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## **The God-Gaze & Dust: Different Concepts of Knowledge of Nature in His Dark Materials**

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The God-Gaze & Dust: Different Concepts of Knowledge of Nature in *His Dark Materials*

Master thesis

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## Introduction

“‘What is Dust?’ ‘It comes from the sky. Some say it has always been there, some say it is newly falling. What is certain is that when people become aware of it, a great fear comes over them, and they’ll stop at nothing to discover what it is.’” (Pullman 160). In this discussion between the characters Kaisa and Farder Coram in the middle part of the first volume of *His Dark Materials* (2000) by Philip Pullman, they reflect on the mysterious phenomenon of Dust. Dust is one of the real enigma’s in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*. That is why this master thesis will focus upon this elusive concept. It will investigate this phenomenon within the trilogy. The thesis statement is that the three different attitudes towards Dust of Lyra, Will and another important researcher in the novel, Mary Malone on the one hand, and Lord Asriel and the Church on the other can be equated with different attitudes towards new knowledge about nature in history. In short, this thesis holds that there are three main attitudes towards Dust. The first one is the one propagated by the Church institutions in *His Dark Materials*. They believe that Dust is something unknown, and the Church believes that such unknown categories must be destroyed immediately since they fear everything unknown in the world. The second attitude towards Dust is that of Lord Asriel, whose attitude towards Dust coincides with the thinking of the Enlightenment, since he wants to instrumentalize it for his own ends of bringing down the Authority (the personification of God in *His Dark Materials*). The first two attitudes will be analysed with the help of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s theory of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. They will be linked to the two main theses of this work: “myth is already enlightenment” and “enlightenment reverts back to mythology” (Horkheimer & Adorno xviii). The third attitude, the one that will be analysed through the lens of Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented Ontology, a discipline that stresses the existence and agency of nonhuman objects, is the one

of Lyra, Will and Mary Malone. They approach Dust with a sense of curiosity and wonder and believe it has an agency of its own.

Various researchers have already written about the trilogy of *His Dark Materials*, of which the last volume *The Amber Spyglass* was published in 2000. One topic that comes to the fore often is Pullman's reworking of the Christian faith in his retelling of the Fall of Man. Oliver (295) believes that *His Dark Materials* belongs to a group of carnivalesque texts: texts that deal with "parodies, profanities, comic crownings and uncrownings" and so also the parody of Christianity. He holds that Pullman's parody of the Christian faith brings forth a positive response in the reader that includes alternative readings that do not have to be atheistic. Furthermore, Oliver declares that the figure of God, in this case called the Authority, is undermined in Pullman's text. This is because the Authority is represented with a frail and weak physical body and is immediately at the mercy of Lyra and Will when they encounter him (Oliver 296). Oliver is not the only researcher that has considered Pullman's subversion of the Christian faith. Padley also states that it is Pullman's intention to attack the Christian faith and he also emphasizes that the Authority is nothing like the Christian God. However, in his case, he finds that the Authority is more akin to the devil of the Christian faith than to a God (Padley 328). What is more, a stark difference between our God and the one in *His Dark Materials* is that the one in the trilogy has a body. This interferes with our Christian faith that God is a spirit and stands above the rest. This is not the case with the Authority in the world of *His Dark Materials*; Padley states that he is "devoid of omniscience" (Padley 330). This is not the only way in which *His Dark Materials* subverts the Christian religion. It insists that good and evil, and spirit and body can coexist at the same time, as Bird contends (118). This is in contrast with the Christian belief that everything sensual with the body is sinful and everything spiritual positive. One of the most important themes of the trilogy is that it makes people human when they have a body as opposed to angels who consist only of spiritual

essence. This theme is relevant for this thesis since it foregrounds the frailty of the Authority already, something that will later be shown in this thesis as well.

Another theme of *His Dark Materials* that researchers have explored is Dust, which is a central concern in this thesis. Dust is seen as the bridge between spirit and matter and every kind of matter that has become conscious of itself consists of Dust. This is why Satan, in the story of the Fall of Man by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, is also completely comprised of Dust. Dust in this case begins the process of changing from potentiality to actuality (Bird 121). In *His Dark Materials*, everybody has a daemon, which is an animal that people carry with them who is an extension of a person's soul. Children's daemons change their form still while those of adults take on one single form. This is because children are not yet conscious of themselves. Colás, just like Bird, also notes that Dust is a bridge between spirit and matter (47). They show that when matter begins to understand itself, Dust is born. Dust is, furthermore, in that regard self-sufficient for it creates itself over and over when matter becomes conscious of itself. However, the Church sees it as being the root cause of original sin to come into the world (Sadri 208). Sadri's scholarly focus is on the apocalyptic boon and the monomyth as a way of telling a story. He holds that the Fall of Man is the first boon for everyone in the world. The first leap from home into an unknown world in the traditional monomyth narrative is here replaced by the move from the garden of Eden, living in innocence, to the knowledge in the outside world. So the first monomythical story is that of Eve, and Lyra's fall is then the equivalent of that story in *His Dark Materials*. This thesis is situated between all these articles and adds to their research by investigating the connection between Dust and the way that certain sets of characters in the novels have reacted to this new phenomenon. It will be argued that their different reactions correspond to three different historical stances towards new knowledge about nature.

