

Kyra Lanser

Dr. Pennington

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### Religion vs. Pullman

Philip Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, has received much criticism since its publication. The criticism has come from many different directions; however, the most prominent critic of Pullman's series is religion – specifically Christianity. Perhaps much of this hostility comes from the fact that Philip Pullman is not exactly religious himself. He claimed in an interview to be religious, he said, "I'm religious, but I'm an atheist. I think religious questions are the big questions. Where did we come from? What is life about? What is evil? Those are questions I do think about." (Jukes). However, most religious people do not consider atheists as religious and furthermore do not like atheists at all because they do not believe in God – or a supreme being – as they do. *His Dark Materials* reflect Philip Pullman's so called religious beliefs. Therefore, it is no great wonder as to why the trilogy has received a significant amount of criticisms, especially from people involved in religions. These critics of Philip Pullman's trilogy write as though they have been personally offended by Pullman which causes their writing to come off as angry and in some cases as extremely biased. Due to the strongly biased natures of the critics, most essays written by said critics cannot be trusted, they are merely rants about Philip Pullman by people whose beliefs were insulted.

The first book in Philip Pullman's trilogy is *The Golden Compass* and that seems to be the book which has been getting the most attention as of late. That is the book most critics focus on the most in their literary critiquing of Pullman. In the book, the main character, Lyra Belacqua, is living her life at Jordan College in England. Suddenly, children are being reported as missing all over England. Lyra is not so concerned with this information until, one day, her own best friend Roger becomes one of those missing children. She is picked up by a woman, Marisa Coulter, and forgets about Roger until she discovers that Ms. Coulter is behind his kidnapping. She then goes on a heroic rescue mission which turns into so much more than just saving her friend when Lyra finds out why the children are being kidnapped. (Pullman)

However, some critics have been able to put their own religious affiliations to the side in order to critic Pullman's stories in a more professional manner. One such critic is Jenny Sawyer who wrote an article titled "Is 'The Golden Compass' really anti-Christian?" which was published in *The Christian Science Monitor*. Jenny Sawyer is an accredited freelance writer as well as being a critic for children's literature. In this article, she went against what many others have said about Philip Pullman's book being anti-Christian and not fit for young children to read. Jenny instead claims that Pullman did not write these books as a way to attack religion but actually wrote them to encourage children to form their own thoughts and to think freely. Sawyer stated that Philip Pullman not only wants kids to be able to formulate their own thoughts and opinions but that he also has great respect for those kids' ability to form their own thoughts and opinions. Later in the article Sawyer goes on to almost praise Pullman on his thought provoking trilogy, mentioning how he discusses topics in his books which adults are not

comfortable discussing with their children themselves. (Sawyer) Pullman has the courage to bring up mature content which exposes the young readers to the less pleasurable side of society. That is the part of the books most adults seem to disagree with, they find it almost horrifying that Pullman has the audacity to open their children's eyes to the 'real' world. Jenny Sawyer brings her article to a close with this: "In short, Pullman doesn't tell his readers what to think, but how to think. And to think, period. This, I suspect, is what Pullman's critics really find unnerving." (Sawyer). Most parents prefer to keep their kids innocent and in the dark when it comes to the 'real' world for as long as they are able to do so; Pullman kind of derails that plan with *His Dark Materials*.

Jenny Sawyer is not alone on her front, Richard Greene and Rachel Robison joined her when they wrote *The Golden Compass' and Philosophy: God Bites the Dust*. Both of them had qualms about reading the trilogy at first due to its being categorized as a young adult fiction series. However, they read it and soon realized it was very sophisticated for children's' books and responded to many deep philosophical questions (Greene). They then realized, much like many other readers of the trilogy, that *His Dark Materials* is not merely for children. Similarly to what Jenny Sawyer noticed, Greene and Robison noted that the books brought about issues which some believed were not appropriate for children to be reading or learning about at their young age. The most prominent issue notice in the book by Greene and Robison was the topic of God and organized religion as a whole. However, these two took those issues in a different direction than many of the other bias critics of Philip Pullman did. They began to think that instead of those controversial topics leading to children being corrupted or tainted, they were

instead leading the children to be free thinkers. Pullman was not trying to promote his own religious (or anti-religious) beliefs, he was promoting children to “embrace their own life as their own” and not blindly follow authority (Greene). Just as Sawyer claimed Pullman was doing with his books, Greene and Robison too believe Pullman is encouraging people – particularly children – to have their own thoughts.

