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Innocence and Childhood in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

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Abstract: Philip Pullman's young adult fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials* combines the characteristics of the adventure tale with philosophical musings about subjects such as God, sin, humanity, and death. Among other things, the work engages in a long-standing debate about the nature of childhood. In this essay, I investigate how the concepts of childhood and innocence are utilized and discussed in the trilogy. I use historical accounts from various periods, as well as contemporary research in the field of childhood studies, in order to position the ideas of the trilogy in the wider context of the history of ideas. The essay shows that *His Dark Materials* sharply criticises the Romantic concept of childhood innocence, exposing it as an ideology used to silence and control children by denying them knowledge and growth. However, as similar Romantic ideas are employed and expressed in the trilogy by the implied author, *His Dark Materials* remains ambiguous as to whether childhood innocence should be completely rejected or not.

Keywords: Philip Pullman, *His Dark Materials*, *Northern Lights*, *The Subtle Knife*, *The Amber Spyglass*, children, childhood innocence, experience, Romanticism

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Introduction

Philip Pullman (b. 1946) is a celebrated British writer of fiction, mainly for children and young adults. His works have received numerous awards, among them the Carnegie Medal in 1995, and the Whitbread Book of the Year Award in 2002. In 2005, he was rewarded the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for children's literature, one of the world's most distinguished awards for writers of literature for children. His best known work is the young adult fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials*, published 1995-2000 to great critical acclaim. The trilogy, which will be the object of study for this paper, consists of the three novels *Northern Lights* (1995); *The Subtle Knife* (1997) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000)¹.

In *His Dark Materials*, the two young protagonists, pre-teens Lyra Belacqua and Will Parry, travel through multiple worlds and partake of numerous adventures on their quest to uncover the truth about humanity, sin, death, and God, ultimately succeeding in saving conscious life from the tyrannical Authority that threatens it. The trilogy, which successfully combines the fantastic adventure story with profound philosophical musings, is intended as “*Paradise Lost* for teenagers in three volumes”, as the author himself puts it (Pullman “Talking to...” 126). The Miltonian heritage is vast – even the title of the trilogy is borrowed goods – and not only does the work contain a war against God, complete with rebel angels and a charismatic but ruthless rebel leader, but it also contains its own version of the Fall of humanity. In Pullman's hands, however, the Fall is not a fall at all, but a triumph for human thought and free will.

The topic of innocence and its loss, as well as the question of what sets children apart from adults, are two of the main concerns of the trilogy, discussed continuously throughout the work. In this essay, I intend to investigate how the concept of innocence is treated in *His Dark Materials*, especially in relation to the concept of childhood. In her article “Innocence”, Elizabeth Wolgast distinguishes between innocence in relation to a specific action, and innocence as an inherent characteristic of a person (297-298). This distinction will be used here also. This essay is not concerned with innocence as related to specific deeds; instead, the focus will be on innocence as an inherent quality of a person or a class of persons. Innocence, in this sense, is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “[f]reedom from sin, guilt, or moral wrong in general; the state of being untainted with, or unacquainted with, evil; moral purity”. Further, innocence can be understood as “[f]reedom from cunning or artifice; guilelessness, artlessness, simplicity”, entailing “want of knowledge or sense, ignorance, [or] silliness” (“innocence”). These are the definitions of innocence which I will use.

More specifically, the principal interest of this essay is the concept of *childhood innocence*,

1 Hereafter cited as *NL*, *SK* and *AS* respectively.

i.e. the idea that all children are born morally pure and free from sin, a state which they later lose through the acquiring of experience. This idea is commonly associated with the Romantic period, and often attributed to the 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his treatise on education, *Emile*, the first chapter of which famously begins with the assertion that “[e]verything is good as it leaves the author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man” (161). In his article “Brilliance of a Fire: Innocence, Experience and the Theory of Childhood”, Robert A. Davis notes that it is an oversimplification to view childhood innocence as the sole invention of the Romantic period; indeed, the concept can be traced back at least as far as early medieval times (383). However, as Hugh Cunningham shows in his book *Children and Childhood in Western society since 1500* (68), Rousseau's writing was immensely influential, and caused the idea of innocent childhood to become popularized and broadly accepted. In the Romantic period, the idealization of childhood grew into what Naomi Wood terms “the Romantic 'cult of childhood’” (*PR* 541), which “indulged in an orgy of child worship that prized children's innocence over adults' experience” (*ibid.*). This attitude did not end with the Romantic period, but was pervasive throughout the 19th and much of the 20th century (Cunningham 74), and, as Kerry H. Robinson demonstrates in her article “In the Name of 'Childhood Innocence': A Discursive Exploration of the Moral Panic Associated with Childhood and Sexuality”, the ideology still has its adherents today (114). However, in this essay, I will refer to ideas closely related to the concept of childhood innocence as 'Romantic' ideas, as it was during the Romantic period that these ideas reached their peak, and, furthermore, this is how they are commonly labelled in scholarly writings on the topic (cf. Burcar; Wood *PR*). I will discuss how these ideas are approached and utilized in *His Dark Materials*, investigating and contrasting the conceptions held by different characters and factions in the work, as well as the views expressed by the implied author.

Pullman is well-known for his humanist values and his criticism of religion. He has been called “one of England’s most outspoken atheists” (Miller), and his critical view of organized religion is evident in several of his literary works. In Pullman's retelling of the gospels in novel form, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, a brother of Jesus' is manipulated and blackmailed by a personification of the church (highly reminiscent of the devil) into editing and censoring his chronicles of Jesus' life. In *His Dark Materials*, God, known as the Authority, is no benevolent creator, but a tyrant who acquired his power through a lie, and the Church are his corrupt and power hungry servants.

