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**Shamanic elements in “His Dark Materials” by Philip Pullman**

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ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this paper is to analyze five themes of the trilogy *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman in the light of their similarity to shamanic motifs. Firstly, I focus on the idea of daemons as similar to the shamanic concept of the helpful spirits that have the form of animals. Secondly, I describe Pullman’s idea of Dust as a kind of spiritual concept and I present Lyra as the mediator who communicates with Dust by means of her alethiometer which resembles a shamanic drum. Thirdly, I show the character of John Parry, the only shaman in the novels, and some other characters who have similar skills. Fourthly, I analyze Lyra’s dream in a cave as an initiation rite and the introduction to the motif of the descent to the underworld. This descent is the last motif I focus on, and the most similar to the shamanic ones. In conclusion, I try to explain why the shamanic motifs are used in the trilogy and why they are still vivid in modern culture.

KEYWORDS:

His Dark Materials, Philip Pullman, shamanism, shamanic, shaman, daemons, alethiometer, Dust, dream, cave, land of the dead, Lyra, John Parry

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## SHAMANIC ELEMENTS IN „HIS DARK MATERIALS” BY PHILIP PULLMAN

*His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman is nowadays one of the most popular series for younger readers. Like other famous English fantasy novels, it is often compared to *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. In his books Pullman tells an allegorical story with numerous references to the Bible and Christian tradition, but unlike his great predecessors, he is strongly critical of the Church and vacant, fanatical faith. His novels are full of well-known Judaeo-Christian themes used in a seditious way. Some of them are derived from the mystical poems of William Blake and John Milton whom Blake named as ”of the Devil’s party without knowing it”<sup>1</sup>. Although strongly Anti-Christian in meaning, *His Dark Materials* are not entirely anti-religious. In the trilogy a lot of symbols and themes from non- and pre-Christian beliefs can be found, among them archetypical motifs derived from ancient myths and literature. In this article I refer to the primary source of many of these motifs – the shamanic beliefs.

Shamanism is a system of beliefs and techniques that still exists in many places in the world. It can be found in North, Central and East Asia, both Americas, Africa, Australia and Oceania, and even in Europe. As there are several definitions of shamanism, there are also some doubts whether the similar phenomena existing in different parts of the world can be defined by the same term. Many scholars affirm that shamanism in the strict sense is pre-eminently the phenomenon characteristic of Siberia and Central Asia<sup>2</sup>. In other regions (for example Africa) sorcerers or medicine-men, even if their acts are similar to shamanism, are not considered shamans<sup>3</sup>. In this article I would like to describe some shamanic motifs used by Pullman in *His Dark Materials* rather than analyze the details of shamanism itself, therefore I treat this system of beliefs as a widely understood phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Blake, “The Marriage Thief Heaven and Hell,” *Complete Poems*, ed. A. Ostriker, New York 1977, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. W. R. Trask, Princeton 1964, p. 4; M. Hoppál, *Szamani Eurazjatyccy*, przeł. A. Barszczewska, Warszawa 2009, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> M. Hoppál, op.cit., pp. 13, 44.

Shamanism is a religious phenomenon<sup>4</sup> based on the belief that apart from the world in which the community lives, there is another world of benevolent and malevolent spirits who can intervene in human affairs. The principal role in the community is fulfilled by the shaman – a person chosen by spirits to communicate between them and humans. To become a shaman, a practitioner has to pass hard and dangerous initiation during which he or she must die and be reborn. The shaman is a mediator between the world of spirits and the community and his main role is to maintain the balance between these two worlds. He is able to encounter the world of spirits by reaching an altered state of consciousness<sup>5</sup>. The shaman has also an ability to treat human ailments by mending the souls, rescue a man by finding his lost soul in the underworld, ascent to the sky, take a magical flight, master over fire and commend the helping spirits<sup>6</sup>.

Taking into account abovementioned ideas about shamanism, I would like to present some elements the reader can find in Pullman’s trilogy which might be treated as shamanic motifs. Firstly, I focus on the most brilliant concept of the trilogy – the idea of daemons – and I show its similarity to the shamanic concept of helpful and tutelary spirits which usually took animal forms. Secondly, I describe the Pullman’s idea of Dust as a kind of spiritual world that Lyra communicate with, using her alethiometer the same way as shamans use their drums. Thirdly, I show the only true shaman in the novels – John Parry – and some other characters who have similar abilities. Fourthly, I try to analyze one of the most interesting and symbolic motifs in the trilogy: Lyra’s dream in a cave. Lastly, I describe the most shamanic of all themes in the Pullman’s story – the descent to the underworld.

