



Subversion of Religious Canon in Pullman's His Dark Materials

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1. Introduction

In 2000 the final volume of the fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials* was published in London. Although it was only after New Line Cinema announced the film adaptation that it attracted world wide attention, it is undeniable that Pullman's work made an immense contribution not only to children's literature, but to British literature in general. The fact that Pullman was the first children's author to receive The Whitbread Award, as well as the sales of more than 15 million, speak in favour of the significance his work. However, because of his public outbursts against the boycotters of his works, Pullman came under strident criticism. Unconventional usage of traditional religious and Church-related concepts as literary devices brought into question his integrity as an author and designated him as a fervent atheist.

The central aim of this paper is to show how Pullman uses various religious concepts, which are mainly related to Christian tradition and doctrines. The resonant imagery of *His Dark Materials* carries numerous canonical references, primarily from the Bible, but also from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the works of William Blake. Pullman employs different strategies throughout the volumes to introduce these, somewhat dogmatic, precepts; they are either rewritten in a way that casts new light upon the matters they relate to or are presented unaltered per se, but in a completely new context that enables a different, allegorical reading of the canonical item. This paper opens with a short explication of the religious canon, followed by examples of its subversion in *His Dark Materials*. Special emphasis is placed on the transfer and modification of the traditional Christian religious concepts into fantasy fiction context and a relatively critical replica of the Catholic Church in *His Dark Materials*.



2. On Religious and Literary Canon

When dealing with elements of religious canon, it is necessary to differentiate it clearly from the literary canon. The major distinction can be noted in the process of canon formation. The religious canon, when once established, is thereafter fixed, whereas the literary canon can be subject to ceaseless flux. Also, there is a wide divergence between their appositeness. The religious canon is to “constitute the basis for thought and behaviour in a congregation whose membership has official status” (Bal 2000) in contrast to the literary, which is to guarantee a high aesthetic quality and to embody the lasting cultural values of a particular society.

Despite these dissimilarities, religious and literary canons are closely intertwined: “There is a tight bond between artistic and religious canonicity” (Bal 2000) and many works, *His Dark Materials* among these, represent religious identities that differ from “the mainstream institutionalised religious systems” and in a way transform them. These transformations that occur during the artistic transfer can be perceived as tools for depicting socio-political circumstances and views the author holds as well as a device for reshaping the notion of religious identities. Judeo-Christian concepts are certainly the most frequently employed elements of religious canons. The motives in the Old and the New Testament impelled the works of many authors and in a way influenced the shaping of literary canon as well. In order to illustrate this, works of John Milton and William Blake will be presented in the context of literary subversion of the religious canon. These two authors are also of importance for the study, since they provided Pullman with inspiration and incentive to write *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

2.1. John Milton: “How can a poet write God?”

The prominence and influence of John Milton’s works is indubitable and is evident in the Miltonic effects – the main trademarks of his legacy as systematised by Havens (2009), which include dignity, reserve and stateliness, sonorous, orotund voice, inversion of the natural order of words and phrases, parenthesis and opposition, unusual compound epithets, passages listing proper names, etc. Milton is often referred to as “the greatest English author” and his epic poem *Paradise*



Lost as one of the greatest poems of the English language. To tell the story of man's first disobedience he invokes: What in me is dark / Illumine, what is low raise and support; / That to the highth of this great Argument / I may assert th' Eternal Providence, / And justifie the wayes of God to men. (Milton I, 22-26). "The thought-world of *Paradise Lost* seemed to accommodate both theologically orthodox elements on the one hand, and idiosyncratic, heterodox elements on the other", as Meyers (2004, 14) notes and, justified or not, the ways of God certainly indicated immersion into the religious canon and wielded Milton's place within the literary canon. The focus will here be placed on the Act of Creation, Adam and Eve's marriage and the character of Satan.

