
‘You molded me like clay’: David Almond’s Sexualised Monsters

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Monsters and the Gothic fiction that creates them are therefore technologies, narrative technologies that produce the perfect figure for negative identity. Monsters have to be everything the human is not and, in producing the negative of the human, these novels make way for the invention of human as white, male, middle-class, and heterosexual.

(Halberstam, 1995, p.22).

Something unusual is happening in some of the most well-regarded, contemporary British children’s fiction. David Almond and Neil Gaiman are investing their stories with a seemingly contemporary feminist agenda, but one that is profoundly troubled by psychoanalytic discourses that disrupt the narratives’ overt excursions into a potentially positive gender re-acculturation of child audiences. Their books often show that girls can be strong and intelligent while boys can be sensitive, but the burgeoning sexual identities of the child protagonists appear to be incompatible with the new wave of gendered equity these stories ostensibly seek. In a recent collaborative essay with two of my colleagues teaching children’s literature at Deakin University, Australia, we considered the postfeminism of ‘other mothers’ and their fraught relationships with daughters in Neil Gaiman’s stories *Coraline* and *The Mirror Mask* (forthcoming). While Almond’s *Skellig* (1998) and *Clay* (2006) ostensibly tell very different fantastic tales, the differences, on closer inspection, seem only to relate to the gender of the protagonists. Gaiman’s girls and Almond’s boys undertake an identical Oedipal quest for heteronormative success, and in doing so reverse the politically correct bids for gender equality made on their narrative surfaces. When read through a psychoanalytical lens, the narratives also undo all the potential transformations of gendered politics made possible through the authors’ employment of magical realism that could offer manifold ways to disrupt binary oppositions. Indeed, that all four stories rely on the blurring of fantasy and reality might be more telling still about the ambivalence with which feminism is tolerated and/or advanced in a progressive nation like Britain. In such a culture the theoretical premise of equality is acceptable, but strange fantasies emerge in response, and gender difference is rearticulated.

In his most recent novel, *Clay*, Almond revisits the central trope in his 1988 novel *Skellig* in which a male, adult-sized, humanoid (but inhuman) figure functions at the center of a desirous relationship between two children. The fundamental difference between *Skellig* and *Clay* entails the gendering of the intimate pair who must care for their monsters until the final release/demise of these monsters allows the male child protagonist to pursue a patriarchally sanctioned, heteronormative relationship that functions in accordance with the Oedipal drama. *Skellig* follows the classic psychoanalytic progression without deviation in ways that this discussion will demonstrate. By comparison, *Clay* is compelling in queering this same logic so that it is two boys, Davie and Stephen, who create and care for their project, a clay golem called Clay.

Both monsters, *Skellig* and *Clay*, ultimately function to empower the male protagonists. *Skellig* empowers the protagonist, Michael, who feels helpless in the face of the threat that his baby sister might die. Davie also is initially helpless, but his paralysis stems from the bigger, stronger bully, Mouldy, who emasculates him through verbal threats and physical abuse. Clay’s role in the text is to rid Davie of the threat to his masculinity that Mouldy poses. In both books, then, the elephant in the room is the large male fantasy figure whose centrality is writ large in the one-word titles of these respective stories. The two male-child protagonists appear to need their belief in a powerful adult-sized male as a codified security for their societal role in patriarchy. The positive closures of these two stories require both boys to internalise the fantasy (figure) of masculine control over situations in order that they can pursue a more dominant relationship with first girlfriends who, at early stages of the stories, are threatening in their agency.

The certainty within uncertainty in *Skellig*

Despite the surface narrative about happy families coping with stress resulting from deaths and near-deaths, *Skellig* is also all about sex. The story functions as a codified manual for the loss of virginity and how this is event is appropriately negotiated through male power. The female characters are inevitably subjugated in the retelling of an Oedipal tale, and in line with the Freudian narrative the protagonist Michael must gain his rightful assertive role.

