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REPRESENTING INNER CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH SYMBOLISM IN SKELLIG

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Abstract: David Almond occupies a distinctive position in contemporary British children's literature due to his unique ability to merge realistic narratives with symbolic and metaphysical dimensions. His Carnegie Medal-winning novel Skellig (1998) explores the psychological transformation of adolescence through an intricate network of symbols that reveal the complexities of human consciousness. Rather than presenting consciousness through direct psychological narration, Almond externalizes his protagonist's inner experiences by employing symbolic figures, liminal spaces, animals, dreams, light, darkness, and flight imagery. This study investigates how symbolism functions as the principal artistic mechanism for representing inner consciousness in Skellig. Drawing upon literary symbolism, cognitive narratology, developmental psychology, and children's literature studies, the article argues that symbolic representation enables Almond to portray psychological states that transcend ordinary verbal expression. The analysis demonstrates that Michael's emotional uncertainty, fear, compassion, and intellectual maturation are reflected not only through his thoughts but also through symbolic interactions with the mysterious creature Skellig and the surrounding environment. Furthermore, the study reveals that symbolism serves as a bridge connecting imagination with reality, allowing readers to experience consciousness as a dynamic process rather than a fixed psychological condition. The findings suggest that Almond transforms traditional symbolism into an instrument of psychological exploration, thereby enriching contemporary children's fiction with profound philosophical and emotional meanings. The article contributes to current studies of David Almond by emphasizing symbolism as a narrative strategy for representing consciousness rather than merely an aesthetic feature.

Keywords: David Almond; Skellig; symbolism; inner consciousness; psychological representation; cognitive narratology; children's literature; identity.

Introduction

Since the final decades of the twentieth century, children's literature has undergone a remarkable transformation in both thematic complexity and artistic sophistication. Contemporary writers increasingly regard young readers not as passive recipients of simplified narratives but as intellectually capable individuals able to engage with philosophical questions concerning identity, morality, death, consciousness, and existence. Consequently, modern children's fiction has gradually moved beyond conventional adventure stories towards psychologically complex narratives that explore the hidden dimensions of human experience. Among the writers who have significantly contributed to this transformation, David Almond occupies a unique and influential position**.**

David Almond's literary works consistently blur the boundaries between realism and fantasy, ordinary life and transcendence, rationality and imagination. Unlike many authors who employ fantasy primarily for entertainment, Almond uses symbolic and supernatural elements as literary devices for investigating the psychological lives of his characters. His novels demonstrate that childhood consciousness is not merely a developmental stage but a sophisticated psychological space where imagination, memory, fear, hope, and emotional growth interact continuously. Consequently, Almond's fiction has attracted considerable scholarly attention from researchers working in children's literature, narrative theory, psychology, philosophy, and cognitive literary studies**.**

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One of Almond's most celebrated novels, Skellig (1998), represents a milestone in contemporary British children's literature. Awarded the Carnegie Medal and translated into numerous languages, the novel has become an important subject of literary criticism because of its multilayered symbolism and profound exploration of human psychology. At first glance, the narrative appears deceptively simple. Michael, a young adolescent boy, moves into a new house while simultaneously confronting his baby sister's life-threatening illness. During this emotionally turbulent period, he discovers a mysterious winged creature hidden inside a dilapidated garage. This enigmatic figure, known only as Skellig, gradually transforms Michael's perception of himself, his family, and the surrounding world.

Yet the significance of Skellig lies not in its plot but in the symbolic network through which Almond represents psychological experience. The mysterious creature is never fully explained within the narrative. Instead, his ambiguous identity invites multiple interpretations: an angel, a fallen human being, a mythological creature, or a symbolic manifestation of Michael's unconscious mind. This deliberate ambiguity distinguishes Almond's narrative from conventional fantasy literature and positions symbolism at the center of psychological representation.

Literary scholars have repeatedly acknowledged Almond's exceptional use of symbolism. Peter Hunt (2001) argues that contemporary children's literature increasingly depends upon symbolic structures capable of conveying emotional experiences that remain inaccessible through straightforward narration. Similarly, Maria Nikolajeva (2014) maintains that modern children's fiction frequently employs symbolic landscapes and fantastic figures to externalize children's internal conflicts, allowing readers to visualize otherwise invisible psychological processes. Such observations are particularly applicable to Skellig, where symbols function not merely as decorative literary devices but as active participants in the construction of consciousness.

