going to,’ I whispered” (Almond, 2007, 10). His desperation is a product of his reluctance to share his concern with his parents or his friends, Leaky and Coot. It is important to note how this changes when he begins to talk to Mina and expresses himself to her. It is however, remarkable that through all this Michael does not express feelings of jealousy or neglect. Throughout the novel he does not complain about this awful situation to anyone, not even Mina. Even when his mother complains about the new house and blames it for the baby’s health –despite the fact that the baby has a weak heart– he still offers to help. The discovery of Skellig in the garage and his acquaintance with Mina is almost simultaneous and far from coincidental. His first meeting with the peculiar creature is very brief, and when he thinks about him for the first time he tries to convince himself that he is not real. However, from the second meeting he accepts that a weird man is living or dying in his garage and so he begins – instinctively at first– to care for him. While his sister is sick at the hospital, being taken care

of by doctors, Michael tries to help Skellig in return. Although he now has to worry about two people in his life, Michael seems to be treating the two as one and the same. He believes that if he and Mina can somehow save Skellig, the baby is also going to be saved.

Skellig, like Michael, goes through a considerable transformation, and what is most noteworthy about his change is that it is achieved *solely* with the help of Mina and Michael and not with the help of magic. There is a certain inversion in Skellig's case, because although the two children's transformation is partly due to Skellig's supernatural aspect, Skellig's is entirely due to the humanity and kindness of the two children. Although the reader is not told how Skellig came to be so broken and fragile in this dilapidated garage, or what his life was like before, the author offers an explanation as to why he didn't receive any help before. Michael asks Skellig how he knew what 27 and 53 on the Chinese food menu was, and he replies that it was Ernie's favourite food. Michael, who wonders whether Skellig is real, asks him: " 'Did he see you? Did he know you were there?' 'Never could tell. Used to look at me, but look right through me like I wasn't there. [...] Maybe thought I was a figment'" (Almond, 2007, 51-52). This elucidation brings three matters to the surface. The certainty of Skellig's existence is a question that is never truly and definitively answered; he is either a figment of the children's imagination or a creature that appears only to them but in a certain dream state where the boundaries of reality are blurred. Even though Skellig's description of Ernie is a piece of information of an event that preceded Michael —therefore an event the boy could know nothing about— the fact that Ernie either did not actually *see* Skellig, believing him to be an illusion or a fabrication, returns the reader to their original confusion and ultimate question: is Skellig real? This becomes even more significant if the reader sees Skellig as a reflection of Ernie.

One of the most moving scenes in the novel, and where the notion of dreaming together and accepting the very uncertainty of it is illuminated, is when the children decide to

move Skellig from the dilapidated garage to Mina's grandfather's old house. The author weaves an almost surrealistic scene beginning with a dream that Michael has about the baby, before being woken up, at the crack of dawn by Mina's owl hooting sounds. "“But you're awake now?” she said. ‘Yes.’ ‘We're not dreaming this?’ ‘We're not dreaming it.’ ‘We're not dreaming it together?’ ‘Even if we were we wouldn't know’” (Almond, 2007, 79). After they have carefully carried him and laid him on the floor of Mina's grandfather's abandoned house, the creature whimpers “My name is Skellig” (Almond, 2007, 82). Although Michael's and Mina's transformation begins when they meet each other and eventually when they meet Skellig, the creature's transformation commences at that very moment. It seems as though his state of prolonged loneliness in the garage had not only made him bitter, angry and miserable, but, most importantly, it had made him forget his own nature, he had neglected himself and had settled into a state of hibernation.

However, at this point, the second matter arises. Could this be another attempt to project the above-mentioned principle that in order to fully comprehend the world we live in, we must sometimes suspend our disbelief, see beyond what we are taught, and use our imagination, instead of our reason? In other words, is it possible that the two children are the only ones who see Skellig, not because he does not exist, but because they have succeeded in bypassing, in a way, the logic—or logical interpretation—of this situation, thus witnessing what lies behind it? If this is the case what does that imply about Michael's mother who does see him but is reluctant to accept he was actually there? Finally, is the reader to assume that Mina's mother would have not only seen him with ease but immediately accepted him? In the end, these are all speculations, in that the author has knowingly ‘neglected’ to express, through Michael's words, the solidity of Skellig's existence, both in the eyes of the children and the adults in story. However, this very decision embodies the ultimate ‘lesson’ that the book teaches, if we assume there is one. Had Skellig been named an angel, a bird or a human,



this entire process for Michael and the reader would have amounted to nothing, for in the end, we choose what to believe and, most importantly, why we believe it.

Skellig has become an extraordinary and integral part of their life, and he is something that they now share; however, because of the oddity of this entire experience, any memory, thought or mental image becomes a dream, or simply something resembling a dream, such as a surreal experience. Skellig appears in a dream for Michael, which could be described as somewhat prophetic. The creature is seen entering the hospital ward, and lifting the baby from her glass case: “She reached up and touched his pale, dry skin with her little fingers and she giggled. He took her away, flew with her in his arms through the darkest part of the sky” (Almond, 2007, 104). This scene is reminiscent of the dream Michael’s mother believes she had while at the hospital the night before the baby’s operation. It seems that Michael is now convinced that Skellig is protecting the baby in some way, and this certainty is transferred onto his dreams, and then confirmed when he goes to visit his baby sister following the operation. His faith in the unknown becomes even stronger and takes on another meaning of significance when considering the fact that if Skellig is seen and accepted as an angel, he may also be an angel of death who has come to take the baby away instead of acting as her protector or guardian angel. Although there is no strong indication in the novel to suggest such a connotation, Michael’s limited knowledge of anything pertaining to Skellig does presuppose and require a tremendous amount of faith in him, which is evident from the very beginning when he asks the creature to think about his sister at the hospital. It could be argued that the dreaming is a way to confuse Michael and to make him even more sceptical of Skellig’s existence, and of his own sanity. However, there are just as many other indications and events in the novel that prove that Skellig is not a product of the children’s imagination, and that Michael’s dreams are simply a manifestation of his anxiety, or a way for him to process all his experiences and attain a better awareness of what is happening around him.

Natov claims that “his dreams also reveal his growing awareness of the spiritual connection between the baby, the natural world, and Skellig, [...] Almond shows us to be deeply connected, our images and dreams accessible to each other” (Natov, 2006, 237).

Skellig’s final transformation comes in two parts; there are two events that signal this and ultimately define him as an angelic creature, both in form and in character. After he has regained most of his strength and has been moved to the house by the children and fed by the owls, Skellig briefly disappears. His visit at the hospital in order to help, and possibly even save, the baby is the first part of his final metamorphosis. In doing this he does not only repay Michael for everything that he has given him, but, most importantly, he finally assumes his role as the guardian angel. Furthermore, the reader witnesses what Skellig is capable of, what the children have been believing in, and who he really is. Finally, this scene depicts another interaction between the magical creature and an adult where the reader is left to believe that he was really there, but Michael’s mother, unable to accept this bizarre sight, convinces herself that she was dreaming. The second part of Skellig’s transformation takes place the last time he meets with the children following the event at the hospital. They arrive at the house and moments later he comes in through the window, wings outstretched, and looking healthier and stronger, but still pale. He calls the children angels for having helped all this time. “ ‘You went to my sister,’ I said. He laughed. ‘Hm! Pretty little thing.’ ‘You made her strong.’ ‘That one’s glittering with life. Heart like fire. It was her that gave the strength to me’” (Almond, 2007, 157). His departure, as well as his recovery, signal the end to Michael’s and Mina’s adventure, the healing and revival of both Skellig and the baby, but most of all, the beginning of the rest of their lives: “In the process of developing an adult identity, each protagonist becomes acutely aware of the fact that identity is fluid and contingent rather than fixed, and each achieves this awareness through a series of personal metamorphoses not all of which are directly associated with magic” (Latham, 2006, 65). Latham’s words are particularly relevant

in Almond and McNish's work, as both authors advocate that this more adult awareness is mainly a product of consistent yet evolving interpersonal relations with peers, friends and family. The magical element, although prevalent in both narratives, does not supersede, nor does it devalue the fact that every non-magical interaction and experience makes part of this fluid process.

Carl Jung writes that "if angels are anything at all they are personified transmitters of unconscious contents that are seeking expression" (Jung, 1953-79, 82). The notion of the guardian angel in Skellig is strongly implied, but the creature itself—which resembles a human, a bird, and an angel at the same time—is never clearly or blatantly defined as a guardian angel, and the reasons for this were elucidated earlier in the chapter. Despite this, the concept itself remains significant because it encompasses the narrative and stands for more than a character who simply personifies some, or even all, of a guardian angel's attributes; it stands for an idea, and most importantly, an ideal, and the very doubt of Skellig's existence seems to be reinforcing this ideal. As Jung suggests, angels are personified transmitters of unconscious contents, but, in this case, the content seeking expression may even be conscious and deliberate. When glanced at briefly, the book tells of an angel that was sick and fragile but eventually becomes strong and assumes his role at the end. However, in spite of the fact that the figure of the guardian angel belongs to Skellig, the role is not exclusive to him, and neither are the actions that define such a creature. This, of course, neither negates Skellig's status, nor does it belittle his role and significance in the story. Nevertheless, this role is primarily assumed by the two children who willingly and knowingly embrace the responsibility of caring for Skellig and succeed in offering him both physical and psychological support. In turn, as Stewart asserts, "Skellig's presence, [through his dream-like quality and epistemological uncertainty] represents endless possibilities in the way Mina and Michael

look at evolution, God, and the world. They hold what are so often conflicting views together, which for some would be both challenging and dangerous” (Stewart, 2009, 315).

While Michael’s transformation is based on character development through the means of an emergent and growing sense of identity and progress, Mina’s identity and defining characteristics have not been transformed, but simply reaffirmed and fortified. Reynolds states the following:

[Magic(al) realist texts] work on the willingness to believe that there is more to the world than we can comprehend with our sense and intellects, and so subvert and override epistemological certainties. Like the Romantics, magic(al) realist writers see the capacity for intellectual openness as being accessed by the imagination. (Reynolds, 2007, 20)

What Reynolds suggests is exactly what Mina is trying to make Michael understand when she tells him of William Blake (a Romantic writer), of how we were once apes, or the *fact* that our shoulder blades once carried our wings. While Michael’s baby sister is being operated on, he is sitting with Mina out in the garden waiting for his father to return home from the hospital. While he is desperately trying to make sense of everything happening in his life he asks Mina what Skellig is. Mina’s reply is definitive:

‘We can’t know. Sometimes we just have to accept there are things we can’t know. Why is your sister ill? Why did my father die?’ She held my hand. ‘Sometimes we think we should be able to know everything. But we can’t. We have to allow ourselves to see what there is to see, and we have to imagine’.

(Almond, 2007, 131)

This ability to transcend the epistemological or scientific is ultimately achieved by Michael, first when he sees the faint glow of the baby’s wings on her back, and eventually when he

witnesses the wings on his own back and on Mina's. At that moment, his transformation can be said to be complete; he does not question the implausibility of what he is seeing, but rather accepts it and marvels at his own evolution and transcendent reality.

## **Conclusion**

The entire book can be described as a process, one that has a beginning and an end, both of which are clearly outlined and beautifully symbolized. Throughout this process, it is not only the characters that experience transition and change, but the entire world around them. The change of season is used in the representation and reflection of this process, but, most importantly, it is used to engender the transformation in Michael. Michael begins recounting his tale by describing how he and his family moved into Falconer Road when winter was ending; this was also the day he saw Skellig for the first time. A change of season is always a turning point and is often symbolic of fluctuating circumstances that need to be resolved; as the change occurs in nature, it is often suggested that it greatly affects people both consciously and unconsciously, physically and psychologically. Almond offers an abundance of references to nature, which are not always immediate or clear, and are often accompanied by the verses of William Blake. Michael's very first words in the novel are very revealing, and even prophetic. "I found him in the garage on a Sunday afternoon. It was the day after we moved into Falconer Road. The winter was ending. Mum said we'd be moving just in time for the spring" (Almond, 2007, 1). Therefore, the story takes place during a transitional period, winter's last breaths. Michael's house is also in the process of changing and getting ready for spring, a new and better life; and by the end of the novel, after Michael's father has worked hard to improve their quality of life within the house, the wilderness has begun its transformation towards becoming a garden, and the house is changing into a home. The baby

is sick but finally escapes danger when spring arrives, and Dr. Death goes away when the baby does not need him to keep her alive any longer. The beginning of the last chapter in the book resembles the first one in many ways. The reader experiences another Sunday afternoon, but one that is warm and bright, and instead of Doctor Death coming over the house to take the baby away to hospital, Michael's parents arrive from the hospital, bringing the baby with them: "It was really spring at last" (Almond, 2007, 167). Michael's transformation is complete and his mood, as well as his outlook on the world, is now very different from what it was at the beginning of the story.

In the Introduction, I described and explored the history and stereotypical representations of the angel figure. It became apparent that until the beginning of the twentieth century, this icon was almost exclusively a religious one. In fact, its relationship to the divine was intimate as angels were seen as the intermediaries between God and humans. In *Skellig*, the angelic creature's proximity to God—physical or otherwise—is practically non-existent as there is a lack of religious references and explicit distancing from the Church, God, or the hereafter, the only mention being Mina's father who passed away. If, as Steven Thomson argues, "the claim to ideological neutrality is itself profoundly ideological", it could also be argued that an atheistic stance is just as, if not more, ideological as a religious one (Lesnik-Oberstein ed., 2004, 146). Although the issue of religion is never brought forth by any character in the book, and although Skellig is never explicitly identified as an angel, neither by himself nor anyone else, as previously mentioned, the idea of the guardian angel is implicitly presented. Despite this, the story is not devoid of a sense of the spiritual or a mention of faith as a concept. Natov states that "Skellig in many ways embodies Blake's vision of spirituality. He is the soul of humanity, the link between the earthly and the heavenly, and between life and death" (Natov, 2006, 236). Blake assumes a great role in the narrative and provides an intertextual framework within which Skellig is elucidated both as a

character and an idea. The artist's ideas of the Contraries and the world we must work to see beyond, in conjunction with Darwin's theory of evolution of all species, including the human, enrich and further support the story's transcendence. Natov describes Skellig as a link between the earthly and the heavenly, but the latter need not necessarily be linked to the religion of the Western world or the institution of the Church. The meanings that derive from *Skellig* may range from the religious to the secular, and each side can offer arguments supporting one or the other accordingly. Furthermore, the fact that the author has carefully 'avoided' making any explicit comments favouring either side—contrary to Pullman and McNish who wished to clearly define where they stand—alludes to the choice of allowing readers to decide for themselves and *see* Skellig in whichever way they wish. Regardless, however, of the absence of any religious didacticism on the part of the author, the element of faith—in one another, and in the otherworldly—remains one of the most prevalent issues in the story. Although Michael struggles with the idea that he had “to keep praying for [his sister], but [he] didn't know what to pray” (Almond, 2007, 10), he finds it comforting and reassuring to keep her heartbeat next to his in his mind. For Mina, as well, the notion that her father is in heaven is much more difficult to take in and accept than the knowledge that a creature like Skellig exists. The children in the novel thus provide a framework, urging children readers to look around them and ask the same questions, hoping that, in the process, they will discover as much about the world, as they will about themselves.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PHILIP PULLMAN'S *HIS DARK MATERIALS*

#### Introduction

Philip Pullman is a writer who has been greatly criticised for his trilogy *His Dark Materials*, which is comprised of three novels, *Northern Lights*, published in the US as *The Golden Compass* (GC), *The Subtle Knife* (SK), and *The Amber Spyglass* (AS). He has published 22 other books written for children, but for this trilogy he received as much controversy as he did praise. This trilogy is multifarious and intricate in many respects, and its greatest influence is John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Pullman has always been clear as to what his intentions were while writing *His Dark Materials* and what he wanted to project; he has characterised the trilogy as a retelling of the story of Genesis, or a different version of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. He has stated in many interviews that storytelling has always been extremely important to him, even as a child.<sup>7</sup> His early influences were numerous, his most important being his grandfather who was an Anglican clergyman and who regularly told him Biblical stories. Another formative figure in the author's life was his high-school teacher who encouraged and urged her students to read aloud in order to grasp a work's meaning more firmly. Pullman writes the following in an introduction to a recent publication of *Paradise Lost*, the work that influenced him the most both as a child, and later as an author and storyteller: "So I begin with sound. I read *Paradise Lost* not only with my eyes, but with my mouth" (Milton, 2005, 1). And so begins a fascination not only with John Milton and the story of Heaven and Hell, but with every piece of writing that provoked physical responses in Pullman, stories that made "[his] heart beat faster, the hair on [his] head stir, [his] skin bristle" (Pullman, 2005, 4).

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<sup>7</sup> (Mustich, 2007); (Lambert, 2010); (FitzHerbert, 2007).



Pullman wished for this story to resonate as a classic tale of the good and the bad and the powers that shift this delicate scale: “Pullman describes his intent in writing the trilogy as ‘*Paradise Lost* for teenagers in three volumes’ —a comment initially made half in jest, but then converted to reality” (Squires, 2004, 18-19). The amount of controversy that Philip Pullman has been involved in since the publication of the trilogy has been almost entirely the result of his choice to show the death of the God-figure in the narrative.<sup>8</sup> However, this act, even though completely deliberate, is not as simple or straightforward as some would like to assume. Religion in Pullman’s work is one of the central issues; yet, its delivery is as complex and thorny as the issue itself. Although the author is a self-proclaimed atheist,<sup>9</sup> his narrative is not purposefully devoid of a higher being, because his intent is not to prove that such a being does not exist. Instead, what he provides is an angel who has assumed the role of creator under false pretences, and is not only indifferent and apathetic to the fate of humanity but lives only for himself and for the pleasure of being in control. Stephen Colbert writes that “Milton’s Satan believes God is keeping humankind in ignorance because it serves God’s ego. It almost seems as if God is the selfish one. That perspective is similar to Pullman’s” (Colbert, 2006, 12). This is indeed Pullman’s mentality when describing the Authority in *His Dark Materials*:

‘The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty, those were all names he gave himself. He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves, the first angel, true, the most powerful,

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<sup>8</sup> Some of the theorists, reviewers, commentators, and believers that have negatively criticized Pullman’s trilogy are Peter Hitchens (2002), Blogger Joe Levi (2007), Frank Furedi, Tom Gilson, the Head of the Catholic League Bill O’Donohue (2007), Russ Wise and Steve Cable (2007).

<sup>9</sup> In an interview, Susan Mansfield discusses Pullman’s absence of faith, as well as the elements that shaped his current beliefs from childhood to adulthood, and finally, how they in turn influenced his writing. “When Kingsley Amis was asked, ‘Are you an atheist?’ he said, ‘Yes, but it’s more that I hate him.’ There’s plenty to hate there, plenty to be angry with. The God who is depicted in the Old Testament is a peculiarly unpleasant psychopath. The Church, in whichever of its varieties, has done all manner of extraordinarily wicked things” (Mansfield, 2010).

but he was formed of Dust as we are [...]. The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he banished her.’ (Pullman, *AS*, 31-32)

Therefore, it becomes evident that the God-figure portrayed by Pullman is not one worthy of worship, faith or love, and his attributes do not in any way resemble the kindness, forgiveness, or love that the Christian God is said to possess and inspire. In *HDM* the angelic presence and significance is employed very differently than in the other two narratives. Although the angels themselves do not have a leading role throughout the trilogy, what they stand for in terms of meaning and ideological representation makes them an indispensable part of the narrative. This chapter will consider the significance of angelic figures in *HDM* in two ways: it will look at the figures of the Authority and Metatron, as a meditation on power and ‘Authority’ within the texts, such as the replacement of the God figure with equally authoritarian figures, and the role of the other angels as guardians or guides for Lyra, and their role in her transformation.

The entire concept of the Authority’s existence, as well as the angels’ inclusion, at first, within a religious framework and the way in which they are gradually and almost violently taken out of it makes the angelic figures central to my arguments about the Fall, innocence and experience, and transformation. The Authority’s existence and true nature primarily create a flawed and problematic religious framework within the narrative, and beg the question of whether another God-figure will take its place when he is killed and, most importantly, if it is necessary that it does. If the Authority is not God, and the Church has been built under false pretences, the entire basis of religion collapses and becomes obsolete. Pullman, not wishing to leave the question open, as McNish does—claiming that there *might* be a God—introduces Dust as a scientific substitute, thereby annihilating any monotheistic

concepts. As a result, the Fall's meaning and significance is inverted and transformed into a beneficial and necessary act of freedom for humanity.

The notion and 'struggle' between the contraries, innocence and experience, is also challenged and the merits of each placed under scrutiny when viewed through a secular lens, mainly as a result of the sometimes fine line that separates good and evil, and the complicated and unclear definition of innocence and of experience. A clear example of this is the fact that the child protagonist Lyra is represented as innocent and somewhat ignorant in the beginning of the trilogy, but upon closer inspection she can be described as significantly more intelligent and perceptive than other children her age. It cannot be denied that Pullman's atheistic beliefs envelop his rendering of the story of Genesis. This is evident not only in the portrayal of the fraudulent God-figure and his Regent Metatron, who was once a man, and a descendant of Adam, but, most of all, in his detailed description of the corrupt Magisterium, created by men seeking control over others. Thus, it seems that the author's disdain is aimed mostly towards the atrocities and wrong-doings of organised religion in the past few centuries; acts of violence and hatred that were implemented and executed in the name of God and the Church.<sup>10</sup> However, the assumption that Pullman is "of the Devil's party" (de Bertodano, 2002) as Blake stated Milton was, could not be further from the truth; for, not being on God's side does not presuppose an alliance with the Devil. Ultimately, the virtues and morals the novel endorses are love, compassion, bravery, and the strength of character to fight for what is righteous and just, against all odds.

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<sup>10</sup> In an interview, Pullman declares that his antipathy to the Church comes "from history. It comes from the record of the Inquisition, persecuting heretics and torturing Jews and all that sort of stuff; and it comes from the other side, too, from the Protestants burning the Catholics. It comes from the insensate pursuit of innocent and crazy old women, and from the Puritans in America burning and hanging the witches – and it comes not only from the Christian church but also from the Taliban. Every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him. Wherever you look in history, you find that. It's still going on" (*Heat and Dust: Pullman Interview*, 2006).

Susan Louise Stewart writes an article in which she argues that David Almond's *Skellig* "may serve as a series of metaphors for attitudes regarding the role of Christian views of creation and evolution in contemporary culture" (Stewart, 2009, 306). She believes that the dilapidated garage in which Skellig resides is a metaphor for the state in which the Church can be found today and argues that

the secular turn [...] is not a simple matter of replacing one set of beliefs with another, as in replacing Christian belief with science or evolution (p. 8). Rather, it is much more complex than that, and there is no single identifiable event that can be held up as *the* moment when it became possible to accept that a belief in God is simply "one human possibility among others" (p. 3). Regardless of the reasons, however, as Taylor observes, most of the Western world is in the midst of what he calls "a secular age" (p. 1). (Stewart, 2009, 312, citing Taylor)

All three authors analysed in this thesis are clearly in this very process of exploring other options and questioning Christian belief. Their decision to incorporate these secular beliefs into their narratives is just as interesting as their decision to use angelic figures in their attempt to do so. For Almond, Pullman and McNish, the 'secular age' that both Taylor and Stewart speak of does not presuppose the end of religion, or the morality that is associated with it. It is not defined by a lack of principles, morals and social codes, nor does it condemn those who choose to believe in God, whether they belong to the Christian faith or any other. Instead, for these authors, it is the freedom to discuss, question and engage with issues pertaining to faith or the lack of it, while offering other alternatives or simply imagining a world, a society, or even a universe that does not know of any God, and has never needed or asked for one. In a secular age it is imagination that brought about the God figure, and in the

case of these three authors it is imagination that allows and enables them to write secular stories filled with religious figures.

The Authority is only one of the five angels that Pullman describes in his trilogy. The other angels portrayed are of various ranks, of both sexes, and of different origins. Each one, including the Authority, is different in demeanour and character. The angels in the trilogy represent a society of their own, resembling, in fact, a human society in some respects, including both benevolent and malicious intent, honest and mischievous temperaments. Pullman decides to ignore some of the most prevalent angelic stereotypes pertaining to asexuality, but keeps others, such as their immaterial and ethereal existence. Furthermore, he seems to suggest that no matter what the nature of a being—whether it is a human, an angel, a witch, or a bear—solely by possessing the gift of free will and a conscious state of being, the choices are endless; and in the end, it will be these very choices that define them, not their origins.

Anne-Marie Bird compares Pullman's angels to Milton's and argues that

Milton, representing both the Protestant and humanistic positions, insisted that all actual beings must be embodied and therefore subject to physical laws directly related to their materiality. [...] Pullman's perception of angels deviates from Milton's in that the angels in *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass* largely conform to the Roman Catholic doctrine in which the emphasis is on the absolute otherness of angels. (Bird, 2001, 120)

This otherness is strongly emphasized in the narrative and expressed by the angels themselves, as well as the humans that attempt to describe them and perceive their nature. It is of great interest that Pullman has deviated from Milton on this point and this has resulted in the depiction of a creature that is far from human in appearance, nature, intelligence and

perception, with different needs for survival, but which nonetheless has the same preoccupations and questions pertaining to their sense of (emotional) completion, contentment and freedom.

The differences between Milton's and Pullman's angels could also be a result of contextual reasons. By the time Milton began to write, at least 100 years after the end of the Middle Ages, the situation in England, characterized by both religious and political upheaval, in conjunction with his personal beliefs and ideologies enabled him to produce, essentially, a modern form of Scripture. It is, nevertheless, expected that he would be profoundly influenced by the heavy and centuries-long ecclesiastical tradition of his time.<sup>11</sup> Pullman arrives four centuries later, towards the end of a century defined by technological innovations, sociological upheavals, religious liberation—at least for the greater part of the Western world—and at the dawn of a new millennium. Overall, the five angels described in *HDM* are deeply intertextual, often controversial, and sometimes even allegorical. Bird argues that “there is no such simple theological dichotomy in Pullman's texts [between matter and spirit, body and mind, etc]. Rather, his work strives to convince the reader of the interconnectedness of these particular conceptual opposites” (Bird, 2001, 115). A parallel here may be drawn between Pullman and Almond in that both authors ‘play with’ with the Contraries that Blake presented in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Although their approaches differ as much as their conclusions, Pullman too actively explores concepts of materiality vs. spirituality, innocence vs. experience, good vs. evil, and faith vs. science. Possibly the greatest difference between the three authors lies in the fact that Pullman clearly wished to engage in a strong and provocative dialogue with religion and its institution and representatives, while, at the same time, exploring powerful notions pertaining to human nature, the meaning and origin of sin and how it is applied and explained, and the extent to which it has influenced humanity over time. In *AS*, Dr Mary

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<sup>11</sup> For more information see David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens (eds), *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England*,(2008), Chapter 5.

Malone, who often voices opinions similar to those expressed by Pullman, states that “I stopped believing there was a power of good and a power of evil that were outside us. And I came to believe that good and evil are names for what people do, not for what they are” (Pullman, *AS*, 447).

A significant characteristic that angels in *HDM* share is a lack of the need for a higher or supreme being, that is, the need for a God, something that he shares with McNish as will be shown in the following chapter. As discussed in the Introduction, most theologians of the middle ages believed angels were characterized and sometimes even defined by their burning love for God, which often seemed the very reason for their existence. Although this was possibly a stronger emotion for the angels pertaining to the higher ranks, the cherubim and seraphim, their absolute faith in their creator is what characterized them. In Pullman’s trilogy, Xaphania, Baruch and Balthamos have turned their back on their false creator and live freely, unburdened by the need to belong to or love a creature that stands above them. Just like Almond’s text, mainly through the use of Blake’s quotations, urges and encourages the child reader to explore ideas and look further, so the angels in Pullman’s narrative bring up questions pertaining to the nature of religion and consequently, whether a representation of angelic creatures would presuppose free will and independent thought.

As will be analysed in this chapter, intertextuality plays a focal role in the trilogy, and the epigraphs that can be found in the beginning of every chapter in *AS* are significant both because of the meanings they supplement and sometimes even create, and for the cultural significance they carry. As previously suggested by Stephens, intertextuality in children’s literature often plays a major part in “attempts to produce determinable meanings and to acculturate the audience” (Stephens, 1992, 85-86). Yet, for Pullman and Almond, the intertexts can be argued to have gone even further. For, in this case, the meanings deriving from the intertexts, and seeping into the final work, are not only provided as superfluous

information that may easily be dismissed, but have skilfully weaved themselves around the narrative, thus becoming an organic part of it; a part the novel could not exist without. Robert Butler writes that Pullman

learnt ‘yards’ of Milton. When he began writing *His Dark Materials* (the title itself comes from Milton), he realised after a while that he was telling the same story. ‘But I didn’t think on the one hand, ‘Oh bugger, I’m telling the same story’, or, on the other hand, ‘Oh great, I can copy it.’ I just realised that in his patch Milton had been working on the same thing. (Butler, 2007, 72)

In telling this story he wished to underline and present such classic themes as compassion, love, bravery, resilience and strength of heart and soul.

