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His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy, ed. Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2005.

Philip Pullman, prize-winning novelist for children, young adults, and adults, has progressed from a big deal to a real phenomenon. But now he has become an industry. The British play based on his writings created a positive stir. The on again/off again movie (no doubt, the first of three) is on again, finally, with big-name stars signed to major roles—questions about religion and about how God will be portrayed, if at all, notwithstanding. Move over, Harry Potter; out of the way, Frodo; step back, Aslan; sheath your sword, Eragon; Lyra Belacqua has captured center stage.

Fantasy/science fiction, that truly melded genre—that hotbed of strange worlds, unique casts of characters, lonely quests and mind-boggling adventures—is now a solid component of our popular culture, a staple of our visual imagination. Its books not only sell; they produce movies, TV shows, stage plays, and Web sites. Various concordances, those extra-text ventures, line the shelves of the box bookstores. Actual books of this genre vary wildly in scope; their range is vast. The boundaries extend from simplistic lexical renditions of video games, as echoes of PlayStation® or grade B movie plots, to sophisticated allegories of our contemporary world. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy fits squarely at the latter end of the genre's spectrum. And because it does, scholars have turned their attention to his work, lending a decidedly academic aura to his popularity. Books have been written, articles have been published, and dialogues have blossomed on listservs. Pullman himself has participated to a limited extent, adding to the general din with his participation on the listserv <child_lit> as well as with lectures, commentary, e-mail correspondence, and speeches.

One such critical book, *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy*, edited by Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott, actively fosters critical debate about Pullman's texts. Lenz states this quite clearly at the end of her introductory essay, noting that "the essays present differing and sometimes-contradictory interpretations" (13). The selection of fourteen essays has been "so arranged that the critical 'dialogue' that informs them will stimulate further discussion and

research" (13). From Lenz's introductory essay to the final section of the book, various scholarly perspectives examine major themes found in Pullman's trilogy. The critical essays run the gamut of theoretical approaches to the trilogy, from reader/response to deconstruction.

Lenz extols both the literary value and the timeliness of the trilogy. At the onset of her introduction, she states that Pullman's trilogy "speaks to some of the most urgent dilemmas of our time and suggests, for the thoughtful reader, not *answers* to the ills that presently beset us but rather ways of meeting them with courage and surviving them with grace" (1). The introduction then sketches several themes that find their way into the articles selected for the book. These thematic topics are: "The Familiar and the Uncommon: Myth Reinterpreted for Our Time," "To Be Awake and Alive," "Myth, Music, and Consciousness Transformation," "Levels of Consciousness and Their Functions in the Novels," "Theme of Creativity in *His Dark Materials*," and "Creativity and Responsibility of the Storyteller." Lenz's introduction, while providing the necessary backdrop for the essays that follow, ends with a paean to Pullman, for it is "Pullman's artistic mastery, the universality of his ultimate concerns, his melding of intertextuality and originality, and the timeliness of his call for intellectual honesty, emotional moderation, and awakened consciousness" (13) that provide the inspiration for the book.

The editors divide the essays into three sections: "Reading Fantasy, Figuring Human Nature," "Intertextuality and Revamping Traditions," and "Pullman and Theology, Pullman and Science Fiction." Each section leads with an excellent three- to five-page summative discussion outlining the main ideas delineated in each of the essays that constitute the section. Indeed, for this review, I could have quoted liberally from these lead-ins to account for each individual essay in their respective sections; they are that helpful, capturing the essence of each critical essay concisely. Additionally, the organization of the essays by section works well, as the structure contextualizes the trilogy in terms of the nature of fantasy, its intertextuality, and religion. The essays in each section then explore specific thematic facets found in the trilogy.

Thus, in the first section, Lauren Shohet, in her jam-packed essay "Reading Dark Materials," states that she is interested "in the modes of reading the trilogy figures, and the stakes of good reading for the trilogy's interrelated models of art, identity, and ethics" (22). And read modes she does. She reads *His Dark Materials* as one would read a Renaissance allegory. With its "rich mode of signification," Shohet reads the

trilogy as though it is truly “a pile of books” that, like all good books, “depend upon their sophisticated awareness of their relationship to past texts” (23). Thus, she positions the trilogy in relation to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, relates the content of its subjectivity to Blake’s “model of ecstatic oneness,” and pinpoints “the stakes for ethics of the trilogy’s conjoined ontology, hermeneutics, and aesthetics” (33).