The topics of innocence and childhood in *His Dark Materials* have been previously touched upon from different perspectives by various critics. Below, I will summarize and discuss the findings of two of the studies, the ideas of which are of major relevance to my own.

In her article “Paradise Refigured: Innocence and Experience in *His Dark Materials*”², Naomi Wood first discusses *His Dark Materials* in relation to Romantic ideas of the innocent child, and then goes on to examine Pullman's rendering of the myth of the Fall. She posits the trilogy as a critique of Romantic childhood ideals, claiming that “*His Dark Materials* dismantles the Romantic myth of childhood innocence and erects in its place a narrative about experience, to emancipate both children and adults from the myth's dark implications” (540).

Lilijana Burcar, in her article “Gender Politics and the Return of the Innocent Child in *His Dark Materials*”, investigates innocence in the trilogy from a gender-oriented perspective. Contrary to Wood, Burcar argues that Pullman uses and promotes Romantic ideals in his trilogy, motivated by “highly conservative gender politics” (47). She claims that, while the first volume depicts childhood as “a highly variegated, complex and socially determined phenomenon” (33-34), the second volume, with its introduction of the male protagonist, sees a shift towards traditional gender patterns. The more complex aspects of childhood become associated with Will, while Lyra, being female, is made to represent the archetypal innocent child (46).

In my essay, I largely agree with Wood's claim that *His Dark Materials* constitutes a criticism of the Romantic childhood ideals. In the trilogy, the ideology of childhood innocence is exposed as a means to silence and control children, and the wish to preserve innocence and deny children the right to growth is shown to have catastrophic consequences. However, Burcar's argument does have some valid points. Although Pullman is clearly intent on criticising the conception of children as simple, innocent creatures, his own use in the trilogy of the Romantic binary of innocence and experience causes the work to remain somewhat ambiguous on the topic.

I will begin my investigation in the first chapter by examining the opinions and actions of the Church representatives who constitute the antagonist faction of the trilogy. I will outline their ideas regarding childhood as expressed in the work, relating them to the Romantic idea of the innocent child, as well as to the Christian theological concept of original sin. I will further show the consequences to which their ideas lead, discussing what this might suggest in terms of the implied author's message. In the second chapter, the focus will shift to depictions of children in the work. I will summarize the way in which children are portrayed, discussing how these depictions are contrasted with the ideas of the antagonist faction. I will further discuss the characterization of children in relation to contemporary ideas regarding childhood innocence. Finally, in the third chapter, I will examine how the distinction between adulthood and childhood is marked in the trilogy, and discuss the views expressed by the implied author regarding the concepts of innocence and experience.

This study is carried out through close reading of the novels in the trilogy, with special

² Hereafter cited as *PR*.

attention being paid to passages that relate closely to the topic of the essay. In order to position the work in its larger context in the history of ideas, historical accounts from various time periods, as well as contemporary research in the field of childhood studies, are surveyed. The views expressed in *His Dark Materials* are then compared and discussed in relation to conceptions of innocence and childhood held historically.

Chapter I: The Church and the Hunt for Innocence

The main antagonists of *His Dark Materials* are the Church and its representatives, often with Mrs Coulter, Lyra's ambitious and cruel mother, in the lead. The Church of Lyra's native world, the world in which the first volume is set, is an immensely powerful organisation, reminiscent of the church of medieval Europe in our world. Its influence imbues all areas of society; it directs all scientific research, and thinkers who do not obey its directives are condemned as heretics. The Church's regime is an oppressive, power hungry one, and the implied author's voice is easily discernible behind the words of the witch Ruta Skadi: “[E]very church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling” (SK 45).

The events of *His Dark Materials* are largely concerned with Dust, a kind of sentient elementary particles that are attracted to, and influence, conscious thought. Dust is however mainly attracted to adults; children do not attract it as much until they reach puberty. This property of Dust interests the Church's scientists (called 'experimental theologians'), who conclude that Dust must be the physical manifestation of original sin (NL 369). The discovery leads the Church to attempt to destroy Dust, or at least to find a way of ceasing its influence on humans, thus restoring the innocence which humanity possessed prior to the Fall, and which children are thought to possess.

Several critics, among them Wood, have recognised Romantic ideas of childhood innocence in the reasoning of Pullman's Church representatives. Believing children to be morally pure as well as intellectually simple, the Church harbour views similar to the ones expressed in *Innocence of Childhood*, a quaint educational book published in 1849. In the book, its author, Mrs Colman, informs her readers that “[l]ittle children are innocent, because they do not know good from evil; they do not yet know what is false, or what is true; they are only recipients of *innocence* from the Lord, through the angels” (11). The Church's fear of the 'corruption' of adults is reminiscent of sentiments such as William Wordsworth's, when he, in his much-cited *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*, mourns the loss of childhood: “But yet I know, where'er I go, / That there hath past away a glory from the earth”, declaring that “[h]eaven lies about us in our infancy! / Shades of the prison-house begin to close / Upon the growing Boy” (337-338). As Cunningham puts it, “[l]ife could be seen, not as an ascent to maturity, but as a decline from the freshness of childhood” (73). The Church of *His Dark Materials* is, however, not content to mourn the loss of innocence; it fervently attempts to prevent it.

While Romantic ideas are evident in the Church's determination to preserve innocence, its emphasis on original sin evokes more traditional religious doctrines and theories such as St Augustine's. A 4th century theologian and highly influential church father, St Augustine taught that human beings were tainted from birth through the sin of Adam (Cunningham 29). Pullman's

fictional Church does consider children to be pure, rather like the 17th century thinker John Earle does: "A child is a man in small letter, yet the best copy of Adam before he tasted of Eve or the apple" (Earle qtd. in Cunningham 46). However, moral decay is nevertheless inevitable; original sin has only been postponed to adolescence. In Mrs Coulter's words: "Grown-ups and their daemons are infected with Dust so deeply that it's too late for them. They can't be helped" (*NL* 282). A child at the research station Bolvangar explains to Lyra: "If you en't got any Dust, that's good. But everyone gets Dust in the end" (*NL* 246).

