Teacher, Preacher or Storyteller? Conflicting impulses in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*

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Introduction

In *Clockwork, or All Wound Up*, Philip Pullman tells a story in which, typically, adult authority is questionable and it is left to the honesty and naivety of the children to undo the blunders of their seniors. While the narrative itself simply gives us the story, with little in the way of character evaluation, the book is peppered with illustrations accompanied by a sort of commentary on the events of the story. The intrusive nature of comments such as “The artistic temperament! What nonsense!”1 and “That’s a typical doctor’s answer”2 makes the book slightly unsettling to read. It is as though Pullman has polarised his conflicting impulses to simply tell a story and to make moral judgments through that story, so that the main narrative tells us *what happens next*, while the illustrations tell us what to think about the story.

The *His Dark Materials* trilogy is a more ambitious, sophisticated and subtle work, but similar themes emerge, albeit on a grander scale – we find scepticism not just of authority, but of the ultimate authority of God and the Bible. We also find a similar conflict between the desire to tell a story, and the tendency to tell readers what to think, and it is precisely this latter tendency which has sparked much controversy about the work in the press, with many reviewers condemning what, in extreme cases, has been seen as promoting Satanism.3

This study is concerned not just with conflicts within the work itself but also with the fascinating inconsistencies in Pullman’s responses to his critics. At times, he insists that he is just a storyteller, even implying that he is the passive servant of a story which effectively tells itself. However, both his comments in interviews and the novels themselves testify to the nourishing and educational power of stories – there is evidently no such thing as “just a story”. This dichotomy is examined in the first section, ‘Authority and Authorship’, which also discusses Pullman’s persuasive narrative technique, never overtly didactic but ultimately imposing in its foregrounding of certain themes.

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1 P. Pullman: *Clockwork, or All Wound Up* (London, 1997), p.16
2 Pullman: *Clockwork*, p.53
In this respect, two devices in particular are worthy of attention. Conventional assumptions about fantasy literature have conditioned critical response, and Pullman himself has rejected altogether his label as a fantasy writer in a bid to be associated with a more ‘serious’ category of literature. In this respect, the work of Kathryn Hume has been particularly helpful, suggesting that fantasy can be seen not as a distinct category of writing, but as part of a single spectrum in which an author may employ aspects of realism or fantasy as he sees fit.\textsuperscript{4} The second section, ‘Fantasy, or “stark realism”?’, examines the way in which Pullman claims to be using the devices of fantasy in order to achieve what he terms “psychological realism”,\textsuperscript{5} but in fact presents alternative worlds that are conditioned by, but also necessarily other than, our own world. He uses fantasy to assert what he thinks ought to be, rather than – as he claims – to convey merely what is.

Similarly imposing is the intertextuality of His Dark Materials, which often takes the form of direct quotation of specific sources. The reader’s attention is drawn to these direct references more than it is to the more subtle use of familiar tropes of children’s literature and fairy tales in other parts of the work. The final section, ‘Intertextuality’, suggests, particularly in the light of the power imbalance in all children’s literature, that Pullman is steering his readers from one recognisable set of references to another, less familiar one, arguably even colouring young readers’ interpretations of texts such as Paradise Lost so as to bring them into line with his own views. This view may be a little extreme, but it is nevertheless necessary to address rationally the idea that Pullman, unquestionably an expert in the art of making people want to know what happens next, is also imposing a moral code on his readers.

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\item[]{\textsuperscript{4} K. Hume: Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature (New York; London, 1984)}
\item[]{\textsuperscript{5} Personal communication from the author, 16 November 2003}
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Authority and Authorship