At the novel's outset, Michael, and his family have moved to the other side of town, but shortly after Michael's baby sister is born prematurely and is sick for the duration of the narrative. During this time of geographical and emotional upheaval, Michael explores the shifting territory of his sexual psychology. In the garage Michael discovers what is apparently an old man, sick and impoverished, who has wings and is younger than he initially seems. His name is Skellig and he embodies a range of the uncertainties Michael is facing: life and death, science and religion, fact and fiction, youth and old age. Skellig's dubious ontological position has been examined at length by Bullen and Parsons (2007) and so I will not discuss those issues here except to support their conclusion that he remains ontologically uncertain; he may be an angel, he may be a vagabond, he may be something evolved from prehistory, he may be a mythical creature, a figment of the character's imagination and so on. The text gives no definitive answer on these questions. Interestingly, however, Skellig's gender is never in doubt.

Psychoanalytic theory is fascinated by the kind of suffering evinced by Michael: sadness, fear of death, melancholy, loss and depression. The novel foregrounds his anxious state and he is thus on the couch for the duration of the story. Furthermore, his dysfunctional self is cured at the novel's closure, making this novel a written version of the talking cure. Michael talks us through the process as a modelling, almost a benchmark, for how to successfully navigate the tensions he faces (he also writes a story of his encounter with Skellig for his English teacher). The novel traffics in all aspects of the Freudian tradition in which the unconscious is generally always linked to childhood and infancy. It does so by following the Freudian progression from the pre-Oedipal space of plenitude of access to the mother, through the split from the maternal, and eventual identification (Freud, 1953). This novel is situated at the interstices of these events, and maps the ambivalent and fraught emotional journey Michael takes above and beyond his worries for a baby sister he has never known. More importantly, it maps the solution to this movement from the mother to a suitably non-incestuous female partner, Mina. In addition, Mina is shifted from a place of empowerment to one of docile acceptance of Michael

as the lead role, namely, the role the novel gives him as the hero. He is then able to join the ranks of men, as my reading will demonstrate.

The initial scene signifies Michael's pre-Oedipal stage neatly. Before moving to their new house, the family lived in the pre-Oedipal chaos of Random Road, Michael lived near his friends, Leaky and Coot, and the baby hadn't been born yet so that the Oedipal triangle was untrammelled by an addition. Significantly, Michael wants to 'get back' to the old house again (p.2), marking his desire to reverse the inevitable progression he must make to heterosexual maturity. Consequently, the time before the geographical and emotional change is depicted as one of plenitude and fulfilment when Michael had his mother's attention all to himself.

Indeed, physical motifs are connected metaphorically to psychological states in the narrative. The garage, for instance, represents Michael's psychological state during this early transitional period (or his pre-Oedipal state). The garage is 'dusty and dirty', 'like a rubbish dump' or 'demolition site', it is also lively with things 'scuttling' and 'scratching' and it 'lurches' (p.4). But, most significantly the garage is out of bounds. It speaks to the unconscious and pre-oedipal desires, those lively, messy and dirty desires that need to be repressed in order to gain normal subjectivity. By comparison the new house is the space in which order is promised to come as the family renovate, but, at this point, ambivalence reigns because the house isn't orderly; the toilet, for instance is in the sitting room (p.2). Michael's transition into maturity can therefore be read through the eventual transition/renovation of the house: which, once fixed, signifies the correct order of things. Nonetheless, at this stage we have a work in progress, as Michael's father renovates the new house, and his mother cares for his sister, Michael has to enter into the post-Oedipal period and adopt a mature (heterosexual) subject position which starts with the split from the maternal.

Michael's trauma of an enforced separation from the maternal is exemplified early in the narrative when his mother prohibits Michael from going into the garage housing Skellig by telling him to 'keep out' (p.4) and asking him if he thinks they haven't 'got more to worry about than

stupid you getting crushed in a stupid garage?’ (p.4). Her phrasing symbolises the impending and inevitable split from the mother, and the subsequent process of repression leading to maturity. The split with his mother is made literal in the narrative when she regularly leaves him to go to the hospital with the baby. The doctors and the hospital in this sense represent the intervention of the father as the law (of the father), namely phallic power and authority, here predictably attached to the rationalities of scientific endeavours. Further to this, Michael is often prohibited access to the hospital and therefore to his mother and throughout the text Michael and his father have numerous arguments as they work out their respective positions of power and authority in at home. In order to build a foundation for desiring appropriate women (that is, not the mother) Freud requires that Michael must learn to want to be with an appropriate feminine subject. Fortunately, the text provides just the right character: Mina.

