

“When Matter Begins to Understand Itself”:  
Tracing Metamodernism in Philip Pullman’s  
*His Dark Materials*

A Bachelor’s Thesis in Arts and Culture Studies

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to create thematic links between the emerging theoretical framework of metamodernism – the cultural epoch said to take place after postmodernism – and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* – a renowned trilogy of fantasy novels. Drawing primarily on what is now seen as the foundational text of metamodern scholarship, namely, “Notes on metamodernism” by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, the thesis seeks to broaden the preexisting, already elusive definitions of the field, while still anchoring metamodernism within the constant flux between modern and postmodern sentiments, structures of feeling. By examining how the novels rearticulate narratives of (post)modernity, the implicit metamodern ethos of the books, not anchored in stylistic choices, aesthetics, or chronotopes, emerges as an oscillation between the interior and exterior struggles of the trilogy.

Two chapters, each linked to a specific narrative structure that is of great importance in Pullman’s books, form the basis of this argument. The first chapter focuses on the absolutist religious myths of *HDM*, and the vehement opposition they encounter at the hands of deconstructing, free-thinking figures; the external part of the metamodern struggle, akin to the political and cultural battles of the past century. The second chapter shifts the attention to the internal growth of Pullman’s protagonists as they mature from children into young adults, a process of personal development that is as important to the metamodern oscillation as the bombastic, overtly visible parts of metamodernity. By supplementing the seminal “Notes on metamodernism” with writings that connect each of the themes with metamodernism, as well as texts linking the very same themes with the trilogy, the thesis applies critical discourse analysis to bridge the gap between previously unrelated lines of academic inquiry. Furthermore, as a way of buttressing the tripartite connection of metamodernism – *His Dark Materials* – religion & adolescence, the theoretical framework already draws direct parallels between the metaphysical makeup of Pullman’s diegesis and some of the most pivotal metamodern concepts; an approach that diffuses the rigid boundary between secondary literature and case study, inviting the reader to approach the entire thesis through a metamodern lens as if it were already there, and allowing for great detail in the reading of *HDM* in lieu of repetitive explanations of how the theoretical framework resurfaces in specific aspects within the novels.

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## Introduction

### Introduction to the Topic

Ever since it first hit bookstore shelves in the mid-90s, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* has been a mainstay in the discourse surrounding young adult fiction. Offering a complex, layered world with allegorical echoes of our own, the trilogy provides loads of necessary introspection for the youths reading it. Human beings whose souls walk beside them as physical creatures, a kingdom of intelligent polar bears, flying hordes of witches, and nearly all other illustrative aspects of the writing have an intuitive way of conveying meaning to the reader, dismantling elements of the known, only to reconfigure them into something foreign. The story is set in an alternate version of Oxford, a world where daemons exist as external, animalistic incarnations of one's soul, and follows the quest of Lyra, a teenage girl in possession of a Golden Compass (a mystical tool of truth-seeking and knowledge), as she takes down the tyrannical Magisterium – as sacralized and bureaucratic of an organization as the religious formations of our reality – and comes to travel between worlds in search of her personal truth.

Alongside its' whimsical fantasy and kaleidoscopic multiverse, *HDM* deals with ambiguous topics that YA fiction often sidesteps for fear of seeming provocative or dangerous to the readers. In a time when the grand narratives of early last century have been ground to smithereens by the deconstructing apparatus that marked the mid (and late) 20th century, children still need to find positivism within the confusing and contradictory landscape of their intellectual development. By taking ostensibly universal narratives, namely religion & adolescence, showcasing the flawed nature of how they exist in the protagonist's world, and fashioning them into new structures of meaning, Pullman leads the reader through a series of oscillations between hope and despair, optimism and pessimism, a whole and its parts. This thesis will argue that this central ethos of *HDM* is what makes it metamodern, and that the primeval goal of this trilogy is to make an age of adults habitable for children, and an age of religious fanatics tenable for spiritual explorers. The trilogy is not a typical metamodern artwork in that it follows the conventional styles, techniques, and themes of the cultural chronotope of metamodernism (that is, the period of time between the turn of the century and the current day), and is, perhaps, less self-aware of possessing such characteristics than more contemporary artworks targeted at an adult audience. However, this thesis will aim to prove that by analyzing the story and comparing important narrative beats to the cultural shifts from modernism to postmodernism to metamodernism, one may uncover how the characters experience these epochs on both an intrapersonal (the idea of adolescence and 'outgrowing'

something seen as imposed and artificially universalized) and interpersonal (the dismantling of a bureaucratic belief system as a universal truth) level. This will be done by reviewing the literature crucial to the metamodern mentality, and by furthering the reach of its ideas by connecting it to theoretical insights related to religion and adolescence. Thus, the ideological backbone of *HDM* rests firmly on the shoulders of cultural history in the past century, yet it is the books' ability to introduce revamped ways of thinking and an intuitive, fantastical practice of meaning-making that helps them move beyond the *impasses* that are seemingly unbreachable in our reality – a generative and creation-oriented sentiment that is far more important to metamodernism than aesthetic choices or narrative tricks.