## DAEMONS

The most curious conception in *His Dark Materials* is the idea of daemons. The daemon is a human soul that – in Lyra’s world – manifests itself outside the body in animal form. These animals are the closest friends to the trilogy’s characters, share their thoughts and dreams, help in need, give advice. The daemon of an adult adopts a permanent form of an animal that reflects best characters and abilities of the person, whereas the child’s daemon can change its shape. The relationship between human and his or her daemon is intimate and separation causes the inconceivable suffering of both psychical and mental nature. The idea of daemons is in fact the only significant element of the story that does not refer directly to any other cultural or literary motif and remains a genuine idea of Philip Pullman. It should be noted that the conception of daemons has found its place in

<sup>4</sup> It is not clearly defined whether shamanism should be treated as a religious phenomenon, a form of religion or a system of beliefs (see: M. Hoppál, “Shamanism: An Archaic and/or Recent System of Beliefs,” *Studies on Shamanism*, ed. A.-L. Siikala, M. Hoppál, Helsinki 1998, pp. 129 ff.).

<sup>5</sup> Mircea Eliade used the term ‘technique of ecstasy’ to describe shamanism, but nowadays ‘an altered state of consciousness’ is preferred (see: A.-L. Siikala, “The Siberian Shaman’s Technique of Ecstasy,” *Studies on Shamanism*, ed. A.-L. Siikala, M. Hoppál, Helsinki 1998, pp. 26–40).

<sup>6</sup> M. Eliade, op.cit., p. 6.

popular culture. The popularity of this motif is reflected by a growing interest in the Internet phenomenon of daemonism – a belief that daemon is an integral part of consciousness of every human being<sup>7</sup>.

Philip Pullman's idea of daemons was inspired by the paintings *The Lady with the Ermine* by Leonardo da Vinci, *The Lady and the Squirrel* by Hans Holbein the Younger and *Young Woman with a Macaw* by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. On these paintings the author saw a link between the depicted person and animal indicating a deep psychological relation<sup>8</sup>. The idea of daemons is therefore an original concept of Philip Pullman, primarily inspired by these three pieces of art. However, some elements of the very idea are also based on other cultural motifs.

The term *daemon* refers to the supernatural being existing in ancient Greek beliefs. Contrary to the Christian theology in which demons are identified with evil spirits, the Greek tradition perceived daemons as powerful and benevolent beings. According to Plato, the Greek term *daimōn* is derived from *daēmon* which meant 'knowing'<sup>9</sup>. The premier meaning of *daimōn* in ancient Greek was 'god, deity', 'divine power' or 'the power controlling the destiny of individuals', and in this sense the term was used by Homer<sup>10</sup>. Also Hesiod mentioned *daimones*, claiming that they were souls of men of the Golden Age acting as tutelary deities<sup>11</sup>.

The most comprehensive description of ancient daemons was made by Apuleius in *On the God of Socrates*. Apuleius suggested that according to a certain signification, the human soul, even when still situated in the body, is called a daemon<sup>12</sup>. This kind of daemon is – according to Apuleius – similar to the Roman *genius*<sup>13</sup>. But he mentioned also another species of daemons, far superior in dignity. For these kind of beings, "Plato asserts that a peculiar daemon is allotted to every man, who is a witness and a guardian of his conduct in life"<sup>14</sup>. This kind of spirit may be treated as a defender in danger and assistant in need. It always accompanies human and oversees his actions and thoughts, but is not visible to anyone. It is also the daemon who leads the soul of a man to the judgement after death<sup>15</sup>. According to Apuleius, this kind of daemons was recognized and worshipped by Socrates<sup>16</sup>. Plato added that this daemon was a source of voice Socrates used to

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. *The Daemon Page* (daemonpage.com). The comparative analysis of the Internet sites concerning daemonism and modern shamanic practices also could be an interesting subject for an academic research.

<sup>8</sup> R. Butler, "Philip Pullman's Dark Arts," *Intelligent Life*, Dec. 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, 398b. More probable root of *daimōn* is *daiō* – 'to distribute destinies'. Cf. "daimōn," H.G. Lidell, R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1940.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. Homer, *Iliad*, 1.222 ('deity'), 17.98 ('divine power').

<sup>11</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 117–124; 252–254.

<sup>12</sup> Apuleius, *On the God of Socrates*, 15.150.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 15.151.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 16.155 (trans Th. Taylor).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 16.156.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 16.156–157.

hear, which always “hold[ed him] back from what [he was] thinking of doing, but never urge[d] [him] forward”<sup>17</sup>. According to another Socrates’ biographer, Xenophon, the voice not only dissuaded, but also pointed to Socrates his duty<sup>18</sup>. The conscience of Socrates is undoubtedly the best known ancient daemon. However, even this daemon does not quite represent the idea from *His Dark Materials*. The daemons from Pullman’s trilogy are strongly connected with the symbolic meaning of animals.

