

**MIRROR-IMAGES, OR LOVE AS RELIGION IN PHILIP PULLMAN'S TRILOGY,  
*HIS DARK MATERIALS***

**ZSUZSANNA TÓTH**

University of Szeged

Email: dzsini24@freemail.hu

***Abstract:** Philip Pullman retells mankind's archetypal memories of the Fall in his fantasy trilogy, His Dark Materials. I aim to prove that the age-old religious desire for the oneness of the sacred and the profane, as well as of spirit and matter is manifested in Pullman's fictional mythology in a way that religion and love also turn out to be one.*

***Keywords:** fantasy literature, myth-criticism, Philip Pullman, religious symbolism*

## **1. Introduction**

Philip Pullman (1946- ), a British author of children's and juvenile fiction, reinterprets the Judeo-Christian myth of the Fall of Man with God, Adam, Eve and the Serpent in his post-modern fantasy book trilogy, entitled *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), written for young adults. Accordingly, throughout the three novels, titled *Northern Lights/The Golden Compass* (abbreviated as *GC*) (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (abbreviated as *SK*) (1997) and *The Amber Spyglass* (abbreviated as *AS*) (2000), the two twelve-year old protagonists called Lyra and William, as the second Eve and the second Adam, respectively, wander through several parallel universes so as to save intellectual and sensual consciousness threatened by the restrictions of religious organizations. The mission of these two protagonists culminates in the fulfilment of the second, virtually redeeming Fall, which Pullman sees as a *Felix culpa* (happy sin), a turning point in human evolution, "when human beings decided to become fully themselves instead of being the pets or creatures of another power" (Fried).

Pullman consciously integrated Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian mythological themes and traditional archetypes into the creation of his own fictional mythology, called mythopoesis, in his trilogy. The focus of my study is the presence of humankind's age-old experiences of the disintegration and restoration of ancient oneness with the divine and all living beings – it is the core of all belief-systems – in Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. In general, one is the symbol of ancient unity, completeness, the deity; it is the *Prima Causa* (the first cause) that includes continuity and totality (Pál and Újvári 1997:114). My aim is to argue that, on the one hand, Pullman offers three manifestations of the oneness of the sacred and the profane, as well as of spirit and matter in the mythopoesis of *His Dark Materials*: a mysterious deity called Dust, the Republic of Heaven, and the happy annihilation of the self

after death. On the other hand, I also aim to prove that all three of them rely on the bond of love so strongly that the religion depicted in Pullman's story and Love become one.

My analysis on the way the author decomposes and rewrites distinctive religious motif systems in his literary work relies on myth criticism, a kind of literary interpretation that regards literary works as expressions or embodiments of recurrent mythic patterns and structures, or of 'timeless' archetypes. The reason is the most influential modern myth critic, Northrop Frye (1973:134-135), who finds that "[t]he structural principles of literature are as closely related to mythology and comparative religion as those of painting are to geometry."

## **2. Dust, the Divine Embodiment of All "[H]appiness, [L]ife and [H]ope"**

The anonymity of any creator and the failure of the tyrannical angel called the Authority gradually unveil the central role of a mysterious cosmic particle, called Rusakow particles or Dust or shadow particles or *straf*, which is virtually the true deity in Pullman's mythopoesis. Most main characters are engaged in a quest either to destroy it or to preserve it.

The structure and nature of Dust implies that this mysterious cosmic particle can be an embodiment of the ancient human desire for unity. First, Dust consists of special particles, which "from what [they] are, spirit; from what [they] do, matter," because "mater and spirit are one" (AS 220-221). Anne-Marie Bird (2005:191) states that the concept of Dust rejects "the desire to describe, categorize, and finally to segregate all that is ordered and rational from all that is chaotic or 'other'." Second, Dust is always found close to human beings because, and this is the reason why it is the core of Pullman's mythopoesis, Dust is both the condition of and the product of consciousness, curiosity and knowledge, both intellectual and sensual. Taking into account that light has been the symbol of knowledge, life and truth (Pál and Újvári 1997:141) and the golden colour has been the expression of transcendence (Pál and Újvári 1997:53), Dust does not surprisingly appear to be "a strange faint golden glimmer, like a luminous misty rain" (AS 318).

