

Leave Neverland, Fall down the Rabbit Hole

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* [1]

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Abstract: Philip Pullman's multi-layered contemporary children's fantasy fiction, *His Dark Materials*, embraces profound subjects while discussing the misconceptions of childhood. His well-known trilogy, which focuses on Lyra's adventurous journeys through the alternative worlds, employs fantasy in order to examine the problems and concerns of the contemporary world and to subvert the canonized and idealized associations with childhood innocence. The aim of this study is to discuss how Pullman's trilogy reconceptualises the dichotomy between the innocence of childhood and the maturity of adulthood and how fantasy enables us to interpret real life issues from a refreshed vantage point.

Keywords: *His Dark Materials*, children's fantasy fiction, childhood innocence, alternative worlds

Introduction

Contemporary children's fantasy fiction provides new lenses for its dual audience to refresh their worldviews. With regard to our postmodern world, it goes beyond the boundaries of the fixed definitions and explanations, reformulating its own conventions and themes. In this respect, contemporary children's fantasy demands new and broader viewpoints for its main themes like childhood innocence because "[t]he horizons of contemporary children's literature are much wider, and the world of childhood is no longer secluded and protected" (Nikolajeva 139). Today, it surpasses the romanticised aspects of childhood innocence, and discusses the popular and controversial subject: the conflict between innocence and experience.

The innocence and experience theme is at the heart of children's literature. This is mostly due to the canonized conceptualisation that innocence is the etiquette of childhood while experience is the signifier of adulthood. Therefore, the growing-up process has been associated with moving away from pureness and walking into the corrupted world. These stereotypical oppositions are constructed as the basic premises of the differences between child and adult. For a long time, children's literature has been assigned the duty of protecting children from the harms and chaos of the adult world. Thus, most children's books, like A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*, try to leave a chaotic and catastrophic world behind, for the tranquillity of childhood innocence in the fantastic worlds. The intense emphasis on the idealization and the nostalgia of childhood has also limited most children's stories to following Peter Pan's motto, *never grow up*. However, the ready-made and iconic classifications of childhood innocence are inadequate in representing children, both in real life and in fiction. This is why, as Katherine Dodou says, "contemporary fiction seeks to problematize the image of the innocent child as a

symbol of vulnerability, guiltlessness, and lack of knowledge” (240). Contemporary children’s fantasy accepts childhood as a transitory phase rather than an everlasting process. Thus, it liberates the notion of childhood from fixed representations.

Positioning childhood in the ivory tower of sacredness causes misassumptions on the notion of childhood. As Peter Hunt points out, “[i]n privileging childhood as this sort of ‘other’, we misrepresent and belittle what we are; more significantly, we belittle childhood and allow ourselves to ignore our actual knowledge of real children” (13-14). Confining children into the idealized stereotypes of angelic figures restricts their freedom to discover and comprehend the multiplicity and the profoundness of both real life and themselves. In contemporary children’s fantasy, “children have been released from [this kind of] iconography” (Ang 166) because it challenges “a sentimental notion of childhood, where happy [children] inhabit a trouble-free country and the sun is always shining” (Griswold 31). While distorting this “saccharine notion” (31) of childhood, the aim of contemporary children’s fantasy is not to create fearful places to enter. On the contrary, it enables children to recognize the difficulties and dilemmas they have already experienced in their daily lives. Through the alternative worlds of fantasy, children get the opportunity to empathise with the child protagonists in dealing with the serious problems and concerns. These challenging alternative worlds shatter the illusion that childhood is a trouble-free space, full of never-ending joy, which is shielded from the harshness of real world issues.

