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**Review: His dark materials trilogy by *Philip Pullman***

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**Introduction**

His Dark Materials was a trilogy created from 1995 to 2000, which arguably jettisoned children's literature to worlds of complexity that seem still to be lacking in most adult literature. Some have described the writing as part Blake, part Paracelsus. The work upholds the great mythic traditions of the West in a late 20th-century postmodern mode. This author ties the story both to the Norton Anthologies and the tolerant humanism of Orwell and Keynes: a rather 1970s mixture, one might argue, of capitalism and public education.

The author does belong to a group of self-consciously artful writers who create complex, adult narratives. The narratives center around grand philosophical questions. In creating the original trilogy of His Dark Materials, the initial objective was to construct a version of Milton's Paradise Lost for young audiences. In the bafflement with organized religion, the author of His Dark Materials sought to oppose Milton's earthly arrogance with the spiritual value of loving the earth and being grateful for the good things that the earth yields. Later, the author would characterize His Dark Materials as a bid to tell a story similar in many ways to Milton's, but with an opposite moral sense to argue for the importance of a material life. There was also hope to draft a version of the work for adults, for at least according to marketing, there ought to be a chance that less intellectually demanding adults might buy books for their children—and that such adults might be willing to exert authority and control over the texts available to those children. Children, apparently, don't actually read books as such. In fitting with the commercial interests in crystallizing His Dark Materials as a blockbuster brand, the publishers furnished the first academic texts on the subject. However, none of these embrace the original libertarian strains in the narratives, focusing mostly on non-controversial themes like initiation into agency, corpses, play, and tactile knowing in His Dark Materials. The result of this orthodoxy seemed to suggest that instead of the 19th-century mark of aesthetic form, the author had written an essay in socialism.

**Background of the Author**

As any good critic should do, before getting into the important nitty-gritty pages of discussing Pullman's creation, a deeper understanding of the author himself is

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required. Philip Pullman grew up in a Church of England family in North Wales and England. He has credited his formative years spent in this locality as key to his experiences of visitations from otherworldly apparitions that steep his Dark Materials novels. This early introduction into an often insular society in a rural location shaped a love of the supernatural and religion-centric writing of some authors he admired: the gothic Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the philosopher Milton's vision of Hell in his *Paradise Lost*.

The family relocated to Rhodesia - a place rich in conflict. Pullman was educated in Zimbabwe where teachers from public schools had fled for their lives. In such a place, Pullman said of reading and writing: 'feels more valuable, as it's something you can do during blackout, when the electricity fails and you haven't got any other entertainment at home or at school.' He read the literary treasure-house writers from the UK - most notably Shakespeare, and he also dubbed D.H. Lawrence 'as much of a toxic snob as you could ask for ... very didactic and self-righteous,' as well as expressing antipathy for the British Nature Poets of the nineteenth century. He eventually moved to Oxford to study. The time at university in such a historic locale did little to heal his perceptions of British writers. He got a job to avoid further postgraduate studies. Years of writing and story progression before, during, and after this time culminated with two quite impressive but lesser-known texts - travelers' guides detailing the real-world reality of the UK. The Regency House's guide to the Miss Allie Cooper film locations served as an infinite gap between the release of his inspired nights' work *Northern Lights* and its sequel *The Subtle Knife*.

### **Overview of His Dark Materials Trilogy**

A trilogy of original novels, *His Dark Materials*, is a children's fantasy with elements of science fiction. The three books that make up *His Dark Materials* are *Northern Lights*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*. *Northern Lights* tells the tale of the young girl Lyra, who is raised in the leading English university, Jordan College in Oxford. She discovers a series of events that eventually lead her far to the north, where she helps in a rebellion against the powerful people and creatures who have organized the world to serve them instead of ordinary people or beings. In the world behind the *Northern Lights*, the spirits that we cannot be aware of are visible, while every person has their animal-like spirit which reflects their nature. *The Subtle Knife* takes us back to our world and then on to an alternate earth, radically different in many ways yet similar in one significant aspect – human evil. In another twist, when Will and Lyra meet, it is revealed that they are instrumental in the eternal war between the obedient authority of the church and the freedom fighters of the republic in the alternate universe. Will and Lyra's bid for freedom and exploration takes them once more to the world behind the *Northern Lights* and then on to a ghostly prison for all the dead; met there and helped by the shrewd Aunty, who herself has two dæmons in physical form on opposite shoulders, flittering and piping at each other. But there is