The Creation of Man

The biblical Genesis presents the Creation of man as the final stage, the crown of God's perfect project. Man is created with love and purpose – to be the image of God and to govern His other creations. Milton's Creation is equivalent to the biblical in terms of mechanics, it is the omnipotent Creator who employed his power and made man be. However, the divine agenda is altered in two major points.

Firstly, the biblical man is created to complete the otherwise perfect work of God; he is the final asset to his vision or earthly world. On the contrary, Milton's man is a creation, a project himself, formed to spite the Chaos. Secondly, the Bible reveals that God wanted a being similar to Himself, His reflection and image, and therefore created man. In *Paradise Lost* "God creates mankind to replace eventually the emptiness in Heaven left when the rebel angels were cast out" (Hajiyeva 2011, 31), and man is given the role of a candidate – if he obeys God's will, he will eventually be eligible for Heaven, to substitute those who were expelled.

Adam and Eve

Milton has been frequently accused of misogyny in relation to the perspective of gender issue he delineated in *Paradise Lost*. His Adam is created powerful and rational; a being capable of governing what God had left in his charge. Eve is in many ways inferior to Adam, but he can not resist her beauty. It is debated whether Eve is presented as Adam's intellectual underling, and



Brodwin gives an interesting proposal that "Eve is created inferior to Adam not in intelligence... but in character" (1975, 62). Erickson notes that "Milton augments Eve's image, giving innumerable insights into her personality and character" and portrays Adam "very much along traditional theological lines" (1988, 156). Further exploration of her character reveals arrogance, greed, lust, and wrath; she is "the vehicle through which Adam meets evil" (Erickson 1998, 170).

Another untraditional and far from canon element is Adam and Eve's relationship. Their marital affairs are presented for the first time in an ordinary, human-like way. Even though sharply contrasted, Milton truly portrays them as a couple, rather than separate entities living in Paradise.

Satan the Hero

One of the most controversial aspects of Milton's epic is undoubtedly his ingenious portrayal of Satan. The Dark Prince is not merely a mindless villain, with nothing but bestial destruction on his mind. On the contrary, Milton chooses to characterise him almost as a Romantic hero. Satan's remarkable intelligence, great boldness and fiery passion significantly detract from the depravity of his agenda; his spirit compels admiration and respect. The superior strength of his character lies in the extraordinary oratorical skills he exhibits on various occasions throughout the poem. It is precisely the persuasive speeches Satan delivers that set the plot into motion, and entice the actions of other characters.

According to Carey (in Danielson 1999), the perspective on Satan's character divided Milton's critics into pro-Satanists (A. J. A. Waldock, E. E. Stoll, G. R. Hamilton, William Empson, William Bryson and Neil Forsyth) and anti-Satanists (Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis, S. Musgrove and Stanley Fish). Falcone (2011) notes that Satan's ambivalence is not epitomised by a struggle between good or evil, but in the notion of his freedom. Satan's tragedy "rests in his failure to choose true liberty (inward fellowship with God) over self" (Falcone 2011, 95). For this reason, he can never achieve true inner freedom, but must satisfy himself with Hell as a place where he can obtain external freedom, i.e. the absence of God's rules:

...Here at least



We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built

Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n. (Milton I, 261)

2.2. William Blake: "The Old and New Testaments are the Great Code of Art"

English Romantic poet, visual artist and visionary William Blake established his writing career on rewriting and interpreting the religious canon. His poetry elucidates his views on creation and the notion of God, the fall of man, the arrival of the Messiah and the last judgement.

His *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* delineates "Blake's theological and mythological development which culminated in a belief system both radical and deeply spiritual, causing some to dismiss his works as lunatic rantings" (Vines 2005, 116). Blake portrays *innocence* as a concurrence of energy, poetry and God, and *experience* as the "invasion and subsequent enslavement of imagination by reason", which brought on man's expulsion from Eden (Malcomson 1967).