In “Second Nature: Daemons and Ideology in *The Golden Compass*,” Maude Hines focuses on the central character of the trilogy, Lyra, and her development in the first book. Using various literary perspectives, Hines works her way through *The Golden Compass*, explaining Lyra’s salient experiences. In doing so, she adopts what I term an “inside Lyra and outside as a reader” stance to look at the ideological, showing that “Destiny works like ideology . . . nature, like free will” (40). Referencing Freud, Bourdieu, Bettelheim, and Pêcheux, among others, Hines’s lens then jumps ahead to examine Lyra’s predicament at the end of the trilogy. Lyra’s “existential choices,” she observes, show that she cannot escape her “habitus” (45).

As her essay title suggests, Lisa Hopkins’s “Dyads or Triads? *His Dark Materials* and the Structure of the Human,” mines the trilogy for patterns, specifically, the structure of what it means to be human, the structure of relationships between humans, and the shape of human behavior. Hopkins’s straightforward essay unpacks Pullman’s deft revealing of the human to us—the essence of good fantasy writing. Noticing the “binary pattern” of Pullman’s world and his use of “tripling,” Hopkins acknowledges “a consciously Gothicizing doubling technique” (49) and “the importance that Pullman attaches to the tripartite” (55).

The last essay of the first section, “*Northern Lights* and Northern Readers: Knowledge, Affect Linking, and Literary Understanding,” by Margaret Mackey, is a personal essay divided into four sections, in which she basically riffs on her reading of the trilogy, on her reading experience of it and on how it affected her. Mackey, who has worked with adolescents and has studied how they read, uses the concept of “affect linking” to tie her personal experience with her reading of *His Dark Materials*. Concluding her piece, she notes: “When affective links successfully make a connection, however, whether occasionally registered or otherwise, we experience the profoundly personal satisfaction of recognition and delight” (66). Her essay typifies how a reader/response approach to a text explores the emotion of the reader while revealing that “the individuality of response cannot be reduced to such a predictable and orderly process” (66).

Section II of the book dives headlong into intertextuality and *His Dark Materials*. Beginning with the opening essay, Burton Hatlen's "Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, a Challenge to the Fantasies of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, with an Epilogue on Pullman's Neo-Romantic Reading of *Paradise Lost*," the section explores Pullman's lively allusions to past literary works and tradition. Hatlen's essay, title length aside, is a mini tour de force that explores Pullman's "coherent and intelligible worldview" (75). Hatlen demonstrates this "by reading *His Dark Materials* against the backdrop of two other important works of modern fantasy—J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and C. S. Lewis's series" (76). He also shows that "in *His Dark Materials* Pullman has aligned himself with the neo-Romantic or 'subversive' reading of Milton's poem as exemplified by, for example, William Blake" (76). Hatlen's skillful and enlightening essay articulately delves into "the machinery of Pullman's fantasy world(s)" (83). His clear prose and vast familiarity with Milton and Milton scholarship make for an instructive foray into Pullman's work as a response to Milton.

Carole Scott's essay, "Pullman's Enigmatic Ontology: Revamping Old Traditions in *His Dark Materials*," sheds further light on Pullman's trilogy by exploring

how Pullman has used his three major literary sources—Milton, Blake, and the Bible—to reinterpret the ontology of mankind's moral and ethical universe, and to redefine humankind's quest for a meaningful purpose in life and the individual's responsibility in defining good and evil. (95)

Scott clearly demonstrates how Pullman, using these earlier models, "melds religion, classical and folk traditions in a modern idiom consonant with [his] vision of the diligent creation of a harmonious universe" (104).

