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## ***His Dark Materials: A Look into Pullman's Interpretation of Milton's Paradise Lost***

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### Abstract

Explores ideas of duality and other concepts from Milton's *Paradise Lost* that influenced Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy.

### Additional Keywords

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*; Pullman, Philip. *His Dark Materials*; Pullman, Philip. *His Dark Materials*—Influence of Milton

## *His Dark Materials: A Look into Pullman's Interpretation of Milton's Paradise Lost*

Karen D. Robinson

WILLIAM Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, Alexander Pope, John Keats, Lord Byron, and Philip Pullman. What do all of these writers have in common? Some of their works were strongly influenced by the writings of John Milton, especially his *Paradise Lost*. How they were influenced by Milton and how they applied this influence to their own works depended greatly upon their personal interpretations of Milton. This is indeed the case with Philip Pullman. The *His Dark Materials* trilogy (*The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*) was based on Pullman's interpretation of *Paradise Lost* and was also heavily influenced by the writings of William Blake.

In the acknowledgements section at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, Pullman lists three debts he must acknowledge as influences on his trilogy: an essay, "On the Marionette Theatre," by Heinrich von Kleist; *Paradise Lost*; and the works of William Blake. In an interview, Pullman said that he began the idea for the books during lunch with his publisher by commenting, "Well, what I'd really like to write is *Paradise Lost* for teenagers in three volumes" (Parsons and Nicholson 126). Although the work is not obviously recognizable as *Paradise Lost*, readers familiar with Milton's work will see the influence of it on *His Dark Materials*.

The first, and most obvious, reference to Milton is the very title of the trilogy: *His Dark Materials*. In the beginning of *The Golden Compass*, Pullman quotes from Book II of *Paradise Lost*:

Into this wilde Abyss,  
The Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave,  
Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire,  
But all these in thir pregnant causes mixt  
Confus'dly, and which thus must ever fight,  
Unless the Almighty Maker them ordain  
His dark materials to create more Worlds,  
Into this wild Abyss the warie fiend  
Stood on the brink of Hell and look'd a while,  
Pondering his Voyage. (lines 910-19)

This action takes place as Satan is about to begin his trip to Earth, crossing Chaos. Milton has a unique view of creation and of Chaos. According to Dennis Danielson, three interpretations exist explaining how God created the world, with Milton composing a fourth idea. First, Chaos already existed, and God took these already existing materials to create the world; therefore, something existed first apart from God. Second, God created the world out of nothing. Third, God created the world out of himself. Instead of using one of these creation theories alone, Milton combined them to explain that God first created Chaos out of himself. God portioned out part of Chaos to become the world and then created the world from that part of Chaos. Therefore, some Chaos is still in existence. Milton describes this creation in Book VII of *Paradise Lost*:

Then staid the fervid Wheelers, and in his hand  
He took the golden Compasses, prepar'd  
In Gods Eternal store, to circumscribe  
This Universe, and all created things:  
One foot he center'd, and the other turn'd  
Round through the vast profunditie obscure,  
And said, thus farr extend, thus farr thy bounds,  
This be thy just Circumference, O World. (ll. 224-31)

It seems reasonable that if God wanted to, He could create many more worlds from the leftover Chaos. Pullman takes this a step farther and says that there *are* many worlds in existence. In *The Golden Compass*, Kaisa (a witch's daemon) explains this concept to Lyra and the Gyptians (Pullman's version of gypsies):

"They [other worlds] aren't part of this universe at all; even the furthest stars are part of this universe, but the lights [Northern Lights] show us a different universe entirely. Not further away, but interpenetrating with this one. Here, on this deck, millions of other universes exist, unaware of one another[...]"

He raised his wings and spread them wide before folding them again.

"There," he said, "I have just brushed ten million other worlds, and they knew nothing of it. We are as close as a heartbeat, but we can never touch or see or hear these other worlds except in the Northern Lights" (164-65).

At the end of this book, Lyra's father creates a bridge from their world to another; in the next volume, Will and Lyra discover a knife that can cut windows into other worlds, and they travel through many of these worlds in their discovery of themselves and their relationships with their daemons and each other.