The animal form of daemons is usually interpreted as a symbol of the brute side of human. Taking into account that English literature was the inspiration of many themes used in the trilogy, scholars often seek in it also the roots of the idea of daemons. For example, Lisa Hopkins suggested that Pullman’s daemons seems to be a reincarnation of the classic Gothic doubling motif found in texts from *Frankenstein* to *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, where the brute nature of a person is revealed in his or her *alter ego*<sup>19</sup>. This argument seems to be justifiable when observing such characters as Mrs Coulter and her malignant monkey and this source should not be overlooked. The striking mental bond between man and his daemon, as well as daemons’ intelligence and benevolent character, should encourage scholars to seek the roots of this motif in much older, religious phenomena such as animism, totemism, metempsychosis, lycanthropy and finally – shamanism.

It should be noted that shamans use their own helpful spirits when they decide to bring back an ill person’s psyche from hell. These spirits are usually animals in form, and the most popular forms are birds – probably that is the reason why in *His Dark Materials* the daemon of the shaman John Parry has a form of an osprey. The relations between shaman and his helping animal are very intimate. Siberian Yakuts believe that each shaman has the ‘mother-animal’, a mythical image of a helping animal that he keeps in secret<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, Mongolian Buryats believe that this assisting animal is perceived as a soul, double or alter ego of a shaman and this animal’s death causes death of a shaman. What is interesting, shamans themselves are also partly animals – in an ecstatic trance shaman’s psyche leaves the body and often takes a form of an animal in order to fight with malevolent spirits.

In all these beliefs, there are many elements similar to the concept of a daemon in *His Dark Materials*. Many parallels to the Pullman’s concept can be also found in Mesoamerican idea of *nagualism* and *tonalism* linked to the pre-Columbian shamanic practices and the idea of werewolves. While *nagualism* refers to the po-

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 31d (trans. H.N. Fowler).

<sup>18</sup> Xenophon, *Works on Socrates*, 12. More about the Greek roots of the idea of daemons see: K. Kleczkowska, “Wewnętrzny głos czy zewnętrzna dusza? Antyczna koncepcja daimones a dajmony z Mrocznych Materii Philipa Pullmana,” *Nowy Filomata* 16.2 (2012), pp. 203-218.

<sup>19</sup> L. Hopkins, “Dyads or Triads? His Dark Materials and the Structure of the Human,” *His Dark Materials Illuminated. Critical Essays on Philip Pullman’s Trilogy*, ed. M. Lenz, C. Scott, Detroit 2005, p. 49.

<sup>20</sup> M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

wer of transforming into an animal form, *tonal* indicates the animal connected with the day in Aztec calendar in which a person was born. This animal not only reflects the nature of the human, but it is also his or her personal spirit and guardian. The health and prosperity of the person depends on this animal and its loss may even cause death of the human<sup>21</sup>. It is not certain if *nagualism* and the shamanic ideas of helping animals and tutelary spirits were known to Philip Pullman, but both these themes were presented in Carlos Castaneda's books popular in the seventies and eighties.

## ALETHIOMETER AS A SHAMANIC DRUM

The main and the most complex concept in *His Dark Materials* is the idea of a conscious matter called Dust. The scholars interpret it diversely, but very often they consider Dust a polemic with Christianity and an alternative theological vision<sup>22</sup>. There is no doubt that this motif is based mostly on the Judaeo-Christian tradition and mythology, as even the very term of Dust refers to *The Book of Genesis*: "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen 3:19).

Dust "cluster[s] where human beings [are], as if it [is] attracted to [them], (...) especially to adults, (...) not nearly so much [to children] until their daemons have taken a fixed form"<sup>23</sup>. According to Lyra's discovery in the museum, the beginning of human-Dust relationships correspond to the evolution of mankind, which means that it is due to this matter that humans are conscious. Hence the attractiveness to Dust is also one of the main differences between men and animals. As explained the angel called Balthamos: "Dust is only a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself (...). It seeks to know more about itself, and Dust is formed"<sup>24</sup>. Other angel, Xaphania, told Lyra and Will: "Dust is not a constant. There's not a fixed quantity that has always been the same. Conscious being make Dust – they renew it all the time, by thinking and feeling and reflecting, by gaining wisdom and passing it on"<sup>25</sup>. In the trilogy Dust is called variously: "a new kind of elementary principle", "the physical evidence for original sin"<sup>26</sup>, "dark matter", "shadows", "particles of consciousness"<sup>27</sup>. Dust calls itself "angels" and explains: "From what we are, spirit; from what we do, matter. Matter and spirit are one"<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> D.G. Brinton, *Nagualism: A Study in Native American Folk-lore and History*, Philadelphia 1894, pp. 11 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. A.-M. Bird, "Circumventing the Grand Narrative: Dust as an Alternative Theological Vision in Pullman's *His Dark Materials*," *His Dark Materials Illuminated...*, op. cit., pp. 188–198.

<sup>23</sup> Ph. Pullman, *Northern Lights*, London 1998, p. 370.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, *The Amber Spyglass*, London 2001, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 520.

