

# **Substituting Genesis**

**Replacing Religion with Philosophy in  
*His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman**

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## Introduction

*Into this wild abyss,  
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,  
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,  
But all this 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)

This short passage from John Milton's poem *Paradise Lost* serves as the prologue to the first part of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Milton's *Paradise Lost* deals with the aftermaths of the war between Lucifer and God, in which Lucifer was defeated. Instead of challenging God openly again, he awaits the new world to be created, a world where he can corrupt Adam and Eve. Milton's poem is a fitting prologue to Pullman's trilogy because it serves as a premonition to what is to follow in the books.<sup>1</sup> It gives the reader a mood, a hint of what is to come, and also, hopefully, makes the reader more alert. Milton's poem is about Adam and Eve, and how they get expelled from paradise. Pullman has in his story given them a second chance, where they can eat from the tree of knowledge, and not having to deal with the repercussions.

Milton's complex poem might not be the first thing one would expect in a children's/young adult's novel, but many books in the genre, such as *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis as well as *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman were never meant to be easy readings. On the contrary, they can be read on many different levels and are thus open to many different readings and interpretations. As Stefan Ekman explains in *Writing Worlds Reading Landscapes*, "Fantasy offers possibilities to create fictive worlds that are fundamentally different from our own, even in cases when the setting

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<sup>1</sup> The portrait of Satan/Lucifer is made "powerful and sympathetic", thus making it possible of an interpretation where Lucifer is the true hero of the story, later romantic poets as William Blake and Percy Byshe Shelley adapted the thought and "regarded Satan as the real hero of the poem – a rebel against the tyranny of heaven". (See Liukkonen par. 13)

masquerades as a copy of the world we live in” (p.12). In fact, as fantasy novels, they ask the reader not only to accept the setting as very different from his or her own reality; the reader is sometimes asked to accept the most incredible phenomenon – but he or she is also invited to connect it to real life. These phenomena often represent different aspects of life, such as moral issues, innocence and guilt, religion, authority, adolescence etc.

Pullman addresses all of these issues in *His Dark Materials* which is influenced by both philosophy and religion. The idea that Pullman is criticising the church as an institution in *His Dark Material* has been vigorously discussed among different religious groups and critics since the release of the first novel. There is, however, more to the novel than just a critique of a church that is described as authoritarian and corrupt. More importantly, it is no longer the institution of truth and love, and it does not embody forgiveness and generosity towards others. These traits are found in the novel, but the holder of these values is no longer the church. These positive attributes normally connected with religion seem to have been transferred to children and nature.

The purpose of this paper is thus to investigate in what way the church is criticised in *His Dark Materials* and to find out to what extent the children in the series become bearers of a new prophecy. In order to answer these questions, I will compare Pullman’s ideas of childhood, nature and religion with the philosophical ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and further on make a comparison between Pullman’s trilogy and the Empirical philosophy. After that, I will be moving on to the concept of *Tabula Rasa* and daemons. The essay will begin with a presentation of the trilogy followed by a summary of the religious criticism in the novel. The next part will deal with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his concerns with childhood, nature and revolution. Then there will be an analysis between empirical philosophy and *His Dark Materials*, and a look at the concept of *Tabula Rasa* and daemons. Finally the portrayal of Lyra and Will as the new Adam and Eve will be discussed.

## ***His Dark Materials***

Since *His Dark Materials* is an extensive piece of work, a brief summary of the trilogy is needed. The first novel, published in 1995, was primarily named *Northern Lights*<sup>2</sup> but later

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<sup>2</sup> From here on abbreviated in parenthetical references as *NL*

renamed to *The Golden Compass* by American publishers. In this first part of the trilogy the setting is in a parallel world to ours. In this world, the predominant ruling organisation is a “Calvinized version of the Catholic Church” called the “Magisterium” (G.M.E.). Two very important ingredients in this alternative world are the concept of Dust and Daemons. A daemon is something similar to an external soul or, as Christofer Emgård writes, it “can be said to represent everything from shamanic spirit animals to physical incarnations or even the soul” (p.1). The daemon can also be traced back to western folklore’s “familiar” which are related to both fairies and demons. The “familiar” could be both good and bad depending on its owner, but mostly they were connected to witches who had supernatural powers. Then they were described as “a low-ranking demon that assumed any animal shape, such as a toad, dog, insect or a black cat” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*) Every character in Lyra’s world has a daemon in the shape of an animal which cannot be separated from him or her more than a few feet. There are many other fictional characters in this world, but the only ones that have daemons are humans.