Shelley King provides an exegetical and allegorical trope for reading *The Golden Compass*. In her essay, "'Without Lyra we would understand neither the New nor the Old Testament': Exegesis, Allegory, and Reading *The Golden Compass*," King notes that the first book of the trilogy

is also about the very act of reading itself. Or perhaps more accurately, it is about reading in the broader sense of the process of textual interpretation and the role it plays in the framing of metaphysical questions within a culture. (106)

Nicholas of Lyra and the alethiometer, the instrument that figures so prominently in *The Golden Compass*, provide the fulcrum for King to

use the book to examine “complementary approaches to the act of reading” (112). She shows that the book, and Lyra as a character, can be read both naively as a fine story and in a more sophisticated, scholarly manner as an allegory, “which is to say in a specifically typological sense” (116).

The ongoing dialogue between William Blake and Philip Pullman, according to Susan Matthews, bears close examination. In her essay, “Rouzing the Faculties to Act: Pullman’s Blake for Children,” she elucidates various allusions to Blake found in the trilogy. Matthews draws from Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, *Jerusalem*, *The Book of Urizen*, *America*, and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to show how *His Dark Materials* “rereads Blake’s multiple, worrying, and often contradictory narratives into a single linear narrative” which “maps the move from innocence to experience onto the process of growing up” (134).

“Tradition, Transformation, and the Bold Emergence: Fantastic Legacy and Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*” by Karen Patricia Smith provides a fitting conclusion to this section as it discusses some universal elements and mythic patterns of fantasy/science fiction found in the trilogy. Smith finds the echoes of many writers in Pullman’s trilogy. She observes,

[i]f one has some understanding of the Bible, northern mythology, Greek Mythology, classic fairy tales, and William Shakespeare, one will find the *Dark Materials* trilogy even more accessible. But even if this knowledge is not second nature, if one is willing to do a little extra thinking and a bit of research there are great possibilities for beginning to appreciate Pullman’s work. (137)

To help readers, Smith presents “five key fantasy conventions . . . to view aspects of Pullman’s literary contributions in the trilogy” (136). The scaffolding allows Pullman’s trilogy to be viewed in the context of high fantasy, revealing Pullman, as a writer, to function “as a narrative ‘magician’ in his ability to interweave the unique strands of narrative elements at once familiar yet simultaneously fresh, innovative, and inspiring” (150).

Section III raises key thematic issues contained in the trilogy. Major theological interpretive questions are asked. The summative discussion that introduces the section asks,

what is his novelistic stance vis-à-vis theology or, more specifically, Christianity? More broadly, how do his narratives relate to some of the ultimate questions raised by philosophers and theologians?

Does he really, as one commentator has argued, identify religion as the villain in the human condition? (155)

Bernard Schweizer, in his “‘And He’s A-Going to Destroy Him’: Religious Subversion in Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*,” wonders why Pullman’s theological stance has not been challenged more directly. For Schweizer, Pullman undermines “God’s claim to have created the universe,” “desecrates God,” and creates “a disoriented, feeble God” who “has obviously no claim to omnipotence or omniscience” (165–66). Interestingly, while the author challenges Pullman’s theological stance (which he labels “misotheistic” [167]), at the conclusion of his essay, he states, “it is particularly important not to throw the baby out with the bath water,” that “there are significant gains to be reaped from letting our children indulge in this kind of fiction since Pullman’s message is also powerfully liberating and positive” (171).

Andrew Leet takes an opposite approach in his essay, “Rediscovering Faith through Science Fiction: Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*.” He places Pullman’s theological position in the context of science fiction criticism. He argues that Pullman has created a “non-Christian” world that is, nonetheless, a spiritual world filled with mystery and faith. Pullman, he notes, has written from within the tradition of the science fiction genre; his theological position is a “questioning of that which is often unquestioned in the realms of organized religion and faith development,” and that such questioning is “neither unnatural nor meant to be corruptive” (186).

