‘Forever Conscious and Forever Falling’: Dust, Dæmons and their Functions in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*
# Table of Contents

## Acknowledgements

1. **Introduction** .......................................................... 4  
   1.1 ‘Th’ Almighty Maker them ordain / His dark materials to create more worlds’ ............ 4  
   1.2 An introduction to *His Dark Materials* and its fictional multiverse ......................... 5  
      1.2.1 Multiverse: a scientific basis for a fantastical story ........................................ 5  
      1.2.2 *Northern Lights* ............................................................................................... 6  
      1.2.3 *The Subtle Knife* ............................................................................................... 7  
      1.2.4 *The Amber Spyglass* .......................................................................................... 8

2. ‘Her dear soul, her darling companion of the heart’: What is a dæmon? .................. 9

3. **Possible inspirations** .................................................................................. 11

4. Interaction with dæmons ............................................................................... 12  
   4.1 Dæmon – dæmon interaction .................................................................................... 13  
   4.2 Dæmon – other human interaction .......................................................................... 13

5. Human trinity and Spectres ........................................................................ 14

6. **Sexuality** .................................................................................................. 16

7. **Settling: from innocence to experience, and the importance of Dust** ........ 18  
   7.1 Textual evidence: What is Dust? ............................................................................. 19  
      7.1.1 Dust and the Magisterium: intercision and a return to a prelapsarian state ....... 19  
      7.1.2 Dark Matter Research and a re-analysis of Creation and the Fall .................... 21  
   7.2 How does Dust function in the story? ..................................................................... 27  
      7.2.1 Dust discussed ..................................................................................................... 27  
      7.2.2 ‘Dust as an all-inclusive, multifunctional metaphor’: Bird’s theory .................... 29  
      7.2.2.1 Intertextuality: Dust as a metaphor in Genesis, Milton and Blake ............... 29  
      7.2.2.2 ‘Without Contraries is no Progression’: Dust as a metaphor for interconnectedness................................................................. 31  
      7.2.2.2.1 A spirit-matter spectrum: Dust, dæmons and oil .................................... 32  
      7.2.2.2.2 A good-evil spectrum: Dust, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter .................. 35

8. **The republic of heaven: a new world vision** ............................................ 39  
   8.1 Replacing the delusion of an afterlife: the world of the dead ............................. 40  
   8.2 Lyra as a Christ-figure: a latter-day ‘harrowing of hell’ ..................................... 42
8.3 Storytelling as salvation, and the Republic of Heaven ............................................ 43
8.4 Dæmons as an affirmation of the necessity of the here and now .............................. 46

9. Religious controversy .................................................................................................................. 48
   9.1 ‘No child should be permitted near these books’; atheism for kids? ......................... 48
      9.1.1 ‘The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that’s all’:
            fantasy or reality? ........................................................................................................ 49
      9.1.2 The death of the Authority ...................................................................................... 52
   9.2 Pullman as a feminist theologian: Pinsent ................................................................. 53

10. Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 55

Works Cited
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1. Introduction

1.1 ‘Th’ Almighty Maker them ordain / His dark materials to create more worlds’

Philip Pullman’s celebrated trilogy *His Dark Materials* has not quite reached the same status as Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, or Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but the frequent comparisons and widespread praise lead us to suspect that it has the potential to do so. It was very well received (although it caused a stir in some Christian circles because of its severe criticism of the Catholic Church), and one of the reasons for its popularity is well-summarised by journalist Christopher Hitchens:

The cleverness—no, the intelligence—of Pullman’s work is this: A child reading it can be entranced by the daemons, stirred by the intrepidity of the youngsters, and impressed by the remoteness and coldness of some adults, as well as by (my own favorite) the huge armored bears which do battle on the side of the kids. A grown-up can take pleasure spotting the references to Milton and Blake and Homer, and follow the implied argument about human nature, free will, and religion. (2002)

Indeed, according to Lenz, ‘[o]ne of Pullman’s achievements in *His Dark Materials* [is] his seamless incorporation of ‘big’ philosophical ideas in a palpable form accessible to the imagination of young readers’ (2003:48) - and there is no shortage of ‘big’ philosophical ideas’: Pullman does not only rewrite Genesis (and, by expansion, *Paradise Lost*), creating his own mythology and a ‘triumph of intertextuality’ (Scott 2005:96), he also develops a new philosophy of life, using the mysterious Dust as a basis.

Although the trilogy was fairly recently completed with *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), it has been the subject of many scholarly studies, ranging from short articles and reviews over longer dissertations to entire books. This wide coverage provides a firm scholarly basis and plenty of views to confront, but at the same time it produces a feeling that the main themes have already been dealt with. After a study of the majority of the published (both scholarly and unscholarly) articles, I felt that even though many authors praise Pullman’s creation of daemons (animal-shaped souls), calling it the ‘most delicious and seductive and intriguing innovation for children that could be imagined’ (Hitchens 2002) and ‘Pullman’s greatest achievement’ (Leet 2005:179), very few of them make a thorough study of this unique narratological feat. After a relatively short summary of the story (the three books mount up to

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2 Christopher Hitchens, not to be confused with his brother Peter, who was outraged by the books’ stance towards organized religion.
around 1300 pages), I will try to give a comprehensive overview of what exactly dæmons are and what their functions in the trilogy comprise. Starting with a description of their characteristics, possible inspirations and dæmon etiquette, I will move on to their functions: they are their human’s soul, act as a kind of conscience, and are strongly linked with sexuality. But most importantly, their settling (when a dæmon loses the ability to shape-shift) is a manifestation of the transition from innocence to experience – and this is where Dust comes in.

Relatively speaking, more articles are written on Dust than on dæmons – this is very understandable, since the fictional universe of *His Dark Materials* is literally made up of Dust: it is its central metaphor – and many have expounded their interpretation of it. I will confront these views with each other and my own, trying to give the reader a clear image of what can be concluded about Dust, and assert that a strong link exists between dæmons and Dust, as, to some extent, they fulfil the same functions in the story. I will try to show how the author uses Dust to convey a sense of interconnectedness, and of the necessity of opposites. Next I will discuss the idea of the Republic of Heaven, and the new world vision that goes with it, along the way discerning another function of both dæmons and Dust: they act as an affirmation of the idea that escapism is fatal to consciousness. In the last chapter, I will go into the polemic surrounding the alleged threat Pullman and his trilogy form to the Christian establishment.

1.2 An introduction to *His Dark Materials* and its fictional multiverse

1.2.1 Multiverse: a scientific basis for a fantastical story

The existence of different worlds, even different universes, may sound like science fiction (or, for that matter, like a children’s fantasy book), but the idea is not such a strange one in the realm of quantum physics. In 1957, the young quantum physisicist Everett published his ‘‘Relative state’ formulation of quantum mechanics’, also known as the many-worlds interpretation. It was known that electron particles did not circle the nucleus, but jumped from one place to another at an extremely fast pace. This led to the discovery that at some moments during this process, the particles were in two places at the same time. Danish renowned physicist Bohr concluded that there must be two levels of matter: that of the things made up of atoms, and that of atoms and particles smaller than atoms, like electrons and photons. The latter would be subject to different laws than the former, explaining why electrons and photons could be in two places at the same time but humans or houses could not. Everett did not believe this to be the case, because ‘if atoms can be in two
places at the same time, why can’t we?’ (Lockwood, 2007, 21:18) So he began working on a ground-breaking theory that would be ignored for the next twenty years and only receive the attention it deserved in the late 1970s: the many-worlds hypothesis.

According to [Hugh Everett III], with every choice and decision we make, with every event in our life that could happen in more ways than one, universes branch off in different directions. Every time we make a decision, we divide into two different versions of ourselves. This is how parallel universes are born. (Lockwood, 2007, 6:56)

This radically daring theory was the starting point for a discussion that is still going on to this day (e.g. Carr and Ellis, 2008), but it also appears to have been the inspiration for Pullman’s idea of the parallel universes in His Dark Materials. Everett’s theory is mentioned literally in The Subtle Knife (253), and the way Lord Asriel explains the existence of ‘uncountable billions of parallel worlds’ (Northern Lights [NL], 376) to Lyra reminds us very strongly of the above quote:

[T]hat world, and every other universe, came about as a result of possibility. Take the example of tossing a coin: it can come down heads or tails, and we don’t know before it lands which way it is going to fall. If it comes down heads, that means that the possibility of its coming down tails has collapsed. [...] But on another world, it does come down tails. And when that happens, the two worlds split apart. [...] In fact, these possibility-collapses happen at the level of elementary particles, but they happen in just the same way [...].(NL, 376-377)

1.2.2 Northern Lights

Northern Lights opens in Lyra’s Oxford: much like ours, but different in many ways. It is an almost Victorian ‘Brytain’, without cars and planes, and ‘with a history in which the Reformation never occurred’ (Hatlen 2005:75): the Church, usually called the Magisterium, is all-powerful and its tentacles spread wide: every scientific discovery has to be reported to the Magisterium, upon which will be decided to accept it or to declare it heresy.

Lyra is an orphan living among the scholars of Jordan College – she was placed in their care by her only living relative, Lord Asriel, supposedly her uncle. One day, she witnesses an attempt to poison Asriel, who is visiting the College, and can warn him just in time. Only a few days later, the Master of Jordan College decides it would be best for her to live with Mrs Coulter, where she discovers that it is Coulter who is at the head of the General Oblation Board, a branch of the Magisterium that kidnap children and take them to the North for experiments. As her best friend Roger is one of the missing children, she escapes from Mrs Coulter’s apartment and joins the Gyptians on a quest to the North to find and save the kidnapped children. With the help of her alethiometer (a truth-teller that she was given by the Master), the Gyptians, the armoured bear Iorek Byrnison and the witch Serafina Pekkala, she
succeeds in finding Bolvangar, the experimental station where the children are kept. There she discovers that the Oblation Board is conducting experiments on the children and their daemons (animal-formed souls), cutting the link between them, as they are convinced that this will stop the attraction of the mysterious Dust, considered to be original sin. After a narrow escape of this same fate, she and her friends save all of the children and take them to safety. But Lyra thinks the Master of Jordan wanted her to bring Lord Asriel, who has been imprisoned at Svalbard by the Magisterium, the alethiometer. When she and Roger arrive, Lord Asriel sacrifices Roger’s life by separating him from his daemon to generate an immense amount of power which allows him to crack open the sky and open up a passage to another universe. Lyra, who has by now discovered Lord Asriel to be her father, and Mrs Coulter to be her mother, decides that if all the adults think Dust is bad, it must be good, so she and her daemon Pantalaimon set out to find out what it is, and enter the other universe.

### 1.2.3 *The Subtle Knife*

In *The Subtle Knife*, we meet Will, a twelve-year-old from our world who accidentally kills one of the men looking for information about his father, an explorer that disappeared in the North ten years before. He runs and discovers a window to another world. Desperate, he steps through and finds himself in Cittàgazze, an abandoned city where only children can roam because of the Spectres: spirit-eating ghosts who only attack, and are visible to, adults. Here, he meets Lyra, and they decide to help one another: Will needs to find out more about his father, and Lyra about Dust. They go into Will’s world, where Lyra talks to Mary Malone, a scientist who is involved in research on this subject. She meets Sir Charles Latrom, who steals her alethiometer and demands Will and Lyra to bring him the subtle knife from Cittàgazze in return for her alethiometer. The subtle knife was made three hundred years ago and can cut through anything, including the edges of the different universes, creating ‘windows’—but also creating Spectres, as it turns out in *The Amber Spyglass*. Will is told he is the next bearer of the knife, as two of his fingers are cut off while fighting for it: the mark of the bearer. They cut a window into Sir Latrom’s house and steal the alethiometer. Will’s wound continues to weaken him as the bleeding will not stop – not even the witches, who are now taking care of the two, can help him. Meanwhile, Mrs Coulter finds out about the witches’ prophecy concerning Lyra. By torturing a witch, she gets her to confess that Lyra is destined to be the new Eve, whereupon Mrs Coulter sets out to destroy her daughter before she can fall. Will, up at night because of the pain, meets Stanislaus Grumman, a wise shaman brought to Cittàgazze from Lyra’s world by Lee Scoresby, one of Lyra’s friends, to

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*Cittàgazze* is a very appropriate name: it means ‘City of Magpies’ – birds that steal shiny things, like the men of the Torre degli Angeli did in other worlds.
help her. Grumman tells Will to bring the knife to Lord Asriel, because it is the only weapon that can kill the Authority (God). When they light a match to see, they recognise each other as long-lost father and son – and at the very same moment, Grumman is killed by a vengeful witch. Will returns to the witches’ camp, devastated, and finds out Lyra has been taken.

1.2.4  The Amber Spyglass

Lyra has been captured by Mrs Coulter and kept in a drugged sleep, to hide her from the Magisterium – by now, her motherly feelings are stronger than her loyalty to the Church. Will meets two angels, Baruch and Balthamos, who want to take him to Lord Asriel. Will refuses, saying that he will only come after he has rescued Lyra. Lord Asriel, in the meantime, also knows of the prophecy and sends a small army to Coulter’s hiding place, together with two Gallivespian spies (tiny humans with poisonous spurs) hidden in the zeppelin of the Magisterium, which has also set out to take Lyra, with that difference that they intend to kill her. Will reaches the cave just before the two armies do, with the help of Iorek Byrnison and Balthamos (Baruch having died), but breaks the knife trying to escape. Thanks to the Gallivespians, Lyra and Will can escape after all but are now stuck with these two, who insist on taking them to Lord Asriel. They come to an agreement: first Lyra and Will do what they need to do, and then they will go to Lord Asriel. Iorek Byrnison mends the knife reluctantly, and they enter the world of the dead, as Lyra feels she should tell Roger she is sorry. Here, she has to leave her beloved daemon behind, betraying her innermost self. They free the dead and find themselves in the mulefa’s world (‘latter-day Houyhnhnms’ [Gooderham, 2003:155]), where Mary Malone has been for some time now, after Dust told her to do so because she had to take on the role of temptress in the second Fall that is to come. The mulefa are able to see Dust, unlike humans, but they see that it is slowly flowing out of the universe and know this is a bad thing. At the same time, Lord Asriel has taken captive Mrs Coulter and tells her about his plan to destroy the Authority. As the final battle begins, they team up to prevent their daughter’s destruction and kill Metatron, the Authority’s Regent, sacrificing their own lives. Will and Lyra find their daemons again (Will is now also able to see his) in the mulefa’s world and discover they are in love. Lyra falls, as predicted, and kisses her new Adam. They find out that Dust (which basically is consciousness) has been leaking away through all of the windows made by the subtle knife, and that people can only live their full lives in the world their daemon (whether it is visible or not) was born in. On the condition that humans will generate enough Dust (by creating, thinking, feeling and living life to the fullest), one window can be left open – all of the other have to be closed to prevent consciousness from leaking away. Lyra and Will realise that this one window needs to be that which allows the dead to escape the land of the dead: they will never see each other again.
2. ‘Her dear soul, her darling companion of the heart’: What is a dæmon?

