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Epic Adolescence: Contemporary Adolescence in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

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EPIC ADOLESCENCE: CONTEMPORARY ADOLESCENCE IN
PHILIP PULLMAN'S HIS DARK MATERIALS

by

Chloe Felterman

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

To find the truth of a societal construct or phenomena, it can help to look at the world of fiction and fantasy. Though this idea may seem ironic or counterintuitive, one will find that fictional literature can reveal the working order of its respective society. Philip Pullman's epic fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, uses and manipulates the traditional constructs of the genre to reflect and reimagine the concepts of adolescence of the late-20th and early-21st centuries. Eleven-year-old protagonist Lyra Belacqua and subsequently her cohort, Will Perry, reveal the complications and difficulties modern American and British adolescents experience as they progress towards adulthood and maturation through their fantastical experiences in Pullman's fictional universe. Moreover, Pullman's creation of the daemon, the animal representation of one's soul, allows for the psychological maturation process of adolescence to become tangible. In doing so, Pullman's trilogy provides a re-conceptualization of modern adolescence while also complicating the genre of epic fantasy.

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DEDICATION

I am forever grateful for the unwavering support and kindness of my parents, sisters, and close friends throughout my time at the University of Southern Mississippi.

And for my grandfather, who showed me the benefit and beauty of researching the literature we love.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AS</i>	<i>The Amber Spyglass</i>
<i>NL</i>	<i>Northern Lights</i>
<i>SK</i>	<i>The Subtle Knife</i>

CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

“Tell them stories. They need the truth. You must tell them stories and all will be well. Just tell them stories” (AS 432).

Whether one subscribes to the Aristotelian idea of mimesis, in which art imitates life, or the Wildean idea that life imitates art, the fact remains that art often holds a mirror to the experiences of humanity. Authors and artists’ works reflect the desires, motivations, and fears of human existence. Philip Pullman’s adolescent fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, emphasizes this unique role of storytelling and thus attempts to re-conceptualize the conception of adolescence in the epic fantasy genre.

Beginning with George McDonald’s *Phantastes* in 1858, which Jack Zipes calls a “pioneer in experimenting with the traditional motifs and themes of well-known [fairytales],” the epic or high fantasy novel has roots in epic legends of King Arthur and has progressed to a complex genre (Zipes 222; 555).¹ Epic fantasy, as Rachel Falconer explains, has basic conventions consisting of a “heroic quest to discover and test the self, battles between the archetypal forces of good and evil, and stories that aspire to shape national histories as destiny” (“Crossover Literature” 564). British authors into the twentieth century, including J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, have used these conventions as a guide for their primarily male-dominated works in which there is a vast imagined world, a heroic journey, and an epic purpose. As the epic fantasy novel continues to evolve in the twenty-first century, however, authors such as Anne McCaffrey, Robin McKinley, Tamora Pierce, and Jane Yolen have shifted focus to female epic heroes (Zipes 555). American author Ursula Le Guin, in addition to creating

female protagonists, further progresses the genre by beginning to distinguish and display the difficulties of adolescence in her five-part series, *The Wizard of Earthsea*, published from 1968 to 2001. Similarly, Philip Pullman's epic fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*—comprising *Northern Lights* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000)—presents a female protagonist, Lyra Belacqua, in the role of the epic hero. Like Le Guin, Pullman creates a protagonist shaped by contemporary understandings of adolescence, but he pushes the construction of the protagonist a step further by pairing her with a daemon, an animal representation of the soul. I argue that his use of an adolescent and animal counterpart as the protagonist of the epic fantasy trilogy offers a re-conceptualization of modern British and American adolescence by paralleling the often-difficult transition into and through adolescence with the epic journey. Specifically, Pullman's construction of adolescence visualizes through his use of daemons both the intangible psychological and quickly-changing physical maturation of an adolescent. The creation of the daemon allows the trilogy to elucidate and challenge previous conceptions of the modern adolescent, and in doing so, Pullman also complicates the genre of epic fantasy.

The trilogy's first novel, *Northern Lights*, also known as *The Golden Compass*, introduces Lyra, an eleven-year-old orphan under the care of the Master of Jordan College in Oxford, England. The Master gives Lyra an Alethiometer (a golden compass-like device), which reveals truth to those who are able to read it (*NL* 73). Few individuals possess the knowledge and understanding to ask the Alethiometer questions and read its answers, but Lyra is given the ability instinctively “by grace” (*AS* 491). While Lyra's Oxford mirrors the one in our own world, hers is set in a parallel universe with witches,

armored bears, and Dust. In our world, Dust is known as Dark Matter, and in the series the invisible substance is believed to be the source of all life. Dust connects all living things and is heavily studied by the authority of Lyra's world: the Magisterium. The Magisterium seeks to destroy the bond created by Dust between a human and his or her daemon, an extension of one's soul that physically manifests in animal form. The human and daemon are tied to each other by an invisible bond that cannot be broken without severe pain, and severing the bond often results in death. The Magisterium believes that by severing the bond in children, the child will cease to mature psychologically and remain sexually inactive, essentially stopping the progression into adolescence. Lyra's daemon is called Pantalaimon, and because Lyra has not progressed through adolescence yet, Pan is able to shift animal forms at will. Once Lyra reaches a state of psychological maturity, Pan will settle into one static animal form for the remainder of their life together.

Lyra is joined in *The Subtle Knife* by Will, an adolescent boy slightly older than she, and together they navigate many universes and dangers to complete their quests. The difficult physical journey concretizes their personal journey into and through the divisive period of adolescence. Pullman uses the epic fantasy genre to create a visible landscape for the turbulence and complications of adolescence, such as changing hormones and anti-authoritarian rebellion, and in doing so challenges the traditional conventions of good and evil found in the genre's predecessors.

Pullman's *His Dark Materials* uses the traditional convention of a sharply defined heroic protagonist and villainous antagonist along with the incorporation of British and American ideas of adolescence in order to emphasize the moral and ethical struggles of

adolescent development. In the early to mid-twentieth century, the typical epic protagonists fight for the common good, clearly opposing the villainous characters. In the case of British epic fantasy, narratives such as *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1949-1954) depict the moral and ethical values of a Christian society—selflessness, generosity towards others, loyalty to their God and those who serve their God. As Phil Cardew explains, the “religious and ethical contexts bring a certainty of action to the hero of a narrative which is absent with a more questionable environment” such as in *His Dark Materials*. The use of Christian elements within Tolkien’s and Lewis’s works creates a binary of good and evil that is understood by “both the characters of the narratives and their readership” that involves the heroes’ having a “clear framework within both to position their own morality and their perspectives on good governance and heroic behavior” (32-33). The defined structure of good and evil should not suggest that these classic epic novels are simplistic. Indeed, these epic fantasies contain great depth in terms of plot and characterization.

Nevertheless, this clearly defined framework of good-and-evil inspired Pullman’s re-conceptualization of the adolescent hero in *His Dark Materials*, and the trilogy challenges the concept of moral certainty and heroism through an array of characters who act both selfishly and selflessly and who can be both dishonest and trustworthy. On multiple occasions, Pullman has stated his distaste for the works of Tolkien and Lewis², and thus has created characters who encapsulate the challenges and moral searching of an ordinary adolescent. As we will examine in Pullman’s trilogy, Lyra struggles with the desire to lie. Lying or the desire to lie occurs frequently in adolescence often due to motives of rebellion or a yearning for autonomy (Jenson et al. 110). The trilogy illuminates the

psychological temptations and moral conflicts faced by youth through the adolescent journey of Lyra, who blurs the lines between conventional good and evil, eventually challenging traditional understandings of heroic and villainous characters seen in the genre's predecessors by encapsulating a muddled morality.