<sup>26</sup> Idem, *Northern Lights*, op. cit., pp. 370–371.

<sup>27</sup> Idem, *The Subtle Knife*, London 1998, pp. 90–92.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 260.

These terms refer to the biblical tradition (original sin, angels), science (dark matter), and philosophy (particles of consciousness), but Dust is still hard to define (in fact, it is no less elusive to the reader than to characters of the books). Dust is a matter that creates humanity and is a being created by humans. The existence of Dust and mankind is inseparable, but ‘shadows’ are still a different kind of being, more intelligent and noble. On the other hand, as a powerful and mysterious matter, it also awes man. Using the term from shamanic cultures – Dust is a kind of a spiritual power.

In the trilogy several possible ways of contacting Dust are mentioned – the alethiometer, Dr Malone’s computer (called Cave – see below), symbols of *I Ching*... Each of these devices, if asked, tells the truth, but it is very difficult to interpret correctly the answer. In Lyra’s world there is a special kind of scholars trained to translate alethiometer’s responses. In every case, the answer seems to have more than one meaning and even the most proficient scholars have difficulty to read properly the symbols on the device.

Lyra as a child was the only person who could read the alethiometer’s answers properly. As it is mentioned in the trilogy, the girl was neither an exceptionally smart nor diligent child, but it was her destiny to become the ‘second Eve’. She was the one whose aim was to bring the balance to the universe by reversing the flow of Dust particles out of the world. However, her destiny would not have been fulfilled without the help of the alethiometer (and Dust itself).

This concept seems to be very similar to the shamanic ones. Lyra was the one who was chosen by spiritual Dust to take the role of a mediator between the conscious matter and mankind – that is why she has a natural ability to interpret alethiometer properly in every case. Lyra was never able to contact Dust without the specific device. Without alethiometer she felt helpless, but she could use also other ways of communication, such as Dr Malone’s computer. The state in which she was able to understand the alethiometer’s answers was very specific – she needed to concentrate and fall into a trance. In this trance she communicated with Dust – in the same way shamans fall into a trance to enter the world of spirits. It can be said that the alethiometer – with all the complicated symbolism depicted on the disk – resembles a shamanic drum with a vision of the universe on its shield.

What is worth mentioning, the skull noticed by Lyra in the museum in London belonged to a ‘sorcerer’. He had a hole made in his skull in order to “let the gods into his head”<sup>29</sup>. The sorcerer lived in times when Dust began to be attracted to humans, and there were much more ‘shadows’ above his skull than above other ones. The similar hole was made in the head of Stanislaus Grumman (John Parry). He was a shaman, performing probably the same duties as the prehistoric sorcerer. The main role of both shamans in their societies was to communicate with Dust and the holes were drilled to make it easier.

Apart from the alethiometer, in Lyra’s world there are several other tools that can be controlled by a human mind, such as Will’s knife or an intention vehicle

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 81.



made by engineers in lord Asriel's fortress which requires the simultaneous control of a man and his daemon<sup>30</sup>. While the intention vehicle is just a technical contrivance, the subtle knife is an invention of a quite different sort. Although Will's knife is not actually dependent on Dust, it is – to a certain extent – intelligent and independent from his owner. As Iorek Byrisonn declares: "What you don't know is what the knife does on its own (...). The knife has intentions too"<sup>31</sup>. The subtle knife had chosen Will as its owner and marked him by cutting [off?] his two fingers. "The knife knows when to leave one hand and settle in another" – says Giacomo Paradisi<sup>32</sup>. This motif is similar to the process of becoming a shaman. To become a shaman, it is necessary to have some bodily defect which is the first indication that the person was chosen by spirits<sup>33</sup>.

The next person who plays a significant role in the story is Dr Mary Malone. She created two devices that enable making contact with Dust – a computer in her laboratory and the amber spyglass. The first device enables to communicate with shadows, whereas the second one – to see them. Even if she is not able to use the computer properly before Lyra showed her how to make contact with shadows, Mary is the second person in the trilogy that could communicate with Dust. It happens for the first time in her laboratory, and later through *I Ching*. Like Lyra, she is the chosen human, as shadows explain: "You must play the serpent"<sup>34</sup> (the tempter of the 'second Eve'). Mary also contacts Dust in a specific state of consciousness that can be described as a trance. In *The Amber Spyglass* we can read an interesting description of Mary Malone's trance, which is very similar to a shamanic flight:

The drift was mesmerizing. How easy it would be to fall into a trance, and let her mind drift away with the floating particles... (...) She suddenly snapped awake to find herself outside her body (...). She flung out her arms to seize hold of anything solid – but she had no arms. (...) [H]er body was further and further from reach, sleeping so hoggishly below her (...). The body slumbered on, and the self that observed was being borne away out of the canopy of leaves altogether and into the open sky. (...) [The particles of Dust] felt her anxiety, and (...) began to carry her back to her deserted body (...). And then she sank back into her body, and awoke<sup>35</sup>.