When asked if he wishes to persuade children that God is dead, Pullman replies: “No. I hope to keep them reading a story. This is not a sermon, and I am not a preacher.” Whenever questioned on the controversial moral content of his books, Pullman foregrounds his role as a storyteller, writing purely to keep us in suspense. Certainly, he handles mystery artfully, as revealed by his controlled introduction of the concept of daemons. A daemon, we eventually discover, is like a person’s soul-mate, taking the form of an animal most resembling that person’s temperament. The opening of *Northern Lights*, however, tells us no such thing, instead instantly filling the mind with questions as we hear that “Lyra and her daemon moved through the darkening Hall.” We are told neither where, exactly, Lyra and her daemon are, why they must “keep to one side, out of sight of the kitchen” nor – most importantly – what a “daemon” actually is. Gradually, the information filters through, but in a way that actually increases the mystery rather than removing it. Pantalaimon, Lyra’s daemon, “was currently in the form of a moth”, which introduces the idea that daemons can change shape, but it is not until much later that we learn about how daemons lose their metamorphic powers at the onset of puberty, when a person’s nature apparently becomes fixed. A few moments later we see “the servant’s daemon (a dog, like almost all servants’ daemons)” so that, bit by bit, we are able to piece together enough information to understand the basic properties of a daemon. Several concepts are introduced in the opening chapters of *Northern Lights* whose explanations are only gradually unravelled, so that even in the closing pages of *The Amber Spyglass* we are still learning more about daemons, Dust, and the precise nature of Lyra’s destiny, initially alluded to when the Master of Jordan College states, at the beginning of the story, that “Lyra has a part to play in all this, and a major one.”

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid, p.5
11 Ibid, p.32
Pullman keeps us in constant suspense regarding these issues, which at its most basic level fuels our desire to keep reading, to know what happens next.

But being a good storyteller does not preclude an author from making moral evaluations, and Pullman’s stance on this issue is strikingly inconsistent. He seems to hide behind his role as a storyteller, emphasising his passivity as the servant of a story that wishes to be told. On the subject of daemons, he implies that the idea just fell onto the page with no effort from himself:

…”it just emerged as I was trying to begin the story. I suddenly realised that Lyra had a daemon, and it all grew out of that.”12 [my emphasis]

Equally, his claim that he never knows exactly what will happen in a book – “I write to find it out”13 – disrupts any sense of communication between writer and reader. Comparing writing novels to sending out messages in bottles, in that “you know you’re sending something out, but you certainly don’t expect to get anything back”, he comments that “it’s the writer’s job to write the best story possible with the material, the tools and the experience that are to hand, and then put it in a bottle … and hope.”14

But if Pullman’s analogy serves as an adequate description of authorship in general, in that once a book has been written and published, how a reader might interpret that text is out of an author’s hands, there is a curious way in which Pullman, more than many authors, attempts to maintain a control over his readers’ interpretations. He writes almost exclusively in the third person, and has commented that “The first person can be rather restrictive, telling the whole story from the point of view of a single person’s mind and opinions: the third person brings into play that free-ranging metaphysical being called ‘Narrator’.”15 On the surface, it seems that his preference is a question of narrative convenience, enabling him to employ the cinematic technique of cutting from location to

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13 Times Online interview, January 29, 2002
14 Personal communication from the author, 16 November 2003
location, in a manner that increases suspense.\textsuperscript{16} Notably, Pullman’s third person narrator rarely expresses direct judgments about the action of the stories.

This is not the case in all of Pullman’s fiction. In an earlier work, \textit{The Butterfly Tattoo}, the narrator takes a more authoritative role, directing his readers towards a ‘correct’ interpretation of events. As the story progresses, the reader is told several conflicting stories about one of its central characters, Barry Miller, and his involvement with the Carson brothers. Miller tells Chris Marshall that the Carsons are Irish terrorists, and that he is renovating a shed in Wolvercote to enable him to hide from them. He later tells Jenny that the brothers are members of a protection racket. Meanwhile, Barry’s employees are spreading rumours that the shed is just a love-nest enabling Barry to spend time with his mistresses.

