

"I woke up one day tied down by a hundred little strings."

Discuss the use and effect of intertextuality in *Northern Lights*

Philip Pullman draws on Kleist, Blake and Milton for his story, ideology and scenery in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy but, as the title suggests, he recognises the dangers as well as the benefits of using others' stories. In his statements on the subject and in his use of an epigram from *Paradise Lost* for *Northern Lights*, Pullman draws readers' attention to his often obvious debt to literary sources. I examine its effect, intended or otherwise, especially in the light of standards of 'good' children's writing.

Stephens' argument that intertextuality is "just a trendier way to refer to influence"¹ underestimates the battle between writer, text, reader and context in *His Dark Materials*. Wilkie stresses the particular importance of the interrelationship of the components of intertextuality in children's literature. She describes the process of *vraisemblance*, "where a child has unconsciously to learn that the fictional worlds in literature are representations and constructions which refer to other texts that ... are now regarded as 'natural'."²

Thomson talks about the undermining effect of Pullman's assumptions about the 'familiar'.³ But by being so explicit in his use of literary intertexts, Pullman manages to avoid the "circular memory of reading"⁴ and create a "metafictional dimension which causes readers to pay attention to the fabric and artifice of these texts ... to the textuality of the world to which it alludes [and] how they are being textually constructed in and by the intertextual playground."⁵

One measure of the effect of intertextuality is the extent to which it serves the purposes of 'good' children's fiction. Thus 'educationalists'⁶ such as Glazer and Williams

¹ Quoted by Daniella Caselli, 'Reading Intertextuality: The Natural and the Legitimate Intertextuality in Harry Potter' in *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, p. 171

² Christine Wilkie, 'Reading Texts: Intertextuality' in *Understanding Children's Literature*, pp. 131-132

³ Stephen Thomson, 'The Child, The Family, The Relationship. Familiar Stories: Family, Storytelling, and Ideology in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*', p. 150

⁴ Wilkie, p. 134

⁵ Wilkie, p. 136

⁶ Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child*, pp. 101-2

argue that 'good' children's fiction has "good plots, rich settings, well-developed characters, important themes ... with an understanding of who the child is."⁷ But to 'pluralists' even 'children's' is a problematic measure. Firstly, as Pifer argues, childhood itself is a cultural construction.⁸ Then Lesnik-Oberstein argues that there is no "knowable', unified child reading audience ... 'except in a common lack of experience.'"⁹ Even this 'unifying' lack of experience cannot be relied on as contemporary British children, whilst materially more cosseted than their predecessors, are now varyingly subject to more adult 'experience'. Thus there can be no guarantee of what Stierle describes as "naïve reading".¹⁰

Even if they cannot 'know' 'children', writers still try to address their audience. To some, including Stephens, the chief aim of children's literature is to inculcate 'reading strategies' so that children can avoid being trapped in a single subject position.¹¹ But writers adopting this approach risk forcing their own ideas on children. There is the paradox of *teaching* children to question¹² and there is the question of who decides what 'liberal attitudes' are and what 'traditional values' to subvert.¹³ The writer risks reflecting social values while proclaiming its iconoclasm.¹⁴ Pullman seems to recognise the dilemma, though admitting that he couldn't "know" his audience, adult or child¹⁵:

I think it depends on your view of education ... if you believe in setting children's minds alive and ablaze with excitement and passion or whether it's a matter of filling them with facts and testing on them ... I know which one I'd go for.¹⁶

Northern Lights takes a risk and invites 'unknowable' readers to question everything.

⁷ Glazer and Williams, *Introduction to Children's Literature*, pp 34, 19, quoted in Lesnik-Oberstein in *Criticism and the Fictional Child*, p. 127

⁸ Pifer, *Demon or Doll: Images of the Child in Contemporary Writing and Culture*, p. 1

⁹ Karin Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: New Approaches*, p. 4

¹⁰ Karlheinz Stierle, 'The Reading of Fictional Texts', in S. R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (eds), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), quoted in Lesnik-Oberstein, p. 115

¹¹ John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 8, quoted by Thomson, p. 144

¹² Thomson, p. 145

¹³ Nicholas Tucker and Nikki Gamble, *Family Fictions* (London: Continuum, 2001), quoted by Thomson, p. 146

¹⁴ Pifer, p. 5

¹⁵ Philip Pullman, Platform: interview with Joan Bakewell and Nichols Wright, 22 March 2005

¹⁶ Philip Pullman, Platform: interview with Robert Butler and Rowan Williams, 17 March 2004

Another measure of the effect of intertextuality is the extent to which it serves Pullman's own purposes.