At the same time as the daemon is the best friend of character in question, it is also a part of his or her very own being, connected through Dust. It has the ability to speak and does not always have the same sentiment as its holder. Whereas the daemon is attached to the human body, Dust is more elusive. Emgård describes it “above all to represent experience; the collective human experience distilled into matter” (12). In *The Amber Spyglass* the angel Xaphanina explains about Dust that “[it] is not a fixed quantity that has always been same. Conscious beings make Dust – they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on” (*The Amber Spyglass* 440). Dust attaches itself to a human in adolescence and puberty, during that time when a child undergoes much change in awareness of him- or herself and “the first experience of love” (12). There are, however, other interpretations of Dust as well, one being related to “quantum physics” and the “superstring” theory, where Dust is the matter that holds everything together in the universe (Emgård 11). Dust is also conscious and has an active part in the trilogy, for example, it gives Lyra help and direction through a devise called the alethiometer.

The protagonist in *Northern Lights* is Lyra Belacqua, a fearless and adventurous twelve-year-old girl who is living without her parents in Jordan College in Oxford, Brytain<sup>3</sup>. Her daemon, Pantalaimon, has not yet transformed itself permanently into just one animal, something daemons do when a child is in his or her teenage years. Lyra’s father, lord Asriel -

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<sup>3</sup> The names and the geographical locations in Lyra’s world are similar to the ones in reality.

an experimental theologian and explorer - disappears somewhere in the Arctic, and Lyra travels there to aid her father and save her best friend Roger, the kitchen boy at the college, who has been kidnapped. Lyra receives an alethiometer to which she can ask questions and read the truth. Lyra encounters witches who prophesise that “[w]ithout this child we shall all die...But she must fulfil this destiny in ignorance of what she is doing, because only in her ignorance can we be saved” (175-176). During her travels and adventures, Lyra encounters different adversaries and receives help from fantastic creatures both human and animals.

The next part in the trilogy, *The Subtle Knife*<sup>4</sup>, introduces the second protagonist, Will Parry, from our own world, more specifically, Winchester, Britain. Will is forced to hide from mysterious men who have ransacked his home. He hides his demented mother in a safe place, and is forced to take a man’s life in order to escape from his home. He eventually finds an entrance to an alternate world, certain that the men following him are gone. The new world is named Cittàgazze, a formerly thriving world, which has been inflicted with spectres through the last centuries. The spectres are mind-eating ghouls only visible and pernicious to adults. It is in Cittàgazze that Lyra and Will meet for the first time and they immediately become friends. They travel between the different worlds of Lyra’s, Will’s and Cittàgazze in order to find Will’s father by the means of a blade acquired in Cittàgazze, enabling them to cut openings between the different worlds. The prophesised bearer of the knife, Will, has to take the knife to lord Asriel and aid him in his forthcoming battle against the Authority, an equivalence to God. Lyra is told by the alethiometer to search for a certain scientist in Will’s world and meets Mary, a former nun turned scientist, who is pre-eminent for Lyra’s prophesy. Mary also discovers the entrances between different worlds and finds yet another place, the world of the Mulefa. This world hardly has any technology and its inhabitants are living very much in symbiosis with nature and in peace.

In the final part, *The Amber Spyglass*<sup>5</sup>, after having rescued Lyra from her deceitful mother, Lyra and Will travel to yet another world, the world of the dead, in order to rescue Lyra’s friend Roger and Will’s father. There they meet two guards whom Lyra tries to delude with a fantastic yet untrue story. In her effort, she is attacked, both physically and mentally, by the guards for lying, and she then resorts to telling the truth about her own world, a successful move. Striking a bargain with the two guards, Lyra and Will manage to release all the people who are trapped in death in order for them to enter the world of the living and become part of Dust. Finally, having joined their side, Lyra’s mother accompanies lord Asriel

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<sup>4</sup> From here on abbreviated in parenthetical references as *SK*

<sup>5</sup> From here on abbreviated in parenthetical references as *AS*

in a fight against Metatron, the Authority's right hand. They manage to defeat Metatron, but in doing so they also seal their own fate. They manage to push him down from a cliff and fall into an abyss of "nothingness". The only way to succeed in this is hold him tight and fall with him. Still, this fight, enables Lyra and Will to reach the Authority which "is ancient, terrified, and demented", and release him from his captivity. "Once in the air, his fragile form disintegrates" (Sandie Byrne 12). The Authority (God) had become so old that he had no more powers left.

