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**A comparative study of how the central character’s journey into adolescence exposes underlying adult themes in Phillip Pullman’s trilogy *The Dark Materials* and Lewis Carroll’s novels *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*.**

Philip Pullman’s trilogy, *His Dark Materials,* and Lewis Carroll’s novels, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass,* are texts which were written primarily for the enjoyment of children and are delivered from the perspective of a child, yet the writers simultaneously fill the seemingly fantastical worlds with greater symbolic significance. By utilising naïve and innocent children as protagonists, the authors are able to deal with difficult themes in an uncomplicated and non-confrontational way. This exposes and magnifies the truths about reality as it lays bare the complexities of life. In both of the authors’ works, the reader witnesses the main protagonists’ journeys from childhood into adolescence, through which the themes of self-discovery and coming of age are clearly illuminated. The multi-layered narratives and intricately woven plotlines allows us to discern a deeper symbolic meaning within both novels: that childhood, although perceived as being our weakest and most vulnerable state is, in fact, the time when we are at our strongest as we are free from the shadows of responsibility of adulthood. This in turn invites the reader to revisit their own experiences of childhood, taking them back to the wonder and carefree nature of youth where they are able to reappraise their adult lives.

In his trilogy *His Dark Materials*, Philip Pullman seems to openly confront the restrictive nature of religion, illuminating wider social concerns about the loss of imagination in the adult world. Pullman was once described as a ‘religious atheist’, suggesting his conflicted views on religion and although his novels seem to pursue an anti-religious agenda, there is in fact much evidence to suggest that the author agrees with core religious ideals but offers a criticism of how religion can be used as a way of controlling and limiting people. When describing his books, Pullman once explained how “the story is against those who pervert and misuse religion, or any other kind of doctrine with a holy book and a priesthood and an apparatus of power that wields unchallengeable authority, in order to dominate and suppress human freedoms.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This distrust of the way in which religion can be used against people is represented in Lyra’s world through the ‘Magisterium’, which is a religious organisation corrupted by power. When Serafina Pekkala, a witch, describes how the magisterium “tried to suppress and control every natural impulse” [[2]](#footnote-2) we are made aware of this organisation’s dominance in Lyra’s world. However, Lyra refuses to be taken in by this establishment, preferring to put trust in her own personal views. Despite her young age, Lyra’s independence of mind effectively indicates Pullman’s belief that adults conform to ideas without questioning, whilst a child may decide to assert their own notions.

Lewis Carroll also focuses on significant themes within his novels and, as he lived in the Victorian era, many of his opinions on individualism and the severity of the age he lived in were concealed within his texts. The restrictiveness of Victorian society is embodied within the very essence of Carroll’s texts as they are not only a product of his time, but are also cleverly crafted so as to offer a critique of Victorian society through veiled symbolism, an exaggerated fantasy world, and a satirical style of writing. Lewis Carroll is in fact a pseudonym for his true name, Charles Dodgson, and it is well known that his two novels *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* where based around Alice Liddell, a young Victorian girl who he was commissioned to take photographs of. Carroll took numerous photographs of Alice Liddell, as well as many prominent figures in Victorian society, which he then caricatured and transformed into some of his most ridiculous characters, subtly embodying his criticisms of Victorian society. In his novels, Carroll is preoccupied with the loss of imagination within adult society. He believed childhood was a time of innocence, untouched by the limitations and conformity of the adult world. Carroll delivered these cutting and critical messages throughout his two novels, disguising them in the fantastical imaginary world created by Alice. His ideas were buried deep enough to avoid causing offence to the society of his time but, nevertheless, illuminated stark concerns about what is lost during the journey into adulthood.

The dual function of the narrative within Pullman’s trilogy, *His Dark Materials,* maintains the quality of the childlike storytelling, where we become consumed in the character’s journey into adolescence whilst also permitting a more detached exterior perspective through which we can observe the wider messages and symbolic significance of the character’s actions. Written in a third person narrative, we get a clear sense that a story is being told, allowing us to see the broader, moral picture without being trapped inside the minds of the characters. We are first introduced to Lyra, the central protagonist, as a young girl and we witness her maturation through the course of the three novels. In the final novel in the trilogy, the structured narrative is interrupted with a series of dreamlike conversations between Lyra and her dead friend Rodger, conveying how Lyra’s guilt at being unable to save him lies heavily on her conscience:

“Roger, where are you? What is this place?” He said, “It’s the world of the dead, Lyra-”[[3]](#footnote-3)

These conversations are written in italics and are present at the start of the first eight chapters in the novel. Pullman deliberately fractures this conversation by splitting it into short sections which are typographically different from the main narrative so that the reader can understand the division between the worlds of Lyra and Will, another central character. This allows an active awareness of the differences between reality and unreality, opening up the exploration of ‘other’ worlds as a new concept for the reader. We are able to understand Pullman’s own unconventional ideas about death and what comes next, as he clearly challenges certain religious doctrines about the afterlife, believing they cause limitation and restriction of the imagination. Through the dreamlike quality of this conversation, the author suggests that life is often not straight forward and carefully explained: we should be open to all possibilities such as the surreal world of dreams. Lyra’s ability to adapt and learn from her conversation with Roger illustrates how children are more open to alternative explanations.

Similarly, in Carroll’s two novels a parallel function is performed by using the third person narrative, meaning that again we are offered a privileged, omniscient view. However, the story is also framed from the viewpoint of Alice, as we follow her journey into adolescence. This allows the reader a wider perspective to interpret these adventures in a more complex and symbolic way, whilst maintaining the outlook of a child. Alice is often observed talking to herself and she appears to have two contradictory personalities; one who is a young girl, unable to look after herself, whilst the other is of a much older age, who stands for no nonsense:

“Come, there’s no use in crying like that!” said Alice to herself rather sharply[[4]](#footnote-4)

In the absence of an adult, Alice adopts the role of a more mature perspective and this split personality represents Alice’s two conflicting desires: to stay a child forever whilst also wishing to grow up quickly. Carroll replicates the stages of growing up that everyone goes through, and the conflicting emotions that can control a person’s direction in life. Alice has to discipline herself and act older than her years, symbolising how she struggles to balance the two different personalities. This mirrors the Victorian moralistic approach to bringing up and educating children, which is in direct opposition to the natural, adventurous and unrestrained childlike instincts. Carroll reflects how at some point in our transition into an adult, we all have to concede to the social ‘norms’ and expectations of our society. Throughout Carroll’s novels, the narrative is disrupted by seemingly nonsensical poems and rhymes that, at a glance, appear to be simply childish nonsense but on closer inspection, reveal darker meanings:

“I’ll be judge, I’ll be jury,” said cunning old Fury: “I’ll try the whole cause, and condemn you to death.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

This unpleasant verse conveys Carroll’s hidden criticisms of the Victorian justice system and its corrupt nature. The author disapproved of the amount of authority that judges, prosecutors and jurors had, linking to Pullman’s similar dislike of the power that religious figures can control. By concealing this message within a nonsensical verse, Carroll embodies his exact criticisms about how justice within his society was flawed and illogical. His dislike of the controlled and restrained growth that children endured to become adults is clearly expressed, as he criticises the inhibited society that he lived in.

Pullman equally illuminates his belief that the journey into adolescence is restrictive and limiting through the development of Lyra’s character where she is first introduced to us as a headstrong young girl with little maturity. Lyra relishes the freedom in her life and dislikes the rules and regulations that dictate the adult world. Pullman cleverly reveals his criticisms about conformity and the loss of individuality in society by placing Lyra in an elevated position whilst simultaneously having her question and challenge society’s expectations from the unbiased perspective of a child. This allows Pullman to expose the artificial and unjust nature of the divisions that society imposes. Lyra becomes involved in a conversation with a priest at Jordon College, her home, who is trying to teach Lyra the ways of their society:

“I don’t mean Rodger the Kitchen boy. I mean children such as yourself. Nobly born children. Would you like to have some companions of that sort?”