David Rudd (2010) further suggests that Almond's narratives resist fixed interpretation because their symbolic richness deliberately encourages multiple readings. Rather than providing explicit explanations, Almond allows symbols to evolve alongside his characters' psychological development. This openness invites readers to participate actively in meaning-making, thereby transforming reading itself into an exploration of consciousness.

From a narratological perspective, Dorrit Cohn (1978) demonstrates that literary fiction possesses unique techniques for representing consciousness beyond direct interior monologue. She argues that consciousness may be conveyed indirectly through narrative structures, imagery, symbolism, and character interaction. Likewise, Alan Palmer (2004) expands the study of fictional minds by proposing that consciousness should be understood as socially distributed rather than exclusively internal. Characters reveal their psychological states not only through private thoughts but also through relationships, dialogue, and interaction with symbolic environments.

These theoretical perspectives illuminate Almond's artistic method. Michael rarely explains his emotions directly. Instead, readers infer his psychological transformation through recurring symbolic motifs including darkness, light, wings, birds, decay, fossils, owls, dreams, silence, and abandoned spaces. The narrative thereby transforms physical objects into psychological signs.

Psychological criticism likewise provides valuable insights into Almond's fiction. Carl Jung's theory of archetypes proposes that symbolic figures emerge from the collective unconscious and embody universal psychological experiences. From a Jungian perspective, Skellig may be interpreted as an archetypal guide who facilitates Michael's movement from psychological uncertainty toward emotional integration. Although Almond avoids explicit psychoanalytic terminology, his symbolic narrative reflects many of Jung's observations concerning transformation, individuation, and spiritual growth.

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Developmental psychologists similarly emphasize adolescence as a period characterized by cognitive expansion and identity formation. Erik Erikson identifies adolescence as the developmental stage during which individuals negotiate identity versus role confusion. Michael's experiences correspond closely to this psychological model. Faced with family instability, illness, and unfamiliar surroundings, he gradually reconstructs his understanding of responsibility, empathy, and selfhood. Significantly, this developmental journey occurs primarily through symbolic encounters rather than conventional instruction.

Recent developments in cognitive literary studies further reinforce the importance of symbolism in representing consciousness. David Herman (2013) argues that literary narratives invite readers to simulate fictional minds by integrating textual cues into coherent cognitive models. Symbolic imagery enriches this simulation because it activates emotional and conceptual associations beyond literal description. Likewise, Monika Fludernik (1996) contends that experientiality constitutes the defining characteristic of narrative. Readers understand fictional consciousness not merely through explicit thoughts but through embodied experiences generated by narrative structure.

Within Skellig, consciousness emerges as a dynamic interaction between perception, imagination, memory, emotion, and symbolic interpretation. Michael's observations of Skellig repeatedly alter his understanding of ordinary reality. Each encounter encourages him to reinterpret familiar objects—dust, insects, birds, empty buildings, and silent rooms—as meaningful components of his psychological world. Consequently, symbolism functions simultaneously on aesthetic, philosophical, and cognitive levels.

Despite extensive scholarship devoted to David Almond, relatively few studies have examined symbolism specifically as a mechanism for representing inner consciousness. Existing research frequently concentrates on fantasy, spirituality, religious imagery, or child psychology independently, while overlooking the ways in which these dimensions interact through symbolic narrative structures. This article seeks to address this gap by investigating how symbolism mediates psychological experience throughout Skellig. Rather than interpreting symbols as isolated motifs, the present study considers them integral components of Almond's representation of consciousness.

Accordingly, the objectives of this article are threefold. First, it examines the principal symbols that structure Michael's psychological development throughout the novel. Second, it investigates how symbolic imagery externalizes otherwise invisible emotional and cognitive processes. Third, it demonstrates that Almond employs symbolism as an innovative narrative strategy capable of representing consciousness without relying upon extensive psychological exposition.

Ultimately, this study argues that Skellig illustrates a significant development in contemporary children's literature, wherein symbolism transcends its traditional decorative function to become a sophisticated instrument for exploring the mysteries of human consciousness. Through this artistic achievement, David Almond not only expands the possibilities of children's fiction but also contributes to broader literary discussions concerning the relationship between imagination, symbolism, and the human mind.

