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## EXPOSING “HIS DARK MATERIALS”: PULLMAN OWES TO GOD WHAT HE GIVES TO HIS DAEMON

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Knowing that Philip Pullman conveys his atheism through his fiction, I expected the assault on Christianity one witnesses in reading through *The Golden Compass*, the first book of the His Dark Materials trilogy.<sup>1</sup> Quite unexpectedly, however, Pullman’s unholy fantasy ensnared me and nearly swallowed me whole. Only by God’s grace through my privileged training in the scriptures and Christian apologetics did I emerge from the experience without doubting the truth of the Christian worldview. Now with the movie-release of *The Golden Compass*, I feel increasing anguish for young people who will undoubtedly be moved by Pullman’s storytelling and, potentially, become hardened against the true gospel.

I believe that J. K. Rowling, Dan Brown, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins, though certainly influential, cannot compete with Pullman’s ability to provoke his readers, especially young people, to question what they believe is true and real. I have thought long and hard about how it is that Pullman so grabbed me despite my having every reason to slough off his creation as irrational and blasphemous—it is irrational and blasphemous. We all suspend disbelief when we enter a fictional world—and we possess an astonishing capacity to rationalize any sinful thought, belief, desire, or behavior; but Pullman, I think, has accomplished something extraordinary in his novels.

I do not doubt that my emotional attraction to Pullman’s creation says as much about me as it does about the work itself. I, apparently, do not have attraction-immunity to a particular literary device that Pullman created. This device is the “daemon” (pronounced “demon”), which Pullman masterfully exploits as a subtle but radical redefinition of the image of God in humans. Ostensibly, a daemon is the outward physical manifestation of the soul in animal form. Through this redefinition Pullman subverts the Christian worldview and retells its story of creation, fall, and redemption from the perspective of atheistic nihilism. Pullman’s enthralling exploration of the daemon, then, forces the reader to imbibe the worldview that supports it in order to sustain fascination with it. And the reader wants to remain fascinated by it. The daemon thus is ingenious and utterly evil.

The Bible teaches, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27 RSV). Christian theology holds that this image-bearing entails that humans are spiritual, personal, self-conscious, rational, emotional, volitional, relational, immortal, and powerful; and as originally created, humans also possessed an inherent righteousness, holiness, and direct knowledge of God.<sup>2</sup> Collectively, these qualities further entail that human beings are most truly human only when in loving submission to, and communion with, their Creator and, to a lesser degree, fellow bearers of the image of God, especially within marriage between a man and a woman.

In *The Golden Compass*, however, each human and daemon pair essentially forms a complete, autonomous male and female union such that to be human is to commune with and submit to no one but one’s self. In an introductory note Pullman explains that *The Golden Compass* is “set in a universe like ours, but different in many ways,”<sup>3</sup> and the differences emerge early, with multiple references or allusions to daemons in every chapter. On the opening page the narrator introduces Lyra and her daemon Pantalaimon (or “Pan”), who is scolding her in whispered conversation. Throughout the story Lyra and

Pan converse out loud with one another, though we also learn that they communicate in nonverbal and (something like) telepathic ways. They constantly carry on subject/object dialogues. Repeatedly, moreover, we are shown and told that Lyra loves Pan and Pan, Lyra. No pet is more faithful to his owner, and no owner more devoted to her pet, but Pan is no mere pet. They feel for each other, but each also feels what the other feels and experiences what the other experiences.

This autonomous relationship is brought out further in gender references and allusions. A person's daemon is of the opposite sex, except in rare cases. Humans, moreover, naturally find the notion of touching another person's daemon repulsive. Speaking of "the most beautiful daemon she'd ever seen," the daemon of a highly respected elder, Farder Coram, the narrator tells us that Lyra "*longed to touch that fur, to rub her cheeks against it, but of course she never did; for it was the grossest breach of etiquette imaginable to touch another person's daemon.*"<sup>4</sup>

The violation that occurs within the story when a human does touch another human's daemon evokes feelings we associate with sexual molestation.

Human/daemon relationships in Pullman's universe subsist as subject/object relationships between male and female; Pullman thus relativizes gender as a social construction whereby each human is literally both male and female, in varying proportions. The subject/object relationship between the male and the female completes the autonomous self. Nature and Scripture, however, tell me plainly that I am male. It is the true and living God, moreover, who is my Other, and after Him, other people, not myself. I owe to God what Lyra gives to Pan.