The first words in Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials trilogy are ‘Lyra and her dæmon’, and this immediately makes clear to the reader that things in Lyra’s world are slightly different. Pullman’s very first words in His Dark Materials are ‘Lyra and her dæmon’. Over the next few pages the reader is gradually handed more clues as to what this ‘dæmon’ might be: he can talk to Lyra, is called Pantalaimon and ‘was currently in the form of a moth, a dark brown one’ (NL, 3). A dæmon is an animal-shaped manifestation of the human soul, who can have different shapes at different times, depending on the mood they and their humans are in, or on the situation they find themselves in. Imagination plays a big role in the shapes a dæmon can take:

Everyone’s dæmon instantly became warlike: each child was accompanied by fangs, or claws, or bristling fur, and Pantalaimon, contemptuous of the limited imaginations of these gypsy dæmons, became a dragon the size of a deer-hound. (NL, 56)

Later (NL, 49) it is made clear that this shape-shifting is characteristic only of children’s dæmons, reflecting the myriad of possibilities inherent in them. As they mature, their dæmons begin changing less often and eventually settle on one particular form. ‘Being an adult entails accepting the narrowing of one’s potential possible ‘shapes’, learning to live with a diminishment of the protean possibilities inherent in the child’ [Lenz, 2001:140]. (Moruzi, 2005:63).

Adults’ dæmons have settled into one particular shape, and this shape is tell-tale for their human’s character: a human radiating power or strength will have a dæmon shaped accordingly: Lord Asriel, for example, has a snow leopard for a dæmon (NL, 11).

Social status, too, is often reflected in one’s dæmon. This is especially made clear in the portrayal of servants and their dæmons, who are almost always dogs, although there are still differences according to hierarchy: ‘He was a servant, so [his dæmon] was a dog; but a superior servant, so a superior dog.’ (NL, 7) According to Hines (2005:39), ‘[s]ervant is not merely a profession, but ontology: the figure of the dæmon naturalizes the rigidity of the class system in Lyra’s world’, but in The Amber Spyglass, Lyra explains that this is not the case: ‘if your dæmon’s a dog, that means you like doing what you’re told, and knowing who’s boss,

\[^4\] NL, 285.
and following orders, and pleasing people who are in charge’ (483). So it is logical that people who have this kind of nature would feel very comfortable serving someone; and the fact that one dog is superior to another again reflects the characters of their humans, and not necessarily the apparent class system.

Because human and dæmon can talk to each other, the internal (moral) discussions humans have with themselves is acted out between them: ‘You’re a coward, Pan.’ – ‘Certainly I am’ (NL, 9). This “dialogic” nature [...] might be equated with ‘conscience’ (Lenz, 2005:8).

The fact that one’s dæmon reflects character as well as mood is -something that both has advantages and disadvantages. As Hines ([2005:38]) puts it: ‘dæmons make people legible to others as well as themselves’. A dæmon’s behaviour might give away what their human is trying to hide:

All the time, the golden monkey [Mrs Coulter’s dæmon] was prowling about restlessly, one minute perching on the table swinging its tail, the next clinging to Mrs Coulter and chittering softly in her ear, the next pacing the floor with tail erect. He was betraying Mrs Coulter’s impatience, of course [...] (NL, 285)

But at the same time the settling of dæmons can teach their humans something about themselves, as an old sailor tells Lyra:

[There’s (...)– there’s compensations for a settled form. [...] Knowing what kind of person you are. Take old Belisaria. She’s a seagull, and that means I’m a kind of seagull too. I’m not grand and splendid nor beautiful, but I’m a tough old thing and I can survive anywhere and always find a bit of food and company. That’s worth knowing, that is. And when your dæmon settles, you’ll know the sort of person you are. ([NL, 167])

Dæmon and human are one. They are not separate entities but are one person in two bodies, the dæmon being an animal representation of its human’s soul. Human and dæmon are connected on the mental level in this way, but their unity also translates itself to a physical reality: the distance between them is clearly limited. If somehow they force themselves (or are forced) further apart, a great mental and physical pain ensues:

Pantalaimon looked at her, and then became a badger.
She knew what he was doing. Dæmons could move no more than a few yards from their humans, and if she stood by the fence and he remained a bird, he wouldn’t get near the bear, so he was going to pull.
She felt angry and miserable. His badger-claws dug into the earth and he walked forward. It was such a strange tormenting feeling when your dæmon was pulling at the link between you; part physical pain deep in the chest, part intense sadness and love. And she knew it was the same for him. Everyone tested it when they were growing up: seeing how far they could pull apart, coming back with intense relief.
He tugged a little harder.
‘Don’t, Pan!’

But he didn’t stop. [...] The pain in Lyra’s heart grew more and more unbearable, and a sob of longing rose in her throat.

‘Pan.’

Then she was through the gate, scrambling over the icy mud towards him, and he turned into a wildcat and sprang up into her arms, and then they were clunging together tightly with little shaky sounds of unhappiness coming from them both. (NL, 194-195)

In some cases, this law of nature, as it could be called, is defied: Farder Coram explains that witches ‘have the power to separate themselves from their dæmons a mighty sight further’n what we can. If need be they can send their dæmons far abroad on the wind [...]’ (NL, 164)

Lyra and Will will learn how this is possible the hard way, as they are themselves separated from their dæmons at the border of the Land of the Dead in The Amber Spyglass. When a human dies, their dæmon vanishes: ‘They were fading [...] fading and drifting away like atoms of smoke, for all that they tried to cling onto their men’ (NL, 105) - the soul goes out like a candle.

A dæmon is most commonly of the opposite sex of their human. Occasionally it happens that both dæmon and human are male or female (NL, 125), and this seems to be something special, although it is never explained what it could mean.

3. Possible inspirations

Although Pullman claims that dæmons were ‘the best idea [he]’d ever had in [his] life’ (interview The Southbank Show [Gunn], 2003, part 2), Pullman has claimed in an interview (SOURCE) that the existence of dæmons was ‘the best idea [he] ever had’, and although he never gives a clear explanation as to where he got the idea of dæmons from, but it is possible to find some related phenomena and ideas that might have inspired Pullman in his development of the dæmon.⁵

The was found in.

Familiars were believed to be animal-shaped spirits who served witches or other magicians. They were most often cat-formed, but dogs, owls, snakes, toads, crows and hares are also noted. (MORE + SOURCE) (Wikipedia, 2008)

The ‘fylgja’ is found in Scandinavian mythology and has more in common with Pullman’s notion of dæmons. Fylgjur are said to be supernatural creatures that are usually

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⁵ The inspiration mentioned was found on Wikipedia and in Simpson, 2007.
animal-shaped. Their form corresponds to the way of living of their companion, very much like dæmons’, and can therefore be conceived as a form of a person’s soul. Unlike dæmons, they are not always present: they usually only appear during sleep, and when they are seen while awake, this would be a sign of one’s impending death. (SOURCE Wikipedia, 2008) This aspect of the fylgja might have served as Pullman’s inspiration for that other life-long companion in His Dark Materials, namely one’s Death, who comes into existence at birth and is present (though in most worlds hidden) throughout one’s life and beyond:

[…] in the middle of your pain and travail, your death comes to you kindly and says easy now, easy, child, you come along o’ me, and you go with them in a boat across the lake into the mist.

(AS, 275)

-The Rough Guide to Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials mentions the Leonardo Da Vinci painting ‘Lady with an Ermine’ as a direct inspiration for Lyra and her dæmon Pantalaimon, whose favourite shape is that of an ermine. (Simpson, 2007:40)

The fact that a dæmon is usually of the opposite sex of its human, also brings to mind Jung’s notion of the Anima and Animus, both manifestations of an inner personality, the Anima being the unconscious female side of the male, and the Animus the unconscious male side of the female. These unconscious inner personalities exhibit those characteristics that are missing in the conscious and perceivable personality; they counterbalance and complete each other, and this is exactly what dæmons and humans do. (Jung, 1980:9) (SOURCE)

Another possible source of inspiration, particularly for the term ‘dæmon’, is philosopher Socrates, who claimed to have a daimonion, Greek for ‘small daimon’ (alternative spelling of dæmon).

Since childhood, Socrates experienced recurrent visits of voices that he variously called “divine sign,” “spiritual sign,” “my prophetic power,” or, in Greek, the “daimonion.” He describes this experience:

‘This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do . . . ’ [Cooper 1997, Apology 31d]

Whereas the “daimonion” addressed Socrates unexpectedly about trivial matters, it did not give him advice when he was facing serious decisions and might have expected some assistance. (Muramoto and Englert 2006:652-653)

Socrates’ daimonion was, according to Muramoto and Englert, a result of temporal lobe epilepsy, which caused him to hear voices.

4. Interaction with dæmons
In the same way people are bound to certain rules on how to treat each other politely, there are rules on how to act towards someone’s daemonic, both for daemons and humans – which is logical, since a daemon is in fact an extension of the human one wishes to treat politely.

4.1 Daemon – daemon interaction

Daemons sometimes physically express what their humans do not even express orally: feelings like affection and politeness, but also enmity, power or hatred can then be read in a daemon’s body language even though their human does not express these feelings. When Lyra is discontented about John Faa’s decision not to take them with him on his journey, this is acted out by their respective Faa’s:

[John Faa said: ‘] Now off you go.’

Pantalaimon hissed quietly, but John Faa’s daemon took off from the back of his chair and flew at them with black wings, not threateningly, but like a reminder of good manners; and Lyra turned on her heel as the crow glided over her head and wheeled back to John Faa. (NL, 141)

Among children, it is common that disputes are settled by their daemons: they will stare at each other, use threatening body language such as hissing and baring their teeth, until one of them gives up and acknowledges the dominance of the other, a result which is, under normal circumstances, accepted by their humans as well. (NL, 269-270)

Daemons will talk to each other if necessary, for instance to pass on a message between their humans when they should not be seen or heard talking:

While [the Gyptians] were agreeing with Lee Scoresby what to play and for what stakes, his daemon flicked her ears at Pantalaimon, who understood and leapt lightly to her side as a squirrel.

She was speaking for Lyra’s ears too, of course, and Lyra heard her say quietly, ‘Go straight to the bear […]’. (NL, 193)

4.2 Daemon – other human interaction

The single most important rule is that a human should never touch another human’s daemon. It is a taboo that is never talked about, since everyone seems to instinctively know that there is nothing more forbidden:

She 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. Daemons might touch each other, of course, or fight; but the prohibition against human-daemon contact went so deep that even in battle no warrior would touch an enemy’s daemon. It was utterly forbidden.
Lyra couldn’t remember having to be told that: she just knew it, as instinctively as she felt that nausea was bad and comfort good. (NL, 143)

As the above extract makes clear, it is not because this taboo exists that humans never wish to break it; and this goes for dæmons as well, something that is often illustrated when Lyra discovers the truth about what the Gobblers (the General Oblation Board) do with the children they kidnap: they cut the link between them and their dæmon, leaving them only half a person. Lyra finds such a severed child and after they get over their initial horror, Pantalaimon feels the urge to comfort the child:

[...] Pantalaimon sat inside her hood, warm and close and full of pity. Lyra knew that Pantalaimon’s impulse was to reach out and cuddle and lick the little half-child, to lick him and gentle him and warm him as his own dæmon would have done; but the great taboo prevented that, of course. (NL, 216-217)

In the trilogy, the taboo is broken several times, and it always causes great distress, except when Lyra and Will discover that touching each other’s dæmon can also be a sign of deep affection and, more importantly, sexuality.

Since dæmons are actual creatures and their voices as real as a human’s, they can not only speak to their own humans, but to others as well, although this is unusual (NL, 146). When they do, this is most often because their human is unable to do the speaking, be it because no one should notice (NL, 251), or because their human is severely ill or injured (NL, 146). It is not that easy, though: ‘It was difficult to talk while your dæmon’s attention was somewhere else’ [NL, 251]. Human and dæmon have to literally divide their attention if they are not doing the same thing.

5. Human trinity and Spectres

A human in Lyra’s world seems to consist out of two parts: body and dæmon, a duality which could be translated to other worlds (including our own) as the duality of body and soul. But as Lyra and Will are thinking of entering the world of the dead, they have trouble understanding which part of them will be going there: dead people have no dæmons left and neither do they have a body. This leads them to think about a possible other part of humans:

‘What part of us does that? Because dæmons fade away when we die – I’ve seen them – and our bodies, well, they just stay in the grave and decay, don’t they?’
‘Then there must be a third part. A different part.’
‘You know,’ she said, full of excitement, ‘I think that must be true! Because I can think about my
body and I can think about my dæmon – so there must be another part, to do the thinking!’

(AS, 175-176)

Hopkins (2005:54) remarks that it would be ‘this third part, this thinking, responsive part, on which the monstrous Spectres prey, and the pitiful state of their victims makes it clear that this third part is quite as essential to human beings as the dæmon is.’ Mary Malone tells the children that the Catholic Church in her world ‘wouldn’t use the word dæmon, but St. Paul talks about spirit and soul and body. So the idea of three parts in human nature isn’t so strange.’ (AS, 462-463) It seems indeed, as Hopkins says, quite a remarkable fact that Pullman, who is a self-declared atheist (interview Unicon 2000), should agree with any Christian doctrine, but

while Pullman’s project of portraying humans may be in line with Christian orthodoxy in the relatively minor aspect mentioned by Mary Malone, it fundamentally cuts against it in a much more major one. Christianity has asked its followers to believe in a trinity, of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Pullman tells his readers that they are a trinity. [...] Humans are internally complete; they have no need to look outside themselves for a deity. (54-55)

In this way, Pullman puts his readers on the same level as God, which is of course exactly as he believes it should be: the message in *His Dark Materials* is that we as humans must build ‘the Republic of Heaven’ in the here and now, instead of waiting for the Kingdom of Heaven as it is promised by Christianity – ‘we need all the things that the kingdom of heaven used to promise us but failed to deliver’ (interview Unicon 2000).

In the creation of the Spectres – who presumably prey on this third, conscious and thinking part – we can also see the level of importance Pullman attaches to what we shall call, after St. Paul, the spirit. These Spectres, who are invisible to children, are found in the world of Cittàgazze and have turned it into a place where adults are constantly on the run and children often wander around alone, orphaned. Angelica explains to Will why the adults are so afraid of Spectres:

Well, when a Spectre catch a grown-up, that’s bad to see. They eat the life out of them there and then, all right. [...] At first they know it’s happening, and they’re afraid, they cry and cry, they try and look away and pretend it ain happening, but it is. It’s too late. And no one ain gonna go near them, they on their own. Then they get pale and stop moving. They still alive, but it’s like they been eaten from inside. You look in they eyes, you see the back of they heads. Ain nothing there. (SK, 62)

Later in the same volume (SK, 142) these ‘spectral forms’ that are ‘just visible as a drifting quality in the light, a rhythmic evanescence, like veils of transparency turning before a mirror’ (SK, 134) are called ‘the Spectres of Indifference’, and it is precisely this name that is so very appropriate: they feed on the consciousness of their victims: while their body remains alive and perhaps their soul as well (we cannot know this for sure as the people of Cittàgazze do
not have dæmons), their ability to think, notice and care is literally eaten. A father who has been attacked watches his child drown: '[T]he child […] grabbed vainly at his hand, gasping, crying, but the man only turned his head slowly and looked down with perfect indifference at his little son drowning beside him' (SK, 136). Stanislaus Grumman explains why children are safe for the Spectres: 'the Spectres' food is attention. A conscious and informed interest in the world. The immaturity of children is less attractive to them' (SK, 292).