When analysing Blake's works, Northrop Frye (1947, 1990) suggests that, according to Blake, all of God's doings come through man, via his imagination and consciousness. Blake rejects the notion of a human soul superior to the body and proposes that "the Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination. That is, God himself" (Blake, 273). Man's God-likeness is contrasted with the cruelty of institutions, such as the Church and the State, since they come between man and God. In embracing religion and discarding religiosity, "Blake sought to challenge the collapse in society's values, to reverse the decent into the godless abyss of reason and to reunite an intrinsically holy humanity with its



creator" (Vines 2005, 121). His literary strivings were aimed against the interpretation of the religious canon in his time and, therefore, do not present only a subversion of the canon, but also of the societal circumstances he wrote in.

3. Religious Canon in His Dark Materials

3.1. Transfer of Traditional Judeo-Christian Concepts into Fantasy Fiction

It would be utterly artless to say that "*His Dark Materials* is Pullman's modern reworking of Milton's classic 17th-century poem *Paradise Lost*, disguised as a children's adventure story" (Meacham 2003), but it is irrefutable that the two works share a common basis, at least regarding major themes and motifs. However, Milton's objective was to "justify the ways of God to men" and explicate the clash between God's infinite prudence and man's right to exercise free will. Whereas Pullman, despite having publicly declared that his "books are about killing God", and that he is "trying to undermine the basis of Christian belief", concludes humbly: "Before too long I realised I was telling a story which would serve as a vehicle for exploring things which I had been thinking about over the years. (...)My intention is to tell a story – in the first place because the story comes to me and wants to be told."

The story which came to him, however, abounds with various elements of the traditional Judeo-Christian teaching. The central theme is the eternal battle between Good and Evil, Light and Darkness. In addition to this, there are many references both to the Old Testament, such as the Creation, the Original Sin and the Fall of Man, and to the New Testament: resurrection, reconciliation and expiation. The Catholic Church hierarchy is caricatured, as well as any form of organized religion in general, with its doctrines and public attitudes.

The Creation Myth



The fundamentals of *His Dark Materials*' plot include the story of the creation of the world. Although this creation myth underlies the whole trilogy from the very beginning, it only becomes explicit to a higher degree in the last volume. The angel Balthamos, in a desperate attempt to compel Will to help him and join Lord Asriel's forces, elaborates on why he is so eager to fight against 'God':

He was never the creator. He was an angel 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. (Pullman III, 26)

It was precisely this paragraph that caused the most altercation; Pullman's work had been fiercely berated by *The Catholic Herald* and the Association of Christian Teachers said his "blasphemy was shameless" (BBC News 2004). Namely, Pullman was never reserved when it came to his religious views: "If we're talking on the scale of human life and the things we see around us, I'm an atheist. There's no God here. There never was. But if you go out into the vastness of space, well, I'm not so sure. On that level, I'm an agnostic." (Pullman in Meacham 2003).

But, it is not Pullman's atheism or agnosticism for that matter, that agitate zealous Christians so much; it is the fact that he calls "The Authority, God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh, El Adonai, the King, the Father, the Almighty" an imposter, a liar and self-proclaimed creator. This effect is even enhanced when one notes that Pullman does not make explicit references to the Creation from Genesis here, but simply adds a prequel, so to say. He proposes the existence of the Matter which became self-conscious and eventually created Dust – an embodiment and indication of reason. It is interesting how Pullman's Dust stands in a sharp contrast to God's Dust, an omen of sin and an eternal flaw in man: "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen 3:19). Also, it could be compared to the description of Creation in the Book of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). If the notion of the Word is compared, or even equalled, to the Dust, an inversion becomes apparent: it was not God who created the Word here, but vice versa, the Word created him.



Accordingly, Pullman's representation of the creation myth can be interpreted dichotomously. It might be perceived, on the one hand, as a case of malicious transposition of the narrative's elements or, on the other, merely as a radical change in perspective.