### Literature Review

The baseline for this literature review is, of course, the seminal text on metamodernism penned by Vermeulen and van den Akker in 2010. One of the key components in their notes is the idea of metamodernism as an oscillation “between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (5). It is this in-between state that characterizes the cultural realities of the 21st century, and the authors argue that one can no longer soundly exist on either side of this chasm, yet has to be always swinging across it. Furthermore, metamodernism is not bound by aesthetics, morality, or experience; it is a structure of feeling and thus is neither in agreement nor opposition with the general conceptions of (post)modernism. It is somehow the designation applied to that which supersedes designation and categorization; the modern human condition requires a modality which permits it to describe processes and objects based on the tension between essential qualities, not an ascription of the qualities themselves.

Metamodernism also thinks in terms of spacetime rather than distinguishing the two dimensions, thus forsaking the categorizing attempts of both previous epochs, and pursuing a forever receding horizon, both in terms of physical and temporal distance (Vermeulen & van den Akker 12). This notion of ungraspability as the guiding beacon of metamodernism is further elaborated on by Jonathan Rowson in his preface to *Dispatches from a Time Between Worlds: Crisis and Emergence in Metamodernity*, as the author defines trends and tendencies that emerged in the decade separating the text published by Vermeulen and van den Akker and the publication of this book. Rowson starts by distinguishing metamodernism from other *-isms* aimed at supplanting or countering the reign of postmodernism: “The other contenders, like hypermodernity, supermodernity and even ecomodernity, all focus directly on the implications

of technological developments. The meta prefix is distinctive, however, because it is generatively reflexive and tacitly humanistic” (2). This prefix is perfect here, as it indicates a self-reflexivity, a quality that is crucial to the metamodern ethos in that it does not necessarily position itself as existing after modernity, acknowledging that its grasp did not cease with the postmodern turn, and instead aiming to examine the ways in which we orient ourselves in relation to this phenomenon. Modernism (and postmodernism, for that matter), the author claims, is being rendered obsolete as a dominant cultural epoch because, while our modes of thinking and critique are largely stuck within the 20th century, the problems that require untangling are far more nuanced. The author also untangles a crucial separation between diverging strains of thought in metamodernism – the one coined by Hanzi Freinacht, which is based on Integral Theory and is thus more political, and the one outlined by the famous duo of aforementioned Dutch scholars, which lingers in the artistic and cultural domain. Rowson’s article features a tripartite composition of metamodernism as a phenomenon, the latter part of which is crucial to this thesis and will be discussed more elaborately in the theoretical framework.

There is a remarkable volume of metamodern writing that deals with the two central themes of this thesis, in a rather direct way and without seeking the artistic intermedium in order to comment on the structures of society. The (very metamodernly) anonymous author of Octopusyarn, writing on *Metamoderna*, the famous site of Hanzi Freinacht’s influential work, suggests that a direct confrontation between religion and the current cultural epoch is inevitable, yet the author does not share the common view that religion is doomed in the face of rationalism and the materialistic sensibilities of our time. Arguing for the exact opposite, the author claims “that religion is the solution to the crises of our times and that a new Metamodern Religion is already emerging”; moving away from the modernist conceptions of faith and finding new meaning within the etymology of the word (as the word comes from the Latin *religio* – to bind, weave together), the author defines it as “the fabric that ties society together”, bringing to the forefront the social necessity for common belief. Furthermore, in times when the God of old has been dead for more than a century, his rule is supplanted by the “trifecta of the dominant modernist religion”, namely, Science, Capital, and Man (as *Anthropos*). A new, metamodern religion is key to dethroning the faux-fulfilment that came after Christianity lost its splendor, and it is even more instrumental in saving humanity from its’ own devices.

In a candor not dissimilar to its address of religion, metamodernism also deals with the adolescence of the subjects already born into the confusing oscillation and contradiction of this epoch. Strangely enough, many of the proponents of redefining meaning for the children of

metamodernism are, in fact, adherents of traditional Christianity (many of whom are hopeful for metamodernity as a gateway back to the glory days of theology and religion), and are thus less focused on spurring the development of a new kind of religion, concentrating their efforts on the transformation of Christianity for the new epoch (for instance, Kenneth A. Schmidt in his article “Multiple Modernisms and American Christianity: Where is the Church?”). Even though this thesis is not compatible with the assertion that subjects of metamodernity (especially adolescents) would necessarily benefit from a restructured Christianity (as it is characteristic of metamodernism to brandish an informed naivete, bolstered by a critically-oriented way of reasoning that would prevent the epoch from relapsing into one of the binary opposites it is trying to reconcile), the analysis of metamodernity as a chronotope for growing up found in Christian metamodern writing is quite intriguing. For instance, Benjamin Vincent identifies a set of characteristic sensibilities in the adolescents of the early 21st century: “apocalyptic hope, inverted worldview-building, and highly narrated identities”. The first aspect describes how “the metamodernist generation yearns for a new beginning” yet realizes that it can only come if action is taken against the crises of the time. The second one refers to the relationship between metaphysical foundations and ethical conclusions; whereas historically, ethics were derived from metaphysical counterparts (according to Vincent), “among the rising metamodernist generations, it seems this conventional order has been reversed... the metamodernist generation first seeks to be grounded in certain essential ethical principles and then selects the best ideological framework to match those ethics”. As the final characteristic, Vincent names the increasing tendency of metamodern adolescents to articulate their identities (and the problems that plague them) in an open, honest manner, which creates an effect that oscillates between the positives of spreading awareness and eliciting help, and the negatives of anchoring their self-worth in traumatic experiences, thus sabotaging one’s relationship with the world. However, in all of these contradictory states teenagers may face, Vincent proposes gospel as a tool of reconciling the adolescent with the times they exist in. As mentioned before, this seems like an insufficient solution to the problem that, as *HDM* showcases, religion is at least partially to blame for. Although the final conclusion of this train of thought is exactly what Pullman stands against, it is nonetheless noteworthy that even his dire opponents identify similar properties within the condition of adolescents, with practically the same opportunities for transformation and self-fashioning, yet fail to realize how self-critical this stance actually is.