## **Criticism of the Church**

Judging from the plot summary above with its description of a society ruled by the church and the characterisation of God/the Authority, it is not strange that *His Dark Materials* books have become so controversial. In Canada, the series was removed from several Catholic school libraries and parents were advised not to let their children see the movie because of its "strong antireligions [sic] content"(G.M.E. 1). In 2008, a pamphlet of 26 pages was emitted by "the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights in the United States" named "The Golden Compass: Agenda Unmasked" claiming the novel to be "written to promote atheism and denigrate Christianity by featuring a 'Calvinized version of the Catholic Church' called the 'Magisterium'"(G.M.E. 3). Jonathan Derbyshire reports that Pullman has been called "the most dangerous author in Britain" in a British newspaper column (1). The fact that Philip Pullman has overtly announced himself a resolute "Church of England atheist" can surely not be the only reason why he is met with such opposition. In order to enable an understanding of this acrimonious antagonism it is necessary to take a closer look at some of the religious aspects of the novel.

In the last part of the trilogy the narrative makes it clear that the Authority is the equivalent to God, "The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty - those were all names he gave himself" (28). In the continuing part of the description, however, there is a section which may very well stir up emotions among Christian readers, because of its rather blasphemic statement:

He was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves – the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed out of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself...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...And the Authority still reigns in the Kingdom, and Metatron is his regent. (AS 28)

Metatron, a Judaic mythological angel also known as the archangel Michael (or “the Prince (or Angel) of the Presence” (Encyclopaedia Britannica)) called upon as “Lord Regent” by other angels in the trilogy, has been given a considerable amount of God’s power in Pullman’s version. The Authority is described as having been jealous of man, and therefore proclaimed man lesser than angels. However, that is not enough, as the “Authority considers that conscious beings of every kind have become dangerously independent” (AS 54), and to remedy that, the Authority and Metatron plan to transform the Authority’s celestial dwelling “into an engine of war”. Metatron will interfere much more in people’s everyday life and there will be a “permanent inquisition in every world” (AS 54). The Authority, however, has over time become more and more old and frail and is finally trapped in a crystal cell by Metatron, who has taken control of heaven. By the time Lyra and Will reach The Authority, and release him from his imprisonment he is severely senile, whimpering and afraid, only to be disintegrated by the air and turned into dust (AS 366-367). In other words, God in the *His Dark Materials* version is both jealous and vindictive towards man. He is old and frail, and he is tricked out of his office by his right hand man/angel, and confined into a crystal. Pullman has in a way taken the divinity out of God, and transferred him into something mortal.

The events concerning The Authority and Metatron in the plot mainly takes place in the last part of the trilogy, but voices raised against *His Dark Materials* were heard long before its release. Already *Northern Lights* was subject to intense scrutiny from different religious communities. In this first part of the trilogy, set in Lyra’s world, there is not much mentioning of either angels or the Authority himself. In this part, the focus is more on the church as an institution, and some negative aspects of it, such as consenting to the abduction of children and persecuting all who oppose the Magisterium (a religious institution), which continues throughout the trilogy. Here, it is the Magisterium that is the predominant ruling organisation, which has several subordinated departments. These departments seem to assume slightly hostile positions towards one another but especially towards anything that would diminish the role of the Magisterium. As lord Asriel describes it at the end of *Northern Lights*:

It suits the Magisterium to allow all kinds of different agencies to flourish. They can play them off against one another; if one succeeds, they can pretend to have



supported it all along, and if it fails, they can pretend it was a renegade outfit which had never been properly licensed. (373-374)

Besides theological studies, there is also scientific research being made to understand the concept of Dust. The Magisterium's official position is that dust does not exist, but when reading further along it is clear that at least one of the departments, the Oblation Board, is conducting studies concerning the same matter. The Magisterium's position is that Dust is "original sin" (NL 371), since it can not be controlled.

The research of Dust is done by different agencies, such as the Oblation Board, which uses specifically grim methods. They kidnap children in order to cut off their daemons. The reason for performing this surgical practise, called intercision, is that Dust (Original Sin), attracts itself to adults and youngsters in their puberty, but not to children whose daemon has not yet settled into just one shape. The children being taken are generally from the lower class, and the parents' bereavement is not taken so seriously by the authorities. To a large extent, the disappeared children's fate is to die, but not before a prolonged suffering without their daemon. However, not all die who undergo this procedure. In *The Subtle Knife*, there are soldiers belonging to Mrs Coulter who are without their daemon. They are described as docile and having no free will. This can be a likeness to extremist groups who only listen to their religious leader, and obey every word their leader say. There can also be drawn a parallel to the Uruk-hai in *The Lord of the Rings* who were created by the forces of evil to produce fear and havoc among all nations. Naomi Wood writes that Pullman has through his "characterizations" made a "pointed" resemblance to the "Christian Church", with remarks to the well known inquisitional way of taking care of dissidents and other free speakers, and the ancient practice of castrating young boys in favour of maintaining their youthful voices "at the cost of their sexuality" (243). The critique aiming at the church in *His Dark Materials* is not directed solely towards the Christian church, but more towards institutionalised religion and the doctrines and misery caused in the name of God or His written words.