Dust's mode of existence can be associated with pantheism or panentheism, the beliefs in oneness with all living things. Pantheism is, basically, a doctrine according to which God and the universe are identical. John Ferguson (1976:142) considers the Jewish-Dutch Baruch Spinoza and the German G. W. Friedrich Hegel the leading Western philosophers of pantheism. In contrast, the doctrine of panentheism professes that "God is immanent in all things but also transcendent, so that every part of the universe has its existence in God; but He is more than the sum total of those parts" (Ferguson 1976:142). Pat Pinsent (2005:207) argues that this "sense of feeling connected to other living beings, and indeed to nature itself, sometimes involving a degree of awe and a recognition of some form of presence" is often expressed by people who feel alienated from religious bodies. Anne-Marie Bird (2005:192) finds Dust and the universe interchangeable because "there is no distinction between the 'source' and the 'product'."

The ontology of Dust is the manifestation of Love itself, the fundamental attractive force pervading and binding the universe. "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." (AS 28) Furthermore, "matter loved Dust. It didn't want to see it go." (AS 404)

Here the keyword is *love* or *Eros*, which in Greco-Roman mythology was the cosmic basic principle operating the world, also the personification of sexual desire (Pál and Újvári 1997:124). In the era of the Renaissance, although Marsilio Ficino, an Italian humanist philosopher, was responsible for the Renaissance revival of Plato in Western culture, the Jewish Portuguese philosopher Judah Leon Abravanel, better known as Leone Ebreo's work, entitled *Dialoghi d'amore* [*Dialogues of Love*], was one of the most important philosophical works of his time. The author seeks to define love in philosophical terms by structuring his dialogue as a conversation between two abstract characters, Philo as love or appetite, and Sophia as science or wisdom. Ebreo echoes the world view of antiquity, according to which love is responsible for the unity of the universe, also the source of the existence of all things in the world (Klaniczay 1976:324). In light of this, it is not surprising that Donna Freitas (2007:25) believes Dust to hold everything together because it is "the ultimate, unifying and animating principle of the universe." What is more, Dust is part and parcel of the world and human beings so intimately that "it is as if the universe and God [Dust] are *lovers*, and the erotic love enjoyed between creatures [is] a tangible expression of this divine intimacy" (Freitas and King 2007:135).

Not only Freitas but also Pullman himself seems to be deeply fascinated by Dust. He explained the origin of the idea of Dust in an interview:

This notion of dark matter – something all-pervasive and absolutely necessary but totally mysterious in the universe – was one of the starting points. [...] the idea that Dust should be in some sense emblematic of consciousness and original sin – what the churches traditionally used to understand by sin, namely disobedience, the thing that made us human in the first place – seemed too tempting to ignore, so I put them together." (Fried 2012)

He even plans to write a companion novel to *His Dark Materials* trilogy with the title *The Book of Dust*.

### **3. Consciousness, Above All: The Republic of Heaven**

Although Dust is definitely treated as a divinity in Pullman's mythopoesis, it is far from being omnipotent, omnipresent and immortal. Dust needs all conscious beings for its own survival. The reason is:

Dust came into being when living things became conscious themselves; but it needed some feedback system to reinforce it and make it safe, [...]. Without something like that, it would all vanish. Thought, imagination, feeling, would all wither and blow away, leaving nothing but a brutish automatism. (AS 403)

In other words, the existence of Dust depends on all human beings, just as their happiness depends on Dust. According to Freitas (2007), the fact that this divinity "yearns to be loved through our respect for the body, the earth, and through our lives in the here and now" is the proof of Pullman's definite rejection of the classical notion of a distant, detached and

transcendent God. By the way, the most obvious enemy of Dust in Pullman's mythopoesis is the Church itself that tried to "suppress and control every natural impulse" (SK 44), and, in accordance with this, it decided that "Dust was the physical evidence for original sin" (GC 325). Margarita Bertilsson (1991:301) declares that the central task for the Christian religion has always been "to control sexual love and to make it subservient to religion."

Nevertheless, as the Kingdom of Heaven (the confidence in the afterlife and in the otherworldly compensation for abjuring worldly pleasures) is doubtful, people *must* be enlightened about the importance of intellectual and sensual curiosity, pleasure and wisdom, to preserve and make more and more Dust, the condition of consciousness. For the British author, the key value of the Republic of Heaven is the sense that "this world where we live is our true home. [...] This is a physical universe and we are physical beings made of material stuff" (Roberts 2002). The mission of saving Dust is associated with building the Republic of Heaven, which has to be primarily preached by the protagonists of Pullman's story, Lyra and Will as the second Eve and Adam:

Conscious beings make Dust – they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on.