The resistance to the binary of good and evil in *His Dark Materials* creates a challenge to the traditional hierarchies found in contemporary British and American societies, specifically those regarding adults and youth, as well as societal authorities like the Church. Lyra's mother and father, Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel, are absent for most of her life.³ Lyra does not know who her parents are until their identity is revealed to her later in the series. By virtually eliminating the parent-child relationship early in the narrative and introducing the two into Lyra's life while she is in the period of adolescence, the narrative challenges the hierarchical roles of adults, since Lyra has not grown up recognizing their authority over her. Similarly, the texts' secondary protagonist Will Parry, who is from our world, does not know his father and assumes the role of caretaker for his sick mother. Like Lyra, he meets his father after entering the period of adolescence and thus is able to conceive of his father as an adult without the subordination that a child may feel in the child-parent hierarchy.

Lyra's journey models the traditional coming-of-age, adolescent tale found in many young adult or children's novels, such as *Earthsea*, *Harry Potter*, or *Percy Jackson*. The core of the coming-of-age story in which the protagonist moves from a psychological place of naivetés to maturity in adulthood rests within these epic tales, including Lyra's; thus, some scholars or writers, such as John Stephens, consider the epic story to be a *bildungsroman* (43). While some elements of the *bildungsroman* are present in

Pullman's trilogy, most obviously Lyra's progression towards maturity, the story lacks one significant distinction: coming of age *as an adult* (Trites 10). While Lyra begins the trilogy in childhood and journeys into adolescence, the trilogy does not end with her as an adult. One may certainly argue that her journey of growth and development, two elements clearly seen in the bildungsroman genre, suggest the novel doubles as a bildungsroman; however, the focus of her development remains primarily in adolescence, suggesting that while there are elements of bildungsroman, Lyra represents a more generic adolescent development throughout the trilogy.

Throughout Lyra's journey, she struggles with the desire for power and autonomy. This struggle coalesces with her paternal figures—both her biological parents as well as the adults who take on the role of her guardians—and, like with many adolescent-parental relationships, these relationships often involve “conflict” because they are more likely to “repress than to empower” (Trites 56). Natasha Giardina argues that while the trilogy keeps the tradition of the child as the protagonist with the “adult authority...left impotent and helpless on the sidelines” (141-142), the series also challenges this tradition by providing an “alternative model” for the relationship between adults and children, one that is founded on “mutual respect” rather than a hierarchy (148). Alternatively, Kristine Moruzi asserts that Lyra and Will's relationship with adults is actually one of submissiveness in which the two become “dependent on adults” at the conclusion of their quest and therefore revert “back to their status of children” (67). Both Giardina and Moruzi refer to Lyra and Will only as children, however, despite their growing independence; yet Lyra leaves the state of childhood when she leaves Jordan College to begin her quest as the epic hero, as does Will when he enters an alternative

universe and joins Lyra. As I will explain further, Lyra and Will question the morals and ethics of the world around them, as is typical for adolescents, and they therefore question the hierarchal relationship of parent and child. The interaction between parents and the children in the series highlights the progression of Lyra and Will's adolescence because the two show beginnings of self-awareness, a sense of purpose, and a sense of identity as individuals.

As the title *His Dark Materials* suggests, the trilogy is strongly influenced by John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*⁵ and is concerned with "moral, intellectual, and spiritual freedom" through the agonistic engagement with Milton's text (Falconer 14). Lyra and Will are often referred to as the new Eve and the new Adam throughout the series. The two journey together to the land of the dead to save the souls trapped in eternal darkness and also destroy the foundation of Heaven, a difficult and complicated quest that once again mirrors the challenging progression through adolescence.

The vast physical space of Lyra and Will's journeys—from the lakes of Hell to the gardens of Heaven and the universes in-between—not only reflects the epic inspirations of the trilogy (such as *Paradise Lost* and *Dante's Inferno*) but also the vast opportunity of Lyra's choices. Sarah Cantrell suggests that both Lyra and Will are faced with innumerable choices and a "space of possibilities" (319). While self-discovery is key to their journeys, they must also "accept the mystery of all the spaces beyond their reach" (320).

Once psychologically mature, the two realize that their purpose in life is to create a new "Republic of Heaven" in their respective worlds (*Amber Spyglass* 548). The deviation from traditional Christian beliefs has led many to criticize the trilogy as one

that may “corrupt the faith of even a devout child” (Eldridge 53). His *Dark Materials* continues to receive backlash from critics claiming the narrative is heretical to Christianity, specifically the Catholic church, and promotes sex for young children;⁴ however, sexual desire has and continues to be a cornerstone in young adult literature as the characters often experience “sexuality as a rite of passage that helps them define themselves as having left childhood behind” (Trites 84). While sexuality is not the main focus the trilogy, it does occur at the conclusion of Lyra and Will’s journey. Moreover, Pullman has been marked as “notoriously unsympathetic towards organized religion” (Jobling 154).⁶ In Lyra’s world, the corrupted Magisterium, the Church’s government, is the controlling power of society, but like the challenge to the traditional adult-youth relationship, Pullman challenges the effectiveness of the hierarchy of the Church. The ultimate epic task of creating a new “Heaven” with the free will to choose their own morality and ethics, though controversial to some critics, ends the series and moves Lyra and Will’s closer to adulthood.

CHAPTER II – ADOLESCENCE

The epic fantasy novel, specifically in British literary traditions, has long been associated with children due to its conventions of imaginative storytelling anchored in mythical creations. The desire to understand the unexplainable through imagination creates what Shiela Egoff calls an “instinctive link” between youth and epic fantasy, a link that is strengthened through the narrative’s respect for “curiosity, a sense of wonder, a love of the fabulous, and an ability to see to the heart of things with courage and honesty” (19-20). Thus, it is not surprising that the most well-known epic fantasy novels of the early to mid-twentieth century use youth as the foundation for the protagonists, such as Frodo Baggins (who is on the cusp of “coming-of-age” [Tolkien 28]) and the four Pevensie children. Pullman continues this tradition with his young protagonists, but the trilogy thematically focuses more heavily on the development of the adolescent in addition to the traditional epic quest.

While the term “adolescence” has existed since approximately 1425 C.E. denoting the physical and psychological transition into adulthood (“adolescence”), modern adolescence has shifted into a lengthy period of time, usually beginning with the physiological transitions of puberty and lasting through the late teenage years or early twenties. According to Crista DeLuzio, a prolonged adolescence is due in part to an increase in opportunities that began in the late eighteenth century, specifically for middle- and working-class boys, whose societal roles transitioned from laborers to students. In England, the Elementary Education Act of 1870 empowered district school boards to require all children between five and 13 to attend a school. England furthered compulsory education through the Education Act of 1944, which kept youths in school until they

were 15 years of age. It was later increased to 16 years of age in 1973. The increase in time spent in secondary and professional education forced youths to rely on their parents or guardians for financial stability, which in turn created a “semi-dependent relationship” with the adult world (Deluzio 98). Even boys who did not continue their education became forced into this relationship, since their work life became increasingly supervised by adults and their earnings were expected to “contribute to the family economy” (98). Thus, a prolonged waiting period between childhood (in which the youth is fully dependent) and adulthood (in which the matured youth is independent) began to solidify in British and American societies.

Though modern conceptualizations of adolescence often have negative ramifications due to the adolescent’s increased desire for independence and search for a personal identity through experimentation, such as rebellion against social norms and alcohol or drug use, psychologists at the beginning of the nineteenth century, specifically G. Stanley Hall, believed adolescence was a time of “spring in the soul” (“How Far...” 649). He asserts that the transition from childhood to adolescence is turbulent, specifically from a psychological perspective. Hall alludes to childhood as a period in a “warm climate” in which one is in “unity and harmony with nature” (*Adolescence* 71); however, when one begins the evolution into adolescence, one is “driven from his paradise and must enter upon a long viaticum of ascent, must conquer a higher kingdom of man for himself, break out a new sphere, and evolve a more modern story to his psycho-physical nature” (71). Hall describes the psychological development in adolescence as a “pilgrimage...from its old level to a higher maturity” (73).