One of the most prominent themes in the trilogy, one that pertains to the element of transformation, and something that Pullman shares with both Almond and McNish, is the transition from innocence to experience, and what this process entails; the theme is also linked to William Blake and his work, which becomes evident in the way Pullman wishes to describe the protagonist Lyra’s transition, or rite of passage, from innocence into experience and in the various ways in which he shifts the scale towards experience, that is adulthood. This pair of contraries is intricately designed in *HDM*, the childhood/innocence concept escaping the stereotypical definition. I will explore Lyra’s transition from one state to the other while also defining the notion of innocence as it appears in the trilogy, as well as the ways in which it may differ from Milton and Blake.

Transformation in Pullman is not presented in a similar manner to Almond. Although the leading character’s transformation is directly related to her transition from innocence to experience, the process as well as the conclusion is very different. Lyra’s transition and acquisition of knowledge deals with feelings of guilt over the death of her childhood friend



Roger, true fear and loneliness over the loss of her daemon,<sup>12</sup> and unexpected and never-before-felt waves of emotion for Will. Although Lyra is twelve years old, whereas Michael in *Skellig* is eleven, her adventure and circumstances move her beyond the limits of Michael's experiences, and force her to face a world where innocence will only hinder her view of reality and the aims she has set: seek forgiveness from Roger, and free the world of the dead. In the previous chapter it was argued that Skellig, the angel-like figure, was not only a part of Michael's transformation but played a major role in this process and enabled him, with the help of Mina, to look beyond the ordinary and open his mind. In Pullman's trilogy, although the angels are highly significant to the narrative, their contribution to Lyra's transformation functions differently. Throughout the chapter it will become clear how or even if Lyra and Will experience a transformation and what it means for them.

The following quotation not only defines Pullman's trilogy, but clearly explains his intentions in writing it as well as the side on which he stands. He is not diplomatic in the way he expresses his viewpoint, nor does he deny the appeal that the character of the Devil had for him when reading Milton's epic:

Suppose that the prohibition on the knowledge of good and evil were an expression of jealous cruelty, and the gaining of such knowledge an act of virtue? Suppose the Fall should be celebrated and not deplored? As I played

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<sup>12</sup> Daemons are the manifestation of a person's soul in animal form. Their nature is highly complex, as are the rules and taboos that surround their existence. The reader is not told how the daemons spring into existence when a human is born, but they are told that when they die they simply vanish into thin air like a spirit slowly dissolving. In the majority of cases the daemon is of the opposite sex of its human, but the reader does come across one man whose daemon is also male, although the reason for this is not offered. This idea of the two sexes coexisting into one person is highly indicative of the author's desire to create a human being that is more balanced and complete by having both a male and a female side. Furthermore, this idea of possessing, in physical form, both the male and female physical aspects of ourselves coincides with Blake's ideas of the Contraries and their reconciliation. Being aware of and living with both, we are complete, as both Blake and Pullman believe that this is necessary. Nicholas Tucker claims that the daemon "corresponds to the psychologist Carl Jung's idea that all humans have a craving for an other half, also of the opposite sex which, if we could reunite with it, would then mean that we could at last become truly whole individuals" (Tucker, 2003, 141-142).

with it, my story resolved itself into an account of the necessity of growing up, and a refusal to lament the loss of innocence. [...] Innocence is not wise, and wisdom cannot be innocent, and if we are going to do any good in the world, we have to leave childhood behind. (Pullman in Milton, 2005, 10)

In the previous chapter I argued that Almond is not too quick or eager to reject childhood or ignore some of its merits, while Pullman's premise in *HDM* is based on the belief that the innocence that is unavoidably linked to the early years of a person's life is something 'we must leave behind' in order to acquire knowledge. His choice to express this while retelling the story of Adam and Eve is far from coincidental or random, for the argument he makes is not limited to a solitary aspect of life or a specific time in history, but extends to the state of humanity as a whole; and so it is that he goes back to its very beginning—or to be more precise, to what the Christian world considers to be its beginning. The greatest difference lies in the fact that the foundation of this beginning is what needs to change for him in order to become significant. For it is only in our understanding of what biting the apple truly means that we can change and make the world a better place.

This Chapter focuses, to a great extent, on the theme and use of intertextuality in Pullman's trilogy. It explores and actively engages with the way in which Pullman has not only borrowed concepts and ideas from several sources but has even used direct quotations, in the form of epigraphs, which he has placed within the text. Throughout the analysis, several arguments made are shared by other critics, such as the fact that Pullman inverts many aspects of the story of the Fall and Man's disobedience against God. However, my own argument differs on a fundamental basis while still encompassing the above notions. I argue that Pullman's narrative is indeed a retelling of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but in this rewriting Pullman deconstructs the story of Genesis to the point where it does not exist anymore. He

begins by gathering all the elements that make up this story, putting them together in a clearly unorthodox yet still identifiable manner so as to create the assumption, or by the end the illusion, that he has invested in the rewriting of Man's beginning and demise. As the story progresses it becomes clear that each fundamental element is inverted or transformed thereby shedding its original meaning and interpretation and assuming a completely new role and consequently, significance. The angels, in *HDM*, play an indispensable part in this attempt as they too are religious figures whose attributes and purpose have been inverted. By the end of the third book in the trilogy, Pullman has not only retold but actually unraveled the story of Genesis to the point where he entirely annihilates the premises behind it, and in all its forms. In this, however, he also succeeds in annihilating the concept and premise of religion—specifically the Christian religion—by deconstructing the foundations of authority, the Church, and the very idea of good vs. evil.

### **Intertextuality: Blake, Milton, and *The Amber Spyglass***

The use of intertextuality in Pullman is far broader and more encompassing than in Almond, whose quotations of Blake from *The Songs of Innocence and of Experience* provide an emotional framework and adorn the scenes in which they are placed. While Almond's excerpts serve to facilitate certain points the author is trying to get across and are content-specific, Pullman's work in a different way, in that they introduce the themes that exist within the narrative and reinforce them. Pullman has inserted an epigraph at the beginning of every chapter in the *AS*; there are 37 quotations from twenty different sources.<sup>13</sup> The majority of these chapter headings are by Milton and Blake, and the remaining range from Genesis and

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<sup>13</sup> Pullman apparently decided not to include such epigraphs in *GC* and *SK*. Quotations are entirely absent from *SK*, while in *GC* there is only a small excerpt from Book II of Milton's *Paradise Lost* at the beginning (which will be discussed later in this chapter).

The Book of Job, to Emily Dickinson, Edmund Spencer and John Keats. Their significance lies in the way they contextualize and introduce each chapter, as well as in the way they prepare the reader by offering them an insight into what will follow. Marko Juvan explains in *History and Poetics of Intertextuality* that this is indeed the function and purpose of epigraphs or mottos:

A motto's function is to interpret and *predict*. It awakens expectations about the text's or its parts' *thematics*, meaning, and even structural scope. Using the motto, an author indicates the context in which the reader should construct the work's meaning or aesthetic profile; she can also evoke complex analogies or contrasts between her literary work and the antecedent cited. (Juvan, 2008, 27, emphasis added)

The word 'predict' was emphasized because in *AS* the epigraphs clearly assume this role, one of the most powerful examples—analysed further in the chapter—being two excerpts by Milton which predict and identify Mary Malone and Lord Asriel as Devil figures. Another such prediction occurs in Chapter 37 of *AS* with the words of Pindar who urges his soul to *not* “seek eternal life, but exhaust the realm of the possible” (*AS*, 2000, 485). The significance of this epigraph, as well as its power of foresight, is possibly the most fundamental theme Pullman offers the trilogy: the concept that instead of constantly seeking to ensure the ‘comfort’ of the afterlife—an arguable, problematic, and dubious notion in itself—people should attempt to live and seek happiness and fulfilment, within realistic means, in their everyday life.

The epigraphs in general, however, create both intertextual and intra-textual frameworks of meaning in that they work both in isolation and as a whole. Despite the wide variety of sources, their diversity being both temporal and pertaining to content, they create an

intertextual umbrella under which the narrative can ‘act’ both independently and in relation to the quotations. This section aims to highlight and discuss some of the intertextual elements within the trilogy, not all of which are related to Milton or Scripture, as well as their use and significance.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, the section will analyse Pullman’s use of Blake, the extent to which Pullman’s use of intertextuality defines the trilogy and the purpose it serves. Moreover, it will compare and contrast some key scenes from the story of Genesis and explore Pullman’s version of these; it will also collectively look at and discuss the chapter epigraphs in *AS*, a few examples of which will be analysed in greater detail.

Intertextuality in *HDM* is especially potent in the 34 chapter epigraphs of the *AS*. Surprisingly, out of these 34, only six are from Milton and they are all from Book I of *Paradise Lost*. In Chapter 5, the epigraph is especially significant since Asriel is identified as, or compared to, Lucifer whose “aim against the Throne and monarchy” was ambitious (Milton, 2005, ll. 41-42). It is not surprising then that the quotation from Chapter 17, the protagonist of which is Mary Malone, speaks of the Serpent that “was more Subtil than any Beast of the Field” (Genesis). Therefore, the author identifies two Devil figures while destroying two God figures: the Authority and Metatron. As will be seen further in the chapter, the role of the Devil is ultimately played by Dr. Mary Malone, as she is the one seen tempting the children; yet Asriel also assumes this role when he wages war against the Authority, not so that he may rule in his place, but so as to rid the worlds of a false Authority

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<sup>14</sup> For example, in an interview for *Intelligent Life* Robert Butler explains how the idea of the daemon came to be. “The daemons are the single most brilliant idea in the books. Pullman got the idea from paintings by Leonardo da Vinci (The Lady with the Ermine), Holbein (The Lady and the Squirrel) and Tiepolo (Young Woman with a Macaw), where there seems to be a psychological link between the person and the creature” (Butler, 2007, 71). Colbert suggests another element of intertextuality which is apparent in one of the books’ name. “Another title inspired by Milton appears on the American edition of the trilogy’s first volume, *The Golden Compass*. The title began as a plural: *The Golden Compasses*. That was Pullman’s working title for the story, before he thought of *His Dark Materials*. It referred to circle-drawing compasses, not a compass that shows north, south, east and west. The compasses are mentioned in *Paradise Lost* when God marks a design for the world” (Colbert, 2006, 19-20).

and destroy the Church. This duality of the Devil-figure is especially interesting because it separates the two primary and most significant acts committed by the Devil: defying the authority and tempting Adam and Eve. In the Introduction it was argued that the three authors analysed in the thesis work towards the depiction of a new kind of angel, which in turn implies a changing outlook on humanity. As this chapter shows, the inversions Pullman offers link the theme of positive and productive disobedience with that of an angel who has free will and the ability to act according to individual conscience.

As previously argued, in *HDM* both acts have been transformed, or inverted, into positive and beneficial acts for humanity. Furthermore, whereas in Asriel's case it is a very conscious and well-planned decision, in Mary's case it is the result of a series of events and circumstances that ultimately lead her to discover, understand and even converse with Dust, and create the Amber Spyglass. It is not clear why Pullman chose to separate these two acts and allocate them to two different characters. However, it is my belief that his decision was based on the different motivation that would drive each character to commit this act. Furthermore, by separating the two acts, the author is able to explore each concept individually, in greater detail, and most importantly, from different perspectives, backgrounds, and through a completely dissimilar outlook on the world. Pullman states in an interview that "what really matters, you see [...] is not what you believe but how you behave" (Mansfield, 2010), and this very ideal is what characterizes and ultimately separates these two focal characters. Although they both believe in something greater, they act and respond in very different ways to numerous situations, and their acts towards the accomplishment of their goals is what places them on two opposite poles. In this way, Pullman explores this relationship between belief and behaviour.

Here again the reader witnesses another inversion, but one that contradicts not so much Milton's story, as Scripture's. In the original story of Genesis, the Devil's act of temptation is

driven by malevolence and revenge.<sup>15</sup> Pullman's perspective, however, is that the Devil was only trying to tell Adam and Eve the truth about God and make them realize that the tree held knowledge that God wished to hide from them. In Chapter 33 of *AS*, when Mary Malone tells Will and Lyra the story about how she came to leave the Church, Will asks whether this decision was a difficult one. She responds that "In one way it was, because everyone was so disappointed. [...] But in another way it was easy, because it made sense. For the first time ever I felt I was doing something with all of my nature and not only part of it" (Pullman, *AS*, 446). Mary's statement emphasizes that her motivation was linked to belief and personal conviction about truth, and not revenge. Based on this premise, the act of temptation takes on a very different meaning, one whose origins are not defined by evil intent, but a wish to awaken and inform. Therefore, Pullman dichotomizes the two acts and although they still form parts of a whole, their nature forces them to be executed by two very different characters, who although sharing some characteristics, also each possess a quality which will define them as carriers of this responsibility. In Asriel's case it is his defiant and overwhelming personality which enables him to gather an army and overthrow the Authority, whereas in Mary Malone's case it is her own personal awakening experience—her moment of lucidity when she realized that there is no God and that we make our own lives and create our own happiness, while being in charge of it, as well as responsible for it. Lyra asks Mary if she thought about good and evil while she was a nun, after she has told the children that "one of the reasons [she] became a scientist was that [she] wouldn't have to think about [it]" (Pullman, *AS*, 446). But she knew what she "*should* think: it was whatever the Church taught me to think. And when I did science, I had to think about other things altogether. So I never had to think about them for myself at all" (Pullman, *AS*, 446). The given, rehearsed, imposed

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<sup>15</sup> Neil Forsyth writes in *The Satanic Epic* that "Assembling the other fallen angels, Lucifer-Satan insists God 'has not done right,' nor 'can he accuse us of any sin.' He conceives a plan of revenge, to make Adam and Eve transgress God's will. Their downfall is wrought not through greed or lust, but simply because the serpent appears as God's messenger" (Forsyth, 2003, 52).

upon doctrine of the Church facilitated this inactivity of thought and exploration of matters of good and evil, and so her research, encouraged by the Church, constituted a numbing agent against such thoughts. She was finally able to see the truth, and so it is now her turn and responsibility to show this to others. The epigraph in this case, however, is not only indicative of, and predicts, Mary Malone's true nature and purpose, but also exerts an ironic sense of foreboding because, at this point, the reader is already aware of the fact that Mary will assume this role in a truly 'subtil' manner, without even realizing it. At the same time, the 'innocence' or ignorance with which Mary carries out the act of tempting Will and Lyra subverts the original act presented in Genesis and Milton.

A question that is undoubtedly raised here is whether this subversion challenges the reader's understanding of the devil, of the notion of good and evil, and, consequently the reader's ability to associate Mary with the Devil figure. In the conventional sense, Mary's character does not resemble the Devil's in any shape or form, assuming, of course, that one only considers the more stereotypical definitions and characterizations. Lord Asriel, on the other hand, is a character who the reader can more easily identify as a devil-figure, especially after he has ruthlessly killed Roger. The notion of good and evil in the trilogy, and unavoidably that of the Devil, may be seen as highly problematic, or confusing. This is mostly due to the fact that most characters are neither completely good, nor entirely evil. Furthermore, characters such as Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter challenge the reader's perception and forces them to reconsider acts of great evil based on a final act of benevolence. Based, however, on the above premise that the Devil in *HDM* is *not* the Devil in *Paradise Lost*, and the act of temptation is not detrimental to humanity, the reader is then 'forced' or simply asked to completely ignore all previous misconceptions and to take a more flexible and relativist stance on the morality of individuals. Once this is achieved, these characters will



have to be considered as they are defined but filtered through a novel point of view introduced by Pullman.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, it is far from coincidental that the theme in some of the first epigraphs taken from Blake is innocence, and they are excerpts from “The Little Girl Lost,” “The Poison Tree,” and “Auguries of Innocence.”<sup>17</sup> In each of these—Chapters 1, 11, 13 and 19—Lyra is the protagonist and as the story progresses the reader bears witness to her gradual loss of innocence, or to be more precise, her ideological ignorance, which is heralded by several events, some of the most prevalent being her admitting that she is no longer able to lie and tell stories, and her meeting and confrontation with her own death. As previously mentioned, the issue of innocence and experience is presented as a major theme in *HDM*, but the definition of each state is not always clear or absolute. The notion of innocence and experience, as well as the particular way it is defined and used within the trilogy, will be analysed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Lyra starts off as an innocent girl of 11 years who has only ever seen Oxford. Although her environment has been protected to a great extent, her intelligence, energy, curiosity and fearlessness have placed her in several dangerous situations. She knows about the Gobblers and understands the threat, as much as she knows and fears Lord Asriel. Lyra is innocent in

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<sup>16</sup> Neil Forsyth also speaks of a dichotomy in the Devil figure as described in Milton “One role Satan is to play in *Paradise Lost* is to project and play out the consequences of that metaphysical dualism: he certainly believes himself to be a kind of alternative power to God. In Milton, though, he does not stop that uncomfortable regression whereby we go back from Eve to the apple to Satan to Lucifer [...], and inevitably conclude that God is responsible for everything in the world, including evil. But his existence makes the question problematic, and Milton wants his readers to ask it specifically, as he does himself in his treatise” (Forsyth, 2003, 38).

<sup>17</sup> Just as Pullman’s epigraphs may work both in isolation and as a complete whole, so the *Songs* can be read, understood and seen both individually and in relation to one another. The themes these poems tackle are not limited to basic notions of loss of innocence, or a child’s transition to experience. Most poems in this collection, and especially in Experience, including ‘A Poison Tree,’ present clear and powerful allegories for elements of Genesis, and references to religion, the power of imagination, and the restrictions that rules, and the conformity to these, inflict on a person forcing them to forget and lose their human spirit. The Poison Tree, for example, is undoubtedly a reference to the Tree of Knowledge from which God forbade Adam and Eve to taste.

many respects, but also quite knowledgeable about some issues. Her innocence, however, is also the reason why she is able to read the alethiometer with no prior education or training. Although this is revealed in *AS* by Xaphania, it is also hinted in *GC* when Farder Coram tells Dr. Lanselium that Lyra is “a strange innocent creature, [...]. How she comes to read that instrument I couldn’t guess, but I believe her when she talks of it” (Pullman, *GC*, 176).

Lyra’s innocence has been protected by the walls of the College, yet this begins to change when Mrs Coulter takes her away. The experiences Lyra acquires throughout her journey are also indicative of the extent of her innocence or ignorance in the beginning. The most evident example is that although she effortlessly and very cleverly outsmarts the King of the bears, she is intimidated and even scared of Will, who is barely older than her. Another powerful example is after Roger has been killed and Asriel has fled. She and Pantalaimon sit and look at the city in the sky, and Lyra finally realizes that she can no longer trust the people around her, “We’ve heard them all talk about Dust, and they’re so afraid of it, and you know what? We *believed* them, even though we could see that what they were doing was wicked and evil and wrong...” (*GC*, 1995, 398). She understands that she is responsible for Roger’s death, despite the fact that both she and Pantalaimon “thought [they] were helping him” (*GC*, 1995, 398) and decide to at least attempt to rectify their mistake by promising themselves that “Next time [they]’ll check everything and ask all the questions [they] can think of” (*GC*, 1995, 398). Blind trust in the word of adults and authority figures is linked here to her initial naivety and ignorance, which she gradually and eventually learns to shed.

‘The Little Girl Lost’ has been surrounded by some controversy because of the belief that, in the poem, sleep represents sexual awakening, a notion that does not stray far from *HDM* and Lyra’s own awakening in the end of *AS*. According to Jonathan Cook, Blake’s poem “transforms its sources and produces meanings which, I think, challenge deeply rooted assumptions about the nature of sexuality” (Aers et al, 1981, 51). The parallels that can be

drawn between the two girls, Lyra and Lyca, are not only numerous but also very strong. The girl in the poem cannot sleep—that is, escape the confines of innocence and experience her new-found sexual desire—knowing that her mother worries about her. In *HDM*, Lyra’s mother also becomes an obstacle by keeping her in a state of sleep—in this case an ideological and sexual ignorance—and not allowing her to assume her role as the new Eve by experiencing an awakening that is not only sexual but also ontological. The care she is providing is problematic in more than one way for she is not only hindering her daughter’s progress as a person and as young adult, but she is also going against her own instincts and beliefs, something which becomes clear when her own daemon appears “discontented. He didn’t like what she was doing here in the cave, and [when] he tried to express his concern, she brushed him away. [...] Nevertheless, his scepticism affected her, [...] and she wondered what in the world she thought she was doing” (Pullman, *AS*, 7). Lyra’s escape from Mrs Coulter, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, is not achieved with the greatest of ease, the child’s own hold on the “only mother she would ever have” (Pullman, *AS*, 160) being stronger than she (Lyra) herself had anticipated. The poem, however, as well as Pullman’s narrative, goes further, and the little girl lost finally succeeds, with the help of the “beasts of prey” (Blake, 1970, 24), in falling asleep. The message of both Blake and Pullman becomes clear at this point: ultimately, our very nature as human beings will prevail over the powerful hold that society, and consequently the rules that hold it in place, has on us.

The reader of *HDM* is offered pieces of other texts which in turn provide each chapter, as well as the book in its entirety, with another dimension, another level of meaning and a parallel, deeper understanding of the story. Umberto Eco describes a book as a forest within which the reader must walk. When inside it, the reader may be repeatedly asked to choose a path and walk it, thereby automatically rejecting another. “Every text after all [...] is a lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work. [...] In a narrative text, the reader is forced

to make choices all the time. Indeed, this obligation to choose is found even at the level of the individual sentence” (Eco, 1995, 3-6). In Pullman’s trilogy, the paths and crossroads often appear to be daunting and the possibilities numerous. This level of intertextuality, however, ultimately defines and characterizes a work of literature, whose meaning lies not only in its basic storyline and focal characters, but also on the several other stories and themes that are woven around it. In the first book of the trilogy, Pullman has inserted a small excerpt from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which in fact includes the name of his trilogy; it is a passage that has defined Pullman’s work in many respects, and has provided him with the basis for his own work:

Into this wild abyss,  
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,  
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,  
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed  
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight,  
Unless the almighty maker them ordain  
**His dark materials** to create more worlds,  
Into this wild abyss the wary fiend  
Stood on the brink of hell and looked a while,  
Pondering his voyage...

-John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book II

The dark materials that Milton speaks of are the tools God used to build the universe. In Pullman’s trilogy they may be used as a reference to a number of elements. This scene in which Satan is in the process of reaching the gates of Hell and sits “look[ing] a while, pondering his voyage” is significantly, and not incidentally, reminiscent of the scene towards

the end of the *GC* where Lord Asriel has just opened a window to another world in the sky and contemplates travelling through it and implementing his plan of overthrowing the Authority. These dark materials, or “dark intentions, like the forms of thoughts not yet born” (Pullman, *GC*, 390) may also be compared to Dust within the trilogy—which is analysed in the following section—the elementary, conscious, particles that settle on humans when they reach puberty (Pullman, *GC*, 390). This quote by Milton is a powerful, and even boldly ambitious, way to begin telling a story. It is not used lightly, nor does it stand alone or irrelevant in relation to the narrative. However, it does presuppose or require, in order to function properly, at least a fragmented, or elementary knowledge of Milton’s work, or at the very least, an understanding of this very scene Pullman has inserted. Provided the reader is even vaguely familiar with the story of Genesis, or Milton’s poem, and they are consequently able to grasp its meaning, it is of grave importance to retain it, for in the course of the story it does surface, in an equally powerful, but a significantly dissimilar way.

It is my belief that the labelling of *HDM* as a ‘retelling’ of Genesis or Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, severely limits and narrows the trilogy’s depth of meaning and creative imagination and originality. Although the similarities are numerous, as are the quotations by Milton and several religious sources, the creative and imaginative power employed by Pullman render this a story retold through a strictly contemporary, twentieth century, secular looking glass. This quotation succeeds in incorporating not only one of the trilogy’s most powerful themes, good vs. evil, but also encompasses one of its most basic concepts: this wild abyss, which both God and the Devil gaze upon and ponder is the chaotic world we live in today; a world where the struggle between good and evil is eternal. Pullman’s re-telling lies in the concept that God may not always represent the good, and ‘the wary fiend’s’ agenda may not always hide malevolence. The line between the two poles that characterize and define a

person is finer and more obscure than we would like to believe. It is this philosophy that delineates Pullman's retelling.

### **Inversions of the Fall**

The inversions discussed in this section are not only indicative of the influence that Milton's work has had on *HDM*, but also of the way in which Pullman wished to retell the story of Genesis and the points he aimed to make. Claire Squires states that,

In his inversion of the morality of the Fall, and also in his exploration of the rich imaginative possibilities afforded by devils, Hell, and the multiple worlds travelled through by Satan and the angels in *Paradise Lost*, Pullman is both a profoundly intertextual writer [...] and a provocative one. (Squires, 2006, 13)

Pullman's parallels with Milton's *Paradise Lost* are numerous. However, there are a few that could be described as the most obvious or basic, both in their similarity, or, as Squires suggests, in their inversion. The intertextual and provocative elements will clearly surface through the analysis that follows, and both their meaning and purpose will be highlighted. Pullman does not begin with the Creation and Lucifer's fall from heaven, but chooses instead to have Eve in place first, when the story commences, and introduce Adam in the second novel. Pullman presents an Adam and an Eve who are of the same age, but come from two different worlds—two of the million different worlds that exist simultaneously. The two characters do not reside in paradise, or even in a paradise-like world, but on earth; they come from two different worlds and meet for the first time in the *SK*. But here is where one witnesses Pullman's first inversion. In Pullman's universe, paradise, or the afterlife, is not

considered preferable or superior in any way. In fact, the author gives a horrendous and terrifying view of the underworld:

[Lyra and Will] found themselves on a great plain that extended far ahead into the mist. The light by which they saw was a dull self-luminescence that seemed to exist everywhere equally, so that there were no true shadows and no true light, and everything was the same dingy color. [...] but the silence was immense and oppressive, and the grey light filled [Will] with fear, and Lyra's warm presence beside him was the only thing that felt like life. (Pullman, *AS*, 294-295)

Pullman clearly draws from Classical sources in his depiction of this bland and emotionless underworld (Virgil, biblical texts, etc.). However, he does not leave the dead in that Authority-imposed misery, but suggests that this is a trap from which escape is possible. With Xaphania's help in closing all other windows between all other worlds, Lyra and Will sacrifice their own happiness and love and release the dead from this trap and allow their souls to become one with nature and the world once again. Pullman stresses the significance of building the Republic of Heaven here on earth, meaning that people should do their best to enjoy and appreciate life in the here and now, for there *is* no after.

One of the most significant —if not the most potent— inversions given by Pullman is the Fall. This new Eve's role in *HDM* is not only central to the narrative, or the characters around her, but also to all humanity, in all the worlds that Lord Asriel opens up and exposes. It is clear that Lyra assumes the role of the new Eve; however, this is done without her knowing so. This parallel becomes evident to the reader in a slow progression, thus allowing them to witness Lyra's development and growth. This element of the narrative is inescapably tied with *Paradise Lost* and the story of Genesis. Yet, how does Lyra assume this role, and at

what point does this merging occur? Lyra assumes this role from the very beginning, without being aware of it. Squires states that “Following Blake’s line on Milton, that the latter was ‘of the Devil’s party without knowing it’, Pullman sets out in the trilogy to reverse the morality of the Biblical Fall and to celebrate knowledge, consciousness and sexuality” (Squires, 2006, 119). This very inversion is especially evident in the way the author describes Lyra’s journey<sup>18</sup> and ultimately ‘leads’ her to bite the apple; the difference lies in Lyra’s ignorance of what her choice may lead to, or what it signifies for humanity, but also in the consequences of this action. In the original story of Genesis, Eve is warned by God that neither she, nor Adam, should taste the fruit from this tree; thus, when she is tempted by the snake, her choice is fully conscious in that she knows she is disobeying, but decides to do so anyway because her curiosity has overcome her fear.<sup>19</sup> However, in the trilogy the inversion lies not only in the fact that it is significant for Lyra to make her own choice, without being warned, but most importantly in the author’s claim that Lyra’s ‘betrayal’ or Fall is what liberates humanity, not what condemns it. Pullman bases this on the belief that by tasting the fruit of knowledge, humans finally escape ignorance and a false sense of innocence.

Yet what is this new Eve’s betrayal in *His Dark Materials*, and how does it ultimately change the course of events? In the case of the ‘original’ Eve, in the story of Genesis, the Fall was a result of her biting the apple from the forbidden tree and offering some to Adam. This

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<sup>18</sup> Lyra’s journey begins at the College in Oxford and the story takes her to London, to the North in Bolvangar, and from the Northern Lights to multiple other worlds including the world of the dead where she meets her death and is separated from her daemon.

<sup>19</sup> 1: Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?  
2: And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:  
3: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

4: And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:

5: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

6: And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat (Genesis, Chapter 3, 1-6).



act is what brought sin into the world, which ultimately also brought pain, hunger, shame, fear and a self-awareness that was not there before.<sup>20</sup> Adam and Eve were said to be in complete peace with everything around them in the Garden of Eden. They felt no cold, no pain, and no shame of their own bodies, so there was never a need to cover them up with clothing.<sup>21</sup> Thus, they harmoniously coexisted with nature, animals, and each other. The Devil, in the form of a serpent, is able to deceive Eve by telling her that the fruit contained divine knowledge, which God did not wish to share with them for selfish reasons. However, whether this was accurate was not the issue. God's punishment was a result of their disobedience. Although He has given them everything they could ever need in order to be safe and happy, and asked for one thing in return—or deprived them of one tree—they are still ungrateful enough, curious enough, and rebellious enough to ignore everything and succumb to temptation. God punishes Adam and Eve by depriving them of everything except knowledge. He takes away security, safety, harmony, but opens up instead the entire world to them, as if reversing the rules, or state, of paradise.