“No.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Lyra refuses to be drawn into the world of social class and stands stubbornly where she pleases. Through this, we see Pullman’s deeper meaning as he implies that we need not conform to the rules of society and instead, should learn from children who are able to rise above the divisions as they view life in an uncomplicated and straightforward way. Lyra is independent in her society as she is not influenced by the complexities of the adult world. Nevertheless, due to the lack of contact with, and understanding of her own sex, Lyra has only the stereotypes of what the Masters of her college believe, suggesting that the environment that we are brought up in can still influence the conceptions we form. Because of this male upbringing, Lyra looks down upon women in general and believes them to be inferior to men. Pullman uses irony here to expose the ridiculous, narrow and even dangerous nature of society’s dictating norms. He demonstrates the ways in which society constructs a filtered sense of reality, making it unreal through Lyra’s absurd dismissal of her own sex:

She regarded female scholars with a proper Jordan disdain: there **were** such people but, poor things, they could never be taken more seriously than animals dressed up and acting a play.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This limited impression is all that Lyra has at first as she has never met a woman who she can look up to and admire, suggesting that she forms her opinions due to experiences she has had. By telling people what to think, rather than allowing them to experience and come to their own conclusions, Pullman illuminates the dangerous outcome of restricting people’s perspective. However, Lyra’s perception of woman changes over the course of the novels as she discovers her own determination and desire to succeed. This portrays how, away from the confinements of society, Lyra’s perspective widens and she is free to make up her own mind. Lyra meets her mother, Mrs Coulter, and initially is in awe of her intelligence and charm but, as time passes, she begins to realise that beneath the beautiful face lays a monster with a thirst for violence who ‘seemed to be charged with some kind of anbaric force. She even smelled different: a hot smell, like heated metal, came off her body.’[[8]](#footnote-8) This other side of Mrs Coulter is portrayed in the form of her monkey-shaped daemon as in Lyra’s world, a person’s inner soul takes the physical shape of an animal. The monkey represents Mrs Coulter’s fierce intelligence, and her ability to adapt in many different situations, however it also symbolises her rebellious and cunning nature. Lyra is able to see how these two seemingly unrelated personalities are in fact one being, illustrating Pullman’s view that children are able to more easily perceive the truth where adults cannot, or will not.

Lyra’s vanity and self-confidence is both knocked and increased as she meets new people, but it is not until she meets the character of Will that we observe Lyra beginning to grow out of her childlike ways. We are introduced to Will in *The Subtle Knife*, and learn of his troubled background and family. Abandoned by his father, Will is left to care for his mentally unstable mother, forced to live in both the adult and child worlds. Will tames Lyra’s wild nature by teaching her modesty and morality, and she asks Will to show her the door which opens into his world:

“Show me,” she said. It was a command, not a request. He shook his head. “Not now,” he said*.[[9]](#footnote-9)*

Lyra has rarely been refused in her life, and Will’s abrupt rejection throws her off balance as she learns humility, only further leading to Lyra’s transformation into an adult. Will’s character contrasts with Lyra as he has had to learn to fight for himself and his life has never been easy. Lyra, on the other hand, has lived in the safety of Jordan College and has always had someone to depend upon and trust. These oppositions exaggerate and emphasise Pullman’s illustration that children such as Will are able to perceive more clearly the truth, as they are aware of the adult world but also have the benefits of still being in their childhood.

Although slightly younger, Alice’s journey into adulthood is just as evident and is a highly symbolic representation of the differences between the world of a child and that of an adult, emphasising in particular what is lost along the way. When Alice falls down the rabbit hole into Wonderland, she adapts to her surroundings as only a child can. However, she is afraid to progress in life, illuminated through her split personality. Carroll portrays the difficulties and isolation that children face when growing up through Alice’s clear desire to remain a child forever. Unable to recognise herself in Wonderland, Alice says “was I the same when I got up this morning?”[[10]](#footnote-10) suggesting through this highly philosophical statement that she is becoming more self-aware and is beginning to grow into an adult. Her continuous physical growth in size suggests how Alice is outgrowing the world around her, and the transition into adulthood is inevitable. She tries to console herself when she says “you must manage the best way you can”[[11]](#footnote-11), using this coping mechanism to reassure herself in a mature way. Carroll portrays through her growth that Alice is reluctant to face the next stage in life, and feels awkward and out of place in her new body. She feels powerless and is somewhat intimidated by her enormous height, as she is being forced to grow both literally and metaphorically into an adult before she is ready.