Interestingly, Pullman suggests that this same phenomenon is found in our world as well: when Lyra explains how Angelica’s brother Tullio acted when attacked by the Spectres, namely counting stones in the wall and then losing interest, Will says: 'If they make people behave like that, I wouldn't be surprised at all if they came from my world. […] Maybe they're not called Spectres. Maybe we call them something else.' (SK, 234) It is his mother’s behaviour, which is reminiscent of obsessive-compulsive disorder, that makes him think this:

[S]he wasn’t mad. Except that she was afraid of things I couldn’t see. And she had to do things that looked crazy, you couldn’t see the point of them, but obviously she could. Like her counting all the leaves, or Tullio yesterday touching the stones in the wall. Maybe that was a way of trying to put the Spectres off. If they turned their back on something frightening behind them and tried to get really interested in the stones and how they fitted together, or the leaves on the bush, […] they’d be safe. I don’t know. It looks like that. […] So maybe we do have the Spectres in my world, only we can’t see them and we haven’t got a name for them, but they’re there, and they keep trying to attack my mother. (SK, 274)

Will connects the spirit-eating Spectres with his mother’s illness: she, too, was afraid of things Will could not see and as a result did things that looked strange, ‘like touching all the railings in the park’ (SK, 272), as if she were acting out a ritual to keep whatever it was she was afraid of at a safe distance. Whether we should assume that Pullman intends all of this as a metaphor, saying that Will’s mother was simply afraid of that illness that a rather pessimistic view could call ‘the disease of the 21st century’ - namely indifference to other people and their suffering, no longer being able to think for oneself, and really an overall loss of consciousness - and that the Spectres are the embodiment of that illness, is not clear. It seems as if the author does not wish to make it clear himself, but by handing out some clues invites his readers to think about these events and drawing their own conclusions.

6. Sexuality

As mentioned above, touching another person’s dæmon is utterly forbidden. When Lyra fights three men at Bolvangar, the ‘sexualized description’ (Hines, 2005:42) makes clear
why this is the case: a daemon is not just a human’s soul, conscience and consciousness, it also represents sexuality and, in a way, the sexual organs:

[…] suddenly all the strength went out of her.
It was as if an alien hand had reached right inside where no hand had a right to be, and wrenched at something deep and precious.
She felt faint, dizzy, sick, disgusted, limp with shock.
One of the men was holding Pantalaimon. […]
She felt those hands… It wasn’t allowed… Not supposed to touch… Wrong… (NL, 276)

This reads like a rape scene indeed, or as Hines calls it, ‘sexual molestation’ and a ‘metaphorical gang rape’ (2005:42). The process of intercision is linked to this fact, of course: to cut off a person’s daemon from its human is in that way very similar to castration or circumcision, where the sexual organs are (partly) removed. Mrs Coulter explains ‘the benefits of intercision as a way to avoid sexual feelings: ‘at the age we call puberty […] daemons bring all sorts of troublesome thoughts and feelings’ [NL, 285]. Daemons are connected with natural sexual […] feelings’ (Hines 2005:43). This connection is ‘confirmed, with a reversal of values, when Lyra and Will, now in love, wilfully break the taboo’ (Colás, 2005:54). This happens after they have enacted the second Fall, in which Lyra offers Will the fruit and they declare their love for one another, stopping the flow of Dust out of the universe (The Amber Spyglass [AS], 492):

Knowing exactly what he was doing and what it would mean, [Will] moved his hand from Lyra’s wrist and stroked the red-gold fur of her daemon.
Lyra gasped. But her surprise was mixed with a pleasure so like the joy that flooded through her when she had put the fruit to his lips that she couldn’t protest, because she was breathless.
With a racing heart she responded in the same way […]. (AS, 528)

Their ‘blissful discovery’ (ibid.) symbolises the young adolescents’ sexual awakening: discovering themselves and one another as sexual beings is, according to the story, a sign of having made enormous progress in the journey from innocence to experience, because Lyra ‘knew […] that neither daemon would change now, having felt a lover’s hands on them. These were their shapes for life: they would want no other.’ (ibid.) According to Moruzi, ‘[t]he explicit connection between sexual awakening and settled daemons implies that this is the only way children can achieve higher consciousness’, something she finds ‘troubling’ (2005:63). I tend to disagree on this matter: Pullman indeed makes an explicit connection between sexuality and maturity by having the daemons settle after this experience, but in my view this does not necessarily mean that it should be regarded as an imperative. Acquiring sexual awareness is of course part of growing up, and ‘[t]ypically, sexuality in children marks the end of innocence’ (Moruzi, 2005:60), but I am convinced that Pullman did not intend to convey the message that unless a young person has had some sexual experience, he or she
cannot be considered mature (or the other way around: that as soon as someone has acquired a sense of themselves as sexual beings, they have reached experience). Moruzi narrows down the message I believe Pullman wants to give his readers, namely that sexual awareness is a good thing, and part of growing up – in any case, nothing to feel guilty about, and definitely not a sin.

7. Settling: from innocence to experience, and the importance of Dust

Shew you all alive the world
Where every particle of dust breathes forth its joy.
(William Blake, 1966:237)

In the preceding chapters, I have tried to establish some of the functions that daemons fulfil: they are their human’s soul, can be compared to a conscience (because of the fact that human and daemon can talk to each other and have discussions), and are strongly connected to sexuality, taking up, to some extent, the function of the sexual organs. But the most salient feature of daemons is the fact that they settle into one shape at a certain age, when their human makes the transition from innocence to experience. This settling has a very important consequence: ‘During the years of puberty they begin to attract Dust more strongly, and it settles on them as it settles on adults’ (NL, 370). Whether the settling is the cause for Dust to be more attracted or the greater attraction of Dust the cause for the daemon to become settled is never made clear, something which seems to endorse the idea that both phenomena are interlinked to such an extent that it can never be decided which acts as the cause and which is the consequence. Dust can be argued to be the true main character of His Dark Materials: it is at the very centre of Pullman’s universe, it simply is (and quite literally so) His Dark Materials, as Pullman borrowed this phrase from Milton to refer to Dust in the trilogy’s title. As ‘Dust has a tremendous amount of meaning thrust upon it’ (Bird 2005:192), I will try to paint a picture of what Dust is, and which functions it has within the story. First of all, I will use my primary source, namely the text itself, to see what knowledge of Dust can be distilled from it; secondly, I will expound on how Dust and its functions have been interpreted by several scholars, and confront these views; and thirdly, I will develop Bird’s (2001) theory that sees Dust as an all-encompassing metaphor, trying to undo the spirit-matter and good-evil dichotomies of traditional Christianity.
7.1 Textual evidence: What is Dust?

The phenomenon of Dust is explained to the reader of the trilogy in little scraps of information that are found all over the story. In this chapter, I will have a look at the knowledge about Dust that can be derived from the text itself: ‘Dust and the Magisterium’ will concentrate on Lyra’s world, while ‘Dark Matter research’ will explain what (scientific) knowledge is available from Will’s world.

7.1.1 Dust and the Magisterium: intercision and a return to a prelapsarian state

Dust is a name for ‘elementary particles that don’t interact in any way with others – very hard to detect, but the extraordinary thing is that they seem to be attracted to human beings.’ (NL, 89-90) In Lyra’s world, they were discovered by the Muscovite (what we would call Russian) scientist Boris Rusakov, after whom Dust is sometimes called Rusakov Particles. As Lord Asriel explains to Lyra, Rusakov had to explain himself and his discovery to the Magisterium because it might affect the doctrines of the Church, and

the Inspector of the Consistorial Court of Discipline suspected Rusakov of diabolic possession. He performed an exorcism in the laboratory, he interrogated Rusakov under the rules of the Inquisition, but finally they had to accept the fact that Rusakov wasn’t lying or deceiving them: Dust really existed. [...] The Magisterium decided that Dust was physical evidence for original sin. (NL, 370-371)

Because Rusakov had discovered that Dust is increasingly attracted to children as they near puberty – universally recognised as the time where one becomes conscious of oneself as a material and sexual being – the Church decided that this would finally prove the long-held idea of original sin. In the same way the Magisterium exhibits innumerable traits that characterise the Catholic Church, their Bible story of original sin as Lord Asriel reads it to Lyra reminds us very much of the one we know:

And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:
For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and your dæmons shall assume their true forms, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.
[... S]he took the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.
And the eyes of them both were opened, and they saw the true form of their dæmons, and spoke with them.
But when the man and the woman knew their own dæmons, they knew that a great change had come upon them, for until that moment it had seemed that they were one with all the creatures of the earth and the air, and there was no difference between them:
And they saw the difference, and they knew good and evil, and they were ashamed, and they sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness… (NL, 371-372)

Original sin is the result of this Fall, it is a constant state of sin that the human race finds itself in: ever since Eve fell, man has felt conscious, guilty and ashamed, and death and suffering have made their entry into man’s life. The moment Adam and Eve ate the apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, their daemons assumed fixed forms and they became conscious, aware of the fact that they were different from the other creatures in the Garden, and aware of their nakedness, feeling that this was something to be ashamed of.

This is the doctrine of the Magisterium, and if Dust provides physically detectable proof for it, then it must be destroyed at all costs:

It may be, gentlemen, that the Holy Church itself was brought into being to perform this very task and to perish in the doing of it. But better a world with no church and no Dust than a world where every day we have to struggle under the hideous burden of sin. (AS, 74)

Mrs Coulter’s General Oblation Board is a first step towards this ultimate goal. The Gobblers, as they are called, kidnap children and take them to the North, where they perform ‘a little cut’ (NL, 284) - intercision. Intercision or the Maystadt Process (NL, 171) means that the invisible bond between child and daemon is broken: the child is forever severed from its soul: it will never reach puberty as its daemon can never take a fixed form and therefore it is free from Dust – free from original sin. Not only is the bond between the soul and its body broken, but the Oblation Board also insists on taking away the daemon permanently from the child:

He was clutching a piece of fish to him as Lyra was clutching Pantalaimon, with both hands, hard, against her heart; but that was all he had, a piece of dried fish; because he had no daemon at all.

[...] That was intercision, and this was a severed child.

Her first impulse was to turn and run, or to be sick. A human being with no daemon was like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghasts, not the waking world of sense. (NL, 214-215)

Intercision means ‘cut between’ (from Latin inter, ‘between’, and caedere, ‘to cut’), and there is a similar word which also brings to mind religious motivation for such a ‘little cut’ (NL, 284), namely circumcision: the removal of (some of) the foreskin of the penis, circum meaning ‘around’. In Genesis, the first book of the Pentateuch or Torah in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, God tells Abraham to distinguish himself and his descendants from other people by a physical trait, which would be a sign of their covenant:

And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. (Genesis 17:11)
And the uncircumcised man child [sic] whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant. (Genesis 17:14)

The people of Israel are chosen by God to serve him, and a man or boy who is not circumcised will be cast out of the community and thereby be condemned to impure life, an existence without God’s presence; in fact something very much like Adam and Eve after the Fall. So if we think further along these lines, we could discern an analogy between life without intercision (under the influence of Dust and therefore original sin) and that without circumcision (cast out of God’s presence).

Although circumcision is never mentioned in the trilogy, Lord Asriel does talk to Lyra about another precedent of these cuttings in the history of the Church, namely castration:

Something like it had happened before. Do you know what the word castration means? It means removing the sexual organs of a boy so that he never develops the characteristics of a man. A castrato keeps his high treble voice all his life, which is why the Church allowed it: so useful in Church music. [...] Some died from the effects of the operation. But the Church wouldn’t flinch at the idea of a little cut, you see. (NL, 374)

Indeed, in the same way a castrato never becomes a real man, so a severed child never becomes a real human. Both ‘treatments’ have to do with preventing nature from taking its course.

But it is not only Boris Rusakov and the Magisterium who have knowledge of Dust in Lyra’s world. The Tartars, a northern Asian race, are known for a notorious practice called trepanning: drilling a hole in the skull. Although it was supposed this was something they did to their enemies (NL, 26-27), it turns out that, in fact, they perform it on themselves and those whom they regard with great respect. Later, Lyra hears a little girl say that ‘the Tartars make holes in their skulls to let the Dust in’ (NL, 248). They know of the existence of Dust and probably have known over thousands of years, and, more importantly, they regard it as something good, something desirable – quite the opposite of the Magisterium’s opinion.

7.1.2 Shadows and Dark Matter Research and a re-analysis of Creation and the Fall

The Church in Will’s world used to control everything, just like the Magisterium, but for decades now its power has been on the wane, and it has become a mere religious institute, with hardly any real influence left. When Lyra goes to see Mary Malone at the Dark Matter Research Unit in Oxford University, as the alethiometer advised her to do, Mary explains the stage at which ‘Dark Matter research’ finds itself. It is not clear who discovered it, but as
Mary says, ‘there are lots of different research projects trying to find out what it is’ (SK, 90). In fact, they only suspect it exists:

Dark matter is what my research team is looking for. No one knows what it is. There’s more stuff out there in the universe than we can see, that’s the point. We can see the stars and the galaxies and the things that shine, but for it all to hang together and not fly apart, there needs to be a lot more of it – to make gravity work, you see. But no one can detect it. (SK, 90)

The researchers are looking for the thing that holds the universe together, that encompasses all existence. While Mary is looking for an explanation for a physical problem, she will find that Dust offers a solution to precisely this question on a much higher level, a level which she, as a former nun, wanted to escape by becoming a scientist (SK, 100). Mary’s team has discovered that the Shadow particles are conscious, and that they are only visible if one expects to see them, if one finds himself in the state that Keats calls ‘negative capability’: ‘capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (SK, 92 & Keats, 1956:103-104). The team has developed a way of ‘communicating’ with Shadows: a very complicated computer (called the Cave, after Plato’s ‘Shadows on the wall of the cave’ (SK, 92)) to which one can be linked up by patches on the head: ‘if you think, the Shadows respond. [...] The Shadows flock to your thinking like birds’ (SK, 92-93). When Lyra is linked up to the Cave, she tries to use it in the same way she uses the alethiometer, and the Shadows respond in the language she is used to: that of pictures and symbols, like the alethiometer. They tell her that Mary could make the Cave use human language as well, with enough power and programming.

Mary and her team have had no chance to notice how Shadows are particularly attracted to adults, and much less to children, like Lord Asriel has in Lyra’s world (NL, 22): this is probably due to the fact that, in Will’s world, people do not have daemons, so that there is no obvious difference between young people who have reached maturity (and therefore have settled daemons) and those who haven’t. But what they have discovered is when all of this started happening. Mary and her team noticed that Shadows were only attracted by objects made by humans:

Anything that was associated with human workmanship and human thought was surrounded by Shadows...

And then Oliver, Dr Payne, got some fossil skulls from a friend at the museum and tested them to see how far back in time the effect went. There was a cut-off point about thirty, forty thousand years ago. Before that, no Shadows. After that, plenty. And that’s about the time, apparently, that modern human beings first appeared. (SK, 93)

These ‘modern human beings’ are probably the Cro-Magnon men, the earliest form of modern man in Europe, who appeared approximately 35,000 years ago (Mac OS X dictionary, ‘Cro-Magnon man’). At this cut-off point Dust started to be attracted by humans,
and they became conscious beings. Something must have happened around that time which made ‘the human brain […] the ideal vehicle for this amplification process’:

There were Shadow particles around before then, obviously – they’ve been around since the Big Bang – but there was no physical way of amplifying their effects at our level, the anthropic level. (SK, 249)

But just like the Magisterium intervened in Rusakov’s research, so are Mary and her colleague visited by Sir Charles Latrom, who tells them he can put in a good word for their funding if he can decide the course of research from now on. Sir Charles is in fact Lord Boreal, who comes from Lyra’s world and has been travelling between the two worlds for years. He is involved in the General Oblation Board together with Mrs Coulter – the power of the Magisterium apparently goes beyond world borders. Dr Payne is willing to give in to these demands, but Mary refuses and leaves, and returns at night to try and talk to the Shadows – Shadow-particles as Lyra told her was possible. She succeeds in communicating with them through the Cave by typing questions to which ‘the answers lashed themselves across the right of the screen almost before she was finished’ (SK, 259):

Are you Shadows? Yes.

