

So easily corrupted



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Lord Acton, a British historian, once said “ All power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely”. Over the course of human history, the Church has been the focus of many criticisms, including but not limited to the relationship with the state, the persecution of heretics, the crusades, the Inquisition, and the homophobic beliefs. In the His Dark Materials series by Philip Pullman, the author seeks to convey the true nature of the Church and its effects on the world of men. He is influenced by Paradise Lost by John Milton, especially the Fall of Lucifer and the Fall of man. The Fall of Lucifer freed Satan and his fellow angels from the will of God. The Fall of man granted free will to men. Pullman favors another “ Fall” against the Church, or rather the men who oppress other men by using religion as a cover to further their own corrupt motives and carry out evil deeds. Additionally, Pullman believes in the power of analogies. In a rare interview, Pullman commented that “ If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales... It’s all about thinking by analogy. And analogy is an enormously powerful tool in science” (Jukes). Pullman employs this power of analogy to convey his own opinions on the Church while advocating for men to think for themselves through science, or rather evidence. And although, Pullman criticizes the Church and its dictatorial power over the world, he does not necessarily criticize the religion itself, rather how religion is used to cover up the immoral motives of men.

The first in the His Dark Materials series, The Golden Compass narrates a world under international theocracy by the Magisterium, also known as the Church. Pullman writes that “ Ever since Pope John Calvin had moved the set of the papacy to Geneva... the Church’s power over every aspect of life had

been absolute" (The Golden Compass 16). The Church seeks to suppress any sort of heresy and dominate the lives of men. As seen with the Master poisoning the wine intended for Lord Asriel, who seeks to research "Dust", a mysterious particle that is attracted to adults, the Church is willing to act illegally and without bounds in order to protect its own interests and eliminate anyone in its way. However, we see that it is the members who make up the Church, not the religion itself, that threatens the free will of men. A similar desire for total dominance is seen with God in Paradise Lost. God does not give angels free will, believing that angels are his servants. Milton writes that "Of Providence, Foreknowledge, Will, and Fate,/ Fixt Fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute" (Milton 559-560). Presumably, God did not intend humans to have free will, keeping them from eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Satan, the most beautiful among all the angels, desires this free will for himself and his fellow angels. Milton writes that "what time his Pride/ Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his Host/ Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring/ To set himself in Glory above his Peers" (Milton 36-39). Satan also desires to rule like God, unwilling to bend to the will of God and arguing that his father is a tyrant. This desire eventually leads to the Fall of Lucifer, in which Satan is banished to Hell after leading a failed war for the control of Heaven. Satan is best described by his own quote, "Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav'n" (Milton 263). After his failure in conquering heaven, Satan sets out to corrupt mankind. Ironically, his action to convince Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge leads to humans gaining free will, which Satan so desired for himself and his fellow angels. In likening his novel with that of Milton, Pullman does not question the existence of God or the feasibility of religion, but he criticizes the Church for its corrupt desires and

the actions taken to pursue those desires. Similarly, Milton portrays Satan as a tragic hero, who seeks freedom to choose his own life, while depicting God as an overbearing overlord, who seeks to control the lives of his angels and his newest creation, humans.

To understand the Church better, we must further analyze its actions. The Golden Compass also explains that human souls exist outside of the corporeal body as daemons that accompany and help their humans. Interestingly, the daemons of children move freely and have the ability to change their appearances into any creature, becoming a permanent form once their humans reach puberty. The main plot is about the Church secretly severing the daemons from kidnapped children by a process called intercision, breaking the bond between the daemon and the human. Pullman explains that “ 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” (The Golden Compass 107). The Church believes that this process frees the subject from “ Dust”, which is thought to be the physical manifestation of sin. However, the “ freed” children are lifeless, appear to have no free will, and thus are easier to control by the Church. Again, the Church is likened to God from Paradise Lost. Both the Church and God seek to dictate the future of all sentient beings. Almost similarly, in order to seek and destroy the source of “ Dust”, Lord Asriel, a scholar, severs the daemon of Roger, a friend of Lyra, in order to release enough energy to tear a hole into a parallel universe. Seemingly, the Church and Lord Asriel are sacrificing children for their own motives. However, the Church seeks to imprison all humans to the will of the Church by “ freeing” them from their daemons. Contrarily, Lord

Asriel searches for knowledge and desires to save all humans; he is not driven by corrupt desires. In this context, Lord Asriel is a tragic hero like Satan, acting immorally to do good overall. Pullman utilizes the power of analogies to liken the objects and characters in his novels to those of *Paradise Lost*. However, in doing so, it is almost as if Pullman is acknowledging the existence of God; Pullman disagrees with the tyrannical presence of the Church but understands that God may be real.