Findings and discussion

The analysis demonstrates that David Almond constructs consciousness in *Skellig* not through extensive interior monologue but through a carefully organized symbolic system. Michael rarely verbalizes his emotional conflicts directly; instead, his psychological condition is externalized through recurring symbolic images that gradually acquire deeper emotional significance throughout the narrative. This narrative strategy confirms Dorrit Cohn's (1978) argument that fictional consciousness may be represented indirectly through imagery and symbolic structures rather than explicit mental narration.

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The central symbolic figure is Skellig himself. Almond deliberately avoids assigning the mysterious creature a stable identity. Various characters perceive him differently: he resembles an angel, a dying man, an owl-like being, a mythological creature, and at times an ordinary homeless person. This ambiguity is not a narrative uncertainty but a psychological strategy. Because Skellig resists definitive categorization, he becomes capable of embodying Michael's evolving emotional state.

Initially, Michael encounters Skellig while experiencing anxiety generated by three simultaneous crises: relocation to an unfamiliar house, uncertainty concerning his newborn sister's survival, and the emotional instability of his parents. The neglected garage where Skellig resides mirrors Michael's fragmented psychological condition. Dust, decay, insects, broken furniture, and darkness symbolize neglected aspects of both the external environment and Michael's unconscious fears. As Michael gradually cleans the garage and begins caring for Skellig, his own emotional world becomes increasingly ordered. The physical restoration of the symbolic space parallels the reconstruction of psychological stability.

From a Jungian perspective, Skellig functions as an archetypal guide facilitating Michael's individuation process. Rather than solving Michael's problems directly, the symbolic figure enables self-discovery through experience. The novel therefore transforms symbolism into psychological action rather than static metaphor.

Spatial symbolism occupies a crucial role in representing consciousness throughout the novel. The abandoned garage constitutes a liminal environment situated between domestic security and unknown wilderness. It functions simultaneously as a realistic physical location and a symbolic threshold separating ordinary consciousness from psychological transformation.

Liminal spaces have long been associated with transitional states in literary narratives. In *Skellig*, the garage becomes the site where rational explanations lose authority and symbolic perception emerges. Michael repeatedly moves between the family home, where practical concerns dominate, and the garage, where mystery and imagination reshape his understanding of reality. This oscillation reflects the developmental uncertainty characteristic of adolescence.

Importantly, the garage is never portrayed simply as a frightening location. Instead, it evolves into a place of healing, reflection, and emotional growth. Almond thereby subverts conventional symbolic associations between darkness and danger. Darkness becomes not merely an absence of light but a necessary condition for psychological insight. Such representation aligns with Jung's conception of confronting the unconscious as a prerequisite for individuation.

The spatial progression throughout the novel—from confinement within the garage toward increasingly open natural environments—corresponds closely to Michael's expanding emotional awareness. Consequently, physical movement acquires psychological significance, demonstrating Almond's ability to integrate symbolic geography into narrative consciousness.

Among the novel's most persistent symbolic motifs are wings, birds, and flight. These images repeatedly accompany moments of emotional revelation, suggesting transcendence beyond immediate material concerns.

Bird imagery appears in multiple forms: Skellig's wings, owls, pigeons, blackbirds, and Michael's fascination with flight. Rather than functioning solely as traditional symbols of freedom, these recurring images represent expanding consciousness. Michael gradually learns to perceive reality from perspectives unavailable through ordinary observation.

One of the novel's most significant symbolic episodes occurs during the dreamlike flight scene shared by Michael, Mina, and Skellig. The experience resists literal interpretation, existing somewhere between dream, imagination, and supernatural event. This ambiguity enables Almond to represent psychological integration without reducing the experience to either fantasy or realism. Flight

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symbolizes the temporary liberation of consciousness from fear, enabling Michael to confront uncertainty with renewed emotional resilience.

The symbolism of wings also extends to Michael's newborn sister. Although physically fragile, she becomes associated with hope, renewal, and spiritual continuity. Thus, flight imagery unites seemingly separate narrative strands into a coherent symbolic representation of emotional development.

While Skellig represents symbolic mystery, Mina embodies an alternative mode of perception grounded in imagination, intuition, and openness toward nature. Unlike Michael, who initially seeks logical explanations, Mina accepts uncertainty without demanding definitive answers.