Each of these conflicting stories is a version of the truth, mingling fact with fantasy. But what distinguishes \textit{The Butterfly Tattoo} from, say, Richardson’s \textit{Clarissa}, where the narrative is constructed entirely from the conflicting reports of the participant characters, is that here there is an ‘authoritative’ version of Miller’s story, provided by the narrator himself. Early on, we are told that Miller actually worked \textit{with} the Carson brothers but, when they were involved in a botched bank robbery, he brought about their conviction, and his new life in Kidlington was built on the stolen money. So while Chris’s perception of the truth is confused as events unfold, the reader always has a definitive, ‘true’ version of events to fall back on.\textsuperscript{17}

Conversely, in \textit{His Dark Materials}, the truth is rarely revealed to the reader before it is discovered by the characters within the story – in this later work, Pullman is ostensibly showing rather than telling. But the reluctance to allow his narrator to express independent judgments is part of Pullman’s narrative strategy. Instead of making moral evaluations himself, he puts these judgments into the mouths of his characters – a fact that he has used in his defence. He claims, for example, that when Mary Malone says that “The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that’s all”,\textsuperscript{18} this is just a character in the story speaking, not the author expressing his anti-Christian

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} P. Pullman: \textit{The Butterfly Tattoo} (London, 2001)
\textsuperscript{18} P. Pullman: \textit{The Amber Spyglass} (London, 2001), p.464
views. Similarly, in *The Amber Spyglass*, it is Lyra and Pantalaimon, rather than the narrator, who outline the alternative form of religion that can be built now that the Authority (the other-world equivalent of God) has been defeated:

“And then what?” said her daemon sleepily. “Build what?”
“The republic of heaven,” said Lyra.

But although Pullman’s narrator does not directly agree or disagree with such statements, the patterns that emerge throughout the trilogy indicate that these are more than just arbitrary comments that we can accept or reject as we see fit. The “republic of heaven”, for example, is of central importance to the trilogy’s vision. Asriel’s civil war against the Authority is reminiscent of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, where Satan “Raised impious war in Heav’n”. As in *Paradise Lost*, the rebel angels claim that the Authority “was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves … He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie.” Again, this claim is made by a character in the story, rather than Pullman himself. But whereas Satan’s similar claims are ultimately rejected by the narrative voice in *Paradise Lost*, the eventual death of the Authority in Pullman’s version serves to support the view that God is a finite being, not immortal or eternal – his re-writing is one in which Satan’s claims, which are shown to be lies in the original, are true.

So although Pullman’s work is rarely didactic in the sense of directly imparting its author’s views, it is persuasive in a more subtle sense. Whatever Pullman may claim, the way in which his characters voice his own beliefs is strikingly imposing. In ‘Lyra and the Birds’, a short story included in the *His Dark Materials* companion piece, *Lyra’s Oxford*, a similar tactic is employed. Early on, Lyra voices her contention that “Everything means something, … We just have to find out how to read it.” Later, Sebastian Makepeace makes the same point using almost exactly the same words and, on this

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20 Pullman: *The Amber Spyglass*, p.548
22 Pullman: *The Amber Spyglass*, p.34
occasion, rather than allowing the reader to recognise the repetition for himself, Pullman emphasises it:

“Everything has a meaning, if only we could read it,” he said.
Since that was exactly what [Lyra] had said to Pan just a few hours before, she could hardly deny it now.24

So central is this idea to ‘Lyra and the Birds’ that Pullman is not willing to risk allowing his readers to miss it. It is reminiscent of the comment reiterated by the Duchess in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland that “Everything’s got a moral, if only you can find it”,25 but its intention could not be more different. Whereas Carroll’s text satirises the derivative act of finding morals in absolutely everything, Pullman’s story is about careful reading – how to recognise the ‘truth’ in everything. The irony is that careful reading is not entirely necessary with His Dark Materials, since its main themes are constantly reiterated and emphasised in such a striking way.