Even though Pullman’s work draws heavily on the vast canon of fantasy and fiction upon which stands the very era of (Western) modernity, and does so in both a symbolic and narrative

capacity, it does not present the stories of this canon as being absolute, already told and not to be altered. According to Ana Kedveš in her article “Subversion of Religious Canon in Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*”, the dogmatic precepts of the church are “either rewritten in a way that casts new light upon the matters they relate to or are presented unaltered per se, but in a completely new context that enables a different, allegorical reading of the canonical item” (1). In a manner that creates a strange narrative friction, *HDM* insists on telling modern stories in a postmodern way; it does not reject the optimistic, universalist ideas of the former outright, stubbornly employing the deconstructive mentality of the latter to find hope in the pitfalls that are inevitable when dealing with topics such as morality, faith, and God. Furthermore, as theologian Cyril O’Regan points out when writing about the relationship between *HDM* and Christianity, “the meaning of the texts is not defined by polemic” (45), meaning that the series is more concerned with creating a new, fertile locus for inner discussion, rather than try pointing out why the discussion is unproductive in the first place. Thus, drawing on Rowson’s conception of metamodernism as a “potentially fecund, world-creating and metaphysical” (19) relationship between modernism and postmodernism, and linking it to the “view of reality in which imagination provides a compass to map the potential romance of life after religion” (O’Regan 45) that Pullman promotes in his novels, this thesis will aim to answer the research question outlined below.

### Research Question

How does Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* use postmodern tools to reconfigure modern narratives, and in what way does this textual practice make it metamodern?

The overarching research question will be answered with the help of two subquestions that shall serve as guiding posts for the two main parts of the thesis, each dealing with one of the central themes. While the first question deals primarily with the outer pressures and external manifestations of religion (and how misguided they may be in relation to ‘actual’ spiritual transcendence), the second one is more concerned with how these outer stimuli influence the development of the self, and how one can strike a personal balance within the ethos of simultaneous progress and stagnation, faith and disbelief, triumph and crisis that governs our time:

What does the trilogy’s critique of bureaucratic religious authority (and its opponents) suggest about the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment at the hands of the Christian church?

To what extent does the trilogy redefine the notion of ‘growing up’ as an unavoidable, creationary, and instrumental process in the formation of an individual?

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical concepts central to this thesis are mostly derived from the field of metamodernism, as they will serve as the connective tissue between the central argument of each chapter and the tenets of the cultural epoch. However, due to the richness and sheer volume of Pullman's trilogy, certain fictional concepts from *HDM* that are instrumental to the construction of the argument will also be elaborated on in connection to their metamodern counterparts.

A crucial concept from the foundational text of the field is born out of the tension between the unattainable, ungraspable goals of metamodernism and the problematic, halting realities that constrain it. This tension is deemed romantic by Vermeulen and van den Akker, as the authors claim the metamodern ethos gives birth to a kind of neoromanticism: "the metamodern artwork ... redirects the modern piece by drawing attention to what it cannot present in its language, what it cannot signify in its own terms" (10). A presence that cannot be translated into the linguistic realm or described as a definitive qualitative or quantitative force is also at the crossroads of the central themes in *His Dark Materials* – a strange particle referred to as Dust. A reworked Christian symbol, Dust starts off as "a conventional metaphor for human physicality inspired by God's judgment on humanity: 'for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return'" (Bird 112). However, this reductive interpretation of Dust is only favored by the Magisterium as a tool of establishing authority, and Pullman makes apparent that "it is an extremely adaptable concept, offering an almost infinite number of possibilities or meanings" (Bird 113). In Oxford, Lyra is presented with an alethiometer – a Golden Compass with the power of 'decoding' Dust in order to gain access to truths – which functions as a tool of detangling the complex reality of her world (and later, others), navigating knowledge that supersedes factual understanding. Even though the Church has outlawed the use of these devices, it employs one when "a prophecy made by witches is unveiled: Lyra will be a new Eve" (Kedves 9), though does so in a way that is different to the girl's intuitive reading of the device, having to employ a book of symbols in a tedious (and inconclusive) process. Thus, the neoromantic tension, or Dust in Pullman's trilogy, and one's attempts at making sense of it, cannot be ensnared by the rational experience, and cannot simply be deemed sin as done by the Church. Rather, Dust "symbolises the necessary convergence of contraries" (Bird 122) that underpins the metamodern condition, doing so without succumbing to oppressive hierarchies or the vitriol necessary to dismantle them, yet still stressing the importance of lived experience in reconciling such contraries.