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always a price to pay. Lyra's efforts to unlock a new spiritual republic lead to the cracking apart of the barriers separating every world to release its dead at an untimely apocalypse. Nor can there be a perfect outcome in a flawed creation: from Pantalaimon and other deserters of the two worlds, the spirit for Lyra draws in Will. The dead and the last rebels, including the two pre-adolescents, must return to hell itself to set the naturalizing universe right.

### **Themes and Motifs in His Dark Materials**

The predominant focus of His Dark Materials is on the fundamental meanings of existence, and the discussion of morality. More specifically, the acquisition of knowledge—what to do with it, how to react to it, and who to let guide the use of it—and moral choices. Furthermore, the implications of these choices are explored, laying out their subsequent results for the characters. To be kind, loyal, forthright, honest, and loving are byproducts of good morals, while arrogance, deceit, and anger reveal inner flaws and have broader social ramifications. Compassion and cruelty, equality and power struggles—there is no shying away from asking questions that have haunted those who have dared to ask them both externally and internally. From the concept of innocence, the first theme has woven its way: the ongoing struggle between good and evil. Consequently, many chapters within His Dark Materials dissect the issues visited in earlier works. Adolescence is a time of self-discovery, and for Lyra and Will, that is one of the primary subjects His Dark Materials delineates, exploring and clarifying many themes of young adult fiction. The Church is one of the key authorities in the interpretation of society. In a world of institutionalized power, the Magisterium offers another example, demonstrated especially in Malcolm's and Will's storylines, of how power can corrupt. Armoured bears, humans, daemons, witches, Spectres, angels, and Mulefa—all entities possess it—is another important theme in His

### **Exploration of Good and Evil**

Three major themes characterize the trilogy of His Dark Materials: the exploration of good versus evil; the effect of external forces and personal experience on human development; and the connection between religious dogma, scientific discoveries, and divine evolution. Perhaps the most technological theme in His Dark Materials is the elusive presence of good and evil. The author doesn't resign himself to the continuous binary of good and evil; instead, he writes his characters in a grey moral zone. Readers cannot firmly claim a personality as nobly good or greatly evil simply because the alignment changes at the character's will. Instead, the trilogy is a self-contained paradox of motivation: the villains hold upright intentions, and the heroes obscurely shade their ambition.

Distinct characters illustrate this moral ambiguity. One character uses the blood of a heavily sedated child to tear apart the fabric of an anguished universe – an explicitly nefarious act put to good, universal use. The armored bears aren't motivated by the dissolution of destiny; rather, their queen's stutter "might at any point tip into fear"

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which they can no longer allow. Two main characters are primarily motivated by personal gain and the protection of the status quo; the only reason they act as agents of rebellion is due to the benefits they reap. While one character's arc may give his cause more merit – he does refashion an important tool to protect his estranged mother, but also seeks solace in outsider immigration – the other's is a self-indulgence that doesn't grow until the final third of the trilogy. She does everything for “self-interest” while appeals to morality and destiny do not yet “work on [her].” A connection between “good” and “self-interest” is a very modern, capitalist notion of utilitarian morality. Actions serve a common good while benefiting individual characters.

### **The Role of Religion and Authority**

In various fulfilling stories, narrations of different aspects of theology appear, but seldom are critiques of religious beliefs and theocracy addressed from an academic perspective because it is quite diverse from Eastern and Western literature that generally revolves around the values of religious wisdom of outstanding individuals and ordinary people who submitted to them. In the His Dark Materials trilogy, organized religion is not an institution to be admired. The question is whether the author actually wanted to test religious beliefs in a philosophical, ethical, and dogmatic way. Religion is generally the product of some kind of established standard, not individual but socially built, enforced unjustly, and used to prevent wisdom and freedom in society.