*His Dark Materials* was published as three separate volumes. *Northern Lights* was published in 1995 in the United Kingdom, and under the name *The Golden Compass* in the United States (Watkins 15). The second volume *The Subtle Knife* was published just two years after, and in 2000, the third volume *The Amber Spyglass* followed. The books were well-received. More than seven million copies in thirty-seven languages were sold (Watkins 16). The trilogy has also been adapted into an HBO series, and there has been made a film titled *The Golden Compass*, based upon the first volume. The books are fantasy novels initially set in a fantastical version of Oxford. They are mostly written for children, but they are also suited for adults. Since they are fantasy novels primarily written for children, they are historically not seen as serious literature. However, this thesis will show that one can also critically engage with such novels.

First of all, it is important to start with a brief summary of what the novels are about and what kinds of novels they are. *His Dark Materials* invites the reader into the world of the already mentioned main protagonist, Lyra Belacqua, who in the first volume called *Northern Lights* goes on a grand adventure to the North together with her, later to be found out, mother Mrs Coulter. At first, Lyra gets told by Mrs Coulter that the main threat to the world are the mysterious particles called Dust. Soon, she finds out that Mrs Coulter is not to be trusted because she is behind the disappearance of children in Oxford, including her friend Roger (Moruzi 56). At the end of the novels, this prior small adventure to go save the missing children has grown into a massive scale exploration of the world and a rescue mission to save the world. On their way, Lyra and a new person who is introduced in *The Subtle Knife*, Will Parry, come across a knife that can cut between different dimensions. When Lyra and her companions such as Will Parry and Mary Malone find out that Dust particles are leaking through the windows between parallel universes, her initially small quest and her small world becomes bigger as she (and Will both) reach(es) the cusp of adulthood within the last pages of

the third book called *The Amber Spyglass* (Moruzi 55). All the while, the Church of the world in which Lyra has grown up, believes it is her fate to be the Eve figure of humanity, creating a sense of tension around her persona. At the end, she and Will discover that they are in love with one another and their reunion symbolizes the Fall of Man. However, they need to leave each other behind in the end since all the windows to the different worlds need to be closed, including the one between Will's world and hers. Their worlds are vastly different. The world of Will represents our world from around the 2000s, while Lyra's world is a fantastical version of Oxford. The biggest difference between Lyra's world and our own are those little animal companions called *daemons* that have been mentioned earlier. Apart from those two worlds, *His Dark Materials* creates multiple others to create a feeling that there are several thousands of worlds that all play out differently because of individual choices. In the end, after a whole adventure that even guides them through the world of the dead, the children save the day by closing all the windows to these different worlds, stopping Dust from leaking out through the cracks between the windows.

The structure of this thesis will be as follows: firstly, the two groups of thinkers that together compose the theoretical framework will be elaborated upon to make the most important concepts and ideas clear. Next, a literary analysis will be performed of *His Dark Materials*, close reading being the primary method to analyse the text. This will be done with the philosophies of the theoretical framework in mind to tackle the question to what extent the debate about Dust reflects the different ways in which history has responded to the advent of new knowledge about nature. This literary analysis part will be split into two chapters. Chapter one will explore how the Church's perception and Lord Asriel's perception about Dust can be linked to the way in which people regarded new knowledge about nature in the age of mythology and the Enlightenment. Chapter two will delve into how Mary Malone's,



Lyra's and Will's way of looking at Dust reflects the more post-anthropocentric view of contemporary times in regard to new knowledge about nature.

### **Theoretical framework**

#### *Adorno and Horkheimer on Myth and Enlightenment*

Adorno and Horkheimer, two German philosophers of the Frankfurt School, are known for their work called *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1947. This treatise will be fruitful in the investigation of the thesis statement of this master thesis. Especially in the case of the first chapter of this thesis, which will explore the ways in which the Church's and Lord Asriel's perspective on Dust reflect certain stages in world history in their response to nature, knowledge and the unknown. Adorno and Horkheimer touch in their work upon roughly three stages in world history, namely the prehistoric stage that was dominated by magic, the stage in which mythology dominated the world and the Enlightenment. This thesis will in the first chapter explain to what extent the Church's side of the debate about Dust can be equated with the mythological stage in history as is posited by Adorno and Horkheimer and to what extent Lord Asriel's perspective about Dust and its ramifications can be equated with the stage of the Enlightenment. On top of that, it will show that those two stages in history are not as dissimilar as they first appear to be. In order to do this, it is first necessary to understand their theory in general.