And if you [Lyra and Will] help everyone else in your worlds to do that, by helping them 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. (AS 440-441)

The oneness of the sacred and the profane is realized by the Republic of Heaven because the fact that humans are responsible for themselves and, in this way, for Dust, elevates and equals man with the divine. By the realization of the Republic of Heaven, each human being can become the *middle* of his own world, the microcosm inside the macrocosm, the point around which the universe revolves, and the point containing all options (Pál and Újvári 1997:287). What is more, the significance of this institution is best captured by the theories of Leone Ebreo in his book, *Dialoghi d'amore*. By resembling the human and the cosmic forms of love, he advertised the comprehension of the central role of man as the reduced replica of the universe, imagined as a living organism always making love (Klaniczay 1976:324). In this way, the Jewish philosopher created the theory of the perfect harmony of the microcosm and macrocosm, according to which man can become part of the true harmony – only with the help of love (Klaniczay 1976:324). In Pullman's story, the most prominent examples for man as the centre emanating and receiving love in the universe are the second Eve and Adam. Due to their cosmic role, when Lyra and Will fall in love with each other, the (rather contradictory) fulfilment of their true love – a *Felix culpa*, the second Fall – partly stops Dust leaking from the universe, or dying.

The Republic of Heaven also achieves the togetherness of past, present and future generations. Pullman defines this institution as "a sense of being connected to other people, to people who are not here any more, to those who have gone before us. And [it is also] a sense of being connected to the universe itself." (Roberts 2002) Therefore, the Republic of Heaven

reveals Pullman's yearning for oneness, even for the advent of a Golden Age which, in the author's understanding, is not back to childhood but going forward, through the travails and difficulties of life with the hope of approaching paradise again.

Despite of these resemblances to oneness, however, the establishment of the Republic of Heaven also commits to the number two. Instead of one, the number of divine omniscience in general, the Republic of Heaven also resembles the dualism of the two, giving birth to dialectics, the basis of all efforts, movements, struggles and development (Pál and Újvári 1997:255). Besides, Pullman's explanation on his guiding principle also points to the number two:

[I]f you look at the book carefully you will see a lot of little patterns throughout [...], all of which have to do with two things or two people or a person and a place that were very close to each other are split apart. [...] I had to be true to that pattern because that is the basic pattern of the whole story. (Pullman 2002)

Similarly, the number of two as an archetype is, on the one hand, connected to the perception of humankind's primordial experience of separation from perfect oneness (Me and You, the One and another One), and on the other, the two produces dissociation, contrast, distortion and confusion (Pál and Újvári 1997:255). The cosmic need for Dust created by the everyday joys and wonders of human life, thus, under the great enterprise of the Republic of Heaven requires the oneness of Eve and Adam becoming two, in other words the sacrifice of Lyra and Will's love.

Nevertheless, Love for and from Dust, as the intellectual and sensual consciousness, is above everything – not by obligation but by *free will*. As one of the main manifestations of religious cults, devotion is the symbol of self-sacrifice, with the function of implying *dependence on and love for* the deity (Pál and Újvári 1997:29). In a deeper sense, sacrifice can renew the world, the relationship of human and gods (Pál and Újvári 1997:29). This is exactly what happens to Pullman's protagonists, whose sacrifice of their own happiness of growing up together saves, restores, even renews the relationship between Dust and all conscious beings within the framework of the Republic of Heaven. According to Freitas (2007:156),

Lyra and Will choose to love in a way that sacrifices their own desire to be together on behalf of their larger love for all worlds. They sacrifice their own erotic love to save Erotic Love, to allow Love to flourish among others for all the future. This is, Pullman implies, the right choice, but it is no less difficult because it is right.

In light of this, Pullman's story implies that "grand meanings in life are made, not by the imposition of external forces but through an individual's daily choices to help others" (Freitas and King 2007:165). Without Dust there is no life. Obligation and altruism are necessary because "no one could [be able to build the Republic of Heaven] if they put themselves first (AS 464). Lyra and Will accept this, understanding that "there are fates that even the most powerful have to submit to" (AS 440), because of the responsibility-taking for ourselves and

for the others. Pullman believes that everyone has the responsibility to “make this place into a Republic of Heaven for everyone” (Roberts 2002). In this way, the quest to preserve Dust becomes the noblest and deepest part of humanity.