Only some leaders and religious figures interfere in the lives of others and the society they build when these leaders and religious figures, false prophets, have a limited perception of spirituality. This can happen due to a lack of spiritual knowledge because of the low quality of organizations they lead and the weakness of the soul that can be seen in the moral life that is contrary to divine and human virtues in such a society. Their commandments and dogmas threaten the truth about moral wisdom. In the educational process, children must understand socialization with various ideas that are present in society. A deep-seated reason for the disapproval of authority does not always mean that democracy and secularism are a priority; it does not fully offset the advantages of a theocratic government because an authoritarian system does not always damage the quality of life. Autocracy that truly works through the moral system and true religious wisdom is a necessary form of human existence. In the context of the Mystery series, there is a clear distinction between the authorities and individuals who have transcendental qualities. Pan, the soul of Daniel, is initiated into the understanding, planning, and execution of the Anti-eternity plan and the philosophy of God. Courage and wisdom against God's power are emphasized. Pan has rediscovered the mystery oracles as the source of all wisdom.

### **Character Analysis**

In His Dark Materials, the characters are complex and nuanced, representing central themes explored in the trilogy. The child protagonists are particularly intriguing, portrayed with depth and complexity. The journey through the novels becomes a

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journey of self-exploration for the characters, and the dialogue that arises out of examining them becomes a way to think about some of the most central philosophical inquiries tied up in the novels. Examining Lyra and Will provides a useful way to think through questions of natural metaphysics and, more specifically, of natural normativity: what is it to be good, just, and brave? What makes someone truly evil?

The characters in *His Dark Materials* are constantly in development. Lyra, for instance, is initially entirely motivated by selfish desires, by vanity, by curiosity; this vanity leads to a sort of playful dishonesty that at times seems entirely callous. Her friendships with Will, the Gyptians, or Lee Scoresby seem to be largely borne of her impulse to manipulate situations to her benefit and her insatiable curiosity. Even when she does initially begin to develop beneficent motivations – for instance, in her desire to rescue her uncle, explore Tony's cut – she tends to imprint her own desire for self-liberation onto all those around her, failing to see Ogunwe and Balthamos' service of Will as something worthwhile outside of the context of a task she has set for them. Lyra is much enamored of the fairy-tale vision of love and the sacrifices it requires. Love seems almost always to mean a fierce loyalty, striving toward mutual sacrifice with idealized devotion.

### **Lyra Belacqua**

Lyra Silvertongue, born Lyra Belacqua, is perhaps the most crucial character in *His Dark Materials*. When we first meet her, she is on the brink of adolescence, and there is a lot she still has to learn. At the beginning of *His Dark Materials*, the author seeks to introduce his protagonist in order to provide a better understanding of the nuanced character, development trajectory, and elements of narrative insight. We are informed that Lyra is headstrong and naive. She learns quickly from the tales. At some point, she begins asking questions, and it is her curiosity that leads her through the trilogy and her constant quest for truth. She carries her courage; she will not descend without permission. She has strength now. When traveling with Farder Coram, she tells the dog following them to leave immediately. She knows how to kill if she must. Now her face is both innocent and experienced. Lyra's encounter with one of the town women is entirely strange; the woman refuses to approach Lyra unless she is told about her question. Lyra was curious and wanted to know as much as she could. What really attracts sympathies for Lyra is her relationship with her daemon. Pan is not quite an equal to her; she is always stronger, and she feels so protective about Pan that he wonders if she can survive losing him. He wishes to have Lyra's innocence and passion. She is a seductive and capricious character. She is a liar, but "she thinks of it as storytelling to spin a tale out of nothing." Lyra's characters now appear to be nuances of the previous mixture rather than opposites, primarily affected by her innocence and understanding. Her innocence decreases, but she does not break as terms interchange. Lyra Belacqua is not presented with clear moral decisions in the fairy world of the opening chapters. Once she has reached adulthood, it's utterly subjective. One of the