## **Revolutionary Rousseau, Children and Nature**

The late eighteenth century is known as the end of the period of a scientific and philosophical era called the Age of Enlightenment. One of its most influential philosophers was Jean

Jacques Rousseau. Much of the critique and the philosophical reasoning coheres between Rousseau and the narrative in *His Dark Materials*. As mentioned earlier, the critique against religious institutionalism throughout the trilogy is harsh. Rousseau, on the other hand, attacked, already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, most “institutions of civilisation”, among them the Church and the state. In the one preface to *Émile* the modern editor has written: “There have been many reformers, but none more radical than Rousseau; for he advocates the overthrow of civilisation and the return to the state of nature” (viii). This could just as well have been written about Lord Asriel (Lyra’s father) in the trilogy. He sets out to bring down the Authority and its dogmatic ruling, in order to create a free world. What happens in *His Dark Materials* is that not only is God/religious authority criticised, but also in the end, defeated. People no longer have to listen and live by what someone or something else dictates; instead they are encouraged to seek out knowledge and have an open mind. As one of the witches says in the story; “all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity... most of that time, wisdom has had to work in secret, whispering her words, moving like a spy through humble places of the world while the courts and palaces are occupied by her enemies” (AS 429), Clifton Yearley tells us that the human qualities most esteemed by Rousseau were “freedom, simplicity, honestly expressed emotions and individualism” (2). These are all traits that are important in *His Dark Materials* as Lyra and Will begin to build a new and better world. Rousseau also claimed that “liberty and humanity” were two traits that had taken great loss in building civilisation (*The Social Contract* 16). If we compare the society in Lyra’s world with Rousseau’s descriptions there are similarities between them.

Rousseau described his society as corrupt, but declared that all things are not lost. According to him, there is a way of returning to our natural free state, but that means shedding all deceitful and false truths of how people should be and to constitute “a new and genuine social contract” where all people work together for the greater good of all (Yearley 2). This kind of society exists in *His Dark Materials*; it is the world belonging to the Mulefa. In this society everything is connected to nature, and the Mulefa has learned how to live in harmony with it. This is also the place where Mary (the serpent in the garden of Eden) realises that man and nature can co-exist without harming each other, but that it is a frail harmony.

According to Rousseau, the nature of man is described as sometimes excluding and selfish, especially in a rigid society, but when it is a matter of the soul it “only lives its true life in communion with others...The truth and goodness discovered by another can only be mine by my self-active participation in it. Spiritual participation does not diminish, it rather

increases (*Émile* .x.). The daemons in *His Dark Materials* could very well be described as the natural (soul) state of man. Nicholas Tucker and Christofer Emgård discuss the role of Daemons as a “*caretaker self*” (Tucker 144) which means that when someone is feeling sad or depressed, the daemon acts as a solace, and tries to cheer up the situation; it also works as an extra confidence booster, when difficult tasks are ahead (Emgård 16). Daemons have many other roles to play as well, but all of them are pure and genuinely true to themselves and their own nature. This characteristic can be applied to Rousseau’s explanation of humanity, “The natural state then being “primitive innocence”, so when society grows, creating rules of convention, we conform more and more into “corrupt sophistication” (Encyclopaedia Britannica on Rousseau), and therefore lose our true selves in the process. An example is the world that Lyra lives in.

In the world Lyra lives in, it is necessary to have a secret agenda and avoid telling the truth since everything is being scrutinised by the Magisterium. Lyra is early on forced to put up a façade or to tell a lie in order to save herself or the situation, because if she had told the truth, she might end up worse than before. It is not only Lyra who withholds the truth; much of the whole society thrives upon its lack of honesty. For example, her father has told her he is her uncle, her mother does not come forth and reveal herself as her mother until necessary and her teachers at the college she lives in have not told her the truth about either of the parents. Instead they assist the parents and their lies in order for them to avoid assuming responsibility for their child.