Why did Pullman create visible daemons for the people in Lyra's world? In an interview, he said that he was having problems getting the book started before he realized that Lyra had a daemon. This idea suddenly came to him, and he realized the power and potential that the creation of daemons could have (Parsons and Nicholson 128). This idea of Pullman's could very well have come from his readings of Milton and Blake. According to Denis Saurat, both Blake and Milton believed man to have a dual nature, consisting of reason and desire (58). Saurat sees both authors as wanting a harmony and balance between these two natures; however, he contends that desire was more important for Blake and reason came first for Milton (59). Pullman's use of daemons also shows this dual nature of man, allowing a much more direct and explicit duality than anything in Blake or Milton.

Lyra and Pan are perfect examples of this duality. Each balances the other, and harmony exists between them; one cannot live without the other. Usually, Lyra represents desire and Pan reason. One example of this can be seen at the beginning of *The Golden Compass*. Lyra wants to explore the Retiring Room, a place forbidden to anyone but Scholars; women especially are forbidden. Pan is very nervous, fluttering about in the shape of a moth, and keeps begging Lyra to give up this madness and leave the room. Once they get into the room, Pan says that they've seen it and can now go. Lyra insists on exploring it further. Lyra's desire to explore this forbidden place almost gets them in trouble, but with Pan's quick thinking, they hide just in time and learn information that proves invaluable later, although they are unaware of the importance at the time. Throughout the story, they take turns being reason and desire; however, at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra shows more reason and Pan desire, until they both settle down and together become more reason than desire. This development occurs when Will and Lyra are finally reunited with their daemons and find that they must make a very difficult decision. The daemons tell them that windows cannot continue to be opened into other worlds because every time a window is opened, a Specter (a creature that feeds on the daemons of adults) is created. Also, every window that has been opened must be closed because Dust leaks through all of the open windows. Without Dust, people will not be able to survive. The daemons tell Will and Lyra to decide which of their two worlds they will remain living in since they cannot go back and forth between the two. Will and Lyra, however, have also made a discovery while apart from their daemons: they cannot live very long (about 10 years is all) in

a world not their own. Lyra and Will struggle to find a loophole so they can still be together as they desire, but their daemons are still being reasonable and tell them that there is not a way; every window must be closed. They each offer to live in the other world, even though they will sicken and die shortly afterwards. Reason slowly comes to them, and neither will allow the other to make this sacrifice. They are then told by an angel that if they work to help create more Dust (Dust is created by consciousness, by thinking and feeling and gaining wisdom; they must share this message with other people), one window might be left open. Happiness and desire overwhelm them until reason comes thundering back to Lyra. They cannot leave a window open between their worlds. The one window that must be left open is the one in the land of the dead that allows ghosts to escape the miserable place. Will's desire and rage overcome him until he realizes that Lyra is right. After this realization, both Will and Lyra, along with their daemons, discover that reason must overcome desire, and they settle into the reality that they must spend their lifetimes apart from one another.

Besides using Milton and Blake's ideas about the duality of man, Pullman could be using this duality in order to balance Blake and Milton—Blake leaning toward desire and Milton reason. Perhaps by having reason win out in the end, Pullman is suggesting that Milton's ideas were more in tune to actual human existence. In order to continue existing for very long in the world, reason must overcome desire, Milton must overcome Blake. Desire can only take one so far in life; if all one has in life is desire, or if desire takes control, one will rarely ever accomplish anything. With Lyra and Pan in the Retiring Room, if Lyra's desire had overcome Pan's reason and quick thinking, she would have been caught without learning the information that she does, thus changing the entire course of her story, most likely for the worse.

Before moving on to a discussion of how Will and Lyra are like Adam and Eve, the nature of Dust needs to be explored. When Dust is first mentioned, it seems to be something that is negative and should be shunned. Instead, as Lyra and Pan find out, Dust is a good thing and necessary for survival. Lyra's father, Lord Asriel, discovers a curious characteristic of Dust: it only gathers on adults and not on children. This information helps lead Lyra to her own discovery of what Dust really is; as the Church in her world refers to it, Dust is original sin. When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Dust was brought into the world. Pullman describes Dust as consciousness

and knowledge and wisdom. It is experience, something that children, in their innocence, do not yet possess. In this light, Dust is something to be desired by everyone except those in the Church.