Not long after his discovery of Skellig, Michael meets Mina, and the relationship between this heterosexual pair drives the novel while Michael is home from school coping with his anxiety about his new sister. Mina is initially authoritative and experienced and thus doesn't embody the form of femininity that Freud deems 'correct'. Significantly, Mina's father dies early in her life, and thus she has grown without a patriarchal presence. Her character is active and instructional; she is connected to birds of prey, instructs Michael in the laws of nature, and teaches him about the sensual through clay modelling and art. In the metaphoric world of the sexual, however, things are more complicated. Mina takes Michael into her forbidden place during the night. The house itself is metonymic of powerful feminine sexuality: it is an old house she has inherited that has many passage ways and stairs symbolising feminine mystery (the kind of symbolism Salvador Dali drew on in many of his paintings) and has a sign saying 'DANGER' across the entrance door (p.41). The colours of Mina's house indicate the kind of sexually fraught danger that Michael is entering: the house is made of blackened stone (p.41) and the sign is painted red. All sorts of exciting things happen: Michael is initially blind but Mina takes his hand, leading him forward and telling him not to stop, hunching on the floor and pulling him down as well (p.42). She is

in control and directly challenges his manliness when she asks him 'How brave are you? As brave as me?' (pp.40-43). Following this, she takes his hand again, and leads him inside the roof which is even more dangerous in having split floorboards and scattered glass on the ground (p.42). Michael does start to see and curiously enough what he sees is 'darkened and reddened' (p.43), he asks Mina 'What will happen?' and she tells him to be quiet and watch and wait until she 'trembled' (p.43). Underscoring her powerful and his passive position Mina concludes by 'laugh[ing] at [his] stunned silence' (p.43) and instructs him not to tell anyone about it. The two then decide to move Skellig from the dilapidated garage into this sexualised space.

This, of course, isn't the correct order of things in terms of gender and sexuality power as it is deemed appropriate under patriarchy. Mina at this point has all the (sexual) experience and knowledge. In a 'satisfying' conclusion this hierarchy needs to be adjusted, and thus Michael's successful negotiation of his identity relies on the domination of the feminine. While they are 'looking into the place where each other's dreams came from' (p.100) (recalling that Freud argued that dreams provide access to the unconscious, and thus access to perverse sexual drives), they are interrupted by the resident emblems of 'normal' masculinity, Michael's boyhood friends Leaky and Coot. This consolidated pair functions to expose Michael's passive relation to Mina when the boys play football in front of her. Michael is an excellent footballer but, in this instance, he is 'hopeless', stumbling, 'shaky and wobbly' (p.101). His inability to perform his masculinity causes Michael to remember his position as a man and subsequently he and Mina argue. The problem for Michael now is that his access to Skellig has been limited by Mina. Michael realises Mina has control and he curses himself because in order to go to Skellig he now 'had to rely on Mina' (p.112).

For Michael and Mina to sort out an appropriate sexual power dynamic they must have a highly sexualised encounter in Mina's forbidden place (p.119-121). It starts with nervousness where their breath was 'fast, shallow, trembly', Michael's heart was thundering and they 'felt each other shuddering' (p.117). They 'turned together, kept slowly turning, like [they] were carefully, nervously beginning to dance' and Mina tells Michael twice 'Don't

stop' (p.119), until they were breathing in rhythm and had 'moved into each other, like we had become one thing' (p.120). Although Mina initially guides Michael into this experience, it is precisely this experience that marks Michael's transition and the shifting of the gendered hierarchies. When it is finally over Michael finds himself 'crumpled on the floorboards alongside Mina' (p.120) and from this low status he starts to take a more assertive stance. Leaving the house, he asks Mina if it happened to her too (p.121), to which Mina responds in the affirmative, but her newly tentative and vulnerable position is marked when she searches for Michael's reassurance that it will happen again (p.121).