Pullman continues the next novel, *The Subtle Knife*, in a parallel universe, introducing the notion of parallel universes and dark matter. These notions are controversial as they both lack solid evidence to support them. In fact, they are like religion, requiring people to believe in them more than having facts to back them up. Pullman may have included these topics to show that religion should not be blindly followed, rather it should be faced with resistance and questioning. It should be noted that Pullman does not disparage religion but is trying to foster healthy, reasonable doubt instead of blind faith. However, the most important facts we learn from this novel is that Lord Asriel is raising an army to fight the forces of the Church and Lyra is prophesized to bring on the second Fall of man. Additionally, the Church is also “assembling the greatest army ever known” in order to silence Lord Asriel and assert their rule (*The Subtle Knife* 26). In *Paradise Lost*, Satan fails in winning the war against God, who also assembled a great, strong army, and is unable to free himself and his fellow angels from the rule of God. Eve brings on the first Fall of man by disobeying the rule set by God and eating from the Tree of Knowledge. This choice leads to humans gaining free will to choose their own lives. Pullman attributes Lord Asriel to Satan and Lyra to

Eve. If Lord Asriel fails in his rebellion against the Church and the Authority, he would have failed his fellow men in allowing the Authority to tyrannical rule over all the universes. His failure would also nullify the effects of the first Fall of man, as the Church would sever the daemons from all humans and leave them without free will. If Lyra succeeds, then she brings on the second Fall of man, which frees humans from the dictatorial presence of the Magisterium and the Authority. Mrs. Coulter, an agent of the Church, comments that “ Why, I shall have to destroy her [Lyra] to prevent another Fall” (The Subtle Knife 189). In addition, Mary Malone, a physicist studying dark matter, or “ Dust”, is instructed to find Lyra and “ play the serpent”, or the role of Satan (The Subtle Knife 150). This revelation further supports the role of Lyra as the second Eve.

The Amber Spyglass further exposes the corruption of the Church and narrates its fall. The novel starts with Mrs. Coulter, the mother of Lyra, keeping Lyra drugged in a remote cave hidden from the Church. Pullman writes “ Drugged, deceitful sleep! Ama saw a streak of white materialize at the girl’s throat as her daemon effortfully changed into a long, sinuous, snowy-furred creature” (The Amber Spyglass 50). Mrs. Coulter seeks to keep Lyra safe from the Magisterium and from causing the second Fall of man. In a sense, Mrs. Coulter is liken to God, as she hopes to keep her child safe from outside forces. In addition, she is depriving Lyra of her free will, just as God deprives the free will of his creations. Just as Satan visits Eve in a dream, Lyra is visited in a dream by Roger, promising to help him.

Meanwhile, as Lord Asriel is gathering forces to fight the Authority and the Church, he “ had burst the worlds open, all the Arctic ice had begun to melt”,

causing the armoured bears into migrating south (The Amber Spyglass 100). This development signifies that the upcoming war affects all sentient beings, not just humans; even the armoured bears may be subjugated if the Authority wins the war. Interestingly, the Authority is an angel who thinks he is God. This revelation conveys the opinion of Pullman that even if God is real, he is not as great as the Church portrays him to be. Balthamos explains that “ The Authority... 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 were (The Amber Spyglass 33). The Authority is frail and easily killed, betrayed by his own servant, Metatron. This betrayal further depicts the corruption inside the Church, as the Church leaders all have corrupted, personal motives. After defeating the Authority and the Church, Lyra sets out to build the Republic of Heaven. This ending hints that Pullman does not believe that religion is evil. Religion is an ideology and defined by those who believe in it. The Republic of Heaven is the new, moral interpretation of God and his teachings. However, there is always the risk that this new interpretation becomes corrupt as well, as seen with the consistent theme of the His Dark Materials of “ Dust” being attracted to adults (age is associated with sin).

Although Pullman does not advocate religion, he is not against it either, but rather against how religion is used to achieve the dark, corrupt desire of men. The Church in the start may have sought to lead humanity to the light of God, but eventually it became corrupt by the men leading it. This fate was inevitable, as men seek power over other men. In the His Dark Materials series, the Church seeks to imprison free will, believing that it, and only it,

knows the best for all men. In such a case, it is better for men to rebel against such tyranny, just as Satan rebels against God in *Paradise Lost*. In addition, Pullman advocates for men to question the Church, instead of blindly following its teachings, as men, who are fallible, lead the Church, not God. Pullman said “ What you feel and believe are private to you and belong to nobody else. What you do in the public sphere is what’s important” (Jukes).

Works Cited

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