The Fall of Man

Another major stumbling block regarding *His Dark Materials* is Pullman's account of the Original Sin. His adroit juggle with this part of religious canon is multi-layered and includes several related elements: the perception of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, that is, the notion of Knowledge/Sin itself, the view of childhood as an age of innocence/ignorance, the trinity of human nature, the roles of Adam and Eve and the significance of the Serpent, as well as the contentious description of the Second Fall.

"Go to the shelf beside the desk and bring me the Bible" (Pullman I, 285), says Lord Asriel to Lyra in *Northern Lights*. The text from Genesis, the story of "how sin came into the world, sin and shame and death" is discarded as a fairy tale imposed by the Church, and used as a template for developing an entirely new image. Since the scientists from Lyra's world have discovered the existence of Rusakov's particles, that is Dust, and through its further explorations, it has become obvious that it is attracted to consciousness: "Conscious beings make Dust, they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on" (Pullman III, 393). Therefore, as it is emphasised throughout the trilogy, the Fall of Man was not actually a fall, but rather an ascent from the state of ignorance to the state of experience and self-awareness. The Church, on the other hand, did not rejoice over the idea of enlightenment: "The Magisterium decided that Dust was the physical evidence for original sin" (Pullman I, 284). From that moment on "all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. She and the rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed" (Pullman III, 382). It appears that Pullman not only prolonged the Dark Ages but, moreover, announced its climax: "That is what the Church does, and every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling" (Pullman II, 26).



There is also an interesting novelty regarding human nature: "Pullman creates an idea, much like Freud's idea of the Id, which says that it is 'the unconscious basis of the psyche dominated by primary urges' and that 'contact with the external world modifies part of the ID.'" (Ebbs 2000). This division between the body, which is capable of sensing the world around it, the spirit, which is oriented towards learning about the world around it, and the soul, which is loving the world around it. This is especially intriguing, if one considers the fact that the human souls in Lyra's world are presented through daemons. "The energy that links body and daemon is immensely powerful" (Pullman I, 287) and attracts vast amounts of the Dust. There is a considerable difference in the quantity of Dust produced by adults and children. This is the reason why the Spectres feed on adults only, for the children are not conscious enough to attract a lot of Dust. In the time of puberty, as children's characters form and their daemons assume fixed shapes, more Dust is beguiled.

Since Pullman's Church considers everything related to Dust to be sinful and ungodly, the notion of childhood as a Dust-free period is idealised. Furthermore, they try to preserve it even by cutting off the children's daemons because, as Mrs. Coulter explains to Lyra, "your daemon's a wonderful friend and companion when you're young, but at the age we call puberty(...) daemons bring all sort of troublesome thoughts and feelings, and that's what lets Dust in" (Pullman I, 218). Conversely, it is the experience and maturity that Pullman idolises, in opposition to a child's innocence and ignorance; he regards childhood as a preparatory stage: "we move from childhood through adolescence to adulthood and I wanted to find a way of presenting it as something natural and good, and to be welcomed, and, you know – celebrated, rather than deplored" (Pullman, 2004). The Child Hero Archetype is subverted in order to:

undermine the idealisation of childhood as a prelapsarian state of nature.(...) This is the moment at which the purpose behind Pullman's use of the figure of the Child Hero becomes apparent. Pullman's works do not yearn toward a higher form of innocence: rather, his works present the view that loss of innocence is that which makes us fully human. (Crosby 2005)

To underline this, Pullman introduces various woes into his parallel worlds; Spectres are attacking people, the Church has gotten out of control, etc. Everything indicates the necessity of the Second