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first things we notice is Lyra's journey from point A, a headstrong girl, to point B. Determined now as an adult, Lyra has lost the strength of defiance. While she was still an adolescent resistant to the submissiveness of the adult world, there is a significant power shift. She becomes an adult who is content in her own skin. The story transforms corresponding to her mental map; it ignites "new enterprises." Her actions show significant differences while she was an adolescent taking her first steps. As a young girl, Lyra, afraid of losing her position, chooses ignorance and deceives herself. She consciously indulges in her dream world and escapes harsh reality. When she is faced with a difficult decision of saving her friend and sacrificial victim to fate's cruelty, she is stripped of any controlling power. Even before her conversion in a different world, which proved to be significant, her choices succumb to necessity. The form of agency puppeting her destiny was the church. Because choices require immeasurable courage, she resorted to the simplicity of adolescent thinking at this moment. She wants "us to be safe." A tragic ineffable ordinariness encapsulated her choice. In this newly established world, there is nothing for her to struggle for. That starts at her later age when choices are possible, although it demands great inner battles. Her language reveals flexibility: "Now, apart from eating, she was used to spending her life occupied with new mental and physical enterprises for which she was never any good." The word "now" is the utmost significant marker of transition, as when used in accordance with the mental decision, as is the appearance in the presence of melancholy relief. "The shock her whole soul went into every time she stopped for a minute. She had to work conscientiously at a very low level.... She is struggling. She bolted the water and left the mug." Savoring the delights in her budding youth, fantastic talent and immense success come with it; she can also somehow utilize that youthful aspiration beyond common understanding.

### **Will Parry**

At the outset of *His Dark Materials*, Will Parry is a rather different person from who he becomes by the end of the sequence, though there is no discernible moment of epiphany in his childhood that marks this transformation. As with Lyra, or in more paradigmatic terms, as with Adam and Eve, there is a period of calculation and realization, and there is need and impulsive recognition when confronted with a grandeur that overshadows yet far exceeds the ordinary. Twelve years into his career, Will Parry becomes the missing daemon of nightmares, an adult only for want of years and a child only because of what age signifies to those caught up in events far beyond the scope of a normal life. Like Lyra, Will learns to endure and to adapt and to take risks—indeed, to depend upon risk rather than see it as something to be anticipated and forestalled. These changes in his character are the themes of this chapter. Will Parry and his daemon singlehandedly stand in for hard-pressed philosophers seeking a way out of a state of nature or any other form of annihilation that arises as a consequence of ethical views opposed to theirs.

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This chapter strengthens the belief that *His Dark Materials* is at least partly about identity rather than about the identification of character with tragic or comic action. Yet, as with the analysis of Lyra, this section contradicts that claim. Will is not a coherent philosophical view rendered into a concrete character. He is self-contradiction outright. He has a practical sense of boldness about him that belies the proposal that he and Lyra are figures of philosophical dialectic. This practical disposition does seem vitally to affect his imaginative production. Will's choice to become a fugitive is informed by his training as a scout and his father's imperative rule to him to "Find somewhere to hide."

### **Narrative Techniques and Worldbuilding**

*His Dark Materials* presents its narrative as a combination of bildungsroman and epic genres, telling an adventure story in three distinct but interrelated parts. It focuses on the process of growing up, providing an exploration of human maturation by drawing metaphors across parallel worlds. Some of the unusual techniques allow for the expression of not only the potential for multiple realities but also the far-reaching moral consequences of these parallel worlds' disjunction. Such narrative duplication offers the chance to consider central concerns in various, often extremely different contexts. The intricate world-building imagines alternative societies that still run along similar, if distinctly recontextualized, lines. Through their frequent transits between Earth's minutes and another world's decades, human appearance and self physically change as time projects forward and back across them. The narrative acts to highlight these distinctions, breaking up major adventures between different times in a well-structured cascade; the ultimate ripples of individual decisions are shuffled for dramatic impact by sledging characters through different ring structures of eternity. However, it also matches these arcs' through lines with the thematic arcs of Lyra and Will's relationship, marriage providing a well-synchronized reunion as the climax of the penultimate book. Partly founded on alterity, another major dramatic focus of the story is on self-identity, particularly who one desires to be. Lyra's dæmon there acts as what the books term physical manifestations of a character's self, appearing as their dual's animal personification. Whereas old institutions see it as bestial with destiny, it is characterized as the embodiment of a character's emotional and psychological state.

