

TITLE:

Greek and Roman Elements in *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman

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ABSTRACT:

The article focuses on the topic of Greek and Roman influences on *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman. The author presents the ancient origins of several motifs of the trilogy, for example compares the daemon from *His Dark Materials* to the ancient *daimon*, Lyra's dream in a cave to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the Pullman's vision of the Underworld to Greek Hades, and the Subtle Knife to the golden bough. She also tries to understand the function of the Greek and Roman elements in the trilogy. Finally, the author ponders if the vision of ancient culture in *His Dark Materials* can influence its reception in the future.

KEYWORDS:

His Dark Materials, Philip Pullman, Greek and Roman influences, daemon, Allegory of the Cave, Underworld, Hades, harpies, Lyra, Orpheus, Subtle Knife, golden bough

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Greek and Roman Elements in *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman

Philip Pullman is nowadays one of the best known English fantasy writers. The monumental trilogy he authored, *His Dark Materials*, gained popularity not only among teenagers (to whom it was primarily directed) but it also attracted numerous adult readers. The novel owes its success to the intriguing plot and several skillfully interwoven references to the literary masterpieces of the past. The story presented in *His Dark Materials* is based on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as well as William Blake's poems, and several fragments of the Bible. The intertextuality of Pullman's trilogy is an excellent material for researchers and it has already been the subject of many studies. But besides the references to English literature and the Bible in the works of Pullman, much less known phenomena, like shamanism¹ or gnosticism², are mentioned there. In the trilogy, there are also several references to Greek and Roman literature. While references to the Judaeo-Christian tradition are easy to explain (as *His Dark Materials* is strongly anti-Christian), Pullman's references to classical literature and myth are a much more complex problem. The aim of this article is to present the elements of the trilogy that are similar to ancient mythology or ideas taken directly from Greek and Roman literature³. The main purpose of this paper is to indicate the role these elements play in *His Dark Materials* and how they may weigh on the further reception of the Greek mythology.

The Greek and Roman influences, albeit less emphasized than the Judaeo-Christian ones, can be found in many elements of the trilogy. We can note them in the very lan-

¹ See K. Kleczkowska, *Shamanic elements in "His Dark Materials" by Philip Pullman* [in:] *Literatura na granicach*, ed. K. Kuchowicz et al., Kraków 2015, pp. 34–46.

² E.g. Z. Tóth, *Gnostic Spiritual Heritage in Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials Fantasy Trilogy*, "University of Bucharest Review" 2013, vol. 3, pp. 172–181.

³ The study on this topic have been so far carried out only by Owen Hodkinson ("*His Greek Materials*": *Philip Pullman's Use of Classical Mythology* [in:] *Our Mythical Childhood: Classics and Children's Literature Between East and West*, ed. K. Marciniak, [in press]).

guage of *His Dark Materials*, for example in the Homeric-style similes in the scene of fighting bears in *The Northern Lights*⁴. There are also several words in the trilogy derived from Greek. One of the most evident examples is the alethiometer, a compass-like device that, when asked, always says the truth. Its name is derived from Greek word *aletheia* which means ‘the truth’. Another important example is the word *daemon*, which refers in the trilogy to the human soul manifesting itself outside the body in an animal form.

The term *daemon* is derived from Greek *daimon*, a word that appeared for the first time in Homer and means there ‘deity’ and ‘divine power’⁵. In Hesiod we can find another meaning of the term: in *Work and Days* *daimones* were presented as guardian deities, souls of the virtuous people of the Golden Age who guard subsequent generations⁶. According to Plato, this story should be read more figuratively and the name ‘daimon’ can be related to every wise and virtuous man, not necessarily living in the Golden Age. He explains also the etymology of the word. He claims that the term ‘daimon’ is derived from ‘daemon’ which means ‘knowing’⁷. What is interesting, both main features of ancient *daimon* – a guardian and a wise adviser – can be seen in Pullman’s conception of daemon. As Serafina Pekkala says in *The Amber Spyglass*, daemons exist to help people, “guide them and encourage them towards wisdom”⁸.