As mentioned earlier, Lyra has grown up in a college environment without her parents present. Her tutoring was done by clergymen and teachers. Rousseau is very clear when it comes to who is to tutor the children: it is the parents:

Save in this way, you will never succeed. As the real nurse is the mother, the real preceptor is the father. Let them agree in the discharge of their functions as well as in the system they follow, and let the child pass from the hands of one into the hands of the other. He will be better educated by a judicious though ignorant father, than by the most skillful teacher in the world; for zeal will much better supply the place of talent than talent the place of zeal. (*Émile* 15)

Rousseau continues to proclaim that the children, when not brought up by their parents, but instead sent away to schools, will lose their bond to their family. They will become “polite and formal” strangers and the “sweetness” of family life will no longer exist. He continues by calling it a crime for a man not to take part in his child’s education and claims that if a man

only “feeds and clothes” a child, he has only “fulfilled but a third of his task” (Émile 16). Lyra is well educated, and is very well aware of how to convince people in her surrounding. The only person, however, that she feels truly close to, and considers to be her family, is the kitchen boy Roger, who is later on kidnapped. Lyra’s devotion to Roger expresses itself as she travels to the far end of her world, encounters deadly adversaries, and finally enters the world of the dead in order to ask his forgiveness for putting him in a mortal situation. This is a good description of the closeness in a family that Rousseau is speaking of, although Roger is not a blood-relative to Lyra.

Rousseau might very well have influenced Pullman on a variety of philosophical issues, although there are centuries between them. There is, however, another philosophical idea not connected to Rousseau, that can be traced in *His Dark Materials*, empiricism. This philosophical view was preceding Rousseau about a century.

## **Empiricism in *His Dark Materials***

The empiric philosophy is the “view that all concepts originate in experience” and “that all concepts are about, or applicable to things that can be experienced”. It also dictates “that all rationally acceptable beliefs or propositions are justifiable or knowable only through experience” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). With this view in mind, it can be difficult to explain the existence of God or angels, since not many people can say they have experienced a first hand encounter with either of them. On the other hand, some of the philosophers had no problem in embracing both beliefs by stating that life and nature includes such miracles it can only be proof of divine existence. Another major topic among empiricists was the refusal of the soul being born with innate ideas as opposed to gaining them from experience (Antony Easthope 74). The fact that you would inherit traits from your predecessors was only explained by the social inheritance and not through genes (which probably were not discovered by the 18<sup>th</sup> century). Both Lyra and Will are good subjects to test the empiric theory on. Their parents are present in the trilogy apart from Will’s mother, but she is mentioned especially in the beginning of *The Subtle Knife*. This makes the discussion of innate knowledge versus experience possible.

Will’s mother is early on described as a paranoid schizophrenic, having good and bad days. The narrative explains that Will began to realise that “his mother was different from other people” at the age of seven (*SK* 7). They had to play a game in the shop when buying

groceries. The game consisted in not letting anyone see when they put groceries in the cart. The problem arose when Will's mother had misplaced her purse and could not pay. They had to sneak back the merchandise on the shelves and disappear from the shop quickly before the enemies could spot them. His mother became more and more anxious and Will became a frightened little boy. This was a repetitive behaviour when they were shopping. As he grew older he began to understand that the enemies were inside his mother's head and not real. This made Will protect his mother more and more both for his own sake and hers. He realised that if the social services knew that his mother was sick he would be sent away, probably to an orphanage. He could not have any close friends; they might understand the situation and report it to the authorities. He secluded himself instead and tried to be as inconspicuous as possible. However, this strategy did not always work, the boys in school bullied him and picked fights with him. Will's answer to this was to beat up a boy so severely that no one else would ever try again.

Will's father, John Parry, a famous explorer had disappeared in the arctic when he was a toddler. It was after the father's disappearance that his mother began to show abnormal behaviour. This behaviour of hers was not entirely unprovoked. Strange men claiming to be either the police or journalists were asking questions about his father. From time to time they would reappear at his home and the visits had become increasingly brusque the last couple of months. The same men were the reason why Will finally had to hide his mother at an old lady's house. All of these experiences made Will very good at making himself invisible. Although people saw him they never noticed him. He has a very rational way of thinking and has had it throughout his childhood, he always considered that problems were solvable. This speaks in favour of the empirical theory since his mother instead of dealing with reality disappeared into insanity, whilst Will dealt with all of his problems in a rational manner. In other words, he did not inherit any mental illness from her.