While Hall explicates the path to maturity in adolescence for boys, he also denounces any sexual desires as dangerous and unacceptable. This idea continues to permeate the conceptions of adolescence into the twenty-first century. Roberta Trites, while explaining the way sexuality is depicted specifically in adolescent novels, states, “Realistically speaking, we live in a society that objectifies teen sexuality, at once glorifying and idealizing it while also stigmatizing and repressing it” (91). This idea stems from Trites’ view that adolescence is, at its core, a dichotomy of “power and powerlessness” (x). Though childhood is a period of “dependency” or a “rationale for regulation” by parental figures (Sánchez-Eppler 36), and adolescence is a period of self-discovery and growing autonomy (Lesko), both stages are associated with the adult perceptions that youth need to be protected and guided by those more mature. Childhood is associated with a perceived innocence that is an adult construction stemming from nostalgia and the desire for children to fit a “static, angelic ideal,” untouched by difficult experiences and free of sexual desires (Gubar 127; 124); however, children often experience difficulties and have sexual feelings, even if they are unaware of the meaning of those feelings (Gubar 121). Thus, both children and adolescent literature often revolve around the constructs of power, with children’s literature providing an affirmation of “the child’s sense of self and...personal power” and adolescent literature depicting the protagonist “[negotiating] the levels of power that exists in a myriad of social situations within which they must function” (Trites 3).

The modern conception of adolescence is often divided between the biological and sociohistorical viewpoints. This period of time consists of both physical and psychological changes and “is fraught with a series of difficult psychic challenges”

(Hines 33). From a biological perspective, adolescence is a turbulent time of “raging hormones” that contribute to rapid physical development, emotional chaos, and an evolutionary “coming of age” period. In this view, Nancy Lesko explains, adolescents are “naturally emerging and outside of social influences” (2). This characterization of adolescents as governed by “raging hormones” plays into the idea that adolescents are “rebellious” and “natural challengers of authority and limits” (Lesko 3).

From a sociohistorical perspective, adolescents are often considered “peer oriented,” often “succumbing to ‘peer pressure,’” a demeaning view suggesting that adolescents are “immature” and “inferior to adults” (Lesko 3, 4). This idea is furthered because adolescence is “signified by age,” usually the teenage years (Lesko 4), and adolescents are expected to attend age-segregated schools. Because of the development of mandatory education in the mid-twentieth century, the adolescent and the teenager are often one in the same. This change toward compulsory schooling created a new environment for teenaged youths and thus created a new social group, which has become associated strongly with rebellion and consumerism.⁷

Adolescence is often marked with difficult decisions and challenging moments. In the mid-twentieth century, Erik Erikson proposed the epigenic principle in which he identified eight stages or “critical steps” an individual experiences throughout the course of development. These steps are “turning points” or “moments of decision between progress and regression, integration and retardation” (270-271). Each is defined by “critical moments”—moments of sacrifice, suffering, or loss; a difficult decision; a significant achievement. Of the eight steps, step five, “Identity vs. Role Confusion: Devotion and Fidelity,” occurs during adolescence. Erikson describes the adolescent as a

“psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult” (262-263). During this stage, as we will see with Lyra, the adolescent questions his or her identity and searches “for the social values which guide identity” (262). This stage is associated with forming relationships with peers as well. Often, adolescents in this stage “fall in love,” which can be either a sexual or non-sexual intimate relationship in which the two individuals find a shared identity. Erikson explains that adolescent love “is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffused ego image on another by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified” (262).

Contemporary adolescence is complicated and continues to change due to an increase in personal choice and freedom, especially for girls. The common early-twentieth-century English conceptualization of adolescence construes the stage, “for both the girls and the boys, ... as a romantic period in which vitality is combined with idealism” (Ferral 13); however, perspectives on adolescence, including Hall’s, favored the study of boys rather than girls. Hall does not engage with the variables and progression of adolescent girls to the same extent that he does with boys because the girl, he believes, “never outgrows adolescence as a man does” (*Adolescence* 624). This perspective contrasts with the more progressive idea that both adolescent boys and girls have generally the same opportunities. The more equal perspective derives from less emphasis placed on solely domestic roles for women and a greater emphasis on women in the workforce and politics (Barnett).⁸ This shift in emphasis suggests a greater value for women’s roles outside of the home and therefore gives adolescent girls more choices when deciding how to proceed in life.

Adolescents in Britain and the United States are expected to discover their purpose or role in life, and with the increased opportunities presented to adolescents, coupled with the notion that all goals and dreams are possible to achieve, one's purpose becomes more difficult to determine. Thomas Hines suggests that because adolescents have this expectation, the period of adolescence is one of "experimentation and protracted preparation, usually in school" (7). Negative views of adolescence correlate this experimentation with drugs, alcohol, and sex; however, the period primarily correlates with a discovery of self-interests and the beginnings of independence. Modern adolescents are continually "denied a role in their society, other than that of style setters and consumers" (Hines 8). Because of the negative perception, adolescents are often held back by adults and therefore rebel in order to gain freedom and independence. This rebelliousness often leads to an increased desire of guardians to protect adolescents from the world and themselves, which in turn leads to more rebelliousness and experimentation. As adolescents continue to discover their passions and gain a greater understanding of the self, they "tend to believe, at least some of the time, in the romantic idea that to be human, you must become the hero of your own life" (7). This notion suggests an affinity between the period of adolescence and the modern epic fantasy novel.

The conventions of epic fantasy allow the genre to mirror the journey of adolescence if we imagine adolescence as a quest for understanding one's identity and purpose in life. In the same way that adolescents tend to rebel against their authority, the individual often must rebel against authority figures to gain the independence to begin his or her quest and assume her role as the epic protagonist. The gradual evolution of

adolescence lends itself to being understood as a journey, one with obstacles, challenges, and temptations.⁹ In the same way that the epic fantasy novel poses questions of good and evil, so too does the adolescent. Typically, the stage of adolescence begins one's questioning of ethical guidelines, and one must establish within oneself an ethical framework.

CHAPTER III - THE EPIC FANTASY PROTAGONIST

All epic fantasy novels center on the epic protagonist's quest—the ring must be destroyed in Mordor or the White Witch must be defeated. Lyra must save her best friend in the land of the Dead. The quest begins with a “call to adventure,” as Joseph Campbell explains, which “rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration—a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth” (47). There is no definite way in which the call comes to an epic protagonist—from “a blunder” to a “phenomenon [that] catches the wandering eye and lures one away” (53-54). In each case, the call begins the quest for the protagonist from “within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (53). It is possible for the protagonist to refuse the call, but these cases, as Campbell shows us, end in tragedy and an unfilled life. Of course, in the case of Lyra Belacqua, her quest begins with a blunder, as she finds herself trapped in a wardrobe in the forbidden Retiring Room, as well as the mysterious phenomenon of her best friend's disappearance. Her passionate temperament and loyalty to Roger spur her to accept her call to adventure, and thus begin her quest.

The epic protagonist is typically considered virtuous rather than simply good. Virtue, as Campbell explains, is “the pedagogical prelude to the culminating insight, which goes beyond all pairs of opposites” (41). The hero strives for virtue, which “quells the self-centered ego,” but it is something that must be “achieved” (40). As epic fantasies have progressed, the hero too has changed in order to reflect the values of its society. Modern British epic fantasies tend to keep their epic heroes firmly standing on the side of good; that is, their character aligns with moral values that benefit others, such as courage, loyalty, and selflessness. Any good character who falls into temptation becomes

classified as bad, as a villain, with little room for change and growth. The hobbits Frodo and Samwise are considered good and virtuous because they resist the temptations of the Ring and ultimately save Middle Earth, while Sauron is evil and desires to destroy and control all of Middle Earth. The Pevensie children are good, with Edmund as the exception. His only way to be brought back to the side of good after falling into temptation is through the sacrifice of Narnia's leader and God-like figure, Aslan. Susan, however, does not have the same chance. She gives into "worldly desires," which place her on the wrong side of the moral binary and prevent her from entering Aslan's heaven at the end of the series. This should not suggest that these epic heroes and villains are not complex. On the contrary, each character has depth and dimension, and the heroes are faced with many temptations. There is rarely a question, however, of the morals of the villains. Little sympathy (if any) is given to Sauron or the White Witch, since they stand firmly on the side of evil. Therefore, for the most part, the characters in early-to-mid-twentieth century epic novels reflect their place on the binary as either good or evil, a trope still found in epic fantasy novels in the twenty-first century.