Adorno and Horkheimer start their philosophical treatise with describing the premise of what the Enlightenment was supposed to entail according to itself, in order to later debunk and criticize this way of perceiving the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment generally characterized itself as the progress and growth of the rational mind (Horkheimer and Adorno 1). By gaining more knowledge and emphasizing a way of looking at the world that was rational and based upon fact, its goal was to topple over all kinds of fantasy and myth in order

to free human kind from fear of the unknown. In short, its desired outcome was “the disenchantment of the world” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1). This is reflected back in the character of Lord Asriel that moves up against the Church in one of the first chapters of the volume *Northern Lights* to introduce a new enlightened insight into what is termed ‘Dust’ in *His Dark Materials*. To go back to the philosophers, they posit that the Enlightenment as a movement believed that ratio was superior to different forms of superstition. The human mind that favoured logic and rational thinking was able to gain knowledge about nature and use this same knowledge as a tool to dominate both nature and other human beings alike (Horkheimer and Adorno 2). Again, Lord Asriel is a good example of this since he uses his knowledge on Dust as a tool to further his own ends at the end of *Northern Lights*. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, knowledge and power are in this sense intricately linked since in general, learning about nature gives someone else the power to know how to control and manipulate it (2).

If the Enlightenment’s project of disenchanting the world and overcoming myth and fantasy with hard facts was to prevail, the old ways of seeing the world had to be destroyed. This meant that there was no place anymore for animism, which is the belief that certain natural objects or creatures have supernatural, spiritual qualities. In *His Dark Materials*, this belief of animism is explored upon by the character of Ama, who still believes in the old, more prehistoric ways of handling struggle and issues and who is someone who even goes to the local shaman to ask him for guidance. In enlightened thinking, though, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, this way of perceiving the unknown is rejected and it is persisted upon that all different kinds of mythological ideas such as totemic animals, myths of Gods or even the absolute Idea are not different from each other in essence, but instead are all ways of coping with the unknown factors of nature in order to make it more tangible for human beings to understand (Horkheimer and Adorno 3). Enlightened thinkers classified such beliefs and

ideas such as Ama believes in, as stemming from prehistory and found no place for it in their rationale. However, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that even in those times of prehistory, human beings were already on the path to Enlightenment because they were rationalizing their stories and attempting to discern general truths from their own tales (Horkheimer and Adorno 3). Enlightened thinkers perceived these universal ideas originating from mythological tales as still being part of superstition and insisted that they possessed a latent fear for the spiritual entities in which people believed. However, the Enlightenment's critique of myths also applies to itself. This is why Adorno and Horkheimer argue in one of their main theses that "enlightenment reverts back to mythology". According to the logic of Enlightenment, any kind of thought that implies in and of itself to have some sort of inherent power should be eradicated, since it is only a myth people tell themselves, since according to the Enlightenment's rationale, nothing on earth is imbued with a spiritual or powerful essence. Hence, Ama's story of the shaman *and* also tales of an existing deity such as God or Allah, should never be believed since they are an extension of the people's latent fear of the unknown. However, to apply this enlightened logic on the Enlightenment itself means that the Enlightenment is forced to acknowledge that it is in itself just another myth as well and no different from the myths that came before, for "reason" can in that way also be regarded as just another meaningless symbol (Schmidt 825-826). Meaning is altogether abolished when the Enlightenment's way of thinking is taken to the extreme.

Whereas other philosophers that criticized the Enlightenment stopped at this point of the argument, Adorno and Horkheimer continue their argument and contend that the rudiments of the Enlightenment were already present in earlier stages of history (Schmidt 827). The idea of God, for example, can be compared to what is now known as the theory of objectivity in scientific research. This is where their second thesis comes in: "myth is already enlightenment". To be able to grasp the content of this thesis statement, it must first be made