Firstly there are his intentions in borrowing. Pullman first contemplated "a re-writing of ... *Paradise Lost*".¹⁷ He has said that his greatest inspiration for the book was Kleist's 'On the Marionette Theatre', that he drew on Milton for its landscape, that it is "about Blake's journey from Innocence to Experience" but that when he felt enslaved by the "hundred little strings" of others' systems he followed Blake's example and created his own.¹⁸ Whilst he had no specific audience in mind, he does expect his readers to pick up on the intertexts: "I pay my readers the compliment of assuming that they are intellectually adventurous."¹⁹

Secondly there is its use in, and contribution to, fantasy. Pullman said that he was writing about truth, about "what it is to be human".²⁰ He laments contemporary authors' "lack of ambition",²¹ seeks "an enlargement of imaginative sympathy" and is "temperamentally 'agin' the post modernist position that there is no truth."²² He gives *Paradise Lost* as an example of fantasy that is truthful and profound²³ and says that fantasy, with its "wideness and amplitude"²⁴ is there "to support and embody realism".²⁵ Like Blake, he sees truth in imagination rather than rational thought.²⁶ Among other things, Pullman has argued that his book is about "the story" and about "a coming of age, about innocence"²⁷ and that it is not against religiosity *per se* but against "fundamentalism where you get people trying to read a mythical account as if it is a literal account."²⁸

¹⁷ Nicholas Tucker, *Darkness Visible: Inside the World of Philip Pullman*, p. 89

¹⁸ Platform, 22 March 2005

¹⁹ Philip Pullman, interview by Achuka.co.uk

²⁰ Achuka

²¹ Peter Hunt, 'Introduction: Fantasy and Alternative Worlds' in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, p. 37

²² Platform, 17 March 2004

²³ Achuka

²⁴ Lenz, p. 138

²⁵ Achuka

²⁶ Tucker, p. 156

²⁷ Platform, 22 March 2005

²⁸ Platform, 17 March 2004

I now explore how he uses intertextuality to convey his arguments about these three themes: religion, innocence and experience and – moving to the metafictional – the importance of ‘the story’.

His Dark Materials becomes more didactic as the story progresses; in *Northern Lights*, the argument appears more balanced. Pullman’s use of Blake and Milton allows ambivalence and dialectics, where powerful ideas and images can be weighed up without too heavy an authorial position.

Before he could present an argument about creation and “the powers that move people”²⁹ Pullman had to create a place where such issues *matter*. In Milton and Blake there is a dialectic between Heaven and Hell.³⁰ Milton states that “The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven”³¹ and Blake contrasts love’s power both to build “a Heaven in Hells despair” and “a Hell in Heavens despite.”³² Lyra’s world may seem an intolerant one, in which Rusakov can be accused of heresy³³ for his scientific observations by “Priests in black gowns”³⁴ and in which the intolerance of Reformation and Counter-Reformation are even-handedly mingled.³⁵ But this is the scenery of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the meaning of the creation story was central to people’s lives. It is in contrast to our ‘post modern’ society in which indifference is mistaken for tolerance.

Lyra’s world echoes the Hell on Earth of Blake’s ‘The Chimney Sweeper’, an industrial world in which cruelty is inflicted on children with few misgivings. And as the plot moves north, the scenery becomes both heavenly and infernal. Milton’s Hell is an awesome location,³⁶ as is ‘the North’. Lyra’s emotional response to the Aurora, “as if from

²⁹ Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights*, p. 74

³⁰ Millicent Lenz, ‘Philip Pullman’ in *Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction*, p. 127

³¹ *Paradise Lost*, Book I, line 255

³² William Blake, ‘The Clod and the Pebble’ in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

³³ *Northern Lights*, p. 370

³⁴ William Blake, ‘The Garden of Love’ in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

³⁵ *Northern Lights*, p. 31

³⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, lines 171 to 182

Heaven itself ... like the fires of Hell ... so beautiful it was almost holy",³⁷ is all the more striking because, whether or not the reader is conscious of the debt to Milton, this physical phenomenon is drenched with spiritual meaning.