The epic fantasy often reflects a moral, political, or ethical truth about a culture that becomes clearly identifiable when the protagonist completes the quest and gains a reward. Every quest has a prize "in which the object sought may or may not be a mere token of reward" (Mendlesohn 25), but a physical prize is not usually the significance of the quest. Instead, the true reward gained by the protagonist "is moral growth and/or admission into the kingdom, or redemption" (25). The simple gaining of a token, a reward, or an object would not constitute an epic quest but rather an uninteresting journey or race to the finish line. The physical stakes are essential to the narrative—for instance,

the ring must physically be destroyed in order for Good to conquer Evil—but the psychological stakes are equally, if not more, significant. The protagonists “engage in a deeply personal and almost religious battle for the common good” (Egoff 6). When Frodo drops the ring into Mount Doom, he does not just destroy the ring—he destroys Evil and overcomes the psychological temptation to keep the ring for himself. His mental battle against the temptations of the ring rivals the difficulty of the physical challenges of fighting orcs and climbing Mount Doom. The epic nearly always contains elements of good and evil and represents the high purpose of the quest through the idea that those who represent the side of good can and will defeat those in opposition, the evil, as a universal truth. While *His Dark Materials* certainly poses questions of good and evil, the narrative lacks characters who fall solely into the category of hero or villain. Instead, the characters, even the most oppositional, have traits that lend themselves to sympathy and acceptance; thus, the perceived moral binary becomes obscured, if not eliminated, throughout the trilogy.

CHAPTER IV – ADOLESCENCE AND EPIC FANTASY IN HIS DARK MATERIALS

As *His Dark Materials* depicts an understanding of the challenges and changes of adolescence, the narrative structure, though laced with fantastic and epic elements, mirrors the progression of an ordinary, twenty-first century youth towards the psychological maturation of adulthood. One of the most challenging aspects of this progression for modern adolescents is the understanding of one's self, one's desires, and one's purpose in life. The difficult questions associated with these aspects are not always consciously asked and answered, but each must be dealt with in order to reach a state of maturity. As Lyra moves into adolescence, she questions her purpose and identity and rebels against those who try to make decisions about her life for her.

Her adolescent journey, apart from the fantastic and supernatural elements, has a key difference from that of an ordinary adolescent: her specific purpose in life is foretold. She has a specific purpose prophesized by the witches. Serafina Pekkala, the leader of the witches, knows Lyra's fate and shares the prophecy with Lee Scoresby, a man helping Lyra in *Northern Lights*:

“There is a curious prophecy about this child: she is destined to bring about the end of destiny. But she must do so without knowing what she is doing, as if it were her nature and not her destiny to do it. If she's told what she must do, it will all fail; death will sweep through all the worlds; it will be the triumph of despair, forever” (310).

Lyra is asleep when Serafina reveals this prophecy; therefore, while the reader discovers this fate along with Lee Scoresby, Lyra must uncover this prophecy on her own through

her quest. Until she discovers the prophecy, her ignorance suggests a lingering naivety in the transition from childhood to adolescence. As the trilogy progresses, Lyra understands that her destiny requires her to not only save her best friend, Roger, but for her to also journey to the land of the dead and free those trapped in the eternal darkness. The foretelling of Lyra's quest suggests the inevitability of her adolescence. Just as her fate becomes a necessary piece of the trilogy's ending, so too is her progression into adolescence a natural step in her development into a self-sufficient and mature individual.

Lyra's story in *His Dark Materials* begins in the playfulness of childhood and reveals her as a uniquely rebellious female character, a characterization in line with the progression from the male-dominated epic fantasy novels of the mid-twentieth century. She possesses naive innocence, "clambering over the College roofs" (*NL* 35), but while she is adventurous and playful, she certainly has her flaws, particularly when interacting with adults. Lyra is headstrong, impulsive, and stubborn. She is a "coarse and greedy little savage, for the most part," described by the narrator as a "half wild-cat" because of her temper and unkempt appearance (36). When her temper rises, she uses explicit language, such as when she was caught in a pink, frilly dress by Roger, and she screamed "curses that shocked the poor Scholar who was escorting her" to a tea with her Lord Asriel (37). When she makes a decision, even Pan cannot change her mind, such as when he begs her to "hurry out" of the forbidden Retiring Room of Jordan College where "only Scholars and their guests" were allowed and "never females" in the series' first scene (6; 4). Her stubborn and passionate temperament reflect the less-than-angelic child, a child who cannot be fully controlled, and a child on the verge of adolescence.

Lyra refuses to acknowledge her status as an upper-class child. Though orphaned, she is well taken care of by the scholars; yet Lyra and her best friend Roger, a kitchen boy, ignore any economic or gender barriers and spend their days running around the College, “racing through the narrow streets, or stealing apples from the market, or waging war” (35). Their friendship troubles the adults who watch over her, especially Father Heyst, the Intercessor, who suggests that Lyra should socialize with “nobly born children” or “other girls” so as not to “miss all the usual childhood pleasures and pastimes” (52). Ignoring any show of politeness, she answers all of his questions with “No,” clearly stating her refusal to engage in more socially accepted pastimes. This refusal to conform to gender or socioeconomic stereotypes furthers her distinctive character as a strong-willed female protagonist who does not shy away from a challenge.⁹

Lyra does not stay a child much longer, and just as a realistic transition from childhood to adolescence is never clean-cut but rather a gradual and recursive process, Lyra’s transition takes time. We see her first steps into adolescence when a critical moment occurs: Roger is taken by The Oblation Board, colloquially known as the Gobblers, and she and Pan realize that the adults in her life are not taking his disappearance seriously. She and Pan decide that they must “rescue him” despite the quest being “dangerous” (62). This discussion with Pan is Lyra’s first step in her epic quest as she decides it is imperative to rescue her friend. Her decision to rescue Roger, despite the backlash from the adults, shows her first signs of initiative, rebelliousness, and independence, and her first steps into the next stage of her life.

Adolescence does not occur without effort, but rather is achieved gradually through a series of vicissitudes between childhood dependency and adulthood. Her initial

quest to save Roger begins hesitantly as she shifts from the beginnings of independence back into the total care of adult guardians. Upon her initial decision to leave Jordan College, Lyra is pulled back into the role of the child when Mrs. Coulter invites her to live at her home. She showers Lyra with fine clothes and food until Lyra realizes that Mrs. Coulter wants to take her Alethiometer, which drives her to make the decision to rebel once more (*NL* 97). On the streets, alone except for her daemon, Lyra further progresses into adolescence and away from the naivety of childhood. In typical epic fantasies, the protagonist assumes the role of the epic hero, and there is a clear starting point for the hero's journey. The manipulation of the traditional outset of Lyra's quest highlights her dual role as both the protagonist and adolescent. By blurring a clear starting point of Lyra's quest, the text affirms the ambiguous beginning of Lyra's desire for independence and her journey into adolescence.