Another concept that reverberates within the central themes of *HDM* is related to Rowson's elaboration of metamodernism. The concept of *meta* is seen as threefold by Rowson; it is composed of a cultural between, a political after, and a mystic beyond – three different ways of relating oneself to the present conditions, all with implications that drastically alter what metamodernism does to the subject situated within it. The latter part of this conception indicates a transcendence, a moving-beyond all of the previously established terms of relating oneself to reality, and is particularly relevant to this case study, as both of the central themes (religion and adolescence) are inextricably ensnared by the promise of transcending a current state of being for a 'better' or more advanced one. Lyra's counterpart, the conflicted yet determined Will Parry, comes to possess the Subtle Knife, a double-edged blade with fantastical abilities. As Giacomo Paradisi explains to Will in the *City in the Sky* (the name of which, Cittagazze, is revealed to the reader), one edge can cut any sort of matter – a literal example of deconstruction – while the other can open windows through other worlds. An opening to the multiverse is symbolic of the metamodern strive towards a “higher-order betweenness that is not merely in between the modern and postmodern but is open to the possibility of a different kind of after that is truly new, the out-between that is implicit in ‘a time between worlds’” (Rowson 17). This means that, instead of situating themselves in between the warring factions of the modern and postmodern, Will and Lyra cleave through the cultural between and political after to access the mystic beyond. Entering an intuitive state similar to Lyra's when she reads the alethiometer, Will can tear portals that facilitate the flow of Dust from universe to universe, creating something akin to the atopic metaxis coined by Vermeulen and van den Akker; it is, “impossibly, at once a place and not a place, a territory without boundaries, a position without parameters” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 12). Because of this impossibility, however, the portals must be closed after use, as “human technology has increasingly put this precious ecosystem in danger by damaging the fabric of reality and allowing the finite amount of Dust to leak slowly from the universe” (Fitzsimmons 217). The exploration of the mystic beyond (using the Knife) and the reading of truths (with the alethiometer) are both necessary pursuits in the protagonists' journey towards metamodernity, as they open their worldview to a conceptual framework that defies that of (post)modernity, yet the duo must realize that they are still bound by their embodied experience and have to situate themselves in the endless oscillation between various feelings, rationales, and (meta)narratives.

## Method and Structure

Metamodernism is a relatively new field, and while Vermeulen and van den Akker were content with describing what they thought fit within the metamodern framework, Rowson is more concerned with prescribing what this framework could look like in the first place. As there is very little work directly linking *His Dark Materials* to metamodernism as a field of literary study, this thesis will follow in the methodological footsteps of Rowson's prescriptive metamodernism, with the aim of situating the trilogy as a rather early (and somewhat unlikely) proponent of the cultural epoch. Therefore, most of the theoretical insight used in this thesis will be largely related to metamodernism as a general field, not the specific study of it in writing, since it is neither the formal characteristics, nor a directly self-reflexive voice of the narrators that make *HDM* metamodern. Caused in large part by the choice of audience, and aided by the rich intertexts of theological, philosophical, and literary origin, Pullman's masterwork tackles the "the meta challenge of saving civilisation from itself" (Rowson 7), an aspect of the *meta* oft ignored in favor of (postmodern) subjectivity. Chronologically, metamodernism emerges after postmodernism, and thus inherits the characteristics of this epoch more closely than its more distant predecessor, often utilizing the tools and techniques typical of the latter half of the 20th century. *HDM* counters this by staging the story from the point of view of a teenager – a person that ought to believe that the world can be saved from ruin, and that humanity is in fact worth saving, even if they utilize tools of postmodern deconstruction in the process. It is exactly this thematic proximity to the ideological prescriptions of metamodernism, rather than the formal descriptions of it, that makes the choice of method for this thesis clear. Even though aspects of close reading and context analysis will certainly be used in analyzing certain scenes or patterns within the story, the general method of choice is critical discourse analysis (CDA). This way of looking at the matter allows for a seamless link between theoretical insight about the themes of religion & adolescence in Pullman's trilogy and the general discourse of metamodernism, with the goal of demonstrating the connections between how the themes are employed in the books, and the way they are portrayed through a metamodernist scholarly lens. These connections will be made apparent by analyzing secondary sources relating Pullman's trilogy to either one of the themes, and ascertaining whether their findings confirm the metamodern flux between poles of feeling, modes of meaning-making. Thus, by evaluating how (and why) *HDM* deals with themes that have long been the battleground of the (post)modern, one may learn whether the trilogy rises beyond it, into what Rowson deems the mystic beyond – rather underexplored and uncharted territory in metamodernity.

## Chapter 1: Blowing the Dust Off Religion

In *His Dark Materials*, Pullman does not limit himself to the perspective and narration of the adolescent characters, which allows him to describe a conflict of universal scale, abstracting from the personal journeys of Lyra and Will. This means that the tale of defying religious power takes on a political and cultural dimension, with both sides of the conflict being equally important to understand, for they stand as a background for the choices the protagonists have to make in order to combat the flawed perceptions of their predecessors and transcend the struggles of the past. The religious front in Lyra's world is vehemently opposed to notions of transcendence that do not fall in line with its doctrine, disallowing any kind of "move beyond ... forms of the modern" (Rowson 17). In his staging of the metaphysical battle for the universe, Pullman echoes the cultural tension that gave rise to metamodernism, with the religious narratives of Lyra's world crumbling at the very thought of Dust – a kind of neoromantic presence the church "cannot present in its language... cannot signify in its own terms" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 10). Thus, this chapter will seek to answer the following research question: What does the trilogy's critique of bureaucratic religious authority (and its opponents) suggest about the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment at the hands of the Christian church?