In his prison, in the midst of this scenery is "the devil"³⁸ – Lord Asriel – who realigns the 'hero' and 'villain' roles of God and Satan.³⁹ "Of the devil's party without knowing it"⁴⁰ Milton made Satan an heroic figure, describing him as once "clothed with transcendent brightness", engaged "in the glorious enterprise" and with the "courage never to submit or yield."⁴¹ Asriel's final speech has an ambition that rivals Satan's:

"This will mean the end of the Church ... the end of those centuries of darkness! Look at that light up there: that's the sun of another world! Feel the warmth of it on your skin now! ... You and I could take the universe to pieces and put it together again, Marissa!"⁴²

When Asriel explains the nature of 'dust' and the Church's preoccupation with it, Pullman perpetrates a daring act of intertextuality, using and rewriting part of Genesis to incorporate daemons into Judaeo-Christian language.⁴³ This both appropriates the central myth underlying the writing of Milton, Blake and Kleist and addresses all three themes covered in this essay. In an authorial voice, Asriel likens the act of 'intercision' to an institutional crime of our own world – the castration of young boys.⁴⁴ There is a danger that this powerful figure might become wholly attractive; through his destruction of Roger⁴⁵ for the greater good of his own "glorious enterprise", Pullman ensures that Asriel resumes his place beside Milton's Satan – magnificent but without a redeeming sympathy.

Above all, *Northern Lights* and its literary texts deal with Innocence and Experience. Milton's "heavenly muse" sings "of man's disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden

³⁷ *Northern Lights*, p. 183

³⁸ *Northern Lights*, p. 21

³⁹ Lenz, p. 124

⁴⁰ William Blake quoted by Tucker, p. 147

⁴¹ *Paradise Lost*, Book I, lines 86, 89 and 108.

⁴² *Northern Lights*, pp. 395 and 396

⁴³ *Northern Lights*, pp. 371-3

⁴⁴ *Northern Lights*, p. 374

⁴⁵ *Northern Lights*, p. 391

tree.”⁴⁶ In Blake’s ‘Garden of Love’ the chapel gates are shut and priests are “binding with briars, my joys & desires.”⁴⁷ And in ‘On the Marionette Theatre’, Kleist argues that while “Paradise is locked and bolted ... we have to ... see if it is perhaps open somewhere at the back ... we must eat again of the tree of knowledge to return to the state of innocence.”⁴⁸

The Church in Lyra’s world is preoccupied with preserving innocence, and both Blake and Milton look to Christ to redeem mankind from its fall; Pullman draws most heavily of Kleist’s more ambiguous arguments. Innocence or a state of grace, Kleist argues, is only possible for the unconscious, the inanimate, the animal or “a god”. So it is a child, a puppet or a bear that shows a “natural grace”; only by becoming infinitely conscious can adults return to grace. It is possible to read this as a Christian text – that Christ or God the Father is implied; Pullman’s use of this story depends on personal choice and hard work to move towards a state of grace. The argument might be too conceptual if Pullman had not used Kleist’s fencing bear and introduced the daemon as a metaphor for the separation of self and consciousness. Children have a separate consciousness but until puberty it is not affected by ‘dust’, Pullman’s metaphor for experience. By portraying daemons as rich characters in their own right and as the essence of “what it is to be human”, Pullman creates a more tangible journey towards experience.