Lyra, Will and Dr Mary Malone enter the world of a different sort – the spiritual world of Dust (in case of Lyra and Mary) and the parallel universes (in case of Will) thanks to the help of their extraordinary devices as well as their unusual mental skills at communicating with these helpers. At the other extreme, we meet

<sup>30</sup> Cf. C. Scott, "Revamping Old Traditions in His Dark Materials," *His Dark Materials Illuminated...*, op.cit., p. 100.

<sup>31</sup> Ph. Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, op. cit., p. 190.

<sup>32</sup> Idem, *The Subtle Knife*, op.cit., p. 189.

<sup>33</sup> A. Szyjewski, *Szamanizm*, Kraków 2005, p. 47.

<sup>34</sup> Ph. Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*, op.cit., p. 261.

<sup>35</sup> Idem, *The Amber Spyglass*, op. cit., p. 384–386.



the character of Lord Asriel whose courage, curiosity, and determination connected with a large amount of money enables him to build the passage between the worlds and nearly reach the secret of Dust. As Anne-Marie Bird observes:

Asriel represents the new enlightened man, he is and intellectual and a pioneer; in fact, he appears to be “Mr. Modernity” himself, who, rather than being an upholder of tradition, believes that enlightenment can be achieved only by means of humanity’s own exertions<sup>36</sup>.

The role of Lord Asriel as the man who challenges the God Himself – and wins! – cannot be underestimated. He represents Satan from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*<sup>37</sup> and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*<sup>38</sup>. But both enlightened Lord Asriel and benighted Mrs Coulter are punished for their haughtiness and fell into the Abyss. Lord Asriel is not chosen by Dust and he is too ambitious to bring balance to the universe and to create the Republic of Heaven. But Lyra and Will intend to achieve this aim and they finally give priority to the benefit of the universe over their own happiness. Similarly, shamans are always conscious that even if their role in the society is pivotal, they are nothing more than a part of the universe in which they live.

#### JOHN PARRY – A SHAMAN

There is one character in the trilogy who is called a shaman – Will’s father, John Parry. John Parry is a mysterious figure, and even though a lot of information about him can be found in *His Dark Materials*, many aspects of his biography remain unclear. It provokes many additional questions and a variety of interpretations. Colonel Parry became a shaman after appearing in Lyra’s world and joining the Yenisei tribe. There he had his skull trepanned in order to make a hole through which the spirits could contact him. It makes stronger the argument about the similarity between Dust and spirits in shamanism. In addition, John Parry was very interested in Dust as a scientist at Berlin Academy. He passed through the process of his initiation behind the gate to another world. For the characters of the trilogy it was just a parallel universe, but for the Yenisei tribe it was the world of spirits.

John Parry has a lot of skills, not only shamanic ones. He can bring the storm like a magician, use herbs to heal wounds like a medicine-man, and even foretell future events like a clairvoyant. He is also known as Jopari or Stanislaus Grumman. The first of these names is just a Yenisei tribe’s mispronunciation of ‘John Parry’ what impedes the revelation that the shaman and Will’s father are the same person. The second name is, however, much more interesting. As we can read in the novel, John Parry changed his name to Stanislaus Grumman, because it seemed for him to be more natural in the new world. Grumman attended the Ber-

<sup>36</sup> A.-M. Bird, “Circumventing...,” op. cit., p. 188.

<sup>37</sup> Ch. Boffy, *Philip Pullman’s His Dark Materials: Paradise Lost and Found Again*, Université de Haute Alsace 2006, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> A.-M. Bird, loc. cit.

lin Academy and was known as German, but his name (Stanislaus) is actually of Slavic origin. Maybe this name is derived from the name of Stanislav Grof (born 1931), the famous Czech psychiatrist whose observations of human psyche are often used in modern explication of shamanism.

John Parry is not the only character with shamanic features in the trilogy. Besides aforementioned abilities of Lyra and Will, many shamanic features are characteristic to witches. Their daemons have always a form of birds, animals which are usually main helping spirits of shamans (John Parry's daemon also has a form of a bird – an osprey). Witches are also able to see the proper form of a daemon belonging to a person living in Will's world, even though it is hidden inside the human<sup>39</sup>. It could be compared to the ability of shaman – as Mircea Eliade observes: “The shaman is the great specialist in the human soul; he alone »sees« it, for he knows its »form« and its destiny”<sup>40</sup>.

One of the main abilities of the witches is that they can recede from their daemons for long distances. The same ability Lyra and Will acquired after their journey to the underworld, where they were forced to leave their daemons behind before entering the land of the dead. At the end of the story we learn that the witches' skill to recede from their daemons is not in fact an innate ability:

There's a region of our north-land, a desolate abominable place, where a great catastrophe happened in the childhood of the world, and where nothing has lived since. No daemons can enter it. To become a witch, a girl must cross it alone and leave her daemon behind. (...) [H]aving done it, they find that their daemons were not severed (...); they are still one whole being; but now they can roam free, and go to far places and see strange things and bring back knowledge<sup>41</sup>.