In Lyra's native universe, every human being has a 'daemon', a physical manifestation of the person's soul. The daemon has the shape of an animal and serves as a life companion to its person; it can move and reason separately and may even argue with its person, but essentially they are two parts of the same being. Having a daemon is an essential characteristic of being human; as the witch Serafina Pekkala tells Lyra, "[a]s long as there have been human beings, there have been daemons. It's what makes us different from animals" (*NL* 314). In the third volume, it is revealed that Will, who comes from our world, also has a daemon "inside him" (*AS* 285), as do all conscious beings, including the tiny gallivespians and the wheel-riding mulefa. Having a daemon, then, is the defining quality of a conscious creature.

The daemon is also associated with sexuality, as Maude Hines demonstrates in her article "Second Nature: Daemons and Ideology in *The Golden Compass*"³ (42). To touch another person's daemon is "the grossest breach of etiquette imaginable [...] utterly forbidden" (*NL* 143). When the doctors at Bolvangar nevertheless do touch Lyra's daemon Pantalaimon, "the interaction is figured as sexual molestation" (Hines 42): "She felt faint, dizzy, sick, disgusted, limp with shock. One of the men was *holding* Pantalaimon. He had seized Lyra's daemon in his human hands, and poor Pan was shaking, nearly out of his mind with horror and disgust. [...] She *felt* those hands... It wasn't *allowed*... Not *supposed* to touch... *Wrong*..." (*NL* 274-275). However, the act of touching another person's daemon is not necessarily an act of abuse. Towards the end of the trilogy, Lyra and Will caress each other's daemons in a blissful and decidedly sexually charged scene (*AS* 503).

In childhood, the daemon can change its shape at will, but in puberty, the daemon settles into a determined shape. As the daemon's settling coincides with the accumulation of Dust, it attracts the interest of the Church: what if the two are connected? In Lord Asriel's words: "Perhaps if the daemon were separated from the body, we might never be subject to Dust - to original sin" (*NL* 373). In their fervent quest for innocence, the representatives of the Church baulk at nothing. At the research station Bolvangar, Mrs Coulter and her team perfect a method for permanently severing the link between the daemon and the human, testing it out on children kidnapped from the slums.

The perversity and cruelty of this action strikes the work's protagonists as unspeakable. The

3 In the USA, the first volume of the trilogy was published as *The Golden Compass*.

first time Lyra encounters a severed child, she wants "to turn and run, or to be sick" (NL 214), and the reader is told that "[a] human being with no daemon was like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghasts, not the waking world of sense" (ibid.). Through 'intercision', as the operation is called, the researchers have not only 'saved' their victims from the loss of their innocence; they have also robbed them of that which made them human.

Nevertheless, the Church representatives insist that intercision is "for the children's own good" (NL 282). In *Innocence of Childhood*, Colman, addressing the children directly, tells her young readers: "Now, as you grow older, wicked thoughts and evil passions will continue to arise, which will require all the strength in your power to overcome" (15). Her words are echoed by Mrs Coulter, as she attempts to excuse the intercision process in front of the deeply upset Lyra:

All that happens is a little cut, and then everything's peaceful. For ever! You see, your daemon's a wonderful friend and companion when you're young, but at the age we call puberty, the age you're coming to very soon, darling, daemons bring all sort of troublesome thoughts and feelings, and that's what lets Dust in. A quick little operation before that, and you're never troubled again (NL 283).

Mrs Coulter's claim to be concerned for the welfare of children is starkly contrasted with her obvious penchant for excessive cruelty. Members of her research team are troubled by her "*personal* interest" and her keen desire, at the early stage of the research project, to watch the children and their daemons being forcefully pulled apart (NL 273). In the second volume, she insists on personally torturing a captive, telling the victim: "We have a thousand years of experience in this Church of ours. We can draw out your suffering endlessly" (SK 34). By exposing the sadism and ruthlessness of Mrs Coulter and the Church she represents, Pullman puts to question their claim to moral superiority, unmasking the hypocrisy of their attempts to justify themselves.

The reader is made to understand that the mutilation of children for the sake of preserving innocence is no new practice with the Church. Lord Asriel, Lyra's father, compares intercision to castration: through the severing of a boy's sexual organs, his high child's voice is kept throughout his life (NL 372). Ruta Skadi makes explicit the relation between intercision and circumcision which is already implied by the similarity of the names:

For all [of the Church's] history [...] it's tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can't control them, it cuts them out. Some of you have seen what they did at Bolvangar. And that was horrible, but it is not the only such place, not the only such practice. [...] I have traveled in the south lands. There are churches there, believe me, that cut their children too, as the people of Bolvangar did - not in the same way, but just as horribly. They cut their sexual organs, yes, both boys and girls; they cut them with knives so that they shan't feel (SK 44-45).