Contemporary children’s fantasy fiction empowers its child protagonists without encapsulating them in iconized and idealized childhood innocence. The road to the discovery of the world and the self is reinforced by the limitless alternatives and opportunities of fantasy. Fantasy provides a refreshed vantage point for children who have already been born into the chaotic and catastrophic realities of our world. As Jack Zipes explains, “fantasy enables us to gain distance from our own world and its conventions ironically so that we can become better acquainted with our own world and perhaps change it, after experiencing the other world” (189). Likewise, the experiences of the child protagonists in the alternative worlds of fantasy enable them to confront their fears and anxieties about growing up or entering the world of adults. Furthermore, the challenges and difficulties of the fantastic worlds empower the child protagonists to feel more courageous and take responsibility for themselves and their worlds. In this respect, fantasy functions as “a tool confronting rather than evading reality” (Gilead 84) for both child protagonists and the reader because it is “the frame that guarantees our access to reality, our ‘sense of reality’” (Žižek 122).

In our contemporary world, fantasy operates as one of the most significant methods for mirroring the realities of the world because “we exist in a postmodern world that is inescapably drawn to fantasy. In part, this is because the nature of contemporary life has itself become fantastical” (Falconer 76). In the hyperreality of our world, we cannot rely on certainties; instead, we live among ambiguities and ambivalences. The subversive power of fantasy enables children to adapt themselves into these complexities and dilemmas. Furthermore, the “global, intuitional language of fantasy” (Le Guin 44) offers new possibilities for comprehending real life issues. While contemporary fantasy fiction encourages both the child protagonists and the reader to discover the ambivalences of real life

issues, it also challenges the idealizations and misconceptions about childhood, giving a voice to them so they can express their individuality and discover their self-expression. In this respect, this study aims to show how children's fantasy fiction subverts the fixed definitions and idealizations of childhood innocence and how fantasy enables children to comprehend real life issues through the alternative worlds. This study focuses on Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* to interpret the concerns and problems of our world in relation to the theme of innocence and experience.

Reformulating the Notion of Innocence and Experience through Fantasy

The sentimentalised and privileged status of childhood over adulthood creates extreme dichotomies between childhood innocence and adulthood experience. Contemporary children's fantasy fiction criticizes most of the conventions of previous periods, like the extreme idealization of childhood as a time of sacredness and unquestionable pureness. Like most contemporary children's fantasy novels, *His Dark Materials* subverts the never-grow-up story of Neverland and follows Tolkien's idea that "[c]hildren are meant to grow up, not to become Peter Pans" (45). Therefore, the eleven-year-old female protagonist, Lyra, curiously delves into the challenging adventures as a road to maturation, experience and wisdom. Her quest for self-discovery, beyond sterilized and protected places, distorts the idea of confining children to domesticity and passivity for protection. While Pullman liberates his protagonist both to discover her sense of self and gain awareness and experience in the alternative worlds, he also profoundly touches on essential real-life issues like child abuse, environmental problems and the misuse of power and knowledge. He never undermines the children's capacity to discover new possibilities and to enhance their worldviews. Instead, he tries to show that childhood is not a phase of everlasting journey and growing up can be a difficult but necessary path for children to follow in order to create a better future for themselves. Therefore, Pullman centres his story on "Lyra's world-changing regenerative "fall" (Oram 419), which urges the necessity of leaving childhood behind and entering the world of experience.

The trilogy starts in Lyra's alternative world which has unfamiliar and extraordinary elements but closely examines real life issues. Lyra's Oxford depicts real life problems, like child abuse in the Station, Bolvangar and the misuse of power by such corrupted institutions as the church, The Magisterium. Pullman's trilogy tells an alternative Fall story in which he discusses the innocence and experience theme. This metaphoric Fall symbolizes gaining wisdom and experience instead of death, damnation and original sin. Pullman reformulates Milton's *Paradise Lost* and introduces Lyra as the new Eve. Thus, Lyra is destined to cause the Fall again with the male child protagonist, Will. Pullman reconceptualises the story of Fall as the revival of freethinking, consciousness and "as the actual beginning of true human freedom" (Glanzer 167). Moreover, this concept of the Fall is based on "Kleist's optimistic view - sometimes called 'the fortunate fall'" (Lenz 125). In this way, Pullman constructs a rivalry between the representations of the Fall as a chance and the Fall as damnation. In the trilogy,

the church accepts the Fall as the source of original sin and an assassin, Father Gomez, is assigned to kill Lyra since she is considered a betrayer by the church. The members of the church think that “How much better for [them] all if there had been a Father Gomez in the garden of Eden! [People] would have never left paradise” (Pullman, *His Dark Materials* 706). The devout aim of the church is to prevent the revival of awareness and consciousness by even killing a child.