Apuleius, a Roman writer, in *On the God of Socrates* suggested that there were two kinds of daemons. He claimed that a human soul (situated in the body) was sometimes called a daemon. This sort of daemons can be compared to the Roman *genius*, an immortal soul accompanying human from the birth⁹. But Apuleius maintained that there was also another kind of daemons, far more superior in dignity. This type of being is a peculiar daemon assigned to every man to accompany him through his whole life (and even after death) and to be his guardian, adviser, and assistant in need. The daemon recognized and worshiped by Socrates belongs to this category¹⁰. The philosopher used to hear the voice that advised him what to do¹¹. It should be noted that Socrates did not see his adviser whereas the Pythagoreans claimed they could see their daemons and they were surprised that other people were deprived of such abilities¹².

The daemon shown as a personal companion, adviser and guardian is very similar to the conception depicted by Pullman¹³. However, in *His Dark Materials* one more

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ E.g. Homer, *Iliad*, 1.222 (‘deity’), 17.98 (‘divine power’).

⁶ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 117–124; 252–254.

⁷ Plato, *Cratylus*, 398b–c. More probable root of *daimōn* is *daiō* – ‘to distribute destinies’. Cf. “*daimōn*,” H. G. Lidell, R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford 1940.

⁸ P. Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, London 2001, p. 500.

⁹ Apuleius, *On the God of Socrates*, 15.150 ff.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 16.155 ff.

¹¹ Xenophon, *Works on Socrates*, 12. However, according to Plato, the daemon only dissuaded Socrates what not to do, but never urged him forward (*Apology*, 31d).

¹² Apuleius, *On the God of Socrates*, 20.167.

¹³ To read more about the comparison between the ancient conception of daemons and the one of Pullman, see: K. Kleczkowska, *Wewnętrzny głos czy zewnętrzna dusza? Antyczna koncepcja daimones*

feature of daemons is significant. Every daemon takes on the form of an animal which best reflects the owner's nature. Pullman himself stated that his main inspiration for the idea of daemons were the paintings: *The Lady with the Ermine* by Leonardo da Vinci, *A Lady and a Squirrel* by Hans Holbein the Younger, and *Young Woman with a Macaw* by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. The author saw in them a deep psychological bond between the depicted person and animal¹⁴. However, the notion of the strong connection between animal and human can be also found in stories and beliefs of several cultures, especially in such religious phenomena as shamanism, nagualism, tonalism, animism, totemism, and lycanthropy¹⁵.

The evident reference to Greek literature emerges in *The Subtle Knife* when Dr. Mary Malone explains to Lyra how her computer works. Dr. Malone's computer, named Cave, is used to contact with Dust, in Mary's world called Shadows. "Shadows on the walls of the Cave, you see, from Plato"¹⁶ explained Dr. Malone. It refers clearly the fragment of *Republic* in which Plato described how people perceive an illusion as the reality on the example of the shadows of real things seen on a wall of the cave¹⁷.

However, it is not the only reference to Plato's Cave in the trilogy. Much more spectacular allusion can be found in *The Amber Spyglass*. The book opens with Lyra sleeping in a Himalayan cave guarded by her cruel mother, Mrs. Coulter, who drugged Lyra to be sure that the girl would not escape. Mrs. Coulter is a religious fanatic who represents an anachronistic world in which religion dominates over science. She tries to forestall Lyra's fate as the second Eve but keeping the girl in a comatose state means also, symbolically, depriving her of knowledge¹⁸. Lyra in the power of her mother resembles people from Plato's Allegory unable to distinguish the truth from the illusion ("I don't know if this is real or not, even"¹⁹, she talks sleeping). With the help of Will, the girl wakes up, what eventually allows her to obtain knowledge about the nature of the world (especially Dust, or 'Shadows'), as philosophers from Plato's Allegory.

The motif of the cave is important not only as a reference to Plato. A cave, treated as a figurative gate to the Underworld, is one of the most common sites where the symbolic initiation can happen. This tradition can be found in a Greek legend about Epimenides of Cnossos who had slept in a cave for many years before he became a famous Greek 'shaman'²⁰. In Pullman's version, Lyra is dreaming (in the cave) about Roger who describes his deplorable condition and it encourages Lyra to go to the

a dajmony z Mrocznych Materii Philipa Pullmana, "Nowy Filomata" 2012, vol. 16, pp. 203–218.

¹⁴ R. Butler, *Philip Pullman's Dark Arts*, "Intelligent Life," Dec. 2007.

¹⁵ See K. Kleczkowska, *Shamanic elements...*, op. cit., pp. 34 f.

¹⁶ P. Pullman, *The Subtle Knife*, London 1998, p. 92.

¹⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 514a–520a.