[...]
Dark Matter is conscious? Evidently.
What I said to Oliver this morning, my idea about human evolution [that something must have happened that made Shadows attract to people], is it Correct. [...] Every single thing about what was happening was impossible: all her education, all her habits of mind, all her sense of herself as a scientist were shrieking at her silently: this is wrong! It isn’t happening! (SK, 259)

But what are you? Angels.


And Shadow-matter is what we have called spirit? From what we are, spirit; from what we do, matter. Matter and spirit are one.

[...]
And did you intervene in human evolution? Yes.

Why? Vengeance.

Vengeance for — oh! Rebel angels! After the war in heaven — Satan and the garden of Eden — but it isn’t true, is it? Is that what you — but why? — Find the girl and the boy. Waste no more time. You must play the serpent. (SK, 260-261)

Are you Shadows? Yes.

[...]
Dark Matter is conscious? Evidently.
What I said to Oliver this morning, my idea about human evolution [that something must have happened that made Shadows attract to people], is it [...]

Every single thing about what was happening was impossible: all her education, all her habits of mind, all her sense of herself as a scientist were shrieking at her silently: this is wrong! It isn’t happening! (SK, 259)

But what are you? Angels are creatures of Shadow-matter? Of Dust?
And Shadow-matter is what we have called spirit?
 [...] And did you intervene in human evolution?
Why?
Vengeance for – oh! Rebel angels! After the war in heaven – Satan and the garden of Eden – but it isn’t true, is it? Is that what you – but why?
(SK, 260-261)

This is of course a key passage in the trilogy: while Lyra suspects that the alethiometer works by Dust, she has never communicated directly with it as Mary does through the Cave. What the Shadows tell Mary is surprising both for her and the reader: a sudden religious turn seems to be taken here, where the story of the Garden of Eden is really true and where angels exist and are able to communicate with humans. This is probably one of the most interesting things about His Dark Materials: it radically retells the story of the Fall, using all the elements Christianity offers (God, Satan, angels, Adam and especially Eve) but making them part of its own mythology (see below). Pullman is known for his statement that while Blake described Milton as, or perhaps accused him of, being unknowingly of the Devil’s party (1966:150), he himself is of the Devil’s party and knows it. (interview Unicon, 2000).

The Shadows offer Mary such a large amount of new and strange information that she cannot believe it to be true. When she understands what these Shadow-particles are telling her, namely that it was them who consciously intervened in human evolution by making humans conscious beings – what they are really saying is that it was they who
played the serpent so many thousands of years ago in the Garden of Eden, tempting Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil – her reaction is ‘but it isn’t true, is it?’ And these are Lyra’s exact words, too, when she is read the Biblical story by Lord Asriel:

‘And that was how sin came into the world,’ he said. […]

‘But…’ Lyra struggled to find the words she wanted: ‘but it en’t true, is it? Not true like chemistry or engineering, not that kind of true? […]’

‘[… T]hink of Adam and Eve like an imaginary number, like the square root of minus one: you can never see any concrete proof that it exists, but if you include it in your equations, you can calculate all manner of things that couldn’t be imagined without it.’ (NL, 372-373)

While Lord Asriel regards the story as a tool necessary to understand its greater consequences, the Shadows tell Mary Malone that it was, in fact, true. The Magisterium turns out to be quite right about Dust: it truly is the enemy of the Church and its God, be it that in this version of the story they are the ‘bad guys’. Pullman has been severely criticized for this stance – I will expand on this polemic in the chapter ‘Religious controversy’. Many thousands of years ago, the universe came into existence (no one knows how, or whether there was a creator (AS, 221-222)), matter became curious about itself and Dust was formed. Out of this Dust, a first angel came into existence, and when more came, he told them he was their creator:

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 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. One of those who came later was wiser than he was, and she found out the truth, so he banished her. We serve her still. (AS, 33-34)

It may be the angel Xaphania of whom Balthamos speaks here, as she is ‘one of the angels who rebelled so long ago’ (AS, 220). In any case, it is interesting that Pullman chooses a female angel to be the one who leads the rebellion against the Authority. This fits in with his rewriting of the Fall, in which Adam remains almost completely unmentioned and Eve is not the cause of original sin but the liberator of man. Wood (2001:239) remarks that

Pullman appears to agree with those Gnostics who ‘instead of blaming the human desire for knowledge as the root of all sin, […] did the opposite and sought redemption through gnosis. And whereas the orthodox often blamed Eve for the fall and pointed to women’s submission as appropriate punishment, Gnostics often depicted Eve – or the feminine spiritual power she represented – as the source of spiritual awakening’ [Pagels, 1988:68].
In the trilogy, women are represented as the saviours of the human race, almost as a compensation for the way in which the Church has treated them over the last two thousand years. It has indeed been noted [Pinsent, 2005:199-211] that Pullman has a lot in common with the feminist theologians (more on this subject in the chapter ‘Religious controversy’).

In the Christian scriptures, it was Satan (sometimes called Lucifer) who rebelled against God. His main motive was pride, a desire to be as powerful as God. He started a war in heaven but lost, and was cast out together with his accomplices:

12 How you are fallen from heaven,
O Lucifer, son of the morning!
How you are cut down to the ground,
You who weakened the nations!
13 For you have said in your heart:
‘I will ascend into heaven,
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation
On the farthest sides of the north;
14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
I will be like the Most High.’ (Isaiah 14:12-14)

In Pullman’s mythology, the same thing happened (angels rebelled and were cast out of heaven), but they only did so because the Authority had no right to place himself above them and pronounce himself the King in the Kingdom of Heaven. The rebellion was righteous, for the Authority wanted to retain his position and granted the angels little independence and knowledge: ‘[he] has been suppressing them since he came into being’ (AS, 221). When human beings came into existence, he played the same trick on them: claiming he created them, he told them what to do and what not to do – in particular he tried to keep them dumb and dependent by not allowing them to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. Again angels, Dust, rebelled and tempted Eve to disobey her God and become a conscious being. Interestingly, the connection between Dust and the serpent has an echo in the Bible: when God condemns the serpent for having deceived Eve, he says

Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life. (Gen 3:14, emphasis added)

Since then, every adolescent has been attracting Dust, and every time a dæmon settles, a new Fall takes place on the individual level: the child’s innocence and unselfconscious grace is replaced by a state of consciousness, a confrontation with the self (the form of their settled dæmon) and a realisation of oneself as a material, mortal and sexual being – in short, Dust is the catalyst for innocence to become experience. –Dust-
particles have played the serpent at the time of the first Fall; this time, it is Mary's task to be the temptress. They have played the serpent at the time of the first Fall, this time it is Mary's task to be the temptress.

7.2 How does Dust function in the story?

7.2.1 Dust discussed

Since His Dark Materials was completed in 2000, numerous articles and even books have been published on several aspects of the trilogy. One of those aspects is Dust, which is dealt with in most of the articles only as an aside. Some scholars, however, have paid more attention to this intricate metaphor (notably Bird, 2001 and 2005), and others have made valuable remarks on it.

Those who apparently feel threatened, or at least insulted, by Pullman tend to (perhaps willingly) pass over Dust's complexity, calling it 'childish, simple-minded pantheism' (Krehbiel, 2001), or saying that '[l]ove is embodied in Dust' (Padley & Padley, 2006:328). While the first comment, coming from a Christian reviewer, carries an obvious dimension of judgement in it, it may have a point in calling Pullman's implicit set of beliefs 'pantheism': the universe is made up of Dust, it is everywhere indeed, and others (Freitas, 2007 and Bird, 2005) have also suggested that Dust can be considered a kind of deity (see below). Padley and Padley are also partly right: it is indeed true that love is embodied in Dust, but this can hardly be called a definition of Dust, as it carries so much more in it. Fortunately, others have taken the trouble to look deeper into the subject of Dust, obtaining much more complete definitions.

Freitas (2007) makes some daring claims, calling His Dark Materials 'deeply theological, and deeply Christian in their theology', and Dust 'the divine fabric of the worlds' and even 'the true God'. This viewpoint is very interesting, as Pullman is a self-declared atheist (interview Unicon 2000) and has been attacked by insulted Christians on innumerable occasions. Freitas goes on: 'divinity isn’t just a being, it is a substance that loves us and animates us, yet has a mind of its own'. Indeed, Dust is conscious, and it loves humans: it is not only attracted to them once they reach a certain maturity, and to all objects made by human creativity (SK, 93), but when Mary observes it flowing out of the universe she feels a 'profound, helpless regret [...] in the air. [...] The Shadow-particles [...] were sorrowful' (AS,
In an interview with Pullman (n.d.), Freitas explains that she sees the divine in Dust. Pullman reacts:

I was very, very pleased when I saw that you’d written that, because that’s what I think too. Nobody else as far as I know has picked this up [...]. I agree with that. [...] That you see Dust as an aspect of the divine doesn’t surprise or worry me at all. It makes complete sense to me. But my view of this is that we are both dependent on the other [...]. Without us, Dust will dwindle away. But without Dust, we will dwindle away.

Pullman stresses that unlike the ‘traditional’ relation between the Divine and mankind, the relation between Dust and humans is mutually dependent. Wood (2001:253) disagrees with Freitas for this same reason: ‘Dust [...] is not simply a substitution for a personal god at a further remove. The relationship between Dust and humanity is more symbiotic’. This mutually dependent relationship seems to me to be the most important aspect of Dust. Dust is consciousness, and so humans need it to be able to fully live their lives and be creative, interested, thinking, feeling and conscious beings. But Dust needs humans as well: it is ‘not a constant. There’s not a fixed quantity that has always been the same. Conscious beings make Dust – they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on.’ (AS, 520) In Lyra’s world, the relation between Dust and human is even made visible through the settling of the daemon: without Dust, a daemon wouldn’t settle – or is it the other way around? It is never made clear, illustrating again the existing interdependence.

Bird appears to agree with Freitas, be it that she puts it in a less radical way than Freitas (who keeps close to the Christian terminology in stating that ‘Dust is the Holy Spirit’ [2007]):

[T]he suggestion is that Dust functions as a replacement for the redundant God [...]. [...] [P]osited as the central presence in the trilogy, Dust is the logos or ‘Total Being’, the ultimate cause or ‘ground ... from which beings as such are what they are ... [and] can be known, handled and worked upon’ [Heidegger 1978:374]. In other words, Dust is a point of origin, a First Cause – a ‘presence’ responsible for whatever else is ‘present’ – in much the same way as the Christian God. (2005:191-192)

In my view, this is very well put: it makes a comparison between Dust and the Divine much more convincingly than Freitas is able to do, mainly because it keeps away from applying the Christian terminology to Dust. As Dust makes humans conscious beings, it is indeed ‘responsible for whatever else is ‘present’: without Dust, humans would find themselves in a prelapsarian state of ignorance of their own possibilities – or, as Bird says: Dust works as ‘an essential and dynamic force which initiates the process of awakening from potentiality to actuality’ (2001:121). The Fall and the subsequent relation between humans and Dust was necessary for mankind to be able to lose its innocence, and move on towards experience,
maturity and wisdom. In an interview in ‘The Southbank Show’, Pullman explains ‘the necessity to lose innocence’ (Gunn 2003, part 2):

The story of Adam and Eve is, not for me, a story of an unfortunate rebellion which has to be regretted and lamented ever since, but a very important and brave step forward towards achieving what it is that we’re capable of, which is wisdom. (ibid.)

Although most of Bird’s observations are very perceptive and convincing, there is one aspect on which I cannot agree with her: she claims that Dust is ‘the psychic bond [...] that forms some energetic point of contact between dæmon and human’ (2001:117). I cannot see why she would say this, as there is no such suggestion in the text. It is true that Dust and humans are thoroughly interlinked, and the connection between dæmons and Dust is also obvious, given the fact that the settling of dæmons and the attraction of Dust are both physical manifestations of the transition from innocence to experience, but to assert that the bond between human and dæmon is made up of Dust is absolutely unproven.

So what is Dust? Pullman has called Dust ‘a picture, [...] a visual, physical analogue of everything that is consciousness. Human thought, imagination, love, affection, kindness, good things [...] and curiosity, intellectual curiosity’ (interview Freitas, n.d.). Dust is above all consciousness. Ever since Eve accepted Dust, it has been influencing human kind for the better: it makes humans wise, curious, creative and loving beings. Instead of the Fall being a fall, it is considered an ascent: it is ‘re-presented as the positive inheritance of all human beings’ and ‘the first essential step toward maturity for the generations that follow’ (Bird, 2001:122). Shohet summarises it nicely: ‘Dust [...] both expresses and constitutes the interrelation of all beings, the participation of all mind and all matter in a cosmic ecology of consciousness’ (2005:29).

7.2.2 ‘Dust as an all-inclusive, multifunctional metaphor’: Bird’s theory

In one of the very few articles completely devoted to Dust, Bird’s 2001 article ‘Without Contraries is no Progression’: Dust as an all-inclusive, multifunctional metaphor in Philip Pullman’s ‘His Dark Materials’, Bird claims that Dust works as an intricate metaphor in the story, serving the author to show that without the ‘necessary convergence of contraries’ (122), man cannot be fully alive and awake. In what follows I will elaborate on Bird’s careful dismantling of all of the functions Dust fulfils in the story – illustrating it with clear textual evidence, and adding some of my own findings to it.
7.2.2.1 *Intertextuality:* Dust as a metaphor in Genesis, Milton and Blake

As said before, Dust can be considered the true main character of *His Dark Materials* – a title which Pullman borrowed from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, as he did many other things (Pullman describes *Paradise Lost* as one of the ‘three debts that need acknowledgement above all the rest’ (AS, Acknowledgements)). It is perhaps more complex and well-developed than any human character in the story (who are absolutely no flat characters, and all carry a great amount of ambiguity in them), and is not only a driving force behind the plot but behind the entire fictional universe. Dust is a very powerful metaphor that holds every position between pure matter and pure spirit: as shown above, it is both a physical reality (scientifically detectable particles of matter) and the ultimate manifestation of the spiritual.

*His Dark Materials*, as a re-writing of the Fall, has of course not come about in a literary vacuum: it follows an entire (mainly English) tradition of re-writing the events that led to man’s burden of original sin. In this tradition, the most important authors are John Milton and his *Paradise Lost*, and William Blake; but Heinrich Von Kleist and Ted Hughes have also contributed with, respectively, the essay *On the Marionette Theatre* (1810) and *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970).

In Bird (2001), a comparison is made between the Bible’s, Milton’s, Blake’s and Pullman’s use of Dust as a metaphor, each of them taking it one step further. In Genesis, dust is a metaphor for man’s mortality:

> In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3:19)

In saying this, God stresses man’s physicality, the fact that he is made up of matter and not pure spirit. Bird comments: ‘[d]ust contains mankind’s origins and is literally the substance that marks his demise’ (2001:113). The metaphor reinforces the clear opposition between matter and spirit that is made in the Judeo-Christian scriptures (for more about dichotomy in Christianity, see below).