This rite seems to be a classic initiation during which a girl becomes a witch. In this description we can also find some similarities to the shamanic initiation, because the separation from a daemon could be treated as symbolical death (especially in a place “where nothing lives”). Lyra's initiation, prophesied by the witches, also took place just before entering the land of the dead. What is more, John Parry and other shamans have the same ability as witches, and it is very likely that their initiations have the same scenario as witches' ones.

One of the most amazing episodes in *The Subtle Knife* is also the shamanic flight of Lee Scoresby. In fact, it is Grumman who makes the flight, but Lee has a vision of it and feels as if he participated in it. In this vision, Lee is transformed into a bird that leads a flock of other birds against his and Parry's enemies. This vision is the magnificent literary example of the use of a strictly shamanic motif. It should be emphasised that the ability to take the form of a bird and fly in order to fight against malevolent spirits together with the possibility of bilocation are the distinctive features of shamans.

<sup>39</sup> Ph. Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, op. cit., p. 505.

<sup>40</sup> M. Eliade, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Ph. Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, op. cit., p. 500.

## LYRA’S DREAM IN A CAVE

The last volume of the trilogy opens with Lyra sleeping in a cave. It sounds like a beginning of a fairy-tale: “There is a Himalayan valley, very high up, near a glacier where the light is turned into rainbows by the ice. (...) The girl is captive in a cave among the trees, kept asleep by the woman.”<sup>42</sup> The only difference is that the woman is not a jealous witch, but equally cruel Mrs Coulter (Lyra’s mother), eventually touched by her maternal instinct. Aware of the fact that Lyra is being in danger, Marisa Coulter decides to hide her in distant Himalaya mountains, and drugs her to be sure that she would not escape.

By keeping the girl in a comatose state, her mother wishes to forestall Lyra’s fate as the second Eve<sup>43</sup>. But the motif of a cave where Lyra is kept recalls also the Plato’s Allegory of the Cave as the place in which people are deprived of knowledge and a chance to acquire it<sup>44</sup>. It means that Mrs Coulter, as an authoritarian parent and a religious fanatic, tries to keep the girl from knowledge, including knowledge of her own sexuality<sup>45</sup>. Lyra’s efforts to wake up (“I want to wake up first! I wouldn’t care if it was just for an hour, as long as I was properly alive and awake”<sup>46</sup>) symbolises the willing to achieve full consciousness about the nature of human and the world (including the mystery of Dust). This knowledge will help her to reach her destiny. Mrs Coulter represents an anachronistic world in which religion dominates over science; her surname puns on “culture”, indicating the culture built on religious conservatism and the rigid image of femininity<sup>47</sup>. As Susan Matthews remarks: “Pullman sets out to counter the force of a culture that tries to keep the children asleep”<sup>48</sup>. Awakened Lyra, the ‘second Eve’, symbolises the aware inhabitants of new world, the ‘Republic of Heaven’.

The deprivation of knowledge and the awakening to consciousness is not the only possible interpretation of this episode. The motif of sleeping girl is derived from the poems *The Little Girl Lost* and *The Little Girl Found* from *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* by William Blake. Blake’s work was credited by Pullman as one of the three key influences at the end of *The Amber Spyglass* and the first chapter begins with an epigraph from *The Little Girl Lost*. What is more, Lyra’s name sounds very similar to the name of Blake’s heroine – Lyca – what clearly indicates that the motif should be read in the light of Blake’s poetry<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> M. Lenz, “Introduction,” *His Dark Materials Illuminated...*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> See: Plato, *Republic*, 514a–520a.

<sup>45</sup> S. Matthews, “Rouzing the Faculties to Act: Pullman’s Blake for Children,” *His Dark Materials Illuminated...*, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>46</sup> Ph. Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, pp. 125, 127.

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 125.

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, pp. 125 ff.

The sleep of Lyca has been already interpreted as the vision of the fate of a human soul after death, the manifestation of the archetype of Kore/Persephone, or an initiation ritual<sup>50</sup>. In any case, the sleep of Blake's heroine in a cave is treated as the symbolic death, as it refers to the archetype of the cave. A cave is an ambivalent symbol; as a shelter it refers to mother's womb and therefore to rebirth, but as a dark, dangerous place leading to the depths of the earth it is also treated as the entrance to the land of the dead. Therefore caves are the universal places for initiation rituals (symbolic death and rebirth) where it is possible to meet spirits and deities. Probably for this reason Mary Malone makes contact with Dust by means of the computer called Cave.