This is exactly where Pullman applauds and praises Adam and Eve. For him, this is humanity's first great deed, the first step towards knowledge, the shedding of ideological ignorance. But if Eve 'fell' by biting the apple—thereby defying God's rules and restrictions—, how does Lyra 'fall'? By giving into her feelings for Will. Pullman describes the Fall—consequently the new Eve's giving in to temptation—not as something that is bad for humanity; not a fall from grace but a liberation, the first step towards the acquisition of knowledge, or in Pullman's words "...the best thing, the most important thing that ever

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<sup>20</sup> See the following for a more detailed discussion of these aspects of Genesis. Neil Forsyth, *The Satanic Epic*, 2003; Martin Kessler and Karel Adriaan Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis*, 2004; George W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, 1983; Robert Adler, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 2001; Martin Buber and Nahum Norbert Glatzer, *On the Bible: eighteen studies*, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> 2:25 And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed (Genesis, Chapter 2).

happened to us” (Parsons and Nicholson, 1999, 119). Therefore, being bestowed this new meaning and significance, ‘The Fall’ ceases to be an accurate word with which to describe this fundamental change in humanity’s status. Essentially, in inverting the meaning of the Fall, original sin, and the expulsion from the garden of Eden, Pullman has transformed, or more accurately reversed the supposedly catastrophic consequences that were a result of Adam and Eve’s disobedience. His retelling of this classic, religious story, therefore, becomes a secular interpretation, one that is innovative, optimistic, and, from a religious point of view, guilt-free verging on sacrilegious. The act of killing God in Pullman’s trilogy is not as powerful as the clear statement that there never was one—“He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves” (Pullman, *AS*, 2000)—and humanity is not in need of one to be happy or complete.

Another inversion in Pullman’s story is given in the way the author defines or expresses obedience. Naomi Woods compares the works of C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman on many aspects of their writing, ideology, storytelling, and their use of the story of Genesis. One of the elements she compares is that of obedience, or lack thereof. In the case of Lewis obedience is not only praised but deemed necessary, and acts as an indication of grace and virtue. “In his monograph on *Paradise Lost*, Lewis asserts that obedience to authority is decorous and appropriate, even beautiful; we consent to submit, recognizing authority’s right to control knowledge and power” (Wood, 2001, 239). She describes obedience in Pullman’s series as not “nearly so tied to the values of Genesis, and, hence, far more problematic. [...] Pullman’s narrator focuses upon the “knowledge” aspect of the Genesis archetype” (Wood, 2001, 248). Lyra is confused about who to obey and discovers through her adventures that disobedience has actually resulted, more than once, in a more beneficial situation. One clear example that Woods offers is in the very beginning of *Northern Lights* where Lyra has to reveal herself in order to save Lord Asriel from the poison contained in his drink, yet she does so without considering the consequences; the punishment for hiding in the scholars’ rooms: “Fear of

punishment for disobedience is not compelling in this life-and-death situation. [...] Disobedience in this instance places Lyra in a situation where it is indirectly ‘rewarded’”(Wood, 2001, 249). In fact, throughout the trilogy, what Pullman insists on and attempts to show is that there *is* no black and white, and that rules are there, not necessarily to be broken but definitely challenged. Whatever choice we make carries with it consequences that may turn out to be unpleasant even though the goal we aim for is benevolent and well-meant. One such example, and possibly one of the most powerful, is when Lyra decides to bring Lord Asriel the alethiometer at any cost, taking Roger with her. The moment she realizes what she has done, is one of great torment and guilt: “Oh, the bitter anguish! She had thought she was *saving* Roger, and all the time she’d been diligently working to betray him...” (Pullman, *GC*, 1995). This feeling of guilt eventually drives Lyra throughout the trilogy and takes her to the world of the dead where she finds Roger again and apologizes. However, what is most interesting is the link that is unavoidably created between the elements of ignorance and betrayal, and the way that Pullman aligns them, allowing the reader to parallel the two, and suggests that Lyra’s naivety and lack of experience lead her to betray Roger, a mistake she learns and grows from. Despite being aware of Asriel’s relentlessness and determination to achieve his aims, she does not even consider the possibility of the existence of danger—for her or Roger—in his presence, and so Lord Asriel becomes the first authority figure Lyra learns to question. In the end, although this act proves to be one of her biggest mistakes, it inevitably takes her one step closer to achieving a higher state of experience and awareness.

The issue of disobedience, however, is not only limited to Lyra, but also extends to the general notion of disobedience towards an authority, or, in this case, the Authority: a patriarch and a ruler whose aims and means are neither kind nor righteous. This deeply flawed God-figure begs the question of whether it would be right or wrong, and even moral, to follow and believe in such a higher being, or whether it would be preferable to challenge and resist it.

Furthermore, the obedience of the people who do serve him, as well as the actions they commit in his name, are also brought into perspective and are consequently seriously questioned upon consideration of the fact that neither the end nor the means are moral or humane.

Another question raised at this point is the extent to which Pullman employs ideological or even didactic tactics to instil in his readers the understanding that an authority, of any form or stature, may be or become oppressive. To this, a reader, and especially a child reader, may easily begin to question the obedience it has been taught to show towards authoritarian figures in its environment, and this may indeed be why Peter Hitchens declared Pullman as “the most dangerous author in Britain,” stating that “he knows perfectly well what he is doing. He openly and rightly believes storytelling can be a form of moral propaganda” (Hitchens, 2002, 63). This notion is especially controversial in the trilogy and it is not only linked to the disobedience of Lord Asriel or Mary Malone, but the blind and ignorant obedience towards the Authority by the Magisterium. Will asks the angels Baruch and Balthamos what happens when we die. They tell him that there is a world of the dead which “the Authority established in the early ages” (Pullman, *AS*, 33). They go on to explain that “everything about it is secret. Even the churches don’t know; they tell their believers that they’ll live in Heaven, but that’s a lie. If people really knew...” (Pullman, *AS*, 33). Pullman here condemns the Church’s blind belief in something that they themselves know nothing about and characterizes their obedience as something not only flawed, but fundamentally wrong. They preach and enforce ideals and ‘truths’ that are false so that they can control and manipulate their believers. In contrast, Lord Asriel consciously disobeys a cruel God figure, an act that is defined by Pullman as righteous and almost noble, and in turn, the two angels’ loyalty to Lord Asriel is an indication of obedience that is based on rational choices and facts.

Throughout the trilogy, the reader also discovers yet another notion of obedience which is a deceptive one, portrayed most potently by Mrs Coulter. When asked by Lyra about the

work of the General Oblation Board (Gobblers) and the cut they perform on children in the North she claims that the separation of human and daemon is in the child's best interest: "Darling, these are big difficult ideas, Dust and so on. It's not something for children to worry about. But the doctors do it for the children's own good, my love. Dust is something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked" (Pullman, *GC*, 282). The pretence lies in the fact that she will not allow her own child to go through with it. She protects her both in this situation and in *AS* when the Magisterium is set on killing the new Eve. Her obedience to the Magisterium is clearly a by-product, or an unavoidable consequence, of the power this constitution has bestowed upon her; a power that she willfully and eagerly wields with manipulation and charm. Mrs Coulter confesses to Will that she had given "her life to [the Magisterium]; I served it with a passion. But I had this daughter..." (Pullman, *AS*, 140). Her behavior thus demonstrates that obedience cannot be absolute, and her conflicting beliefs and values lead her to manipulative and deceptive acts. In Mrs Coulter's case, obedience itself creates or manifests deception.

On the issue of disobedience, James H. Sims states that in Milton "the judgement pronounced upon Adam [by God] is much closer in vocabulary to the Authorized version [of the Bible]," and wonders why "Milton's Biblical allusions become almost exact quotations in this part [of the poem]" (Sims, 1962, 46-47). He believes that "the answer involves Milton's conception of the chief problem man faces in maintaining a right relationship with God: [...] How can man avoid disobedience to God?" (Sims, 1962, 47). But in Pullman's worlds this disobedience by Adam and Eve means nothing because the figure they disobey is both deceitful and corrupt. The emphasis he wishes to give is not so much to the first time the Fall of man took place, but the second, when Lyra, the new Eve, offers Will the fruit and together they bring about a new age of knowledge while leaving their childhood behind in order to leave the false paradise that is childhood innocence.

The theme of obedience, or lack thereof, is also showcased through the angels in the trilogy. Their allegiances and beliefs are based on free will and not on the narrow-minded or blind following of a particular authority figure. Free will is associated with choice, which is made based on one's personal convictions, not a false sense of loyalty imposed on one by fear, and in the multiple universes of Pullman's trilogy, angels act upon their free will and choose to either follow the Authority, support Asriel in his mission, or remain neutral to either cause. Yet, their choices are not two-dimensional, nor absolute, and this becomes evident when Baruch and Balthamos, who have forged an allegiance with Lord Asriel, do not hesitate to help Will in his search for Lyra, despite the fact that this was not initially in their plans. The greatest act of disobedience is, of course, displayed by Metatron, whose false subservience to the Authority was only a ploy used to acquire and accumulate enough power to eventually destroy and replace him, thereby placing himself on the throne. Metatron's figure and his act of disobedience will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Other acts of disobedience are also performed by Lyra's parents. Lord Asriel is undoubtedly the epitome of disobedience, as he "never found himself at ease with the doctrines of the Church" (45) and consequently is seen as exercising "gigantic blasphemy" in "aiming a rebellion against the highest power of all" (47).<sup>22</sup> The element of disobedience, however, also raises the issue of good and evil and how it is defined within the trilogy.

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<sup>22</sup> In the following quotation, Thorold, Lord Asriel's faithful servant explains to the witch Serafina Pekkala his master's intentions. 'But you know about our God? The God of the Church, the one they call the Authority?' [...] 'Well, Lord Asriel has never found himself at ease with the doctrines of the Church, so to speak. [...] It's death among our people, Serafina Pekkala, to challenge the Church, but Lord Asriel's been nursing a rebellion in his heart for as long as I've served him, that's one thing I do know.'

'A rebellion against the Church?'

'Partly, aye. There was a time when he thought of making it an issue of force, but he turned away from that.'

'Why? Was the Church too strong?'

'No, that wouldn't stop my master. [...] it's my belief he turned away from a rebellion against the Church not because the Church was too strong, but because it was too weak to be worth the fighting.' [...] 'I think he's a-waging a higher war than that. I think he's aiming a rebellion against the highest power of all.'

He's gone a-searching for the dwelling place of the Authority Himself, and he's a-going to destroy Him. [...] He's a-going to find the Authority and kill Him' (Pullman, *SK*, 45-48).

Especially in the case of Asriel, his act of killing Roger begs the question of when the end justifies the means and at what cost. Asriel's ultimate plan is to overthrow the Authority, *not* so that he can take his place and become a god himself, revered by all, but to rid humanity of an ancient lie. Furthermore, by killing the Authority, he will also succeed in eliminating and nullifying the Magisterium —and the Church in its entirety— and the corrupt power it has wielded for centuries. Therefore, given the obvious nobility of his plan, is Roger's murder justified? Or do Asriel's actions ultimately place him in the same category as the people he is trying to destroy? Whose aim is more righteous, when each side firmly believes that *their* justification is better and will do anything in their power to get there? Asriel also embodies the dark side of ambition which is fuelled by the absence of inhibitions and basic human compassion and love. For, even though his end is righteous, the means are often questionable. The following quotation is indicative of Lord Asriel's ruthlessness, even in his youth, and the fearlessness and determination that drove his convictions and guided his actions:

Mr. Coulter had a gun, and Lord Asriel knocked it out his hand and struck him down with one blow. [...] [He then] Shot him right between the eyes and dashed his brains out. Then [as] cool as paint [...] [he] took you up and dandled you and sat you on his shoulders. (Pullman, *GC*, 132)

These questions, although indirectly asked by Pullman, are not clearly answered and Asriel's moral status remains ambivalent. It becomes apparent that the author's aim is to pose the questions and leave it up to the reader to decide, for although he does take a firm religious stand, the morality of the story roams more freely. This is not to suggest that he lacks morals or ethics, or perceives them as unnecessary. On the contrary, his aim is to present characters who are deeply, and most importantly, *realistically* complicated; characters who do not easily fall within the category of good or bad. These characters are the ones who make up the complex and often controversial nature of the narrative; they are not all bad or all good, they

can and *do* become both, and so determining their place between the two moral poles becomes an issue of analysing and defining all their different acts, as well as their means and aims. Although Pullman does not exculpate Asriel or justify his relentlessness, the author's projection of the Magisterium, the Authority and Metatron, clearly confesses his disdain for the woes that organised religion has inflicted, and promotes a different choice.

Asriel and Mary Malone provide the final inversion, which is that of the Devil figure in the trilogy. Although, in the end, Milton's aim in writing *Paradise Lost* was to justify God's ways to man, in the beginning of the poem the reader witnesses the Devil as being more righteous or sensible than God. This very image is what stayed with Pullman, and what he wishes to show in his own narrative. The author inverts Milton's morality not only when he clearly states that Asriel's concerns and feelings towards the Authority and the Church are legitimate and reasonable, but when he exposes this God-figure's wrongdoings and presents his demise as a Fall—not of Man, but of God; a Fall that is once again defined by the parameters that characterize Lyra's Fall. Therefore, if Lyra's fall was an act of liberation from the ignorance in which humans dwelt in, the fall of the Authority represents an act of liberation from the bonds and control of a corrupt authoritarian. Yet the morality Pullman employs is not straightforward either, as far as Asriel is concerned. This partially surfaces from Pullman's act of killing Asriel, which designates that his role was important but remained a means to an end he was unable or not meant to complete himself. Instead Pullman places this responsibility within the hands of the children and Dr. Mary Malone.

In *HDM*, the role of the Devil in regards to the temptation and the offering of the fruit of knowledge is played by Dr. Mary Malone, a major character in the trilogy despite the fact that she only appears in two of the three novels, who plays the role of the serpent by tempting Lyra at the end of the trilogy. Her contribution to the story does not end there, nor is it limited to this act. The first time the reader encounters Mary is in the fourth chapter of *The Subtle Knife*.



Lyra finds Dr. Mary Malone, a scientist working for the Dark Matter Research Unit at Oxford University, and Mary begins to explain what it is that she is researching, and how this could indeed be what Lyra refers to as Dust. Mary's background, a nun and a scientist who eventually left the church and pursued science instead, as narrated in her own words, reveals the choices she has had to make in order to get where she is and the sound reasoning behind them. This duality and struggle between science and faith is present in all three narratives and Pullman's exploration of this is expressed through Mary Malone.<sup>23</sup> Mary Malone's story about the marzipan<sup>24</sup> may be seen as an allegory of Lucifer's fall, in which moment he too realized that there is more to simply praising and loving God. "I thought physics could be done to the glory of God, till I saw there wasn't any God at all and that physics was more interesting anyway. The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all" (Pullman, *AS*, 441). So it is that Mary realises there is more to life, and her energy, passion and growing knowledge should be devoted to something else, something realistic. Furthermore, the marzipan story, and specifically, the way in which a young boy offers her the delicacy by placing it between her lips intentionally makes her another Eve figure, one who was also tempted and who not only eats from the fruit of knowledge but eventually rejects God's doctrine. Thus, the reader witnesses the duality of Mary's character as she embodies both Satan and Eve, assuming and acting out both roles, all the while being conscious of what she is doing. This way, she complicates these extreme roles but succeeds in effectively carrying out both while staying true to her nature and beliefs.

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<sup>23</sup> McNish's viewpoint on this issue will be discussed in the following chapter.

<sup>24</sup> In Chapter 33 of *AS* called 'Marzipan', Mary Malone tells Lyra and Will the story of how she decided to leave the Church and devote her life to science instead. During a dinner, following a science conference, someone gives her a piece of marzipan which brings her back memories of when she was a young girl and a boy "too a bit of marzipan and he just gently put it in [her] mouth—[...]—and [she] fell in love with him just for that, for the gentle way he touched [her] lips with the marzipan" (Pullman, *AS*, 444).

The scene in which this internal change occurs in Mary signifies not only the gravity of that moment when someone offered her marzipan and what followed after that, but also a crucial element which resonates throughout the trilogy. The fact that Mary decides *not* to become a nun and rejects, in a way, the way of God and an ‘innocent’ and pure and ‘ignorant’ state of being and living, in order to fully experience what life has to offer, including making mistakes or sinning, alludes to two things. Primarily it creates a clear parallel between Mary and the Devil, who although faithful to God at first, had second thoughts and rejected him, thus falling from heaven; in fact, this very act later enables him to tempt Adam and Eve, just like Mary tempts Will and Lyra. Secondly, Mary’s history also projects one of Pullman’s main themes, that what is most important and what humans beings should aim for is to make the best of what they have in this life, and, as Asriel suggests, build the Republic of Heaven here on earth. A question is raised at this point about whether the author wishes to project an ideological stance or promote a sense of didacticism to the child reader, and if so, what is the exact message he wishes to convey? Pullman neither hides nor denies his atheistic beliefs, and these are clearly visible and uninhibitedly expressed in his trilogy. Therefore, the question is whether his intent to kill God is as strong as his desire to offer an alternative, that is, a different way to live, without the burden of faith and God. Several elements of the story hint to the fact that he does attempt to provide an alternative way of life, one that is more realistic: based on what people have, and what they can see. When Lyra tells Pantalaimon at the very end of *AS* that they must now build the Republic of Heaven she seems to suggest that ‘heaven’ is not a place no one knows about and no one can see, but it is something people must strive to create in their lifetime and all around them. It is a state of happiness one must try to build and experience while alive, for there is no after.

However, there is one more notion that is implied in Mary’s decision to reject the Church and pursue instead a scientific field of study and a way of life, which could be described as

opposite to the religious one; while the former is based on reason and research, the latter is based solely on faith. This notion is a clear comparison of ignorance and experience. Pullman celebrates and praises the freedom to explore, know, and appreciate the world, and all the wonders that it has to offer, instead of living in a conservative and restrictive mind frame, enjoying nothing and missing out on everything, while patiently, and sometimes miserably, waiting for an afterlife that may not even exist. This celebration is most effectively shown through Dr. Mary Malone and the circumstances that lead her from that night in Spain to the day she builds the amber spyglass; moreover, she explains to Lyra that although these past few years —after she left the Church— she had been “solitary but happy”, in the Mulefa world she is “The happiest [she has] ever been in [her] life” (Pullman, *AS*, 446). The time spent with the Mulefa becomes increasingly significant and life-changing for her as she learns their culture, language and traditions; she admired the fact that “the Mulefa seemed so practical, so strongly rooted in the physical everyday world” (Pullman, *AS*, 222).

The inversions discussed in this section are a testimony to the way in which Pullman inverts, and eventually deconstructs the elements of the Fall. One by one, he recreates several key scenes in order to reverse their meaning and essentially obliterate their very purpose. This reversal is not only related to their religious essence, but extends to questions of morality, ethics, and the fundamental idea and balance of good and evil. Pullman takes nothing for granted, but instead chooses to challenge every single element that constructs the story of Genesis and the origin of God, and questions the merits of innocence and experience, respectively. The following section will look closely at the representation of angels in the trilogy, as well as analyse the meanings attributed to each one, always considering the above premise.

## Angels

In order to understand the trilogy's associations between Dust and angels, it is necessary to examine a common assumption about angels; namely, that they are disembodied beings composed entirely of spirit—representative of the 'gap' between the human and God. (Bird, 2001, 120)

The angels presented in *HDM* are carefully chosen and depicted, but also evocative of an ideology employed by the author; for they are not only 'representative of the gap between the human and God' as Bird suggests, but the nature of their existence stands as proof of the very absence of God. Despite the fact that there are thousands of angels in existence, in Pullman's worlds, the author only introduces and carefully describes five. Although this may initially appear as too small a sample of such an extraordinary species, these five angels' qualities, characters and idiosyncrasies succeed in creating a multifaceted and complete framework of the angelic existence and nature. The Authority, Metatron, Xaphania, Baruch and Balthamos, however, are also used by the author to achieve something crucial to the story's meaning: these angels exercise free will and act according to their own principles, and their existence is not based or dependent on a God figure to whom obedience is owed. In the process of deconstructing the story of Genesis and ideas of original sin and the Fall of Man, Pullman has also freed the angels of a patriarchal regime, thereby relieving them from their traditional roles and obligations either towards God or the Devil. Milton's angels deviate from the ones introduced in Scripture, in that they are corporeal beings with human appetites, both for nourishment and sexual desire, whereas Pullman has stayed truer to the spirituality that defines angels, emphasizing their otherworldliness. Joad Raymond writes that,

Milton's angels are peculiarly intense creations. Like humans, they eat, digest, make love for pleasure, suffer pain, and feel isolated. Their vision is

subject to the laws of optics. They engage in more intimate relations with humanity than in any other modern text. Their representation engenders conceptual problems: as the poet John Dryden complained, their numerousness is perplexing. [...] Milton's angels are a mix of literal representation, extensive learning, unusually theology, and inspired storytelling, all subordinated to a narrative that is at once descriptive and heuristic. (Raymond, 2010, 10)

Pullman's description of angels—apart from their abovementioned ethereal nature—does not significantly differ from Milton's in regards to their communication and relationships with humans. It is interesting to note, yet difficult to pinpoint, the reason behind Pullman's decision to present them in a Christian light as far as their appearance and nature is concerned, while, at the same time, creating two apparently male angels—defying their stereotypical asexual nature—who are in love with each other. Baruch and Balthamos are two angels whose nature and background are introduced in the beginning of *AS*; they tell the truth, but are weaker than human beings because they do not have true flesh. They are not of a high order among angels and so they can barely be seen, especially in daylight. They also state that they are far wiser than human beings. They undoubtedly form a pair in the trilogy, as they are companions and have loved each other deeply for many years. Baruch, who was once a man, was transformed into an angel by Balthamos.

Despite the love that he has for Baruch, he also expresses gratitude in that he has learned to be kinder because of him. Baruch's death in the *AS* changes Balthamos, and following a short time of overwhelming grief, he vows to help Will in his quest, but to do so “cheerfully and willingly, for the sake of Baruch” (Pullman, *AS*, 93). Both angels play a small but a nonetheless vital role in the trilogy. These two angels, however, also stand for something else. Their apparent homosexual love for one another is one of the many reasons the author has

been attacked by religious groups. However, the way Pullman describes their love and affection for one another, he seems to suggest that there should be no limits or boundaries in love, and that each person is entitled to the freedom to be with whomever they desire. Balthamos clearly states that although he has lived for thousands of years “he [had] never met a nature that made [him] so ardent to do good, or to be kind, as Baruch did” (Pullman, *AS*, 94). This very feat is clearly shown in the way he assists Will even after Baruch has died. Finally, in *Baruch*, the author reaffirms his celebration of humanity and its benevolence and compassion. Of course, this is not to suggest that Pullman believes that humans can become angels. However, it is emphasised that Baruch, who was once a man and has therefore experienced what it is like to be human, is kinder and more understanding when it comes to human affairs, while Balthamos is more detached and less sentimental.

The ethical argument that the author poses in presenting this controversial relationship may be seen as caustic or openly provocative. However, a counter argument could be raised as to the existence or nature of homosexuality between two beings who do not possess corporeality. To this, one may also counter-argue that even if their relationship is platonic, the fact that they are defined as male angels—referred to as ‘he’—who confess to being in love with each other, marks their relationship as homosexual. It is my belief that the author’s intent stems from a desire to partly provoke, but, most importantly, stress and even exercise, to its fullest, the concept of accepting someone while seeing beyond their differences, whatever these may be. I believe that the controversial aspect of this was not intended to attract the negative attention of those who will see it as sacrilegious, immoral, or counter-Christian, but the positive dialogue with the people who will view and ponder it as an issue whose negative critique, led by close-mindedness, has caused significant suffering to many, and whose attempt at a resolution would make the world a fairer place to live in. The very existence of this issue in the trilogy appears to also create a didactic dimension and effect, in presenting

homosexuality to child readers as positive. This move, however, also contributes to the text's further departure from the Christian doctrine, the books' primary audience being the most controversial aspect.

Xaphania—the only female angel in the trilogy that the reader is introduced to— is an angel of “a much higher rank than Baruch or Balthamos, and visible by a shimmering, disconnecting light that seemed to come from somewhere else” (Pullman, *AS*, 201). Seraphina Pekkala also describes her as strange, and being “old and young together” (Pullman, *AS*, 479). She was one of the first angels to stand against the Authority, and for that she was cast out; moreover, she is far older than Metatron—the Authority's Regent—for she mentions that “he came to prominence long after [she] was exiled” (Pullman, *AS*, 379). Apart from offering vital information to Lord Asriel about the Authority and Metatron, she is also able to find a way into the Clouded Mountain—with the help of many other angels—and guide Asriel and Mrs. Coulter to Metatron so that they can defeat him. The fact that she was cast out by the Authority may define or mark Xaphania as another Lucifer-figure, one that precedes both Lord Asriel and Mary Malone. Pullman presents his readers with several forms of rebellion and a variety of radicals. Yet despite this charismatic array of rebels, as stated earlier in this chapter, a replacement for the seat of the ‘throne’ is not an issue Pullman wishes to pose; in fact, throughout the trilogy, he clearly rejects it, not because of the challenge of finding a worthy surrogate, but because it goes against his ideological perspective. Finally, should he have chosen to select such an adversary, one of his focal arguments, regarding the lack of necessity of a God figure, would automatically collapse.

Xaphania's most important undertaking comes towards the end of the trilogy when she has to explain to Will and Lyra that all windows to all worlds must now be closed with the Subtle knife, leaving only one open for the world of the dead. She is compassionate in that she sympathises with the pain of the two children and realises that being separated is extremely

hard for them —despite everything they have been through, this would probably be the hardest thing they would ever have to endure. As an angel, she can fly extremely fast and is able to travel through worlds without the use of windows. Lyra and Will become fascinated and momentarily hopeful at the thought that they too might be able to do so and meet again one day; however, Xaphania explains that it is very difficult.

“The way you have,” Lyra said, “is it possible for us to learn?” “Yes. You could learn to do it, as Will’s father did. It uses the faculty of what you call imagination. [...] It is a form of seeing.” [...] “And is it like the alethiometer?” said Will. “Does it take a whole lifetime to learn?” “It takes long practice, yes. You have to work. Did you think you could snap your fingers, and have it as a gift? What is worth having is worth working for.”

(Pullman, *AS*, 494-495)

The angel’s claim that imagination can be used in order to acquire or facilitate the children’s ability to travel through worlds as angels do is clearly reminiscent of Blake’s belief that imagination can be used to see beyond what we perceive as real, using our eye as a window, something that Michael employs in *Skellig*. In fact, in all three narratives, imagination is valorised as an unambiguously positive quality, one that the authors are encouraging in their readers.

Xaphania’s role, however, may not end there. Bernard Schweizer argues that as a female angel she represents or resembles a female deity that is far more benevolent and worthy of awe than the Authority himself. Although the author does not wish to introduce a different kind of God, but completely abolish the very idea of monotheism, his portrayal of Xaphania



could be, according to Schweizer, an example of feminist theology, and clearly reaffirms Squires' own belief that Pullman is both intertextual and provocative:

Taking into account that Pullman's heroine is a female prophetess, that his witches are powerful and dignified characters, and that the only positive god figure in the trilogy is Xaphania, we might well conclude that Pullman is leaning toward Mary Daly's feminist theology. While both Daly and Pullman advocate the overthrow of masculine gods, they acknowledge a form of spiritual transcendence that recognises the value of female experience and therefore puts the female element back into grace. (Schweizer, 2005, 168-169)

Yet, even if Pullman has been directly influenced by Mary Daly, and Xaphania does resonate with elements of her theology, his repeatedly expressed belief that anything divine or holy, which inevitably belongs within a metaphysical framework, is never as significant or precious as the life we live here, today, seems to allow little room for speculation regarding the introduction of another deity.<sup>25</sup> The focal point of all metaphysical speculation in Pullman's trilogy seems to be the conviction that there *is no God*. The Authority was clearly not the creator, and even though he was one of the first angels to be brought into existence, even he was not aware of any higher being. Finally, Dust consists of elementary particles and is therefore part of nature and of the world, was introduced for this very reason: to assume the role of "creator" without any religious connotations.

Pat Pinsent argues that there is another dimension to Xaphania, and a clear parallelism between the female angel and Sophia (wisdom):<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Professor Mary Daly was "among the first American women to train as a Roman Catholic theologian [who] challenged orthodoxies from the start. She came to wide attention in 1968 with the publication of "The Church and the Second Sex" (Harper & Row), in which she argued that the Catholic Church had systematically oppressed women for centuries" (Fox, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> In the Foreword to Bulgakov's *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, Christopher Bamford writes that "Bulgakov's path to true philo-Sophia passed through two movements. The first, [...] develops the idea of the cosmic Sophia as the intelligible basis of the world—the soul of the world, the wisdom of nature. [...]"