Milton’s ‘dark materials’⁶, the name Pullman uses for Dust, is ‘the mass of unformed primal matter left over from the construction of the universe’ (Bird, 2001:112), and is

> brimming with almost limitless potential that merely awaits the Maker’s transmutation. Moreover, in Milton’s work the metaphor of dark materials is extended with the suggestion that the material which comprises the bulk of the universe’s mass is made up of sentient particles in a state of rebellion. (Bird, 2001:114)

This is of course already much closer to Pullman’s metaphor of Dust than is the Bible’s; especially the suggestion of sentient, rebellious particles has much affinity with Dust –

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⁶ *Paradise Lost*, Book II, l. 916 (2000:48)
Pullman just takes this one long stride further.

Blake’s work does not literally mention dust or dark materials, but his notion of ‘Energy’ can be considered akin to Dust (Bird 2001:118): it is condemned by the religious institutions (‘All Bibles or sacred codes’ [1966: 149]) as being ‘Evil’, and these institutions have told their followers ‘[t]hat God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies’ (idem ibid.). The analogy with Dust’s situation in His Dark Materials is clear: the Magisterium wants to destroy Dust because it is ‘something bad, something wrong, something evil and something wicked’ (NL, 284), and when Eve gave in to Dust’s temptation, she and Adam were cast out of the Garden of Eden. Like Pullman, Blake takes up a different position: his work ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’ (1790-1793) has also been called a ‘Bible of Hell’ (Shock, 1993), clearly implying that he is ‘of the Devil’s party’. In this ‘voice of the Devil’ (1966:149), Blake claims that ‘Energy is the only life’ and ‘Eternal Delight’ (idem ibid.).

7.2.2.2 ‘Without Contraries is no Progression’: Dust as a metaphor for interconnectedness

In Genesis, contradiction and opposition play an important role: ‘creation is [...] a matter of making distinctions, and of articulating opposites - in an attempt to organise or make sense of the universe’ (Bird 2001:111). God divides light from the darkness, land from earth, and day from night (Genesis 1), and after the Fall, three dichotomies which are essential to Christian religion are put forward: innocence versus experience, good versus evil and spirit versus matter (Bird 2001:112). As His Dark Materials describes a young girl’s journey from innocence to experience while her destiny is to lead all humanity to experience by causing a second Fall, it is quite clear that the author does not wish to deny this particular opposition. The other two dichotomies, however, he seeks to synthesise, and

[The effect of this is to transpose what is, in traditional Christian readings, a paradigm of disobedience and punishment into a scheme of self-development. The key to this ontological scheme is Dust. (Bird 2001:112)

'Self-development' is a very important notion here: it stresses the narrative’s key theme of coming of age, and at the same time it summarises very neatly another idea that Pullman has borrowed from William Blake, namely that true life is impossible without the necessary contradictions; or, as Blake himself puts it:

Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are all necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. (1966:149)
These ‘contraries’ are indispensable for a constant development of the individual, through ‘the conflict or struggle between opposites’ (Bird 2001:119). A number of devices for conveying this idea to the reader can be distinguished. Dust serves as a metaphor for the coexistence of spirit and matter, and good and evil. Other notions (dæmons and seed-pod tree oil) and characters (Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter) will be also brought to attention as serving to endorse this idea.

7.2.2.2.1 A spirit-matter spectrum: Dust, dæmons and oil

Pullman’s Dust is a reflection of a ‘desire to connect everything’: he ‘uses [Dust] in order to connect the plethora of seemingly incompatible elements that make up the universe’ (Bird 2001:113). It does not only literally hold together all of the parallel universes, but Dust itself proves that there is no longer an opposition between spirit and matter: it manifests itself in the entire spectrum ranging from pure matter to pure spirit. As the Shadows tell Mary: ‘From what we are, spirit; from what we do, matter. Matter and spirit are one’ (SK, 260). Pullman has succeeded in opening up the metaphor used in Genesis so that it fits his own view. Supporting this transition from opposition to spectrum, the dæmon represents, like Dust, an amalgam of spirit and matter, in that the soul is normally considered spirit, but is presented as a materialisation of that spirit: a dæmon is the embodiment of the soul. Spirit and matter are one in Pullman’s fictional universe. At the same time, the fact that body and soul manifest themselves as separate entities (human and dæmon) could be argued to support the Gnostic thought of a mind-body dualism7 (Bird 2001:115), but again the author succeeds in showing that a synthesis of opposites is possible and even necessary: body and soul, human and dæmon, are clearly one being (‘But he is me!’ Lyra exclaims when she is told she has to leave Pan behind at the border of the world of the dead [AS, 295]), and are so absolutely interdependent that they simply cannot live without each other. Although it is

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7 According to Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Gnosticism is ‘the thought and practice especially of various cults of late pre-Christian and early Christian centuries distinguished by the conviction that matter is evil and that emancipation comes through gnosis’: every human has a soul which is a divine spark, imprisoned by a material body, setting up a firm contrast between mind and body. The idea that matter is evil and spirit is good of course echoes the spirit-matter and good-evil dichotomies of Christian theology (Bird, 2001:115). Pullman himself has said about this: ‘My myth does owe something to Gnosticism, but it differs in one essential characteristic. The Gnostic worldview […] rejects the physical created universe and expresses a longing for an unknowable God who is far off. My myth is almost the reverse. It takes this physical universe as our true home.’ (qtd. in Cooper, 2000:355).
possible to remain alive without one's dæmon, to live and to be alive are shown to be different things:

‗But tell me about you curious bodyguard, Marisa [Coulter]. I’ve never seen soldiers like that. Who are they?‘
‗Men, that’s all. But... they’ve undergone intercision. They have no dæmons, so they have no fear and no imagination and no free will, and they’ll fight till they’re torn apart.’ (SK, 209)

Imagination and free will are what separates us as humans from animals: without one’s dæmon, there is no attraction of Dust, and without Dust, it is impossible to be fully human, to be fully alive.

Spirit and matter are not only shown to be interdependent in the notion of the dæmon, but this interdependence is also the basis of the ‗eco-system‘ (if that is what one could call it) of the world of the mulefa, where, as in the whole story, ‘everything was linked together‘ (AS, 133). In this system, mulefa and Dust sustain each other, in the same way humans and Dust do: humans and mulefa generate Dust (or sraf, as they call it) so that Dust can keep them alive, conscious and wakeful. Atal, a zalif (singular of the plural mulefa) explains to Mary how this interdependency was brought to pass. Again we recognise the story of the Fall:

‗Ever since we had the sraf, we have had memory and wakefulness. Before that, we knew nothing.‘
‗What happened to give you the sraf?‘
‗We discovered how to use the wheels. One day a creature with no name discovered a seed-pod and began to play, and as she played she [...] saw a snake coiling itself through the hole in a seed-pod, and the snake said— [...] The snake spoke to her?‘

Not not! It is a make-like. The story tells that the snake said What do you know? What do you remember? What do you see ahead? And she said Nothing, nothing, nothing. So the snake said Put your foot through the hole in the seed-pod where I was playing, and you will become wise. So she put a foot where the snake had been. And the oil entered her foot and made her see more clearly than before, and the first thing she saw was the sraf. [...] [T]hey discovered that they knew who they were, they knew they were mulefa and not grazers. They gave each other names. They named themselves mulefa. They named the seed-tree, and all the creatures and plants. [...] [T]hey showed their children how to use [the seed-pods]. And when the children were old enough, they began to generate the sraf as well, and as they were big enough to ride on the wheels, the sraf came back with the oil and stayed with them. So they saw that they had to plant more seed-pod trees, for the sake of the oil, but the pods were so hard that they very seldom germinated. And the first mulefa saw what they must do to help the trees, which was to ride on the wheels and break them, so mulefa and seed-pod trees have always lived together.’

(AS, 236-237)
In Atal’s story, the myth of the Fall is once again re-written. The serpent showed the first female a way of ‘becoming wise’: acquiring knowledge and becoming conscious. When this mulefa version of Eve first put her foot through the seed-pot hole, she came into contact with sraf and began to see the world as it was, including Dust (making the mulefa the only human-like species that can actually see Dust without any tools). Dust comes pouring from the sky, and it reminds the reader of the movements of the Aurora Borealis, or northern lights: ‘drifting golden sparkles’ (AS, 287), ‘little swirling currents of intention, that eddied and broke off and drifted about’ (AS, 244). The seed-pod trees have flowers that ‘are turned upwards’ and the sraf ‘enter[s] their petals and fertilize[s] them like pollen from the stars’ (AS, 289). The seed-pods that are subsequently produced by the trees are saturated with oil that contains the sraf, and this is passed on to the mulefa through their use of the pods as wheels. This, in its turn, is necessary to ensure the existence of the trees: everything is connected. The oil has essentially the same role in the story as the daemon has: they both play a key part in the connection between Dust and humans or mulefa; on top of that, as shown, they both function as a proof of Pullman’s wish to stress interconnectedness and undo the opposition spirit-matter.

It is often stressed that matter loves spirit, and spirit loves matter: the first is made very clear in the following passage, where Mary helplessly watches Dust flowing out of the universe:

Wind, moon, clouds, leaves, grass, all those lovely things were crying out and hurling themselves into the struggle to keep the Shadow-particles in this universe, which they so enriched.

Matter loved Dust. It didn’t want to see it go. (AS, 476)

Bird (2001:120-121) remarks that ‘the reverse of the statement that ‘Matter loved Dust’ […] is also apparent’, and indeed, in the longing of angels (‘beautiful pilgrims of rarefied light’ [SK, 288]) for materiality this is substantiated: ‘they coveted it and longed for contact with it’ (AS, 420). Lord Asriel knows this, too:

Few […] and short-lived as we are, and weak-sighted as we are – in comparison with them, we’re still stronger. They envy us, Ogunwe! That’s what fuels their hatred, I’m sure of it. They long to have our precious bodies, so solid and powerful […]! (AS, 394)

If we place the different ‘races’ of the narrative on the spirit-matter spectrum, we get something like this:

\[8\] In fact, on several occasions, Dust is literally brought in connection with the northern lights: NL, 183, 190, SK, 96-97.
It is obvious that angels can be placed at the far end of the ‘spirit’-side (as they are ‘complexifications’ of Dust [SK, 260]). The place of humans, mulefa and Gallivespians is also rather easily decided: they occupy the middle position between spirit and matter, as they connect to Dust and have a soul but are made of matter. Witches are placed closer to the ‘matter’-end, as they, more than humans and mulefa, live close to nature, and are much more sensitive to it: they can feel ‘the tingle of starlight on their bare skin’ (SK, 289) and hear the ‘music of the Aurora’ (NL, 314), for example. Armoured bears find themselves on the opposite end of Angels, having no daemon (not even an interior one, like the people in Will’s world) and therefore no spiritual soul – although they consider their armour as essential to their being as a soul (NL, 196).

The author succeeds in convincingly dismissing the traditional spirit-matter dichotomy and setting up a spectrum ranging from spirit to matter with the help of Dust as a metaphor, and strengthened by the notions of daemons and seed-pod tree oil.

7.2.2.2 A good-evil spectrum: Dust, Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter

Dust does more than embody a synthesis of matter and spirit: the metaphor undoes the clear opposition between good and evil, its borders blurred and even erased. The very idea that Dust is not evil, as the Magisterium believes, as they have believed the Fall to be the beginning of all evil while it was in fact the beginning of consciousness for mankind, already questions the labels ‘good’ and ‘evil’ - it seems that these are a matter of perception. Pullman has said in an interview:

There are very few struggles, actually, between good and evil. All the struggles that we can see clearly in the world are struggles between one idea of good and another idea of good. And that's by far the more interesting way of looking at it. (Gunn, part 7, 2003)

Good and evil are relative notions: each man decides for himself (whether under the influence of organised religion or not) what he will consider good and evil. This relativity is also to be found in Blake’s work: ‘As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to Angels look like torment and insanity [...’] (1966:150). What is torment for one person can be a delight for another. In the story, Lyra wonders whether Dust is good or evil, and decides it might be good even though she heard nothing but the contrary:
Pantalaimon said: ‘We’ve heard them all talk about Dust, and they’re so afraid of it, and you know what? We believed them, even though we could see that what they were doing [viz. intercision] was wicked and evil and wrong... We thought Dust must be bad too, because they were grown-up and they said so. But what if it isn’t?’ [...] If Dust were a good thing... If it were to be sought and welcomed and cherished... (NL, 397-398)

Another clear way in which the author wishes to blur the boundaries of good and evil is the high amount of ambiguity that he has given most of the characters. ‘Every time we imagine that we’ve sorted out the good guys and the bad guys, Pullman pulls the rug out from under us’ (Hatlen, 2005:79); especially Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter, Lyra’s parents, are good examples. Mrs Coulter is ravishingly beautiful, but dangerous and even lethal, something which is reflected in her daemon:

The woman herself was beautiful [...], lovely in the moonlight, her brilliant dark eyes wide with enchantment, her slender shape light and graceful; but as she snapped her fingers, the monkey stopped at once and leapt up into her arms, and [Will] saw that the sweet-faced woman and the evil monkey were one being. (SK, 213)

From the moment the reader discovers she is not exactly kind, as she looked at first sight (NL, 87), Mrs Coulter seems to become the embodiment of evil: she is ice-cold, powerful and power mad, using and abusing anyone who might be useful, and the driving force behind the ghastly crimes of the General Oblation Board. Even the people who execute the intercisions are worried by her innate cruelty:

‘Her attitude worries me...’
‘Not philosophical, you mean?’
‘Exactly. A personal interest. I don’t like to use the word, but it’s almost ghoulish.[... D]o you remember the first experiments, when she was so keen to see them pulled apart – ’ (NL, 275)

Mrs Coulter is problably the most terrifying character of the entire trilogy: she is Lyra’s mother (NL, 125), but when she finds out Lyra is destined to be the second Eve, she answers rather casually ‘Why, I shall have to destroy her’ (SK, 328). It appears to be easy to decide she is wholly and utterly evil, but in The Amber Spyglass Mrs Coulter is ascribed a very ambiguous role: throughout this entire third part of the story, the reader is never sure whether what she does is good or evil. It appears to be the same for Mrs Coulter herself: her cruel old self is constantly fighting a motherly urge to protect and care for Lyra. When she keeps Lyra in a drugged sleep and hidden in the Himalayas to protect her from the Church who is out to kill her, this inner struggle becomes visible:

‘No one here but us,’ her mother said, in a sing-song voice, half-crooning. ‘Lift yourself up and let Mama wash you...’ [...] [T]he girl, moaning, struggling into wakefulness, tried to push her mother away [...].
'Leave me alone! I want to go! Let me go! Will, Will, help me – oh, help me – '

The woman was gripping her hair tightly, forcing her head back, cramming the beaker against her mouth. [...] The golden monkey sprang on Lyra’s daemon, gripping him with hard black fingers. [...] Then Pantalaimon became a porcupine.