The motif of a cave as the gate to the land of the dead appears in Blake's poem, but in Pullman's trilogy it is much more evident. Lyra, while sleeping in the cave, dreams about a boy called Roger who died in consequence of her and lord Asriel's fault. Being in a state between life and death ("I'm so afraid of sleeping all my life and then dying"<sup>51</sup>), the girl is able to make contact with her friend, what would not be possible in reality. Lyra is not sure if the vision of Roger is only a dream, as it seems to be real ("I don't know if this is real or not, even"<sup>52</sup>). But on the other hand, the girl has no doubt that the vision reflects her friend's actual condition. The motif of a deceased friend who returns in somebody's dream (or as a ghost) and depicts a lamentable vision of the life after death was quite popular in ancient literature. It can be found on the last table of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (on which the king of Uruk invokes the ghost of his friend Enkidu)<sup>53</sup> and in *The Iliad*, where the spirit of Patroclus appears in Achilles' dream<sup>54</sup>.

This motif is also similar to many shamanic visions. Becoming a shaman is never a result of a personal choice, but the spirits' vocation. In most cases this vocation is heard by a future shaman in his dream. The transition between a common member of society and the shaman requires difficult initiation during which the candidate must die and be reborn. One of the most common sites where the initiation can happen is a cave, as the place that symbolises death, the entrance to the underworld and the place where it is possible to encounter the spirits or gods<sup>55</sup>. Sometimes the dream in a cave lasts long, even many years, as it was in the case of famous Greek 'shaman', Epimenides of Cnossos<sup>56</sup>. Moreover, in the tradition of many tribes, the vision of the ghost of a deceased relative or ancestor is treated as a source of shamanic power.<sup>53</sup> In *His Dark Materials* it is the vision

<sup>50</sup> E.g. N. A. Greco, "Blake's »The Little Girl Lost«: An initiation into Womanhood," *Colby Quarterly* 19 (1983): 144–154.

<sup>51</sup> Ph. Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>52</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>53</sup> A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, New York 2003, pp. 773–774 (tablet XII – Bilgames and the Netherworld, 238–268).

<sup>54</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, 23.65–101.

<sup>55</sup> M. Eliade, op. cit., pp. 46 ff.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p. 389.

of dead Roger who urged Lyra to fulfil the most dangerous of all of her missions. Lyra, who suffers pangs of conscience, takes a journey to the land of the dead. In fact, in many shamanic stories, the descent to the underworld becomes the first act of the initiation process. A cave once again appears as a symbolic entrance to the underworld.

## THE DESCENT TO THE LAND OF THE DEAD

Lyra's descent to the underworld is one of the most intriguing moments in the trilogy. The motif of a living hero who takes a journey to the land of the dead is best known from the great poems of the past: Vergil's *Aeneid* or *Divine Comedy* by Alighieri. In both these poems, the journey of a hero is only a pretext to show the underworld and its inhabitants – mainly as a warning for contemporaries (*Divine Comedy*) or to demonstrate the fates of the characters of the story (*Aeneid*). The vision of the land of the dead in *His Dark Materials* is partly embedded in these literary prototypes, as can be seen from many ancient ideas in the episode. The ferryman from the trilogy guarding the deceased resembles Charon from *Aeneid*<sup>57</sup>, and the harpies also appeared in Virgil's poem<sup>58</sup>. What is more, the motif of the desire of the dead to touch a living body (and fascination by its blood), as well as the hero's inability to embrace the spirits, could be found in *Odyssey*<sup>59</sup>. In *Odyssey* there is also a character of a clairvoyant Teiresias who tells the hero about his future<sup>60</sup>, as does John Parry in *His Dark Materials*. Last but not least, in the lamentable vision of the underworld presented in the trilogy, there is neither punishment for sins nor reward for good deeds. It is the idea which was known in the earliest Greek beliefs and can be found in some fragments of *Odyssey*<sup>61</sup>.

The ancient Greek and Roman ideas on the underworld are commonly understood as the elements of European tradition and it is probably the main reason why Pullman decided to create his land of the dead similar to the ancient ones. Lyra's journey was also – as in the case of *Aeneid* or *Divine Comedy* – a pretext to show the fate of the inhabitants of the underworld. This lamentable vision aims to make the reader think – what will happen if the 'Authority' is not the merciful God, but an impostor tyrant? But the ancient myths about the descent to the underworld do not only show the fate of the deceased. The vast majority of ancient stories about a journey to the land of the dead were created to show the extraordinary capabilities of the hero who was able to descent to hell and return. The story of Heracles stealing Cerberus or the Mesopotamian myth about the goddess

<sup>57</sup> Vergil, *Aeneid*, 6.298 ff.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, 3.215 ff.

<sup>59</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.206–208.

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, 11.90 ff.