Not surprisingly, Michael assures Mina that they will have this (sexual) experience again. He is moving into a more powerful position, where he no longer relies on Mina to be able to access his desires. This endows him with a new found confidence which is distinctly linked to his masculinity and Michael returns to school the next day and plays football and his manhood, his skill and performance, is admired by the other boys when they tell him that 'it was the best [he'd] ever played' (p.129). This scenario of sex and football ensuring Michael's masculinity is then repeated and solidified because practice makes perfect as Michael tells Mina (p.136). In chapter 42 Michael and Mina return to Mina's abandoned house, after which Mina tells Michael 'I could sleep here ... Just like this. And be happy forever' (p.165). However, Michael, adopting his new position of authority, tells her that they will have to leave. Subsequently, Michael returns to school and his masculinity is reassured again through his renewed strength and in football. He was 'brilliant', no longer wobbly and uncertain, instead he has complete command over his physical mobility with 'body swerves and dribbles and flicks' (p.169). Indeed, Leaky tells Michael that he is a 'lucky dog' (p.169), and Michael tells him 'Someday I will tell you everything' (p.170).

In order to stabilise Michael's newly-found position of power the garage that represents the earlier Oedipal phase of ambivalence can now be demolished. Michael has now successfully negotiated his identity and this transition is symbolised through the demolition of the garage. In a phrasing that marks the sexual dimensions of

this transition, the very masculinised labourers comment that the demolition was 'bloody lovely ... you cannot beat a bit of knocky down' (p.178). Michael no longer feels as though the loss of the garage will result in a sense of emptiness now that his masculinity is assured. All those sexual desires that are not appropriate for the correct social order symbolised through the garage of the pre-Oedipal and Skellig no longer threaten to collapse, scratching and scuttling and lurching in an untenable garage. Skellig too has left Mina's house and disappeared into the ether having served his varied purposes

Michael's masculinity is confirmed in the final chapter when Michael's mother and sister return to the house and Michael connects with his father in solidarity. Where Michael had previously refused to obey his father, not going to school, and using swear words (p.142-3), they have now reached a new relational position. Not only do they look each other in the eyes for the first time (p.145) but Michael's father offers him reason and logic rather than direction and orders. In this newly defined psychological and geographical space they sit down and share a beer together (p.180). And Mina, well, Mina has been allocated her correct subject position in terms of feminine sexuality. She visits Michael's family in this final scene and is 'awkward', 'apologetic' (p.180), 'shy and quiet, like I had never seen her before' (p.181). Mina's speaking position is ambivalent and uncertain, just as Michael's had been at the beginning of his Oedipal Journey. Thus, through his heterosexual initiation Michael gains power, and this developmental trajectory is critically linked to age-old gendered hierarchies whereby the feminine must be submissive and power is confirmed within fields of masculinity. Michael has adopted a fixed and secure subject position available to the male subject in a world of seeming uncertainty.

Moulding the masculine in *Clay*

While the gender trouble Michael needed to resolve was to be more powerful in his relationship with Mina and thus avoid a feminising position that queers his status, Davie in *Clay* has this same issue redoubled by the queer intensity of his relationship with the new boy in town, Stephen. Eve Sedgwick argues that homosocial relations are not simply about obligatory heterosexuality and the bonds between

men which privilege patriarchy, as occurs in *Skellig* through the boys playing football, but they are also characterised by intense homophobia (1985, 1991). Indeed, *Clay* can be read as a profoundly homosocial novel, in which the range of representations of boy-boy desire is far more explicitly queered than the masculinity played out amongst boys and men in *Skellig*. This novel thereby offers an important challenge to masculinities. Through the metaphor of shaping clay, Almond demonstrates how masculinities are constructed and contingent within cultural spaces and times. Consequently, no character is unproblematically demonised (or inherently evil). Even Davie's antagonist, the violent boy Mouldy who dies during the story, is given a familial past that draws in readers' sympathies given his father's early death. Mouldy, as his name suggests, has already been moulded by dominant expressions of masculinity, whereas Davie is more like unformed clay. However, the newcomer, Stephen, whose character is the most transgressive, disrupts Davie's development to heterosexual normativity, if only briefly, and only in negative ways.

Set in Newcastle in a 1960s working-class, Roman Catholic town called Felling, the narrative speaks as much to the neomasculinities of the present day as to religious and historical limitations around sexuality in a small town such as Felling in the 60s. Both social and familial histories are repeating themselves and not only in Mouldy's case. Much like Michael, Davie's subject position starts as ambivalent and uncertain, he is unsure about many things and thus he evades decision-making and instead follows others; he is a practicing Catholic in step with the town; he smokes to fit in with his mate Geordie; and he fights Protestants because it's what his father did. When the mysterious Stephen Rose arrives in Felling complete with a family history of magic tricks, hypnosis and madness, and his own history of expulsion from a nearby priest training college for young boys, Davie quickly becomes his target as a partner in crime. When he first meets Davie, Stephen sees him as 'Dead ordinary, dead innocent, dead big imagination. Just the lad I need' (p.230). The relationship between the two is thus established as one of power where Stephen becomes a shaping force in Davie's maturing identity.