Fall: "So it was clear to me from the beginning that this was what *His Dark Materials* would have to be about as well. It would have to lead up to a garden in which something similar took place, or something analogous, anyway" (Pullman in Fried 2000). Furthermore, a prophecy made by witches is unveiled: Lyra will be a new Eve, she will be tempted and "have the power to make a fateful choice, on which the future of all the worlds depended" (Pullman III, 51). Indeed, Lyra is somewhat Eve-ish: "The girl is more trusting. I think we could win her around. She's innocent, and she loves easily" (Pullman III, 146), but also "a thoughtless, insolent child" (133). Will is more alert, "but won't go anywhere without her" and even his name is symbolic – it refers to what mankind gained after the Fall: a consciousness that entails free will. Just like in Eden, Lyra and Will have a serpent too, Mary Malone, an ex-nun turned scientist, whose character and attitude towards the Church doctrine many Catholics found offensive: "I used to be a nun you see. I thought physics could be done to the glory of God, till I saw there wasn't any God at all and that physics was more interesting anyway. The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that's all" (Pullman III, 350). It was Mary who, in a way, is responsible for the change, for the Fall. Her stories and views of the world, life and love open Will and Lyra's eyes. This enables the recreation of the Eden scene: "Then Lyra took one of those little red fruits. With a fast-beating heart, she turned to him and said, 'Will...' And she lifted the fruit gently to his mouth" (Pullman III, 371).

Their Fall, however, does not bring about misery and desolation. On the contrary, as witch Serafina Pekkala explains to Mary: "Something like that happened yesterday. I don't know what it was. They saw each other differently, or something... Until then, they hadn't felt like that, but suddenly they did. And then the Dust was attracted to them, very powerfully, and it stopped flowing the other way" (Pullman III, 382). Apparently, it was what the universe needed to achieve harmony again and restore its balance. The passages describing Will and Lyra's physical awakening were harshly criticised and the Northern American editions of *The Amber Spyglass* were even censored. However, Pullman discards the accusations of immorality and vulgarity: "Nowhere in the book do I talk about anything more than a kiss. And as a child, a kiss is enough. A kiss can change the world" (Pullman 2003).

Life After Death



One of the foundations of Catholic teaching is the eternity of the human soul, which inevitably implicates the existence of afterlife. In Catholicism, death is nothing but a new beginning; heaven and boundless joy await those who have proven themselves to be worthy and interminable suffering for the sinful. Pullman substitutes this merit system with a disheartening image of the Land of the Dead, where everyone goes to, “kings, queens, murderers, poets, children” but nobody comes back from. His descriptions are painfully expressive: “The land of the dead isn’t a place of reward or a place of punishment. It’s a place of nothing. The good come here as well as the wicked, and all of us languish in this gloom forever, with no hope of freedom, or joy, or sleep, or rest, or peace” (Pullman III, 254). The ghosts of deceased people feel deceived. A woman who died as a martyr complains to Lyra:

And they said that Heaven was a place of joy and glory and we would spend eternity in the company of saints and angels praising the Almighty, in a state of bliss. That’s what they said. And that’s what led some of us to give our lives, and others to spend years in solitary prayer, while all the joy of life was going to waste around us and we never knew. (Pullman III, 254)

Pullman decides to show mercy and correct the wrongdoings of the Church. Lyra and Will are eventually able to release them by cutting a portal to another world. The ghosts realise that this entails dematerialisation and disappearance but are eager to accept the regress: “We’ll be alive again in a thousand blades of grass, and a million leaves; we’ll be falling in the raindrops and blowing in the fresh breeze; we’ll be glittering in the dew under the stars and the moon out there in the physical world, which is our true home and always was” (Pullman III, 254).

The Republic of Heaven

“Let Your kingdom come, let Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” are the lines from the Lord’s Prayer, *Our Father*. They refer to the Kingdom of God that is within the people that can be approached by understanding and accepting the world like a child. It also denotes a spiritual rebirth, as well as performing the will of God. Finally, the paramount realisation of the Kingdom of Heaven will take place after Christ’s Second Coming, when he delivers the final judgment on all the



living and the dead and defeats Satan. Pullman seizes this utterly religious concept and gives it a political, as well as a spiritual connotation.