Repeatedly, Pullman refers to the characters’ own concept of the story that they are involved in. The work’s status as a trilogy is significant here, because the shifting perspectives of each of the three parts show that we are moving from a story about a little girl in Oxford to one of more wide-reaching, cosmic importance. Lyra’s initial failure to recognise that she is one cog in a far greater story is presented to comic effect in Northern Lights. We have been told that, some time ago, Lyra trespassed on a gypsy boat, hoping, in a harmless childish fantasy, to sink it by pulling out abung that she imagined to be hidden somewhere. Much later, John Faa tries to explain to Lyra how the gypsies have been observing her because of her extraordinary destiny. Lyra, unable to move beyond her local situation, confuses what he is saying:

“Oh, yes,” said John Faa, “all your doings, they all get back to Farder Coram here.”
Lyra couldn’t hold it in.
“We didn’t damage it! Honest! It was only a bit of mud! And we never got very far —”26

Lyra’s growing realisation that she is part of a greater story that extends beyond her own situation reflects the development of a child’s consciousness, as it learns to consider

24 Ibid, pp.45-6
others as independent beings rather than seeing everything as intrinsically linked to itself. In *The Subtle Knife*, Will tries to resist his role in the story, but is warned that he cannot change his destiny:

“I didn’t want it! I don’t want it now!” Will cried. “If you want it, you can have it! I hate it and I hate what it does —”

“Too late. You haven’t any choice: you’re the bearer: it’s picked you out.”

Again, Pullman asserts the idea of an autonomous story, this time *within* the text. He is suggesting that Lyra and Will are part of this story whether they like it or not. But part of the charm of the work is that Lyra never quite lets go of her childish naivety. She undertakes the most astonishing mission, travelling to the land of the dead, and releasing its inhabitants from their torment, but she is hardly aware of what she is doing, motivated instead by the charmingly simple desire to “say sorry” to her friend Roger for bringing about his death.

Storytelling is a recurrent theme in *His Dark Materials*, documented in some detail by Claire Squires in her *Reader’s Guide*. One specific occasion, however, stands out as worthy of comment. Immediately prior to Lyra and Will’s enactment of the second Fall, Mary Malone tells them a story about why she gave up being a nun. In essence, she missed the experience of falling in love: “Being in love was like China: you knew it was there, and no doubt it was very interesting, and some people went there, but I never would.”

Pullman explicitly depicts the enlightening effect of Malone’s words on Lyra:

She felt as if she had been handed the key to a great house she hadn’t known was there, a house that was somehow inside her, and as she turned the key, deep in the darkness of the building she felt other doors opening too, and lights coming on.

Pullman stresses the importance of this scene, explaining that “the whole reason [Mary has] been brought through the book is to tell that story.” He then comments that “if

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26 Pullman: *Northern Lights*, p.121
29 Pullman: *The Amber Spyglass*, p.466
30 Ibid, p.468
there were no stories about love, nobody would ever fall in love." 32 This is the most direct statement of the notion that it is through stories that one learns and develops consciousness. It would seem that Pullman’s feigned passivity as the tool of an autonomous story is something of a red herring: here, stories are presented as a means of direct communication.

So Pullman’s claim to be ‘merely’ a storyteller, making readers want to know what happens next without trying to educate or morally instruct them, is contradicted by the novels themselves. Pullman’s enticing narrative style is certainly part of his appeal, but the foregrounded references to the educational power of stories means that his works are also charged with a kind of consciousness of their own power – this is not just a story: it is a story about stories, and what they can do. With this in mind, we can examine in more detail two particular aspects of His Dark Materials that serve to foreground Pullman’s own beliefs: his use of alternative worlds and the tools of fantasy; and the intertextuality of the trilogy.

32 Ibid.
Fantasy, or “stark realism”?

Pullman once refuted the claim that he was a writer of fantasy, instead describing his work as “stark realism”. More recently, he has tempered this comment by explaining that it was made in the hope of disassociating his writing from that of, for example, Tolkien, in which “you won’t find a speck or a grain of truth about what it feels like to be a human being.” Such a statement implies that his sole use of fantasy is to reflect the way things are. But this is only one of two principal uses of fantasy in Pullman’s work. In terms of the first, reflective, use of fantasy, daemons serve a useful narrative function, enabling Pullman to trace the developing relationship between Will and Lyra.