In line with these power dynamics, Stephen has a particularly exceptional skill for creating clay figures and

this God-like or God-given talent is aligned with violence and evilness, as is Stephen himself. He persuades Davie to create a clay monster with him called Clay, a creature similar to Skellig in that the ontological nature of the monster is unfixed: he could be real, he also could be a figment of Davie's imagination, or, with Stephen's ability for hypnosis he could be an illusion created by Stephen in order to control Davie. But, again, his gender is quite certain. When Clay comes alive Davie, like Dr Frankenstein runs away from his creation and according to Stephen's version of what happens, he and Clay frighten Mouldy so that Stephen easily pushes Mouldy into the quarry where he dies. Stephen and Clay are therefore critical to ridding Davie of the threat to his masculinity posed by Mouldy, and the resolution where all three male beings are expelled from Davie's life enables him to take up a heteronormative subject position in a relationship with a girl called Maria as the story's positive resolution.

To read the repetition of the Oedipal narrative in this story, Mouldy occupies the powerful adult masculinity that terrifies the Oedipal child into accepting loss of the mother through the threat of castration. Unsurprisingly then, the most violent of act perpetrated by Mouldy is when he choked Davie and the motif of choking is often repeated in Davie's dreams. Indeed, Mouldy is often linked Davie's fear of losing body parts in a range of displaced metaphors for castration including Davie's recounting of stories about Mouldy biting the heads off rats and biting the ear of another kid (p.72). Davie and Geordie also fantasise about taking parts off Mouldy, Davie in particular imagines penetrating Mouldy's foot with a knife so that the wound will become infected and the foot will have to be amputated, effectively disabling Mouldy's power.

However, Davie's desire to respond to violence with violence is a fantasy and in reality he blunts the knife he has been sharpening to attack Mouldy with (p.21). This act, signifying his own anxiety and impotent violent masculinity, is even more poignant in that he conceals it from Geordie. Indeed, Geordie and Davie's relationship at the beginning of the novel is pre-Oedipal and filled with oral pleasures including the cigarettes that are smoked pervasively in this novel (and often shared by Davie and Geordie), and the altar wine they drink. These stolen objects/pleasures and

the enjoyment they afford are also construed as sins for which the boys must atone. Each week both boys confess to the same sins, smoking cigarettes, drinking altar wine, swearing, and impure thoughts (p.37-40). This performance of childish desire is constantly repeated and needs to be disrupted for development into a mature heterosexual subject position; as Geordie promises that they will 'really change' after confession next week (p.41).

Certainly they must change to form the type of homosocial relations embedded in hegemonic masculinity, and thus to prevent desirous relations that slip into queerness. Geordie and Davie's relationship is remarkably close to this precipice and is articulated when Davie says of Geordie, 'He laughed and pulled me tight. I felt the excitement burning in him.' (p.46). There are numerous similar instances of intensity between Geordie and Davie, and while they are not explicitly sexual, they are motivated by a desire for personal closeness between same-sex characters. However, Geordie's sexuality is in fact less vulnerable to queerness than Davie's: when asked by Stephen what they want to be, Geordie says 'A footballer', (p.55) a sport which suggests homosocial desire (as it did in *Skellig*) and thus signifies Geordie's certain trajectory into appropriate masculinity. Davie, on the other hand follows Geordie's lead saying he also wants to be but Stephen senses his ambivalence and responds, 'You tell lies, Davie, don't you?' (p.56).