The other duality that Pullman explores is this one of innocence versus experience. In the interview with Parsons and Nicholson, Pullman says, “sin, or what churches have called sin, is in fact a very important stage in human development” (124). Why is this consciousness called Dust? Perhaps Pullman was influenced by another part of *Paradise Lost* in which Adam tells Eve that “we are dust, / And thither must return” (XI.199-220).<sup>1</sup> Only after Adam and Eve have eaten the fruit, disobeying God, is this decree made: they will die and return to being dust; therefore, it is quite reasonable for Pullman’s Dust to be the physical manifestation of original sin. Without the original sin, man would not have been made to return to dust and Dust would not have existed. Although Pullman never states this directly, perhaps when the ghosts leave the world of the dead through the window into the other world, instead of disintegrating into nothing, they become Dust. By opening the window for the ghosts to escape, Will and Lyra are participating in the creation and saving of more Dust. Without this possibility to become Dust, the ghosts would exist in misery in the land of the dead; therefore, Pullman shows the beginnings of the idea that the fall of Adam and Eve (and thus of Will and Lyra) was fortunate because Will and Lyra are rescuing the ghosts from a miserable existence and creating Dust (which Pullman considers to be a good thing) at the same time.

In another article, Pullman is quoted as saying, “It’s the story of the Fall, which is the story of how what some would call sin, but I would call consciousness, comes to us” (Lenz 134). Therefore, Pullman would consider the Fall to be fortunate, which is a subject that has been extensively discussed, especially with regard to *Paradise Lost*. One side of the argument claims that Milton rejected the idea of the Fortunate Fall. According to Virginia R. Mollenkott, Milton goes through great trouble to show what would have happened to man had he not fallen; if man continued to be perfectly obedient to the will of God, he would progress toward a wonderful goal—ascension into supernatural and heavenly bliss. Mollenkott uses the words of God from Book XI of *Paradise Lost* to prove this: “Happier, had it suffic’d him to have known / Good by itself, and Evil not at all” (ll. 88-89). Other critics and Pullman himself, however, saw Milton proposing a fall that was fortunate. In order to grow, man needs to be tested, and this testing can only come about through

the existence of both good and evil. Milton makes this point in *Areopagitica*, which is largely his argument about the importance of truth. He also argues that it is impossible to separate good and evil. Therefore, man needs the existence of both parts of this dichotomy if growth and virtue are to be obtained. Pullman illustrates this idea by creating a physical embodiment of this knowledge—Dust. The Church of Lyra's world wants to destroy Dust; however, Will and Lyra, in their roles as Adam and Eve, discover the importance of Dust and are instrumental in the preservation of it.

But just how Will and Lyra are like Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*? A one-to-one direct comparison does not occur, as Pullman's story takes place within different circumstances. Will and Lyra are not the only people that exist in the world, and they are not created with one another. Their relationship, feelings, and some actions, however, are very similar to those of Adam and Eve. In the world of *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve are alone, except for each other. They do occasionally have visits from angels, but for the most part, they rely upon one another for companionship. Although Will and Lyra are not completely alone (there are other people and creatures including Lyra's daemon), they do increasingly rely on one another, sometimes to the exclusion of everyone and everything else around them (especially near the end). In *Paradise Lost*, Milton shows that Eve relies upon Adam to explain what he has been told by the angels that come to visit, and she defers to Adam's decisions (until the crucial moment when she pushes him to allow her to go off by herself). Milton, however, also shows that Adam can be swayed by Eve because he almost worships her; it is this that probably causes him to give in to Eve and let her go off by herself. Lyra is very headstrong and wants to do things her own way, but after she meets Will, she realizes that sometimes her quick decisions and actions get her into trouble and she submits to the decisions made by Will. In this way, we can look back to the description of reason versus desire and see Lyra again as desire with Will as reason. Lyra has learned that her desire gets her into trouble, so she submits to Will's reason; she learns that reason must overcome desire in order for them to move forward toward their goal. Nevertheless, Will does not lead Lyra around blindly; he seeks her opinions and considers them when making decisions. Adam and Eve's relationship as described by Milton seems more like this, with Adam taking the opinions of Eve into consideration before making his decisions. It does not mean that all decisions will be the best ones, but he does not overlook Eve's feelings. In this way, Milton shows Adam and