As the trilogy progresses, the narrative reflects the female adolescent journey through Lyra and Pantalaimon's relationship. The discovery and understanding of Lyra's psychological self becomes visible through the conversations and physical changes of Pan. Because daemons in Lyra's world are nearly always the other sex of their human and have complimenting personality traits, Pan transforms into male animals and is cautious and logical, as opposed to Lyra's rebelliousness and impulsive behavior. In the world of the series, during childhood and adolescence, a daemon shifts between different animal forms, often reifying the emotions of its human half or responding to a specific need. Pan is most often an ermine, but he changes into a leopard to "launch himself" against attackers (*NL* 102), as well as a firefly, lion, and even a dragon depending on the emotions he and Lyra feel. He is a piece of her, inseparable by an invisible bond. When

she finally matures in adolescence to the point of understanding her identity, her daemon will take its final shape and remain in that form for the rest of their lives, leading some scholars to believe the daemon takes its final form when the individual reaches sexual maturity;¹⁰ however, the progression towards maturity in adolescence is far more complex than *only* sexual awareness and understanding. Therefore, a daemon settles when the individual knows “what kind of person you are” (*NL* 167), an idea that encompasses not only sexual awareness but a complete sense of one’s identity, desires, and purpose moving forward into adulthood. The understanding of one’s identity and role in life marks the end of adolescence and the beginning of adulthood and often includes an understanding of one’s sexual preferences and desires but not necessarily so. The daemon may also settle before its human becomes fully independent and considered an adult because, like Lyra, one may reach this understanding before one becomes physically mature or socially independent (such as being able to care for oneself financially). The settling of the daemon reveals the daemons true role as the physical representation of the human’s psyche. The animal companion helps its human understand his or her identity by shifting forms to mirror internal psychology. The shifting of forms throughout childhood and specifically throughout adolescence signifies the constant evolution happening within the psyche of the individual. The mistakes, the questioning of ethics, the struggle to become independent, and the unique challenges faced by each person all help the individual mature, just as Lyra’s quest leads her towards maturation, and her daemon reflects these processes.

Lyra’s development into an adolescent is often hindered by the adults who assume the role of her parents, but her movement into adolescence cannot be stopped in the same

way that her journey to the North cannot be stopped. She has accepted her call to adventure, and she has moved away from a childhood need to be protected by her adult guardians. Despite this desire for the independence to venture on her own and save Roger, like many adolescents, she is often perceived as in need of protection by adults. Her independence—the ability to make her own decisions—is often challenged and questioned. From the beginning of *Northern Lights*, she is protected by the adults guiding her. The Master of Jordan College, who knows the witch’s prophecy and strives to keep Lyra within the safety of the walls of Oxford, is willing to murder Lord Asriel to do so. By murdering him through poison, the Master believes he will stop Lyra’s fate and spare her the danger of her destined quest. His desire to stop her from beginning her quest reflects the common notion of many adults who wish for young people to never leave childhood. The adults’ grip on Lyra in the first novel cause her to question her independence and ability to mature, making it often feel to Lyra “that she would [never] grow up” (168). But to stop a child from developing both mentally and physically in adolescence is as ineffective as trying to stop an epic protagonist from completing the quest.

The challenge of negotiating with and defying the parental figures allows Lyra to develop by forcing her to rely on herself and Pan to journey on her quest—an action that leads to her eventual independence. John Faa, who organizes a search-and-rescue mission to save Roger and the other children from the Oblation Board in the North, tries to protect Lyra and keep her from journeying with them, sternly telling her, “Lyra, there en’t no question of taking you into danger, so don’t delude yourself, child. Stay here and help Ma Costa and keep safe. That’s what you got to do” (140). Ma Costa, a surrogate mother to

Lyra, works with John Faa to keep her safe by restricting her independence through rules and boundaries, attempting to prevent her from journeying North. Both she and John Faa believe that Lyra's purpose is to remain safe, and thus in a state of childhood. Of course, this is not possible, and their resistance only furthers Lyra's development by forcing her to find the strength to stand up for herself. The traditional path of an epic fantasy protagonist, in which the protagonist overcomes the obstacles presented and continues the quest without fail, requires Lyra to progress in her journey. In the same way that adolescents mature whether they desire to or not, Lyra's role as an epic protagonist who has accepted the call causes her to continue despite the efforts of the adults to keep her safely contained. When she is forbidden to travel, she and Pan tell themselves, "We will go...Let 'em try to stop us. We will!" (140). She goes to the North with the party. She rescues the children. She flies in Lee Scoresby's hot air balloon that was once off limits—"Naturally Lyra was eager to fly with him, and naturally it was forbidden" (227). Though she must constantly ask for permission or lie about her whereabouts, her rebellion, often frustrating to those trying to protect her, suggests her increased self-awareness and agency over her own life. The struggle for control over her life represents a difficult obstacle, which as I have demonstrated above represents a traditional feature of epic fantasies, and incites Lyra's journey of self-discovery that allows her to begin the process of identifying the type of person she wants to be—determined, courageous, and selfless.

While Lyra's relationships and interactions with adults throughout the series reveal her progression through the stage of adolescence, the specific relationship with her mother, Mrs. Coulter, reflects not only the rebelliousness of an adolescent to parental

protection but also a deeper understanding of her own autonomy and self-reliance. The relationship exhibits the nostalgic desire for parents and guardians to keep their children in a state of childhood by physically capturing Lyra and literally containing her throughout parts of the trilogy. Though absent for most of her life, Lyra's mother tries to protect her by taking her back into her home in *Northern Lights* and placing her in a deep sleep under her care in *The Amber Spyglass*. Like many adults, she does not understand that Lyra has entered a state of adolescence and instead wishes to keep her in a state of childhood innocence, protected from the world and (in keeping with the epic fantasy) her destiny. When speaking about Lyra, she states that Lyra will soon "approach the cusp of adolescence, and then it will be too late for any of us to prevent the catastrophe" (*Amber Spyglass* 326). The catastrophe refers to Lyra's completing her quest, essentially destroying the world of the dead, and thus destroying the realm of Heaven. The series represents a mother's efforts to delay or halt her child's adolescent development as having the same ramifications as halting the hero's quest in an epic fantasy. Mrs. Coulter's assertion that Lyra has not reached adolescence—though Lyra has shown her progressed maturity, independence, and growing self-awareness—indicates Mrs. Coulter's lack of understanding of her daughter. She continually refers to Lyra as a child, unaware that Lyra has grown past that stage of her life. Because of her desire for Lyra to remain in a state of innocent childhood, Mrs. Coulter's attempts to protect her through confinement causes Lyra to rebel and casts Mrs. Coulter as the villain in Lyra's life; however, because no character is fully good or fully evil, she sacrifices herself for Lyra and redeems herself in the end of the trilogy.

Unlike the adults who wish to protect Lyra but are easily swayed to allow her to progress, Mrs. Coulter continuously attempts to contain Lyra. This provokes Lyra to resent her and establishes her as the perceived villain in Lyra's life. While she is often considered villainous, not just to Lyra but to many characters including Roger, Mrs. Coulter cannot be considered a straightforward villain because the series strives to show the process of adolescence and seemingly erases any clear lines of the traditional moral binary. Her actions are often horrific, such as capturing and leading the experiments on children as the leader of the Oblation Board, but she also shows redeemable qualities. Serafina Pekala once vowed to "send an arrow into her throat" after witnessing her torture a witch; however, her need for revenge curbs when Mrs. Coulter "sacrificed herself with Lord Asriel to fight [Metatron] and make the world safe for Lyra" (479). Her shifting moral choices force us to question her status as a true villain, just as adolescents often question the moral and ethical codes presented in society. Because she sacrifices herself, the traditional conception of good and evil as opposing sides is erased, forcing one to question the ethics of each character presented in the series. This questioning of a character's virtue and nature varies from the traditional tropes of fantasy in which there are clear lines between heroes and villains. The variation signals a distinction in Pullman's trilogy that furthers the conceptualization of adolescence.

The binary of good and evil appears regularly through the trilogy, but it is quickly complicated or thwarted. When Lyra first meets Will Parry in *The Subtle Knife*, she secretly asks the Alethiometer if Will is "a friend or an enemy" (28). She intends to discover if he can be trusted and if he is good or evil. Instead of placing Will on the binary, the Alethiometer reveals that Will "is a murderer" (28). It gives no context to the

answer, so Lyra must make her own judgement based on this fact along with her previous interaction with him (for instance, his knowledge of Oxford and other worlds and making her dinner). Upon this discovery, she does not classify Will as good or evil; rather, the Alethiometer's answer brings comfort because "a murderer was a worthy companion," and he reminds her of Iorek Byrnison. She accepts that he does not have to be on the binary. Instead, she decides that she can trust him based on his actions towards her.