Neither does the Church shy away from even more radical measures when innocence is threatened. When Mrs Coulter learns that the witches call Lyra "Eve, again" (SK 278), and that she is destined

to repeat the actions of the former Eve and bring about a new Fall of humanity, she rapidly concludes: “Why, I shall have to destroy her, [...] to prevent another Fall” (ibid.). Mrs Coulter's method for keeping Lyra from falling is to “[drug her] into Sleeping-Beauty-like submission in order to 'protect' her from her own maturity” (Wood *PR* 542), thus fixing her forever in an innocent state. Other agents of the Church are prepared to go even further. An assassin, the zealous Father Gomez, is sent out to murder Lyra before she has the opportunity to be tempted. Although he has “a horror of harming an innocent person” (*AS* 466), he and his employers clearly feel that preserving innocence is more important than preserving life. As Peter Coveney shows in his book *Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature*, this is by no means a novel sentiment. Discussing the child in Victorian literature, Coveney concludes that the literary child of the period is “a purity which must die before it is corrupted” (149). As an example, he quotes the novel *Boy*, published in 1900:

We may ask whether for many a child it would not have been happiest never to have grown up at all. Honestly speaking, we cannot grieve for the fair legions of beloved children who have passed away in their childhood, - we know, even without the aid of Gospel comfort, that it is 'far better' with them so (Corelli qtd. in Coveney 147).

The notion that it is “far better” to die as a child, with one's innocence intact, than to grow up, inevitably tainted by original sin, is echoed by the president of the Consistorial Court of Discipline, as he muses: “How much better for us all if there had been a Father Gomez in Eden! We would never have left paradise” (*AS* 72).

Innocence, in the eyes of the Church, is synonymous with ignorance, asexuality, dependency, and a lack of imagination and free will. Children are expected to be docile, obedient, sweet, and gullible, and are treated patronizingly, their thoughts and opinions being given little regard. As Mrs Coulter instructs the defiant Lyra: “Now the first guest will be arriving in a few minutes, and they are going to find you perfectly behaved, sweet, charming, innocent, attentive, delightful in every way” (*NL* 88). When Lyra is kidnapped from her companions and brought to Bolvangar (telling the staff that her name is Lizzie), the doctor who admits her tells her not to trust her own senses:

'Well, Lizzie, you're a lucky little girl. Those huntsmen who found you brought you to the best place you could be.'
 'They never found me,' she said doubtfully. 'There was a fight. There was lots of 'em and they had arrows...'
 'Oh, I don't think so. I think you must have wandered away from your father's party and got lost. Those huntsmen found you on your own and brought you straight here. That's what happened, Lizzie.'
 [...]
 'But I saw them shooting arrows!'
 'Ah, you thought you did. That often happens in the intense cold, Lizzie. You fall asleep and have bad dreams and you can't remember what's true and what isn't. That wasn't a fight, don't worry. [...] Now Sister Clara will take you along to the dormitory where you'll meet some other girls and boys who got lost in the wilderness just like you' (*NL* 242-243).

The doctor expects an 'innocent' child to be so ignorant and easily led that not even the evidence of her own memory should prevent her from trusting a kindly-seeming adult. His eagerness to conceal unpleasant truths from Lyra is reminiscent of thinkers such as Neil Postman, a modern-day adherent to the ideal of childhood innocence, who argues that the innocence of children should be preserved by keeping from them information regarding such "secrets of adult life" (79) as "death, mental illness, and homosexuality" (87). Children should stay cheerful and not worry, even when there is ample legitimate reason for them to do so.

The sort of 'innocence' sought by the Church is perhaps best seen in the examples of people who have undergone the intercision process. Tony Makarios, the 'intercised' child encountered by Lyra, is described as inspiring both pity and revulsion. Robbed of his humanity, he asks incessantly for his daemon, while clinging hard to the piece of dried fish which is all he has for a substitute (*NL* 214-215). Mrs Coulter's 'zombi' bodyguard, a kind of elite soldiers without daemons, "have no fear and no imagination and no free will, and they'll fight till they're torn apart" (*SK* 176). The nurses at Bolvangar, also intercised but allowed to keep their severed daemons as "trotting pet[s]" (*NL* 283), are characterized by their lack of imagination, their "strange blank incuriosity" (*NL* 282) and their "bland calm manner" (*NL* 253). Their daemons are described as passive and apathetic.

The mindless zombi soldiers and indifferent nurses are examples of the kind of 'innocent' people that the Church seeks to create. Easily controlled and uncomplaining, they do not threaten the power of the Church, or ultimately, the power of the Authority which it serves. For the reader, however, the 'preservation' of this version of innocence appears sinister. The witches' prophecy, stating that if the Church would triumph, "[t]he universes [would] all become nothing more than interlocking machines, blind and empty of thought, feeling, life..." (*NL* 308), seems credible.

Chapter II: The Children

The children in *His Dark Materials* are nothing like the docile, obedient, and dependent 'innocents' desired by the Church. On the contrary, children in the work are characterized as intelligent, rude, imaginative, and highly resourceful. The two young protagonists, Lyra and Will, are curious, capable, and independent, refusing to submit to the authority of adults or to accept patronizing declarations that certain things are not “for children to worry about” (NL 281). Lyra chafes at the notion of “stand[ing] around [...] being all sweet and pretty” (NL 85); she wants to act. Her handling of a dangerously interested adult, when on the run from Mrs Coulter, demonstrates that she is not naïve or unaware:

'Where are you going, all alone like this?'
'Going to meet my father.'
'And who's he?'
'He's a murderer.'
'He's what?'
'I told you, he's a murderer. It's his profession. He's doing a job tonight. I got his clean clothes in here, 'cause he's usually all covered in blood when he's finished a job.'
'Ah! You're joking.'
'I en't.'
[...] She drank her coffee stolidly and ate the last of her sandwich.
'Good night', she said. 'I can see my father coming now. He looks a bit angry' (NL 101).