As Alice continues to meet strange and bizarre characters, she begins to understand more about herself and we witness her gradual growth into adolescence. Alice builds on her sense of morality, which is clearly portrayed when she publicly disagrees with the King and Queen of Hearts when they are wrongly accusing an innocent man. Alice is able to discern what is right from wrong, asserting her views independently without being stifled by society’s interpretations.Forgetting her fear in the face of her indignation at the King and Queen, Alice opposes the ruling monarchs, standing up and making her opinion heard when she says *“*I don’t believe there’s an atom of meaning in it.”[[12]](#footnote-12) A witness had just given ‘evidence’ in the form of a nonsensical verse that allegedly proved one man’s guilt. However, the verse explains little and, seeing this, Alice challenges the court when she says, “If any one of them can explain it, I’ll give him sixpence”[[13]](#footnote-13) highlighting how she is becoming more confident in herself as her journey into adulthood progresses. Carroll’s deeper messages in this scene are revealed through the attitude of the characters within the courtroom, as at the time of the Victorian period, the ruling King and Queen were the controlling powers over the land. The corrupt scene of the courtroom suggests that Carroll heavily disagreed with the interference from the monarchy in his society, and he again manipulates height in Alice as her sense of self-assurance grows when towering over the heads of the jury. The King and Queen rule all the hearts of the land and can influence the morality of society due to their dominance. It is ironic that they are named after hearts, as from their actions and words, they are all but compassionate. When the Queen commands: “Behead that Dormouse! Suppress him! Pinch him! Off with his whiskers!”[[14]](#footnote-14) the reader feels shocked by the violent imagery behind her words. Carroll conveys that the ruling authority in any society is not necessarily a force for good, and that powers can be abused. He uses this childish tale to exaggerate and amplify these issues, starkly exposing the difficulties and injustices of society.

Similarly, Pullman exposes the complexities of the adult world through his depiction of the world in which Lyra lives. In her society, conformity and obedience are encouraged through the various religious organisations that dominate, and imagination is restricted during the journey into adolescence. Pullman uses rules that we consider as ‘medieval’ to define the society in which Lyra lives. A person’s social class is decided by the form their daemon takes:

Then he smoothed the hair over his ears with both palms and said something to his daemon. He was a servant, so she was a dog; but a superior servant, so a superior dog.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The servant’s daemon takes the form of a dog, playing on the symbolic associations with loyalty, obedience and duty, and thereby suggesting he is defined only by his role in society. This social hierarchy appears old fashioned to the reader, as this is a world where servants still exist and there is a distinct divide between the rich and the poor. Through the shape an individual’s daemon will take, Pullman offers a criticism of how our fate is decided for us in society according to our rank or position. As a child, the daemon can change shape at will between various different animals and it is only when puberty begins and the child is transformed into an adult that the daemon will settle on a permanent form. This conveys a lack of freedom within adulthood, as an adult daemon is restricted to only one form. When discussing her daemon, Lyra reveals to an old sailor on her journey north that she doesn’t want her daemon to take a settled form:

“Oh you will. Anyway, there’s compensations for a settled form.” “What are they?” “Knowing what kind of person you are.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Through this character, Pullman suggests that due to the conforming nature of society, people are perfectly happy to have their place decided for them, and relish the security and safety that is brings. However, as a child, Lyra delights in the freedom and irregularity that she and her daemon share, without the restrictions that come with a settled shape. The author symbolically suggests that childhood is a time where we have the most freedom, and the journey into adulthood becomes limiting and reductive as we are forced to obey the social norms and customs that dictate our societies.

In contrast, Lyra and Will discover a world inhabited by wheeled creatures called the ‘mulefa’ in *The Amber Spyglass*, where the pressures and expectations that order society do not exist. Although they look like animals, we are told that “these beings weren’t humans, but they were **people**…it’s not **them**, they’re **us**.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Through this, Pullman illustrates that because our society is based around greed and selfish desires, the ‘mulefa’ community is unable to be distinguished as a functioning society as these selfish needs do not exist amongst them. The world they live in is a place where the only resources used are sourced from nature and the community work together as a whole, depending on each other for support. This is a world wholly untainted by greed and desire, where the journey into adolescence is a positive one as it involves a child becoming integrated more fully into a supportive community. Adult mulefa use rounded seed pods to wheel them about, whilst their children have to use their feet, which is far less convenient in comparison as ‘the speed and power and grace of the adults was startling by contrast’[[18]](#footnote-18). When a child reaches adulthood, they receive their own set of precious seed-pod wheels, symbolising the positive influence of moving into later life as the children are finally large enough to use the wheels, becoming one with the gift nature and evolution has created. Figuratively, Lyra and Will accept their growth into adulthood when they are in this world, as they are influenced by the calming and positive adult lifestyle of the mulefa. Pullman suggests through this that in a society uncorrupted with the negative influences of a world where greed and consumerism are present, children can become ‘the true image of what human beings always could be’[[19]](#footnote-19), and live without fear of conformism or repression.