It is no coincidence that Pullman chose to situate his young heroine, the rebellious and unruly Lyra Belacqua, in the fictitious Jordan College of Oxford University. A rather unwelcoming, mysterious place for most children, her first home made Lyra absorb knowledge whether she wanted to or not. Most of the tedious lecturers struck her as boring, though the more subversive and mystical aspects of academia were like a magnet to the girl's prickly nature. In the strange world of Pullman's protagonist, Oxford is one of the very few institutions that form an opposition to the main political and religious authority in society – the Magisterium – and basically the only place in which a child can grow up to know an influence strong enough to rival God, namely, secular knowledge. In her article "Far From Narnia", Laura Miller describes Lyra's universe as a "church-burdened world, in which the Reformation lead to consolidation, not schism, and the Papacy was moved from Rome to Geneva by John Calvin", replacing one of the biggest blows to the institutional integrity of the Church in our world with a buttressing of its strength in Lyra's. This is why, contrary to the reality we live in, the Church has slowly become the single most powerful entity in the few hundred years after the Reformation. It is "run by a cabal of celibate men obsessed with sin and its eradication" (Miller), who have distorted the canons of their religious text (the Christian Bible, albeit with slight alterations to fit the constitution of their world; for instance, Genesis gives a clear

mention of daemons – the animate incarnations of one’s soul that take an animal form – to explain the ontology of their world) to fit their political agenda and skewed teleological outlook. With its ideological and doctrinal strength enforced by the bureaucratic, almost entirely male-lead, and power-hungry Magisterium, the holy men have no qualms employing “torture and a doctrine of ‘preemptive penance’ – a program of self-flagellation that provides its adherents with a kind of get-out-of-Hell-free card, forgiving them in advance for such politically useful sins as assassination” (Miller). In the start of the series, the Magisterium has recruited the conniving Mrs. Coulter (who, unbeknownst to Lyra and the reader, is the protagonist’s mother) to operate the General Oblation Board, with the goal of separating children from their daemons before their companions settle into their final form; the mark of entering adulthood. Even though she serves the Magisterium in the beginning of the trilogy, Coulter’s nature changes rapidly, and the most interesting facet of her character, namely, the fact that her daemon is mute as opposed to most others, indicating a detachment from the emotional side of her psyche, foretell that her motivations are muddled. The primeval objective of the Church throughout the entire series is a complete denial and destruction of Dust, the miraculous substance that settles on adults, eluding children until they approach maturity. Genesis and the Fall of Man are used by the Magisterium to define Dust as “the physical evidence for original sin” (Pullman 304); a gateway of justifying their quest against the ‘sinful’ adolescence of children. As their daemons settle into their permanent shapes, and the children begin to attract Dust, the Gobblers (a colloquial way of referring to the Oblation Board) are deployed to hunt them down and bring them to Mrs. Coulter – a rather stark metaphor to the forceful practices of indoctrination used by the Church in its pursuit of the younger generations. This rash action comes as a consequence of Lord Asriel’s (a driven, free-thinking explorer who is revealed to be Lyra’s father) discovery of a city in the sky; an inexplicable vision of another world, made possible only through the light emission properties of Dust, that challenges the ideological authority of the Church. The promise of something beyond the visible world that is not part of the Christian myth of the afterlife also strips the magistrates of their claim to unanimous purity in the eyes of God, a notion that “radically contradicts traditional Catholic teachings: according to Catholic dogma, only human beings have souls, granted to them by the breath of God” (Fitzsimmons 216). The Magisterium is unable to see Dust as the elusive, transformative particle that it is, attempting “to turn the finite into the infinite”, however doing so without “recognizing that it can never be realized” (Vermeulen & van den Akker 8); a practice similar to the neoromantic meaning-making of Vermeulen and van den Akker, though lacking the necessary self-awareness.