Eve to be on more equal footing with each other, giving support to those critics who think of Milton as a feminist. Also, although Milton has Eve off doing other chores (such as cooking dinner) when angels come to visit, she still hears much of what Adam and the angel are discussing. In Book XI, the angel is explaining to Adam that he and Eve must leave the Garden, when “Eve, who unseen / Yet all had heard, with audible lament / Discover’d soon the place of her retire” (ll. 265-67). This description of Eve is very reminiscent of Lyra, who often hides and overhears things that are important to her but were not originally meant directly for her ears. This is, then, another way in which Milton (and Pullman) shows that Eve (and Lyra) is equal to Adam (and Will) because Eve actually hears those things that are important for her to learn. She later has Adam tell her what was said because he tells her things while kissing her, but she had already heard the main part of the information directly in her own ears.

A poignant scene occurs between Adam and Eve that brings to mind the scene between Will and Lyra (discussed above) when they discover they must spend their lives apart from one another. In Book X, Adam and Eve are discussing what they should do now that they have disobeyed God. First, Eve begs Adam to forgive her; she will take all the blame upon herself. Adam relents and is no longer angry with Eve, and he then tries to take the blame himself for allowing her to go off by herself. Then Adam says that they are both to blame and the full burden cannot be taken by only one of them. Eve suggests that the two of them commit suicide, which would be better than “To be to others cause of misery, / Our own begotten, and of our Loines to bring / Into this cursed World a woful Race” (ll. 982-84). Adam explains that this is something they cannot do; they must remember God’s promise that “thy Seed shall bruise / The Serpents head” (ll. 1031-32). Therefore, for the good of the future of mankind, they must endure their sorrow and suffering. Milton shows that Adam and Eve understand that their personal sufferings are unimportant in the scheme of the future of the world; their actions are important in how they affect the future of mankind but not how they personally affect Adam and Eve. If part of what the fruit gave them was a consciousness and understanding, they are using this new understanding when they make the decision not to kill themselves and to take the suffering because eventually something good will come of it. This selflessness of Adam and Eve is also shown in Will and Lyra. Each offers to live in the other’s world, even though that means becoming sick

and dying; however, each will not allow the other to make this sacrifice because each could not bear watching the other sicken and die. Then, they discover a solution by which they might still be able to live together—keeping open just one window, one between their worlds. Lyra's remembrance of the window in the world of the dead is very like Adam's remembrance of God's decree that Satan shall be crushed one day. Because of this, Will and Lyra know that no other choice can be made unless they selfishly decide to close the window in the land of the dead. This decision also was made after they had eaten their fruit, so they are showing the consciousness and understanding they have gained, just as Adam and Eve had done. They must suffer, by being apart, for the good of mankind (both dead and alive). Before eating the fruit, both couples probably would have made the same decisions: Adam and Eve not to kill themselves and Will and Lyra to live apart, but they would not have fully understood the importance of their decisions. Only through acknowledging the suffering that they must all go through can they realize how difficult a decision they must make; it is the understanding that good can come out of suffering that is gained through the eating of the fruit. In this way, both couples are willing to give up their own happiness for the happiness and victory of others, a choice made of their own free will.

Much of *Paradise Lost* is concerned with showing that God gave man free will. Milton is very adamant about presenting God in this manner. In the argument for Book III, Milton writes that God "created Man free and able enough to have withstood his Tempter." One of the most important places where Milton presents the idea of free will is also in Book III, with God speaking: "I made him just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (ll. 98-99). Slightly further down, God explains why he created man with free will.

Not free, what proof could they have givn sincere  
Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,  
[.....]  
What pleasure I from such obedience paid." (ll. 103-04, 107)

If man had not been given free will, the decision to disobey God would have no meaning because it would have been God who caused the disobedience rather than the free will of man. If this were the case, God could be seen as a tyrant, causing man to fall and then punishing him for something that was not his

own choice. Milton's professed purpose in writing *Paradise Lost* was to "justify the ways of God to men" (I.26); thus, he would clearly want to emphasize man's free will. To have God be seen as a tyrant would be going against Milton's purpose. Therefore, man must have free will in order for God's ways to be justified; He allowed man the possibility of disobedience and the Fall in order to show the importance of the gift He gave to man.