She both rebels against the folly of the Authority (*AS* 219-20) and shows the compassion and wisdom characteristic of the biblical Sophia. The character Mary Malone recounts how Xaphania has “always tried to open minds ... for most of the time wisdom has had to work in secret” (506), while the protagonists are moved by Xaphania’s presence: [...] Pullman may not be reinstating a deity, but he is certainly making use of the Wisdom tradition. (Pinsent, 2004, 202)

One of the strongest examples to be used in defence of Pinsent’s argument is when Xaphania speaks to the children a final time, explaining to them what they must do, and how it would be possible for them to reunite in the future. Therefore, it is possible, and even probable, to see Xaphania in this light and describe her role in the trilogy, not as a guardian angel, but an angel of wisdom; one whose role is to advise and guide, not protect.

Xaphania’s purpose in the trilogy is somewhat ambiguous in that she does not appear to entirely assume a specific role. She is a strong angel, a rebellious one, and most importantly, a wise and fair one. Her dynamic seems to match Lord Asriel’s, but the reader is not given enough information to determine whether there is also a more violent or malevolent side to her. Her allegiance to Lord Asriel and the way she talks to the children shows a strength of character, an honesty, and an integrity that is hardly present in most human characters. Xaphania is the only angel who does not seem to have any flaws and is driven only by a higher sense of justice and righteousness; even if Moruzi’s claim to subordination is considered, Xaphania is the only character who undoubtedly treats the children as equals, or

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But [...] an *intermediary* is needed, a boundary between the Nothing of the Creator and the multiplicity of the cosmos. This boundary [...] is Sophia. Sophia is the divine “Idea,” the object of God’s love. [...] As Dostoevsky wrote: “Beauty will save the world.” In Bulgakov, this Sophianic beauty manifests through the life-giving power of the Spirit, who is never apart from the Word or meaning. Therefore Sophia is twofold, at once Divine and creaturely—above and before creation *and* “in” creation. The world is created in Sophia and Sophia, at the same time, is in the world, throughout it, in the form of divine energies and spiritual beings, as its boundary” (Bulgakov, 1993, xvi-xvii).

as adults. Although she knows what they have been through, as well as what they mean to one another, she speaks to them in a way that denotes respect and mutual understanding, instead of being patronizing. She urges them to use their imagination and find knowledge for themselves but warns them of the difficulty and the amount of effort and dedication they will have to put into it. Finally, she treats them as experienced beings who understand what needs to be done, rather than innocent, nonchalant children who must be told what is good for them or the greater good.

Metatron is an angel —described by the narrator as “the prince of angels” (Pullman, *AS*, 398)— but, like Baruch, he was once a man; his name then was Enoch, he lived as a human 4,000 years ago and was, in fact, Baruch’s brother. When he died, the Authority transformed him into an angel and made him his Regent. He is physically described as an angel by Mrs. Coulter in the third book as being “exactly like a man in early middle age, tall, powerful, and commanding. Was he clothed? Did he have wings? She couldn’t tell because of the force of his eyes. She could look at nothing else” (Pullman, *AS*, 397-398). Through other descriptions of Metatron, the reader becomes aware that he has always been ambitious and cruel, his ultimate aspiration being to take over and assume control; he has also taken advantage of the Authority’s fragility and has slowly transformed the Clouded Mountain into “an engine of war” in order to defeat Asriel, kill Will and Lyra, and “intervene much more actively in human affairs” (Pullman, *AS*, 61). Despite what the Authority may or may not have done in the past, and especially considering his dying appearance in the end —where his face expressed relief when dying— Metatron appears to be far more malevolent, fearsome and conceited. These attributes are also intensified and seconded by his apparent lust for women, which he had when he was a man, and seems to retain even now, especially in the presence of Mrs. Coulter, to whom he confesses “when I was a man, [...] I had wives in plenty, but none was as lovely as you [...] I loved their flesh” (Pullman, *AS*, 399).

Daniel Abrams writes that “One of the earliest descriptions of Metatron is found in the Babylonian Talmud” (Abrams, 1994, 293) where Metatron is seen by rabbi Elisha ben Abuya “sitting and writing down the merits of Israel” (Abrams, 1994, 293). This event has given rise to several different interpretations, but Abrams claims that Odeberg “offered early evidence suggesting that Metatron was a hypostatic being”, that is, “a distinct heavenly being, presumably an angel, and [...] subservient to the commands of God” (Abrams, 1994, 295). Pullman has clearly been influenced by the Jewish Enoch/Metatron tradition, choosing to go beyond the use of sources from authoritative books in the Bible, especially concerning his description of Metatron as seen above. As mentioned in the Introduction, his use of more apocryphal texts in some ways suggests that he is undermining the authority of scripture. George Foot Moore states that

In the revived apocalyptic and cabalistic literature of the Gaonic period and after, the translated Enoch becomes Metatron; his earthly body is transmuted into fire, and he takes his place among the angels, over whom he is advanced to the first rank and supreme rule, thus taking the place held in the older angelology by Michael. (Moore, 1922, 78-79)

The most interesting aspect of this is the fact that Pullman is not only drawing from authoritative books on the bible. Instead, he is, in some way, undermining the authority of scripture, by drawing on the multiple stories and versions and looking outside ‘canonical’ biblical texts. This is an especially interesting challenge to scriptural authority, considering that the trilogy is concerned with question of authority. Furthermore, it is of great interest to note that Milton himself “was one of the seventeenth century students most deeply versed in extra-Biblical religious works. [...] There were few, if any, writers of [that] century who would be more likely to desire and in better position to obtain information concerning I Enoch than [Milton] (McColley, 1938, 23-24) According to Professor Fletcher, “the poet’s

conception of the angel Uriel” as well as several other similarities stand as testament to his inspiration and influence from the Book of Enoch (McColley, 1938, 24). But Metatron, in *HDM*, is even more complex, and his hybrid nature goes beyond the Jewish tradition. It is seen as being both a blessing and a curse, for although his angelic side provides him with immense physical strength, an overwhelming appearance that is both grand and intimidating, and infinite wisdom and knowledge, his human weaknesses, such as lust and anger, are still able to influence him and cloud his judgment. Xaphania says of Metatron: “I have never seen him up close. But he would not have been able to dominate the Kingdom unless he was very strong indeed, strong in every way. Most angels would avoid fighting hand-to-hand. Metatron would relish the combat, and win” (Pullman, *AS*, 379). This superiority of power is also expressed by the narrator towards the very end when Mrs. Coulter and Asriel are trying to kill Metatron: “in spite of the two humans’ and their daemons’ fierce efforts, when Asriel is about to lose consciousness, Metatron ‘still wasn’t hurt’” (Frost, 2006, 76). In the end, however, his feelings of infinite strength and superiority and his indescribable hunger for power are what bring about his end. Having been blinded and tricked by Mrs. Coulter’s cunning and beauty he falls into the trap she and Asriel have set for him and dies in the abyss.

As previously mentioned, angels represent a society of their own, and Metatron assumes a similar role to Lord Asriel’s, in that he is powerful, ruthless and wishes to overthrow the Authority. The greatest difference between the two figures is two-fold and lies first in the malevolent nature of the angel, and second in his aim to assume complete power and appoint himself, not as Creator, but as ruler—a role that the Authority has for centuries now been indifferent to. In his review of Odeberg’s book, G.H. Box states that “Among other points of interest [...] is the identification of Metatron with the Prince of the World,” and adds that of great significance is also the fact that “one of the names assigned to Metatron is Dibburiel, that is the Word of God” (Box, 1929, 82). In *HDM*, it seems that Metatron has essentially

become ‘the word of God’, not by acting as an intermediary who is subservient to God, but by silently and slowly replacing the Authority: his ultimate goal being to assume power and enforce his own ideology. Although Asriel’s morality is once again questioned in relation to his true adversary—for Metatron is the only angel Asriel actually fights with—their respective aims draw a fine line between outright malevolence and the determination to use whatever means necessary to achieve a higher goal that is aimed towards the greater good. Therefore, it could be argued that Metatron assumes, in a way, the role of this higher being that Pullman is truly after. The Authority is, certainly, part of the problem, in that he has literally been absent and has not only allowed this institution that has supposedly represented him to take control and act on his behalf, but believes “that conscious beings of every kind have become dangerously independent” and wishes to put a stop to it with Metatron’s help (Pullman, *AS*, 61). It is slowly revealed, however, that Metatron is taking advantage of the Authority’s weakness and inability to act, and has put into motion a plan of his own:

‘Metatron is proud,’ [...] ‘and his ambition is limitless. The Authority chose him four thousand years ago to be his Regent, and they laid their plans together. [...] The churches in every world are corrupt and weak, he thinks, they compromise too readily... He wants to set up a permanent inquisition in every world, run directly from the Kingdom. And his first campaign will be to destroy your Republic...’. (Pullman, *AS*, 61)

In the end, the reader is given very little information about the Authority and his intentions and plans, because it seems that his absence in all human matters preceded his death by thousands of years. The Clouded Mountain became his refuge and hiding place; but whether this was due to indifference, fear, or other reasons, it remains unknown. This very point,

however, could be intentional on the part of the author, because a bland and absent authoritative figure inspires neither hatred nor awe, not even sympathy. On the contrary, were he to be powerful, or even simply destructive and evil, the reader's position would be far more easily set. The state in which Will and Lyra find this God-figure in the end of *The Amber Spyglass* stirs only sentiments of pity yet, this is not necessarily accompanied with sympathy, forgiveness, or understanding, but, most probably, with apathy and scorn: "Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and mumble in fear and pain and misery, and he shrank away from what seemed like yet another threat" (Pullman, *AS*, 410). Though he may have been inactive and not directly responsible for the Church's actions in all these different worlds, his very idleness—which does not relieve him of blame—is what ultimately causes the reader to feel this contempt.

Considering the fact that the angels, as a 'species', hold such significance, it could originally be assumed that the five described in detail cannot form a representative sample. However, upon closer inspection, these five angels—the Authority, Metatron, Xaphania, Baruch, and Balthamos—demonstrate a significant number of aspects and attributes, such as determination, wisdom, love, hate, patience, trust, malevolence and lust, thereby forming in and of themselves a microcosm based on free will, decision-making, and the consequences that follow. In each angel's representation, Pullman has, once more, deconstructed the highly conforming black and white veils through which the angels of Scripture are seen, being either heralds of God's love and majesty, or Satan's wrath and evil.

### **Transformation: Science vs. Faith and Innocence vs. Experience**

In Chapter 1, the issue of faith vs. science was analysed in *Skellig* and it was argued that despite the often contradictory nature of these two notions, it was possible for them to coexist

based on Blake's idea of the contraries, where opposing ideas and concepts are an essential part in forming a complete self. In Pullman's trilogy, the edges between these two notions are not as hazy or undefined. Although the question is posed as well as commented on to a great extent, the positions held by the characters involved, especially Mary Malone, clearly allude to an ideology in which faith, in everything except the self and people, has been removed almost entirely and from its very roots. It should be noted, of course, that even in *Skellig*, the faith that was implemented by the characters was not directed at God, or any particular religious figure, but at the notion that there *can* be something that is beyond our understanding and something that defies the boundaries of reality; therefore, in *Skellig* it was faith in the unknown or the unexpected that formed a definitive pair with science and the laws of nature.

In *HDM* I argue that the faith which is already in place within the worlds, led by a corrupt authoritarian, is a flawed creation. Over the centuries, this has resulted and succeeded in oppressing the ones who stand on the other side of this corrupted belief, and who are being judged daily based on a set of rules and regulations put in place by a select few whose sole purpose is to control and oppress while serving their needs and quenching their thirst for power at the expense of others. This faith, described by both Mary Malone and Lord Asriel, but also brought to light by the actions of Mrs Coulter and the Magisterium, is a driving force which must be stopped in order for humanity to regain freedom, and the knowledge that will enable it to use it well. The following quotation is representative and indicative of the view of religion and its representatives that the author wishes to portray:

‘And finally,’ said Father MacPhail, ‘the child. Still just a child, I think. This Eve, who is going to be tempted and who, if precedent is any guide, will fall, and whose fall will involve us all in ruin. Gentlemen, of all the ways of dealing with the problem she sets us, I am going to propose the most radical, and I have confidence in your agreement.’



‘I propose to send a man to find her and kill [Lyra] before she can be tempted.’

‘Father President,’ said Father Gomez at once, ‘I have done preemptive penance every day of my adult life. I have studied, I have trained...’

[...] Preemptive penance [...] involved doing penance for a sin not yet committed, intense and fervent penance accompanied by scourging and flagellation, so as to build up, as it were, a store of credit. [...] ‘I had you in mind,’ said Father MacPhail kindly. ‘I have the agreement of the Court? Yes.’

(Pullman, *AS*, 71-72)

In these few lines, Pullman succeeds in revealing the beliefs, corruption and current state of the Magisterium in *HDM*, but, at the same time, he is also drawing a parallel with Christianity and the unspeakable acts of cruelty this institution has performed over the centuries in the name of God. He offers the reader a ‘sneak peek’, which could also be described as a rude awakening, into the wrongdoings and raw reality of the Magisterium and seems to whisper ‘this is the faith, and these are the people in whom believers place their faith’. The absence of a true God is deliberate by Pullman and denotes for him the futility of such a higher being. Yet, this act of defiance is again targeted towards the people who supposedly represent and speak on behalf of this God; a God that the Western world has come to know mainly through these self-appointed correspondents of the divine and the holy. Laurie Frost includes an excerpt from an interview Philip Pullman gives to Readerville where he speaks about the Authority:

The God who dies is the God of the burners of heretics, the hangers of witches, the persecutors of Jews, [...] all these people claim to know with absolute certainty that their God wants them to do these things. Well, I take them at their word, and I say in response...that God deserves to die. [...] The

Authority...is an ancient IDEA of God, kept alive artificially by those who benefit from his continued existence. (Frost, 2006, 11)

There is one final element regarding the Authority in *His Dark Materials* that could be viewed as a critique or, possibly, even a criticism of the perception believers have of God. It becomes evident that the Magisterium, that is the Church, is devoted to the Authority and they act on his behalf, while Lord Asriel works against him —his final goal being to dethrone and kill him so as to build the Republic of Heaven on earth. However, throughout the trilogy, the information that the reader is given about this supposed God figure is related by very few characters, such as the witches Ruta Skadi and Serafina Pekkala in the *SK*, and Balthamos in the *AS*;<sup>27</sup> moreover, the ancient angel is seen only by Mrs. Coulter towards the end of the third book, and finally freed from his crystal litter by Will and Lyra, who describe him as a “poor thing” (Pullman, *AS*, 410). A significant contradiction is presented here between the idea that both opposing parties have of this being, as well as his power and influence, and his actual state, which not only lacks strength and influence, but seems very far removed from and indifferent to anything relating to humanity and the worlds. In the trilogy the one party does what they believe is the Authority’s wish, while the other has dedicated itself to annihilating him and his detrimental influence on the world; yet, what they do not realise is that the Authority is not a part of this equation —having resigned from ‘ruling’ or even caring about humans for thousands of years— and these two groups are fighting, in reality, against each other, or against an ideal, and their *idea* of what the Authority is and what he stands for. Thus, it is belief itself, or faith, that is destructive, not the Authority. Yet, for Asriel, God’s weakness does not eliminate the imminent threat that is Metatron, the Authority’s Regent. At this point, a question may be raised as to whether Pullman allows or leaves room for the

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<sup>27</sup> Pages 45-48 and 273-277, *The Subtle Knife*; 29-35, *The Amber Spyglass*.

substitution of this erroneous faith with a more virtuous one; one that can successfully incorporate science, nature and benevolence. It is my belief that his narrative not only grants this 'replacement' but also encourages it. The amber spyglass, a tool with which Mary Malone is able to see these dark materials, may be a metaphor for both science, in that its construction was based on scientific principles, and faith; faith in humanity's ability to first build something, as well as consciously seek to *see* and uncover the truth, which in *HDM* is Dust, the true materials that form and shape reality.

Dust is an especially interesting concept in the trilogy, and one that appears to be multifarious, both in meaning and in the different purposes it serves, one of them being the manifestation of the loss of innocence and the transition towards puberty. It is also considered to be original sin by the Church and consciousness by the scientists who first discovered it. Pullman writes that it was experimental theologian Boris Mikhailovitch Rusakov of Muscovy who discovered Dust:

'and they're usually called Rusakov Particles after him. Elementary particles that don't interact in any way with others-very hard to detect, but the extraordinary thing is that they seem to be attracted to human beings.'

'Really?' said the young woman, wide-eyed.

'And even more extraordinary,' he went on, 'some human beings more than others. Adults attract it, but not children. At least, not much, and not until adolescence. In fact, that's the very reason—' His voice dropped, and he moved closer to the young woman, putting his hand confidentially on her shoulder. '—that's the very reason the Oblation Board was set up. (Pullman, *GC*, 88)

As a result of this transformative ‘function’, Dust may also be a representation of sin, as the two are intricately connected in the trilogy, mainly because Dust is seen to begin to settle on humans as they leave childhood and become more self-aware.<sup>28</sup> which is in turn linked to the acquisition of knowledge and experience, and the slow departure from childhood.

Dust is also personified in a way, or, more accurately, brought to life, with the help of Dr. Mary Malone. In her world, she is able to build a machine that enables interaction and actual speech with these elementary particles. In the *SK*, the reader sees Lyra approaching Mary Malone in order to get answers regarding Dust; however, what Malone believes she is researching is dark matter, which in Lyra’s world is Dust. In fact, within the trilogy, Dust, or the Rusakov particles, have many definitions and are viewed differently by each character. Balthamos tells Will in the *AS* that Dust is “only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angels were condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all” (Pullman, *AS*, 31). There is a strong parallel that may be drawn here between Pullman and Milton, dark matter (Dust) and his dark materials, and science and faith, respectively. By stating that Dust, conscious elementary particles, are what angels are made of Pullman is once again making both the idea of God and religion obsolete; he is, essentially, annihilating the idea of a sole creator, one that is responsible not only for angels and human beings but for everything in existence. It is at this point that the element of faith disappears altogether and gives way to pure science and nature. The dark materials with which God creates the world according to Milton are replaced with these invisible, minute, particles, and so the faith and belief in something greater is consequently replaced with a sense of disillusionment and a newfound need to work toward improving the life we have now instead of the one that will

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<sup>28</sup> The attributes of Dust which seem to be compared with sin can be found in the following pages: 20-22, 280-284 (*GC*). Especially telling are the following words by Mrs Coulter: “Dust is something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked. Grownups and their daemons are infected with Dust so deeply that it’s too late for them” (Pullman, *GC*, 282-283).

come after death. In this way, Pullman also reaffirms his belief that people should strive to build the Republic of Heaven on earth instead of waiting for a non-existent Heaven.<sup>29</sup>

The theme of innocence vs. experience, as well as the process of this transition, is focal in the works of all three authors analysed in this thesis, and the definition that is attributed to each state in each respective narrative is highly indicative and revealing of each author's ideology. In *Skellig*, the state of innocence was linked to elements of imagination, suspension of disbelief in things that defy the laws of reality, and the ability to see beyond what is in front of you. On the contrary, the state of experience was often, but not always, related to the loss of this innate gift to imagine because of the necessity to conform to the rules of reality and society—an ideology shared by Blake as presented through excerpts of his poems in Almond's novel. In *HDM* the two states are significantly more complicated and related to issues of morality, sexuality, and the ability to anticipate and accept the consequences of one's actions. Again, some of these beliefs are indirectly expressed—as mentioned in a previous section—by the epigraphs Pullman has inserted in *AS*. Innocence in *HDM* may most accurately be defined, or characterized, as ideological ignorance, and this becomes clear through the analysis of several scenes. The most ideologically ignorant character in the trilogy is, of course, Lyra, whose transformation or transition can easily be traced and identified in the course of the three novels. The scenes that follow showcase this exact process and shed light on the way in which she becomes aware of her own 'innocence,' and the events that facilitate this transition.

A very significant part in this transition is played by the daemons, who are essentially the manifestation of a person's soul in animal form. Their nature is highly complex, as are the

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<sup>29</sup> At the very end of *AS* Lyra tells Pantalaimon that “[Will] said there wasn't any elsewhere. [...] I remember he said the Kingdom was over, the Kingdom of Heaven, it was all finished. We shouldn't live as if it mattered more than this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place” (Pullman, *AS*, 518).

rules and taboos that surround their existence. The reader is not told how the daemons spring into existence when a human is born, but they are told that when they die they simply vanish into thin air like a spirit slowly dissolving. In the case of Iorek the armoured bear his soul is represented by his armor, and in the case of Baruch and Balthamos the lack of corporeality and their expression of a desire for it could imply that they are not whole or that they need one another for they complete each other. In the trilogy, this is more accurately expressed by Stanislaus Grumman —also known as John Parry— who is Will’s father, when he explains that “...in this world I saw my daemon for the first time. People here cannot conceive of worlds where daemons are a silent voice in the mind and no more. Can you imagine my astonishment, in turn, at learning that part of my own nature was female, and bird-formed, and beautiful?” (Pullman, *SK*, 213-214).

The second aspect of the daemon’s ability to change shapes and their ultimate decision to settle in puberty is that of transition, and ultimately, of transformation, both literal and metaphorical. As previously mentioned, one of the author’s focal themes in the trilogy is the transition from innocence to experience, and from ignorance to knowledge; the daemon, and the function of Dust, play the most significant role in this transition, and the fact that Pullman decides to make this transition visible and obvious in two ways emphasizes the significance of this transformation and the meanings that lie behind it. Squires claims that “For the Church, this Fall is the source of ‘original sin’ (NL371), of the transition of innocence to experience and also, in Pullman’s version, of the fixing of the daemon in its ‘true form’” (Squires, 2006, 73). The reason daemons are able to change shape during childhood clearly signifies their fluctuating state of being; although the age at which they reach puberty is not specifically set, it usually occurs in their teens, when they have grown enough mentally to distinguish certain things, and have opinions of their own. Also, their sense of understanding becomes more acute and more accurate. However, growing up and exiting childhood while slowly moving

towards adulthood is not always related to age, but, most importantly, to experience and the influences from one's surroundings. Some children may live in a more sheltered and familial environment, thereby delaying the experience of events that will make them more aware of the world around them. On the contrary, there are children whose lives have been harsher and more complicated, and so they are immersed in the sometimes cruel reality of the world earlier in their lives. Baker states that "In fantasy for children, too, the quest and journey is usually a quest for wholeness and identity, for maturity. "'Womanhood' or 'manhood' is a goal achieved: after that, often, the story is over, the transition effected, the journey complete" (Baker, 2006, 238). In the trilogy, this journey is emphasized to a great extent and the author's decision to make the completion of this transition visible, when a person's daemon finally settles, accentuates this even more. The emphasis lies not only in the manifestation of the transformation itself but also in the meaning that derives from it, that is the fact that the type of animal the daemon settles into reveals several aspects of the person's personality; in turn, the person's acceptance of this form and the level to which they embrace, acknowledge and accept these characteristics within themselves are also indicative of the type of person they have become.

In the first book, Lyra begins to question the necessity of the daemons' will to settle in one final form when they reach puberty, telling on the seamen on the ship on their way to the North that she would like Pantalaimon to always have the ability to transform:

'I want Pantalaimon to be able to change forever. So does he.'

'Ah, they always have settled, and they always will. That's part of growing up. There'll come a time when you'll be tired of his changing about, and you'll want a settled kind of form for him.' 'I never will!' [...] Anyway, there's compensations for a settled form. [...] Knowing what kind of person you are.' (Pullman, *GC*, 167)

As a child, she is unable to fully understand the seaman's words at that time, and finds Pan's constant changing as something pleasant and fun, but also something that gives both him and her a certain sense of freedom. However, towards the end of the trilogy and her adventure, Lyra, in fact, experiences joy, relief, and understanding when Pantalaimon finally settles into his pine marten form, knowing now who she is.<sup>30</sup> While explaining to Lyra and Will that all windows to all worlds must be closed, the angel Xaphania says that "Dust is not a constant. There's not a fixed quantity that has always been the same. Conscious beings make Dust, they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on" (Pullman, *AS*, 491). Whether it is dark matter, conscious elementary particles, or original sin itself, it envelops and contributes to everything. So, when Lyra decides to act on her emotions for Will and gives in to 'temptation', thereby biting the apple, she is leaving childhood and innocence behind; she is moving towards a more conscious state of being and so allows Dust to settle on her and her daemon. As a result, both hers and Will's daemons settle, but so do they, after having moved from a state of innocence to a more experienced one. Returning to Blake's concept of contraries, Anne-Marie Bird states that "Dust, according to the trilogy, symbolises the necessary convergence of contraries; an event that is synonymous with the first independent action taken by Adam and Eve, which is subsequently extended into the first essential step toward maturity for the generations that follow them" (Bird, 2001, 122).

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<sup>30</sup> "Pan, [...] you're not going to change a lot anymore, are you?" "No," he said. "It's funny," she said, "you remember when we were younger and I didn't want you to stop changing at all...Well, I wouldn't mind so much now. Not if you stay like this." [...] And she knew, too, that neither daemon would change now, having felt a lover's hands on them. These were their shapes for life: they would want no other" (Pullman, *AS*, 498).



Pullman parallels childhood and innocence with ignorance, and associates adulthood with experience, knowledge, and wisdom. Squires claims that “dualistic thoughts –of the opposition between innocence and experience, for example, or between good and evil- are contested and confused by Pullman, as William Blake did before him” (Squires, 2006, 76). The most evident proof of this within the trilogy is the fact that he considers Lyra’s —the new Eve’s— Fall as charismatic and liberating; for she has now moved into a state of un-  
innocence, of knowledge, and of conscious choices. Another clear indication of this is in the scene when after biting the fruit with Will, Lyra discovers that she is now unable to read or understand the alethiometer like she did before. Xaphania tells her, however, that now she will have to study for years in order to be able to understand it again, but when she finally succeeds, the readings she will achieve will be even better.

One of Lyra’s greatest turning points in her life-altering adventure comes moments after she leaves Pantalaimon behind, and when she and Will attempt to enter the Land of the Dead and are trying to pass the Harpies who are blocking the entrance. The Harpies agree to let them through, but they demand something in return; Lyra proposes to tell them a story in exchange for safe passage. She begins to weave a fictitious tale of her family and her origins digging as deep as she possibly can into her vast imagination, but the Harpy Lyra made the deal with seems to understand that she is lying and so, enraged by the betrayal, is ready to attack her while screaming ‘Liar!’. At that moment, Lyra cries out to Will in despair:

“Will –I can’t do it anymore– I can’t do it! I can’t tell lies! I thought it was so easy  
–but it didn’t work– it’s all I can do, and it doesn’t work!” (Pullman, *AS*, 297)

Through these life-threatening circumstances Lyra has a moment of revelation in which she realises that her ‘gift’ will not serve her anymore, for she is now exiting the world of childhood and entering adulthood; she thus begins to understand the value of truth. Ringrose

claims that “children’s literature is heavily populated with liars —child and adult characters whose untruths propel the plots of the fictions they inhabit, and are central to the moral dimension of the texts. Novel after novel testifies to the intriguing power of the lie, and of its euphemism, “telling stories”” (Ringrose, 2006, 230-231). Lyra’s obsession with lying can be attributed to several factors. The first and most obvious is that it enables her to easily manipulate people and situations, and create false impressions when she wishes to impress someone, as in the case of the children she plays with, or the man she lies to in the cafe in London. The second reason could be her desire to give a more interesting account of her life since the reality of it is to her mundane and ordinary. However, the most important is the pride she takes in telling these lies and the dexterity with which she applies her imagination to these fictitious stories. She believes this to be a defining characteristic which differentiates her and makes her special in some way, even resourceful. Moreover, she uses it to defend or protect herself and her true identity in the face of danger. The element of pride is accentuated when she successfully tricks and manipulates the king of the bears by telling him that she is Iorek’s daemon, and the only way for him to claim her as his daemon is to beat Iorek in a fight. For this feat, Iorek names her Lyra Silvertongue. With this, she sheds her old, insignificant name, Lyra Belacqua, and embraces the new one with gratification and honour. Yet, at this instance, when the harpies ask of her to tell a story and she makes one up instead of being truthful, she realises that lying will no longer serve her, and with this decision she takes one more step towards adulthood and maturity. However, a seemingly contrasting element to her decision to stop telling lies is the fact that she loses the ability to read the alethiometer instinctively. This means that, from now on, she must work both towards learning to read the instrument through years of study and hard work, and learning to be more truthful herself in the process. Lying becomes a significant theme in the trilogy because it is presented in two different ways. It is juxtaposed with truth, making part of the set of contraries that Blake speaks of, and assumes a

double significance. In Lyra's case, lying is associated with, and even defined as, the extensive use of imagination when describing an event, an act that is common and expected during childhood. Therefore, when Lyra is lying, she is exercising her childhood prerogative of being imaginative and nonchalant, unaware of and disinterested in the value of truth. The realization comes when the Harpies call her a liar, an unsurprisingly homophone word to her name, Lyra, as throughout the trilogy she is seen lying and weaving fictitious stories in order to conceal her identity and escape danger. The second meaning is more accurately represented by Mrs Coulter who masters the art of deception and lying in an adult framework for the sole purpose of succeeding in her manipulative schemes. This aspect of lying differs from Lyra's in that it is conscious and lacks the naivety and ignorance of the latter.