¹⁸ S. Matthews, *Rouzing the Faculties to Act: Pullman's Blake for Children* [in:] *His Dark Materials Illuminated: Critical Essays on Philip Pullman's Trilogy*, ed. M. Lenz, C. Scott, Detroit 2005, p. 127.

¹⁹ P. Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*, op. cit., p. 56.

²⁰ E. Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and the Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks*, trans. W. B. Hillis, Abingdon 2000, p. 301.

Land of the Dead. The motif of a dead friend who returns in a dream or emerges as a ghost to depict a pessimistic vision of the afterlife is well-known in ancient literature. One of the most famous examples is the last tablet of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* on which the king of Uruk invokes the ghost of his deceased friend Enkidu²¹. A similar idea can be found in *Iliad* when the spirit of Patroclus appears in Achilles' dream. "Even in the house of Hades is the spirit and phantom somewhat, albeit the mind be not anywise therein" – says Achilles – "for the whole night long hath the spirit of hapless Patroclus stood over me, weeping and wailing, and gave me charge concerning each thing, and was wondrously like his very self"²². Ancients believed that dreams about the deceased people were a proof of the existence of the afterlife²³. The same notion is present in *The Amber Spyglass*, as the girl had no doubt that the vision in her dream reflects the actual condition of Roger and therefore decides to free his friend from the horrible Underworld.

The idea of the Underworld in *His Dark Materials* is the most striking example of Greek and Roman influences on the trilogy. The Land of the Dead in *The Amber Spyglass* is in fact Hades, even if its name does not occur in the book. It should be mentioned that for most people from the world described by Pullman, getting to the Underworld, since they believed in Christian Heaven, is an unpleasant surprise. The Authority, the first and highest angel in the trilogy, is in fact Christian God, and the Magisterium is an equivalence of the Church. But the afterlife, promised to be Christian Heaven, turns out to be a gloomy Hades from long forgotten Greek myths.

In the Underworld from *His Dark Materials* there is neither punishment for sins nor reward for good deeds. This idea, originated from the ancient Mesopotamia, can be noticed in the earliest Greek beliefs and some remnants of it can be found in *Odyssey* in the fragment in which Achilles²⁴ and Heracles²⁵ complain about their miserable status in the Land of the Dead despite their achievements in the former lives. In *Odyssey* we meet also another element of Pullman's conception of the Underworld. The hero cannot touch his mother because she is a spirit²⁶. In the trilogy the dead wanted to touch a living body (Lyra) but the girl was unable to embrace the spirits. In *Odyssey* the author introduced the character of a clairvoyant Teiresias who was in Hades and revealed Odysseus' future²⁷, as did John Parry for Lyra in Pullman's Underworld. Also the character of a ferryman who transported Lyra and her friends to the Land of the Dead resembles Charon from *Aeneid* by Virgil²⁸.

²¹ A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts*, New York 2003, pp. 773–774 (tablet XII – *Bilgames and the Netberworld*, 238–268).

²² Homer, *Iliad*, 23.103 ff.

²³ E. Rohde, op. cit., p. 7.

²⁴ Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.465 ff.

²⁵ Ibidem, 11.601 ff.

²⁶ Ibidem, 11.206-208.

²⁷ Ibidem, 11.90 f.

²⁸ Vergil, *Aeneid*, 6.298 ff.

A theme of the descent to the Underworld is common in ancient myths. It has two different functions: to show the reality of the Underworld (as in the case of Odysseus' descent in *Odyssey*) and to show the extraordinary capabilities of a hero who was able to descend to hell and return (as for example Heracles). Among these stories, the most intriguing is the myth of Orpheus and Euridice, one of the very few examples of an unsuccessful quest. Although Lyra's quest eventually goes successfully, her journey to the Underworld resembles the myth of Orpheus more than any other ancient story. As Owen Hodkinson observes, the girl's name refers to the myth of the Thracian musician, as it resembles lyre used by Orpheus²⁹. Moreover, the girl decides to descend to the Underworld to free her best friend; the Thracian musician did the same for his beloved wife. Orpheus softened the hearts of infernal monsters with his ravishing music³⁰ while Lyra enchants the harpies with storytelling. Even the scene of calling Roger in the Underworld resembles the fragment of *Metamorphoses* in which Eurydice is called³¹. At one point, while ascending out of the Underworld, the girl looks behind her and slips. She doesn't fall only because of the help of one of the harpies. This fragment evidently refers to the element of the Orpheus' myth³² in which the musician looked back at his wife and then lost her forever³³. It is also worth mentioning that both the Greek myth of Orpheus and the story of Lyra resemble the shamanic legends about descent to the Underworld known from many cultures around the world³⁴.