When the children are rebuked for their insubordination and told to be more respectful towards adults, Will retorts: “I'm not going to be spoken to like that, so don't try. Respect goes two ways. [...] You are not in charge here; we are” (AS 168-169). As noted by Wood in her article “Paradise Lost and Found: Obedience, Disobedience, and Storytelling in C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman”⁴, the protagonists' frequent disobedience of various authorities is a major driving force behind the narrative, and, furthermore, usually produces desirable results for the two children (249). Thus, it is shown that Will and Lyra are capable of making sound decisions for themselves; they do not need to be led by 'better knowing' adults.

Neither are the children of the trilogy depicted as the “fountains of impeccable goodness” (Burcar 38) envisioned by the Romantic tradition. As Burcar notes, “Lyra and Will both exhibit characteristics, attitudes, and behaviours, which make them neither inherently good nor inherently bad” (ibid.). Lyra is introduced as “a coarse and greedy little savage” who likes to “lord it” over her urchin friends (NL 37). Furthermore, she is a compulsive liar; in fact, her ability to tell convincing lies is presented as her foremost talent. At one point, compelled to speak the truth, she laments that “[it is] difficult to tell them the truth when a lie would have been so much easier for them to understand” (SK 75). The children are well aware of the adult world's idea of 'innocent' children, and know how to exploit it to suit their needs. Lyra is capable of summoning up an expression of

4 Hereafter cited as *PLF*

“bland and vacuous docility” (SK 73) to assure adults that she does not pose any threat, and Will is proud of his talent of hiding from sight by “simply [making] himself part of the background” (SK 65).

Pullman does not shy away from portraying children as violent or cruel. In the children-only populated city of Cittàgazze, Will and Lyra rescue a cat which is being stoned and beaten by a mob of children (SK 96-97). Later, Lyra and Will themselves become the targets of the same child-mob, wielding sticks and guns:

They weren't individual children: they were a single mass, like a tide. They surged below him and leaped up in fury, snatching, threatening, screaming, spitting, but they couldn't reach.

[...]

Someone was shouting 'Kill! Kill! Kill!' and then others joined in, louder and louder, and those on the roof began to stamp and thump the tiles in rhythm, but they didn't quite dare come closer, faced by the snarling daemon. Then a tile broke, and the boy standing on it slipped and fell, but the one beside him picked up the broken pieces and hurled it at Lyra (SK 204-205)

Lyra is shocked at the behaviour of the Cittàgazze children. Will, however, is not surprised. Used to protecting his mentally ill mother, he has experienced, and taken part in, the violence of children before:

He had learned to fight at school; there had been plenty of occasion for it, once the other children had sensed that there was something the matter with his mother. And he'd learned that the object of a school fight was not to gain points for style but to force your enemy to give in, which meant hurting him more than he was hurting you. He knew that you had to be willing to hurt someone else, too, and he'd found out that not many people were, when it came to it; but he knew that he was (SK 154).

The children of *His Dark Materials* are multifaceted, thinking individuals, existing in a social context and acting from a multitude of different motives. By portraying them thus, Pullman contributes to the contemporary discourse which warns against the stereotypical Romantic conception of children as innocent, pure, and 'natural' beings. Jenny Kitzinger, in her article “Defending Innocence: Ideologies of Childhood”, argues that “‘innocence’ should be rejected because it is an ideology used to deny children access to knowledge and power” (80). Furthermore, the ideology of childhood innocence carries the implication that children who do not conform to the innocent ideal forfeit their right to protection and respect (ibid.); according to this logic, a child who is not 'innocent' is not really a child at all. Wood likewise argues that “[r]emoving 'the child' from time and placing it in myth [...] obscures history's *children* who may have desires, orientations, and needs not countenanced by the adult-generated ideal” (PR 542-543). Several scholars assert that childhood innocence is a social construction invented by adults, out of adult desires for control and nostalgia (Robinson 115-116; Wood PR 542; Richardson 173). Similarly, the Church's 'preservation' of childhood innocence in *His Dark Materials* serves the purpose of making children more

controllable for adults, and the threat of 'moral impurity' is removed. For the children, however, the cost for preserved innocence is the loss of their humanity.

Even so, Pullman does not do away entirely with the idea of innocent children. There is still a sense in which the children of *His Dark Materials* can be said to be 'innocent', especially in the first volume. Lyra and her Oxford friends may be rude and unruly, but their insubordination is expressed mainly through harmless pranks, such as “clambering over the College roofs [...] to spit plum-stones on the heads of passing Scholars or to hoot like owls outside a window where a tutorial was going on; [...] or stealing apples from the market” (NL 35-36). The lives of the children are depicted as free, untroubled by politics or rules of etiquette, and powered by curiosity, creativity and a general love of life. Although the narrator insists that the Oxford children are not 'innocently' playing but are in fact “engaged in deadly warfare” (NL 36), the innocent nature of their 'warfare' is affirmed by the descriptions of it. Fights do occur, but none of the savage nature experienced by Will, and there are no instances of bullying described. Of the mud battle with the clay-burners' children, which Lyra remembers and relates with great delight, readers learn that “none of [the children] had had a better day in all their lives” (AS 315). A child's life in Oxford may be a “rich seething stew of alliances and enmities and feuds and treaties” (NL 36), but when external enemies, in the shape of the Gobblers, threaten, all the different child factions immediately abandon their loyalties and hostilities, and ally in the face of this real and menacing danger (NL 56-58). Altogether, the description of Lyra's life in Oxford reads like a nostalgic memory of an idealized 'happy childhood'. Here, paradoxically, Pullman obeys the call of Rousseau to “[I]ove childhood; promote its games, its pleasures, its amiable instinct” (209). Situated at the very exposition of *His Dark Materials*, the innocence of the Oxford scene provides a contrast for the sinister events that follow.