First of all, Pullman, instead of the Kingdom of Heaven, uses the Republic of Heaven. This change has considerably more to it than just a cosmetic vocabulary alteration; the entire concept it conveys is considerably modified. The term kingdom refers to a monarchy, a realm ruled by and in absolute control of one entity solely. The connotations it carries are oppression, restrictions and single-mindedness. As an opposition to this, Lord Asriel, the character Pullman matches to Satan, proposes the idea of a Republic, which implies a system where the governing entity is chosen by the people and which is characterised by democracy, collaboration and tolerance. These opposites are portrayed in order to present the current state of affairs and the utopia mankind should aim to achieve.

Equally important, the Republic of Heaven has an immaterial, spiritual dimension to it. The Republic is not only a place, free of the Church and other constraints, but also a state of mind. Lord Asriel's grandiose vision may not be fulfilled but it is replaced with an enlightened legacy:

We have to build the Republic of Heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere. We shouldn't live as if it mattered more than this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place. We have to be all those difficult things like cheerful and kind and curious and patient, and we've got to study and think and work hard, all of us, in all our different worlds, and then we'll build... the Republic of Heaven. (Pullman III, 414)

3.2. The Portrayal of the Roman-Catholic Church

References to the Roman-Catholic Church are practically omnipresent in *His Dark Materials*. It seems as if Pullman is dissecting its structure in order to call attention to its flaws on every level and in every segment. "The critic Jeffery Overstreet describes the novels as 'Atheism for Kids: Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* Trilogy is an agenda-driven epic that tells kids Christianity is evil" (Ebbs 2002). Many others called it 'an anti-religious book', but Pullman claims that in fact "the story is against those who pervert and misuse religion, or any other kind of doctrine with a holy book



and a priesthood and an apparatus of power that wields unchallengeable authority, in order to dominate and suppress human freedoms" (Pullman in Highfield 2005).

The Image of God

The existence of God and his almightiness is the crux of every monotheistic religion and the basis for the formation of the religious canon. The premise that he is an almighty supernatural being who, not only created, but is still and always will be in control of the entire universe is the postulate for further development of the religious belief system. By negating this, Pullman delineates the Church as a house built on nonexistent foundations. Interestingly and very indicatively, the revelation comes from angels Balthamos and Baruch, a couple of well informed insiders: "he was formed of Dust as we are" (Pullman, III, 26). Pullman gives no detailed account on how did it happen that matter became conscious, but leaves no doubt regarding God's role in the Creation.

He also brings to light the perception of God and how it was manipulated over time: "When the Authority was young, it wasn't surrounded by clouds, but as time passed, he gathered them around him more and more thickly. No one has seen the summit for thousands of years. So his citadel is known now as the Clouded Mountain" (Pullman III, 27). The expression used here, the Clouded Mountain, is very suggestive of how the image of God has assumed fictional, rather than religious properties. When Will and Lyra finally meet God they are shocked by what they see: "Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and mumble in fear and pain and misery, and he shrank away from what seemed like yet another threat" (Pullman III, 325). Not only is the figure of God deprived of any power, but also of the last bit of dignity; he is tantamount to a helpless toddler. His disconcerting weakness is in a sharp contrast to the frightening power of the Church.

The last, and probably the most dissentious reference to God, the one that got the trilogy the label 'book about killing God', is the account of God's death:

But in the open air there was nothing to stop the wind from damaging him, and to their dismay his form began to loosen and dissolve. Only a few moments later he had vanished completely, and their last impression was of those eyes, blinking in wonder, and a sigh of the most profound and exhausted relief. (Pullman III, 325)



Will and Lyra carry out a sort of euthanasia, which is another debatable issue for the Church. Many critics and fans asked Pullman how come he never refers to Jesus Christ in *His Dark Materials*. He simply replies that the figure of authority fits the story better. However, if the God-killing incident is examined closely, certain parallels between him and Jesus can be found. Just like Jesus Christ was sacrificed and died for the salvation of the world in the *New Testament*, in *His Dark Materials* God dies and the restoration of balance is enabled. Also, Christ forgives the men who crucify him and, here, God smiles at Will and Lyra as he dissolves into the air. Concludingly, although the figure of God is utterly distorted, it is not completely deprived of omnibenevolence.