James H. Sims compares the scene of Adam's and Eve's expulsion from heaven in Milton and the Bible and argues that "there is amplified re-telling [in the scene] in which God 'drove out the man; and he placed at the East of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life' (3:24)" (Sims, 1962, 128). In *AS*, when Xaphania, wielding the subtle knife, tells the children that they must separate so that she may forever close the windows between the worlds, it is not only reminiscent of the way Adam and Eve were driven away from the gates of Eden but may be seen as an allegory for this scene, which has generated some debate among theorists such as Christine Moruzi and Claire Squires. The similarity also begs the question of whether Pullman is also punishing the children, just as God punished Adam and Eve, and decided to forever bind them to their own worlds. Lyra's and Will's separation is discussed and somewhat condemned by Moruzi who raises issues such as the childhood-adulthood transition, the relationship between children and adults, and their respective roles in society. She argues that in his treatment of the child characters in his trilogy, Philip Pullman actually subordinates children and the entire idea of childhood by "allow[ing] [them] to become increasingly independent, but only within

carefully defined parameters which allow him and his adult readers to remain comfortable in their superior positions in the social hierarchy” (Moruzi, 2005, 65). She asserts that in the end, Pullman re-immerses them as children in their respective different worlds and ‘forces’ them to assume their previous roles as children. She further discusses the moment when Lyra realises that she has lost the ability to read the alethiometer and states that “[Lyra] increasingly trusts her own instincts about the path to follow and Pullman applauds this growth by taking away her innate access to the knowledge that the alethiometer possesses” (62). Moreover, she believes that Pullman’s treatment of the children is somewhat hypocritical in that while he “emphasises the importance of making independent choice, he subverts this intention by providing only one viable option for the two young lovers” (62).

Squires believes that this decision to separate the two children in the end lies elsewhere.

In the end, Pullman’s own storytelling virtuosity has backed him into a corner in which he must contradict either his sense of a good ending or his construction of a consistent morality. [...] This is a harsh lesson for his young protagonists, his readers and indeed Pullman himself to learn. The act of telling stories is beset with decision that put both the creators and the audiences of narrative in a place which is emotionally, ideologically and technically fraught. (Squires, 2006, 113-114)

She claims that there is a loose end in the trilogy, which has more to do with “the paradoxes in the trilogy and the holes in its ideology. The morality espoused by the trilogy would seem to suggest that they should be together, but narrative logic and the lesson about sacrifice in adulthood separate them” (Squires, 2006, 112-113).

The text presents us with evidence that the author’s final decision to keep the children in different worlds is not as absurd or punishing as it might seem, and that Pullman does not negate or contradict the argument that he has been building on throughout the narrative.

Instead, he seems to willingly and purposefully suggest that life is neither fair, nor always filled with happy endings; therefore, Will and Lyra's separation is an unpleasant, terrible, and extremely strenuous situation that the children have to go through and live with, but because this is a decision associated with the greater good of all the worlds, something the children have been working towards, they must be brave and mature enough to leave any selfish reasoning behind and accept their predicament. This does not, of course, mean that they will do so happily or easily, but their very acceptance of this, and the maturity with which they discuss any alternative and ultimately decide against it makes their decision even more admirable and, most importantly, contradicts Moruzi's claim to subordination.<sup>31</sup> Xaphania has facilitated or simply pointed out what they should do. She is there to see them through the most difficult decision they will ever have to make. They, as children, make the least selfish decision, whereas the adults in the story so far have almost always acted out of selfishness and personal interest. It is important to note, at this point, that Will is an extraordinary and unique character, but, most of all, an ideal companion for Lyra. He is a child who is wise, resourceful, and mature far beyond his age, with a personality that demands respect and awe, and ultimately defies convention. Therefore, it could be argued that Will's transformation is not defined by significant change or maturity, but increasing confidence and strength, and, most importantly, his newfound feeling of love for Lyra. His basic characteristics thus remain the same, and are simply reinforced or slightly evolved. This decision for Lyra, however, completes her transformation as she now understands and accepts the truth, both about the state of the worlds and her own predicament. She is ready to bear her separation with Will, based on the premise that closing the window between them guarantees the safety and balance of the worlds. Nevertheless, both she and Will are hopeful that they might one day be able to

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<sup>31</sup> 'No,' [Lyra] said in a quiet wail, 'we can't, Will—' And he suddenly knew her thought, and in the same anguished tone, he said, 'No, the dead—' 'We must leave it open for them! We must!' (Pullman, *AS*, 492).

meet again by accessing and exercising—as adults—their power of imagination, a point that is clearly reminiscent of Blake, and also prevalent in Almond’s narrative.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter looked at Philip Pullman’s trilogy, focusing on the elements that make it similar to, but at the same time, also differentiate it from the story of Genesis and Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost*. Despite the numerous similarities, and considering the fact that the author himself has defined his work as a retelling of this Christian story, it becomes apparent, through the analysis, that the actual retelling, or rather reconstructing of certain scenes and themes is done in order to gradually and eventually reverse their very meaning and essence, and finally annihilate them by making them appear insignificant and fundamentally flawed. This deconstruction is a process for Pullman, and one that is very carefully created. The key elements that give the trilogy this transformative power are: Lyra, the new Eve, Lord Asriel and Mary Malone, two controversial and novel Devil figures; Dust, elementary particles that essentially make a Creator an obsolete and archaic notion; and the angels, stereotypically religious figures that defy and reject a monotheistic existence, and choose instead to live freely and make their own choices.

Intertextuality becomes, in *HDM*, a focal part of the narrative, not only because of this retelling, but also due to the epigraphs that Pullman has inserted at the beginning of every chapter in *AS*. These excerpts are neither decorative nor insignificant; on the contrary, they become testament to the universality and transcendence of all the issues and themes that Pullman poses in his trilogy, for the subject matter is not only limited to religion, Christianity and the existence of God, but also extends to sociological issues such as equality, homosexuality, notions about good and evil, morality, and finally, an evaluation of childhood

and its innocence, as well as the slow transition into adulthood and the experience that inevitably follows it.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CLIFF McNISH'S *ANGEL*

#### Introduction

David Albert Jones, in his work *Angels: A Very Short Introduction*, gives a brief account of the angel's history as a religious persona, through which the secular characteristics emerge as he reaches their representation in the twentieth century.

The elusive character of angels helps explain why they remain popular in an age that finds faith difficult. This is why Iris Murdoch described this age as a 'time of angels' and even wrote that, if there is no God, the angels are set free (Jones, 2011, 122).

The term 'elusive' does more than simply explain or shed light on the reasoning behind these three authors' decision to feature secular angels in their narratives. In fact, it defines and underlines this decision, as well as justifies the evolution of the angel and its often controversial nature. *Angel* is the eighth novel written by Cliff McNish, published in 2007.<sup>32</sup> This work of literature was chosen for analysis and discussion for several reasons. Although it differs significantly from the works of Almond and Pullman, it shares some common themes, such as the dualities of innocence vs. experience and science vs. faith, and transformation, which are, however, explored through different mechanisms. The novel's main theme is that of the guardian angel; however, it is important to note that the author himself has emphasised that despite the use of angels, there are no religious connotations or links: "I do not hold

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<sup>32</sup> Because this work is quite recent in its publication, and due to the fact that the author has not received the same exposure as Almond or Pullman, there has been no critical work or academic discussion written for *Angel*. Therefore, this chapter's analysis will be based on my critical examination, the information I was able to acquire through communication with the author via an e-mail correspondence which will be provided as an appendix, as well as a wider research into angel-focused texts, literary or otherwise.



religious views myself, and therefore my angels were in some ways bound to be secular. I think the concept of the guardian angel is fascinating, but why should religious devotees have exclusive use of it?" (McNish, e-mail correspondence). McNish's protagonist, Freya, dares to ask Mestraal whether God truly exists. 'Are you from God? Are angels the messengers of God?' 'No, unless we do that bidding unwittingly. Perhaps the godhead exists. Some of us believe, others not. In that way at least, we are not so different from your own species' (McNish, 2007, 113). Mestraal's response is indicative of two things: first, it denotes the author's desire to leave the question about God open, and second, and most important, it establishes his wish to bridge the gap between human and angel and bring the two species on equal terms even when a higher figure is concerned. McNish's concept could also be shared by Almond, and several other contemporary works of young adult fiction, such as *Uninvited* by Justine Musk, *Saffy's Angel* by Hilary McKay, and *The Girl with the Broken Wing* by Heather Dyer, who have purposefully chosen to include secular angelic figures within their narrative. Although all these authors share a common vision of a 'free angel', McNish's work was selected over the others because of the ethical dimension it offers, as well as the theme of choice which is significant both within the novel and in relation to the other two works analysed in the thesis. The three works selected in the thesis form a pattern and a slow progression from a basic secularization of the angel and its evolution to a natural being (Almond), to its deconstruction and redefinition as an agent of free will (Pullman), and finally to a creature who, moved by this freedom, is forced, just as humans are, to make a choice (McNish). This choice, however, is not singular, but is more accurately described as a daily struggle. Both Hestron and Mestraal, as well as all other angels in McNish's work, consciously and constantly choose to answer their wards' calling and needs. The three types of angels in these three works form, in essence, one new angel: a secularized, modern, free, flawed, almost humanized yet metaphysical, alien creature who is no longer empowered by

the stereotypes that have kept it alive for so many centuries, but is granted instead the freedom to choose, and is finally seen acting upon this choice.

In the *The Encyclopedia of Angels*, Rosemary Guiley offers a detailed account, of all things angelic throughout the centuries. Of their presence in the twentieth century she writes that:

A renaissance of popular literature in angels began in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and spawned a popular angelology. This view portrays angels as more than messengers and administrators of God's will, but as personal companions, healers, and helpers. The modern angel is a being who is always good and benevolent, in contrast to the biblical angel who metes out punishment and justice when God so commands. (Guiley, 2004, 31)

Guiley's description of the modern, twentieth-century secular angel seems to define McNish's vision of his own angels, as well as the tone he wished to offer his work. But in addition to being companions, healers and helpers, McNish's angels possess two more qualities which ultimately demarcate them: a strong moral compass and an innate free will. McNish's secular angels also differ immensely from the other two authors' discussed in this thesis. While Pullman makes use of extensive religious material only to remove its necessity at the end, Skellig is a part-human, part-angel, part-bird creature, and one that appears to have evolved. McNish accomplishes something different with his angels in that he completely removes the human, the scientific—at least in the way Almond describes it—and the religious. He therefore creates a different species, one that to human eyes resembles a stereotypical angel taken out of Scripture, but one that is in reality something else entirely. By the end of the story, the only thing typically angelic about these creatures is their wish to guard and protect humans, thereby assuming the role of the guardian angel.

The issue of intertextuality is not as strong in McNish's novel as in the other two texts as he does not directly or indirectly make use of other works of literature. Instead, the novel connects the myth of the guardian angel to contemporary social issues and problems that strongly affect teenagers today, such as peer pressure, bullying, and social alienation, terms and concepts which will be discussed later in the chapter.

A final key term of this chapter, and the novel in general, is transformation. In McNish's work, this notion takes on a meaning that differentiates it from the other two works, the greatest dissimilarity being the fact that the protagonist undergoes both a physical and an emotional transformation. Freya, a seemingly ordinary human being, is gifted with an angelic essence and eventually becomes half-human, half-angel; essentially, she acquires the physical characteristics of the angels in the novel, which she can hide or reveal at will, while retaining the corporeality and overall demeanour of a human. This more literal transformation will enable me to develop my consideration of transformation in the thesis in new directions, as Freya's physical change adds a new dimension to the concept of the guardian angel that McNish creates. The theme of transformation in the thesis so far has been linked to maturation, and to the transition from a state of innocence, that is of naivety and ideological ignorance, to a more experienced and adult consciousness of the world and one's surroundings. In this, McNish's work does not differ to a great extent, as he does make use of this interpretation of transformation. Freya's case differs, however, in that although she was born with an innate ability to become an angel and assume this guardian role, she is still given a choice to either embrace or deny it. Once this choice is made, despite the transformation that occurs to her body, 'seen' only by her father and the other angels, the most significant change is one that she must make within herself, which in turn results in a choice she must keep making every day.

The first section of this chapter will closely look at the two angels presented in the narrative. Mestraal and Hestron are two angels who are brothers, and through them the author poses questions pertaining to the nature of good and evil, and the often fine line that divides the two, as well as the damaging consequences, to the self as well as to those around you, of constantly having to choose between two very difficult and painful situations. Contrary to *Skellig*, the question of the reality of the angels in McNish's narrative is not posed as an issue or something that the reader should dwell on. Despite the fact that the protagonist Freya is the only one who can see them (a peculiarity explained by Hestron in the novel), their existence is perceived as fact. One element of the story that may seem to pose the dilemma of the angels' existence is the fact that Freya is hospitalized after Hestron visits her when she is eight years old. Following this event, Freya becomes obsessed with angels to the point where she becomes a threat to herself by believing she is an angel and by attempting to fly out the window. Her father places her in the care of medical professionals who keep her institutionalized for approximately six years. Her belief in angels is thus constructed as a mental illness which must be cured, and so the reader may be led to believe at first that Hestron may truly have been a figment of her imagination. By the end of the story however it becomes apparent that the angels are real and that Freya does indeed possess angelic qualities, something that is even observed by her father. The real questions are revealed to be not about the existence of angels but about interrogating the concept of faith, and perseverance of character when it is pitted against scientific forms of knowledge.

Of the three authors to be analysed in the thesis McNish is the one who most heavily relies on and makes use of the guardian angel persona. Although his angels are far from stereotypical, and are not messengers of God, they are defined and driven by their love for humans and their need to guard and protect them. They are "at least seven feet tall, with creamy-white skin, displaying [themselves] in what [Freya] later recognized as the classic

style: shining, fully-robed, [their] halo like a mane of golden sunshine” (McNish, 2007, 1). They are powerful, asexual, beings with extremely heightened senses of sight and sound, and who have several rows of wings with “supple feathers. Tips as smooth as the afterglow of sunsets. [...] to touch them was like dipping [one’s] fingers inside light itself” (McNish, 2007, 2). Their most important quality is their free will which is, however, unrelated to any allegiance to a higher power. They are free agents who collectively decided to remain close to earth and help those in need. Although they are very tall and strong, it is understood that they are not corporeal as humans are but not entirely ethereal either. Essentially, McNish presents them as alien creatures, whose ‘home’ is outer space. While Hestron is the epitome of benevolence and grace, Mestraal is a flawed angel, whose desperation and realization of the selfishness of human nature, as well as his inability to help all those in need, have darkened him to the core of his existence and turned him into a dark shadow of his former self. In his darkest moments, although he does not deliberately bring harm, he is blind to other people’s suffering and remains passive and indifferent, qualities defined in the novel as equally harmful. The section will outline Mestraal’s characteristics as a flawed guardian angel and attempt to delineate McNish’s ‘flawed’ angelic stereotypes as they are dismantled one by one.

The second section will illuminate and analyse two sets of contraries which were also discussed in the previous chapters, innocence vs. experience and science vs. faith. The approach to both concepts in McNish’s novel is achieved in a significantly different manner, especially regarding the latter. Medicine, or medical science, which makes up the scientific focus of the novel, assumes a less favourable form and is seen as the means through which Freya’s ‘mad’ thoughts of angels must be extracted and her sanity restored. The author does not give a detailed account of the psychotherapy Freya is subjected to in order to accept the scientific truth that angels do *not* and *cannot* exist in the real world. However, there are instances throughout the novel that refer back to her medical instructions of how to deal with

her fabricated visions of angels, as will be seen in the section in question. Andrea Nicki, in her article ‘The Abused Mind: Feminist Theory, Psychiatric Disability, and Trauma’ talks about mental illness in women and the often detrimental consequences that are associated with it. She stresses the notion that “mental illness, like physical illnesses, involves difficulties in social adaptation that, without proper accommodation, sources of support, and aid, can be seriously disabling” (Nicki, 2001, 81). This very issue is explored in *Angel* primarily through Freya, but also indirectly through her schoolfriend Stephanie, who although not hospitalized, medicated, or perceived by medical professionals as mentally ill, is treated by her peers and her social entourage as a “freak” due to her parallel faith in angels (McNish, 2007, 140). Thus, science in *Angel* is viewed with apprehension and a certain amount of fear on Freya’s part because it signifies a loss of ‘normality’ or an inability to accept what is ‘normal’ or real.

The issue of faith in the novel is relatively complicated and multifaceted. Freya’s belief in angels is different to Stephanie’s mainly because the former was able to see and talk to one and is based on personal experience, while the latter’s is a blind faith, resembling religious faith in God. Stephanie has never seen angels but she is positive that they exist, and neither her hostile social circle, nor Freya’s pleas to limit her expression of this faith and love towards them, is powerful enough for her to lose faith in them. Both girls’ faith is seen by society, and science—in Freya’s case—as insane. However, there is a subtle difference: Freya admitting to actually having seen one officially places her in the ‘crazy’ category, whereas Stephanie is just a ‘weirdo’ for believing in them. The story’s theme and layers of meaning do not intend to sabotage this suspension of disbelief for the readers, but simply to provide a realistic scenario of what would occur should these circumstances arise in reality. The God-figure is removed from the element of faith described in the novel, but this faith is placed instead in a league of secular angels. At the same time, faith is also placed in people, the best example being Stephanie relying on Freya and believing that she will do the right thing, a test Freya

fails to pass the first time. Freya's faith is tested in many respects, not only concerning the existence of angels—something she never really rejects, but simply later represses in order to regain normality—but also faith in herself, first as a human being, and secondly as an angel. This self-doubt and the fear that stems from it lead her to make some wrong choices, for which she must suffer serious consequences, such as her brother's resentment, the loss of her friendship with Stephanie, and her initial inability to be a good angel and help her wards.

The issue of innocence vs. experience and that of Freya's transformation, which in the narrative is manifested both literally and metaphorically, is intricately linked with her belief in angels and what follows after she sees Hestron for the first time, her struggle to integrate into her social circle at school, and her inability to become the angel she has dreamt of being since the night Hestron first appeared. Her innocence is essentially lost when she betrays Stephanie and her wards, and she begins to understand the perseverance and resilience that is required on her part in order to become a better human being to her brother, her father, and her friend, and a better angel to those who need her. Evidence from the text will show that her personality, as well as her actions, makes her a very realistic character, making mistakes and decisions that many might have made but would never admit to. The most important aspect of her character is this very transformation and the acquisition of these unpleasant experiences which enable her to fully realise the error of her ways, and help her shed her childish selfishness, moving onto a more responsible and mature state. In the previous chapter it was argued that innocence in Pullman's work was defined more accurately as ideological ignorance; in McNish's novel the loss of innocence is linked with the ability to acknowledge and see how one's actions may influence, and even hurt, others. This realization is consequently followed by the choice to assume responsibility, assess your actions, and attempt to resolve them.

The third section of the chapter will look at the social issues that McNish deals with in his narrative through all the child characters, Freya, Stephanie, Amy, who is Freya's friend, and Luke, Freya's brother. The three most prominent are bullying, social alienation, and a study of public schooling vs. homeschooling. The latter was also analysed by Almond in *Skellig*, where Michael's school experience was juxtaposed with Mina's homeschooling by her mother, a free-spirited adult. In McNish's narrative both systems are presented in a less than favourable light and are only seen from their problematic perspective. Stephanie's conservative and lonely upbringing, as her parents "didn't understand much about the real world" (McNish, 2007, 26), is considered equally painful and dysfunctional as Luke's daily struggle with bullying and Freya's desperate attempts to fit within Amy's social circle at any cost. Luke's experience with bullying is also inextricably linked to the element of protection, a key theme in the novel. This protection is multifaceted and takes on several forms; primarily it stems from Luke's need to protect the weak, thereby taking it upon himself to deal with the bully, Tate. Secondly, in assuming this responsibility, he must hide all signs of struggle in order to protect both his father and Freya from the 'trouble' of them having to deal with *his* problems instead of Freya's, which have always appeared to him to be more difficult and serious. Thirdly, towards the end of the novel, when Luke's problem endangers his own life, it finally becomes clear that someone else must now protect him; this time, Freya, with Mestraal's help, assumes this responsibility and successfully pulls him out of harm's way and saves his life. Essentially, Luke assumes the role of a human 'guardian' figure, drawing a parallel with the guardian angel role, and ultimately suggesting that human guardianship is not exclusive or should not be limited to supernatural beings, but also extends to a human's ability to console and protect. In this way, the author promotes a model of guardianship and caring for his young readers.



McNish appears to harbour the idea that we might need to move away from the stereotypical, perfect guardian angel, and allow ourselves to imagine a flawed guardian who is just as entitled to disappointment as humans are. As I shall show in the next section, while Rosemary Guiley speaks of the idealized human being, McNish attempts to do the opposite by ‘debasement’, or more accurately, humanizing the angelic. The notion of the binaries is as essential to the narrative as is the element of choice. The analysis that follows will delve into all issues discussed above, and will unravel the novel’s focal theme, choice. The theme becomes apparent both through the angel characters, Hestron and Mestraal, as well as most human characters; they represent choice, and more significantly, what follows this choice, and how one learns to live with it. For the choices we make define what we eventually become, but the way in which we choose to live with them and even change them define who we are right now. While Mestraal chooses to shed the ideal, Freya must choose whether she will embrace the angelic. In McNish’s novel, innocence and experience become a choice.

## **Angels**

In the Introduction it was argued that although the twentieth century was defined by its growing secularism, it was at the same time filled with angelic representations in both poetry and prose. In all three narratives analysed herein, the angelic presence stands alone, without a God; that is, without a higher power to which they owe allegiance or obedience. Especially in the case of McNish, the angel assumes a new role, that of a historical persona rather than a religious one. This begs the question of whether Almond has done the same, but the difference with Almond lies in the fact that Skellig is also part bird, and so the character is further removed from the stereotype, having significantly and literally evolved. In the previous chapter it was argued that Pullman deconstructs the religious, and consequently the angelic; in this chapter it will be shown that McNish *reconstructs* it, borrowing familiar motifs and

merging them with new ones, thereby recreating a novel idea of an angel: a secular guardian angel armed with free will, the ability to fall and rise again, and a strong sense of faith in humanity, not a God. In essence, McNish humanizes the angelic.

Guiley writes that

Popular angelology has brought angels down to earth: They have personal names, beautiful humanlike appearances and characteristics, and they have personal conversations with their human charges. In many respects, the modern angel is like an idealized human being. (Guiley, 2004, 31)

In McNish's novel, creating a perfect, human-like, down-to-earth angel is not the ultimate goal. Although Hestron could fit within this framework that Guiley suggests, Mestraal is far removed from it. He is neither beautiful nor idealized, but dark, ugly and flawed, an appearance he selects himself. In this section, Mestraal will often be compared to or juxtaposed with Freya as a result of their numerous common elements. I argue that both angels are humanized by McNish, each to a different degree. While Hestron is portrayed as the epitome of the human and thus idealized, Mestraal 'falls' almost to the lowest degree of humanity—the lowest being actually committing a crime, and rises again, moved by Freya's courage and resilience. Freya's and Mestraal's trajectory appear to merge as each character attempts to assume the role they were meant to embody but struggle to make the choices that will lead them to their respective end. Mestraal is not presented as a juxtaposition to Hestron, but as an alternative to the idealized human being that Hestron represents.

Mestraal and Freya's relationship is complicated and co-dependent. The angel helps the human know and learn how to survive with her angelic side, while Freya helps Mestraal cope with his more human side, the one that is prone to weakness, failure, and feelings of contempt and disappointment. The act of a human comforting an angel undoubtedly brings the two

species closer together to the point where they almost merge and this shows how guardianship is not confined to the supernatural but can be a human role as well. In humanizing angels, McNish seems to be elevating humans by suggesting that they can have an equal moral status and didactic impact to angels, and that a human's capacity for care and protection can equal an angel's.

McNish succeeds in setting up notions of guardianship and faith through these angelic creatures as well as from the other human characters. The two angel brothers form a pair but also work in isolation to provide the narrative with different notions and two separate meanings of the guardian angel persona. Issues of morality, faith, good and evil, and sacrifice surface from their words, as well as from their actions, thereby creating a moral foundation on which the story will be built and around which the characters will revolve. At first glance it is easy for the reader to define Hestron and Mestraal as the good and bad angel, respectively; yet, as the story progresses, this definition becomes superficial and eventually demeans the book's meaning and depth. As with Pullman, the lines between good and evil are not clear and distinct but realistically fine and sometimes even merging. Jones argues that "Angels have taken different forms in different times and places. They have carried different cultural meanings. Nevertheless there are recurrent patterns. Angels are liminal figures at the threshold between the visible and the invisible worlds" (Jones, 2011, 122). These qualities and characteristics that Jones describes have granted the angel figure, especially in the twentieth century, a certain flexibility and freedom to adorn, visit and even populate narratives, be it in a religious or secular environment. Furthermore, their ability to so easily move between the visible and the invisible, especially in the case of Almond and McNish, facilitates the element of doubt and mystery both for the reader and the character in question. This liminal quality may also account for, or even facilitate, the angel's ability to tread between the moral planes

and further complicate and call into question fixed social and ethical binaries of good and evil, and faith and science.

At this point a question arises concerning the qualities and characteristics of a secular guardian angel. In McNish's narrative, the angels are able to comfort, console and indirectly help and offer hope to all those in need. They are not completely corporeal and so they cannot use their bodies like humans can, but not ethereal either as the reader sees "[Freya putting] her face up against [Hestron's] heart. It wasn't like a human heart. It beat more slowly than ours" (McNish, 2007, 150). But if their love for humans and their need to help them even at the cost of their own life does not come from God, or any higher being, where does it stem from? Hestron describes it as a selfless act; a choice that they all collectively made after "[seeing] your wars, witnessed hunger, loneliness, the way you deny each other love – all the terrifying things you do to one another. How could we leave then?" (McNish, 2007, 152) Thus, this act is more accurately defined as a choice rather than a calling or the involuntary following of an order being placed by a higher being.

Hestron is the first angel described in the novel, and the one who visit Freya when she is young. His 'classic style' (McNish, 2007, 1) evokes in the little girl feelings of security and awe. At first glance, Hestron appears calm, collected and magnificent, but only minutes later, an emotional response on his part, that of tears "that spring from his eyes [and] poured freely over his unblemished cheeks, across his sculpted lips and down his smooth throat [...], shocked [Freya] (McNish, 2007, 2). Contrary to Mestraal, Hestron represents the more stereotypical angel and approaches Guiley's idealized human being. Hestron's emotional responses throughout the novel fortify and reaffirm Guiley's statement, for despite being a powerful angel, he still has the ability to feel compassion and even sadness. When he explains to Freya what the angels do he confesses that "millions of you are perpetually crying out, [...] you think not being able to satisfy all that need does not wound us?" (McNish, 2007, 149). At

this point, it is important to attempt to define the term ‘idealized’ within the framework of McNish’s novel, especially considering the fact that Hestron personifies this model. How does one describe an almost perfect human being? Possibly the most important quality is an almost innate ability and aptitude, as well as an unlimited capacity for compassion, benevolence, and sacrifice of oneself in order to help others whatever their need,<sup>33</sup> in fact, it would most accurately be defined as the honest and unquestionable will to put another person’s need above one’s own. A supernatural ability to do so, thereby being able to offer more than everyone else, is what in the end makes it ideal. Finally, mortality completes and perfects the ideal, for if the angels were immortal and indestructible, the human element would be taken out of the equation. Hestron’s ideal character, and eventually sacrifice, is shown when he places himself between two cars in order to soften the blow and save a number of human lives in the process. Freya has already been transformed into a part-angel when she finds herself along with several other angels in the scene of the accident. Although Freya is at the scene and knows what she must do in order to help, for “there was still time for [her] to intervene. [It was] Her life or theirs” (McNish, 2007, 224), yet she could not bring herself to sacrifice her own life for this cause—something Hestron tells her “[he] never expected [of her]” (McNish, 2007, 227). “Her feathers begged her to act, but she couldn’t. And then another angel arrived” (McNish, 2007, 224). Hestron places himself in the hands of death without a second thought. The knowledge that he will even have a chance of saving these people is more than enough incentive to discard his own safety; this is, in fact, the reason for his existence, “the death [he] wanted” (McNish, 2007, 227) and this indeed transforms him into an idealized—almost human—being.

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<sup>33</sup>Indeed, as will be shown in this section, it is this very notion of unlimited care and protection that Mestraal questions and struggles with. Ultimately it is also what drives him to abandon his wards, after realizing the impossibility of caring for everyone at once.

Mestraal's story is indicative of the author's wish to not only portray unconventional guardian angels that do not know if God really exists, but also to portray *flawed* angels that are as entitled to the choice of free will as humans are. Also, by projecting such a being that is as capable of mistakes and acts of weakness, anger and despair, and, at the same time, presenting a human whose nature is part-angelic he inverts the conventional rules of human fragility and error, and angelic perfection. While Mestraal explains to Freya the futility of helping humans due to their indefinite need for it, and following her transformation into a part-human part-angel, she tries to comfort him by placing one of her wings on his shoulders. To that, Mestraal exclaims:

‘Ah, brother [...] is that what you're doing, using a child to remind me of who I once was? Too late for that, no matter how remarkable the child.’ [...] A human comforting an angel. It brought a powerful reaction from him —shame, gratitude, all the emotions he did not want to face. (McNish, 2007, 214)

This act completes this inversion and makes these two creatures equals: a humanized angel and a human with angelic qualities and abilities. With this, McNish succeeds in bridging the metaphysical gap between the two species and reaffirms the notion that with choice comes equality.