Anne-Marie Bird, on the other hand, “explores Pullman’s attempt to construct an alternative theological vision that is particularly attuned to the secular humanistic climate of the late twentieth century” (189). Adopting postmodern and post-structural theories, her essay, “Circumventing the Grand Narrative: Dust as an Alternative Theological Vision in Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*,” probes Pullman’s vision by focusing on “his rich and paradoxical concept of Dust” (189). Deconstructing Dust, à la Derrida, Bird concludes,

given the radical instability of Dust, building an alternative theological vision with Dust at its center enables Pullman to avoid constructing a new grand narrative. Indeed, the very term “Dust” is an extremely apposite one, as not only does its intrinsic amorphousness allow for great adaptability, but the very vagueness of the term suggests that, as opposed to the notion of a solid fixed foundation, what the trilogy actually presents is a shifting field of relations in which there is no secure and stable point. (196–97)

Not all Christian theologians are hostile toward Pullman, as Pat Pinsent reveals in her essay “Unexpected Allies? Pullman and Feminist Theologians.” She notes that feminist religious thinkers can feel quite comfortable with Pullman’s theology; Pullman is a “kindred spirit” (209) with them, especially “in areas such as the nature of God and the Church, the interpretation of the Fall narratives in Genesis, and expectations about the afterlife” (200). Equally important is Pullman’s portrayal of Lyra, which, according to Pinsent, “is consonant with the renewed understanding of the female role in a religious context” (200). Pinsent ends with a discussion of “Lyra’s search for truth,” especially appropriate since Pinsent’s essay has demonstrated it is through Pullman’s creation of an “enterprising and spiritually questing female protagonist” that is most “likely to be welcomed to all who have been inspired by the rereading of Scripture presented by such writers as Elisabeth Fiorenza and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel” (158).

It seems proper that the last essay of the last section of *His Dark Materials Illuminated* be titled “‘Eve, Again! Mother Eve!’: Pullman’s Eve Variations.” The essay, by Mary Harris Russell, investigates versions of Eve found in Pullman’s trilogy, especially as manifested in the three important characters of Mrs. Coulter, Mary Malone, and Lyra. These variations of Eve, which Harris traces throughout the three books and supports with the work of such religious authorities as Elaine Pagels, reveal the ultimate “breaking through” (220) that Lyra’s transformation represents, “true knowledge embodied as ‘youth’” (220). Lyra, the new Eve, is the hope for us all.

His Dark Materials Illuminated is more than a scholarly testimonial to the work of a nuanced writer of fantasy. It is a serious examination of various themes and machinations at work in his popular allegory. A reviewer once commented that if a reader of *His Dark Materials* followed up on every allusion found there, then that reader would receive a first-class course in British literature and literary tradition. After reading *His Dark Materials Illuminated*, I would agree.

Certainly, *His Dark Materials Illuminated* has elevated the discussion of Pullman’s trilogy. I suspect that this book will be followed by several other scholarly ventures into the world created in *His Dark Materials*. The book’s strength lies in its panoramic sweep, in the breadth and wealth of the ideas mined in Pullman’s trilogy that it presents. As such, it is an eminently usable text, especially in a college classroom. (I can attest to this, as I have included it as required reading in my upper-level Literature for Young Adults class.)

The broad critical range of *His Dark Materials Illuminated* begs for more detailed study in the areas initially examined by these critical essays, as well as into other areas not examined. Obviously, there is much to be interpreted and discussed, and, as Lenz and Scott note, critical “dialogue” is imperative since divergent views are the order of the day when discussing Pullman’s trilogy.

An apocryphal story floats about that Pullman wrote his trilogy with the intention of making it into the English departments of universities—of becoming an area of study, so to speak. As a writer, I find such a suggestion patently absurd, mere literary gossip, toxic residue from the popularity of his work. What is not absurd is the fact that Pullman’s masterful, allusive trilogy is the work of a very literate man (after all, this is an author who references in his acknowledgements the likes of Heinrich von Kleist), that his writing in the trilogy fires the imagination of all types of readers, even scholars who are anxious to interpret the work in light of larger critical issues. Ultimately, *His Dark Materials Illuminated* demonstrates simply that Pullman’s trilogy is not only a very good story containing important themes; it is a literary work that speaks to major texts from other eras. Critical books such as this one serve to buttress the opinion that Pullman’s trilogy has strong literary legs. Of course, it is time, not scholarship, that will eventually determine whether the epic journey of Lyra Belacqua can run with those wondrous quests of our past.