Pullman's fantasy is irrational by contradiction, of course. In what I take to be an allusion to the self-sufficient Christian Trinity, in which the one eternal God subsists in three distinct persons, at the end of *The Golden Compass* Lyra exults in her preserved union with Pan: "We're still one being; both of us are one."<sup>5</sup> Instance after instance in the fantasy, however, contradict this proclaimed unity. A startling example intended to communicate coming of age is representative:

"Then a bath, with thick scented foam. Mrs. Coulter came into the bathroom to wash Lyra's hair, and she didn't rub and scrape like Mrs. Lonsdale either. She was gentle. Pantalaimon watched with powerful curiosity until Mrs. Coulter looked at him, and he knew what she meant and turned away, averting his eyes modestly from these feminine mysteries as the golden monkey [Mrs. Coulter's daemon] was doing. He had never had to look away from Lyra before."<sup>6</sup>

For some of us this subject/object language, despite the irrationality, raises already compelling storytelling to new heights with powerful emotional effects. I literally grieved over Lyra and Pan in their jeopardy and elated in their victory. They are a couple. These are children, of course, and their affection is real and moving. As I read I fell in love with their love for one other—their compassion and nurture for each other, the banter and scolding they share in communion, the comfort and protection they reciprocate. I want them to thrive, to succeed in rescuing Roger and the other children, not just because it is a very good thing to rescue enslaved and tortured children but because Lyra and Pan want so desperately to see them free like she and Pan are. I want Lyra and Pan to undo the evil Church Magisterium and to liberate her father, Lord Asriel, because they, Lyra and Pan, innocent and victimized children as they are, seek that with all their heart and strength.

Over these horrific wrongs it is right to recoil in grief. And this intense emotional response provides another way for Pullman, to paraphrase Hank Hanegraaff, to suck the reader into his world and get his worldview into the reader. All the while I struggle to become clear about the actual object of my affection and must remind myself that this love for the other is nothing more than sickening self-love, no more endearing in children than in adults.

The reader must ultimately choose whether to celebrate with Lyra and Pan their new knowledge and freedom to traverse the multiverse, the currently popular naturalistic explanation offered to explain away the need for a Creator. Reading or watching Pullman's tale is very risky, even if one is thoroughly grounded in the understanding and defense of the Christian worldview. If you are not grounded, you

must become so. We live in an age when such study is no longer optional. I, therefore, suggest that if you decide to encounter *The Golden Compass* either through book or film, you first engage the clarion critical review of Pullman's fantasy trilogy by Mark Ryan and Carole Hausmann Ryan entitled, "Killing God: The Propaganda of His Dark Materials." This exemplary instance of Christian discernment was published in the *Christian Research Journal* (vol. 26, no. 3 [2003], available online at [www.equip.org](http://www.equip.org)).<sup>7</sup>

Good storytelling draws us into the thoughts and feelings of others, and through fiction we experience ways of sensing and interacting with the world that we would not otherwise realize. These experiences wrought through imagination can profoundly affect how we perceive reality from the moment of that encounter on, even if we are not fully aware of any shift in our perception. That, of course, is one reason why the Bible repeatedly tells us to watch our life and doctrine closely, warning us to guard continually against the inexorable influence of corrupt morals or bad teachings. Bad company corrupts good thinking and good morals. For these reasons, then, I must impute to the His Dark Materials series, whether in novel or film format, an NC-17 rating for its power to destroy one's worldview.

— Stephen Ross

## NOTES

1. Philip Pullman, *The Golden Compass*, His Dark Materials, Book One (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995, first Knopf paperback edition, 1998).
2. See Kenneth Richard Samples, *A World of Difference: Putting Christian Truth Claims to the Worldview Test* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 172–79.
3. Pullman, *The Golden Compass*, unpaginated, prior to table of contents.
4. *Ibid.*, 142.
5. *Ibid.*, 399.
6. *Ibid.*, 77.
7. I also strongly recommend that you study Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Reading between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway Books, 1990); Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2002); and especially, Samples, *A World of Difference*.