Where Lyra is never consciously aware of her growth into an adult, we observe Alice’s reluctance to journey into adulthood as it is associated with negative influences and a loss of imagination in her society. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice enters an upside down world where everything she has known in the real world has an opposite significance or meaning. Symbolically, Carroll suggests that Alice finds this new world difficult to comprehend and understand as it is different to everything she has ever known. When trying to reach a destination, one has to ‘walk in the opposite direction’[[20]](#footnote-20) symbolising how Alice is attempting to understand the journey into adulthood by finding unexpected ways of approaching it, as the social norms regarding adolescence set by her society do not make sense to her. As the ‘Looking Glass World’ takes place in Alice’s dream, we sense that the issue of growing up is one that Alice worries about and she shies away from being forced into adolescence too early. This is illustrated through the train ride journey as distance is covered extremely fast in the ‘Looking Glass World’:

“I don’t belong to this railway journey at all- I was in a wood just now- and I wish I could get back there!”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Alice’s desire to return to the ‘wood’ symbolically conveys how she felt sheltered and safe, where the difficulties of growing up felt unimportant and unreal. When she unexpectedly jumps forward, Alice is forced to confront these issues and the changes they will bring to her life. This reluctance to progress suggests that Alice is wary of change, and wants to find her own way through life without being controlled by outside influences. Throughout both novels, Alice journeys through her fantasy world alone, briefly meeting new characters before she parts from them to continue on her solo adventure. Symbolically, this suggests that Alice attempts to find her own path through the difficult stages of growing up, maturing as she tries to create order in the chaotic world around her. Carroll’s perception that children are able to overcome the conforming nature of the adult world highlights how children still have their imagination and self-confidence, and therefore do not succumb to the social decorum of their society.

Alice matures within the ‘Looking Glass World’ as she becomes involved in a game of Chess, where her growth into womanhood is symbolised by her eventual transformation into a Queen. Alice takes part in the game of Chess and has to follow a set of rigid rules, suggesting that her ultimate fate of becoming a Queen is preordained. Chess is a strategy game, and within Alice’s dream, it represents her attempt to create order in the nonsensical world by struggling to connect her own life experiences to the ‘Looking Glass World’. When meeting the Red Queen, Alice is instructed to take the place of a pawn, and told that “when you get to the Eighth Square you’ll be a Queen.”[[22]](#footnote-22)Alice is set on this route, symbolising her continued journey through childhood to reach the inevitable outcome of becoming a woman, as well as her growth in power within the game. When Alice ultimately becomes a Queen, she has reached the end of her journey, and her denial of growing up is resolved:

“if I really am a Queen, I shall be able to manage it quite well in time.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

This acceptance of her growth into adulthood suggests that, although Alice still feels daunted by the prospect, her journey of reaching the goal of ‘Queen’ has taught her that she can remain her own individual person, even though she has to abide by the strict rules within society. Carroll conveys through the setting of a Chess board that our lives are predetermined due to the expectations that society demands but, within this, we should test our capabilities and push the boundaries of our comfort zones. Although Alice follows the rules set out originally, she strays from the path, creating flexibility in order to discover her own individual route that will lead her into adulthood.

Lewis Carroll’s novels *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* and Philip Pullman’s trilogy *The Dark Materials* illustrate both Lyra and Alice’s journeys into adolescence, using fantastical worlds filled with symbolic significance to convey their individual yet overlapping ideas about society, religion, and the difficulties of the adult world. Both of these series of books are primarily written for the enjoyment of children, as we follow the story through the eyes of a child. However, on a more symbolic level, the central protagonists are separated from the adult world due to their youth, allowing the authors to exaggerate, satirise and amplify their ideas by using indirect confrontation. This creates the impression of simplicity, exposing the truths about reality through the naïve stance of the characters. We witness the main theme of growing up develop as both bodies of work evolve, drawing the reader’s attention back to their own experiences of adolescence. We can identify with Lyra and Alice, as we re-evaluate our childhood, comparing the author’s interpretation with our own personal memories. As the characters progress through their growth into womanhood, the reader realises that childhood is a time to be treasured, where the restrictions and conforming nature of society had not yet reached and influenced the actions of everyday life.

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