Lyra herself is often a representative of innocence in the trilogy. Her honest curiosity and eagerness to explore once again evoke Rousseau, who claims that a child “wants to touch everything, handle everything [...] it is thus that he learns to feel the hotness, the coldness, the hardness, the softness, the heaviness, the lightness, of bodies, and to judge their size, their shape, and all their sensible qualities by looking, feeling, listening” (193). The delighted attitude with which Lyra discovers new things can be seen in her reaction when Will takes her to visit the cinema:

Lyra was entranced. She had seen projected photograms, but nothing in her world had prepared her for the cinema. She wolfed down the hot dog and the popcorn, gulped down the Coca-Cola, and gasped and laughed with delight at the characters on the screen. [...]

'That's the best thing I ever saw in my whole life,' she said. 'I dunno why they never invented this in my world. We got some things better than you, but this was better than *anything* we got.' [...]

'D'you want to see another one?'

'Yeah!' (NL94)

Lyra makes new friends with a childish ease, and her compassionate and brave nature coupled with her artless awe at the world charms numerous adults – from the kindly Farder Coram to the intimidating armoured bear Iorek Byrnisson – into becoming her devoted protectors. Farder Coram declares that Lyra is “a strange innocent creature, and I wouldn't have harmed her for the world” (*NL* 175), and Lord Asriel's manservant Thorold tells Serafina Pekkala: “I was fond of her, mind – you couldn't help it” (*SK* 40).

Although Lyra's stories and fantasies are rich in gory detail, encounters with real-life violence fill her with horror and shock. That she herself has believed in the inherent innocence of children is clear from her reaction after the attack of the Cittàgazze mob: “Well, I won't trust kids again,' said Lyra. 'I thought back at Bolvangar that whatever grownups did, however bad it was, kids were different. They wouldn't do cruel things like that. But I en't sure now. I never seen kids like that before, and that's a fact” (*SK* 231).

Just as the darker depiction of the Cittàgazze children contrasts with the portrayal of the cheerful and trouble-free Oxford childhood, Lyra's innocence and trustfulness is often contrasted with Will's more mature and cynical outlook. As the lady Salmakia observes to her colleague, “[h]e is too alert. He watches everywhere for us. [...] The girl is more trusting. I think we could win her round. She's innocent, and she loves easily. We could work on her” (*AS* 186). Accustomed to taking care of his mother, and hiding both her and himself from the authorities in order to escape institutionalization, Will gives the impression of having had to 'grow up before his time'. This fact is noted by Lyra, who taunts him: ”If you start behaving like a grownup, the Spectres'll⁵ get you” (*SK* 56). Amelia A. Rutledge, in her article “Reconfiguring Nurture in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*”, makes the observation that although both children eagerly pursue independence, their methods for acquiring it are different. While Will openly asserts the right to his, Lyra “relies on persuasion, evasion, and trickery” to gain hers (129). Thus, while Will refuses to be 'treated as a child', Lyra outwardly acknowledges the right of adults to rebuke her and tell her what to do. This acknowledgement does, however, by no means ensure her obedience.

The two protagonists' different expressions of childhood are examined in detail by Burcar, who interprets the contrast as a “renaturalization of rigid gender binarisms” (34). Burcar's claim that Lyra, after the introduction of Will in the second volume, becomes “[e]ntirely subsumed under the category of intuitive or helpless femininity” (*ibid.*), unable to “exercise any kind of meaningful agency” (41), may be considered a rather grand overstatement. Lyra does certainly not lack agency; in fact, it is through her initiative that the two most crucial events of the trilogy (the liberation of the dead, and the Fall) come to pass (*AS* 166; *AS* 303; *AS* 468). Burcar's contrasting of Lyra's ability to

5 The Spectres are a kind of soul-devouring vampires of the Cittàgazze world. They only attack adults, and are invisible to children.

read the 'alethiometer'⁶, described by Burcar as an intuitive and spontaneous process, to Will's ability to wield the 'subtle knife'⁷, which “requires conscious intellectual effort” (41), is likewise a fallacy. On the contrary, it is explicitly stated in the work that the two processes require very similar states of mind (*SK* 162; *AS* 461). Nevertheless, Burcar's article does provide some useful insights. Whereas Will is consistently portrayed as rational, strong, and mature, inspiring the respect, and sometimes fear, of adults whom he encounters (*SK* 243; *AS* 505), Lyra, who is repeatedly referred to in the trilogy as “the child”, does indeed, at times, function as an “icon of innocent prelapsarian childhood” (Burcar 46). Lyra's status as a representative for innocence in relation to her enactment of the role of Eve will be further discussed in the third chapter.

In *His Dark Materials*, children are depicted as complex and variegated people, who are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but are rather individuals who have to navigate through the same moral uncertainties as adults. Pullman uses his portrayals of children as a critique of the concept of childhood innocence, but the trilogy remains ambiguous on the topic, as he himself employs the concept as part of his characterization. Furthermore, as will be shown in the next chapter, *His Dark Materials* is very much concerned with mapping out the inherent difference between children and adults.

6 A truth-telling device

7 A knife which is used to make openings between worlds

Chapter III: Innocence, Experience, and the Nature of Dust

Many scholars critical towards the concept of childhood innocence also express criticism towards the idea of children and adults as two distinct, qualitatively different, kinds of people (cf. Robinson 115). In an interview with Parsons and Nicholson, Pullman appears to agree with this critical stance. Discussing the difference between writing for children and writing for adults, he states that “when you're writing for children, you cannot expect them simply to *know* as much. That's all. You expect them to be just as intelligent, just as curious, just as alive to all the story offers, just as capable of being moved by the same sort of things” (“Talking to..”122). However, *His Dark Materials* continuously emphasizes qualities which mark adults and children as distinctly different from each other. As Mrs Coulter says, “[t]his is at the heart of everything, this difference between children and adults!” (SK 176).