In Lyra’s world, the Oblation Board of the church does not hesitate to endanger children’s lives in the name of protecting the world from another damnation. In the Experimental Station, Bolvangar, children become the victims of pseudo-scientific experiments, searching for Dust, which is believed to be “the physical evidence for original sin” (314) by the Magisterium. However, Dust refers to the “particles of consciousness” (428), which indicates a threat for the authority of the church. The Dust is unattractive to children until they gain sexual awareness in adolescence which refers to the revival of individuation and self-awareness, and a road from inexperience to maturity. The rebelliousness of adolescence jeopardizes both the control and the authority of the church. In Lyra’s world, each person has a daemon which “is a visual representation of one’s inner essence, personality, or emotions” (Greenwell 103). In the experiments of Bolvangar, children are severed from their daemons before they become adolescents; before they become attracted to Dust. The daemon is an essential part of self, thus severing a daemon from his/her person can seriously endanger both lives. As Santiago Colás says, “[d]estroying the invisible bond that links daemon to human, intercision reduces the human to something like an automaton and the daemon to an equally unlively” (52) creature.

The Oblation Board of the church manipulates the children’s inexperienced presence under the pretense of saving them from damnation and corruption. The daemons of the severed children are kept “[i]n a series of glass cases [...] [and] ghostlike forms of cats, or birds, or rats, or other creatures, each [is] bewildered and frightened and as pale as smoke” (222). The cruel imprisonments of the daemons reveal the devout purpose of the Oblation Board to restrain children from their authenticity and freedom. They disregard how much their actions harm the children. Children suffer after losing their connection with their daemons; and this pain and depression can cause their death. For example, Lyra encounters a little boy who cannot endure the pain and the depression of being detached from his daemon. He tries to lessen his pain by “clutch[ing] a piece of fish to him [...] that [is] all he [has], a piece of dried fish” (183). He is like “[a] human being with no daemon [...] like someone without a face, [...] something unnatural and uncanny that belong[s] to the world of night-ghosts, not the waking world of sense” (184). This incident clearly exemplifies the extreme cruelty of sacrificing children in order to prevent the spread of Dust. Pullman shows how such corrupted institutions are afraid of losing their absolute authority and panopticon control of people. Dust, the symbol of consciousness and wisdom, threatens the omnipotent power of the church in Lyra’s world. For this reason, the members of the Oblation Board want to stop Lyra from regenerating the Fall, which will enable the spread of Dust. While Pullman emphasizes that “[w]ithout consciousness, [Dust], the universe will lose the capacity for freedom necessary for human existence” (Oram 422-423), he equally depicts child abuse in institutions which try to legitimize their practices for the sake of trouble-free and

sterilized lives, distanced from the damned corruption. The head of the Oblation Board, Mrs Coulter, explains and justifies their practices and experiments by saying that “the doctors do it for the children’s own good[.] [...] Dust is something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked. Grown-ups and their dæmons are infected with Dust so deeply that it’s too late for them. They can’t be helped” (240). This belief is very similar to the Puritan belief that children are “young souls to be saved, or, more probably, damned” (Townsend 6). Therefore, children should be protected from evilness and wickedness of the corrupted adult world. In this respect, the members of the Oblation Board stick to the belief that they are protecting children, that “a quick operation on children means they’re safe from it. Dust just won’t stick to them ever again. They’re safe and happy” (240). This depicted pseudo-happiness of children actually ensures the redemption of the church; preventing the church from losing its control by creating the puppets to follow its orders and regulations. If children are infected by Dust, they can work to increase awareness and consciousness for people. For that reason, the members of the Oblation Board actually try to eliminate any risks that could endanger their authority and lessen the power of their ideas.