#### **4. “The most sweet and desirable end”: The Happy Annihilation of the Self after Death**

Taking Dust and the Republic of Heaven into account, oneness in Pullman’s mythopoesis seems to be obviously connected to life; however, death, more precisely the total annihilation of the self, also provides a sense of completeness with the universe. In Pullman’s story when people deace, they get into the Land of the Dead, which is neither a place of reward, nor a place of punishment, but “a place of nothing” (AS 286), where every ghost is tormented by harpies. In the tradition of the Orphic Journey or Christ’s Harrowing of Hell, Lyra and Will descend to the underworld and lead the ghosts out through an opening into the wide open space, where the ghosts can merge with the cosmos, without preserving identity. As Lyra informs the ghosts: “When you go out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart, [...]. You’ll drift apart, it’s true, but you’ll be out in the open, part of everything alive again.” (AS 286) This obliteration borrowed from atomist philosophers like Epicurus is portrayed as a sort of ecstasy and pleasure, on entering a true Heaven:

They [the ghosts] took a few steps in the world of grass and air and silver light, and looked around, their faces transformed with joy [...] and held out their arms as if they were embracing the whole universe; and then, as if they were made of mist or smoke, they simply drifted away, becoming part of the earth and the dew and the night breeze. (AS 385-386)

The soul made of Dust returns to Dust. In this way, the atoms of the disintegrated individual go on in “the death-rebirth cycle of nature” over and over again (Hunt and Lenz 2001:160).

This artistic imagination on dissolving in the divine recalls two religious traditions. On the one hand, the personal experience of a supreme being is called mysticism, the soul’s direct union with God (*unio mistica*) – in Pullman’s story with Dust. Mysticism functions to redirect the libido into religious sentiments (Ferguson 1976:151); accordingly, Ferguson (1976:127) informs us that “the true great strands of *agape* and *eros* come together.” This affectionate union of the two turns out to be the true Paradise, the perfect harmony between God and man, or all living things (Pál and Újvári 1997:372). Of course, it must be deserved by contributing to the establishment of the Republic of Heaven.

On the other hand, the souls’ joyful mergence with the cosmos depicted in Pullman’s mythopoesis is associated with a desire for continuity, either spiritual or material, after death. This desire has a long tradition in Western culture from the earliest times. Jonathan Dollimore (1998:xx) states that “[r]eligiously, the desire for eternity would be expressed in life as a conflict between the need to struggle forward and the yearning to return, both path leading to a divine death – that peace that passes all understanding.” In *His Dark Materials* trilogy the struggle forward and the leaving of valuable things behind when building the Republic of Heaven evokes the personification of Eros as a desire for immortality in Plato’s *Symposium*, in which eternal existence on the material level means procreation, while on the spiritual level

the creation of intellectual and artistic works. Nevertheless, the more seductive option for continuity in Pullman's mythopoesis seems to be rather living on in Dust, through Dust and new living things after the annihilation of the soul. The reason is death has been considered to be the only solution for the universal experience of the growing alienation in the evolution of the self by both antique and modern philosophers, such as Plato and Georges Bataille. As Dollimore (1998:xxi) argues, "death has held out the promise of a release from [...] the pain of being individuated (separate, differentiated, alone)." After all, I venture to state that the desired goal of a long and busy life as part of Pullman's propagation of *biophilia* (the love of life) is the sweet, peaceful death so as to become an integral part of the living cosmos animated with love.

As Pullman definitely closed the possibility of continuing the relationship between Lyra and Will, who wanted to live their lives together, the only thing that can console the desperate lovers is the hope of their final union after death. This solution faithfully follows the Christian narrative of the Fall which, according to Dollimore (1998:52), is characterized by the transition from unity to division, the experience of desire as loss and absence, and finally the *compulsion to reunite*. It is in accordance with this that Pullman's Adam and Eve comfort each other:

I [Lyra]'ll be looking for you, Will, every moment, every single moment. And when we do find each other again, we'll cling together so tight that nothing and no one'll ever tear us apart. Every atom of me and every atom of you... We'll live in birds and flowers and dragonflies and pine trees and in clouds and in those little specks of light you see floating in sunbeams... And when they use our atoms to make new lives, they won't just be able to take one, they'll have to take two, one of you and one of me, we'll be joined so tight... (AS 445)

However, Pinsent (2005:204) observes that this romantic hope Lyra expresses to Will about their future union may seen as her own "creation of a kind of myth of faithful love enduring forever, contrary to the harsh impersonal reality of indiscriminate final oblivion." This is how Pullman immortalizes William and Lyra's love.