It is no coincidence that the Adam figure in Pullman's trilogy is named Will. Through this character, Pullman most strongly asserts the doctrine of free will. From the time Will's father left, Will has had to support his mother. He knows that if he does not take care of her, he would be taken away and she would probably end up in a mental institution. His childhood has been consumed with protecting his mother, and he is unable to be himself; he has always made himself hidden and unseen. Because of events surrounding his protection of his mother, he accidentally steps through a window into another world and begins his journey. At the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, Will wonders what he will do now that, in his own world, he won't have to worry so much about his mother and can live his own life. He asks the angel, "What work have I got to do then?" (444). He doesn't give the angel a chance to answer, however, and immediately answers himself:

"No, on second thought, don't tell me. I shall decide what I do. If you say my work is fighting, or healing, or exploring, or whatever you might say, I'll always be thinking about it. And if I end up doing that, I'll be resentful because it'll feel as if I didn't have a choice, and if I don't do it, I'll feel guilty because I should. Whatever I do, I will choose it, no one else." (444)

The angel replies that Will is now on the path to wisdom by finally realizing that he has free will and can and, most of all, *should* make his own decisions. I think, and believe Pullman's interpretation shows that he agrees, *this* is what the eating of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil brought to Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. They are finally aware that they make and are responsible for their own decisions. This awareness of responsibility is another reason why Adam cannot agree that suicide is the best answer for them and also why the fall was fortunate.

In some ways, it almost seems that Will and Lyra are a reversal of Adam and Eve, that instead of being a retelling of *Paradise Lost*, Pullman is providing his own version of *Paradise Regained*. Instead of dooming mankind to punishment and a life away from Paradise, Will and Lyra have saved mankind and will show

people that it is possible for Paradise to exist again, within their own minds. To paraphrase Pullman, each person must create one's own Republic of Heaven. Besides being Adam and Eve figures, Will and Lyra could be seen as Christ figures; their journey to the land of the dead to release the ghosts could be compared with the Harrowing of Hell, for example. Seeing Will and Lyra as Christ figures more fully reinforces the idea that this is Pullman's version of *Paradise Regained*. Although this comparison to Christ does not directly tie to Milton and to *Paradise Lost*, it is important in the understanding of how the trilogy could be a regaining of Paradise, with Will and Lyra making a sacrifice, not of their lives but of their love, in order to save mankind.

In this regard, with Will and Lyra saving mankind rather than dooming it, no single specific moment can be regarded as a "fall" for Will and Lyra; they seem to ascend more than they fall. This view could be taken for Adam and Eve as well, as pointed out in an article by Millicent Bell.<sup>2</sup> According to Bell, Milton uses a method that does not allow the reader to isolate a single cause of the fall because there are multiple transgressions, and the transition from innocence to sin can be felt early in the poem. Eve's temptations can be traced back through her wanting to go out in the garden apart from Adam to her dream to her waking by the pool and looking at her reflection and being delighted by it. Adam's temptations can go back from his being persuaded by Eve to let them separate to his questions of the angel and seeking knowledge for its own sake to his seeing Eve and thinking that she is the most wonderful and beautiful thing he has ever seen (idolatry). Basically, Bell contends that Milton's description of the fall is not as the Bible presents it and possibly that Milton presents no fall at all. In her view, Adam and Eve come to the fruit already having sinned; therefore, all that is left is for them to realize their sinfulness (a climax of self-realization). Therefore, if one were to follow this argument, the fall was not only inevitable but necessary; since Adam and Eve were sinful almost from their very beginnings, they needed to have this climactic moment in order to gain redemption and to receive an inner regulator of conscience. This also seems to be what happens with Will and Lyra. They have already fallen along the way in their journey, and it is the moment of realization that is important. Will and Lyra have taken a picnic beneath some trees, and Lyra, remembering the story Mary Malone had told them (about a picnic that she had once under a tree with a young man), takes a little red fruit and turns to Will:

And she [Lyra] lifted the fruit gently to his [Will's] mouth.

She could see from his eyes that he knew at once what she meant, and that he was too joyful to speak. [ . . . ]

Around them there was nothing but silence, as if all the world were holding its breath. (416-417)

It is at this point, when they realize their love for each other (and eat some fruit) that they have reached their maturity and consciousness and Dust starts to settle upon them. This moment is what everything has been building toward, just as in *Paradise Lost* everything builds toward the moment that Adam and Eve eat the fruit, whether or not one believes their Fall to have occurred at that very moment or at some point before.