Lyra's physical journey through the trilogy is fraught with mistakes and unwise decisions, showing the reality that maturation does not occur at once but is an often slow, non-linear process. In *The Subtle Knife* Lyra journeys alone to Will's world, our world, to sustain her curiosity despite Will's warning. Like her rebelliousness against the parental figures, she rebels against Will's words, but this rebellious action has disastrous consequences. Over the course of only one morning, she reveals her connection with Will to an inspector searching for him and has her Alethiometer stolen when she gives into luxury and accepts a ride in a Rolls Royce (144-155). She knows that giving away her connection with Will and trusting the man in the Rolls Royce are dangerous and wrong because both may have disastrous consequences on her quest, yet she chooses these actions regardless and gives in to her curiosity. This act of falling into temptation in order to satisfy a personal desire undermines the traditional role she plays as a virtuous hero; however, she acknowledges the adverse actions: "Will, I done wrong... Oh, I done such wrong things this morning..." (155). Though she is not morally perfect, her imperfection and the consequences that ensue force her to question her identity and purpose and to take action to amend her mistakes. The imperfection allows her to gain the experience and wisdom that lead to a more mature individual. She now must make the moral choice

to steal the Subtle Knife from a man named Tullio or continue her quest without the Alethiometer. She devises a trade—the Subtle Knife for the Alethiometer—and she and Will make the decision to steal. Along with the immoral decision to steal, Lyra also makes the morally good decision to own up to her errors, telling Will when they are about to steal the Knife, “I ought to go first...seeing it’s my fault” (172). She makes morally good choices *and* morally bad ones, but when she makes mistakes she is able to learn from them and make the necessary corrections, a sign of progression in her adolescent journey. The progression of this journey is highlighted through the obstacles and difficulties of her epic quest. Just as she continues through adolescence towards the maturity of adulthood, so too does she continue through the conventional process of the epic.

Continued difficulties, such as the monsters Lyra faces in journeying through the land of the dead, force her to reflect on her actions and thus the formation of her identity in the same way that obstacles, whether through familial or social issues, force adolescents to reflect on the morals and decisions that will ultimately form their identity. One of Lyra’s defining characteristics is her ability to lie fluently, which earns her the name Lyra Silvertongue by Iorek Byrnison, the armored bear king, after she “tricked [Iofur Ranknison]” into thinking she was a daemon (*NL* 347-348). This characteristic complicates her morality. While lying may get her out of trouble and allow her to continue her quest, which will benefit the greater good, she continually deceives people. Her internal struggle to lie or not to lie is visibly manifested in a mythical creature: a harpy. The harpy No-Name prevents Lyra and the others from leaving the land of the Dead, but Lyra negotiates with the harpy, suggesting that if she were to tell No-Name

“where [they]’ve been” and “all kinds of strange things” she and Will have witnessed on their journey, the harpy will let them go freely. When No-Name agrees, Lyra begins the story but embellishes her backstory, creating a fictional mother and father. Her fictitious tale is cut off by the harpy: “‘*Liar! Liar! Liar!*’ And it sounded as if her voice were coming from everywhere...so that she seemed to be screaming Lyra’s name, so that *Lyra* and *liar* were one and the same thing” (293). Lyra did not tell her and Will’s tale. Instead, she lied and told the harpy a fake story, a clear violation of their deal. Instead of allowing her to escape trouble, her lying fails her, and Lyra is unable to deceive the harpy. By blending the two words, Lyra and liar, the harpy reveals Lyra’s psychological ethical struggle and the struggle to understand her identity. This struggle highlights the moral and ethical development adolescents face as they question social norms and develop their own understanding of right and wrong. She must decide if she wants to be known as a liar or if she wants to be trustworthy. The epic fantasy world with harpies barring her exit out of the land of the dead forces Lyra’s reflection on who she is and who she wants to be—questions that permeate the stage of adolescence—by creating catastrophic consequences. Without her reflection and maturity to understand the importance of honesty, Lyra and Will would have remained trapped along with the departed souls. Therefore, the trilogy’s world enables Lyra’s progress through adolescence to be guided by the conventions of the quest.

Pantalaimon plays a unique role in Lyra’s adolescent journey as a tangible representation of Lyra’s psychological development. Upon leaving the land of the Dead, Lyra once again reflects on her actions and decisions, specifically that of leaving Pan behind to save the trapped souls. Pan, and all other daemons, are not allowed in the land

of the Dead; thus, Lyra is forced to make the decision to stay with Pan or save Roger. Separating herself from Pan causes both to have a pain so intense that it typically causes death. Their separation marks a significant step in her progression through adolescence because it illustrates a difficult and critical decision, a step necessary for a successful development towards adulthood. Lyra makes the decision to leave Pan on the shore as she continues her quest, the “cruellest thing she had ever done,” for which she was “hating herself, hating the deed, suffering for Pan and with Pan and because of Pan” (283). Pan did not want Lyra to leave, knowing that this decision equated to complete abandonment and possible death, but Lyra disengaged “his cat claws from her clothes, weeping, weeping,” a pain so deep that it was “tearing her heart out of her breast” (283-4). Lyra’s decision causes raging emotions and extreme psychological turbulence, mirroring the turbulence often felt by adolescents during changes in hormones and stress levels. Their separation further suggests the difficulty of adolescence, specifically when one must become totally independent. Though she has made decisions before this moment, the separation from Pan marks a different type of independence. Pan is at once a piece of her and a separate being. By leaving him on the shore, Lyra, in part, sacrifices herself. She knows that it may kill both her and Pan, but she puts Roger’s soul above her own.

As expected with a trilogy’s theme of muddling morality, Lyra’s self-sacrificial decision is also deeply problematic. Because Pan is his own being, he has his own thoughts and emotions. When Lyra leaves him, he feels abandoned with “nothing worse to feel” (285). Though Pan knows that Lyra’s decision is “all for the best” in terms of Roger’s soul, the physical and mental pain caused by Lyra leaving him “abandoned on the shore” raises questions about the ethics of her choice (285-6). The pain is so intense

that it causes Pan to abandon and hide from Lyra, an action unheard of in daemons. Thus, the difficult decision to leave Pan complicates her role as the perceived hero of the epic fantasy because, from Pan's perspective, she has committed a horrible act. Lyra even tries to convince herself that her decision to leave Pan was necessary and benefitted the greater good, the souls of dead, which will one day be her own soul. She reflects on this decision with Will, and he also tries to convince her that she is not morally bad. He tells her, "We didn't have any choice at all" (283). Yet Lyra did have a choice. Before she steps into the boat to sail away from Pan, she thinks, "She could say no...She could be true to the heart-deep, life-deep bond linking her to Pantalaimon; she could put that first..." (283). Her decision was not forced upon her, and she actively made the choice to leave Pan with the full knowledge of the pain it would cause. Her choice to complete her epic quest or to remain with Pan signifies the choice many adolescents encounter when faced with difficult decisions, typically decisions that force them to become more autonomous and progress towards adulthood. Despite the pain and regret felt after choosing to continue her quest without Pan by her side, Lyra concludes, "It was a *good* thing we did" (462). In this moment, Lyra must come to terms with her choices, specifically the fact that she damaged her relationship with Pantalaimon and caused him significant anguish. This deeper self-reflection leads her to accept her decisions and allows her a greater understanding of herself. The epic fantasy world constructs a visualization of Lyra's moment of self-acceptance through the return of Pan at the end of the trilogy.

While the trilogy highlights a modern conceptualization of adolescence, particularly through the female perspective, it recedes slightly in its modern perspective when revealing the emergence of a sexual identity in Lyra and Will. The two adolescents'

sexual awakening is reminiscent of Stanley Hall's belief in the dangers of sexual awakenings in adolescence. Their passion for each other may be fatal if the two choose to remain together. Because they are from different realms, they cannot live fully together. If Lyra were to stay in Will's universe, she would be incomplete and within 10 years become "ill and fade and then die" (487). Leaving an opening between their two realms would allow evil in the form of Specters to come into the worlds. In order to keep both realms safe, they must close the cuts in the universe, and in doing so never see each other again. While their sexual awakening brings a moment of intense pleasure and love for each other, the moment is fleeting. Their desires are dangerous if allowed to continue, suggesting an underlying idea of the dangers of adolescent sexuality.