Probably the most surprising element of the Pullman's construction of the Underworld are the harpies. As other elements of the Land of the Dead in *His Dark Materials*, they come from Greek mythology but their role in the trilogy is much more significant than in Greek literature. In fact, there is no direct relationship between harpies and the Underworld in extant Greek writings. Their name means 'snatchers' and in many myths they snatch away food³⁵. However, in *Odyssey* they were believed to kidnap people as well, they were blamed especially if a person disappeared without any tidings³⁶. In one of such stories³⁷ harpies gave the kidnapped to the deities of vengeance, Erinyes. In *Aeneid*, Erinyes were described as the most terrible inhabitants of the hell³⁸. In that way, a harpy was a kind of a *psychopomp* who led a man to the Underworld. The effigies of harpies were often put on graves what

²⁹ O. Hodkinson, op. cit.. The name 'Lyra' resembles not only the instrument, but also Lyca, the name of the heroine from *The Little Girl Lost* and *The Little Girl Found* from *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* by William Blake (see: S. Matthews, op. cit., p. 125 ff.). The girl, as Lyra, is sleeping in a cave. The motif is mostly interpreted as a symbolic death.

³⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.40 ff.

³¹ Ibidem, 10.48.

³² Cf. O. Hodkinson, op. cit.

³³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10.56 ff.

³⁴ See K. Kleczkowska, *Shamanic elements...*, op. cit., p. 43.

³⁵ E.g. Virgil, *Aeneid*, 3.209 ff.

³⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.241, 14.371.

³⁷ Ibidem, 20.77–78.

³⁸ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 7.324 ff.

confirms that these beings were perceived also as ‘snatchers’ of human souls. But the only mention of them inhabiting the Underworld in the ancient literature is *Aeneid*³⁹. In this excerpt, however, they are mentioned together with numerous other mythological monsters such as Chimera or Gorgons. In fact, the idea of the direct connection between harpies and the Underworld can be found in much later epoch, in the most famous literary reference to *Aeneid*. Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* established the idea of harpies as inhabitants and cruel guardians of hell⁴⁰. Therefore they appear also in Pullman’s Underworld even if the trilogy was less influenced by Dante’s vision than Homer’s or Virgil’s⁴¹.

In *Aeneid*, like in *The Amber Spyglass*, the harpies are described as repulsive woman-like monsters: “birds seem they, but with face like woman-kind; foul-flowing bellies, hands with crooked claws, and ghastly lips they have, with hunger pale”⁴². However, in the earliest sources, harpies were not ugly at all. As we can read in Hesiod: “long-haired harpies (...) on their swift wings keep pace with the blasts of the winds and the birds”⁴³. In *His Dark Materials* the winged, repulsive harpies may be interpreted as angels seen in a distorting mirror, as the Underground is a false Heaven. Their ability to find the worst and most shameful moments of the former life of ghosts is probably a play with the Christian conception of sin, with all its additional elements such as confession and purgatory. However, the idea is not distant from Greek mythology. In *Aeneid*, a harpy called Celaeno proved her prophetic abilities and foretold Aeneas’ crew their future what made them frightened and discouraged⁴⁴. It is also worth mentioning that the fragment in which Lyra makes harpies hear ghosts’ stories about their previous lives is one of the most clear examples of Pullman’s fondness to storytelling which he owes to Greek culture, mostly Homer⁴⁵.

In the trilogy we can find one more possible reference to the *Aeneid*. In *Aeneid*, the hero was encouraged by Sibyl to pluck the golden bough from a tree devoted to Proserpine in order to get to the Underworld⁴⁶. When the hero showed the picked bough to Charon, the ferryman invited him to his boat with respect⁴⁷. As Frazer writes in his monumental work *The Golden Bough*, Aeneas armed with the golden bough “might boldly confront the dreadful spectres that would cross his path on his adventurous journey”⁴⁸. Frazer suggests that the ‘golden bough’ may be treated as an ‘open Sesame’ in the hands of Aeneas to unlock all gates, including the gates

³⁹ Ibidem, 6.289.

⁴⁰ Dante, *Divine Comedy*, 13.10–15, 101–102.

⁴¹ O. Hodkinson, op. cit.

⁴² Virgil, *Aeneid*, 3.221–223, trans. T. C. Williams.