The monkey screeched and let go. Three long quills were stuck shivering in his paw. Mrs Coulter snarled and with her free hand slapped Lyra hard across the face, a vicious backhand crack that threw her flat; and before Lyra could gather her wits, the beaker was at her mouth and she had to swallow or choke. [...] And the woman was singing softly, crooning baby-songs, [...] her sweet voice mouthing gibberish. [...] She took one dark blonde curl [from Lyra] and put it in a little gold locket that she had around her own neck. [...] But the woman held her lips to it first... (AS, 53-54)

Gradually the reader has to put aside everything he or she ever thought to know about Mrs Coulter, and make way for a new version of her: still ruthless, but with a touch of humanity that was missing before. When she realises what danger her daughter is in, she cannot help but to feel like what she is: Lyra’s mother. When Lord Asriel notices this, he despises her for being so weak:

‘You’re right,’ he said, getting up, ‘She is unique. To have tamed and softened you – that’s no everyday feat. She’s drawn your poison, Marisa. [...] Your fire’s been quenched in a drizzle of sentimental piety. Who would have thought it? The pitiless agent of the church, the fanatical persecutor of children, the inventor of hideous machines to slice them apart and look in their terrified little beings for any evidence of sin – and along comes a foul-mouthed ignorant little brat with dirty fingernails, and you cluck and settle your feathers over her like a hen. Well, I admit: the child must have some gift I’ve never seen myself. (AS, 211)

And when the time comes for Mrs Coulter to really save her daughter by convincing Metatron, the Regent of the Kingdom of Heaven, of her pure evil nature, so that he will believe she will betray both Lyra and Asriel and side with him, she is mortified that the ‘mustard-seed [that] had taken root and was growing, and the little green shoot [that] was splitting [her] heart open’ (AS, 427) would not remain hidden by all the atrocities and crimes she had committed – she even ‘wished[s] [she]’d committed greater ones to hide it more deeply still’ (idemibid). But she does what she is best at and ‘[lies] with her whole life’ (AS, 418) - and she succeeds. Metatron only sees ‘pure, poisonous, toxic malice’ and calls her a ‘cess-pit of moral filth’ (AS, 419). Mrs Coulter has an evil nature indeed, but the reader is demonstrated that this does not necessarily mean that she has no choice but to act as her nature dictates: the message is that no one is exclusively good or exclusively evil.

Through the character of Lord Asriel, the author want to convey essentially the same message as he wants to carry out by means of Mrs Coulter, but with Lord Asriel, the two components are more evenly balanced from the start. He is a fierce man, powerful and rather frightening, harsh and proud, but very well-respected in Lyra’s academic environment of
Jordan College. As he is the only one of whom she knows to be related to, the reader trusts him, as Lyra does, but at the same time fears him as she does. Although he almost breaks her arm the first time he is presented in the story, he is also shown to be caring, be it in his own rough way: ‘You’re not coming [to the North with me], child. Put it out of your head; the times are too dangerous. [...] if you’re a good girl, I’ll bring you back a walrus tusk [...]. Don’t argue anymore or I shall be angry.’ (NL, 29) But Lyra discovers his Machiavellian nature at the end of *Northern Lights*, when Lord Asriel sacrifices her best friend Roger to open up a bridge between their world and Citàgazze. He is a man who will do anything to achieve his ultimate goal, and although ‘a spasm of disgust crosses his face when they talk of the sacraments, and atonement, and redemption, and suchlike’ (SK, 47), this goal is not to rebel against the church, ‘not because the church was too strong, but because it was too weak to be worth fighting’ (SK, 48). His servant Thorold explains to the witch Serafina Pekkala what he thinks is going on now that his master has gone beyond the borders of their world:

I think he’s waging a higher war than that. I think he’s aiming a rebellion against the highest power of all. He’s gone a-searching for the dwelling place of the Authority Himself, and he’s a-going to destroy Him. [...] [The first rebel angels] couldn’t do it. And they had the power of angels. Lord Asriel is just a man, with human power, no more than that. But his ambition is limitless. He dares to do what men and women don’t even dare to think. [...] I say he’s mad, wicked, deranged. Yet with another part [of me] I think, he’s Lord Asriel, he’s not like other men. Maybe… If it was ever going to be possible, it’d be done by him and by no one else. (SK, 48-49)

Thorold’s mixed feelings about his master match those of the reader: do we like or dislike Lord Asriel? Do we think he is good or evil? Is he a good man doing evil things or an evil man with a humane side to him? In refusing to offer the reader closure to these (and other) moral questions, the ‘narrator challenges the reader, even as Lyra is challenged, to make moral sense of the story without overt direction’ and ‘demonstrates the difficulty of determining the good course of action when knowledge is always partial and impressions may be manipulated or mistaken’ (Wood, 2001:246). Judging people and their actions is not always as easy as it may sometimes seem – the line between good and evil is not a straightforward and effortlessly visible one.

Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter are the two characters who most clearly embody Pullman’s message that good and evil are not completely separate notions; as Lenz (2005:8) puts it:

*Throughout most of the narrative, both are possessed by a self-serving ‘intention’ that closes their minds to larger realities though their goals [their ‘idea of good’] are – until the last moment, when they join in mutual sacrifice to save the world for Lyra they both have done evil things (although Mrs Coulter has of course gained much less reader sympathy) because they wanted*
They allow good to overcome evil and put aside their egotistic nature for the greater good: Lord Asriel and Mrs Coulter both know that their daughter is about to play a great role in the existence of the conscious universe. ‘They could not have done it alone, but together they did it’ (AS, 507). Russell remarks that Lord Asriel’s sudden change in attitude from ‘the Asriel who arranges Roger's death to the Asriel who is proud and protective of his daughter’ (2005:221) is not as convincing as Mrs Coulter’s conversion, because Pullman spends hardly any time on his emotional life – an observation that certainly makes sense.

People cannot be called ‘good’ or ‘evil’; this is only possible for their actions – a thought which is also literally voiced by Mary Malone:

‘When you stopped believing in God,’ [Will] went on, ‘did you stop believing in good and evil?’

‘No. But I stopped believing there was a power of good and a power of evil that were outside us. And I came to believe that good and evil are names for what people do, not for what they are. All we can say is that this is a good deed, because it helps someone, or that’s an evil one, because it hurts them. People are too complicated to have simple labels.’ (AS, 471)

With Dust to serve him as a metaphor, and with Asriel and Mrs Coulter, the author succeeds in opening up the traditional dichotomy of good and evil, and making it into a spectrum. *His Dark Materials* undoes both the spirit-matter and the good-evil opposition, ‘while leaving the innocence-experience dichotomy firmly in place’ (Bird, 2001:112). Without contraries there is no progression – we must engage in a struggle between the good and evil that is present in all of us to improve ourselves and become fully human.

8. The republic of heaven: a new world vision

*His Dark Materials* does not only develop a new mythology in its rewriting of the Fall in a positive manner, it also offers the reader a new world vision, which comprises the final message of the story: ‘we have to build the republic of heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere’ (AS, 382). Mary Malone discovers essentially the same thing:

Had she thought there was no meaning in life, no purpose, when God had gone? Yes, she had thought that.

‘Well, there is now,’ she said aloud, and again, louder: ‘There is now!’ (AS, 476)

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*Interestingly, this is the only occasion where which Pullman refers to Mrs Coulter as ‘Lyra’s mother’: in willing to sacrifice her life to save her child’s, she has finally taken up her role as a mother.*
'There is no elsewhere' should be taken literally, as the Authority not only lied about himself being the creator: the world of the dead is not heaven, but rather 'a prison camp', and 'everything about it is secret. Even the churches don't know; they tell their believers that they'll live in Heaven, but that's a lie' (AS, 35). According to Gooderham (2003:161), it is 'Pullman's task [...] to replace the old myths with a new, more honest story, [...] to replace the delusion of an afterlife'. In this chapter, I will show how this new world vision is developed in the story; how this, in its love for life and the world, transcends the gloomy vision of (some forms of) postmodernism, and, finally, I will discuss the last important function of dæmons.

8.1 Replacing the delusion of an afterlife: the world of the dead

With a boatman awaiting Lyra, Will and the Gallivespians at the border, to take them to the other side of the lake and into the land of the dead, we are reminded of Charon, the ferryman in Greek mythology who took the dead to the other side of the river Styx, and into Hades. As Gooderham remarks: 't]he story about human life without an afterlife [...] may have a contemporary gloss, [but it] is constructed extensively out of the imagery and logic of archaic myth' (2003:162). Indeed, not only the boatman, but also the harpies living in the world of the dead, are taken from Greek mythology. But first, let us have a look at a striking difference between Charon and this boatman. To be taken across the river Styx, the dead had to pay an obolus (a silver coin); Lyra, Will and the Gallivespians, have to pay a much higher price: in order to be allowed into the world of the dead, they have to leave behind their souls at the shore. At first, it seems as if Lyra is the only one affected by this: it is Pantalaimon who is denied access by the boatman: ‘Not him’ (AS, 295).

Will said, ‘That’s not right. We don’t have to leave part of ourselves behind. Why should Lyra?’ ‘Oh, but you do,’ said the boatman. ‘It’s her misfortune that she can see and talk to the part she must leave. You will not know until you are on the water, and then it will be too late. But you all have to leave that part of yourselves here. There is no passage to the land of the dead for such as him.

[...]

It’s not a rule you can break. It’s a law like this one...’ He leant over the side and cupped a handful of water, and then tilted his hand so it ran out again. ‘The law that makes the water fall back into the lake, it’s a law like that. I can’t tilt my hand and make the water fly upwards. No more can I take her dæmon to the land of the dead.’ (AS, 296-297)

Lyra needs to go into the land of the dead, because she feels guilty about saving her best friend Roger from Bolvanger and then, unknowingly, betraying him by bringing him to Lord Asriel, who sacrifices him to tear open the sky and make a bridge into another world (NL, 380). She wants to tell him she’s sorry: ‘if I don’t say sorry it’ll all be no good, just a huge
waste of time’ (AS, 175). This means that if she wants to make up her betrayal to Roger, she has to betray part of herself in leaving Pantalaimon behind. In fact, in doing so, she fulfils the prophecy that the Master of Jordan made about her with the help of the alethiometer: ‘that’s the saddest thing: she will be the betrayer, and the experience will be terrible’ (NL, 33).

Finally Lyra succeeds in pushing Pan away and leaving him on the shore, ‘doing the cruellest thing she had ever done’ (AS, 298). When they are on the lake, she gives ‘a cry so passionate that even in that muffled mist-hung world it raised an echo, but of course it wasn’t an echo, it was the other part of her crying in turn’ (AS, 299) – but it is not only Lyra who feels this pain: Will and the Gallivespians, too, suddenly feel that something they did not know they had is left behind:

> Part of it was physical. It felt as if an iron hand had gripped his heart and was pulling it out between his ribs [...]. It was far deeper and far worse than the pain of losing his fingers. But it was mental, too: something secret and private was being dragged into the open where it had no wish to be [...]. And it was worse than that. It was as if he’d said, ‘No, don’t kill me, I’m frightened; kill my mother instead; she doesn’t matter, I don’t love her,’ and as if she’d heard him say it, and pretended she hadn’t so as to spare his feelings, and offered herself in his place anyway [...]. (AS, 299-300)

Only when they arrive in the land of the dead do they discover how gloomy and depressing it is. ‘Pullman achieves a powerful and coherent narrative precisely by jettisoning popular notions of the soul living on in a happy afterlife and by returning to older fears of the horror and finality of death’ (Gooderham 2003:162). The ghosts of the dead are kept in a constant state of guilt and shame by the harpies, who ‘wait till you’re resting […] and they come up quiet beside you and they whisper all the bad things you ever did when you was alive, so you can’t forget them’ (AS, 323). When Lyra sees their misery, she tells Roger (and the reader, for whom this is a surprise as well) that she has heard the witches’ Consul’s prophecy about her – that she ‘has a great destiny that can only be fulfilled elsewhere – not in this world, but far beyond’ (NL, 175) – and that she believes her destiny is to free the dead from this place (AS, 325). The Chevalier Tialys, one of the Gallivespians, remarks that ‘[t]his will undo everything. It’s the greatest blow you could strike. The Authority will be powerless after this’ (326). But destroying the Authority is Lord Asriel’s goal, not Lyra and Will’s; they simply do what they feel they should do, and feeling sorry for the dead, they intend to free them. Will tries to cut a window into another world for this purpose, but meets nothing but rock. The world of the dead is apparently located, like in the ancient idea of heaven above and hell down below, underground. The ghosts ask Lyra to tell them about the sunshine, and the wind, but she is afraid the harpies will attack her again like they did when she made up a story (‘Liar! Liar! Liar!’ […] They] seemed to be screaming Lyra’s name, so that *Lyra* and *liar* were one and the same thing’ [308]) – so this time, she tells them the truth, describing the
‘world she knew’, ‘playing on all their senses’ (329-330). Surprisingly, the harpies listen too, ‘[b]ecause it was true. […] Because it was nourishing’ (332). But they have heard of Lyra’s plan and feel threatened in their task, given to them by the Authority, to see the worst in everyone and feed on it: ‘This is a wasteland now; we shall make it a hell!’ (332). Tialys proposes a new task for them:

Instead of seeing only the wickedness and cruelty and greed of the ghosts […], from now on you will have the right to ask every ghost to tell you the story of their lives, and they will have to tell the truth about what they’ve seen and touched and heard and loved and known in the world.

But the harpies insist on an ’honourable place’, ‘a duty and a task’, they want ’respect’ for what they do (333). Lady Salmakia then appoints them the task to ‘guide the ghosts from the landing-place by the lake all the way through the land of the dead to the new opening into the world’. From now on, the dead will have to tell a true story, that confirms they have lived their life to the fullest, if they want to be guided back into the world. Lenz notes:

The terms of the ensuing ‘treaty’ express an entire philosophy of life. Only those who ‘see and touch and love and learn things’ [AS, 334] – and tell the true tale of their experiences, will be guided out of the nether regions […]. Escape from the Land of the Dead can be won only by those who have lived aesthetically and soulfully, who have enjoyed the gift of life through their intellects and senses. (2003:52)

Indeed, this is one of the most important messages in the story: we must make the most of our lives, live them with all our senses and enjoy ‘the physical world which is our true home and always was’ (AS, 336), because there is no noteworthy afterlife. As one ghost says:

When we were alive, they told us that when we died we’d go to heaven. […] 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. […] But now this child has come offering us a way out […] 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 […]. (335-336)

The lies of the Authority and the Church have caused people to renounce so-called earthly pleasures, leaving them with nothing, as ‘for us there is no elsewhere’ (382). As theologian Stuart observes: the ‘hope in life after death has been used by Christianity to encourage people into passively accepting situation of oppression in the present’ (1996:42).

8.2 Lyra as a Christ-figure: a latter-day ‘harrowing of hell’

Now that the harpies have a new task, they will take the travellers to ‘a part of the land of the dead where the upper world [is] close’ (334). It is a long and dangerous journey, and everyone is weary from the lack of their souls, but at last they reach a place where Will can cut a window into another world. Roger is the first ghost to step through and become part
of everything: ‘he found himself turning into the night, the starlight, the air … and then he was
gone, leaving behind […] a vivid little burst of happiness’ — a sort of ‘pantheistic immortality’,
as Lenz (2003:52) calls it. Lyra has succeeded in liberating the dead, freeing them from the
ever-lasting emptiness of the land of the dead.

Pinsent (2005:203) notes that

[If the Fall is regarded […] as an opening up of the human race to knowledge, much of the
abundance of Christian theology devoted to theories of atonement becomes irrelevant. This
lack of interest parallels the absence of any need for a redeemer, or indeed an explicit Christ
figure, in Pullman’s rewriting of this material […].]