In its treatment of Dust as a congruent religious narrative instead of acknowledging it as a metaphysical force, the Magisterium is susceptible to the alluring “idea of modernity as a grand epoch” (Rowson 2) and its “utopic syntaxis” (Vermeulen & van den Akker 12); a general sentiment of forward-moving progress, guided by a grandiose, universal vision that ought to stand for all of life is exactly the kind of self-righteous stance taken by the Magisterium. It is no surprise, therefore, that the opposition that rallies to tear down the oppressive religion of its time is postmodern in nature. Lord Asriel rearticulates what Dust is, suggesting that matter may play a vital, positive part in the development of spirit, thereby deconstructing the Gnostic (and very Christian) separation between mind and body, reveling in his quest to find “physical proof that something happened when innocence changed into experience” (Pullman 305). Asriel does not discriminate between the goodness or evil of matter or spirit and disagrees with “traditional Christianity in which the irreconcilable nature of the opposites arises from their moral emphasis” (Bird 115), finding evil within the very practice of claiming moral goodness of spirit over matter. He tells Lyra: “Human beings can’t see anything without wanting to destroy it, Lyra. That’s original sin. And I’m going to destroy it. Death is going to die” (Pullman 309). The Lord’s pursuit, albeit fueled by righteous disdain for the immoral practices of the Church (and their highest power, the Authority) comes at the cost of any morality whatsoever. Caught up in the materiality of his goal, Asriel uses the Oblation Board’s technology to sever the bond between Roger, Lyra’s friend, and his daemon, in order to unlock a bridge between worlds. In doing so, he embarks on a journey of building the Republic of Heaven, a multiversal state that declares war against God’s regent, Metatron. With the combined might of the Magisterium and the Authority bearing down on him, Asriel joins forces with a faction of rebel angels, a move which casts him as a “Lucifernian figure” (O’Regan 40); yet another indication that, in spite of his fiery deconstruction of God’s unanimous rule, he is still a part of the same struggle that metamodernism seeks to transcend. Similarly, even though Mrs. Coulter comes to oppose the ways of the Church (although driven by a love for her daughter, not the goal of destroying God himself), her moral fabric is too eroded to care for Lyra as a mother should, or to return to the society she herself had terrorized. Asriel and Coulter have dedicated their lives to deconstructing (or, as Coulter did earlier, mistakenly upholding) the religious authorities that seemed ubiquitous in their world, which is the reason they cannot endure past this struggle or harken in a new world. This is exactly why, as the battle between the Republic and the Metatron reaches its climax, Asriel must unite with his past lover to take down God’s rogue angel in an act of sacrifice. The two postmodern, deconstructing forces (and coincidentally the parents of Lyra, the second Eve) – the revolutionary and the betrayer – cannot be the ones building the

future, for their quest against the God of modernity had taken too much of the optimistic spirituality necessary for making a society thrive, or for finding personal meaning outside of a raging battleground.

It is thus up to the young protagonists of the story, Lyra and Will, to reconcile the misguided religion and its flawed opponents. As the angel Balthamos explains to Will in *The Amber Spyglass*, “[The Authority] was never the creator. He was an angel like ourselves, the first angel, true, the most powerful, but he was formed of Dust as we are, and Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself” (Pullman 622). This conception directly undermines any basis for the fundamental claims of the Church; furthermore, it suggests that consciousness (or the spirit) is only a consequence of the condensation of matter, the dark materials that give birth to light, and that the free, intuitive, and non-hierarchical flow of Dust is what actually drives the universe. In their struggle for meaning, Will and Lyra have to redefine the Fall of Man as something other than descent into sin. With the ability of traversing worlds, the pair uses their new-found knowledge of Dust to transcend the battleground of their predecessors, harkening in “a cultural shift that integrates prior modes and a superposition of sincerity and irony” (*Metamoderna*). The struggle towards such a future is as much internal as it is external, for the battle against the Authority is only one aspect in the trilogy’s address of metanarratives, and the protagonists must embrace their inner growth in order to change the worlds around them; much like when dealing with the metamodern crisis, which “plays out both in the world out there (from climate change to nuclear risk) and in our subjective experience (atomization, lack of meaning)” (*Metamoderna*). The battle for metamodern religion, a fabric that binds society, not sows division through hierarchy, must be fought on two frontiers at once; in the cultural, political arenas of our time, and within our conflicted identities that this very time produces.

## Chapter 2: The Fall of Man as the Growth of Lyra

While analyzing the political battles between the Authority and the Republic of Heaven, one must not forget the importance of Lyra's (and Will's) personal journey, a struggle of redefining adolescence to signify something other than a fall from innocence into sin. When detailing the neoromantic tension characteristic to metamodernism, Vermeulen and van den Akker highlight how it manifests through "aesthetic categories lingering between projection and perception, form and the unformable, coherence and chaos, corruption and innocence" (8); while the first three of the aforementioned oppositions are mostly related to the first chapter of this thesis, the latter one is of particular importance here. From a metamodern point of view, it is exactly the inner aspect of Lyra's challenge to the metanarratives of her world that matters most. The entire narrative is anchored around the girl's growth into adulthood, with the Magisterium and other factions trying to capture her to either stop or bring about the Second Fall of Man, to which she is the key. By investigating how the trilogy treats Lyra's journey from a bratty girl to a strong young woman, this chapter will seek to answer the following question: To what extent does the trilogy redefine the notion of 'growing up' as an unavoidable, creationary, and instrumental process in the formation of an individual?

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the religious authorities of Lyra's world are primarily concerned with vanquishing Dust (and, thus, sin) from their domain, and the most effective path towards accomplishing this goal, to their mind, is oblation – the practice of splitting a child from their daemon, preventing the flow of Dust onto to the child (a marker of maturity and conscious thought) and disallowing the daemon its permanent form. Adolescence is equated to the Biblical event that saw humanity banished from heaven, and the church believes that such a Fall has to be prevented for each individual, and that the collective sins of humanity may yet be forgiven if it departs from the path of free will and choice; their rite of passage from innocence to experience, from ignorance to knowledge, is deemed dangerous and uncomfortable by the Magisterium. In essence, for the holy men "Dust symbolizes the awakening of sexual awareness, humanity's rejection of the heavenly for the earthly, and thus, a descent from spirit to matter" (Bird 116). While the church adapts this reductionist approach to the contradictory (and, often times, terrifying) realities of growing up, "Pullman attempts to synthesize the opposing principles that lie at the core of the myth while leaving the innocence-experience dichotomy firmly in place" (Bird 112). In other words, Pullman's protagonists Lyra and Will transform "a paradigm of disobedience and divine punishment into a scheme of self-development" (Bird 112), with this transformation of the narrative articulated through the

characters' relationship with Dust, and an increased understanding of what this cosmic substance actually represents.