⁴³ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 267–268, trans. H. G. Evelyn-White.

⁴⁴ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 3.243.

⁴⁵ See O. Hodkinson, op. cit.

⁴⁶ Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.140 ff.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, 6.401 ff.

⁴⁸ F. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 68 [on-line:] <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/frazer/gb06800.htm> [20.07.2015].

of death⁴⁹. In the first chapter of his book, Frazer describes a peculiar ritual that the ancients linked with the legend about Aeneas and his mysterious branch⁵⁰. In Nemi, there was a sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis where a priest was chosen in a strange way: he had to pluck the bough from a sacred tree of Diana and then slay his predecessor. After this ritual, he became a new King of the Wood and received the inviolability and protection.

All these traditions are similar to Pullman's conception of the Subtle Knife. The Subtle Knife can open the door between the worlds (also a gate to the suburbs of the Underworld) and it has a unique ability to deter the Spectres. What is more, the knife has only one owner – if this tool chooses someone as its new bearer, the former guardian must die. Although the knife was invented by the researchers, it has a power of spiritual and magical nature. The other name of this tool, *Asahættr* ('God-Destroyer'), suggests also its religious significance. Therefore the bearer of the knife is a kind of priest who resides in the Tower of the Angels and guards the priceless knife.

To sum up, in *His Dark Materials* there are several elements derived from Greek and Roman tradition. Most of them refer directly to the ancient works, but several (for example harpies as guardians of the Underworld) come from later literature, partially based on Greek mythology. There are also some elements of *His Dark Materials* that refer to the Greek culture but presented in a new way, as for instance the motif of daemons. The variety of these elements raises the question about their meaning and function in the whole trilogy.

The Greek and Roman works belong to the masterpieces of literature. Philip Pullman, an English teacher, not only was familiar with the classical literature but he also wanted his students to share that knowledge. The references to ancient literature can undoubtedly popularize the ancient works among children and teenagers, as – interested in the stories presented in the books – they may willingly read the works of Homer or Virgil. On the other hand, the classical mythology is also the source of commonly recognizable themes. When analyzing Pullman's references to the antiquity, it should be remembered that sometimes he intentionally used motifs easy to understand for a common reader. There is also one more reason why Pullman referred to the ancient literature, especially in his vision of the Underworld. The ancient mythology is an alternative vision to Judaeo-Christian one. As Pullman is strongly opposed to Christianity, by the references to antiquity he encourages to put the dogmas into question. He recalls the deposed myth of Hades and compares it to the Christian one: if the first one is false, why the second is accepted with full confidence? And what will happen if the Authority is actually as cruel as ancient gods were believed to be?

The last question that should be asked: can Pullman's references to the classical literature influence the further reception of the antiquity? It seems that besides the popularization of ancient mythology, *His Dark Materials* cannot weigh on the teenagers' perception of ancient literature and culture. But some phenomena that can be found in popular culture and in the world of the Internet simply deny this

⁴⁹ Ibidem.

⁵⁰ Ibidem, 1 ff. [on-line:] <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/frazer/gb00101.htm> [20.07.2015].

assumption. One of the clearest examples is the phenomenon of daemonism that gains popularity among teenagers. It is a belief that each person has his own daemon⁵¹. The popularity of this phenomenon shows that the trilogy's vision of ancient motifs can be subsequently transformed by the readers. As Pullman based his version of the original sin mostly on Milton, and his description of the Underworld on Dante, maybe the works of future writers interpreting Greek and Roman mythology will be based on Pullman's vision?

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⁵¹ See K. Kleczkowska, *Dajmonizm – czyli poznaj samego siebie. Zjawisko dajmonizmu w polskim Internecie a koncepcja dajmona w trylogii Mroczne materie Philipa Pullmana*, *Periodyk Młodych Religioznawców „Ex Nihilo”* 2014, vol. 12, pp. 111 ff.

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Summary

Greek and Roman Elements in *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman

The article focuses on the topic of Greek and Roman influences on *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman. The author presents the ancient origins of several motifs of the trilogy, for example compares the daemon from *His Dark Materials* to the ancient *daimon*, Lyra's dream in a cave to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the Pullman's vision of the Underworld to Greek Hades, and the Subtle Knife to the golden bough. She also tries to understand the function of the Greek and Roman elements in the trilogy. Finally, the author ponders if the vision of ancient culture in *His Dark Materials* can influence its reception in the future.