He was desolate. But then he felt the strangest thing, and brushed the back of his right wrist across his eyes to find Pantalaimon’s head on his knee. The demon, in the form of a wolfhound, was gazing up at him with melting, sorrowing eyes, and then he gently licked Will’s wounded hand again and again, and laid his head on Will’s knee once more.

Long before Lyra’s love for Will has been openly stated, we are given this startling indication of the intimacy of their relationship. In Lyra’s world, to touch another person’s daemon is the greatest taboo imaginable, so for her daemon to independently interact with another person leaves her “breathtaken”. Pullman uses daemons to convey feelings and actions which are difficult to verbalise in the everyday world. Again, in The Amber Spyglass, the taboo of touching another person’s daemon is used to show how the protagonists’ relationship has developed:

Will leapt across the clearing and seized the nearest daemon while Lyra scooped up the other. And even in that horrible urgency, even at that moment of utmost peril, each of them felt the same little shock of excitement: for Lyra was holding Will’s daemon, the nameless wildcat, and Will was carrying Pantalaimon.

Our principal reaction here is one of recognition – using an entirely fantastic creation, Pullman has successfully conveyed what it can be like to fall in love. But can fantasy ever be solely reflective in the way that Pullman claims? Regarding his negative treatment of the Catholic Church in the novels, Pullman explains that “I’m happy to have

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33 Personal communication from the author, 16 November 2003
34 Pullman: The Subtle Knife, p.191
it in place as a … villain”, before instantly covering his tracks: “But we’re talking about another world … in which the Catholic church develops in a very different way…”36 So now he is using the fantastic element of his novels in his defence, claiming that they are not reflections, but creations – Lyra’s world is not our world; it is an alternative world. This is supported by Irwin’s definition of fantasy as “a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as a possibility”.37 But Kathryn Hume points out that fantasy can never be entirely distinct from reality, in that even pure invention must be based on previous experience. In the case of other-world fiction, “though other forms of life probably exist elsewhere in the cosmos, any current literary portrayal is … a metaphor and a subcreation from matter we know in our own world, not an intuition of another world.”38

Hence, there is a duality in the concept of fantasy. It serves a useful narrative function, enabling the author to discuss things that are otherwise difficult to verbalise. But in another, arguably conflicting sense, fantasy is distinct from reality in that it violates some of its most important laws – namely, as Rosemary Jackson identifies, the laws of chronology, three-dimensionality, and rigid distinctions between the animate and inanimate, self and other, and life and death.39 At various points in the trilogy, Pullman violates all three.

Our understanding of this apparent paradox is helped by Jackson’s discussion of paraxis, “a telling notion in relation to the place, or space, of the fantastic, for it implies an inextricable link to the main body of the ‘real’ which it shades and threatens.”40 If one imagines a mirror, what is seen in the mirror is only an image, but it is a direct reflection of the real object placed in front of it. In Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There, the alternative world is literally reached by stepping through a mirror, and this explains much of the apparently nonsensical content of the book.41 Other fantasy works are less explicitly linked to this analogy, but paraxis is a useful concept because it shows how any invention, no matter how fantastic, is conditioned by the writer’s and the

35 Pullman: The Amber Spyglass, p.439
36 Bakewell: BBC Radio 3: ‘Belief’
38 Hume: Fantasy and Mimesis, p.21
39 Ibid.
40 Jackson: Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion, p.19
reader’s knowledge of the real. Consider, for example, the notion of “pre-emptive absolution”, set out in The Amber Spyglass:

Pre-emptive penance and absolution were doctrines researched and developed by the Consistorial Court, but not known to the wider church. They involved doing penance for a sin not yet committed, intense and fervent penance accompanied by scourging and flagellation, so as to build up, as it were, a store of credit.42

This has clear links with our paradigm of paraxis, Through the Looking Glass, where time runs backwards, so that in the justice system, “the crime comes last of all”43 Carroll’s Alice books are a prime example of how other-world fiction can satirise our own world. What initially appears absurd, and therefore distinct from reality, is eventually recognised as familiar, so that we are then forced to acknowledge the inherent absurdity of our world. Similarly, pre-emptive absolution seems an absurd notion, but the real-world equivalents on which it is based are plain to see. In much the same way, in Northern Lights, Asriel makes explicit the link between the severing of a child from its daemon and the castration of choir boys,44 so that what initially appeared to be Pullman’s own creation is eventually aligned emphatically with similar atrocities committed in our world. By inducing our disgust at the actions of the characters in his alternative world, he implicitly encourages disgust for the real-world equivalents, ultimately leading to one thing: an attack on the Church.