In this state of ambivalence, Davie's intimacy with Geordie is doubly disrupted because Davie is desired by both Stephen and Maria. Maria, like Mina, is initially constructed as much more active than her (potential) male partner. She is the one to initiate the relationship through her friend, Frances, and this occurs immediately after the aforementioned moment between Geordie and Davie. Frances tells Davie that Maria 'fancies' him (p.47) and wants to 'go with him' (p.48), but Davie doesn't verbally respond. To Frances, Davie's silence indicates his ambivalence, even more she suggests that being with Maria (and thus heterosexuality) is the only viable option when she asks him 'Do you just want to stay with that daft Geordie?' (p.48). Maria is also actively seeking the relationship and she presents herself at the appropriate love object by walking up and down in front of Davie's house. He is too panicked, at this stage, to go out and meet her but he will come to a point of empowerment

that allows him to pursue her once he has dispensed with his dangerous relationship with Stephen, a relationship that has the potential to disrupt heterosexual norms.

Davie's reluctance to form a relationship with Maria causes him the serious problem of displacing his desire inappropriately with an intimate relationship with Stephen. The most overt manifestation of this is the kiss that Stephen gives Davie when he sees Davie out walking with Maria (p.120). But even more intriguing in its sexual imagery is the text's treatment of the desirous relationship, resulting in the monstrous clay golem. Davie had been woken by Stephen calling up to his window in the night and the ensuing dream is telling in terms of the connections between domination and sexual intimacy in same-sex relations. The passage reads:

...He beckoned me. I shivered. I drew the curtains. I went back to bed.

I lay and tried to sleep. His voice went on for a while, then stopped, then started again, but this time it seemed close by me in the room, it seemed to echo from deep inside my head.

'Davie! Davie! Davie!'

I felt Stephen's fingers on me, like he was forming me, like I was his clay. His fingers slid and slipped across me. I squirmed on the bed, trying to break free from him.

'Be still,' he whispered. 'Let me make you. Davie.'

I blocked my ears with my hands.

'You're mine, Davie,' he whispered.

(Almond, 2006, p.75-76)

Stephen, who is linked with all things evil and sinful, is here seemingly enacting that evil by trying to form Davie into a homosexual subject and this is a terrifying and traumatic event for Davie. So too the Oedipal trajectory is a painful one, a drama that features the pain of separation and repression. But, in many ways this pain is displaced onto Stephen, as though Stephen embodies the sin of diversion from the correct Oedipal path, and Davie lacks the agency (in accordance with his uncertain and unformed masculinity) necessary to evade Stephen.

Davie and Stephen's production of Clay tells a story about cultural fears of same-sex desire. Together the boys shape a (monstrous) being with the potential to incite violence and death, indicating the homophobia that Sedgwick argues underscores homosociality. Clay (the golem) is represented in acutely negative terms that draw on both the spiritual, in terms of Catholic sin, and the scientific, in terms of 'unnatural' production. Stephen too is constructed as the all-powerful and negative entity, capable of controlling and commanding Davie and Clay, and his character is also represented in negative terms which draw on discourses of spirituality and science; it is Stephen who is understood to desire the god-like position in creating life (adopting the position of the Frankenstein scientist, or God himself). In a critical account of the novel, Don Latham writes that Stephen 'in effect seduces' Davie (2006, p.116), and indeed the reader is positioned to see Davie as relatively innocent through his passivity. Any sin he might have accrued is, according to Latham, redeemed through his relationship with Maria (2006, p.124-125). If redemption is found through heterosexuality, the broader question this paper asks is: What subject positions are outlawed in the process?

Before Davie can be redeemed he will experience a censure for this transgression of heterosexual norms similar to that which Michael suffered with Leaky and Coot in *Skellig* for enjoying the company of a more intelligent and empowered girl. The queerness of Davie's relationship with Stephen (who is often referred to as 'weird' in the novel in ways that might be interpreted as synonymous with queer), is recognised by the other children in Davie's class who assume that the kiss Stephen gives Davie indicates a homosexual relationship and the implications are that it is 'Disgraceful, degrading, disgusting', 'appalling' and 'shocking' (p.158). Connell argues that male 'compulsory heterosexuality' is itself policed through different forms of punishment (Connell, 1995, p.104) and this is the case in the text; not simply through the negative textual representation of Stephen and what is created through same-sex desire (Clay), nor through verbal humiliation in class, but also through physical violence. As a result of that kiss Davie and Geordie fight after the class (p.155-159), and a beating from Mouldy also ensues (p.124-125).