The Critique of the Church Hierarchy and Organised Religion

The Church Pullman portrays in his trilogy could be most accurately described as a villainous criminal organisation with one and sole objective: to gain as much power as possible. In unmasking it, Pullman starts at the top of the tree. After disclosing God as a benign imposter, he turns to his Regent Metatron. Even his name, 'beyond throne', is symbolic of Pullman's attitude to his position and, not to mention his greediness, overreaching ambition and weakness of the flesh. This character and his role can be compared to those of the Pope, God's Regent in the Catholic Church.

Apart from the leadership, Pullman also criticises the rest of its structure. His clergy are wicked, power-hungry and unscrupulous. In realising their plans, they do not recoil at anything. To exemplify, when constructing a bomb to kill Lyra, they follow it through although they are very well aware of the fact that their plan might not come off and that the entire world could be destroyed. Just like in the real world: "In the name of their god, they have burned, hanged, tortured, maimed, robbed, violated, and enslaved millions of their fellow-creatures, and done so with the happy conviction that they were doing the will of God, and they would go to Heaven for it" (Pullman 2002).

Another criticism is directed towards the Church's own discord. Even though they are fighting the same enemy and it is apparent that collaboration would ensure them the victory, the Church departments refuse to work together. They simply cannot overcome their calamitous



destructiveness: "If in order to destroy Dust we also have to destroy the Oblation Board, the College of Bishops, every single agency by which the Holy Church does the work of the Authority, then so be it" (Pullman III, 55), and are, accordingly, allotted destruction.

Image of the Helpers: Exclusion vs. Acceptance

His Dark Materials has an astonishingly wide and diverse range of minor and supporting characters. In creating sidekicks for Will and Lyra, Pullman is making a firm and convincing statement about tolerance and alliance. Although, their helpers are somewhat socially different and come from marginal groups, they succeed where the Church fails; they manage not only to surmount their differences, but also use them as an advantage in fighting against the common enemy.

The first ones in the rainbow coalition were Gyptians, a nomadic people, living and travelling on boats, who were regarded as trouble-makers in Lyra's world. Pullman draws here an evident analogy to the Romani people, who are similarly marginalised. In *His Dark Materials* Gyptians prove valuable and strong allies, whose loyalty saves Lyra. Secondly, there are witches, who are sinful flying temptations, persecuted by the Church. One of Lyra's best friends is the polar bear Iorek, an armoured brute, who is able to foresee things even before the alethiometer. Finally, both Will and Lyra's lives have been saved by homosexual angles. Even though Metatron exiled them, their love is so strong that it creates an abundance of Dust.

The inclusion of these protagonists is not merely a critique of the Church but of the society on the whole. Pullman fights prejudice and stereotypes through Lyra, whose childish playfulness and open-mindedness prevents her from judging and discriminating.

4. Conclusion

Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials* is a fantasy literary work profusely aggrandised with elements of the religious canon. The author employs numerous traditional Judeo-Christian concepts, implementing them in a completely new context and reshaping them to tell his story. His interpretations and representation brought on a lot of criticism and public discussions, and his writing was perceived by some as a scurrilous attack against Christianity.



The analysis of Pullman's work in the framework of the religious canon raises the question of boundaries that art overcomes. Obviously, for part of the audience, killing God in a children's book was too much, a sacred realm not to be invaded. Others, however, consider the vehicles, such as the murder of a divinity, felicitous or perhaps even necessary to convey the author's message about organised forms of religion. The only certainty is the ambivalence of responses to the subversive act. Pullman interprets this as a never-ending life battle and calls to befitting arms:

I think we should act as if. I think we should read books, and tell children stories, and take them to the theatre, and learn poems, and play music, as if it would make a difference. We should act as if the universe were listening to us and responding. We should act as if life were going to win. (Pullman in Miller 2006)

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