Going back to the characters, several other specific examples are evident as to how Lyra, apart from Will, is similar to Eve and sometimes Adam. There is a great prophecy among the witches about Lyra:

“The witches have talked about this child for centuries past. [ . . . ] And they have spoken of a child such as this, who has a great destiny that can only be fulfilled elsewhere. [ . . . ] Without this child, we shall all die [ . . . ] But she must fulfill this destiny in ignorance of what she is doing, because only in her ignorance can we be saved.” (*The Golden Compass* 154)

Lyra actually finds out about this prophecy, so she does know that there is something special about her, but she doesn't fully understand all of the specifics and ramifications of this prophecy. In the same way, God sends an angel to warn Adam and Eve that they may be tempted by a fallen angel. They are told the story of the War in Heaven and know that something important is going on. Therefore, Lyra, Adam, and Eve know that something will happen that will prove to be important, but they don't truly understand why it is important or what will happen if they fail. If they had understood, they probably would have made some different decisions, possibly causing the Fall not to occur, which would be a bad thing if one is a proponent of the Fortunate Fall idea. Dreaming is another common occurrence between Lyra and Eve. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan comes to Eve while she is sleeping and plants a dream in her head, where she eats of the Tree and finds herself with a nature like the angels. This dream is very troublesome to Eve, and it might be this that causes her to want to spend some time apart from Adam, perhaps to prove to herself and to him that she was sufficient to stand on her own. At the end of *The Subtle Knife*, Lyra's mother, Mrs. Coulter, has kidnapped Lyra and forced her into a drugged

sleep. Mrs. Coulter was an agent of the Church, hoping to stop the prophecy about Lyra, the second Eve, and keep Lyra from fulfilling what she is supposed to do. Mrs. Coulter's motives at this point are unclear as she has broken away from the Church and is probably not sure herself if she is trying to protect Lyra or harm her. During this time, Lyra dreams that she is in a world like that where the dead are and finds Roger, a friend who had died before she could save him. In these dreams, Lyra promises Roger that Will will come rescue them and set them free. Although Lyra had been feeling very guilty about what happened with Roger, it was not until the dreams occurred that she got the idea to actually go to the land of the dead in search of him. If she had not had these dreams, she would not have been as focused on finding Roger and going to the land of the dead. This journey into the land of the dead and the creation of the window to release the ghosts causes all of the heartache and sorrow at the end of the trilogy. Therefore, for both Eve and Lyra, things might have turned out completely differently had they each not had their respective dreams.

This brings me to a discussion of the roles played by some of the other characters in both of the works. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan is a very important character, so much so that many readers and critics have thought him to be the hero of the epic. Through Satan's aspirations, the War in Heaven begins and the strategy against man is undertaken. Satan also causes the dream that leads Eve to the temptation of actually eating the fruit of the Tree. In *His Dark Materials*, Satan's character is divided into two people: Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter, Lyra's parents. Lord Asriel gathers and leads the forces against Heaven, building a fortress (Pandemonium) just like Satan. He is the great, charismatic leader that everyone flocks to and turns to for guidance. As shown above, Mrs. Coulter forces Lyra into a drug-induced sleep, causing her to dream just as Satan did to Eve. In *Paradise Lost*, many readers have been confused about Satan—is he a heroic character or evil and perhaps a fool? This same confusion and ambiguity is used by Pullman for both Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter. At times they seem to be evil and on the wrong side (against Will and Lyra) and at other times, they are helpful to the protagonists and perform heroic actions.

The role of the serpent is played by Dr. Mary Malone, the scientist that Lyra meets in *The Subtle Knife*. She is told by angels (on the fallen side) that she is to follow Will and Lyra because she must be the serpent for them. She is an innocent (like the serpent used by Satan in *Paradise Lost*) and does not know what she is supposed to do. When she, Will, and Lyra finally meet up again,