Nicholas Tucker reminds us of the unbalanced portrayal of Church leaders in the trilogy:

Like the caricatures found in the atheistic propaganda put over in pre-war Soviet Russia, these characters suggest that a good clergyman or nun has never existed. This is clearly unfair, as is the suggestion in the trilogy that the Church is only concerned with its own cruel and cynical survival… 45

Similarly, Melanie McDonagh points out that many of the acts of cruelty associated with Catholicism in His Dark Materials are actually popular clichés, with little basis in fact.46

41 Carroll: The Annotated Alice, p.184
42 Pullman: The Amber Spyglass, p.75
43 Carroll: The Annotated Alice, p.248
44 Pullman: Northern Lights, p.374
Such violation of reality for the purposes of establishing an archetypal ‘enemy’ figure in the trilogy necessarily means that Pullman is not just using fantasy to reflect the world as we know it. His disproportionate treatment of the Church makes the work inherently fictional, but Tucker is right to highlight the suggestive nature of such a fiction. Just as J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* idealises childhood from an adult perspective, therefore failing to represent it accurately, so Pullman’s representation of organised religion is motivated by the bias of an atheist. Based on a cliché, Pullman’s “villain” is ultimately conventional but, by making it a villain at all, he is imposing his own moral views on his readers.
Intertextuality

Discussing children’s literature will always be problematic because, as Karín Lesnik-Oberstein explains, critics and authors alike often make assumptions which are based on their constructed ideal of a child rather than on the real, individual child readers. Christine Wilkie shows that this is particularly significant in terms of intertextuality, in that “The writer/reader relationship is … asymmetric because children’s intersubjective knowledge cannot be assured.” The gap in knowledge between child reader and adult writer is particularly important in His Dark Materials, given our above observations about the didactic elements in the work. The “asymmetric” nature of the writer/reader relationship could be perceived as an imposition on the child, who is the less powerful of the two because the adult is completely at liberty to decide what to include in the text. To recall the earlier discussion of Clockwork, where imposing interjections discredit the words of conventional figures of adult authority, it is possible that Pullman, by re-writing both Paradise Lost and the Bible, is attempting to discredit what has been seen by many as an ultimate form of authority.

Building on the work of Barthes, Wilkie describes three main categories of intertextuality: “texts of quotation”, which overtly quote or allude to other works; “texts of imitation”, which paraphrase or ‘translate’ an earlier work into a new context; and “genre texts”, which use identifiable patterns and codes which link them to works of a similar nature. In His Dark Materials we find a tension between these types of intertextuality and, given the inevitable power imbalance in a child’s reading experience, it is necessary to address the idea that Pullman is steering his readers from one set of references to another, attempting to influence their readings of other texts.

A disproportionate amount of attention has been paid, in earlier criticism, to Pullman’s sources in ‘high’ literature, which he foregrounds using paratextual features such as the epigraphs preceding each chapter of The Amber Spyglass, and the ‘Acknowledgements’ at the end of the trilogy:

49 Ibid, p.132
…there are three debts that need acknowledgment above all the rest. One is to the essay *On the Marionette Theatre* by Heinrich von Kleist … The second is to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The third is to the works of William Blake.\(^50\)

Millicent Lenz’s account of the trilogy in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction* does little more than give a step-by-step guide to these sources, showing where their influence is manifested in the novels.\(^51\) Tucker’s approach is more balanced, acknowledging, for example, the origins of demons in the “ideal companions” of earlier children’s fiction, such as Raymond Briggs’s *The Snowman*.\(^52\) While it is true that the works of Milton, Blake and Kleist play a significant role in the trilogy’s vision, for reasons documented by Lenz, far more important is the way in which Pullman foregrounds these influences, saying nothing of the way in which the texts build on familiar tropes from traditional fairytales and children’s fiction.