### **Use of Parallel Universes**

One of the principal themes of *His Dark Materials* is the idea that the world might be, could be, is identical to our own and yet also profoundly different. This interest in parallel worlds demonstrates *His Dark Materials*' continuing engagement with the overlap between fantastical narrative and conceptual innovation, as the multiple worlds within the texts evolve beyond mere narrative devices to become multivalent tools for exploring wider themes concerning choice and exploration, individual development, and relationships. Lyra's world is home to witches and armored bears; in Will's, the Church sanctions a Cittagazze all but ruined by an ancient war that has drawn parallel worlds together. Angels drift through the sky alongside balloon

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travelers; scientists can tunnel between dimensions. Paradoxical in nature, the worlds of His Dark Materials allow characters to accept the critical elements of the fountain while denying its power.

The multiverse functions as a philosophical trope. If one belief in the importance of choice ordered the first volumes, the second seeks to expose the truth of this assertion by showing how characters (and readers) behave in a world without choice, whether by ruling it out of bounds – as some do – or by rejecting the boundaries themselves and “living out of [their] wild desires.” Worlds, the novels suggest throughout, are made as much as found. Different, yet physically connected, the narrative reveals to its readers how relations between characters, peoples, and powers in individual planes are governed by the same interdependencies that bind destinations to one another. Known as the multiverse, the planes are infinite. They are born from time and condemned to death; endlessly perishing yet incapable of utter destruction. Dozens of worlds are described in the series, and between them the novels teem with myriad examples of life going “terribly different, bit by bit, choice by choice.” Indeed, the multi-world setting magnifies this concern with choice.

### **The Concept of Dæmons**

Dæmons are the first and most important concept for a complete understanding of what is at the core of His Dark Materials from an academic point of view. In this universe, a human's consciousness is divided in a very literal sense, and their soul lives, separated from their body, outside, in the form of an animal companion. This animal, which is always the opposite sex of its human counterpart, is called a dæmon. Mystically, when someone goes through puberty, their dæmon settles into the form it will have for the rest of the person's life, reflecting the person's inner thoughts, feelings, and conflicts, serving in part as a mirror to the person's own emotional state. Dæmons' forms symbolize moral choice, and the symbolic meaning that their form has is tied to the nature of the individual human.

The relationship between human and dæmon informs the characters' development and reveals the conflicts at the hearts of the characters. Again, it's not only a jumping point for character development, but one for plot, since dæmons are used to enforce surface-level emotions that subvert internal conflicts, a lynchpin of this series. Dæmons serve as a narrative device to explore magic's role in the world, being a result of a world enmeshed with spirits and natural elements, as well as to give insight on the nature of human identity and the nature of defining "independence" within a place where individuality is reinforced by means of companionship and interdependence, offering insight as to the nature of the world and the way of thinking that cultural aspects can be indicative of when employed considering in-group and out-group standards going to orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Dæmons are a uniquely Touch theory addition, since they are the result of the "twin drives" that create the primary conflicts in His Dark Materials. Touch theory, as a philosophical system, bisects human consciousness and



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behavior into affected and exuded sides, while this is a rejection of dialectics, the affected and exuded sides end up informing almost every aspect of this series.

### **Reception and Impact of His Dark Materials**

His Dark Materials turned out to be a financial and critical success. Critics noted that young readers flocked to Pullman's books while also intriguing older readers. Some reviewers recognized the books for their "fresh" and "unpredictable storytelling" while using classic literary conventions to frame philosophical criticism of religion. The books were both critiqued and celebrated for their philosophical depth and their challenge to define systematic truth: while some philosophers and authors praised Pullman for emphasizing the "abuse of institutional power" in the name of theology, others accused him of propagandizing atheism and the rejection of religion. Many professionals in the field of young adult literature have included the books in their recommended reading lists for young adults and children. However, some religious groups responded with harsh criticism and even called for readers to boycott the novels. These institutions contended that readers would be manipulated by Pullman's atheistic propaganda and that the books inappropriately market atheism to young readers. This further drew wide controversy and sparked debate in public and academic forums.