Just as the hospital functioned in *Skellig*, parents, police and priests are linked to the social and the symbolic in *Clay*. Geographical motifs function in the same way to those in *Skellig* in being linked to the protagonist's psychosexual states. The events of the narrative oscillate between the town/community and Baddock's garden which contains the town's unused quarry. The two spaces function as a binary representing the conscious/symbolic realm and the unconscious/semiotic space respectively. Like Michael's garage, the garden is linked to perversity and sexuality; it had previously been Geordie's and Davie's 'secret place' (p.111), and it was also where Davie and Stephen created Clay; it becomes an even more complicated sexual topos (one equivalent to Mina's inherited house in *Skellig*) when Davie takes Maria there because 'Going in with a girl was different. [He] smelled the rot and the piss and the oniony smell in the undergrowth... It felt warm and humid' (p.111); and it is the place where Mouldy dies and Davie lays Clay to rest. As with the DANGER sign in front of Mina's inherited house, this territory is also linked to danger (p. 199) and is eventually marked with the same sign (p.251).

The dangers are sexual in nature. Davie's visit with Maria is punctuated by persistent 'grunting' noises in the undergrowth (p.113). Sexual and reproductive signifiers appear as tadpoles, a throbbing frog neck (and the frog is, as Maria says, apparently the tadpoles' 'daddy', not their mummy) and a snake. The frog's throbbing neck is reminiscent of Mouldy's hands around Davie's throat threatening castration and becomes particularly symbolic when Maria and Davie watch the grass snake attack the frog:

It took the frog in its jaws. It bit and crushed and gripped. The frog struggled and kicked but there was nothing it could do. The snake started to swallow the frog head first.

(Almond, 2006, p.118)

This violent episode reminds the reader of the violence between Mouldy and Davie, where Davie is paralysed and overwhelmed by the threat of masculinity. Their response to the event is excitement: their hands are 'clenched tight together. [They] goggled into each other's eyes' and shuddered (p.118). The fear and danger associated with

perverse sexuality is affirmed when something (assumed to be Stephen) chases them out of the garden and they kissed, pressing their lips together hard so that Maria ‘grunted’ (p.119) like the creature in the undergrowth. As much as fear, violence and sexuality are connected in this passage they are still connected to inappropriate desire in the Eden-like garden.

It is the symbolic, the space of society, that Davie must enter as an individuated subject. However, he struggles with the crisis of individuation and the difficult passage into the law and he doesn’t want to ‘go back to the truth of parents and policemen and priests. It’s so alien out there.’ (p.235). That Davie needs to reassert himself within this space as a mature masculine subject is articulated when Davie says that the ‘familiar streets and lanes ... with every footstep become more strange to me’ (p.240). They are familiar from childhood, but are quite different once he has progressed through the Oedipal complex. As a sign of this progress, before he rids himself of Clay he takes him through the community ‘naming names’ (p.249) fixing places and people, mapping his territory, effectively rehearsing his place within the symbolic with the powerful figure of masculinity at his side.

To complete the progression into the symbolic, Davie must face all three of representatives of cultural Law enforcement (priests, policemen and parents) when Stephen disappears, and his following response to their questions demonstrates that masculinity, perverse sexuality and repression (or death and disappearance) are related:

*‘Do you think they are related in any way?’ said
Sergeant Fox.*

‘Who?’ I said

*‘The dead and disappeared, son. Do you know
of any links?’*

*He watched me while I thought. I saw Mouldy’s
eyes, glaring through the letter box. I felt Stephen’s
kiss on my cheek.*

(Almond, 2006, p.274).

This quotation is particularly telling as Davie himself links what is now dead, the threat to his adult masculinity

(Mouldy’s glaring eyes), to what has disappeared, the threat to his heterosexuality (Stephen’s kiss).

Davie’s induction into heterosexuality is finally established by his ability to forge ahead in his relationship with Maria after Baddock’s garden has been effectively excavated. As Latham argues, Maria offers Davie ‘salvation from the psychological damage incurred by his association with Stephen’ (p.123); she is ‘generative and redemptive’ (p.123) and her spirituality seems ‘natural, her faith in Davie ... intuitive’ (p.124-125). The ‘intuitively’ supportive and ‘generative’ role that the female plays for the benefit of the male is clearly a limited one (unchallenged in Latham’s discussion), but it is certainly a redemptive one in that it redeems Davie’s potential sins of queer desire. As Davie himself notes, ‘As we kissed I began to forget Stephen Rose and Mouldy ... it was like Maria was some kind of guardian’ (p.280). In addition, the adult ‘blokes’ of Felling have excavated the previously dangerous space of Baddock’s garden and what is left of Clay resides in Davie’s backyard (p.287). Whereas Stephen and Davie had made a monstrous single entity, with Maria by his side Davie uses the material to make single, individual figures, essentially marking his individuated self through heterosexuality. The relationship between Davie and Marie and what it generates is sanctioned by the Father, rendered both spiritual and natural when Davie’s dad comments on their artistic work: ‘It’s a congregation of the saints!’ (p.291). Davie has been moulded into a suitable heteronormative subject position.