A majority of critics regarding Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* are unable to look at the books in an unbiased light the way the three aforementioned critics were. Many critics use their religious views and dislike of anything which goes against their views to propel their criticisms of Pullman’s writing. Bernard Schweizer was so enraged with Pullman’s children series that he called called the trilogy a rebellious, “demonic” enterprise. Schweizer is an English professor at Long Island University in Brooklyn, New York who has recently been focusing on analyzing the use of God-hatred or misotheism in literature (*Wikipedia Bernard*). Schweizer was clearly not afraid to share his obvious disdain for Philip Pullman because in his essay, *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism*, he outright calls Pullman a misotheist. (Schweizer, *Hating*) This contradicts Pullman’s own confession of being a so called religious atheist. Misotheists and atheists are not the same thing; atheists do not believe in the existence of God or any supreme being whatsoever while misotheists admit that God does in fact exist and they hate Him. He goes on to claim that one of the main characters of the books, Lord Asriel, has one main goal and that is to knock God off his throne. Schweizer even goes as far as calling Philip Pullman himself a member of the “Devil’s Party” who does not even attempt to cover up his true intentions.

Schweizer believes that Pullman is pushing his personal thoughts about religion through his stories and one of those personal thoughts is that original sin is bad and should be gotten rid of entirely. In the first book of the trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, children are being kidnapped for their daemons – animals tied to the people meant to symbolize that person’s soul or character (Pullman). The captors of the children are meant to symbolize the Church and they sever the bond between a child and its daemon. Schweizer draws the analogy that severing that bond is going to free the children from original sin and save them. However, the operation seems to do more harm than good for the children because the children are left emotionally and physically stunted and most of them died not long after the operation. (Schweizer, *Hating*) Kidnapping and indirectly killing children just for the sake of getting rid of original sin does not put the Church in a very good light and Schweizer clearly believes that Pullman was fully aware of that when he wrote the book.

Bernard Schweizer wrote another essay regarding Pullman and his trilogy. This second essay, *“And He’s A-Going to Destroy Him”*: *Religious Subversion in Pullman’s ‘His Dark Materials*, goes further in depth on how the story is anti-religious. Schweizer claims that in Pullman’s books, his version of God is not the merciful God of Christianity but “is a grizzled, tottering liar.” (Schweizer, *And*) One thing Schweizer notes is that despite its near heretical message and the way in which Pullman practically decimates the Christian religion in his books, those books became surprisingly popular not long after their publication in the late 1990s and into the early 2000s. This was found to be especially surprising to many critics due to the critiques the *Harry Potter* series had been receiving regarding its possible promotion of

witchcraft around the same time. The explanation Schweizer came up with was that Pullman's books were published at the perfect time to tap into some religious rebellion that was taking place. (Schweizer, *Hating*) The books rode in on that rebellion and were soon too popular for anything to be done no matter how many critiques told people not to give into them.

Schweizer brings in another man's thoughts on Pullman's books into his essay, the thoughts of Alan Jacobs. Jacobs earned a PhD from the University of Virginia and is an English scholar, writer, and literary critic (*Wikipedia Alan*). Schweizer begins to lead his essay towards one of the main religious topics that can be found in *His Dark Materials*, God. He writes about how "Jacobs is particularly piqued by Pullmans' 'truly anti-theological point that whether God lives or dies is not in the long run a very significant matter'" (Schweizer, *Hating*). Jacobs opinion was not widely shared, however. Most readers of the series remained naïve to that take on Pullman's God-like figure in the books. This could be a result of that same rebellious faze people were going under which allowed the books to first be published without many critics attacking it. Bernard Schweizer then shifts from this more logical view to his own bias view of the book's 'God'. He believes the characters portray what must be Pullman's personal belief regarding God: "the heroes of the story act on the belief that God is not a champion of mankind but rather its enemy, since He is opposed on principle to what is beautiful, enlightened, and pleasurable in life." (Schweizer, *Hating*) It is again obvious that this essay, much like his first essay is focusing on Pullman's supposed misotheist thoughts and opinions which get translated into his books.