Despite this recession from a more progressive view of adolescent sexuality, the trilogy maintains a modern re-conceptualization of adolescence by primarily emphasizing Lyra's female experience rather than Will's. In *Northern Lights*, Lyra knows that it is wrong to touch another person's daemon, but she does not suggest an awareness of why that is acceptable and actually highly pleasurable to touch a person's daemon under the right circumstances—that is, when in love. No one is allowed to touch Pan. To touch another person's daemon is considered highly taboo, very intimate, and similar to a sexual act. When it occurs without consent, it causes a great deal of pain and discomfort to both the human and the daemon. This lack of awareness in the first novel positions Lyra on the brink of adolescence. She lacks any sort of sexual awareness, but she is very curious about the world around her. As Lyra begins to think about love and desire during her talk with secondary character Mary Malone, she "felt something strange happen in her body," suggesting an awakening of sexual feelings like "lights coming on" that left

her “trembling” (AS 444). Her understanding of these desires is incomplete, and she “didn’t know what it was, or what it meant” because the feelings are new (447). While there are many variables that play into Lyra’s maturation, the series emphasizes Lyra and Will’s sexual awakening in part to signify them as the new Adam and the new Eve, but also to highlight the reality that adolescents are sexual beings.

As Lyra’s personal journey and exploration culminate in *The Amber Spyglass*, Pan does not shift as often, suggesting that Lyra has established a better understanding of her identity while also emphasizing the inevitability of both the stage of adolescence and her maturation into adulthood. Lyra recognizes Pan’s settling and asks him, “Pan, you’re not going to change a lot anymore, are you?” (498). She accepts that he will settle, a sharp contrast from her early view that Pan “will never” settle nor would she want him to (NL 168). When Lyra realizes that she has fallen in love with Will, she and Will touch each other’s daemons, and “her surprise was mixed with a pleasure,” and both Lyra and Will know that “neither daemon would change now” (498; 499). Despite Lyra’s hesitance towards maturation in her childhood, this scene acknowledges the inevitability of navigating through adolescence and forming a psychological and sexual identity. Lyra acknowledges her growth and maturity by reminiscing about her younger self. She tells Pan, now a large and powerful ferret, “you remember when we were younger and I didn’t want you to stop changing at all... Well, I wouldn’t mind so much now. Not if you stay like this” (498). Though Lyra has not completed adolescence biologically (she is still in her early teens at the conclusion of the trilogy), she is psychologically matured. Pan’s settling marks Lyra’s understanding of her identity as an individual who is loyal, selfless, and understanding of the complexities of the world. She is no longer naïve to the dangers

of the world, and she has questioned the morals and ethics of her society. Through her experiences, she has the ability to make logical decisions for herself. She has completed her quest, saved the souls trapped in the land of dead, and discovered her own independence and resiliency.

Lyra is forced to choose how she will spend the rest of her life, a decision that requires a great deal of maturity. She and Will must make their own choice with their own free will. The two choose to live in their own worlds. They make the choice freely, revealing their psychological maturity and understanding of who they are as well as a deeper wisdom for the workings of their world. Will states, “Whatever I do, I will choose it, no one else” (496). This revelation in the text suggests that adolescents have the potential to foster a positive identity and role that contradicts the negative connotations typically associated with “rebellious” and “hormonal” adolescents. Even if they do not explicitly see themselves as wise and mature, they understand their identity as people who must save their homes instead of allowing Evil to continue to damage the realms. It is this understanding that ends their psychological, adolescent journey. The wisdom they have gained has allowed them both to find their purpose and role in life. Even though they do not know exactly what they will do in their respective universes, they understand their role as protectors of the realms. They understand that their happiness with each other cannot justify allowing Evil to continue to wreak havoc on the universe. While an ordinary adolescent, one who is not faced with fantastic challenges, may not make catastrophic decisions, the psychological effect of the decision remains the same between a typical adolescence and Lyra and Will.

Moreover, by adding another layer of nuance in creating a protagonist who is female, Pullman continues to advance the role of female epic heroes in the genre. Allowing Lyra to explore her identity in adolescence through her morality and sexuality gives her the independence not commonly seen in female characters. Lyra fails and makes many mistakes, but her mistakes do not hinder her quest. Her flaws and character, such as her habit of lying, are not permanent because she is allowed to grow and change through the process of self-discovery and reflection. She is considered the epic hero because she is the protagonist of the epic fantasy, but she is also simply an adolescent girl, growing towards adulthood and trying to understand her identity and purpose.⁷ Her role as the epic protagonist coupled with her identity as an adolescent girl reconfigures the connotations of the epic protagonist as solely good and heroic by reimagining the character as one who questions ethical choices. The duality of Lyra's roles further re-conceptualizes the negative connotations associated with the typical, modern adolescent.

Because adolescence is a time of self-discovery and development of one's identity and values, Lyra and Will reflect on their epic quest, the decisions they and other characters make along the way, and the prospect of moving forward with their lives. The ending sequence of *The Amber Spyglass* gives Lyra and Will the space to question the ethics of their respective societies and specifically question the broad concepts of good and evil. Clear lines between good and evil signify one of the key conventions of epic fantasy, yet Pullman's trilogy candidly shows its rebellion against this binary through the secondary character, Mary Malone, a former Catholic nun turned scientist from Will's world who studies Dust. Mary explains to Lyra and Will her journey from a devout Catholic to scientist, and the conversation naturally turns to faith, an area of questioning

that emerges within the two adolescents. Mary explains that she “stopped believing there was a power of good and power of evil that were outside us” (AS 447). Her conversation with Lyra and Will sums up the narrative’s apparent desire to challenge the binary of good and evil characters and insists that characters’ morals are ambiguous and more complex than previous epic fantasies allowed them to be. The idea of good and evil characters is inconsistent with the reality of the human psychology; as Mary says, “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” (447). Her words reflect the nature of Lyra’s moral psychology, one that contains both ethically good and bad decisions. Though Lyra fills the role of the epic hero as the protagonist of the trilogy, she is not considered in the text as a flat hero or villain, good or bad. Her character is far more complex, as she continually discovers who she is and who she wants to be. As Mary Malone questioned the certainty of ethics in her youth, so too are Lyra and Will, just as ordinary adolescents often question the ethical values presented to them in their respective societies.

During this time of reflection, Pantalaimon hides himself from Lyra, an action unheard of between human and daemon; yet in this moment, instead of feeling intense pain or “torn apart” Lyra feels “safe” and knows he is near (AS 422). The unnatural action of Pan being separated from Lyra indicates a significant moment unique to their relationship. Because Pan and Lyra were separated during Lyra’s journey into the world of the dead, their connection is strengthened and changed to that of “witches and shamans” in which they still “one whole being; but now they can roam free” (472-3).

Despite (and perhaps because) the separation was “so painful” and the two felt “so frightened,” Lyra and Pan can be independent from one another while still being connected. This connection signifies a progression in their relationship and a new form of independence. As the two have journeyed through adolescence together, navigating the dangerous and strange quest, each discovers and forms an identity within the self that is more progressive than that of a typical person in Lyra’s realm. They have the agency to be autonomous and gain the ability to “go to far places and see strange things and bring back knowledge” (473). Lyra and Pan’s new connection between human and daemon signifies the new conceptualization of modern adolescence as a stage of positive growth toward an independent and fulfilling life for those who succeed in progressing through adolescence into a state of independence and maturity. Lyra is able to reflect on her identity and choices, and the turbulence of her journey has clarified her understanding of herself as an independent, courageous young woman.

Adolescence does not end like a fairy tale. Accordingly, Lyra receives no reward for her quest other than an understanding of her self. Instead, she loses both Will and her ability to read the Alethiometer, and she must return to her own world; however, the loss of her ability to read the device also gives her the understanding of what she must do after she and Will part ways: she will become a scholar and learn to read the Alethiometer once more. When Lyra and Will must decide how they wish to spend the rest of their lives, they make the choice to save their homes and close all cuts in the universe in order to rebuild the “republic of Heaven.” Like maturity in adulthood, the process of rebuilding the republic of Heaven is not a “single quest” but rather an “on-going task” (Cantell 320). Lyra and Will will continue to struggle as they move into

adulthood past the trilogy's end. For Lyra, learning to read the Alethiometer will become her "life's work" (515). Her learning will take her into adulthood and continue just as she continues to mature.