The difference between adults and children is intimately related to the nature of Dust. Dust, it turns out, is a wholly benevolent power. Furthermore, it is the ultimate source of conscious thought, and none can exist without it. It is attracted to all conscious creatures, as well as to things constructed or shaped by them. The mulefa, a species of wheel-riding creatures befriended by the physicist Mary Malone, tell her: “Ever since we have had the sraf⁸, we have had memory and wakefulness. Before that, we knew nothing” (AS 224). As previously mentioned, children do not attract Dust the way adults do. Mary Malone constructs a spyglass through which she can see Dust as sparkles of light. Using it, she observes Dust attraction in a young mulefa child and its mother:

[Atal] indicated one of the small children playing in the long grass [...] There was a golden haze around him as there was around the shelters, the fishing-nets, the evening fire: stronger than theirs, though not by much. But unlike theirs it was full of little swirling currents of intention, that eddied and broke off and drifted about, to disappear as new ones were born. Around his mother, on the other hand, the golden sparkles were much stronger, and the currents they moved in more settled and powerful. [...] [T]he Shadows or the sraf or the Dust that bathed her looked like the very image of responsibility and wise care (AS 231).

Children, thus, are construed as not quite complete human beings, still lacking the full consciousness associated with adulthood; the attraction of Dust which is the hallmark of a conscious being does not fully begin until adolescence. Similarly, the vampire-like Spectres only attack adults. According to the shaman Stanislaus Grumman, “the Spectres' food is attention. A conscious and informed interest in the world. The immaturity of children is less attractive to them” (SK 247-258). Pantalaimon explains further: “[The Spectres] grow by feeding on Dust. [...] And on daemons. Because Dust and daemons are sort of similar; grown-up daemons anyway” (AS 490-491). The shape-shifting ability of children's daemons signals that a child's nature is as of yet undetermined; the child is a 'tabula rasa', and his or her prospects are unlimited. At the daemon's settling, the

⁸ 'Sraf' is the mulefa word for 'Dust'.

number of prospects drastically diminishes, but in return, the person gains knowledge about him- or herself.

In *His Dark Materials*, the seeking of knowledge is central to growing up. Pullman thus employs the Romantic binary of innocence versus experience, but unlike the Romantics, who praised innocence and mourned its inevitable loss, Pullman celebrates experience, and posits the acquisition of knowledge as the desired goal for every conscious being. For Lyra and Will, the narrative is a continuous journey towards their maturity, and the pivotal event of the trilogy is their final step into adulthood, symbolized by their re-enactment of the Fall.

Listening to Mary Malone (who has been instructed to “play the serpent” [SK 221]) telling them stories about love and attraction, Lyra feels “something strange happen to her body”, and has the impression of being “handed the key to a great house she hadn't known was there, a house that was somehow inside her” (AS 445), full of promises of new knowledge and sensations. Eager to understand these new feelings, Lyra is inspired to initiate the event which, complete with the symbolic sharing of fruit, constitutes the foretold Fall:

Lyra took one of those little red fruits. With a fast-beating heart, she turned to him and said, 'Will...!' And she lifted the fruit gently to his mouth. She could see from his eyes that he knew at once what she meant, and that he was too joyful to speak. Her fingers were still at his lips, and she felt them tremble, and he put his own hand up to hold hers there, and neither of them could look; they were confused; they were brimming with happiness. Like two moths clumsily bumping together, with no more weight than that, their lips touched. Then before they knew how it happened, they were clinging together, blindly pressing their faces towards each other. [...] Around them there was nothing but silence, as if all the world were holding its breath (AS 468-469).

Through this act, Lyra and Will leave childhood behind and enter into the realm of adulthood. Afterwards, they appear to be “made of living gold”, constituting “the true image of what human beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance” (AS 473). Unbeknownst to them, they have also caused to cease the steady leakage of Dust out of the worlds, thus saving conscious life from the threatening fate dreaded by Mary Malone: “Thought, imagination, feeling, would all wither and blow away, leaving nothing but a brutish automatism; and the brief period of life when life was conscious of itself would flicker out like a candle in every one of the billions of worlds where it had burned brightly” (AS 453).

It is the seeking of knowledge, coupled with an awakened sexuality, which saves the world in *His Dark Materials*. Through his portrayal of the Fall, Pullman rejects both the Romantic wish to preserve innocence, and traditional Christian doctrines of the Fall into sin, arguing that it is not only inescapable, but also vital, that children be allowed to grow up; for only the desire for experience can ensure the prosperity of human thought, culture, and science.

For Lyra especially, as Mary Harris Russell aptly demonstrates in her article “Eve, Again! Mother Eve!": Pullman's Eve Variations”, the trilogy is a continuous search for knowledge (217-

220). In the beginning of the narrative, Lyra is a curious child, exploring the underground passages of Jordan College with her friend Roger (*NL* 48), stealing wine to find out how it tastes (*NL* 47), and listening awestruck to Mrs Coulter's stories of the North (*NL* 69). As the trilogy unfolds, her innocent curiosity eventually grows into a more mature desire for knowledge and wisdom, thus enabling her to perform the role of Eve, willingly rejecting innocence for experience, and completing her transition from “Lyra the curious child” to “Lyra the knowing woman” (Russell 220). As has been discussed in the previous chapter, however, Lyra is sometimes depicted in the trilogy as the archetypal “child”. One might argue, then, that her initiation of the Fall not only amounts to her own entrance into adulthood, but is also a symbol for the liberation of all children from the burden of innocence forced on them.