The immediate cultural response to Pullman's trilogy began with an Oxford stage production two years before the trilogy's completion. The films have become an extremely popular franchise with the release of the first of the three extended versions of previously published films. The film was accompanied by several video games and soundtracks, and with commercial release, it has sparked both discussion and critique. This trilogy has led to a plethora of scholarship to analyze the interdisciplinary nature of the adaptations and forever link adaptations to literary study. Considering His Dark Materials as a cultural phenomenon also prompts questions regarding the ethical responsibilities of authors and narrators. Because the trilogy asks these questions of its readers, it has had a major impact on its purported audience, particularly young adults. Because the trilogy is considered largely targeted at young audiences, considerable scholarship has also considered the impact of its reception. Many have analyzed how the book confronts identity and other profound themes of growing up. Overall, the reception of the series by critics and audiences has been significant in terms of its legacy as his first "children's books" and has been likened to another series in terms of its global popularity. Some modern readers argue that His Dark Materials is less known than Pullman's earlier canon, which generated the nickname "the Harry Potter for adults."

### **Critical Acclaim**

Phillip Pullman's His Dark Materials has received a massive amount of attention in the media; it has been described as "the first British fantasy phenomenon of the 21st century" and Pullman himself as "one of the literary superstars of Britain's present-day literary world." His Dark Materials has been lauded for being embedded in "the tradition of the great Russian novels," an "unashamed deliberate attempt to create

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a secular supernatural mythology,” and most of all “a strong contender for the title of the ‘book of the millennium.’ This is the biggest and best thing he’s ever done.” It is “a phenomenal fantasy,” described as “the pinnacle of his career and gives the phrase ‘must-read’ a whole new meaning” and “in terms of pure delight and pure depth, it is the best book Pullman has ever written.” His *Dark Materials* has been lauded for being “not only wonders of ornately created world-building but giant systems of thought, fighting off dark and terrible opposites of everything they wish to embody.”

Some librarians expressed skepticism about *His Dark Materials*, but they were very much in the minority. Clunes, in the wake of the film of *The Golden Compass*, stated, “Connolly and Pullman have succeeded in bestriding the divide between books for young people (or children, or post-children, or young adults or wizards) and everything else.” Some scholastic critics have unenthusiastically described work on *His Dark Materials* as “undiluted academia,” but this enthusiasm is not just confined to others. *His Dark Materials* has also gained a steady amount of academic attention. Academics have taken interest in *His Dark Materials* not just for its fin de siècle asides but because of its philosophy. To demonstrate the work’s significance, I discuss his awards and grand sales in this subsection. I then argue that the main reason for such acclaim and sales is, actually, academic. I show that the text resonates with the traditions of pedagogy and *Bildung*, reaching out to academic faculties and contesting the exclusivity of modern disciplines.

### **Adaptations in Other Media**

The adaptation of *His Dark Materials* into films and a television series, as well as stage plays, demonstrates Pullman’s fantasy epic to be an ongoing inspiration for great storytelling across multiple kinds of media. *His Dark Materials: The Golden Compass* was released as a film adaptation, but it did not become a series as was originally intended. The stage production won the imagination of children on an international scale, as has the television series seventy-two years later. The trilogy was adapted into a major television series in 2019. The series goes beyond the film adaptations in length and inclusion of details and scenes that the films omitted. Both the stage plays and the television series are unafraid to delve into the darkest material and most violent of characters, including Asriel’s murder of Roger.

Laura Miller posits that Philip Pullman is the “standard source” for reading characters as if they are robust, round characters, perhaps in the style of direct or indirect characterization. One of the most prominent points readers and critics make concerning the television series is how it brings to life the essence of the characters. Specifically, the show provides a more comprehensive view of individual characters, and critics argue that this makes them more compelling; this is seen in the cases of Lyra and Marisa. The television adaptation maintains a focus on agency, and it recognizes Lyra’s willfulness by arguing that the “story makes no bones about the fact that she’s going to help him whether he wants her to or not.” By staying faithful to Pullman’s

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characterization, the television adaptation presents "pedagogical" and "symbolic significance"—that is, the series' tension between the individual and the animated in relation to asserting one's will. Pullman's narrative impact still has the capacity to intrigue viewers with grand themes, big stories, and distinctly appealing characters. For many, the television adaptation endures in its darker, grimmer beauty.

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