*His Dark Materials*, possibly because it is not written exclusively for children, handles such tropes on a more sophisticated level than one might expect. Let us consider our developing attitudes towards Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter in the trilogy. When Asriel appears, he is clearly linked to the trope of ‘mysterious uncle’:

> The visitor mentioned by the Master, Lord Asriel, was her uncle, a man whom she admired and feared greatly. He was said to be involved in high politics, in secret exploration, in distant warfare, and she never knew when he was going to appear.\(^53\)

Before we have even seen him, Asriel is linked to a familiar type of character, whom we might liken to Uncle Ginger in *The Queen’s Nose*, or the Professor in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Mysterious uncles or guardians are often the initiators of adventure in children’s literature. In *The Queen’s Nose*, the kind and understanding Uncle Ginger contrasts directly with Harmony’s unsympathetic parents, presenting a kind of alternative authority. But it is significant that such characters are rarely the protagonist’s biological parent. Parents have everyday responsibilities such as making sure that a child gets her dinner, whereas the ‘mysterious uncle’ is detached from such responsibilities, associated

\(^{50}\) Pullman: *The Amber Spyglass*, pp.549-50  
\(^{52}\) Tucker: *Darkness Visible*, p. 143  
\(^{53}\) Pullman: *Northern Lights*, p.6
instead with distant areas such as “high politics”, “secret exploration” and “distant warfare”. Readers accept such characters without question, because they perform a necessary narrative function, and by describing Asriel in terms of this literary type, Pullman instils certain expectations in his readers. When the reader and Lyra discover together that Asriel is actually Lyra’s father, those expectations suddenly shift. Similarly, Lyra’s encounter with her father at the end of *Northern Lights* reveals that her expectations have changed, too:

“‘I’ll tell you if you tell me something,’” she said. “‘You’re my father, en’t you?”
“‘Yes. So what?’”
“‘So you should have told me before, that’s what. You shouldn’t hide things like that from people, because they feel stupid when they find out, and that’s cruel.””54

Asriel has violated a code of behaviour that Lyra firmly believes in, but what is particularly significant here is his reaction to the revelation that she knows he is her father. Not only is his relationship to Lyra insignificant to him, but so is her awareness of it. Since discovering that Asriel is her father, Lyra has believed that her ‘quest’ is to take the alethiometer to him. When she realises that he does not need it, not only is she forced to rapidly re-assess her own role in the story that she has become involved in, but also her importance in relation to Asriel suddenly diminishes: he may be her father, but at present she is of no significance to him whatsoever. The fact that Asriel was initially presented to us as a ‘mysterious uncle’ heightens our later sense of the cold cruelty with which he has disregarded his daughter throughout her life.

Francis Spufford writes that in “fairy tales … there are no individual characters, only types.”55 *His Dark Materials* is not a fairy tale, but the fact that it draws on certain fairy tale traditions is significant. Mrs Coulter, who, like Asriel, turns out to be Lyra’s biological parent, is initially established as a wicked stepmother, whose clutches Lyra must escape just as Snow White is endangered by the presence of *her* stepmother. Pullman performs a similar narrative trick with Mrs Coulter as he does with Asriel, revealing that she is Lyra’s mother only after we have seen evidence of her cruelty towards the child. This is significant because, as Spufford reminds us, “There is never a