In order to maintain control, Bolvangar also runs like a boarding school and uses manipulations to cover their ill-practices. Children are kept busy with activities created to make them feel safe and ensure that children will have trouble-free lives. However, Bolvangar is actually the centre of cruelty and danger. With their manipulations, they seek to diminish the children into submissive and docile bodies that follow all their regulations without question. For example, Mrs Coulter tries to convince Lyra that their practices are for the sake of their happiness and safety by saying, “at the age we call puberty, [...] dæmons bring all sorts of troublesome thoughts and feelings[.] [...] A quick little operation before that, and you’re never troubled again. And your dæmon stays with you, [...] like a wonderful pet, if you like (241). However, entering puberty is not dangerous for children but it is threatening for those in power. In this respect, Pullman utilizes Bolvangar to highlight the exploitation of childhood immaturity and the misconception of childhood innocence as submissiveness and passivity. Lyra’s fantastic world reveals the abuse and the misuse of power under the cover of good intentions and creating a happy land for children.

While Pullman shows how childhood innocence has been misinterpreted and manipulated, he also points out that childhood is not exempt from guilt and children are inclined towards evil and cruelty. In their journey to the alternative world Cittagazze, Lyra and Will encounter some cruel children who have sticks in their hands and are throwing stones at a cat. In Cittagazze, the children are all alone in this threatening city because it has been haunted by “soul-eaters” (Lenz 141), Spectres, which only attack adults. They emerge as a result of the adults’ selfish mistakes and thus Cittagazze has descended into a wasteland. “It [is] like a playground the size of a city, with not a teacher in sight; it [is] a world of children” (588). The children, in their abandonment and loneliness, are haunted by cruelty and hatred. These children are very similar to William Golding’s schoolboys in *Lord of the Flies*. In the absence of adult guidance, they turn into savages like Golding’s schoolboys who are driven into cruelty and violence. Similar to Golding, Pullman portrays human nature as both evil and good; and he highlights that children are not exempt from the innate inclination for evil in

human nature. When Lyra sees the cruelty of children in Cittagazze, she is so surprised. However, that incident is so normal for Will, who is familiar with the cruel side of children. In Will's world, children dislike his mother because of her actions, resulting from her mental health problems. Will explains that "They [torment] her just like those kids" (572) who torment the cat in Cittagazze. For that reason, Will has "never trusted children any more than grown-ups. They're just as keen to do bad things" (573). Here Pullman distorts the idealization of childhood as a pure and guilt-free phase. As Sarah K. Cantrell points out:

[C]hildhood is no less complicated nor less ethically questionable than adulthood. That children of Cittagazze resort to barbarity [...] indicates the limitations of the adult/child binary Pullman's narrative so frequently interrogates. Readers who approach fantasy seeking to return to childlike naïveté or who ignore the cruelty of which all humans of all ages are capable will be sorely disillusioned (314-315).

Pullman employs both the subversive and reformulating power of fantasy to discuss the different connotations of childhood innocence and the constructed dichotomy between innocence and experience. He shows us that fantasy actually distorts the illusions of idealizations instead of creating illusions to deceive us. Therefore, Pullman encourages both his child protagonists and the reader to follow the labyrinths of the alternative worlds in order to comprehend the complexities of the real world.

Lyra, as a rebellious and courageous girl, is willing to follow the rabbit hole to learn more both about herself and the world. Pullman empowers Lyra, as the new Eve, to fall down the fruitfulness of experience and wisdom. Lyra's and Will's last journey is to the world mulefa. In this world, they "repeat the original decision of Adam and Eve to seek full understanding and consciousness" (Tucker 90), becoming aware of their feelings for each other. Dr Mary Malone, a physicist who searches on dark matter or Dust, plays the role of the serpent for children. As the serpent, she is responsible for guiding Will and Lyra to leave the Neverland of childhood behind and follow the serpent to enter adulthood. Pullman's choice of using a scientist to be the serpent of awareness and temptation reveals his aim to recreate or reformulate his version of the Fall story, which indicates "a refusal to lament the loss of innocence" (Pullman, Introduction 10). The mulefa world is Pullman's version of Eden and in this world, the Fall story refers to "wakefulness" (834) and to the revival of consciousness:

[T]he snake said What do you know? What do you remember? What do you see ahead?" And she said, "Nothing, nothing, nothing. So the snake said Put your foot through the hole in the seed-pod where I was playing, and you will become wise. So she put a foot in where the snake had been. And the oil entered her foot and made her see more clearly than before, and the first thing she saw was the sraf (834-835).