Lyra's journey towards adulthood truly begins when she comes into possession of the alethiometer and learns to read the truth-seeking device. Through this, she gains the power of obtaining knowledge that does not rely on authority, empirical proof, or religious argumentation to be credible; like Eve, eating from the Tree of Knowledge, so does Lyra learn to distinguish between good and evil on her own terms. This process echoes the characteristics of the metamodern adolescent outlined by Vincent, as she looks for ethical truths independently from moral frameworks (see Literature Review). A rather similar dynamic is true for Will when he obtains the Subtle Knife; even though he has had to mature rather early to look after his mother, it is the knife that opens new opportunities for the boy to grow into a man, and to learn about things outside of his world, and follow in the footsteps of his father, a long lost explorer who first discovered multiversal travel. Although Pullman uses children as his heroes, it is not their innocence, a typical defining trait for the child hero archetype, that sets them apart from the morally-flawed, divided world they inhabit, but rather "the experience and maturity that Pullman idolises, in opposition to a child's innocence and ignorance" (Kedveš 9); in other words, their 'fall' cannot be averted, but its implications and the choices it leads one to make are up to the individual.

Perhaps, the reason why Pullman's rearticulation of the Fall is so powerful is his use of the same symbolic elements that the Bible employs. In spite of the personal nature of Will and Lyra's path from child to adult, they are, much like Adam and Eve, guided by a subversive (to the Christian authority) serpent, embodied by the nun-turned-scientist Dr Mary Malone. Hailing from Will's world (the one that seems to represent the one we inhabit), she is the first human in her plane of existence to engage with Dust in its animate, conscious form as she makes contact with angels. She then travels to a world inhabited by mulefa, creatures that resemble elephants, yet are highly intelligent and inhabit an ecosystem that directly relies on the flow of Dust, which they can see with the naked eye: "the mulefa world acts as a barometer of Dust levels in the universe. The giant trees, which are pollinated by Dust, act as an indicator species when they cease to produce seeds and begin to die" (Fitzsimmons 217). Only by hearing their creation myth (which bears striking resemblances to the Biblical one) and learning to understand the ways of knowing used by the mulefa can Mary grasp the importance of Dust, the neoromantic uncertainty that feeds the universe, in facilitating growth and development, positioning herself as the Edenic tempter for Lyra and Will while simultaneously redefining that role. As Fitzsimmons puts it in her article, "the purpose of the serpent then is not to tempt

the Eve figure simply to consume the fruit/seed but to introduce the desire for wisdom and knowledge” (221), transforming the dynamic of the Fall from a denial of God to an actualization of self-knowledge. The desires that arise when Dust begins settling on people are, in fact, manifestations of the universe trying to know itself; formations of Dust accumulating and gaining consciousness, only to produce more Dust as, “in true dialectic fashion, Dust is created by conscious beings, but it is required for beings to become conscious” (Fitzsimmons 223). Dr Malone uses her experience of living among the mulefa and leaving the church to tell a story to the young protagonists; a creation myth of her own, detailing the time she first turned to knowledge and self-exploration in spite of the uncomfortable truths she might uncover. In a near-instantaneous oscillation between the vast expanses of the multiverse and the intimate relationship of two teenagers, Mary’s story “saves the consciousness of the universe, but it also shows Lyra, Will, and the reader a philosophical path that one might take in order to achieve an awakening” (Fitzsimmons 229). The ambiguous, unclear feelings that the two fate-bound children had for each other blossom into love, something far stronger than the empty desire ascribed to Dust by the church, which revamps the circulation of the cosmic particle throughout the universe; in a way, acknowledging how meaning moves between and is created by conscious experience is the key to the mystic beyond. Ultimately, the cultural and political struggle – taking place in what Rowson would call the cultural between and political after – between the clearly defined fronts of the Authority and the Republic is secondary to the radical shift in perception that Lyra and Will undergo. Instead of labelling the process of growing up and gaining consciousness as necessarily good or bad, Pullman portrays human desire for knowledge as what it is; a mixed bag of joy, hardship, and, above all, the responsibility necessary to make choices. This sentiment is a crucial driving force behind the general outlook of metamodernism when it comes to self-actualization and growth in a society that does not grant clear, unproblematic definitions of either of those terms. Lyra and Will have to learn to engage with the entire range of feeling and desire they possess in order to reach adulthood, as confusing as the process may seem. Similarly, so too does the metamodern generation have to devise a strategy for dealing with the ostensibly incompatible realities of our time; to put it in the words of Rowson, “to be metamodern is to be caught up in the co-arising of hope and despair, credulity and incredulity, progress and peril, agency and apathy, life and death. I had mixed feelings about metamodernism until I realised it is about mixed feelings” (3).