## 5. Conclusion

In the mythopoesis of *His Dark Materials* trilogy, yearning for the completeness with the cosmos as the divine is manifested in the perfect unity of the sacred and the profane, spirit and matter. In light of this, Pullman offers three particular notions of togetherness: Dust, the Republic of Heaven, and the happy annihilation of the self. Although the author's decomposition and rewriting of distinctive religious motif systems into these fictional manifestations of oneness are not always entirely free from contradiction, my myth-critical analysis proves that the individual dynamics formed among Dust, the Republic of Heaven and the happy annihilation of the self basically corresponds to the archetypal experiences with ancient unity. By the cohesive power of love, every one and every thing become the reflection of each other, in other words the *mirror-images* of each other, "the true image of what human

beings always could be, once they had come into their inheritance” (AS 421). In this way, mutual Love turns out to be Pullman’s religion.

## References

- Bertilsson, Margaret. 1991. “Love’s Labour Lost? A Sociological View” in *The Body. Social Process and Cultural Theory*. Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth and Brian S. Turner (Eds.). London: Sage, pp. 297 - 324.
- Bird, Anne-Marie. 2005. “Circumventing the Grand Narrative: Dust as an Alternative Theological Vision in Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*” in *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman’s Trilogy*. Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott (Eds.). Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 188 - 198.
- Dollimore, Jonathan. 1998. *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Ferguson, John. 1976. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Mysticism and the Mystery Religions*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Freitas, Donna and King, Jason. 2007. *Killing the Imposter God: Philip Pullman’s Spiritual Imagination in His Dark Materials*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Freitas, Donna. 2007. ‘The accidental heretic’ in *Salon* [Online]. Available: <http://www.salon.com/2007/12/07/freitas/> [Accessed 2012, September 29].
- Fried, Kerry. No date. “Darkness Visible: An Interview with Philip Pullman” in *Amazon.com Message* [Online]. Available: [http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html/ref=amb\\_link\\_2079432\\_11/002-7083137-2301611?ie=UTF8&docId=94589&pf\\_rd\\_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf\\_rd\\_s=center-2&pf\\_rd\\_r=0QW4GD8JBKQXMTFSBZT2&pf\\_rd\\_t=1401&pf\\_rd\\_p=196508801&pf\\_rd\\_i=9459](http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html/ref=amb_link_2079432_11/002-7083137-2301611?ie=UTF8&docId=94589&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_s=center-2&pf_rd_r=0QW4GD8JBKQXMTFSBZT2&pf_rd_t=1401&pf_rd_p=196508801&pf_rd_i=9459) [Accessed 2012, September 30].
- Frye, Northrop. 1973. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Hunt, Peter and Lenz, Millicent. 2001. *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction. Contemporary Classics of Children’s Literature*. London, New York: Continuum.
- Klaniczay, Tibor. 1976. *Hagyományok ébresztése*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó.
- Pál, József and Újvári, Edit (Eds.). 1997. *Szimbólumtár: Jelképek, motívumok, témák az egyetemes és a magyar kultúrából*. Budapest: Balassi.
- Pinsent, Pat. 2005. “Unexpected Allies? Pullman and the Feminist Theologians” in *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman’s Trilogy*. Millicent Lenz and Carole Scott (Eds.). Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 199 - 211.
- Pullman, Philip. 2002. “Philip Pullman” in *CBBC Newsround* [Online]. Available: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/chat/hotseat/newsid\\_1777000/1777895.stm#question12](http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/chat/hotseat/newsid_1777000/1777895.stm#question12) [Accessed 2012, September 29].
- Pullman, Philip. 2007. *His Dark Materials Book I: The Golden Compass*. New York: Lauren-Leaf.
- Pullman, Philip. 2007. *His Dark Materials Book II: The Subtle Knife*. New York: Lauren-Leaf.
- Pullman, Philip. 2007. *His Dark Materials Book III: The Amber Spyglass*. New York: Lauren-Leaf.
- Roberts, Susan. 2002. “A Dark Agenda?” *Surefish* [Online]. Available: [http://www.surefish.co.uk/culture/features/pullman\\_interview.htm](http://www.surefish.co.uk/culture/features/pullman_interview.htm) [Accessed 2012, September 29].

## Notes on the author

**Suzsanna Tóth** is a PhD candidate in the *British and American Literature and Culture* Programme at the Doctoral School of Literary Studies, University of Szeged, Hungary. Her research interests are religious



symbolism, and the theories of cultural memory, verbal and visual representations. She is currently conducting research on Philip Pullman's book trilogy, *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000).