54 Pullman: *Northern Lights*, p.367
wicked natural mother in a fairy tale.”\textsuperscript{56} In a fairy tale we accept the wickedness of stepmothers as a literary convention. But when we find that Mrs Coulter is Lyra’s \textit{real} mother, our terms of reference shift, and we are thrown into uncertainty regarding this suddenly more psychologically ‘real’ figure. Bruno Bettelheim has suggested that part of the psychological function of the wicked stepmother is that it “preserves the image of the good mother”,\textsuperscript{57} enabling children to come to terms with the inconsistency of their parents’ behaviour towards them by seeing them as two separate beings. Much is implausible about Bettelheim’s \textit{The Uses of Enchantment}, but this idea of the inconsistency of a parent’s behaviour seems especially pertinent to \textit{His Dark Materials}. In much children’s literature, it is possible either to see the wicked stepmother as intrinsically evil, or to forgive the mysterious uncle or guardian for maintaining a distance from his children, on the grounds that there is no biological relation. By suddenly transforming these literary types into biological parents, Pullman forces readers to grapple with notions that many similar works permit them to side-step.

To summarise, then, the trilogy begins by establishing itself as a “genre text” – from the outset we are provided with elements such as witches, wicked stepmothers, and ‘quest’ themes, which raise certain expectations. Part of Pullman’s appeal involves the way in which he exploits such expectations. The wicked stepmother becomes a more serious entity altogether when she turns out to be the protagonist’s biological mother, just as the familiar rumours about “Gobblers” coming to take away the children of Oxford take on an altogether more sinister edge when it is revealed that the Gobblers actually \textit{do} exist, in the form of the far more clinical-sounding General Oblation Board, which has been performing brutal experiments on children in the North.

Witches, talking animals and quests are familiar aspects of much children’s literature, and of fantasy in general. But, as the trilogy progresses, Pullman gradually steers us away from the familiar world of children’s fantasy towards another set of references that, taking the form of direct quotation rather than subtle allusion, is altogether more emphatic. Pullman is a self-confessed expert in making us want to know \textit{what happens next}, but such a process necessarily points towards an end – the end of life (which he

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, p.54
addresses in the journey to the land of the dead), or perhaps just the end of the book. When there is no more story to read, *what happens next* is a list of authors – Milton, Blake, and Kleist – and, in the case of certain readers, it is possible that their readings of such authors will be coloured by the didacticism of Pullman’s offering.

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Conclusions

Pullman has famously stated that “‘Thou shalt not’ is soon forgotten, but ‘Once upon a time’ lasts forever.”\(^{58}\) This comment places faith in the concept that one can distinguish clearly between overtly didactic literature and that which places more of an emphasis on storytelling. But, as our section on ‘Authority and Authorship’ has shown, these two apparently conflicting impulses cannot necessarily be separated. Pullman at once acts as an ambassador for storytelling and claims to be its servant, writing ‘to find things out’ rather than to communicate – he has even said that “I don’t think about my readers very much”,\(^{59}\) implying that who will or will not read a book has nothing to do with him. He contradicts himself on this point as well, denying in interviews that he writes specifically with children in mind, but publishing articles about the art of writing for children.\(^{60}\)

There is a fascinating duality about Pullman’s works, which often – though never so much as in the case of Clockwork – endows his writing with an unsettling tone, a feeling that here is a storyteller who knows exactly how to keep his readers in suspense, in one sense providing readers with what they want, but at the same time remaining slightly aloof, a fact which enables him, ultimately, to impose his own moral beliefs on his readers. This imposition is evident in his use of alternative worlds and other fantastic devices, whereby – whether he is using fantasy to reflect, as with his subtle depiction of his characters’ psychological development through their daemons, or to create, fictionalising the Catholic Church and ultimately enacting the death of God in order to assert his idea of what ought to be – his stories always generate more than a desire to know what happens next. We have seen, in any case, that what happens next can refer to many things. Pullman uses narrative skill to show what happens next to his characters; but he also employs fantasy to ask the theological question of what happens after death, and increasingly the trilogy asks what will happen next for its readers, as it points us emphatically towards a certain set of influences. Nowhere in the work does Pullman

\(^{59}\) ‘The Man Behind the Magic’ interview
directly tell his readers what to think, but behind the disguise of the passive servant of the story, he is undoubtedly more than “just” a storyteller.
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