Mestraal's act of rebellion, in refusing to answer the call of his wards and thereby abandoning the pact that all angels agreed upon, is not so distant or alien from the original Christian story, for it was Lucifer, the most beautiful and luminous angel in heaven, God's right hand, who rebelled first. Of course, it should be clarified that such a parallel is not made explicitly in *Angel*, although it may serve as an implicit parallel for the reader who is familiar with the Biblical story. The author himself has claimed that his choice to write a story about

guardian angels was as conscious as the choice to remove them from any religious framework.

About Mestraal, and this very choice, he states the following:

in traditional religious stories angels carry out the word of God, but in fictional terms that isn't interesting. By that I mean that interesting characters are ones that make choices, especially moral choices, and presumably if angels in the Christian sense exist they actually have no such choices. They simply carry out the word of God. But fictionally, what about if such beings exist (i.e. beings that exist on a much higher moral plane than us, are deeply empathic, caring, kind, who devote their whole lives to helping others, but at some point **MUST MAKE A CHOICE** about who to help? How much harder would it be for them to make that choice than for us? And what would it do to such a morally elevated individual to have to let people down? How much more guilty would they feel? Eventually, if not able to respond, wouldn't that crush them? Wouldn't that darken them? —i.e. the very strength of their goodness crushes them over time, because they can't fulfil what they want to do, and yet they feel it all so deeply. These were the sorts of concepts that interested me. Hence, we get the dark angel Mestraal. He's not evil in the traditional sense of a character with questionable moral standards. He has the highest standards, and yet he's become a kind of monster. (McNish, e-mail correspondence)

In this, McNish has aimed for and achieved something similar to Pullman. Although Pullman's story was purposefully filled with religious elements and McNish's is utterly devoid of them, their objectives were alike in that they both wished to experiment with a world without a God figure, but most importantly, a world that is not in *need* of one. While Pullman blatantly destroys the corrupt Authority that organised religion has for centuries now harbored, McNish presents a legion of angels that do not serve God, do not know of any God,

and are not even sure he exists. It is clear that Pullman had no intention of reinstating a new authority figure after having annihilated the first one; instead, he claims that life on earth is what humanity should strive to protect and improve. McNish, on the other hand, deliberately leaves the question regarding God's existence open and unanswered, yet still shares Pullman's view that it does not truly matter, as long humans care about what they do, and how they act while they are alive. He celebrates humanity in his own way, by having his secular angels express their love for humans and their secret desire to one day get as close to being human as possible. Hestron expresses exactly this, on behalf of all angels.

‘So many of you idealise us,’ he whispered. ‘Yet an angel would give anything to get as close as you, being human, can get to your wards. We are so limited. We can reassure, we can intervene in small ways, but think what an angel could do if only it was mortal! The advantages you have —to interact without limitations of the physical planes, to persuade, to touch, properly to do that, to be with each other’. (McNish, 2007, 189-190)

Hestron's words reveal the power relationship between humans and angels in the novel, and they speak of an understanding of the human condition, a respect and compassion for the human species, and the belief that although the two differ immensely in physical appearance and attributes, angels do not consider themselves superior in any way. Furthermore, it accentuates the idea and the argument that the author is projecting about humans being able to effectively be responsible for, and more than adequately care for one another, a notion clearly personified by Luke, as will be shown in the following section. McNish is also implicitly arguing that responsibility is multifaceted and the manner in which a person will decide to either assume or withdraw from it can define a person. The angels in the narrative, having decided to assume responsibility for humans, are thus brought to equal terms with Luke who



has created his own moral code and abides by it throughout the novel, assuming responsibility for Freya, their father, and Sam, a weak boy who is being bullied.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Pullman has been harshly criticised for the secular dogma he supposedly projects and supports. In a similar manner, but not to such a great extent, McNish has also received negative responses to his narrative, which suggest that by portraying a legion of secular angels he insults and disrespects religion: “Actually I've received a few nasty emails on this book from America, from people who have very fixed religious beliefs and think I'm a blasphemer. I think the truth is that the opening scene draws religious believers and non-believers in with its premise, and the religious ones don't like the way it ends up” (McNish, e-mail correspondence). James Wood's article in *The New Yorker* about “Secularism and its discontents” states that “many people [...] believe that morality is a deliverance of God, and that without God there is no morality—that in a secular world ‘everything is permitted’” (Wood, 2011). This very misconception is what these three authors wish to contradict and prove wrong in selecting to write of angelic figures whose existence does not depend on or presuppose a God figure, but whose merit and definition—of good or evil—as creatures is now more than ever based upon their actions, thoughts, and character. On the contrary, the authors' decision to describe and deconstruct such a supernatural and religiously-associated persona within a secular and, some would even say ‘morally-free,’ framework places an even greater burden on themselves and responsibility towards their readers, to be morally candid and scrupulous.

Mestraal is a very complicated character, yet, at the same time, the most fascinating in the story. The first time Freya sees him she is terrified by his presence and momentarily paralysed with fear. She is not only worried that another manifestation could mean her relapsing, but such a horrid presence, which she has never seen, dreamt, or imagined before, could mean a lot more. In the past, the angels she thought she saw were always beautiful,

graceful and luminous, but this was something totally different and it “terrified her that she could conjure up something so frightening” (McNish, 2007, 35). This very thought suggests that she has internalized her diagnosis of being mentally ill, for she was told by the doctors at the hospital that seeing angels was proof that her mind created and presented her with fictitious creatures that did not exist. The fact that what she sees in front of her now is so horrifying means that her condition could be taking a turn for the worse. After Freya has ignored her brother’s plea for a conversation on an important matter, the dark angel reappears, thereby offering the reader an even more detailed, and more chilling description: “Each wing rose and fell without grace, a wet slap of matted filth. The angel’s head was grossly misshapen. It had once seen a deformed woman with a head that shape, deliberately chosen it for itself, then gone window-shopping among the worst of humanity<sup>34</sup> for its other features” (McNish, 2007, 51). The reader sees the angel flying, witnessing a robbery, without, however, attempting to do anything to help. He is seen smiling cruelly, coldly, mocking Freya’s discomfort and fear at sensing him but not being able to locate him. And finally, he flies to

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<sup>34</sup> Mestraal’s dark appearance becomes problematic when McNish describes his ugly attributes as having been taken from “the worst of humanity” (McNish, 2007, 20/51/210), a phrase he repeats throughout the novel. It is unclear whether he is referring to morally corrupt people or deformed and disabled individuals, or whether he is using the term in a more ‘loose’ manner, making its connotation awkward and ambiguous. It seems that, with this phrasing, McNish is using a stereotypical notion of inner morality and drawing a parallel with a person’s outer appearance. Physical deformity or disability is being correlated with evil intent and amorality. The author may, of course, be playing with a preconceived notion that outer ugliness signifies inner monstrousness, taking into consideration that the angelic appearance the reader bears witness to is really a figment of our own preconceived notions of what angels look like. David Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder write in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* that “During his own era, Montaigne argues that monstrosity had become the sign for everything mysterious, and thus ‘against nature.’ Thus the body had been transformed into a symbolic surface that manifests the truth of a malignant morality in need of judgment and susceptible to extermination” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, 70). Because of the recurrent use of the phrase “the worst of humanity” in the novel, McNish appears at first to be employing this very stereotype; yet, other instances prove this theory wrong as he clearly shows that this is not the case, as Amy, one of the most pretentious and cruel characters in the novel, is aesthetically beautiful. The issue, however, becomes even more problematic if the characteristics of “the worst of humanity” are used by McNish, and consequently by Mestraal, because they were considered to be the easiest way to manifest evil. This suggests a rather superficial attempt by the author to convey maliciousness and fear, and begs the question of what other means could have been used instead to portray the intended emotions.

where Luke and Tate are standing in an alley: Mestraal immediately knows that Tate is about to harm Luke, yet, once again, he does *not* intervene.

Mestraal is a character whose qualities change alarmingly throughout the narrative, and a persona that is equally beautiful and ugly, evil and benevolent, hated and loved. He represents, in fact, the epitome of what Blake suggested when speaking of the Contraries, and of the contradicting faculties that make up and complete the soul. How can beauty exist without ugliness, and how can good be defined without the presence of evil? Mestraal is an angel whose “body was so impenetrably dark that the brickwork on the building beneath was nearly erased by the sheer depth of its shadow. [...] There was a face of some kind there, but it was hideous —as if the angel had chosen the nose, eyes and lips of the most deformed people in the world to be its own” (McNish, 2007, 20). The description is as terrifying as the angel itself, and the fact that the author has chosen to introduce him in this particular state, at his worst, without explaining that he was once the most beautiful and powerful, suggests that he wants the reader to hate him first; that is, to have no preconceptions about who he was and what he has *become*, but what he *is* right now. In fact, what the author is doing is allowing the reader to assume binary oppositions between good and evil or light and dark which are then challenged and complicated. In this, McNish seems to follow Pullman’s example, by suggesting that the line between these contraries is not always clearly defined, and one should withhold judgment before examining further. These contraries suggest fixed states of being while all the novels analysed in the thesis show how both humans and angels have the potential to change or transform.

The reader is told that this appalling appearance is the result of his own free will and decision to manifest as such in front of Freya. Hestron tells Freya that “[the angels] fashion [themselves] in the image of those they love’: ‘We can never make up our minds what face among our wards to use, whose features we should cherish most’ (McNish, 2007, 153). This

ceases to be true of Mestraal, whose dark and terrifying face is not only meant to evoke a sense of fear in Freya, but is in fact a clear reflection of his view of the world, and humanity in particular. He, “the fairest [and] most loved” (McNish, 2007, 114), has been darkened, inside and out, and become a haunting shadow, not unable but unwilling to help anyone because of his belief in the utter futility of the angels’ desire to guard and protect due to humans’ unending cruelty towards each other. However, Mestraal is not what he seems. In a way, he and Skellig share something similar, for a past experience has transformed them from the guardians they once were to something appalling, both inside and outside. Of course, it should be noted that their natures differ immensely, and in the case of Skellig, the reader is never told what he was doing before and how he came to lie sick and abandoned in Ernie’s garage, whereas Mestraal’s history is explained in great detail. Hestron explains to Freya what he wanted when he visited her all those years ago. “Mestraal always had the most in his care. [...] I came to you that night in the hope —‘That I would take on some of his wards.’ [...] ‘Yes, [...] Mestraal was the finest of us. Revered by all, a magnanimity of spirit, a greatness, all song, ever what his wards needed him to be. His loss is terrible’” (McNish, 2007, 182-183). Mestraal’s ‘fall’ does not have to do with an act of disobedience against a higher power or a wish to overthrow an authority figure; in fact, it poses no religious dilemma whatsoever. Mestraal’s decision is an ethical one, it is a choice, and a result following a series of events which weakened him within. In spite of his beauty, power and ability to guard, love and protect, the constant struggle of having to appease others eventually filled him with resentment and consequently indifference to human weakness and suffering.

Jones raises the question of how angels can sin, and what kind of sins they are capable of committing. Angels do not have any of the physical needs that humans do, such as hunger, thirst, sexual pleasure, material possessions or financial security; therefore, this begs the question of “why would they make a choice that they must see is harmful to them?” (Jones,

2011, 100). He writes that the Jewish and Christian traditions offer two kinds of sins that are the most prominent: pride (to be like God) and envy (of human beings) (Jones, 2011, 100-101). In McNish's narrative, however, the God figure does not exist, and so the notion of sin, followed by an angel's need to be like God, or assume his power, becomes irrelevant. The wish to be like humans, and have the ability to physically interact with them, is mentioned by Hestron but it does not assume a negative connotation; instead of envy it is expressed as a deep desire, or longing. Therefore, if the element of sin is taken out of the equation regarding Mestraal's 'fall', and it is assumed that his choice, based on free will, was one of morality, the question being raised is what darkened him within and drove him to neglect his wards. Freya asks Mestraal if "angels [are] here to help us? To ease our way through life? To guard us from harm?" To this Mestraal tells her 'Do I look like a being that would guard you from harm?' (McNish, 2007, 113). The cynicism of his words denotes bitterness and disappointment. He suggests that the creature he has become could never be perceived as being able to offer help and protection. The weakness in his actions, or inactions, resembles a human's; it was indignation and the feeling of powerlessness against humanity's overwhelming amount of pain and suffering that led him to this.

What follows this argument of Mestraal's moral decision is firstly the novel's definition of morality, or its moral code, and secondly, the fact that Mestraal seems *not* to face any visible consequences to the immoral choices he made, despite the fact that he continues to witness this suffering which he could have averted to some degree. In order to establish how the author defines morality, or which are the morals that are valued within the novel, one must look at the characters and their actions. Luke and Hestron, along with Luke's and Freya's father and Stephanie stand on one side as they display compassion, self-sacrifice, resilience and fearlessness. On the other side stands Mestraal, who has abandoned all the above qualities and settled for indifference, inaction and neglect, followed by Amy who is blatantly and

purposefully cruel and uncaring, and concerned solely with her own image. Finally, there is Freya who is the one character who morally treads between the benevolent and the selfish, the self-sacrificing and the vain—a behavioural pattern that becomes even more significant when one considers that she is a teenager, a threshold age where peer pressure is most acute, and during which she must decide who she wants to be. Her ethics and consequently her choices fluctuate as her social circle seems to dictate her behaviour. Although Freya sees the consequences of her actions materialize before her, as will be analysed in greater detail in the following section, Mestraal’s time as a dark and negligent angel is not followed by any one event demarcating or reprimanding his ‘bad’ behaviour. Instead, his trajectory is slightly reminiscent of the parable of the prodigal son: he lost his way once, and after realizing the error of his ways he returns home and is neither punished nor condemned, “for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15: 24). At this point, however, it is important to also argue against this idea of punishment regarding Mestraal, as it is obvious that to a certain degree, not helping his wards, witnessing their suffering, as well as the burden of having to deal with his decision on a daily basis and its weight on his conscience are all a form of punishment for him, especially considering his former nature and his deep love of humans. If he had truly stopped caring and had abandoned humanity completely, he would have fled, and would certainly not have engaged in any type of contact or relationship with Freya, nor cared about showing her the state of the world as he saw it. This parallel also harbours nuances of faith which will be explored in the following section.

Jones claims that “Milton who thought that angels did have bodies of a kind, defended the view that angels do eat and drink (and even have sex). This was part of a seemingly deliberate attempt to humanize as to dramatize the life of the angels” (Jones, 2011, 45), and it appears that McNish is attempting to do the same. A clear example of this is when Mestraal decides to show Freya what it is like to be an angel, and what it truly takes to survive and live

with this everlasting feeling of despair, pain and sorrow that your wards feel at all times, and that is consequently and endlessly felt by every angel. He takes her to a basement of a house where a man is mistreating his dog. Mestraal uses this as a simple example for Freya, in order to show her the amount of cruelty that a person can inflict on an animal or another human being. “‘This bothers you?’ Mestraal said. ‘You think this is the worst thing a human being is doing now in the world?’ (...) ‘But what about all my other wards? I can’t be with them at the same time as this man. Do you think that none among them is suffering greater indignity than this dog?’” (McNish, 2007, 208). With this, Mestraal begins to unravel a reality that is both sad and utterly painful and horrifying. He speaks of all the millions of people requiring an angel’s help and comfort, and even though an angel’s nature lies in doing exactly this, in the end, it is never enough. He confides to Freya that both he and all the other angels would want nothing more than to materialise before their wards, show them that they really exist, that there *is* someone there for them to take away their anguish, even momentarily; but what would that come to? “Do you think they are content? No, instead they come to depend on us *even more*. After we reveal ourselves a few even put themselves deliberately in danger to test us. [...] What would the worst of you be like if you knew for sure we existed?” (McNish, 2007, 215). This last question raised by Mestraal gives Freya and the readers much to consider and illuminates notions of dependency and responsibility. As will also be shown in the following section, one version of faith in the narrative, as articulated by Mestraal, is presented as problematic in that it is inescapably linked to feelings of dependency and an unceasing appeal and request for attention, comfort and care that may become consuming and selfish. In Mestraal’s argument that humans’ knowledge of angelic existence would maximize this need, McNish is presenting both Freya and the readers with difficult and complicated concepts of human behaviour. He is not simply deconstructing the notion of making difficult choices every single day, but also showcasing how gruelling a process it can become. Mestraal’s

notion of dependency, however, where care results in greater dependency, is challenged by other models of dependency within the text. Having lost faith in humanity, the angel believes that by providing care he is actually enabling humans to become weaker and even more dependent, whereas Hestron, Luke and Freya, and in fact the narrative as a whole, show that the opposite may be true. The two siblings showcase a notion of interdependency where the burden does not fall on one person but is shared, as they each help vulnerable children at school, Stephanie and Sam, and they enable them to become stronger and more confident.

In addition, it also sheds more light into the angel's behaviour and reasoning behind his decision to leave humans to their own devices. Essentially, Mestraal sheds his responsibility of protecting humans, after having lost faith in them. He decides to selectively look at and judge only their bad actions, without realizing that he is becoming like them in the process. What becomes especially interesting at this point is the fact that a person's knowledge of the existence of angels, and therefore the reaffirmation of their faith in them, removes Mestraal's faith in people. Their selfish act of demanding even more attention backfires and results in Mestraal's transformation into a selfish and uncaring dark angel. Knowing what Mestraal has *not* been doing forces the reader to ask if any form of punishment has been or will be brought upon him as a means through which he will realize the error of his ways and return to his former self. Contrary to Freya, however, who clearly and painfully witnesses the consequences of her actions in her brother's predicament, her ignorance of her father's sickness, and the neglect she showed Stephanie followed by her accident, Mestraal does not suffer any tangible or immediate consequences other than the fact that he will have to carry his abandonment in his conscience for the rest of his existence. The most interesting aspect of this argument, however, is what it reveals about human beings and the possible mutuality that is involved in this relationship of care and guardianship. If angels are unable or unwilling to care for or sacrifice themselves for humans, the question still remains of how humans are able



to assist and comfort each other. Why are humans *not* held equally responsible for the acts of cruelty they perform on one another, while an angel's responsibility or calling appears significantly unilateral?

As Mestraal slowly opens up to what has tormented him, Freya understands how he came to be this way. How all this beauty, light, and infinite love and power that once emanated from him, were transformed into this black shadow of an angel, a horrendous remain of something so magnificent and overwhelming. He reached a point where he had to choose between two or more people in need, having to resort, in the end, to help “only those wards who send out a *cry from the very depths of their souls*. (...) How do you make such a choice? Which do you protect?” (McNish, 2007, 215). Finally, Freya understands. ““You had to choose too many times. That’s why you’re like this”” (McNish, 2007, 215-216). As mentioned in the previous section, Almond’s and Pullman’s work prioritize the issue of free will in moral decisions while McNish reveals what happens when this is exercised. It should be noted that this does not in any way make McNish’s angels superior to or more sophisticated than the other two authors’. It is simply a matter of perspective and the specific phase within this process that McNish wished to offer. In *Angel* the characters interrogate what it means to make a choice. Choosing the right or wrong path, however, is only part of this process; the most significant aspect is revealed with the realization that this very choice may hide behind it a dark side, one which carries with it a burden and which may lead to consequent impossible situations. In removing the religious framework, McNish allows for this process to evolve and grow more freely, without the ‘shackles’ of religion. Because Mestraal’s decision is not based on a religious doctrine but his own personal moral compass it can be observed and analysed more objectively without the implications of religious teachings and what they signify or reveal about his choice. Of course, this begs the question of where morality comes from, and although it has unavoidably been linked to religion, it is also a

product of the rules of a given society. Mestrael's society of angels has chosen to help humans and ease their pain. When he chooses to abandon this task, thereby also turning his back on his gift of comfort, his glowing appearance and grace, he does not only go against his own kind, but also against himself. He rejects the specific ethics that his peers, that is, the angels, selected as a group to respect and uphold and carves a new path which he will tread alone.

Mestrael's role in the narrative is possibly the most significant, following Freya's. Furthermore, his presence, his story and the dilemmas he presents Freya with are what shake her the most emotionally and psychologically. These unbearable and cruel choices Mestrael was forced to make every moment, as well as the uncomfortable and often unspoken realities of human nature that he discusses, offer Freya a new perspective on humanity and the role of the angel which is far removed from the ideal and pleasant one she had contrived. Finally, the ultimate lesson that Mestrael teaches her, but which is also reinforced by Stephanie and Luke, is that being an angel, or simply helping others, cannot be achieved without first learning to be a compassionate human being. The definition of a good and compassionate human being in *Angel* is based on the qualities that the novel values most highly, and which some of the characters possess. Possibly the most important value, and one which Hestron, Luke and Stephanie live by, is selflessness; others include compassion, and generally being a humane person. Freya is seen struggling with these, for although she has good intentions, peer pressure and the need to fit in her social circle has driven her to make several wrong choices. Thus, unless she learns to harness her humanity and discover how to be true to herself, she will never be able to properly help others. Mestrael's life, however, is also linked to Freya's in that it is she who is responsible for awakening in him the light that he had lost. Her power, love and resilience remind him who he once was, and it is potent enough to change him back and help him find the faith he had lost in humanity.

## **Faith vs. Science and Innocence vs. Experience**

This section will closely look at the two binary oppositions of faith vs. science and innocence vs. experience and how they are portrayed in the novel. As they are shared with the works of the other two authors discussed in the thesis, certain comparisons will be drawn in an attempt to establish similarities or differences and what these signify about the works in question. The essence of McNish's work lies in the element of choice and these two sets of contraries showcase and emphasize this. While innocence vs. experience shares significant similarities with the other works, the binary of faith vs. science in *Angel* portrays medicine or medical science in a new light, one that does not resemble Almond's vision of the hospital in *Skellig*. As mentioned in the introductory section, the element of faith is removed from any religious framework and placed instead in a league of secular angels, as well as in people.

Faith in *Angel* comes with a certain amount of expectations; it is not free, nor does one place it in someone light-heartedly. Mestraal's fall, as well as Freya's transformation, becomes proof of that. Mestraal argues that when people place their faith in angels, or any other form of higher power, they become needy, dependent, and most importantly, demanding. Their belief presupposes an immediate response at the first sign of worry or need. It is this excessive and incessant demand that drives Mestraal to abandon his wards. On the other side, there is Freya, who has been born with a gift to become half-human and half-angel. Hestron primarily, but all other angels as well, have placed a great amount of hope and faith in her rare gift and expect her to embrace it and aid them in their mission. Mestraal, having lost faith in all humans, believes that Freya will not be able to rise to her potential and even attempts to dissuade her from pursuing it, explaining that "that is what it means to be an angel. To be able to give up your life unquestioningly. Unflinchingly (McNish, 2007, 216). If he succeeds, his new-found beliefs are reaffirmed and his faith remains lost. Freya's faith, both in herself and the angels, is intricately woven within her problematic and confusing experiences

in the hospital throughout her childhood. In fact, her faith has been redefined as mental illness, and the angels as figments of her sick mind. Especially in the beginning of the novel she is seen struggling between accepting what is in front of her, and what she has been told to believe this sighting really is. Nicki writes that “like the label ‘mentally ill,’ the label ‘crazy’ is also used as a tool to control people who are simply nonconformist and not genuinely mentally ill” (Nicki, 2001, 86). Although this does not directly apply to Freya, as her social circle does not perceive her as ‘crazy’, simply because they are unaware of her ‘condition’, in her own mind she is at first confused about what is real and what is a product of her illness. The author does not dwell on this aspect of her personality or experiences, possibly because it would further complicate the reader’s perception of the angels and the protagonist’s credibility as a hybrid, and would derail the story’s focal theme, choice. The novel instead focuses on the element of choice, but just like faith, it is interrogated, for both themes possess problematic and equivocal sides as well as rewards. Whereas in *Skellig* Michael’s and Mina’s belief in the unknown or the supernatural was considered an extraordinary ability, and even a gift should they prove successful in retaining it as adults, Freya is singled out and placed under the microscope of science in an attempt to eradicate this faith. In spite of the fact that she is justified in the end, the psychologically violent intervention she endures shakes her faith to the core, thereby making her lose a considerable part of herself in the process. Freya’s and Stephanie’s predicaments also problematize the notion of faith in the narrative as a whole, in that it is suggested that faith in the unknown cannot only become impeding in terms of socialization but can actually lead to victimization and peer rejection. This point of view, however, is only one side of the argument, as faith in the novel is multifaceted and extends to faith in oneself and the people one cares about and loves.

The works of all three authors analysed in this thesis attempt to question, problematize and de-romanticise rigidified notions such as religion, childhood development and identity,

education, and social structures whose dysfunction may hinder a child's growth into the society in question. The concept of mental illness in *Angel* (as it is used to define Freya) affects Freya's sense of identity to a great extent and is a contributing factor both to her transition from a state of innocence to one of experience, as well as to her own understanding of faith in angels. McNish also takes this problematic assumption even further by suggesting that faith can have significantly traumatic and damaging consequences, offering the example of Freya and Stephanie. Stephanie is treated harshly and cruelly by her peers when she expresses her faith in angels, while Freya is placed in the care of medical professionals who believe this faith to be a disease which must be cured and eventually removed. In Freya's case, this negative reaction causes her to retreat and suppress her belief, as well as question her own sanity. Surprisingly, although Stephanie shows blind faith in her supposed guardian angel, Nadiel, throughout the narrative, telling herself that "everything will be all right at school [...] It doesn't matter if I make mistakes. Nadiel won't let me make too many" (McNish, 2007, 117), her reaction after Freya has rejected and insulted her is one of anger, despair and indignation to her miserable state, and she takes "the portrait of Nadiel down off her wall and [cuts] it with a knife" (McNish, 2007, 249), only to give him an ultimatum a few minutes later "offering [him] one more chance to save [her]" (McNish, 2007, 253), a point exemplifying the neediness and dependency that Mestraal was explaining to Freya. It is significant, however, that right at the moment when both girls seem to have lost their faith, they rediscover it by finding each other, as Stephanie is ultimately saved by the angel Freya, and Freya is in turn 'saved' by Stephanie's unceasing faith in her.

It was argued in the introductory section that Freya internalizes her mental illness and has been convinced, as a result of her hospitalization and medical care, that her belief in angels was the ill-conceived product of her own imagination and her dangerous disease. When Mestraal appears to her for the first time, this internalization resurfaces as she is trying to

come to terms with what is happening to her and remembers what she “used to do [...] Walk along, checking for angels. But in those days [she] *hoped* to see them. [She] wanted to. She started to shake. It *is* happening again [...] I *am* sick. Mestraal isn’t real. I just think he is” (McNish, 2007, 120). Her belief in angels, as well as her faith in them, becomes at this point almost personified in Mestraal’s horrific appearance, and her believed hallucinations of him seem to be reprimanding her instead of reassuring her that she is *not* crazy. Thus, science in *Angel* clashes with faith to such a degree as to make the two contraries incompatible, whereas in *Skellig*, Almond advocates, following in Blake’s tradition, the harmonious and necessary coexistence of the Contraries. The process of internalizing this illness, however, is also a result of fear as she has been ‘trained’ to consider a sighting of an angel as a symptom which is in turn associated with hospitalization, possibly invasive procedures, and examining doctors.

Freya thinks of Stephanie and Mestraal,

weird, angel-obsessed Stephanie, the mirror image of what Freya herself used to be like – followed by the dark angel’s visit. Had she imagined him? Surely Mestraal had to be real. He seemed too appalling for her to have made up. [...] She knew she wouldn’t be able to control her emotions if she saw [her dad], and if anything slipped out about Mestraal he’d be straight on the phone to the hospital. (McNish, 2007, 119)

Although she does not blame her father, realizing that his reaction is justified based on her ‘medical background’, Freya clearly associates her faith in angels with fear, which is indicative of the punitive techniques the doctors use to coerce Freya into renouncing her belief in angels. This element of fear is also expressed in other instances, thereby establishing the idea that despite the years of hospitalization and ‘care’ Freya’s attempts to suppress her belief

in angels is not out of the conviction that angels are truly fictional, but as a result of the intimidation enforced by the medical professionals. Furthermore, these techniques, which included “specialist clinics, endless child counsellors, [...] cognitive therapies” (McNish, 2007, 5), never resulted in a cure. After all these years, none of these methods succeeded in “break[ing] her out of it. Except that her dad had finally done so. [...] and if that desire still burned [...] – so what? She was more in control of the urge now” (McNish, 2007, 6), proving that this scientific method was only capable of suppressing the expression or verbalization of this belief, while her faith endures despite these punitive tactics. This endurance of faith can also be a result of the fact that her faith is based on an actual experience and not simply an idea or a childhood fanciful belief; Hestron’s materialization in front of her constituted a piece of evidence and a form of knowledge that could not simply be extinguished and forgotten.

