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Animal Attributes and Imagery in Children's Literature

In Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* and David Almond's *Skellig*, animal imagery is used to describe unusual beings in each respective story. In the former, The Other Mother is spider-like in appearance and mannerisms while the latter's Skellig has wings and displays avian behavior. These two characters are on opposite sides of the moral spectrum, their different motivations and personalities bolstered by the specific animal with which they are associated. I wanted to delve into how the creatures that Gaiman and Almond chose for these characters clue readers into their personalities and the themes tied to them. By researching human psychology, concepts surrounding the physicality of hybrid characters, as well as the inclusion of supporting imagery in each story's setting, I was able to track how animal attributes in both narratives were able to communicate very human concepts to their readers.

Many faunae symbolize ideas whether it be due to their nature or how they look. Our initial reactions to different animals key us into how we should react whenever they appear in literature. This is because we as humans apply meanings to certain creatures that our mind remembers each time we come across them. Through a psychoanalytic lens, this form of association is rooted in our own psychological processes (Moreman 482). I first centered on the Other Mother's corresponding beast, the spider. While researching, I found some scholarship that suggested that our adverse response to this animal, along with our frightful perception of snakes, may be rooted in our evolution as a means of survival (LoBue 1891). Some spider

phobias can reach severe levels in the real world, with many psychological cases being harder to analyze due to the involvement of the subject's darkest instincts (Akhtar 252), effectively creating a web of sorts that professionals untangle in order to resolve the issues of their patients. *Coraline* already distrusts her mother from the first time she goes across the enchanted corridor. She recognizes the doppelganger as similar to her actual parent, but is aware of some chilling differences in the being's appearance (Gaiman 25-6). Even after being presented with one of the Other Mother's "improved" wonders in the Miss Spink and Forcible theater show, Coraline still cannot accept the Beldam's affections (Gaiman 42). The readers are notified towards the beginning of the novel that the protagonist gets uncomfortable when she sees spiders (Gaiman 8) and, despite the Other Mother's less monstrous state at this point in the novel, Coraline can still sense that there is something afoot. Going back to the aforementioned theory, the idea that fear serves as a catalyst for safer behavior matches up with Coraline's wariness (Lobue 1889), warning her to keep her guard up. She is already more frightened by arachnids than the average person, and this emotional response leads her to develop suspicions about the Beldam and the trap that is secretly being laid out beneath her.

Birds do not signify the same suffocating themes that spiders do in our minds, but they by no means have entirely positive ideas linked to them either. In many cultures, these animals are associated with death and are considered to be the carriers or stealers of souls (Moreman 482), their ability to fly being regarded as a connection to the afterlife. Their presence can signify impending doom, a foreboding warning of one's eminent fate. This theme is illustrated in *Skellig*, as exemplified in the winged creature's appearance in Michael's dreams (Almond 10) and the baby's bad health, a condition established early in the novel (5). For most of the story, it's unclear if the child will survive and it's only until the very end of the novel that she pulls

through. This is because Skellig visits her in the hospital and heals her, an action that correlates with the other symbolic meaning given to birds, that of life (Moreman 482). He is saved from the brink of death by Michael and Mina, so, out of gratitude, he uses his powers to in turn ensure the baby's recovery. Avian beasts are also tied to the idea of omniscience (Moreman 485). One can infer that Skellig is aware if those around them have failing health, an example being his stationing outside a window to watch Ernie before he eventually passes away (Almond 53-4). His kind have a certain wisdom that allows them to know who is close to death and who can still be saved. By choosing to paint Skellig as bird-like, Almond strengthens his narrative about the endurance of life by drawing upon widely held beliefs already linked to these winged animals.