Her educational experiences outside conventional schooling reinforce this symbolic role. Almond contrasts institutional knowledge with experiential understanding, suggesting that genuine psychological maturity requires both rational thought and imaginative perception. Mina repeatedly encourages Michael to observe birds, silence, movement, and natural processes, thereby redirecting his attention from external events toward deeper patterns of meaning.

From the perspective of cognitive narratology, Mina functions as a catalyst for Michael's expanding theory of mind. Through dialogue and shared experiences, she helps him reinterpret events that previously appeared incomprehensible. Alan Palmer's (2004) concept of socially distributed consciousness is particularly relevant here, as Michael's psychological growth occurs through interaction rather than isolated introspection.

Consequently, Mina represents not simply friendship but an alternative cognitive framework through which consciousness becomes increasingly flexible and emotionally responsive.

Light and darkness constitute one of the novel's most sophisticated symbolic oppositions. Rather than establishing a conventional binary between good and evil, Almond employs these motifs to illustrate shifting psychological states.

Darkness initially accompanies uncertainty, illness, and emotional confusion. Yet it simultaneously becomes the environment in which discovery becomes possible. Skellig remains hidden within darkness not because he represents evil but because genuine psychological insight often emerges from confronting the unknown.

Conversely, light appears gradually rather than suddenly. Moments of illumination accompany increasing empathy, emotional acceptance, and interpersonal connection rather than intellectual certainty. This nuanced symbolism reflects the novel's rejection of simplistic moral dichotomies. Consciousness develops not through eliminating darkness but through integrating both darkness and light into a more comprehensive understanding of experience.

This symbolic complexity distinguishes *Skellig* from conventional children's fantasy literature, where light frequently functions as an uncomplicated metaphor for virtue. Almond instead presents psychological maturity as the ability to tolerate ambiguity.

The symbolic network ultimately converges upon Michael's developmental journey. According to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, adolescence involves negotiating identity through encounters with uncertainty and responsibility. Almond transforms this developmental process into symbolic narrative rather than psychological exposition.

Every major symbol contributes to Michael's evolving identity. The garage represents unconscious anxiety; birds symbolize imaginative freedom; Skellig embodies transformation; Mina introduces alternative perception; and the newborn baby symbolizes vulnerability and hope. Together these symbolic elements create an interconnected representation of consciousness that evolves alongside Michael's emotional maturation.

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The findings therefore indicate that symbolism operates not as ornamental imagery but as the novel's primary narrative language. Psychological development becomes visible through changing symbolic relationships rather than explicit authorial explanation.

From the perspective of children's literature, Almond significantly expands the possibilities of representing childhood consciousness. Instead of simplifying emotional experience, he invites readers to participate actively in interpreting symbolic meanings, thereby transforming reading itself into an act of psychological exploration.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that symbolism functions as the principal narrative mechanism through which David Almond represents inner consciousness in *Skellig*. Rather than relying on direct psychological exposition or sustained interior monologue, Almond externalizes emotional and cognitive processes through an interconnected symbolic system that includes the enigmatic figure of Skellig, liminal spaces, birds, wings, dreams, light, darkness, and natural imagery. These symbols not only enrich the aesthetic texture of the novel but also reveal the gradual psychological transformation of the protagonist, Michael, as he confronts fear, uncertainty, compassion, and personal responsibility.

The analysis further confirms that Almond's symbolism operates on multiple interpretative levels. It integrates developmental psychology, archetypal imagery, and cognitive narratology to construct a multidimensional representation of consciousness. Michael's emotional growth is portrayed not as a linear psychological process but as an evolving interaction between imagination and reality, external experience and internal reflection. Consequently, symbolism becomes an active cognitive instrument that enables readers to experience consciousness indirectly through narrative participation.

The findings also suggest that *Skellig* challenges traditional distinctions between realism and fantasy in children's literature. The novel demonstrates that symbolic ambiguity encourages deeper reader engagement by allowing multiple psychological interpretations rather than imposing fixed meanings. This openness reflects contemporary understandings of fictional consciousness as dynamic, socially constructed, and emotionally embodied.

Ultimately, David Almond extends the artistic potential of contemporary children's fiction by employing symbolism as a sophisticated method of psychological representation. His work illustrates that childhood consciousness is neither simplistic nor transparent but a complex intersection of emotion, imagination, memory, and identity. Future studies may expand this line of inquiry by comparing Almond's symbolic representation of consciousness with that of other contemporary British children's authors or by exploring the cognitive responses of young readers to symbolic narrative structures.

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