Mestraal’s dark and deformed appearance may only have been seen by Freya, as the descriptions of him originate from her point of view, and Hestron makes no mention of his brother’s exterior form, either in the past or present. In the novel, it is clarified that the angels’ true alien form is almost nothing like the stereotypical image that Freya is allowed to see. What she witnesses is a projection selected by the angels themselves so that they do not appear frightening. This all changes when she learns how to *see* with her angel eyes—following her transformation— and she finally discovers what the angels really look like. Regarding this event, Freya also poses another question, wondering whether the state of childhood innocence enables or facilitates one in seeing an angel. Mestraal argues that this is an archaic notion, as well as an erroneous one, thereby rejecting the magical, or the angelic, as something perfect and idealistic which can only be witnessed by a pure being. Freya asks Mestraal ““How can I see you? [...] Is it because I am a child? I’ve heard young people often see angels more easily than adults”” (McNish, 2007, 112). To this, Mestraal responds that this is ‘A myth invented by adults who want desperately to believe in the innocence of childhood’

(McNish, 2007, 112). This statement accomplishes two things: first it reinforces the idea, which is shared by Pullman, that innocence is only a social construct which has been given much more merit and worth than it actually deserves, and second, it brings the angels a little closer to earth, by suggesting that an elevated state of being—whether it is innocence or perfection—is not necessary and is in fact unrelated to a person’s ability to see angels. Thus, Mestraal’s words strengthen the author’s intent to humanize the angelic and bridge the metaphysical and ideological gap between the two species also putting further pressure on the binary of innocence and experience, and good and evil.

The second set of contraries, innocence and experience, is linked to Freya’s literal as well as metaphorical transformation. In the previous chapter it was argued that Lyra’s innocence is more accurately defined as ideological ignorance. In McNish’s narrative, Freya’s innocence resembles a lack of or disregard for responsibility. Her newfound state of experience at the end of the novel is defined as the acknowledgment and acceptance of the fact that her choices are followed by consequences which she must be ready to deal with, and responsibilities which she must assume. The choices in question involve her family, her friends, and herself. Her brother Luke and her friend Stephanie constitute an integral part of her realization of what is right and wrong, and are constant reminders of what is truly important. By giving her a cruel insight into the unfairness and misery that is present in the world, Mestraal is indirectly, and possibly even instinctively, urging her to take a stand and choose which side she will be on: indifference or action. Hestron, on the other hand, shows her the way towards assuming this responsibility she has been endowed with but tells her that it is a burden she must choose for herself, for no one else can make that choice for her. Therefore, the powers that shift Freya’s decision-making are numerous, but their very essence are these characters’ insistence that whatever path she follows will lead her to the inevitable reality of accepting the consequences of those choices.



McNish's portrayal of innocence and experience is achieved within an analytical framework of irresponsibility vs. accountability of one's actions and the ability to acknowledge their consequences. Freya operates within this framework and is seen moving slowly from the former to the latter with great difficulty. Almost all the events that occur in the novel are meant to test Freya in some way, so that according to the choices she makes and the path she chooses to follow, she may finally discover and know herself. Puberty is an especially formative period for any person; a period of time during which children leave childhood, acquire some newfound awareness and outlook on the world around them, and begin to slowly create their own personality. However, for Freya this process is even more gruelling and difficult, because she has essentially missed a big part of her childhood and has not been given the proper amount of time to progress and evolve. Although she is fourteen years old, her six-year absence from an ordinary life —attending school, making friends, making mistakes— has contributed to her initial naiveté upon returning to school. Yet, with slow and steady steps she understands what she needs to do and what needs to be changed in order to become accepted and fully integrate in this new and foreign environment. Thus, the mental illness that has been attributed to her has greatly contributed to her lack of socialization and initial inability to organically enter within her school entourage and merge with her peers. As a consequence, however, she is also seen justifying to herself some wrong moral choices believing they are inconsequential or unimportant compared to the gratification of eventually receiving Amy's acceptance.

Determined to leave everything behind, begin a new life and make friends, Freya starts thinking about and caring for things ordinary teenage girls do: what to wear, who to kiss, and how to befriend the most popular and attractive girl in school, Amy Carr. But due to the fact that all these experiences are new for her, she has to be careful in her approach, and so decides at first to “[stay] in the background, [study] how other students behaved, especially the more

popular girls” (McNish, 2007, 8). Although it is clear that her thoughts about angels are never far away, she has the will and power to control them now, thereby succeeding in acting normally, or as expected of her teachers and classmates. The new environment in school also acts to her advantage since none of the girls know where she was before or what she was doing. “Ashcroft High. A huge comprehensive where only a handful of teachers knew what she’d been like before, and none of the other students considered her a misfit or freak (...) There was no more talk of angels, either. Freya was careful to make sure not one word on that topic passed her lips” (McNish, 2007, 8). It is clear to Freya that if she is to begin a new life as a ‘normal’ teenager, and eventually become a successful one, she has to work at it, and be methodical. Her strategy seems to be working because “in the last month, (...) she’d been accepted into one of the more select social circles at school” (McNish, 2007, 9). Through the course of the book, the reader realises that even though Freya is new to this high school ‘game’, and might not have realised it from the very beginning, she slowly becomes aware of what Amy Carr signifies, how she is able to achieve “fame”, and how much of a friend she really is. However, Freya’s desire and longing to belong and be accepted is, at first, far greater and stronger than her need to analyse Amy’s character in order to see her for what she is: superficial and fake. At that point, her only concern is being accepted and welcomed by a community to which she is a stranger and a newcomer, and she is well aware of the fact that getting noticed by Amy Carr is her best chance of achieving, first, acknowledgment, and then approval. Therefore, the choices that she makes are the product of her desire to fit in, and not decisions based on a thought process through which the consequences of these actions have been weighed and considered. In other words, her actions are not yet responsible, as she still lacks the experience which would enable her to foresee the negative consequences of her actions.

All this changes when Freya first meets Stephanie and discovers that she is also obsessed with angels; Freya is then torn between helping her understand that although the love of angels is not wrong, her confession of it may be a mistake she will not be able to socially recover from, and ignoring her or dismissing her in fear of losing Amy Carr's favouritism and acceptance. At this point, Freya is forced to choose between what is right and what is easy. Freya's brother Luke, however, is far from naïve and is acutely aware of what Amy Carr is like. On more than one occasion, either as a joke, or as a serious remark, he tries to warn Freya against joining her "nitwit gang." "Do what you like," he said as she waved him away. "Just make sure you don't turn yourself into her clone, that's all [...] I just can't help noticing the way others in that little gang of hers follow her around like a bunch of lapdogs" (McNish, 2007, 13). In fact, it is made clear that Amy has set many unspoken rules for the people that surround her, and want to become her 'friends'. She dictates one form of social code based on disdain for others while Freya and Stephanie ultimately obey another promoting compassion. These different sets of values are in fact what Freya struggles with throughout the narrative as McNish advocates that the constant process of choice between moral and social codes is part of everyday life and indeed one of the greatest difficulties one can face. Unable, at first, to foresee the long-term consequences of her actions, Freya chooses to irresponsibly abide by Amy's 'laws', disregarding, or turning a blind eye to the moral decisions this choice will ultimately lead to. One of these very choices is exemplified when Freya is on her way to school and she sees a "local pensioner", and after she speaks with him for a few minutes she notices Vicky and Gemma —two of Amy's "crew"— walking by and immediately realises that it was a mistake because it's not "good to have been seen chin-wagging with an old man" (McNish, 2007, 14). A while later the two girls start speaking about the old man, commenting on his "skinny and veiny" legs, and the fact that he smells. Freya feebly tries to defend him but does not want to go too far, always afraid of receiving

disapproving glances. Therefore, Freya does not only have to keep reminding herself how to behave in order to adhere to Amy's rules and not be seen doing something she is not supposed to, but, most importantly, she has to go against her instincts, against the way she is and the way she has been brought up. Her innocence is still at this point blinding her, as she is unable to see ahead and realise that this course of action will inevitably lead her to a path of betrayal both against herself and her family, and Stephanie.

This on-going process for Freya involves making consecutive choices, both in her social and her family environment; these are sometimes difficult to deal with in the short-term, and very often driven by a sense of fear which has been imposed on her primarily by the medical professionals who treated her, but also by her social entourage whose rules and codes frequently clash with her own personal ideology. It is this very distinction that differentiates Freya from Luke—who does not long for the approval and acceptance of his peers—and what ultimately delineates Freya's evolution from an innocent, irresponsible child, to a responsible and selfless teenager whose experiences contribute to her understanding that every single choice she makes is inescapably followed by consequences which she must have already considered and be prepared to face should they prove harmful to oneself or someone else. As it was argued earlier, most of the events that occur within the book and that surround Freya are meant to test her in some way; some, like in the case of Amy, are explicitly stated as tests or trials which will define her level of commitment to her new friend, while others are more subtly presented. However, at that very moment when the dark angel appears and Stephanie Rice arrives at the school gates for the first time, Freya is unaware of the extent to which she will be tested by both angel and human. Yet, both characters represent, in a way, the same thing; they are there to remind her of what is truly important, and that getting what you wished for—whether it is being Amy's friend, or acquiring wings—comes at a great price, which you need to be able to pay when the time comes. Freya ultimately 'grows up' and

enters a state of experience which is followed by the immediate realization of the harm she caused her family, and Stephanie especially. The consequences of her actions are visible in Stephanie's burn marks from the fire, as well as in Luke's near death experience, both events she is able to prevent from resulting in death, and which are catalysts in enabling her to grow both as a person and as an angel.

## **Social issues**

This section will discuss and analyse the several social issues that McNish deals with in his narrative, the most prominent being social alienation which is exhibited by Stephanie and in part by Freya; bullying, shown primarily through Luke as the victim of physical abuse, but also partly through Amy as the 'aggressor' (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010, 337); and a comparison of home schooling vs. education and socialization in school, shown through Stephanie and Freya respectively. Because the three issues are closely linked, as are the characters, the analysis that follows will not deal with each one separately, but will move through these characters showcasing each issue as it is projected in the narrative.

Peer rejection and victimization features very strongly in *Angel* and is explored both from the perspective of the victim and the bully, and is experienced mainly by Stephanie and Luke, the greatest difference between the two being that in Luke's case the alienation is partly by choice, and not forcefully imposed upon him as in the case of Stephanie. Luke's sense of justice and ability to see beyond the social constructs that his peers have created in order to marginalize those who stand out of the 'norm' even remotely have placed him outside the 'in' circle. The fact that his sister has slowly succumbed to this peer pressure seems to be adding insult to injury but his attempts to warn her prove fruitless. He stands as a 'nobody' within an institution whose principles are supposedly based on the creation of healthy social relations.

On the contrary, Stephanie's alienation is born out of the collective and unified attack on her, resulting in humiliation, open ridicule and psychological abuse. Stephanie's unusual appearance and obvious lack of prior socialization is made clear from the very beginning as she is introduced as "an odd-looking girl, about [Freya's] age, [who] wore what looked like an ancient boy's duffle coat. Below that Freya could just see white little-girl socks reaching down to her nondescript flats. Her face was small and pinched, her mousy hair unfashionably long and curly" (McNish, 2007, 21). As if her appearance is not embarrassing enough, Stephanie first appears in front of the school gates with her mother who treats her like she is a five-year-old child on her first day of school. Freya's "heart went out to her" while she was reminded of herself a few years ago going to school with her own "home-made angel wings". "What was this woman thinking of, (...) didn't she know the rest of the kids would crucify her daughter if they saw this?" (McNish, 2007, 21). This scene is indicative of two things: first, it is proof of an unwritten and unofficial social code that exists in the school and which is used by students to categorize other students, and second, it is the first indication that Stephanie's parents lack social understanding and have therefore been unable to advise Stephanie accordingly. Karna *et al* argue on peer pressure and bullying that "victims tend to be rejected by their peers, and this general dislike is another risk factor for victimization" (Karna *et al*, 2010, 261). Therefore, the reader witnesses two kinds of alienation: one in which the victim becomes invisible and one where the victim's presence alone has become enough to guarantee some kind of an attack, whether it is verbal, psychological or even physical. What is characteristic about the way in which McNish delves into these issues is the raw reality of their description and the fact that he does not wish to 'sugar-coat' the threat that they pose or the dangers they create; in fact, he appears to be suggesting that this is somebody's reality on a daily basis, and what many children may be dealing with in our society.

The debate between state-school education versus home schooling is shared by both Almond and McNish. However, there is one major difference in their approach, as well as their delivery and outcome. As argued in the second chapter, Almond presents both sides of the argument, yet seems to sometimes favour home schooling. However, it should be noted that the type of home schooling he suggests and may possibly encourage is the one he portrays in the novel; that is, the one that Mina receives by her mother, and that is the type of education that encourages freedom of thought and knowledge, freedom to imagine and create, to know nature and appreciate it, but, most of all, the freedom to explore and learn whatever brings about such passions, without, however, precluding social interaction with other children, but actually encouraging it. Yet, in McNish's story, the homeschooling that Stephanie receives is far from inspirational and beneficial. Stephanie is nothing like Mina; while the former has been deprived of any social contact, or freedom to express herself and even grow into herself, Mina is not only free-spirited, outgoing and knowledgeable, but also balanced, happy and imaginative. At such a young age, her thirst for knowledge and exploration of anything alive and beautiful has transformed her, and it is this temperament that helps transform Michael. On the contrary, Stephanie's education has not only been "lacking", but has been extremely limited and constricting in every way. She is scared, vulnerable and utterly alone. Of course, Mina is never seen in a social environment such as a school, and although she never officially meets Michael's friends, Leaky and Coot, after hearing them talk about her and calling her 'monkey girl', she picks a fight with Michael, calling his friends stupid. Michael, clearly aggravated accuses her of knowing "nothing about it. You think you're special but you're just as ignorant as anybody. You might know about William Blake but you know nothing about what ordinary people do" (Almond, 1998, 102). However, despite her obvious lack of socialisation and based on what the reader knows about her, as

well as her mother, it could be argued that she would not be as lost or fragile as Stephanie is in Ashcroft High.

Stephanie resembles Freya in many ways. Despite the love for angels, both girls were socially impaired upon entering school for the first time, but for very different reasons. Stephanie's absence from school is a result of her parents' fear and conservatism towards public education:

Distrusting modern schooling, they'd educated her exclusively at home. All that had changed when Stephanie turned thirteen. Reassessing Stephanie's home environment, the authorities found it lacking, and forced her outraged parents to place her in local education care. (McNish, 2007, 26)

Believing that they are protecting Stephanie, her parents have raised her in a sterilised environment that has rendered her unable to function in a contemporary social environment. Having been raised with what her parents thought as proper moral values, "rarely allowing her out unsupervised" or only permitting her to see kids who were "hand-picked from families just like their own" (McNish, 2007, 26), but with no social experience to accompany them, thus enabling her to adapt, she has never been exposed to the cruelty or unfairness that could occur in any social circle or situation, whether it is coming from peers, teachers, or strangers. In addition to being naive, her unconventional choice of attire, her open love of angels and her expression of it in the classroom are enough to draw negative attention from her classmates, who grab every single opportunity to embarrass and ridicule another person simply for their entertainment.

McNish does not seem to favour state schools either. On the contrary, he projects the issues that exist in both environments; while, for example, he mentions alienation and social dysfunction as a result of a child being homeschooled by parents who are far too conservative



or strict, he also draws attention to the peer pressure, intolerance, and discrimination that may occur in school. Finally, he also poses another problem that may be even more disturbing, yet utterly realistic, and that is bullying and the fear that it creates. Almond does not deal with this issue in any way, but McNish has successfully incorporated it into his study of social behaviour in schools today:

Amy was *the* attractive blonde of year ten. Naturally blonde of course, that had been made clear to Freya more than once. Tall and slender, her athletic legs ended in heels just this side of being banned at school. This morning she had a couple of better-looking boys from Ashcroft High hovering either side of her. Glancing sweetly over her shoulder, she indicated that it was OK to be approached. (McNish, 2007, 17-18)

From this very description alone, the reader is able to understand what kind of person Amy is; she represents, in a way, a stereotype that is nonetheless realistic. Secondary school, in McNish's novel, could be described as a mirror of today's society, where the attractive, popular, and wealthy set the rules and make the decisions, while the less fortunate are simply the followers, hoping to one day get close to the privileged. Amy Carr is clearly one of those select few; she is very much aware of her beauty, and takes advantage of it to the greatest extent, while 'innocently' bending—but not breaking—the rules, so as not alarm or provoke the adult authority such as teachers and parents. Amy represents the type of bullying that is not physically abusive but verbally and psychologically intimidating. She is described as "just about the most admired Year 10 student, [who] had made it obvious [to Freya] that she liked her. And if Amy liked you, others found that they did, too" (McNish, 2007, 9). This very statement by the narrator, as well as the tone of the language—which could be described as slightly sarcastic or cynical—seems not only to reflect a reality but also to criticise it.

When Amy first sees Stephanie being accompanied by her mother through the school gates she immediately defines and categorizes Stephanie as a “‘New victim,’ [...] ‘Oh, this is going to be good. This is going to be so, so good’” (McNish, 2007, 21). At that moment the reader also bears witness to the full extent of Amy’s vile character and intent; for to feel contempt and aversion to a person whom she does not believe is her ‘equal’ in status and appearance is one thing, but the intention to purposefully harm another person —whether it is physically or verbally— suggests something deeper and more disturbing. Based on Amy’s reaction and behaviour towards Stephanie, Amy is clearly defined in the narrative as a bully; she feels superior because of her beauty, her status within the school, the adoration she receives from boys, and the admiration she is bestowed by her friends —whom she of course selects herself but never accepts as equals. She, in fact, believes that they are privileged to be seen with her, talk to her, and hang around her, thereby owing her gratitude and respect. Because of her appearance and the status she has been able to bestow upon herself, she is convinced that she, in fact, *is* above everyone and everything else. She considers the people whom she allows to be close to her to be pawns that she can use, favour, or reject at her own will, without the slightest feeling of regret, or compassion. However, most disturbing of all is her attitude and behaviour towards those that are not —according to her— even worthy of existence; in this case, Stephanie. It is not enough for her to simply ignore Stephanie and deny her a place in her ‘crew’; her aim is to destroy her, both publicly and psychologically.

However, the blame, in this case, does not only fall with the students. The lack of proper discipline and awareness is also exemplified in the teachers, who are unable not only to teach children about acceptance, but actually stop them from harassing a student in their own classroom. Troop-Gordon and Quenette argue that “passive responses by the teacher, therefore, may be associated with decreased feelings of support and heightened internal attributions for harassment, resulting in greater anxiety, depression, and school avoidance

following peer victimization” (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010, 336). The teacher’s agitation and inability to cope with Stephanie’s presence in the classroom is clearly shown when she enters the classroom and desperately tries to fit in. Her attire, which consists of a school uniform with the wrong colours as well as a brooch in the shape of an angel are enough to provoke giggles and whispering. ‘That’s enough!’ Miss Volhard growled. Her voice wavering” (McNish, 2007, 76). Seeing this, Amy immediately seizes the opportunity to begin a conversation with Stephanie, which seems innocent at first but “a few others in class smiled, knowing from experience that Amy had something bizarre in mind” (McNish, 2007, 78). So it is that Stephanie begins to talk about her background and the origin of her brooch, revealing in the process her love of angels and her absolute belief in them, while Amy wears a wicked smile urging Stephanie to go on: “Freya glared at the teacher to put a stop to this, but Miss Volhard seemed unsure how to steer the discussion back to normality” (McNish, 2007, 79). By the time Stephanie explains how every single person has his own guardian angel, the entire classroom is openly and loudly laughing at her, but she does not stop speaking, despite the warnings she is receiving from Freya. “Miss Volhard was trying to get some kind of order, but it was impossible” (McNish, 2007, 82). In the end, when Stephanie could not even be heard over the children’s laughter, she stops talking, feeling utterly embarrassed and terrified; it is at that moment that the teacher takes Stephanie out of the classroom, “at least until [the students] calm[ed] down” (McNish, 2007, 84). The teacher’s behaviour in this situation lacks initiative, control and the foresight to deal both with Stephanie’s obvious lack of knowledge of the unwritten social code, and the other children’s teasing and aggressive reaction. As the only adult and authority figure within the classroom, she should be able to prevent such an event from occurring, or in the least resort to reprimanding Amy and making Stephanie feel at ease. Her inability to do so inevitably leads to the children’s encouragement to repeat such an ‘attack’. The question that is also raised, however, is whether the teacher also needs to explain

to Stephanie why her behaviour resulted in her classmates' reaction of mockery, and if so, how she could do so without insulting her or judging her beliefs. Thus, this event begs the question of whether the 'outsiders' need to change themselves and their beliefs, or subdue and suppress them, in order to fit in, or whether teachers need to find a way to abolish or even limit such aggressive and hurtful behaviour so as to protect possible victims.

Furthermore, it is important to note that Freya also looks to the teacher for support and expects her to act. Although she herself makes an effort to prevent this, she knows that the person most capable of intervening is the authority figure in the classroom, the most powerful person in the room and the one who has the utmost responsibility to act. Yet the teacher fails in this scenario, as Freya has done in several other circumstances; events where *she* is the one who had to act and protect others, where she has to make the *right* choice. Thus, through this example, the narrative projects the idea that failing to act or refusing to do so, that is, making the moral choice not to act, is wrong, and inevitably leads to negative consequences.

Troop-Gordon and Quenette state that

perceiving the teacher as engaging in active intervention efforts (e.g., reprimanding aggressors, separating students, contacting parents) may elicit a view of the teacher as empathetic and accepting of the victimized child, and the complementary perception that the victimized child is not at fault for the maltreatment. Such responses, therefore, may protect children from emotional and school maladjustment stemming from peer victimization. (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010, 335)

This example is a testament both to Amy's relentlessness and aggressiveness, and the teacher's inability to interfere and take a stand, thereby punishing the aggressor and making

Stephanie feel accepted and more secure in the classroom. Had Miss Volhard been successful in controlling the situation Stephanie would have considered the classroom to be a safer environment for her to be in, as “children, particularly those who are frequently victimized, interpret teachers’ advice to avoid or stand up to aggressors as criticism of their ability to effectively stop their mistreatment or as evidence that teachers are unwilling to help them” (Troop-Gordon & Quenette, 2010, 337).

However, there is one more aspect that has not been considered, and that is the discipline and lessons that the other children are not given in their own homes. The novel portrays the intolerance of children, whatever their age, towards other children who do not abide by the unspoken and unwritten social rules of attire and behaviour. Stephanie is a good and kind-hearted person who simply wants a friend close to her, yet, her ‘weird’, old clothes, and her unusual hobbies—which are clearly a social faux pas— instantly put her in the ‘unwanted’ category of social hierarchy. Freya, who has previously been in Stephanie’s situation, realizes and foresees the danger of Stephanie’s victimization by Amy, as well as other students, and attempts to help her. Her support becomes significant for two reasons: first, it temporarily reassures the reader that Freya has not completely lost herself and her compassion as a result of her socialization within Amy’s ‘crew’, and second, it temporarily soothes Stephanie’s transition from her secluded home environment to the openly aggressive and verbally violent school environment. Schmidt and Bagwell argue in “The Protective Role of Friendships in Overtly and Relationally Victimized Boys and Girls” that based on a series of investigations and researches, it was found that “high-quality friendships” enabled the positive adjustment of victimized children in school and protected them from internalizing problems (Schmidt & Bagwell, 2007). Freya begins to assume this role for Stephanie and is successful in creating a bond with her over their conversation about angels, during which she tells Stephanie everything that has happened to her. For Stephanie, Freya’s confession and

friendship becomes, from that point on, the only important thing in her life, thereby making Freya's betrayal later on catastrophic to her self-esteem. Freya's rejection causes Stephanie to blame and hate herself for being too weird and not capable of, or even worth, being anybody's friend. The fact that she does not consider Freya to be at fault is indicative of the continuous rejection she has endured for several years and the conviction that it is she who is to blame. Only at the very end, in the hospital, does she send Freya away, after realizing that all this time she herself had been the victim.

Luke also becomes a victim in the narrative, but this characterization is secondary as his most important role is that of the guardian. In the previous section it was argued that Luke plays a significant role in the guardian angel concept that McNish weaves around his narrative. Whereas Freya is a part-angelic part-human creature, Luke assumes a human 'guardian' figure role without the assistance of any supernatural powers. In fact, his human attributes and characteristics that enable him to successfully aid the people around him that are in need, such as resilience, patience and courage, bring him closer to Hestron (and Guiley's idea of the idealized human being) than Freya. As a counterpoint to Freya's steep learning curve, Luke is presented as a human who already possesses the angelic capacity to care for others and guard them. Because of Freya's condition she and Luke have grown apart all these years, and while Freya is in and out of hospital, and her father spends every waking minute taking care of her, Luke is the one keeping an eye out for their father and doing whatever he can to take care of him. From the first day of school, Luke's concern for Freya is apparent, especially when he playfully tries to warn her about Amy Carr and her entourage. Although he understands that Freya wants to fit in and make new friends, having had a lot more experience of being in school, while she wasn't, Luke knows the dangers. Due to his sister's ordeal, he has had to grow up faster and take on some responsibilities around the

house. Furthermore, he has also had to silently help and support his father through an illness, keeping it secret from Freya, so as not to hinder her improvement and trouble her further.

Luke experiences no transformation, in that he does not change throughout the narrative. He steadily maintains the characteristics he is introduced with and the reader, knowing these, is never surprised by his actions or words. Furthermore, just like their father, Luke is a constant —yet sometimes veiled— support for Freya, always reminding her and showing her what is right when she is unable to see it herself. What is even more admirable is the fact that Luke has succeeded in providing this assistance to his family while dealing with bullying at the same time. The reader is told that he experienced bullying in the past during which time a fifteen-year-old had been beating him fiercely every week for several months “—an ordeal that only ended when the boy’s family left the area. Most of the blows Luke endured at the time had been to his body —out of sight, easily hidden— and so much crazy stuff had been going on with Freya around then that even Dad hadn’t realised the worst of it” (McNish, 2007, 41). All this Luke has had to endure alone without ever seeking help —although he longs to— while his father was focused on Freya. Everything that he goes through, while trying to protect the people he loves at the same time, defines Luke as a human guardian and make him Hestron’s counterpart in every way, despite the fact that he is completely human.

In *Angel*, the social narratives interweave with the angelic ones to promote caring among the book’s readers. The notion of guardianship that is represented by Luke is inevitably linked to Amy’s victimization and Sam’s need of rescue. The dark version of the idea of dependency that Mestraal believes in, where dependency means weakness, is juxtaposed with the notion that to be cared for and protected can result in a person’s growth of character and strength, both emotional and psychological. This is showcased by Stephanie who only necessitates Freya’s support in order to be happy and ignore her classmates’ mockery. Believing that Freya needs her to help her face the dark angel gives her courage and determination, attributes she

had never exhibited before. McNish's perspective is optimistic and positive, despite the realistically painful and sometimes even cruel situations he depicts that may occur in a young person's life. These events are what ultimately shape and transform a young adult and what enable them to become who they are.

## **Transformation**

The theme of transformation in *Angel* is significant in relation to Freya who experiences both a physical and an emotional change, both of which are equally noteworthy and co-dependent. She goes through several stages, each one being triggered by an event or a person, and her reactions vary in nature to the point where the emotional escalation reaches a climax in the form of a verbal outbreak against the people she loves the most. Her physical transformation which consist of wings, heightened senses, healing powers, and the ability to feel those under her care at all times, is joyous at first, but soon becomes a burden, weighing on her shoulders and almost suffocating her. The stark reality and realization of the aftermath of this metamorphosis appears terrifying and overwhelming. The childhood dream of becoming an angel now seems naïve as Freya understands that it takes courage, self-sacrifice, and immense strength of character to become a guardian, whether human, like Luke, or angelic, like Hestron. It is of importance to note that McNish does not conclude the book following the moment of transformation, thereby providing the readers with a happy ending. Instead, he continues to represent the aftermath and consequences of it, as well as the significance that it holds. McNish's decision reinforces the notion that choice is not simply a single occurrence, but a process that has to be committed to every day.

As previously stated, Freya's character and integrity are constantly tested, as Amy wishes to integrate her into her circle of 'friends', Luke wants to give her a wake-up call,



Stephanie wants to become her friend, Hestron hopes to ‘recruit’ her into the angelic society and mission, and Mestraal wishes to offer her a first-hand experience of what it is really like to be a guardian. Freya’s emotions alternate, as do her actions, as a result of the emotional turmoil she experiences as she struggles between what she wants, what is expected of her, and what she ought to do. Luke and Amy are two opposing forces pulling at Freya from different directions. A clear example of this is when Luke goes to find Freya in order to talk to her and sees her with Amy and her crew. Freya dismisses him, aware all the time of Amy’s stare while she is testing her, making sure that she puts her first and her brother second. Luke becomes infuriated, having understood what Freya is actually doing.