Lyra is a very rational girl as well when it comes to solving problems, although she can be more prone towards a fanciful reality. Her mother's character is much darker. Madame Coulter is depicted as very beautiful but ruthless and power-seeking. She is also responsible for the severing of children from their daemons, since she is the leader of the General Oblation board, the organisation in charge of the monstrosities. She enjoys torturing others, often through her daemon. She is, as mentioned earlier, astonishingly beautiful, a quality she often uses to gain whatever she wants from men in power. It is not only her beauty that has taken her this far, but also her great intelligence and lack of all morals. Lyra seems to inherit some of the traits of her mother's. She is a good liar, very headstrong and definitely

intelligent, but she does have a good moral compass. This capacity to see the difference between good and bad, makes her question both her parents. Lyra is mesmerized by Madame Coulter the first time she meets her, but it does not take long until she runs away from her in dismay. In *Northern Lights* Lyra spends most of her time trying to rescue Roger and her father, Lord Asriel. When she finally reaches her father and speaks with him, she understands that he is as ruthless as her mother. She thus questions his morals and opposes him. Whatever Lyra might have inherited from her parents goes against empirical thoughts. Throughout the trilogy, her actions however, are much in alignment with empiricism. She builds her knowledge of the world upon what she experiences and decides on what measurements to take according to the outcome of her knowledge. A good example of this is found by the end of *Northern Lights* when Lyra is discussing Dust with Pantalaimon (her daemon) as she has found out that her father is trying to destroy Dust in another world.

“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.... We thought Dust must be bad too, because they were grown-up and they said so. But what if it isn’t? What if it’s-“  
...”Yeah! What if it’s really *good*...”  
...  
“If Dust were a *good* thing ... If it were to be sought and welcomed and cherished...  
“We could look for it too, Pan!”...  
“We could get to it before he does.”

(NL 397-398)

Lord Asriel travels to other worlds gathering followers to bring down the Authority. According to his theory he should thereby also destroy Dust (original sin). He believes that he is liberating the world from oppression and that his motives are good and pure, even though the method of reaching his goals is less than desirable. In empirical considerations this is explained by the fact that people measure all things by their own sense, and later that the notion of good and evil is used in relation with the person that uses them (Easthope 73). In other words, any notion can be considered to be good or evil depending on who is judging it.

Empiricism does, however, not allow for a discussion of the issue of good versus evil in that many details; it relies more upon how things are perceived by a person. One of the theories much used among empirical philosophers is instead the notion of the mind being as a blank slate when we are newborns, the *Tabula Rasa*.

## Daemons and the concept of *Tabula Rasa*

What Pullman might very well have done, is that he has used the ancient idea of *Tabula Rasa*, re-configured it a bit, and came up with the daemon. The *Tabula Rasa* i.e. the “clean slate”, is a philosophical term much discussed among the empiricist theorists, such as John Locke (1632-1704). The notion of a blank slate was not, however, a new idea but rather a remaking of ancient philosophical thoughts. Locke assimilated the theory and continued to build on it. We can read in the opening text to the second book of his “masterpiece”, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*;

Let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any Ideas; How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy and boundless Fancy of Man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of Reason and Knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, From Experience: In that, all our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self. (*Journal of the history of ideas* 649)

What Locke means is that how we think and perceive of things has to do with what we have experienced so far in life, and how we have dealt with it. Experience builds upon experience and ultimately creates its own truth on which we can start to theorise other things. He also states that everyone is born with the same capacity or incapacity; it is what happens in our lives that makes us who we are. This is a thought comparative to the characteristic behaviours of Daemons. When a person is in his or her childhood years, its Daemon changes its form between different animals repeatedly, depending on how it is responding to external and internal influences. For example, when Lyra was hiding in a closet in *Northern Lights*, her daemon became a moth, suiting the environment and the fact that it was necessary to be inconspicuous. In other cases when Lyra needed to look brave and fearless, her daemon was in the shape of a large cat.

Another philosopher, some years earlier than Locke, also discussed the mind as a *Tabula Rasa*, namely Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626). He considers “sense” to be the door of the intellect, at birth “like a fair sheet of paper with no writing on it,” (Neal Wood 653). The difference is that he has added an interesting notion of “animal spirit” into the context:

For Bacon, the individual's "sensible soul" consists of "animal spirits" which permeate the human body and act as the intermediary and mode of transmission between body and mind. Animal spirits are the conveyors of sense impressions and feelings, responding to stimuli inherently pleasant or painful to human nature and producing motions affecting both body and mind. (Wood 654)

So, here we have a philosopher discussing a part of man as "animal spirits", which can communicate feelings and respond to impulse. The same philosopher also believes that when we are born, we do not have any innate skills. Instead, we become who or what we are, in our adult years, depending of what kind of stimuli and experience we have had as a children.