The loss of innocence does not come without a cost, however. Making the transition from child to adult, Lyra discovers that she has lost the ability to read the 'alethiometer' intuitively. Even so, she learns that she can regain the ability “by work”, through “a lifetime of thought and effort” (*AS* 495), and at the end of the story, it is this patient search for wisdom which is her goal.

At times, Lyra transcends her role as Eve to function almost as a Jesus figure. “[D]estined to bring about the end of destiny” (*NL* 308), Lyra begins her peaceful revolution by travelling to the world of the dead and back again, liberating the ghosts from their prison camp-like existence. In order to go there, she has to leave her daemon behind – an extremely painful and difficult sacrifice (*AS* 284). The event recalls the biblical account of Jesus' temporary death and subsequent resurrection, which, according to Christian doctrine, caused death to be defeated. The resemblance is taken further when Lyra comforts the ghost children:

'[I]f my own daemon was here, you could all stroke him and touch him, I promise.'
And she held out her hands to the children. The adult ghosts hung back, listless or fearful, but the children all came thronging forward. They had as much substance as fog, poor things, and Lyra's hands passed through and through them, as did Will's. They crammed forward, light and lifeless, to warm themselves at the flowing blood and the strong-beating hearts of the two travellers

The scene contains remarkable similarities to the following passage from the gospel of Mark:

13 People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. **14** When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. [...] **16** And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them (“Mark 10:13-16”)

Is Lyra, then, in Burcar's opinion “the embodiment of an intuitive and unselfconscious prelapsarian child” (43), perhaps also the saviour of children? Does her act of letting the ghosts out to be dissolved into tiny particles and rejoin the world as parts of “the air and the wind and the trees and the earth and all living things” (*AS* 320) save the ghost children from the fate of having to stay eternally 'innocent'?

The biblical Jesus did, of course, not commit any *deicide*. However, the new doctrines which he preached largely replaced the old ones, and through his teachings and actions he caused the formation of a new religion. Likewise, when Lyra and Will accidentally cause the Authority, ancient beyond words, to dissolve into thin air, it is not a conscious act of *deicide*, but rather an act of compassion for the “[d]emented and powerless” being which he has become, who is “crying like a baby and cowering away” (*AS* 411). In Russell’s words, “When the new Eve is ready for the new creation, built on truth, the old Authority, built on a lie, must vanish” (212).

At the very end of the trilogy, Will and Lyra make the difficult decision to leave each other and live separately in their native worlds, having learned that the openings between worlds must be closed as they cause Dust to leak out. This decision is the ultimate demonstration of their newly acquired maturity and marks the end of Pullman's tale about a journey from innocence to experience. The loss of childhood carries a cost, but in *His Dark Materials*, the cost of clinging to childhood and preserving innocence is much worse. Through the acquisition of experience and knowledge, human beings can become “as gods” (*NL* 370).

Conclusion

Throughout *His Dark Materials*, the topics of childhood, innocence, and experience are examined and discussed in various ways and from various perspectives. The Church's alleged interest in the welfare of children and wish to protect their 'innocence' from the harmful influence of Dust is sharply contrasted with their cruelty, ruthlessness, and hunt for power. Their method for 'preserving' innocence is exposed as an act of hideous mutilation which robs the victim of his or her humanity. Pullman portrays them thus in order to sharply criticise the Romantic ideal of innocent childhood, and the idea that innocence ought to be preserved. The child characters in the trilogy function as a further contrast to the Church's conception of children as ignorant, sweet, gullible, and docile. Portrayed as multifaceted, highly capable individuals, engaged in conflicts and faced with moral dilemmas, the children of *His Dark Materials* belie the oversimplified conception of children as innocent, simple, and 'natural' creatures. In his reworking of the myth of the Fall, Pullman celebrates growth and experience, positing the search for knowledge as the ultimate pursuit for every human being.

However, Pullman does not completely abandon the concept of childhood innocence which he sets out to criticise. Instead, he equips Lyra with characteristics associated with the Romantic 'innocent' and lets the image of her happy Oxford childhood function as a contrast to the harsh realities which she encounters during the course of the narrative. Evoking the Romantic binary of innocence and experience, Pullman constructs the trilogy as a tale of Lyra's journey from child to young woman, the goal of which is reached through her symbolic enactment of the role of Eve and initiation of the Fall. Furthermore, although Pullman's characterization of children suggests that he considers children to be just as emotionally and intellectually complex as adults, several symbolic means are used in *His Dark Materials* to emphasize the difference between adults and children. Thus, it is implied that children and adults should be viewed as two distinct classes of people, and, moreover, that children should be considered 'incomplete' human beings.

In conclusion, *His Dark Materials* is a powerful statement criticising the Romantic idealization of childhood, demonstrating how the concept of childhood innocence can be used as a means of silencing children and denying them knowledge and the right to growth. However, as Romantic ideas of childhood are also employed and expressed by the implied author, the trilogy remains ambiguous as to whether childhood innocence as a concept should be wholly rejected or not.

In this essay, I have chosen to use texts from various historical periods, both literary and non-literary, the ideas of which I have compared to the ideas expressed in *His Dark Materials*. The use of both historical and contemporary texts has enabled me to determine the position of the trilogy

in its larger framework in the history of ideas. This would not have been possible if only contemporary texts had been used. However, an interesting option for a similar study would be to refer solely to current ideas concerning children and childhood, perhaps comparing *His Dark Materials* to other similar works of young adult fiction. Through such an approach, the trilogy could be positioned in relation to contemporary debate.

Due to the limited scope of this study, I have not discussed how adults are depicted in *His Dark Materials*. Instead, I have chosen to focus solely on depictions of and ideas regarding children. A related topic for future research would then be to compare depictions of children with depictions of adults in the trilogy, in order to determine whether any general differences in characterization can be found.

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