Another critic who was unable to put his own beliefs aside before critiquing Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* – specifically the movie version of *The Golden Compass* – is David J. Stewart. Stewart wrote an article called “The Golden Compass is of the Devil”. The title itself gives away Stewart's opinion of the book/movie, leaving no doubt in the readers' minds what the goal of his essay is. Stewart does nothing throughout his article to hide his hatred towards Pullman and his book. He uses words such as evil, garbage, and demonic to describe Philip Pullman's literary works (Stewart). Stewart claims that “[t]he movie has been dumbed down to fool kids and their parents in the hope that...they will enjoy the movie, and then the children will want the books for Christmas.” (Stewart) Unlike Sawyer, Greene, and Robison who believed Pullman was not trying to force his own beliefs on the young children who read his books, Stewart strongly believes that Pullman was indeed trying to force his ideas onto the younger generations. Stewart does however hop on the same thought train as Schweizer when he describes Pullman as “a sinfully proud, God-hating, militant atheist.” (Stewart)

There are many reasons David Stewart gives for abhorring Pullman's idea of a children's story. Stewart does show a strong dislike for Pullman himself and his personal religious beliefs, however, that is not what he shows to be the main reason as to why he hates *The Golden Compass* along with the rest of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy. The biggest reason he hates the books is the way in which Pullman clearly wrote the books to thrust his beliefs on his audiences. Pullman puts witches and demons into his story, two creatures which obviously go against the Church's teachings and beliefs. (Stewart) Pullman also gives the bad guys a name which is directly related to the Catholic Church. He calls them the Magisterium which is “the authority

and power of the church to teach religious truth.” (Dictionary) What David Stewart hates the most is that a man (Philip Pullman) can impress his own, personal hatred of God upon young children, turning them away from religion (Stewart).

As seen previously in this essay, both Pullman’s books and Pullman himself have received much criticism ever since *His Dark Materials* was published. While some of the critics were able to put their biased views aside in order to give his books a fair assessment, most of them were not. Most of them let their feelings take the wheel and drive their essays and articles, making their critiques, at times, seem more like personal rants than actual literary critiques as they were supposed to be. However, despite these almost passive-aggressive writings regarding Pullman and his work, the books have continued to thrive in popular culture.

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Blurb: With the assistance of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, Mary continues her search for the elusive Hyde and soon gathers around her more women, all of whom have been created through terrifying experimentation: Beatrice Rappaccini, Catherine Moreau, and Justine Frankenstein. When their investigations lead them to the discovery of a secret society of immoral and power-crazed scientists, the horrors of their past soon arrive as well, and it is up to the five of them to stop the malicious machinations of the Soci t  les Alchimistes. It is time for the monsters to triumph over the monstrous. Everdeen Mason reviews science fiction and fantasy every month for The Washington Post. Read more from Book World: Best books of 2017 The best science fiction and fantasy books to read in November There's a new way for novelists to sound authentic. But at what cost? Science Fiction and Fantasy. Comments. Everdeen Mason Everdeen Mason is The Washington Post's audience editor, specializing in search and editorial digital strategies. She also writes a monthly column highlighting the best new science fiction and fantasy books. She joined The Post in 2015. Follow. More Washington Post Boo Science fiction (sometimes shortened to sci-fi or SF) is a genre of speculative fiction that typically deals with imaginative and futuristic concepts such as advanced science and technology, space exploration, time travel, parallel universes, and extraterrestrial life. It has been called the "literature of ideas", and often explores the potential consequences of scientific, social, and technological innovations.