In *His Dark Materials*, the daemon is not only discussed as a part of the soul, it also reflects the personality, i.e. the traits of the animal are strong traits within the person. Lyra is discussing this with a sailor on her way to the North. She explains herself reluctant to the fact that her daemon is eventually going to settle into just one shape. The sailor answers that "they always have settled, and they always will. That's part of growing up" and continues to explain:

Anyway, there's compensation for a settled form... Knowing what kind of person you are. Take old Belasaria. She's a seagull, and that means I'm a kind of seagull too. I'm not grand and splendid nor beautiful, but I'm a tough old thing and I can survive anywhere and always find a bit of food and company. That's worth knowing, that is. And when your daemon settles, you'll know the sort of person you are. (NL 167)

In other words, the daemon settles into one shape when the person has gathered enough knowledge to know what animalistic form is best suited for the personality in question. The comment of settling to be a "part of growing up" also has to do with adolescence and encountering sexuality. When Will has touched Lyra's daemon for the first time, an act much resembling a sexual act in the narrative, they both know that their daemons will not change anymore "having felt a lover's hand on them" (AS 447). This act, however is also connected to sin, dating back to Genesis;

"You do remember the story of Adam and Eve?"

...

"They were thrown out. God threw them out of the garden."

"God had told them not to eat the fruit, because they would die. Remember, they were naked in the garden, they were like children, their daemons took on any form they desired." (NL 371)



The fruit that Adam and Eve ate can be interpreted as a sexual encounter. This would mean that knowledge, sexuality and the settling of daemons are all intertwined.

## **Lyra and Will and the story of Adam and Eve**

The story about Adam and Eve in *His Dark Materials* differs slightly from the Biblical story, mainly with the adding of daemons. Otherwise they are rather similar. Lord Asriel reads out loud from their Bible:

“And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:

“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.

“And the serpent said unto the woman, ye shall not surely die:

“For doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and your daemons shall assume their true forms, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

...

“And the eyes of them both were opened, and they saw the true form of their daemons, and spoke with them.

“But when the man and the woman knew their own daemons, they knew that a great change had come upon them, for until that moment it had seemed that they were at one with all the creatures of the earth and the air, and there was no difference between them:

“And they saw the difference, and they knew good and evil; and they were ashamed, and they sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness...”

(NL 271-272)

Because of this passage in Genesis, mankind is forever cursed with sin. This is a key part of *His Dark Materials*, and what Pullman has done is that he has given humanity a second chance in his trilogy. Lyra’s prophesy which she must not know, is that she will be “Eve again” the “Mother of all” (SK 278).

The characterisation of Lyra in the trilogy does not give the reader a sense of her as holy or flawless, neither does the one of Will (the second Adam). Lyra, as mentioned earlier is a splendid liar; and Will has killed people on several occasions. And yet, these are the two youngsters that will save the world. Millicent Lentz states that children and animals which are “innocent and unformed” are the ones “most strongly” in the state of grace in *His Dark Materials*. However, the children seem to lose this state as they grow up and become adults. (125) Grace, in Christianity, means “the spontaneous, unmerited gift of the divine favour in the salvation of sinners, and the divine influence operating in man for his regeneration and sanctification” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Lyra, apart from being a liar has many other qualities as well. One of these is her ability to read the alethiometer, something that is given to her by grace. She loses this capacity after her daemon has settled and when she has become aware of love between the sexes. As she realises that she cannot use the device anymore she is devastated and cries out to the angel Xaphania who is present.

“[W]hy can't I read the alethiometer anymore? Why can't I even do that? That was the one thing I could really well, and its just not there anymore - it just vanished as if it had never come....”

“You read it by grace” said Xaphania....”and you can regain it by work”

“How long will that take?”

“A lifetime”

...

“But your reading will be even better then, after a lifetime of thought and effort, because it will come from conscious understanding. Grace attained like that is deeper and fuller than grace that comes freely, and furthermore, once you've gained it, it will never leave you.”

(AS 440)

In other words, grace gained by labour and experience is more valuable than the one given, which also can be taken away.

Besides being able to read the alethiometer and telling wild stories, Lyra has another prominent feature: her capacity to oppose authority and follow her own sense of right and wrong. Naomi Woods describes it like this; “Lyra is called “Eve again” to reinforce her role as disobedient liberator of humanity through knowledge and the creation of new true stories” (239). In the last part of the trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra learns through a painful way not to lie, but only to tell the truth. She has on many occasions throughout her adventures told lies, fabricated and lush stories, enabling her to do whatever she needs accomplished. When

being in the world of the dead, Lyra once more decides to try her successful method. This time, however, she tells an untrue story in front of the creatures who are guarding the dead, the harpies, who can see all the bad things people have ever done in their life, and torment them gruesomely for it. They spot her lies immediately, and attack her, leaving her bleeding with a large gash in her scalp. After this incident she begins to revise her beliefs of what traits to strive for, to now become: kindness, curiosity, patience, cheerfulness and especially, being truthful.