It doesn’t mean that children are angelic: Lyra is described as “a barbarian”,⁴⁹ “a coarse and greedy little savage”⁵⁰ and she lies shamelessly. But Lyra has access to a deeper consciousness that allows her to read the alethiometer, the ‘truth teller’⁵¹, without recourse to years of study. The metaphor of daemons also means that Pullman is able to address an adult issue faced increasingly by children today: sexual experience. Through

⁴⁶ *Paradise Lost*, Book I, lines 1-5

⁴⁷ *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

⁴⁸ Heinrich von Kleist, ‘On the Marionette Theatre’ in Tucker, pp. 202 and 207

⁴⁹ *Northern Lights*, p. 34

⁵⁰ *Northern Lights*, p. 37

daemons and the 'natural' injunction never to touch them⁵², child readers can more safely appreciate Lord Asriel's and Mrs Coulter's intimate embrace⁵³ and the horror of Lyra's abuse at the hands of both Mrs Coulter⁵⁴ and the scientists in Bolvangar.⁵⁵ Lyra's journey to self consciousness is beginning, as Pantalaimon averts his eyes "from these feminine mysteries."⁵⁶ The Church, by severing children's daemons, attempts to keep them in a state of grace, which I read as sexual innocence. The result of this 'intercision' is death or trauma for children; for adults it seems to vary between the effects of a lobotomy⁵⁷ and a zombie-like state.⁵⁸

Witches seem closer to the state of grace. Besides their longevity, they can travel long distances from their daemons and – in my opinion a reference to Kleist – Serafina Pekkala tells Lee Scoresby that "a witch would no sooner give up flying than give up breathing."⁵⁹ Like marionettes they "need the ground only to glance against lightly."⁶⁰

Pullman most directly draws on Kleist for the armoured bears, though with the added colour of Icelandic saga. Lyra's fencing bout with Iorek makes a compelling story in its own right, but illustrates this inhuman state of grace. Iofur, amplified by a reference to Oedipus, fails because he tries to be human. He is tricked by the child⁶¹ and the 'true' bear.⁶² There is a likeness between Iorek and Lyra: neither seem to possess imagination. Iorek speaks only of what he sees; Lyra simply "wasn't imaginative."⁶³

In his treatment of 'the story' as a "force towards a better world"⁶⁴, Pullman's use of intertextuality nears metafiction. He uses strong, simple stories such as the Fall and

⁵¹ *Northern Lights*, p. 74

⁵² *Northern Lights*, p. 143

⁵³ *Northern Lights*, p. 395

⁵⁴ *Northern Lights*, p. 87

⁵⁵ *Northern Lights*, p. 277

⁵⁶ *Northern Lights*, p. 78

⁵⁷ *Northern Lights*, p. 257

⁵⁸ *Northern Lights*, p. 375

⁵⁹ *Northern Lights*, p. 309

⁶⁰ Kleist, p. 202

⁶¹ *Northern Lights*, p. 337

⁶² *Northern Lights*, p. 353

⁶³ *Northern Lights*, p. 249

⁶⁴ Philip Pullman, quoted in Thomson, p. 147

Kleist's vignettes to convey his complex and reasoned arguments. But as "much of what we call traditional storytelling was also swindle, lies and untruths"⁶⁵, Pullman draws the reader's attention to the benefits and dangers of story-telling and lying. In defence of the story, he argues that "thou shalt not is soon forgotten but once upon a time lasts forever."⁶⁶ Lyra, without an imagination, asks her father, "It en't *true*, is it? There wasn't *really* an Adam and Eve?" and he responds, "Think of Adam and Eve like an imaginary number ... if you include it in your equations, you can calculate all manner of things that couldn't be imagined without it."⁶⁷ This is the principle of the infinite number of universes in which Lyra's Oxford exists: we have no way of knowing if it is true but without this 'story', quantum physics doesn't work. Thomson says that "learning to live in *His Dark Materials* is learning to tell the right story about oneself."⁶⁸ Thus Lyra collects her story "as if she were settling a pack of cards"⁶⁹, has to "adjust to her new sense of her own story"⁷⁰ and weaves "every detail of the story of her birth ... into a mental tapestry even clearer and sharper than the stories she made up."⁷¹

He stresses that it is not easy to distinguish truth from lies: 'dust'⁷² and the 'Gobblers'⁷³ appear to be lies in children's eyes. He argues that lies can be evil, especially when they are Mrs Coulter's: "Oh the wicked liar, oh the shameless untruths!"⁷⁴ But he shows that for Lyra, like Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*⁷⁵, lying has power: "now that she was ... lying she felt a sort of mastery again, the same sort of complexity and control that the alethiometer gave her."⁷⁶ This brings together Kleist's state of grace and Blake's