The existence of both the Other Mother and Skellig as animal-hybrid characters adds another level to the fantastic: they are almost human and yet still different enough from the real world, a state that allows them to communicate resonating themes to readers. This is believed to be because animal ideas are often used to discuss aspects of our humanity (Chaney 130). By applying this concept to anthropomorphous entities, authors in literature can attach interesting subject matter to their characters. The Other Mother's physical appearance changes as Coraline resists her endearment, going from a copy with telling but small divergences (Gaiman 25-6) into a towering, spider-like beast (126). Her human-like state at the beginning of the novel is illustrated as a façade made by some sort of hungry creature (Gaiman 63), cluing us into her perfidious nature. This purposeful masking of her more frightening features relates the TV segment Coraline watched in the first chapter, in which how some animals were shown to put on a disguise to help them avoid being eaten (Gaiman 5). This technique is turned on its head by the Other Mother so she can lure in prey instead. She takes the form of someone her targets love and trust as a strategy to further entrap children in her clutches. The monstrous true nature of the

Beldam correlates with the concept that monstrosity itself causes one to become more aware of their bodies and, as a result, their mortality (Harrow 142). Readers realize that the Other Mother is not what she appears to be and that fact makes us fear for Coraline's wellbeing. Through his writing, Gaiman connects a spider's physical form to the deceitful disposition of malicious entitiy. By combining the Other Mother's dark nature with the unsettling feelings already tied to arachnids, Gaiman creates a character that embodies the idea of anthromorphism, or the concept that both humans and animals partake in a system of meanings and codes (Moreman 497). Here, "spiderness" becomes an indicator of plotting and death, with the slow deterioration of the Beldam's concealment correlating with Coraline's learning about what this creature actually wants from her. The Other Mother knows that her jarring hybrid form would never grant her the chance to enact her plans, so she imitates a source of comfort like a mother, someone who would usually not cause us to fear for our lives.

Skellig's description is less disturbing than the Other Mother's, with his hybridity mostly being encapsulated by the two wings on his back along with some harmless mannerisms. Still, Skellig's behavior is far from normal, what with his fashioning of owl pellets from his meals (Almond 30) and his consumption of small insects (18). His anatomy also follows that of a bird, his bones containing similar air pockets that make his entire body much lighter than it would be if he were entirely human (Almond 86). Despite these stark dissimilarities to regular human beings, the divergences that Skellig has are not painted to be frightening, his dissimilarities instead invoking a sense of wonder from Michael and Mina. The children ponder on what exactly he is, at one point believing him to be some type of evolutionary ancestor to humankind (Almond 99). By introducing the notion that human shoulder blades grow wings at certain points in life, specifically when humans were angels (Almond 38-9), Skellig becomes less alien in the

children's eyes. He is still a fantastical being, but his feathered appendages become familiar motifs connected to the human life cycle. As a result of the forged intimacy between Skellig's kind and humans, readers don't view him as a monster for his bird-like abnormalities. This brings up the question of which kind of creatures should warrant our revulsion. The topic is discussed in the article "We are none of us just one thing," in which the treatment of dragon hybrid Seraphina by the masses is described as less severe than the reactions more reptilian-looking hybrids face in Hartman's books (Smith 409). I believe that the two children in Almond's narrative are comfortable with Skellig because his bird attributes do not overshadow his human ones. Michael initially thought the winged being was a sickly vagrant hiding out in his family's garage at the start of the book (Almond 8) and, although he suspects the man has wings for some time later in the story, his suspicions aren't confirmed until they are fully revealed to him and Mina (94-5). Appearance-wise, Skellig looks predominantly like a regular human. He does not have plumed skin, a beak for a mouth, or irregular body proportions from what read. The only physical indicator of his "birdness" are the appendages on his back. Because of his overall similar appearance to us, as well as the connections within the narrative that tie his wings to humans, we are more receptive to Skellig's hybridity.