Mary is told (again, by the fallen angels) to tell them stories, so she tells them the story of why she left her convent (she used to be a nun) and became a scientist. She had gone out of the convent to present a paper at a conference and met a young man. They had a picnic under a tree, and he fed her a piece of marzipan. Until that moment, she had never thought much about love and life, having vowed her life to the church, but that taste of marzipan made her remember a time when she was a young girl and had her first boyfriend, who had also fed her a piece of marzipan. She realized, at the moment of eating the second bite of marzipan, that she had been missing out on some of the most important parts of life—especially love.<sup>3</sup> This story moves something inside Will and Lyra and allows them to look at each other in a different light and realize their love for one another. This realization leads to their own moment at a picnic beneath a tree, where Lyra feeds Will a red fruit (discussed above). In *Paradise Lost*, the serpent tells Eve that he has eaten of the Tree and has now gained the ability to speak and to be more human; therefore, if Eve eats of the tree, she will become more like a god. Although the serpent is lying and Mary Malone is telling the truth, it is through the telling of these stories that Eve and Lyra are led to the discovery of eating the fruit for themselves.

Another character that can be seen as similar in Pullman and Milton is God. Pullman's interpretation of Milton's God is very much like that of William Empson. In Book I, the fallen angels are recalling the War in Heaven. One of them, speaking of Satan, says:

O Prince, O Chief of many Throned Powers,  
That led th' imbattelld Seraphim to Warr  
Under thy conduct, and in dreadful deeds  
Fearless, endanger'd Heav'ns perpetual King;  
And put to proof his high Supremacy,  
Whether upheld by strength, or Chance, or Fate. (ll. 128-33)

Empson uses these lines to show that if the fallen angels "*endangered* God, the rule of God is not inherently *perpetual*" (38). Empson also states that "Satan believes God to be a usurper" (40). Although the lines that Empson uses for this idea are spoken by one of the fallen angels and were probably not a position held by Milton himself, it seems that Pullman grasps onto this idea in his trilogy. He explains that God was merely the first angel and declared himself to be the creator when he actually was not. In *The Amber Spyglass*, Balthamos explains to Will:

"The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El, Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty—those were all names he gave himself. He was never the creator. He was an angel just like ourselves—the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself. Matter loves matter. It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed. The first angels condensed out of Dust, and the Authority was the first of all. He told those who came after him that he had created them, but it was a lie." (28)

Pullman's God, or the Authority, at the time of the trilogy is a feeble old spirit and has a regent ruling for him. Within the course of the War in Pullman's story, God fades away into nothingness. The regent is deceived by Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter (finally working together) and is destroyed (although they destroy themselves along with him). Therefore, Pullman's God is not perpetual and is certainly destructible and replaceable as Empson would claim Milton's God to be.

What does all of this have to say about Pullman's interpretation of Milton? Stanley Fish feels that Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* in order to lead readers to a correct response, to test their faith and relationship with God. Fish calls these readers the "fit" readers. Pullman is definitely *not* a fit reader; Fish would say that he fell under the trap laid by Satan. William Blake would not agree with Fish, at least on the part of falling into a trap. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake writes: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of angels and God, and at liberty when of devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (107). Pullman, who admits to being influenced by Blake, agrees wholeheartedly with this idea of Blake's. Pullman has said that he is "of the devil's party, like Milton" (qtd. in Brown 81). He also said: "As for my view that the rebellious angels are on the side of good and freedom rather than authority, repression, and cruelty, again I'm in a long tradition. William Blake consciously and Milton unconsciously wrote about this, so I'm in a line with the English dissenters" (qtd. in Cooper 355). Pullman may have fallen under a trap laid by Milton through Satan, especially as many of his ideas of the angels and God come directly from statements made by Satan and the other fallen angels in *Paradise Lost*. Whether or not one agrees with Pullman's assessment of Milton's epic poem, a reader's familiarity with *Paradise Lost* can lead to a more enriching experience and understanding in the reading of *His Dark Materials*.<sup>4</sup>



Notes

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Pullman's influence here could also have come directly from the Bible rather than filtered through Milton.

<sup>2</sup> Bell's argument would be considered a minority opinion and one that many critics and readers will not agree with. It is because I believe Pullman to be in this minority with Bell that I have included this argument and set it forth as a possibility within *Paradise Lost*.

<sup>3</sup> In this way, Mary Malone and her young man can also be seen as Eve and Adam figures. It is through this eating of marzipan that Mary is brought to self-awareness and a realization of the possibilities of life.

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Emily Nimz and Paul Parrish for their help in brainstorming ideas and gathering my thoughts in the development of this paper.

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