An explicit Christ figure is indeed not present in the story10, but as Gooderham (2003:161)
remarks: Lyra ‘assum[es] the Christ-role in an unmistakable ‘harrowing of hell’’. The story of
the harrowing of hell is assumed to originate in the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus, and
speaks of Jesus Christ’s descent into hell between his crucifixion and his resurrection. There
he ‘brought salvation to the souls held captive there since the beginning of the world’
(Catholic Encyclopedia [CE], ‘Harrowing of Hell’). It still has an echo in the Apostles’ Creed (a
statement of belief) in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: ‘He suffered under Pontius
Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. On the third day he rose
again’ (‘Catechism of the Catholic Church’ on the official Vatican website). Lyra takes on the
same role in releasing the dead.

Furthermore, she acts as a kind of redeemer as well, though not so much a redeemer
in the sense that Christ was: he sacrificed his life to restore ‘man from the bondage of sin’
(CE: Redemption); Lyra frees humanity not of sin, but of the idea of sin. Earthly pleasures –
living life with all of one’s senses – were considered sins by the church and its followers; the
way out of the hopeless land of the dead Lyra and her companions now have established
requires a life filled with these same pleasures.

8.3 Storytelling as salvation, and the Republic of Heaven

Through storytelling, it is possible to escape the world of the dead and find peace
living on as part of everything: it is a salvation from the dismal fate of the dead. Lenz notes

10 This constitutes an opposition to C.S. Lewis’ ‘Chronicles of Narnia’, where the lion Aslan is an
obvious Christ figure. It is no surprise that Pullman has called this series ‘one of the most ugly and
poisonous things I’ve ever read’, ‘propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology’, drawing attention
to ‘the misogyny, the racism, the sado-masochistic relish for violence that permeates the whole cycle’
(Pullman 1998): for Pullman, ‘Narnia’ is the literary embodiment of this ‘life-hating ideology’,
Christianity, with its dislike for growing up (ibid.) and its idolatrous view on childhood (Gunn, 2003, part
2).
that Pullman draws on concepts of Romantics John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley ‘to dramatize the power of storytelling as a medium capable of facing and transcending the dark consciousness of personal mortality’ (2003:48). Imagination and creativity can help us cope with the idea of mortality, with the hopelessness and absurdity of this seemingly meaningless life, in short, ‘with all that threatens to engulf the human psyche in despair’ (Lenz, 2003:49). Keats coined the concept of ‘negative capability’, ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’ (Keats, 1956:103-104) – used literally by Pullman as a description of the state of mind Mary has to maintain when trying to get in touch with Shadows (SK, 92). Lyra recognises this as the same state she has to get into to be able to read the alethiometer (Lenz, 2003:49). Negative capability is, in fact, something we should apply to our everyday lives:

Pullman implies that human consciousness needs to evolve toward this state of receptivity, able to hold contradictions in balance and to exercise ‘negative capability’ if we are going to be able to keep the ‘oppositions’ of good and evil from tearing us apart. [...] Thus, [it] enables one to live creatively with contradictions, to transcend the dualism of good and evil. (ibid.)

In the concept of ‘negative capability’, Pullman again finds a way to dispose of the good-evil opposition: by means of creativity we can find a way to cope with contradictions in our lives and in ourselves.

Shelley’s idea of ‘synthesizing imagination’ or ‘sympathetic imagination’, which involves the capacity to go beyond the limits of one’s own nervous system and identify with the feelings and thoughts of others’ (Lenz, 2003:53), is what he calls ‘the great instrument of moral good’ (Shelley, 1962: page not specified, qtd. in Lenz), as it enables us to sympathise with others. Lenz (1990:90) states that such an active imagination can create ‘what the Romantic poets called ‘a heterocosm – a world other than this one – which, once alive imaginally [sic], can inspire action’ [Watkins 1987, page not specified]. Applied to His Dark Materials, it could be argued that a creative and active imagination is needed to build a heterocosm; in this case, the Republic of Heaven. This Republic is not an actual world11, it is an idea that ‘once alive imaginally’, indeed ‘inspires action’: thought, creativity, cheerfulness, kindness, love, sympathy – these are all needed to be able to build the Republic of Heaven on earth. The term is not Pullman’s, though: it was first used by Gerrard Winstanley, ‘a 17th century Digger, True Leveller and Quaker’ (Boulton 2003), who shared Pullman’s abhorrence of organised religion and the clergy:

11 The phrase ‘Republic of Heaven’ is initially used to refer to an actual world: it is Lord Asriel’s goal of starting all over again in another world, one without kingdoms, kings, bishops and priests, where everyone is equal and free (AS, 222) This ideal is rendered impossible when Lyra and Will are told by Will’s father that daemons cannot live permanently in another world (AS, 381), and from that moment on, the Republic of Heaven becomes an idea and an ideal: it must be built in the here and now.
[Priests] tell the poor people that they must be content with their poverty, and they shall have their heaven hereafter. But why may we not have our heaven here [...]? While men are gazing up to heaven, imagining after a happiness [sic] or fearing a hell after they are dead, their eyes are put out [...]. (qtd. in Hill, 1980:140-141)

Winstanley contends that the Church blinds people to the possibility of happiness here on earth, an opinion very similar to that of Pullman, the more so because they both want to establish a heaven on earth, be it that this means something slightly different for Winstanley (who was engaged more on a political level) than for Pullman.

Several scholars have argued that this ‘Republic of Heaven’ is not a very successful narrative achievement: Pinsent calls it ‘somewhat debatable’ (2005:209), while Gooderham asserts that ‘[b]y comparison with the rewritten myth, this manipulation of theological discourse [i.e. replacing the Matthean ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ by ‘Republic of Heaven’] is weak’ and ‘clumsy’ (2003:162). Pullman has defended himself on this matter, saying that ‘we don’t have to give up heaven’, as it embodies ‘principally the idea of meaningfulness’ and ‘the sense that we are connected to one another, connected to the wider universe’ (Gunn, part 5, 2003). Though Gooderham and Pinsent’s arguments may definitely have a point, Jacobs (2000) completely misreads the message, claiming that it is a ‘bright, shining, explicitly political vision’, and that ‘[p]olitics and morals would be simple if all abuse of authority could be rectified by the elimination of authority. But, of course, republics require authorities, too’ – he fails to see the obvious: that the Republic is not the same as a republic, but that it is an idea, a ‘state of mind, an orientation to life’ (Hunt and Lenz 2001:160). Rayment-Pickard seems to have misunderstood as well: he comments that ‘[w]ithout exception, human attempts to design perfect societies have failed spectacularly’ (2004:83), again assuming that the Republic of Heaven is meant to be a real society.

In offering a way out of the land of the dead by telling the harpies true stories of one’s life, thus proving that one has lived life to the fullest, Pullman affirms the meaning and value of life in the face of apparent hopelessness, providing a kind of armor for the psyche, enabling it to transcend what psychiatrist David Diamond [1996:309] calls ‘the postmodern experience of life as merely chaotic, nonsensical, meaningless and absurd’. (Lenz, 2003:48)

Bird agrees: ‘modernity is often seen as responsible for a general disenchantment with the world [...] whereas Pullman believes not only in the realities of the here and now but also in the joy and enchantment of everyday life’ (2005:189). In this way, storytelling can be seen as salvation from the dim environment of the dead, and from the idea that life is meaningless and absurd.

But storytelling plays another important role in the trilogy: it is a story which tempts Lyra and which is a catalyst for the second Fall she is destined to act out. The ghosts need to
tell the harpies true stories in order to be guided out and into the ‘joy-filled earth above’ (Lenz, 2003:48) – what turns out to be the world of the mulefa. When Mary Malone, who has been instructed by Dust to act as the temptress in this second Fall (SK, 261), sees this window with the ghosts pouring out, one of them says:

Tell them stories. That’s what we didn’t know. All this time, and we never knew! But they need the truth. That’s what nourishes them. You must tell them true stories, and everything will be well, everything. Just tell them stories. (AS, 455)

The ghost is talking about the harpies, of course, but Mary knows nothing of the land of the dead and its guardians, and so she interprets it in her own way: she gathers from this that it is her task to tell Lyra and Will stories, and tempt Lyra in that way, even though she is not sure how this might work. As soon as she has the chance, Mary tells them a story: that of how and why she gave up being a nun. In an ‘A la recherche du temps perdu’ experience, in which the madeleine is replaced by a piece of marzipan, she suddenly remembered falling in love when she was twelve, and in reliving that time, she decided she could not live a life in which she had to deprive herself of those feelings (AS, 465-470). For Lyra, this story, with its descriptions of what Mary felt like, is a revelation: she finally starts to understand her own feelings for Will.

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

[...] And inside her, that rich house with all its doors open and all its rooms lit stood waiting, quiet, expectant. (AS, 468)

Now that she realises that she is in love with him, she does what she is destined to do: in a symbol-laden act Lyra offers Will a little piece of fruit and puts it in his mouth (AS, 492). She offers him knowledge of her love for him and of himself as a sexual being, and so she finally fulfils her destiny as the second Eve. The stream of Dust that had been flowing out of the universe ‘like the Mississippi’ (506), and into the abyss made by the Church’s bomb in an attempt to kill Lyra (373), is so powerfully attracted to these new-found lovers that the ‘mighty river’ is diverted ‘into a different course’ (506).

8.4 Dæmons as an affirmation of the necessity of the here and now

Not long after this re-enactment of the Fall, their dæmons, whom Lyra and Will have sensed to be near for some days now, finally make their appearance again. Will has never actually seen his dæmon, Kirjava, before, but he feels ‘the sweet rightfulness of her coming back to him’ (AS, 510) as she circles, bird-formed, over his head. In their absence,
Pantalaimon and Kirjava have learned that their humans have done what witches have done since the beginning of their existence: the initiation rite consists of a voluntary separation from their dæmons. ‘[These new witches] find that their dæmons are not separated, as in Bolvangar; they are still one whole being; but now they can roam free, and go to far places and see strange things and bring back knowledge’ (500). Lyra and Will are still one with their dæmons, but they have the ability to go as far as they want from them, without experiencing the pain and agony they used to. The separation ‘loosens the boundaries of the self, and, in so doing, enriches it’ (Colás 2005:57).

But the dæmons have learnt more important things, too: while the only recently caused Dust-stream out of the universe has been called to a halt by Lyra and Will, it turns out that this is not the end of the loss of consciousness:

‘Every time we made an opening,’ said Kirjava [...] ‘every time anyone made an opening between the worlds, [...] the knife cut into the emptiness outside. The same emptiness there is down in the abyss. We never knew. No one knew, because the edge was too fine to see. But it was quite big enough for Dust to leak out of. [...] There were thousands [of windows] that they never closed up. So all this time, Dust has been leaking out of the worlds and into nothingness.’ (AS, 512)

Lyra and Will, however, have been told by Will’s father that dæmons cannot survive in another world for too long: ‘your dæmon can only live its full life in the world it was born in. Elsewhere it will eventually sicken and die’ (381). They realise they will not be able to be together, as each of them has to live their life in their own world. Their dæmons function as an extreme affirmation that ‘there is no elsewhere’: no afterlife, but also no other world to live in. This clearly advocates the idea that ‘escapism is fatal to consciousness’ (Lenz, 2005:9): we should not try to live our lives somewhere else, be it in our fantasy or awaiting a hoped-for afterlife. Here, Dust and dæmons are again shown to be thoroughly conjoined: both act as a reason why humans should build the Republic of Heaven where they are, why ‘there is no elsewhere’: escapism is fatal both to Dust and to dæmons.

Xaphania tells Lyra and Will that if they help everyone else in your worlds [...] to learn and understand about themselves and each other and the way everything works, and by showing them how to be kind instead of cruel, and patient instead of hasty, and cheerful instead of surly, and above all how to keep their minds open and free and curious... Then they will renew enough [Dust] to replace what is lost through one window. So there could be one left open. (AS, 520)

For a moment hope flares up in the two lovers, but then they realise that this one window should be the one that allows the dead to be one with the world again. They have the choice between happiness for themselves or salvation for all of the dead – hardly an actual choice for moral human beings, so they decide that they must be separated forever. Gooderham
remarks that the ‘final section of the text thus rewrites, after the fall, the expulsion from paradise’ (2003:169), this time not as a punishment, a consequence of disobedience, but as a consequence of a moral choice.

9. Religious controversy

In the chapter ‘Dust discussed’ I have already shown that some scholars consider Dust as Pullman’s alternative God. In this chapter I will go deeper into the much-discussed subject of Pullman and religion. Especially following the publication of The Amber Spyglass in 2000, Pullman and his writings were fiercely attacked by some Christian organisations, journalists and scholars, and a polemic arose between his ardent opponents and his – usually as ardent – supporters. First, I will discuss the claim that Pullman intends his trilogy as propaganda for atheism: I will take a closer look at the polemic surrounding the passages that gave most rise to religious offence, namely the way the Church is put in bad light and the death of the Authority; and next I will go into Pinsent’s 2005 article which notices surprisingly many parallels between the feminist theologians and Pullman’s ideology.

9.1 ‘No child should be permitted near these books’\(^\text{12}\): atheism for kids?

Columnist Peter Hitchens published a scathing criticism of Pullman following the awarding of The Amber Spyglass with the Whitbread Book of the Year Award, titled This is The Most Dangerous Author in Britain, saying that ‘[h]e is the anti-Lewis, the one the atheists would have been praying for, if atheists prayed’, who writes books that ‘liberal but literate parents, the sort of people who work for the BBC and want all the advantages of a Christian culture without the tiresome bother of having to worship a God they think they are too smart to believe in’ can give to their children and who ‘knows perfectly well what he is doing’ (2002:63). Later, Hitchens added that ‘these are not just stories. These have a powerful propagandist purpose’ (Gunn, 2003, part 7). Entire warning pamphlets have been issued by Catholic organisations\(^\text{13}\) following the release of The Golden Compass, a New Line Cinema film based on Northern Lights. William Donohue, president of the Catholic League, said that Pullman ‘sells atheism for kids’, that the trilogy ‘was written to promote atheism and denigrate Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism’ (Catholic League 2007), and a pamphlet issued by his organisation states that Pullman wants to teach children ‘a vile lesson in a back-door


manner’ (Catholic League 2007a:26). Other Catholic reviewers have called the trilogy ‘a sophomoric anti-Christian diatribe, but dangerous precisely because it is packaged as a fun series of books for young adults’ (Krehbiel 2001) and, plain and simple, ‘evil’ (Vere 2007), while some went quite far in attacking not only the books, but the author’s person as well, calling him ‘the pied piper of the Devil’ and ‘proof that our culture deserves a millstone and another flood’ (Catholic Action UK, 2007). These are no mild accusations, so where do they stem from? Overall, two aspects of His Dark Materials can be discerned that seem to have caused the most controversy. The one-sidedly negative portrayal of the Magisterium (and by expansion Christianity), and the fact that, through the use of actual religious language, the line between fantasy and reality becomes unsettlingly thin is most certainly a stumbling block for many Christians. The second aspect is the death of the Authority, causing some opponents to claim that ‘the point of the whole story [is] to kill the "Authority" aka God’ (qtd. by American Papist 2007).

9.1.1 ‘The Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake, that’s all’¹⁴: fantasy or reality?

There is no denying that, while he succeeds on many levels to tell a balanced story with a large amount of well-developed characters, Pullman fails to keep this up when talking about the Magisterium: apart from Mrs Coulter, every character associated with the Church is evil. From the president of the Consistorial Court to Father Gomez, who is sent, ‘like the arrow of God’ (AS, 75), after Lyra to kill her, to the drunken Russian priest who offers Will vodka and is suggested to have paedophile traits (AS, 103): all of them are despicable, and each one even more nefarious than the next. Pullman has in fact admitted this, too, saying that it is ‘an artistic flaw’ (Gunn, part 7, 2003) – which is the least that can be said about it: it does not only weaken the otherwise very powerful narrative, but it has also contributed to the offence the story caused in many Christians.