When Will and Lyra are at the entrance of land of the dead, they are forced to leave their daemon/soul behind them to be able to continue forward. Here, they meet the harpies mentioned earlier and they discover that when people die, they do not go to heaven but instead end up in this dark, grey and lifeless area, unable to escape. The harpies' assignment is to torment especially the newcomers for everything bad they have ever done in their lives. Lyra is appalled by the fate of all people and tries to comfort them with a story of her life, this time a true story. Her skill in the narrative arts enchants even the harpies and she eventually manages to strike a bargain with them. The deal is that the harpies will guide all who have died to an exit out of the land of the dead. When re-entering the land of the living they will turn to dust and thereby, again, become a part of the universe. The payment the harpies are to receive is the true story of the deceased's life. The story is to be told on the way to the exit. In other words, Lyra together with Will manages to rescue all people who have ever died throughout history from the Authority's place of death and torment. The message here is that the old society had forced people to become liars, but if we are to have a new and better world, it is necessary to shed these old and bad habits and begin with new improved ones, and thereby contribute to our own salvation.

Lyra and Will travel to the world of Mulefa after the episode in the land of the dead, where they are looking for their daemons/souls. Here they recuperate and meet Mary Malone (the serpent) once again. She has been spending some time together with the Mulefa and come to realise that in a perfect world we need to adhere more to the symbiosis between man and nature. Mary Malone is a former nun, something that intrigues Lyra and Will. And they ask her the million dollar question, which propels the two youngsters to fulfil their prophesy. They ask her why she left the church and denounced her vows. Mary explains that she fell in love, and she describes her first encounter with the boy she fell in love with in her adolescence, and the second time, when she fell in love in her adult years, which made her leave the church. By these words she hands over the key, which makes Lyra and will realise that they are in love with each other. That in turn leads to "the fruit of knowledge" which Lyra and Will encounter

in their first kiss. Naomi Woods writes that this scene is “this world’s opportunity to replay that drama without the shame and repression attendant on the Authority’s precepts” (15). The Authority is by now vanquished, so Lyra and Will can build a new world free from old doctrines, based upon new principals and ideas.

## Conclusion

Philip Pullman has written a complex trilogy which can be read on many levels. It can be a pure adventure story if we discard all philosophical aspects of it. But for most readers, a whole world opens up with all of its flaws, miracles and everything in between, and then some more.

The criticism against the church is substantial, but it is not only the church in itself that is the villain. It is more of a reflection on a world living under the dictatorship of an unjust ruler, religious fanaticism and social regulations. By the end of the trilogy, the narrative has not only got rid of the dogmatic church, it has also created a new version of Christianity without sin, more connected to the philosophical thoughts of both empiricism and man’s closeness to nature. Millicent Lenz discusses the subject in *Story as a Bridge to Transformation* and states that “One of Pullman’s achievements in *His Dark Materials* has been his seamless incorporation of ‘big’ philosophical ideas in a palpable form accessible to the imaginations of young readers” (48). He has used the revolutionary thoughts of Rousseau, mixed them with many of the philosopher’s views considering childcare, upbringing and nature. The empirical notion of *Tabula Rasa* is presented in the characterisation of the daemon. As a demon has settled, it has gathered enough knowledge of itself to know what animal shape it should have.

Pullman is creates a new world, almost starting from scratch by altering the outcome of Genesis. He is builds it without original sin, but still with moral values where salvation comes from knowledge, idle work and truthfulness. So, when people die, the way of being released back into the world in the form of dust is by telling the truth about your life. All of these qualities were highly regarded within Rousseau’s philosophy. Rousseau also wished to bring down the church. The emphasis is put between the former Kingdom of Heaven ruled by an autocratic Authority and the new Republic of Heaven based here on earth where democracy will build a better future. This Edonic future does not, however, come without effort from all.

As the angel Xaphania explains to Lyra: the state of grace is earned by persistently working towards it. By the end of the trilogy Lyra and Will, although being much in love, reach the conclusion that they have to live apart from each other, in order to be able to build a new and better world. They sacrifice their love for the sake of humanity and freedom from oppression.

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