The spider and bird attributes of the Other Mother and Skellig aren't the only elements in the books that communicate aspects of humanity to children. Themes related to fear, mortality, and vitality are highlighted by the presence of other symbolic vehicles within these two stories, some tied directly to birds and spiders and others echoing similar messages through different means. In *Coraline*, spiders make appearances during very tense scenes, such as when the protagonist is trapped behind the mirror (Gaiman 79) and when she ventures into the empty flat to face the Other Father (106). The presence of decay (Gaiman 108) and foreboding images such

as the hand made by the tea leaves (149) also support the dark themes connected to the Other Mother. However, by far the most pervading image tied to spiders within the novel is that of webs. I'd mentioned before that the Other Mother is a cunning creature who creates traps for her future meals. Her plotting ways are communicated through animal imagery, albeit from a different sort of animal: bugs. The decision to utilize insects in his narrative was an excellent choice by Gaiman, not only for their clear correlation to spiders in the real world, but also because their positioning in this story relay a sense of peril and helplessness. Readers are given various instances where bugs are depicted as food or pawns for the Other Mother to toy with. There's the scene where she consumes a black beetle as a snack (Gaiman 76), the mutated, grub-like appearance of the Other Father during the game (109), and the description of one of the dead children possessing butterfly wings on her back (140). To return to human psychology, common descriptions by people suffering spider nightmares mention strangulation, being eaten, the inability to move or scream" (Akhtar 245). Coraline is surrounded by insect imagery that mirrors the great danger she is in. She has become another meal trapped in the Other Mother's fabricated world and must defeat the Beldam in order to escape her web. Readers understand that Coraline will be killed if she fails and the thought of a young child being devoured makes us want to see her survive even more than we ever did beforehand.

Imagery also plays a key role in *Skellig*. There is almost an overabundance of bird-related details in Almond's narrative but only specific examples drive home themes about the phases of human life. In relation to death, there is the appearance of dead, rotting pigeons found in the house's chimney (Almond 15-6) as well as that of an underdeveloped, frightened fledgling in Michael's dream that represents his sister's terribly ill state (82-3). There is, however, a greater amount of bird imagery within *Skellig* that illustrates vitality. Some examples include the owl

family in the abandoned house (Almond 43), the improved state of the blackbird fledglings (164), and, of course, the image of bird wings on the baby's back when Skellig heals her (159-60). As is the case in Coraline, other images besides avian depictions support Almond's story about the endurance of life. The state of the garage at the start of the story is incredibly decrepit (3) but its destruction at the novel's end comes with the opportunity to provide more room outside for the baby to play around (175-7). There's the discussion about the Persephone myth (146-7) and the correlating appearance of a pomegranate (153) in addition to Michael's picture of a soon-to-be flourishing garden (179). As stated before, birds are indeed symbolic of death, but the interpretation that best fits Almond's hope-fillled narrative concerns the connection these animals have to living. To mirror the transformation Skellig undergoes from nearly dead to fully healed is the idea that birds represent rebirth and transcendence, which author Moreman claims assist humans in paying less attention to their mortality (482). He also declares that the colors of bird feathers, in additions to their flying and singing habits, also relay themes of life by embodying robustness and energy (Moreman 495). Instead of focusing his story on the presence of death in regular life, Almond paints a story in which characters regain their strength through kindness and magic. It is because Michael and Mina decide to bring Skellig back to health that he is able to save the baby's life. In the end, Almond's story is about a pair of human children who are able bring life to others, a narrative that is reinforced by the images of rebirth and renewed vitality linked to avian creatures.

Animals are fascinating in that they can discuss matters we face in the real world. Spiders are fearsome for their appearance and representation of insecurity and helplessness. Birds are considered to be tied to the cycle of life and death and are also seen as sage beings who know more about the world than we do. The two hybrid characters of the Other Mother and Skellig

drive home to children powerful ideas related to danger and liveliness. By incorporating animal characteristics into these characters as well as into their surrounding environment, Gaiman and Almond communicate underlying themes of mortality and endurance to their readers. Heavy themes aren't unheard of in children's literature, but, through animals and the meanings we place upon them, complicated ideas are able to be communicated to youth by including aspects of them in storytelling.

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