Gooderham remarks that ‘the offense is a surprising one, insofar as the trilogy belongs to a fantasy tradition’ (2003:155) – but Pullman does not live up completely to the conventions of the high fantasy genre (which includes Lewis’ The Chronicles of Narnia and Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings), as ‘explicit metaphysical, religious or ideological language characteristically does not appear in high fantasy texts’ (156). This is of course quite the opposite of what Pullman does: he uses Biblical concepts and terms such as the Fall, Eve, God, Satan, original sin, heaven and so on, and on top of that is his fantastical Church suspiciously much like the real Church, again precisely because of the use of ecclesiastical

¹⁴ AS, 464
language. The fact that he locates the Magisterium not in our world but in Lyra's — making it a fantasy creation — may not create enough distance for some readers:

The careful reader must recognize and may be intrigued by Pullman's sleight of hand; such narrative tactics must, however, be called into question as liable to lead the young (and naïve of all ages) into a confusion of fantasy with actual organizations — with the effect of unproductive posturing on both sides of the ideological divide. (Gooderham 2003:159)

This is indeed well noted, and the mentioned effect has proven to be all too real: Pullman's opponents do not wish to be convinced that the story is not about the Christian God and the actual Catholic Church, and his supporters fail to recognise that, for a Christian, to see the very basis of one's faith (God, the Fall, heaven) 'uncovered' as lies, is quite upsetting, especially if this is presented as a children's story. Padley and Padley (2006:326) state that 'his series is crafted in a manner which actively promotes comparison between the written and the real,' and Pullman himself has added to the controversy by stating that 'Northern Lights is not a fantasy. It's a work of stark realism' (Parsons and Nicholson 1999:131).

A few scholars, such as Freitas (2007) and Leet, have taken up the task to try and oppose this view. Leet (2005:184-185) argues that 'these accusations are based on faulty analyses of textual evidence', whereupon he defends Mary's statement that '[t]he Christian religion is a very powerful and convincing mistake' (AS, 464), saying that this is not intended as an overall judgement of Christianity, but that 'it comes more from a personal reflection' (2005:184), implying that what she means is that it was a very powerful mistake in her personal life (she was a nun before she became a scientist). Unfortunately, this is not a very convincing argument — even if Leet was right about this instance, it is obvious from almost innumerable other occasions that Pullman does not agree with orthodox religion, making Leet's argument a lot less valuable:

'[The Magisterium has] tried to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can't control them, it cuts them out.' (witch Ruta Skadi, SK, 52)

'There are two great powers,' [John Parry] said, 'and they've been fighting since time began. Every advance in human life, every scrap of knowledge and wisdom and decency we have has been torn by one side from the teeth of the other. Every little increase in human freedom has been fought over ferociously between those who want us to know more and be wiser and stronger, and those who want us to obey and be humble and submit.' (SK, 335)

'The Authority considers that conscious beings of every kind have become dangerously independent [...].' (AS, 63)

However, Freitas does make a good point, backed by Pullman himself, in saying that '[h]is trilogy is not filled with attacks on Christianity, but with attacks on authorities who claim access to one true interpretation of a religion. [...] Pullman's work is not anti-Christian, but
anti-orthodox’ (2007). This seems like a much more convincing claim to me, the more so because Pullman has stated that

[w]hat the book is condemning, is specifically ecclesiastical authority, because it seems to me as if churches, of every sort and of every religion, have got hold of a very good way of controlling human lives [...] They borrow an authority from a non-existent God [...] in order to wield power over human lives. (Gunn, part 6, 2003)

Leet notes that ‘this does not mean that religious values [...] are absent from his trilogy. Quite the contrary, these virtues are very much exemplified by the actions of Lyra [and] her companions’ (2005:176-177). What he attacks in his books is not so much the ultimate message of Christianity – which I believe to be the promotion of love, kindness, gratefulness and mercy – as the attitude of the Church, that has appropriated (sometimes far-reaching) authority to itself in the name of God and Christianity: it is not religion that he hates, but organised religion.15 Pullman has actually hailed Jesus Christ, saying that ‘if only people had listened to Jesus instead of the priests who came after him, we’d all be a lot better off’ (Gunn, part 6, 2003). He does not mean to denounce Christians, he wants to bring the unlawful appropriation of authority by the Church as an organisation under attention. The fact that the God in His Dark Materials is called the Authority (amongst many other names; this is the only name that is not really used by Christianity) is no coincidence: the Authority is a false god who has claimed power for himself, and a title of ‘King' that he never deserved.

As said above, the last and most important message the author wants to give his readers is the importance of the Republic of Heaven, a concept about which some scholars are not very enthusiastic, but in fact it is to Pullman’s advantage when it comes to defending himself in this discussion. Gooderham sneeringly calls it ‘uncontentious’, saying that ‘[i]ndeed it might well, half a century ago, have appeared unquestioned on one of the pages of a Narnia book!’ (2003:173) – but why should being uncontentious be a bad thing? Gooderham seems disappointed that Pullman does not call up his readers to rally against Christianity, so to speak. Asked what he has to say about the books’ controversy, Pullman answered:

[The] qualities the story celebrates and praises are those of love, kindness, tolerance, courage, openheartedness. And the qualities that the story condemns are cruelty, intolerance, zealotry, fanaticism. Well, who could quarrel with that? Even Peter Hitchens would find it hard to quarrel with that... No, he wouldn’t. He could do that. (Gunn, part 7, 2003)

15 Here again, Pullman finds an ally in Blake, who also exhibited a resentment for the clergy: ‘And priests in black gowns were walking their rounds / And binding with briars my joys & desires’ (The Garden of Love) REFERENCE
9.1.2 The death of the Authority

Another story element that has been the subject of many worried Christians’ reactions is the death of the Authority. Unlike the former claim, which was definitely not entirely out of place, there are two valuable arguments to oppose the allegation that Pullman kills off God in His Dark Materials. The first one is that God is not killed: Lyra does not set out to kill him (this is Lord Asriel’s goal, and I have shown that this is not a character the reader is meant to sympathise with easily) and he is not murdered but simply dies – this can be derived from textual evidence. The second argument is a little more contested, as it claims that Pullman’s Authority is not God – and therefore, God does not die.

Let us first take a look at the passage in which the Authority dies. Will and Lyra are looking for their dæmons while there is a battle going on between Asriel’s forces and those of Metatron (the Authority’s regent) as they stumble upon a crashed crystal litter, an ancient angel trapped inside:

‘Oh Will, he’s still alive! But – the poor thing...’

Will saw her hands pressing against the crystal, trying to reach the angel and comfort him; because he was so old, and he was terrified, crying like a baby and cowering away into the lowest corner. [...]

Will [...] reached in to help the angel out. Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and murble in fear and pain and misery [...].

‘It’s all right,’ Will said, ‘we can help you hide, at least. Come on, we won’t hurt you.’ [...] 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. (AS, 431-432)

The Authority is not killed, he simply dies from old age – and is profoundly relieved of finally being allowed to do so, as ‘Metatron and those who needed him to serve as a figurehead for their own ‘religious’ policies’ (Leet, 2005:186) have kept him alive too long already. Moreover, it is clear that Lyra and Will mean no harm: they feel sorry for him and want to comfort him. What once was a powerful and deceitful angel has now become a decrepit, pitiful old being. Russell observes correctly that ‘this new Eve’s arrival signals the end of the Authority’s reign but does not actually cause it. [...] This is not murder but a transition, between deceit seen as ‘aged’ and true knowledge embodied as ‘youth’.’(2005:220)

In addition to this argument, Leet and Freitas, among others, have brought to attention that the God who dies is not God: he is what Freitas and King call an ‘imposter God’ (2007): he is not the creator, he is made up of Dust like every other angel – but he deceived them all, first telling the other angels he created them, and later doing the same with the first human beings. The Authority is a power-mad liar who had no right to proclaim himself King
(AS, 33-34). Leet (2005:185) agrees, using the same argument: it is clearly stated in the text that the Authority appropriated the names of ‘God, the Creator, the Lord, Yahweh’: ‘these were all names he gave himself’ (AS, 33). Interestingly, Padley and Padley essentially use the same argument, namely that the Authority is not the Christian God, to assert that Pullman is wrong about God, that he does not know what he is talking about – (willingly?) misinterpreting the portrayal of the Authority: ‘the character he describes as the Authority bears no resemblance to the classical Christian expression of God’ (2006:328). They even misread the above-mentioned clear textual evidence, saying that ‘although Pullman applies to the Authority many names that Christianity uses for the extra-temporal creator of all (such as the Lord, Yahweh [...] ), the figure in His Dark Materials is nothing of the sort’ (331, emphasis added): it is not Pullman who gives the Authority these names, it is the Authority himself. He is not supposed to be the Christian God at all: he only pretends to be God.

9.2 Pullman as a feminist theologian: Pinsent

I have already mentioned the fact that Pullman casts females as playing the most important roles in his mythology (Xaphania as leader of the rebel angels, Lyra as the second Eve, Mary as temptress), and whether this is a conscious decision or not, it does seem to want to against the androcentric character of the (especially Roman Catholic) Church, in which men hold almost all of the positions of the clergy. This is in line with feminist theology: theologian Gerda Lerner is paraphrased by Loades:

Where the male has been thought to represent the whole of humanity, the half has been mistaken for the whole. [...] Feminist theologians want to eliminate [this] androcentric fallacy, and rely on themselves for understanding the God they have found to be theirs, though mediated to them by a religious tradition which causes them profound problems as one powerful form of mediating that fallacy. (1990,1-2)

In her article ‘Unexpected allies? Pullman and the Feminist Theologians’, Pinsent detects a ‘surprising degree of kinship’ (2005:200), as ‘many of the challenges that Pullman poses to established religion have already, quite independently, been set by feminist theologians’ (199). She highlights several points of similarity. First of all, the afore-mentioned greater role he ascribes to women: according to Pinsent, this is ‘consonant with the renewed understanding of the female role in a religious context’ (200). He depicts women no longer as compulsorily passive beings, or even worse, as the cause of mankind’s burden of original sin, but as the liberators of man, those who led the human race to consciousness and knowledge. This takes us straight to the next common ground, namely the view on the story
of the Fall. As shown, Pullman sees the Fall ‘not as a disaster but as a coming of age for the human race’ (202), something many feminist scholars agree upon. Primavesi comments:

It is Eve […] who perceives the desirability of procuring wisdom. [The serpent] found in the woman that intense thirst for knowledge that the simple pleasures of flower-picking and talking with Adam did not satisfy. […] God did not want the woman and man to know good from evil. What a very infantile stupid pair they would have remained! (1991:226)

This is exactly what Pullman feels: he sees original sin as ‘a jolly good thing’ as it is ‘the beginning of wisdom’ (Gunn, part 5, 2003). A third point of agreement Pinsent discerns is the notion that ‘the idea of a personal God […] is dead’ (Pullman interview, Billen 2003). Pullman added that this idea is what he is killing by letting God die in his trilogy. Feminist theologians such as McFague (1987) and Wren (1989) agree that this metaphor of God as a king and ruler is no longer useful:

[T]he well-established metaphors have in many cases served their turn and new ones need to be created. As far as both Pullman and the feminist writers are concerned, these new metaphors can be sought in two main areas – in matter itself and in the spirit of Wisdom. (Pinsent 2005:201)

Dust is such a new metaphor: as said before, Pullman’s ‘all-inclusive metaphor’ (Bird 2001) contains both matter and the spirit of knowledge or wisdom, and it has indeed been suggested that it functions as an alternative deity (Bird 2005, Freitas 2007). Another similarity between Pullman’s mythology and the convictions of some feminist theologians is the view on the afterlife. There is no afterlife in His Dark Materials, ‘no eternity in heaven to be looked toward as a reward for denying oneself in this world and hoping to be happy in the next’ (Pinsent 2005:204). Theologian Ruether remarks that ‘the focus of redemptive hope shifts to […] a hope for a this-worldly transformation of unjust relationships that would bring about a time of justice and peace within history’ (1998:273-274). This brings to mind Pullman’s Republic of Heaven, with its idea that we should not wait for heaven, but instead create heaven on earth. The last shared opinion is the perception of the Christian Church: Pinsent sees ‘little if any difference in the degree of hostility expressed toward what is seen as the patriarchal structure of the Church as it is today’ (2005:206), in which women occupy ‘the bottom of a God-ordered hierarchy’ (Malone 1985:109). Pullman portrays the Magisterium quite like the feminists see the Church.

It can be concluded that Pullman and the feminist theologians are indeed ‘allies’ in several respects: they do not only call the male-dominated structure of the Church into question, but they also try to look beyond the organisation and liturgy to go back to the spiritual basis of the religion.
10. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have attempted to go deeper into the subject of dæmons and Dust, and I have asserted that a strong link exists between them. Having elaborated on dæmons, I believe I have succeeded in bringing in enough textual evidence to support my claim that dæmons represent the soul, act as a conscience and are closely connected to sexuality.

Dust is shown to work as an intricate metaphor in the story, demonstrating that without the ‘necessary convergence of contraries’ (Bird 2001:122), man cannot be fully alive and awake. Dust represents above all consciousness, and there are some arguments that support the claim that Dust serves as an alternative to the personal deity, be it with that difference that the relationship between Dust and humans is much more symbiotic, as they depend on one another for their sustenance.

As to my assertion that Dust and dæmons are profoundly interlinked, I have established that they share three important functions: first of all, they both are material manifestations of the transition from innocence to experience, in the sense that a dæmon gradually settles during this process, and that, at the same time, Dust becomes more attracted to the human. In fact, as these two things happen simultaneously, it is impossible to determine which is the cause for the other, supporting the idea they are strongly connected. Secondly, Dust and dæmons are both affirmations of the fatality of escapism: Dust leaks away through the windows made by the subtle knife (these windows can be considered the ultimate form of escapism as they provide access to another universe), and dæmons can only survive in the world they were born in – in that way making it impossible for their humans to escape permanently. Finally, the author uses both Dust and dæmons to demonstrate that there is no spirit-matter dichotomy. Dust holds every position on the spirit-matter spectrum, as it is at the same time the ultimate manifestation of the spiritual and an actual detectable particle, while, firstly, dæmons are a physical representation of the soul (which is, of course, usually not considered to be physical), and secondly, the vitally important bond between human and dæmon demonstrates that the opposites of body and soul (matter and spirit) are necessarily conjoined. I believe these three substantial mutual functions endorse the claim that Dust and dæmons are thoroughly interconnected.

The new philosophy of life that is put forward by the author is based on several story elements, namely the absence of an afterlife, the stories that the harpies in the land of the dead need to be told, the window that allows the dead to become one with the universe again, causing Dust to leak away, and the fact that a dæmon can only live in its own world:
all of these lead to the idea of the Republic of Heaven, which means that, as there is no next life, we should live our lives to the fullest, and be creative, thinking, loving human beings.

Concerning religion in *His Dark Materials*, I have shown that because of Pullman’s explicit use of ecclesiastical language, the boundary between fantasy and reality is reduced to a line too thin for some readers to enjoy, although what he really means to attack is not religion but *organised* religion. Finally, using Pinsent (2005), I have demonstrated how the Christian feminist theologians share many ideas with Pullman.
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