‘Freya, are you telling me you’re so scared of what this dumb lot thinks that you won’t talk to your own brother?’ He let his eyes stray unashamedly to Amy. Amy understood exactly what he was implying. She gave him a glacial glare, followed by a thin-lipped smile. The smile was aimed at Freya. It was obviously an ultimatum —be loyal now, or you’re out. (McNish, 2007, 50)

The power that Amy has and demands of her ‘friends’ is now made very clear. Yet, it is even more disturbing to see that her influence does not only stop at matters of appearance and behaviour in school, but extends also to every other aspect of her friends’ lives, as long as it concerns her, or she is involved in the situation somehow, as in this occurrence. Amy tests to what lengths Freya is willing to go to in order to fit in and be accepted in her social circle, while, on the contrary, Stephanie’s presence, as well as her request for help and friendship, seem to be there to remind her primarily what she is doing, who she is hurting, and what she is sacrificing in order to be liked. For the rest of the story Luke is seen struggling with Tate’s bullying and trying, at the same time, to help his father and keep his illness a secret from Freya. In the meantime, however, he also bears witness to Freya’s behaviour and relapse. Especially after the first sighting of the dark angel, combined with Stephanie’s arrival and the

thrill that Freya experiences when talking with her about angels, Luke is once again left alone to fend for himself.

When Freya finally understands and realizes the way in which Luke has been suffering, he tells her that he refuses to tell their father about the bullying and begins to accuse her of being neglectful and careless. ““You haven’t even noticed what’s going on with him, have you?”” (...) ‘He’s ill Freya. He’s really ill.’ [...] ‘Dad deliberately asked me to keep it hidden from you.’ ‘Why?’ But Freya knew the answer. [...] ‘He’s just happy to see you back at school, doing normal things again. He didn’t want anything to hold you back’” (McNish, 2007, 176-179). This scene could be an indication that Luke has had enough of Freya’s disregard and apathy towards everything except her own self; however, considering Luke’s behaviour and characteristics so far in the narrative, what he tells Freya is not a result of anger or hate, but true concern. He feels she should be aware of what is happening, and that she is old enough to handle certain responsibilities. He feels responsible for her, and tells her of their father’s condition because the time has come for her to start caring for him and acknowledge what he has been doing for her all these years. Furthermore, he is enabling Freya’s transformation into experience by sharing this responsibility with her. She has been shielded from it for a long time, thus preserving her in a state of ‘innocence’ as a result of her mental state and fragility.

Luke’s involvement in the story becomes critical in two other scenes, both of which intended to teach Freya a lesson about who she is, thereby contributing to her final transformation. The first scene occurs hours after Hestron has died in his attempt to save a family from a terrible car crash and Freya feels responsible for his death. Her pain about Hestron’s death and disappointment in herself is too much to bear and so she returns home distraught. When Stephanie comes by her house in order to find her and make sure she’s all right, Freya dismisses her and sends her away by insulting her. ““I know what I’m saying,’ she

called from the window. 'It's not the dark angel. It's *you*, Stephanie. Why don't you get it? How can you expect me to be your friend? You're too weird! Coming out here half-dressed! Talking angels all the time! Just stop!'" (McNish, 2007, 241). Freya's father walks inside the room in order to discover what has upset her, at which point Freya loses control and starts yelling at him, telling him that he will never be able to control her obsession with angels. Luke is shocked and appalled at Freya's behaviour and bitter words and tries to call Stephanie, but Freya's words have hurt her too much, and so she runs back home. "'You're pathetic,' Luke said, shaking his head. 'I'm ashamed of you. I never thought I'd say that, but I am. I'm ashamed of you'" (McNish, 2007, 243). Luke's words are enough to make her realise what she's done and how cruelly she has acted both to Stephanie and her father. Until this moment, Luke had been forgiving, considerate and understanding towards her, helping her realise what's important and what she is doing wrong. However, hearing her saying such things while disrespecting and belittling her own father is for Luke the last straw. She has disappointed and hurt everyone who cares for her, and this time, Luke cannot turn away and forgive her. This moment marks for Freya her utter failure as a human (a friend, a sister, a daughter) and as an angel and guardian. This climax of irresponsibility is what moves her away from her childhood nonchalance and into a state of knowledge; the knowledge that enables her to see and judge herself and her actions, as well as the ability to acknowledge how these actions have affected and hurt others. In this moment, Freya resembles Mestraal, the overwhelming responsibility she consciously assumes finally becoming evident.

The second scene, which occurs towards the end of the text, is Luke's final confrontation with Tate. While trying to outrun him and escape another beating, Luke "reached a broader stretch of the river, with a bridge that would take him straight into the middle of town" (McNish, 2007, 260). However, moments before reaching the end of the bridge, he slips and falls into the water and begins to drown. At this very moment Freya realises that Luke is

dying and if she does not reach him in time he will not survive. Having just fled Stephanie's house after saving her from the fire Stephanie herself started in her bedroom having decided to burn everything of Nadiel's, Freya's body and feathers are burned to a great extent and she flies "haphazardly, smashing into buildings (...) all the while battling the searing pain in her legs" (McNish, 2007, 262). However, with her last remaining shreds of strength and courage she crashes into the river and manages to pull Luke out. "She managed to heave him up the opposite bank and out of the water, but couldn't drag herself out as well" (McNish, 2007, 263). Mestraal arrives moments later, teaching Tate and the other boys a lesson and pulls both Freya and Luke out of the river and into the air. Luke gains consciousness for a few seconds while they are flying but due to Freya's now extraordinary light he is blinded and unable to understand what is going on. When he recovers he does not recall what exactly happened or how he was saved, but Freya prefers this and so decides not to explain. "Coughing up water, [Luke] tried to see through the light to what was beyond it, unable to understand [...]. Shading his eyes, he looked again. [...] 'He can see you,' Freya murmured to Mestraal. 'No,' Mestraal replied. 'I have no light to speak of yet. Don't you understand? It's *your light* he sees. How could he miss you?'" (McNish, 2007, 266). This scene acts as an antithesis to the previous one: while in the last scene, both Stephanie and Luke reveal and induce Freya's dark side, which is a product of her regret, frustration and disappointment, this scene brings Freya's angelic and humane side to the surface, enabling her to retrieve what she lost and finally earn her angelic gifts. Her disregard for her own safety and well-being in order to save both Stephanie and her brother are a clear indication of her transformation. It is at that moment that she understands, first as a human being, that after years of neglect and self-absorption the time has come for her to help her brother, and then as an angel, that her wards are under her care alone, and their needs come first, and they always will. Furthermore, her decision not to tell Luke what happened and how he was saved reveals a degree of maturity on her part. Her

relationship with Stephanie and its revival proves, of course, to be thorny and arduous, but Freya is adamant about reclaiming their friendship, but this time, on Stephanie's terms.

Freya's transformation throughout the story is remarkable in that she succeeds in breaking personal barriers. As she makes one wrong choice after another, unable at first to realize and foresee what these actions may lead to, she essentially and unknowingly begins a process through which she will learn who she is, and then attempt to prove it. Through her transformation, Freya exhibits and shows both her dark and her good side; although she is at heart compassionate and understanding, consumed by her own personal struggle of being an angel, she loses control of herself, and irresponsibly believing she is the only one being tormented by personal problems, she is cruel and unfair both to her brother and father, and Stephanie. Hestron reveals to Freya that she alone among all humans can see angels, and that is part of her gift. Yet, he also explains that her gift "is greater than that" (McNish, 2007, 150). When Freya asks why it is that she can see them, Hestron replies that it is because she "is not entirely human" (McNish, 2007, 154).

'I'm...I'm just a girl,' she said. 'I'm not an angel.' 'No. Not an angel. Rarer than that. Your kind is so exceptional that among the angels we do not even have a name for the spectacular thing you are.' [...] 'You are both human and angel.' 'Not more powerful than an angel, but capable of coexisting on both planes. Only three others in human history have been able to do so. One was the man called Elijah, who became Sandolphon. Another was Enoch, who became Metatron.' (McNish, 2007, 154)

The magnitude and magnificence of her physical transformation is thus juxtaposed with her unwillingness to use her gift and her unacceptable behaviour towards the people she should be protecting. This is indicative of the fact that her physical angelic attributes are not enough to

make her, or transform her, into an angel. Hestron's words are also reminiscent of Pullman's narrative and the latter's use of the Metatron figure. Although both authors speak of humans who become angelic, Pullman's focus when describing this angel who was once human and was then transformed into an angel is on the human desire for power, which is, however, unavoidably linked to the author's strongly atheistic beliefs about the corrupt nature of religion, whereas McNish focuses on guardianship as well as the concepts that go along with it, his interest in religion being significantly more limited. For Freya, the emotional and psychological transformation becomes the essential parameter that will enable her to personify a human-angelic figure, and it is something she must accomplish herself; it is something she must *choose* and embrace, and finally, something she must keep choosing daily, as it is an awesome responsibility laden with difficulties and sacrifices.

## **Conclusion**

Jones writes that,

In the Middle Ages, talk about angels was frequently an indirect way of talking about human beings. [...] Angels can provide a mirror to help us appreciate human life. Nevertheless, this mirror functions predominantly by way of contrast. Thinking about angels, who do not have bodies, help us appreciate how much of human life is in fact bound up with the fact that we do have bodies. (Jones, 2011, 45-46)

This notion is shared both by McNish and Pullman, and illustrated clearly in their works. For McNish, however, it holds even greater significance as the aim of his narrative is to humanize the angelic, not by debasing it or implying that its merit is subdued when compared to the human, but by suggesting that such qualities and virtues are not exclusive to the supernatural.

This he exemplifies both in Mestraal, who has lost his way and has consciously rejected his angelic mission and gift, and in Luke, who is a guardian and protector personified, in spite of his own personal struggles. By humanizing angels, McNish is elevating humans, thereby bringing the two on equal terms, and stating that as both are agents of free will, they are as prone to weakness as they are capable of greatness.

But angels have one more significant function in the narrative and that is to shed light on human behaviour, how it should be and most importantly what it *can* be. This attribute becomes didactic for the book's younger audience, and both Mestraal's and Hestron's personalities exhibit characteristics that are both angelic and human, responsible and cruel, good and bad. Their ability to choose who they want to be is an indication that what defines a person is not origin but choice. In essence, Cliff McNish uses the two angels, as Jones suggests, to talk about human beings, and reflect on human life, while critiquing it at the same time. Thus, McNish presents his readers with four guardians, two angels, one part-angel, and one human, who form two pairs: Freya and Mestraal, and Hestron and Luke. Although these four characters exhibit different notions of guardianship, protection, dependency, resilience and courage, they are all continuously defined and characterized by their consecutive choices, a principle that demarcates the narrative and extends to all characters within it.

## CONCLUSION

In his book *Angelic Spirituality: Medieval Perspectives on the Ways of Angels*, Steven Chase states that

The angels also serve as symbols. As such the angels are *polysemic*. That is, they have the capacity of possessing many levels of meaning at once, they point beyond themselves giving added meaning to ordinary experience, they become agents of transformation guiding the soul along the path of the spiritual quest, and they express certain patterns of ultimate reality that can be expressed in no other way. (Chase, 2002, 16)

In the works analysed in this thesis, the angels become more than a symbol of transcendent spiritual experience and agents of transformation; they become agents and representatives of a contemporary, secular philosophy. They are created to encompass and embrace the spiritual while consciously abandoning the religious, the didactic and the God-sent. While retaining the ethereal, the incorporeal, the majestic and often the magical, they are humanized to a surprising extent—for both characters and readers—thereby sharing in the human experiences of sorrow, love, pain and joy, while still being able to comfort, love and guard, as is often, but not exclusively, their role.

Possibly the most taboo element surrounding the three authors in question, and their respective works, is the fact that they are all atheists, something they have neither hidden nor denied. Even McNish, who chooses to leave the question about the existence of God open in *Angel*, has stated that “[he has] always had a secular interest in ideas about angels, and perhaps [his] own religious upbringing reinforced that” (Bowllan, 2008). Throughout the



thesis, however, it was argued and demonstrated that the angels' secular disposition does not in any way negate or annihilate their spiritual nature which is still founded and even reinforced in the notion of faith. But faith, in this case, is not confined to the archaic idea of man's faith in a God-figure, a God that is remote, detached and out-of-reach in more than one way. Faith is redefined and rediscovered to describe the way humans trust and have faith in one another, and subsequently, in the otherworldly, or the unknown. In essence, these books promote faith in the spiritual but a faith that is not bound to an ultimate authority to whom obedience is owed. What appears to lie in the core of this secular spiritualism, which includes both human and angelic agents, is free will, which is in turn inescapably followed by choice. This very sequence delineates the thesis and sheds light on the primary reason for the selected order the three authors were placed in.

David Almond forges the connection as "Skellig in many ways embodies Blake's vision of spirituality. He is the soul of humanity, the link between the earthly and the heavenly, and between life and death" (Natov, 2006, 236). The author builds the first stepping stone based on Blake's vision of the spiritual and the gift to see beyond the real and the ordinary. Furthermore, his "story challenges notions of what children can learn, what spiritual lessons we can impart to them. It explores how to access the creative and essential part of themselves, whether it be through dreaming, or looking and listening 'deeper' in the world" (Natov, 2006, 237). With its close engagement with Blake's *Contraries*, *Skellig* also establishes one of the key frameworks for analysis in this thesis. The notion that "without *Contraries* [there] is no progression" (Blake, 1975, 66-67) encompasses one of the thesis' main arguments as it illuminates and emphasizes the idea that good and evil, light and dark, are qualities that can be found in everyone, human or angel, to some degree, and that our moral stature is defined as a daily struggle by every single choice we make towards one side or the other, the sum of our choices making us who we are, and not a single decision.

Pullman's work captures the essence of the Contraries, as well as Miltonic ideas of good and evil, but, according to Natov, his story "goes beyond deciphering and distinguishing between [such] polar opposites [...]. It challenges the very nature of such bifurcation" (Natov, 2006, 238). In rewriting his own version of *Paradise Lost*, Pullman begins to unravel the thread that holds the Christian foundation together, claiming that this Paradise should *not* be regained, as it was never a good place to inhabit in the first place. The fruit from the tree of knowledge, which represents humanity's greatest sin, should never have been withheld from us, and Eve's betrayal should have been perceived as a gift and not a curse. As the final stitch is removed and the thread exposed for what it truly is, a lie, Pullman renders the religious obsolete, while elevating the human. In this process, however, he does not neglect to, honestly and without bias, represent the numerous faces the human element may wear—the moral and the immoral, the powerful and the weak—while emphasizing that such distinctions are not easily made nor clearly defined.

The theme that demarcates McNish's work is choice, a process that is ongoing, gruelling, and which is defined as a daily struggle, not a solitary decision to either be good or evil, fair or unfair, a bully or a guardian. But this choice is not exclusive to humans, and the right to choose, again and again, also belongs to angels who have been choosing to act as guardians to humanity and offer their help selflessly. By granting this freedom to angels, as well as by suggesting that humans have the same capacity for guardianship (particularly in the figure of Luke), McNish humanizes the angelic and elevates the human. For the child protagonist, Freya, who is part-human part-angel, the choices she makes will determine her physical transformation into an angel, as well as her transition from a state of innocence to a more aware state of knowledge and responsibility. This she shares with the book's young readers, as Nicholas Tucker suggests that "one important theme for readers in the mid-years of childhood is the constant tension between their still surviving infantile fantasies and their

increasingly accurate perceptions of the demands of reality” (Tucker, 1981, 121-122). Freya’s childish perception of the angelic resembles a fairy-tale existence of nonchalance, supernatural gifts and ethereal beauty, whereas the reality is that to become an angel and to assume this role necessitates the same discipline and acceptance of the fact that one must carry a great amount of responsibility, and learn to put others’ needs above your own.

Since the publication of the works analysed in this thesis, all three of these authors have written new material. McNish’s latest publications have significantly moved away from both the secular and the angelic, his last two narratives being a weird fiction novel (*Savannah Grey*, 2010) and a ghost horror story (*The Hunting Ground*, 2011). Pullman’s and Almond’s decision to eventually return to the same subject-matter without, however, repeating the same story confesses a desire and a need to develop ideas that reveal new aspects of the same notions that evolved and matured within the authors over time. Since *Skellig* was published in 1998, Almond has written several novels for children, but in 2010 he published a prequel to *Skellig* called *My Name Is Mina*. In this the reader is offered a more detailed and thorough perspective and outlook on Mina as she recounts how she came to be home schooled by her mother and that “while the school system works fine for the vast majority of children, [Almond] reminds us that there has to be a place for alternative schooling for boys and girls like Mina” (Sedgwick, 2010). Almond revisits the same character 12 years later, longing to delve deeper into issues that were suggested by *Skellig*, the most prominent being the current school system, and how it can prove to be insufficient for children such as Mina, whose creativity, imagination and unconventional outlook on the world seems beyond their years, thereby potentially making them socially impaired outcasts, and unaccepted by their peers in a contemporary twentieth century school environment.

In the past, Almond has gone beyond the use of his texts and fiction to advocate his beliefs and convictions about Britain’s school system and how the conformity to strict rules

and methods of testing and evaluation cannot possibly be beneficial for all children and can actually inhibit creativity and imagination. A serious issue came to light recently as “In an attempt to ensure that her pupils don’t face disadvantages in later life, the head of a Teesside primary [...] asked parents to correct children’s local accents and grammar” (Almond, *The Guardian*, 2013). Almond, who is from the north-east of Britain, decided to contribute an article in *The Guardian*, on February 8, 2013, written exclusively in a phonetic representation of local dialect and accent, and express his opinion on talking ‘propa’ English: “Am a rita, and A kno the commin lngwij cums from the hart an sole, and must neva be forgot” (Almond, *The Guardian*, 2013). The article celebrates the use and continuation of such accents, and argues that they neither impede nor deter linguistic or academic advancement, as the author himself was born and raised in Felling and Newcastle Upon Tyne, and not only graduated from university but also taught for many years before becoming a published author. Almond has, in fact, many of his characters, in several of his novels and stories, speaking in the local dialect where the story takes place. In *Skellig*, but especially in *My Name is Mina*, Almond uses his fiction to communicate his wider critique of the school system, which is unable to help, encourage and motivate children such as Mina, whose expression, either through art or other means, does not comfortably fit within the established curriculum. In this sense, these fictional texts are part of a wider activist campaign to make the UK education system more attuned to students’ individuality and creativity.

Pullman’s latest publication, for which he has once again been condemned to “eternal hell” (Flood, 2010) was *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010). When asked what inspired him to write this book Pullman stated that he has “always been fascinated by the difference between the man Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary, who I think almost certainly existed, and the idea of Christ, the son of God. The vast bulk of what people say about Christ seems to me nonsense, impossible, absurd. About Jesus, on the other hand, we can say many

interesting things” (Franks, 2011). Andrew Riemer claims that this “is a controversial novel [that] challenges traditional ideas of faith” (Riemer, 2010). Pullman’s hold on the religious and his decision to significantly alter and once again deconstruct a foundational Christian story accentuates the fact that *HDM* was not the only work within which he wished to express some anti-religious ideas. But this intention, it seems, is not an attempt to debase the values of religion, but, on the contrary, to illuminate the aspects that are, as Pullman claims, ‘interesting’, while challenging and confronting the ‘impossible and absurd’ head on. Pullman’s and Almond’s latest works, however, are also an indication of the strong presence that these seminal themes still have in the most recent publications for children and young adults.

These aspects, in conjunction with the arguments posed in the thesis, lead, once again, to the notion of didacticism in children’s literature. Hans-Heino Ewers, in his article ‘Children’s Literature and the Art of Storytelling’, states that “apart from its proximity to orality, another feature which distinguishes children’s literature from adults’ is its didactic nature” (Ewers, 1992, 174), while J.P. May seems to be validating this view by claiming that “Adults who share literature with children are often conscious that they are using the story to ‘tell’ the child something about life” (May, 1997, 83). These two claims beg the question of whether the three authors in question set about writing their stories with the purpose of teaching their younger audience about religion, education, morality and responsibility. In the case of *Skellig*, Bullen and Parsons believe that

by asking readers to navigate this uncertainty [about *Skellig*], the novel arguable has a pedagogical agenda. It invites child readers to engage in a combined imaginative and intellectual consideration of Michael and Mina’s version of events in tandem with the characters’ own assessment of *Skellig*.  
(Bullen & Parsons, 2007, 136)

Furthermore, Shelley King writes that, in *His Dark Materials*, “the moral qualities expressed by Lyra throughout the trilogy have meaning beyond their function in the narrative, and encourage readers to reflect on aspects of their own lives” (King, 2005, 115). Although King’s is a point that could be applied to all three narratives, my analysis of the works in this thesis showcases that despite the moralistic messages that may surface in the course of a reading, the authors’ primary goal has been to inspire awareness, responsibility, and creativity rather than preach, and challenge, and question archaic and outdated notions of religion, as well as seemingly black and white distinctions of morality, rather than conform to specific standards.

The authors themselves, however, have also spoken in regards to their intentions when writing, and although Pullman has stated several times that he “write[s] books for whoever is interested. When I write a book I don't have an age group in mind” (Singh, 2008), Almond confesses that writing for children was a conscious decision. He explains that when *Skellig* was first conceived as an idea he knew that it had to be a story for children; to that effect he has claimed that “One of the things about writing for kids is they want you to be honest: they want to know the truth. And I think they can tell when you're kind of lying to them or pretending” (Richards, 2002). McNish’s reasoning approaches Almond’s as his goal has always been to write for children and young adults, his daughter being, at first, his primary audience. In the process of writing *Angel*, whose idea was born out of an “arresting image that came from nowhere” (Bowllan, 2008), he began to realize that

In a sense, the whole story almost inadvertently became a moral fable [...] [which] was inevitable once I started contrasting human behaviour with the angels. At first I was worried about that – the last thing I wanted to write was a preachy book, as in my experience that turns teenagers right off. But after completing the first draft I decided that the ethical dimension was the main

strength of the book, and I made each of the characters have choices over the full range of possible moral choices. (Bowllan, 2008)

McNish's statement showcases that the author makes a clear distinction between preaching and ethics, and he achieves this by showing how ethical frameworks can operate independently of religion, a point that is equally emphasized by Almond and Pullman. In the Introduction, the concept of morality as opposed to that of religion was discussed, and Wood's statement about "many people believ[ing] that [...] without God there is no morality—that in a secular world 'everything is permitted'" (Wood, 2011) was brought into question as far as these three authors and their works are concerned. Through my analysis it became clear that Almond, Pullman, and McNish were successful in including a kind of ethical didacticism in their narratives, but one that does not preach and encourages exploration and independent thought rather than urging children to subscribe to a specific dogma. The values that are advocated collectively in all five books pertain to social interaction with peers, curiosity and inquiry about the world we live in and the ability to see what may lie beyond it, responsibility, action and protection towards others as opposed to apathy and cruelty, as well as resilience and strength of character in difficult and often painful situations. All these ethical frameworks for children are established through challenging or casting doubt on religious beliefs, while still retaining, and sometimes even advocating, an interest in faith and compassion towards others.

APPENDIX A

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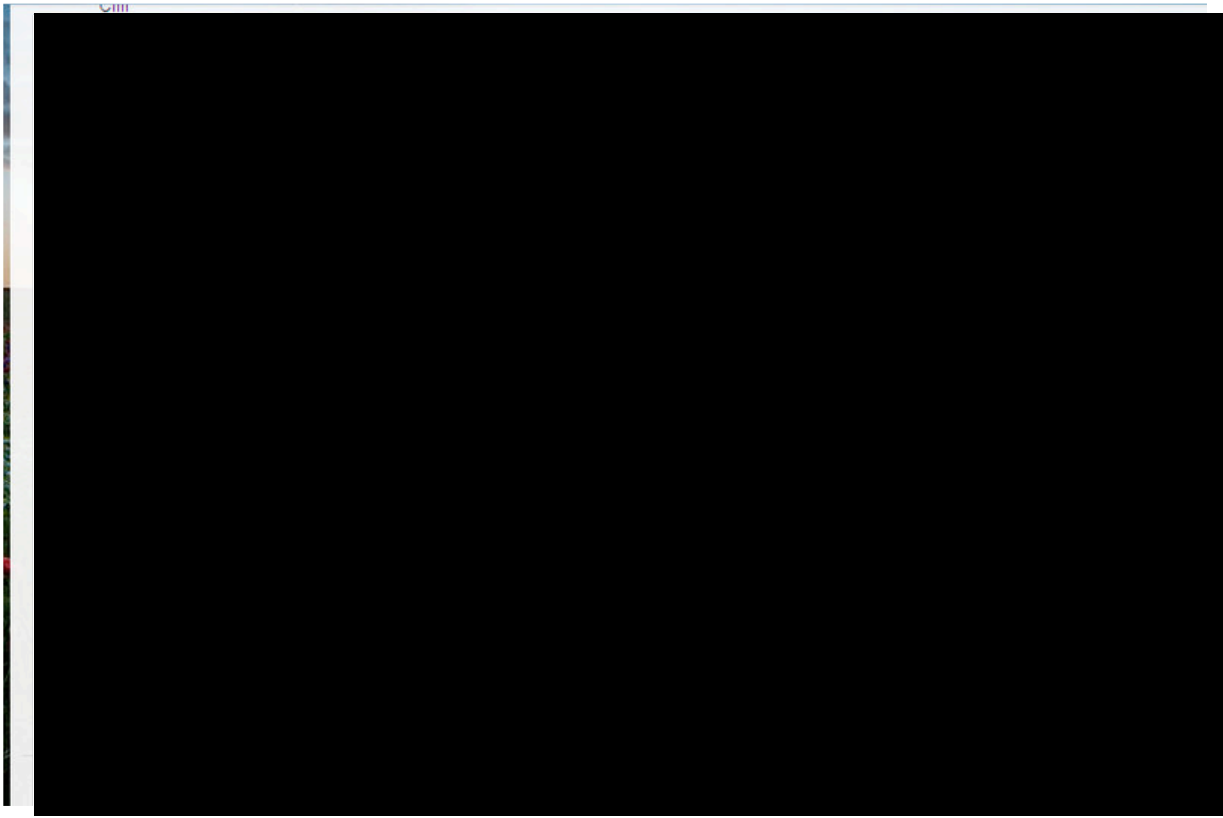
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APPENDIX B

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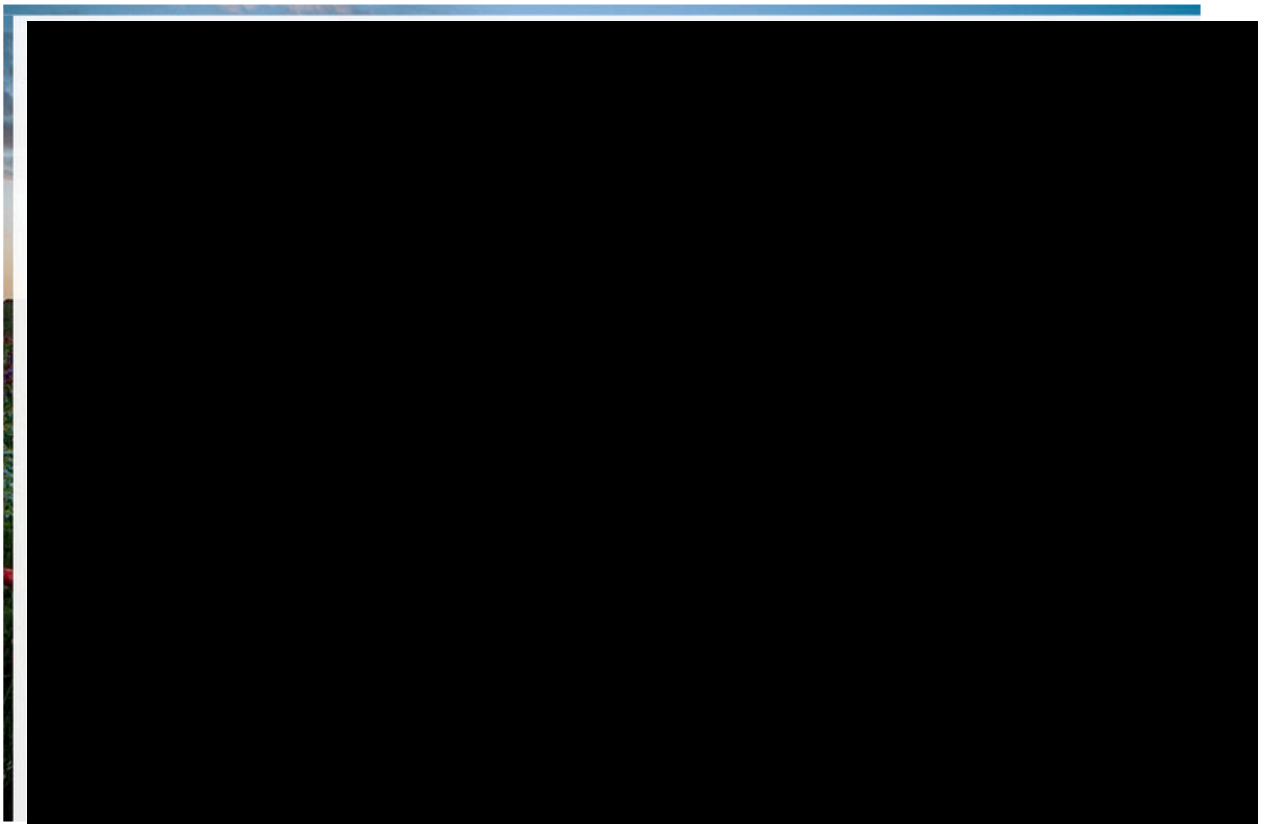
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