In this version, Eve's fall is not the cause of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden but it is the celebration of gaining consciousness and knowledge. The serpent plays its role not as a devil but as a guide to direct Eve to the sraf or Dust in the mulefa world. As Rebekah Fitzsimmons says, this "is the beginning of history and memory, a coming into self-consciousness and awareness" (222). Pullman deconstructs the Christian version of the Fall as damnation. He emphasizes that "The story of Adam and Eve seems to [him] the fundamental myth of why we are

as we are.” (Pullman, “The Writing of Stories” 36). Therefore, the Fall is not only significant for Lyra’s and Will’s self-awareness and authenticity but it also means the awakening of the shared consciousness for all humanity.

Pullman makes both the new Eve and the new Adam responsible for making the universe better. Their love for each other functions as a remedy for fixing the results of people’s exploitations. For example; the mulefa “have taken care of the world. [...] [However,] the trees began to sicken [...] and some of them died” (842). When the new Eve and the new Adam become aware of their love, their fall enables “[t]he terrible flood of Dust in the sky [to stop] flowing” (1045) and in this way, the harmony of nature flourishes again in the mulefa world. This metaphoric Fall symbolizes love, wisdom and consciousness and “lead[s]/[t]o happier life, knowledge of good and evil” (Milton 226). Lyra and Will, who are not children anymore, are ready to “establish a new order based on truth, honesty and love” (Tucker 90). Therefore, Pullman makes his protagonists return to their homes, leaving behind the Eden-like mulefa world. After Lyra’s and Will’s “heightened consciousnesses promise a richer and more rewarding perception of” (Greenwell 116) the universe, they realize that they have to establish a hopeful future for both themselves and for their own worlds. As Geoff Robson states, “They are [...] given the hard choice of leaving their new found happiness and returning to their separate worlds, to build the Republic of Heaven. Their love for each other must be sacrificed to a greater love for humanity” (89). The Republic of Heaven represents hope and new order for all humanity. While Pullman empowers his protagonists to reformulate the Fall story as a chance for maturation, wisdom and consciousness, he also employs his alternative worlds to highlight the serious real life problems and the necessity for taking responsibility for the future of our world.

Conclusion

Contemporary children’s fantasy fiction takes children with their complexities and ambivalences and it challenges the canonized and idealized conventions of childhood innocence. Similarly, Phillip Pullman’s trilogy reacts against the idealizations of childhood innocence, which imprison the individuality and the freedom of the children into glass coffins. He emphasizes that children cannot discover their sense of self and cannot enhance their perspectives about the world unless they follow the path to maturation. He believes that “if we are going to do any good in the world, we have to leave childhood behind.” (Pullman, Introduction 10) In this respect, he constructs his metaphorical Fall story in order to both criticise the idealization of childhood innocence as sacredness and to emphasize the necessity of growing up.

In *His Dark Materials*, Pullman employs the alternative worlds to enable both Lyra and the reader to explore and question the problems and concerns of their worlds. Moreover, the challenging and difficult adventures of these fantastic worlds pave the way to gain self-awareness, consciousness and wisdom. He celebrates the growing-up process because the idealized Neverland actually diminishes children into passivity and subservience. Therefore, he centres his

story on a fantastic journey; a departure from the inexperienced phase of life to mature self-awareness.

Note

[1] This article is based on my unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, “Alternative Representations of Reality in Contemporary Children’s Fantasy Fiction: Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*”.

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