In the multiverse of *HDM*, not unlike in our world, “history is moving beyond its much-proclaimed end” (Vermeulen & van den Akker 5). The Authority and his Metatron are defeated, the forces that fought them are greatly depleted, and the aftermath of their struggle

calls for a new paradigm. By imbuing the personal experience of growing up with universal implications of change, Mary Malone “is able to bring that narration, that history, to a close, to dialectically negate their reality and create a new one” (Fitzsimmons 230) for Lyra and Will. Through their engagement with truth-seeking tools, Mary Malone, and, ultimately, one another, the pair grow mature enough to search for a new beginning – a hallmark of the metamodern generation, according to Vincent – instead of prophesizing the end. Vermeulen and van den Akker state: “The current, metamodern discourse also acknowledges that history’s purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it as if it does exist” (5). They deem this peculiar balance “an impossible possibility” – a term that perfectly encapsulates the new Telos of Lyra and Will, as the teens have to return to their respective worlds, closing the multiversal windows to keep the flow of Dust stable, yet have come to realize that countless other worlds exist in the same fabric of spacetime.

Adolescence in metamodernity (and in the worlds of *HDM*) is not a damning choice between fitting oneself into the restricting teleological frameworks of the time or tearing them down with rebellious vitriol. Rather, it is the realization that meaning is created in the interplay between these two states, and that “the complex paradox of simultaneous unity and difference... is significant in that it emphasises that what makes two concepts polar opposites is what actually unites them and creates a powerful psychic force” (Bird 118). The ending of history (in the metamodern sense, as a freeing realization of no predetermined end to human civilization) is embraced by the metamodern adolescent embodied in Lyra; a new generation with the “zeal for solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems” (Vincent). Growing up to be a fully-fledged individual, in Pullman’s view, is not a dramatic fall from a coherent innocence into a scattered sinfulness, but the ability to choose for oneself, by oneself in a world of constant change and oscillation, whether it be internal or external.

## Conclusion

By examining this trilogy's use and rearticulation of religion and adolescence, the intellectual fabric binding it to the emerging metamodern tradition becomes more clearly visible. This thesis has shown how, through the use of postmodern tools (whether they are, in the literal sense, the alethiometer and the Knife, or, in the more allegorical one, Mrs. Coulter and Lord Asriel), *His Dark Materials* complicates and rearticulates modern narratives, though it is not through these postmodern deconstructions that the trilogy creates new meaning. Asriel's crusade against the Authority alone is not enough to overhaul the outdated mythmaking of the church, and Lyra's personal growth in spite of the ignorance of her world is not itself a challenge to the constricting narratives of adolescence. However, it is the combination of the two, a literal oscillation between the outer and inner conflicts of the characters, that generates new meaning for both struggles. The outer part of this process, covered in Chapter 1, explores how the generation emerging from the struggle of (post)modernity, or, more generally, "humankind, a people, are not really going toward a natural but unknown goal, but they pretend they do so that they progress morally as well as politically" (Vermeulen and van den Akker 5). Chapter 2 dealt with the inner workings of the metamodern in *HDM*, showcasing how "meaning can be teased out in a way that is generative, and the personal work involved in the teasing-out is part of its value" (Rowson 4). Modernity, represented in *HDM* by Lyra's world as a dominion of religious authority over knowledge, is transcended, opened up to reveal countless other worlds at the hands of the postmodern deconstructors of the trilogy; at the same time, the troubling experience of growing up is embraced as an inescapable clash of opposites by Lyra and Will. However, the generative capacity of the trilogy does not stop at the denunciation of one state, one structure of feeling, in favor of another, for Pullman does not imply that an existence within the infinite multiverse of *HDM* is feasible and meaningful, or that adolescence is the final and most important step in one's journey towards intellectual self-actualization. The existence of a plurality of worlds, each with unique rules and hierarchies, is acknowledged as subversive to the narratives of divine authority, though also revealed to be lacking in personal meaning. As Lyra and Will return to their respective worlds and continue living, they do not forget the millions that exist right next to them, invisible to the naked eye but bound together by Dust, nor do they forsake their love, vowing to meet every year, even if their reunion must occur through the unbreachable fabric of spacetime. "A modern naivete ... informed by postmodern skepticism" (5), as Vermeulen and van den Akker would call it, that lets one abstract from their embodied position of personal meaning yet understands that "we shouldn't live as if it mattered more than

this life in this world, because where we are is always the most important place” (Pullman 1015).

Ultimately, the metamodern in *His Dark Materials* is revealed through the narrative combination of the two themes discussed in this thesis, and Pullman’s emphasis on the fact that they are, in fact, two dimensions of the same oscillation. By moving back and forth from the religious ideas of shared, social meaning to the personal, transformative importance of growing up to love someone, the author insists that meaning (and purpose in general) is a quality formed through unadulterated conscious experience, one that occurs somewhere in between the outside world and our minds. Thus, Dust, for Pullman, “is not a metanarrative as such, but an outlook that restores the dignity of the metanarrative impulse without being subject to it” (Rowson 22); it is the necessary, all-encompassing oscillation between ostensible opposites that human beings have to reconcile in order to understand their own complicated moralities. This reconciliation needs to happen from within and without simultaneously, amidst the false certainties and borders that people *think* give them meaning.

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