Conclusion

Both Michael’s and Davie’s shifts into empowered heterosexuality come at a similarly queer price. Michael must divest himself of a feminising anxiety about mothers and babies in order to share a collegial beer with his father, and for this he needs to negotiate a sexual identity with Mina from which she emerges subdued. Stephen’s fall from power is more dramatic, given that his role in queering Davie was at a greater extreme than Michael’s effeminate position. Davie needs to show Maria that a phallic snake could consume and definitively resolve his castration anxiety. Both protagonists can now continue to enjoy the homosocial company of their mates, and they have a female

partner to complete their position in patriarchy. The men who enjoy knocking down Skellig's garage and the blokes taking apart Baddock's garden for their own pleasures have symbolically controlled places of unformed desire and made them subject to the law of the father.

Children's literature commonly models the socialisation of children into normal subjectivity. Understanding sexual difference and sexuality is always a priority in such acculturation, and a significant aspect of children's texts is their function as a template for gender formation. While there are no literal sex scenes in these stories, such that would make the novels so controversial as to significantly reduce their appeal to adults selecting books for young people, instead there exists a metaphoric Oedipal fantasy. As Bullen and Parsons (2007), as well as Latham (2006) have argued, *Skellig* fits clearly into magical realism. But magical realism seeks a metaphoric significance that shares much with fantasy, and I refer not only to the literary genre but also the psychological subtexts of metaphoric logic when I make that observation. Both novels reject the empowered female status central to the surface narrative. Magic realism provides the subtlety by which to manoeuvre the narratives away from these overt politics such that the narratives regress, and allow its readers to regress, to a patriarchal dominance. While such regression is asserted only in and through the fantastical elements, this fantasy is both necessary and required for the male child protagonists to take up their heightened status of maturity in the world.

In times of great uncertainty, the type which Michael and Davie are facing in the novels, there is a particularly Western drive to pin things down, to know the facts of the matter. For the most part, however, these texts don't offer their readers certainties, and as I have noted, the ambiguous ontological nature of the monsters in these narratives function to illuminate the uncertainty of life. For instance, although Mina knows lots of facts, as she says towards the end of the novel:

'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?'

'Sometimes we think we should be able to know everything. But we can't.'

(Almond, 1998, p.140)

However, just as the only aspect of the monsters that is known for certain is their masculine identity so too the male protagonists' quests resolve through their transition into this same privileged gender status. Through a psychoanalytic lens the two stories of *Skellig* and *Clay* are remarkably similar in their heteronormative quest, the only difference being that *Skellig* relies on the submission of the powerful female, whereas *Clay* relies on the expulsion of queerness. The two culturally marginalised subject positions, like the characters of Mina and Stephen, must either submit or disappear, and desire is successfully limited and fixed through a narrative of heterosexuality, one that is achievable through heroic means.

Clay and *Skellig* speak volumes about the western world's unconscious commitment to limiting sexuality and gender roles at the same time as advancing a resistance to stereotypically sanctioned masculinity and femininity. Michael is not a hegemonically masculine boy, to use Connell's (1995) phrase, neither is Mina a typically limited girl. She is shown to be smarter, more open, more intuitive (but in positively rendered rather than irrational ways) than Michael. However, in the end Mina must occupy the Hermione Granger stance of foil to male success despite the headway that Almond seems to make with gender role-modelling. Stephen's demonic queer identity is more obviously and perhaps more predictably decimated in line with the persistent cultural retelling of stories that privilege heterosexual males. These stories are exceptional in literary terms and deserve the recognition they have achieved, but I look for a time in children's literature in which strong female and queer characters will be more than exceptions to the patriarchal rules.



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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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