CHAPTER V – CONCLUSION

Lyra and Will have “changed many things” within their worlds (*AS* 473). This idea of change mirrors the idea that British and American adolescence continues to change as the societal constructs of this stage of life evolve. Attempting to show the truth of the ordinary adolescent journey within the parameters of the epic fantasy novel creates an apparent irony. Epic fantasies are filled with mythical creatures and implausible quests; yet the idea of telling a truthful story permeates throughout the series: When the Master of Jordan College and Dame Hannah Relf, the head of the woman’s college St. Sophia’s, ask Lyra to tell them what happened to her, Lyra states, “I promise to tell the truth, if you promise to believe it” (513). In this moment, both Lyra’s audience and the readers of her journey must decide whether to believe her story or not. While for the reader Lyra’s journey exists in a fictional realm and is filled with fictional experiences, her story reflects the very truth of adolescence—the emotional and mental journey towards maturity. *His Dark Materials* depicts a realistic psychological journey for its protagonists and thus reveals a more telling truth of adolescence than is possible in firmly realistic novels because the genre, though rooted firmly in imaginative fiction, “speaks to us of our place in our world” (Egoff 18). The foundation of the characters is grounded in an understanding of the realities of adolescence and thus is highlighted as the truth within the fiction.

By the end of the trilogy, Lyra has matured psychologically and is faced with her future, “a whole life to live,” as she says to the Master of Jordan College and Dame Hannah (*AS* 513). She sits “defiant” but also “awkward in her growing body” because while she is psychologically matured, she is physically still developing (514). She and

Pan make the decision to accept Dame Hannah's offer to attend a boarding school until she is old enough to become an undergraduate at St. Sophia's and begin relearning the Alethiometer. This conversation with Dame Hannah reveals the ordinariness and reality of Lyra's life. While she has completed an epic quest and matured greatly, she must also abide by some social constructions, such as waiting to enter university until she reaches a certain age. Going to boarding school with "other girls of [her] age" does not negate the development through adolescence Lyra has completed (516). Rather, it shows her maturity and understanding of her place in the world. She has become self-sufficient and independent, but she has also learned to rely on and trust others. She has learned to accept herself without the need of assurance from other people. For instance, when Pan scurries farther away from her than is usually possible for a human and daemon, she once "would have reveled in showing it off to all her urchin friends," but she has learned "the value of silence and discretion" (516). She no longer needs to approval of others because she is confident in who she is. As Pan has settled as a powerful ferret, so too has Lyra settled in the acceptance of herself and her identity as a future scholar and mature young woman.

By combining the conventions of the epic fantasy with an understanding of the challenges of adolescence, *His Dark Materials* represents contemporary youth. The imaginative and mythical elements of epic fantasy juxtaposed with the psychological challenges of adolescents creates a visualization of the abstract journey of adolescence. The conventions of the epic quest and protagonist reveal the magnitude and gravity of the adolescent process. Each decision, while it may not have actual catastrophic effects, either progresses or hinders adolescents in their own journey towards adulthood, and the series suggests that an individual adolescent's development can have profound effects on

the wider world. By viewing Lyra's interactions with other characters, we can see her struggle to gain independence. The narrative creates a strong tension between the adults' desire for Lyra to remain in childhood and Lyra's progression through adolescence and into a state of maturity. Through Pan, we may see her struggle to understand her place in the world. As he shifts form, so does her understanding of her purpose and identity. Because of Lyra's multilayered journey, *His Dark Materials* represents both the traditional elements of the epic fantasy, capturing the imagination of the readers and telling an exciting story of good overcoming evil, while also going beyond the tradition by showing the challenges of adolescence. Through Lyra's morally uncertain character, Pullman challenges the traditional epic, specifically the traditions of the hero-villain binary present in British epic fantasies of the early twentieth century. The combination of a more realistic portrayal of adolescence with the modern conventions of epic fantasy allow a new approach to the traditional genre, one that can be seen through other modern epic fantasies such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* and Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series.

Epic fantasy re-conceptualizes the stage of adolescence; it captures the truth of adolescence and presents it as a difficult quest that must be taken in order to grow and mature. It elevates the period of adolescence as a critical and pivotal stage of life in a way that realism cannot by transforming the often-negative constructs of adolescence with the fantastic; thus, the genre creates an epic adolescence, one that represents the turbulent journey young people face as they progress towards adulthood. *His Dark Materials* stands as a clear literary representation of the challenges of adolescence and the journey one must take to reach a state of maturity. Thus, this combination shows the difficult

decisions adolescents must face, decisions that reflect their moral development and individuality, through the landscape of epic fantasy.

NOTES

¹ McDonald is often credited with the first epic fantasy novel, *Phantastes* (1858), and his work “rebelled against the strict Victorian code by questioning traditional sex roles and creating young protagonists,” a similarity found in Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* (Zipes 222).

² On multiple occasions, Pullman has publicly stated his dislike for Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia* because he believes the epic fantasy series lacks character development and includes hints of sexism and racism with “propaganda in the service of a life-hating ideology” (Pullman “Portrait”). Applying what Harold Bloom coins as the “anxiety of influence,” William Gray specifically argues that the relationship between *His Dark Materials* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* involves Pullman’s subversion of the absolute morality presented in Lewis’ *Narnia* through ambiguous characters who, along with completing their epic quest, are also faced with the difficult task of maturing.

³ In Pullman’s latest book, *La Belle Sauvage* (or *The Book of Dust*), the mystery of Lyra’s placement at Jordan College is revealed. The Master grants her sanctuary as an infant in order to protect her from Mrs. Coulter’s lover, a vicious man who wants Lyra as his own.

⁴ These events coupled with Pullman’s explicit religious language often categorize the trilogy as atheistic or heretical and helped land the trilogy on the number two spot on the “Top Ten Most Challenged Books Lists” of 2008 (ALA 2008).

⁵ Karen Robinson explains that the trilogy draws on the elements of the creation of worlds, free will, and the selflessness of Adam and Eve. Throughout the trilogy, Lyra is often referred to as the New Eve because her quest through parallel universes to free those trapped in the world of the Dead grants new life to those who were trapped. In the second installment, *The Subtle Knife* (1997), Lyra meets Will, who represents a New Adam and accompanies her for the remainder of her quest.

⁶ For an in-depth examination of Pullman’s religious views and use of religion in the trilogy, see J’Annine Jobling’s work, *Fantastic Spiritualities* (2010).

⁷ Clothing and hair styles, music, and accessories are created specifically for young people in their adolescent years. This group is a product of the culture just as much as it shapes the culture through its consumerism. According to Grace Palladino, the desire for certain styles and music creates a culture in which they may control at least partial aspects of their lives: “they have come to expect a level of personal freedom that is limited only by their own sense of decorum and discipline—a remarkable shift from the days before the Second World War, when high school students were supposed to put their free time to good use, preparing for adult futures” (xiv).

⁸ Barnett’s study indicates that “Although still underrepresented, women now hold positions in such previous male preserves as Congress; the judiciary; professional sports;

the military; local, state, and national politics; top-level corporate positions; police; and firefighting.”

The study also indicates that the “age of first marriage is increasing” for men and women “as is life expectancy, and family size is decreasing.” More women are seeking employment outside of the home, and therefore, “women are spending less time in child care and household.”

⁹ While the focus of this research is primarily concerned with the re-conceptualization of modern adolescence within the trilogy, this research lends itself to a larger conversation when looking more into the specific creation and development of the female epic protagonist in relation to cultural and societal norms.

¹⁰ For more information on the connection between daemons and sexuality, see Santiago Colás’ essay, “Telling True Stories, or The Immanent Ethics of Material Spirit (and Spiritual Matter) in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*.”

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