<sup>61</sup> The most significant is the motif of a miserable existence of Achilles (ibidem, 11.465 ff.) and Heracles (ibidem, 11.601 ff.). The information about Heracles' happiness in Olympus seems to be a later interpolation. Also the idea of Fortunate Isles belongs to the later beliefs.

Inanna are the classical examples of this action. On the other hand, in ancient literature we can also find some examples of an unsuccessful mission. Among them the best known is the tragic myth of Orpheus and Euridice.

We should notice some similarities between the stories of Orpheus and Lyra. The girl seeks her best friend and the Thracian musician looks for his beloved wife. Orpheus softens the hearts of Hades and infernal monsters with his ravishing music, while Lyra manage to enchant the harpies with storytelling. It is commonly believed that the myth of Orpheus is a genuine concept of ancient Greeks. But a nearly identical story can be found also in the legends of American Indians<sup>62</sup>. In fact, the story of Orpheus is the most shamanic story of all Greek myths<sup>63</sup>.

A journey to hell is one of the main motifs in shamanic legends. In order to heal a person, shamans used to go to the underworld and bring back his or her soul, stolen by malevolent spirits. On his way to hell, shaman has to bribe the guardians of the underworld (mostly dogs) and the ruler of hell himself. After the successful mission, shaman ascends from hell on a bird<sup>64</sup>. These motifs from a shamanic descent to hell are very similar to the elements of Lyra's journey. The girl seeks the spirit of her friend, bribes harpies by telling gripping stories and, finally, she climbs with all the spirits above the ground. Moreover, in many cases it is an animal who guide a shaman in his journey to the underworld<sup>65</sup>, as in *The Amber Spyglass* dragonflies lighten the way for Lyra, Will, Lady Salmakia and Chevalier Tialys. Some shamanic elements could be also found in Pullman's idea of death. In *His Dark Materials* death is perceived as a personified spirit who serves as the psychopomp (it escorts the newly deceased to the afterlife). In many cultures it was the shaman who fulfilled the role of the psychopomp<sup>66</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

In *His Dark Materials* there are many themes that are shamanic or similar to the shamanic ones. Philip Pullman seems to be acquainted with the phenomenon of shamanism, as his construction of the character of John Parry or depicting the 'shamanic flight' of Lee Scoresby are very accurate. In these themes the shamanic motifs are undoubtedly used deliberately and knowingly. Nevertheless, it is questionable if Pullman consciously refers to shamanism in such motifs as daemons, Lyra's dream in a cave or her descent to the underworld. The idea of Dust and the alethiometer as a kind of drum seem to be similar to shamanic concept only accidentally.

However, the analysis of the similarity between motifs from *His Dark Materials* and shamanism allows to draw two main conclusions. Firstly, the shamanic motifs are still vivid in our culture. It is because shamanism is the source of com-

<sup>62</sup> M. Eliade, op. cit., p. 306.

<sup>63</sup> E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley 2004, p. 147.

<sup>64</sup> M. Eliade, op. cit., pp. 200 ff.

<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, pp. 38 ff.

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, pp. 205 ff; M. Hoppál, *Szamani Eurazjatyccy*, op. cit., p. 36.

monly known motifs present in folk tales and ancient literature. We are familiar with them and therefore we can easily understand their meaning. In the books written for children – such as *His Dark Materials* – shamanic motifs appear along with the genuine concept of the author. It makes the young readers (but adults as well!) feel safe in the fantasy world built on the motifs well-known from many other stories and legends.

Secondly, the stories shown in *Northern Lights*, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass* are embedded in many archetypal motifs. Some of them are similar to shamanic ones (such as the cave, the descent to the underworld or animals as helpful spirits), whereas others seem to be independent. *His Dark Materials* refers to Judaeo-Christian tradition and the works of great English writers, but not only to them. The story is multithreaded and multilayered, the effect that not only adds colours to the fable, but also enables the story to be interpreted in various ways. I hope that article will encourage other scholars to interpret Pullman's trilogy not only as a polemic with Christianity or a comparison to the great English writers, but also as the fascinating work full of other conceptions including those of shamanic character.

## ABSTRACT

### Shamanic elements in „His Dark Materials” by Philip Pullman

The purpose of this paper is to analyze five themes of the trilogy *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman in the light of their similarity to shamanic motifs. Firstly, I focus on the idea of daemons as similar to the shamanic concept of the helpful spirits that have the form of animals. Secondly, I describe Pullman's idea of Dust as a kind of spiritual concept and I present Lyra as the mediator who communicates with Dust by means of her alethiometer which resembles a shamanic drum. Thirdly, I show the character of John Parry, the only shaman in the novels, and some other characters who have similar skills. Fourthly, I analyze Lyra's dream in a cave as an initiation rite and the introduction to the motif of the descent to the underworld. This descent is the last motif I focus on, and the most similar to the shamanic ones. In conclusion, I try to explain why the shamanic motifs are used in the trilogy and why they are still vivid in modern culture.



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