⁶⁵ Jack Zipes, *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children's Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, p. 132

⁶⁶ Pullman, quoted in Lenz, p. 122

⁶⁷ *Northern Lights*, pp. 372-3

⁶⁸ Thomson, p. 158

⁶⁹ *Northern Lights*, p. 108

⁷⁰ *Northern Lights*, p. 131

⁷¹ *Northern Lights*, p. 133

⁷² *Northern Lights*, p. 294

⁷³ *Northern Lights*, p. 147

⁷⁴ *Northern Lights*, p. 285

⁷⁵ Jean Webb, 'Englishness, Heroism, and Cultural Identity: a Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Perspective' in *Children's Literature and the Fin de Siècle* p. 53

⁷⁶ *Northern Lights*, p. 282

redemptive power of the imagination: in this unconscious state of telling lies or divining the truth, “thought grows dimmer and ... grace emerges.”⁷⁷ *Northern Lights* leaves Lyra in this innocent state; in *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra will have to learn the limitations of her lies and how to regain grace through telling the truth.⁷⁸

I suspect that Pullman is an old-fashioned teacher, battling with a good story and the need to tell people an important ‘truth’. By using three traditional texts, he challenges the ‘post-modern condition’ of contemporary thinking.

But I think that he also undermines the effect by overly relying on patriarchal and traditional models for Lyra’s world.⁷⁹ Firstly, his material reinforces stereotypes of sex and class. Lyra is an unusual girl and the nobility of her lineage is Lord Asriel’s⁸⁰, not Mrs Coulter’s.⁸¹ In Lyra’s uncritical eyes, clever women appear like animals dressed up.⁸² Even accepting their lesser place in the social order, it is the male Gyptians who show their mastery.⁸³ And the static, ‘natural’ order of things is often stressed.⁸⁴ Lyra is nobly born and should mix with her own, not with the lower orders whose adult, fixed daemons – such as the servants’⁸⁵ and Ma Coster’s⁸⁶ dogs – mark out their place in society. Even Iorek Byrnison is marked out for greatness through his nobility⁸⁷ – and there’s no mention of female bears. Secondly, there is the danger of characters “living out gnostic predictions.”⁸⁸ Lyra faces the Blakean paradox: how can innocence know its own innocence without becoming its opposite?⁸⁹ So she has to follow her destiny: Serafina

⁷⁷ Kleist, p. 206

⁷⁸ Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, p. 334 and p. 521

⁷⁹ Thomson, p. 155

⁸⁰ *Northern Lights*, pp. 66, 137, 220 and 232

⁸¹ *Northern Lights*, p. 123

⁸² *Northern Lights*, p. 67

⁸³ *Northern Lights*, p. 115

⁸⁴ *Northern Lights*, p. 167

⁸⁵ *Northern Lights*, p. 5

⁸⁶ *Northern Lights*, p. 106

⁸⁷ *Northern Lights*, p. 334

⁸⁸ Hunt, p. 33

⁸⁹ Caselli, p. 175

Pekkala, again in an authorial voice, says that Lyra “is destined to bring about the end of destiny. But she must do so without knowing what she is doing.”⁹⁰

Pullman wants his readers to think for themselves. And, by combining powerful literary texts with his own compelling story, I believe he achieves just that. As an individual telling a story he can be subversive.⁹¹ But by mustering others’ stories, by choosing myths that endorse an ideology of stratified social order and gender stereotypes, he risks “emptying reality.”⁹² And, as Thomson argues, his dialectic of difference ultimately reaffirms the familiar.⁹³ As an adult, I can distinguish the revolutionary from the traditional. For a nine year-old child, it is not so easy. My daughter loves Lyra and her world and through its myths she has learnt more of our own world. But when it comes to living like her, Ellie may well say, “That’s alright for her, but it’s not my place. It’s not my destiny.”

⁹⁰ *Northern Lights*, p. 310

⁹¹ Zipes, p. 133

⁹² Zipes, quoting Roland Barthes, p. 129

⁹³ Thomson, p. 150

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