clear how the Enlightenment perceives *and* debunks myth. Enlightened thinkers regard anthropomorphism as one of the defining aspects of a myth (Horkheimer and Adorno 4). In short, anthropomorphism is the act of ascribing human qualities and features to nature. The way that the Enlightenment attenuates and debunks myth is by asserting that all these different demons and spirits that are projected unto natural elements are in essence only mirror images of human beings themselves (Horkheimer and Adorno 4). Taking this statement into account, it becomes logical to not be anxious of nature, since it is then revealed that humans are essentially not frightened of nature but of weaker versions of themselves that they have projected unto nature. This then, holds true for the Church's fear of Dust, as is explored throughout the trilogy. The Church is not afraid of Dust, but of what they have themselves projected unto Dust, namely the root of original sin. What is more, the Enlightenment regards all these different kinds of manifestations of nature (i.e. spirits, demons and the like) as one and the same in origin (Horkheimer and Adorno 4). This means that the Church's fear of Dust, Lord Asriel's fascination or obsession with it, as well as Ama's belief in the shaman who is destined to *know* about the unknown, all have the same origins: humans' fascination and obsession with the unknown with fear as the root cause of it all. Furthermore, enlightened thinkers only look at the common ground between these entities (fear) and conclude that it can essentially all be categorized as "the subject" for in enlightened thinking, it is common to unify all subjects under a common denominator. This is done to easily be able to compare different subjects to each other. Here, the dichotomy in the Western world of subjectivity and objectivity comes clearly into view. This is precisely one of the defining characteristics of enlightened thinking, namely reducing things to their common denominator in order to better be able to compare, classify and use them. Adorno and Horkheimer explain this phenomenon as making "dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities" (Horkheimer and Adorno 4).

This is where the comparison between the Enlightenment and mythology that Adorno and Horkheimer draw becomes clear, for they argue that “mythology is already enlightenment” because in mythological thinking, just like in enlightened thinking, there is also already a distinction being made between the *logos* on the one hand and the real existing things and creatures in the world on the other (Horkheimer and Adorno 5). What is meant by *logos* in this context is the word or symbol or name for a certain thing that is made distinct from the actual thing in the real world. For example, in the Greek religion of the Olympian gods, they do not see Apollo as synonymous with the sun, but merely as a symbol that represents a real object: the sun. Similarly, in the trilogy, Dust is just the *logos*, the symbol for the real Dust particles that are present in that universe of which no-one knows anything about, except self-proclaimed Lord Asriel. This is why the Church in the novel, as well as myths in our own history, such as the belief in for instance the Islam or Christianity, are alike to the enlightened way of thinking about the rational mind. The deities that mythology created (or in the case of the Christian religion, the one and only God) and the rational mind both place themselves outside of the real, external world (Horkheimer and Adorno 6). So, the Church in the trilogy, through their belief in God, place themselves also outside of the real, external world by indulging in the ignorance of the symbol of Dust.

The distance that is created between them (i.e. both God and the ratio) and nature enables them to have control over nature and master it. This is where Lord Asriel is alike to the Enlightenment, since the Church only fears the Dust and therefore attempts to demolish it, while Lord Asriel attempts to use it as a tool for his own end: the creation of the republic of Heaven. If one is, figuratively speaking, an outsider looking at the world instead of being part of that world, the power over that world at which one looks and gains knowledge about, is increased. This also reduces nature to a position in which it does not exist in and of itself, but *for* something else, namely God, man-kind, the rational mind. This is how in mythology,

traces of the Enlightenment were already visible. Hence, mythology and the Enlightenment share one defining characteristic: the reduction of things-in-itself to things-for-something or someone else. Another consequence of enlightened thinking is that nature is reduced to something objective instead of subjective. Enlightened thinkers presuppose that the essence of all things in nature is the same and therefore they unify nature under a common denominator and reduce it to an object of enquiry. Another similarity between the age of mythology and the Enlightenment is that in both ways of thinking, it is believed that nature repeats itself. Enlightened thinkers believed, wrongly, that they had touched upon something that mythology had not when they stated that everything in nature can be reduced to certain laws of nature and that nothing new can ever happen because everything repeats itself because of these underlying laws. However, the mythological counterpart of this belief is the concept of fate, and allowing for retribution when something does not happen as it is supposed to happen (Adorno and Horkheimer 8).

In contrast to the ages of mythology and Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer assert that the stage of history in which magic was the predominant characteristic is vastly different. In the prehistorical world, the process of separating an idea from reality had not yet been gone through and therefore, a comparison between different ideas to show that they are of the same essence was also not possible yet. This means that a thinking predominated the world in which the focus was on *difference* instead of unity (Schmidt 829). The deities, spirits or myths they believed in were perceived as vastly different from one another and in that sense, especially, non-exchangeable (Adorno and Horkheimer 7). Moreover, instead of focusing on establishing a connection with nature based upon mastery over it, the thinking of the age of magic is more preoccupied with establishing a relationship based upon mutual respect or friendliness. This kind of thinking is only present in *His Dark Materials* in Ama's

belief in the shaman and his ability to divinely intervene in issues that touched the humans of her tribe.

The thing that differentiates all these different stages of history is primarily how they respond to the unknown, the complex and the ambiguous, which in the series is termed “Dust”. Adorno and Horkheimer, for the sake of giving it a name to clarify the concept better, call this phenomenon *mana* (10). *Mana* is defined as “primal and undifferentiated [...] everything unknown and alien” and as “that which transcends the bounds of experience” (Adorno and Horkheimer 10). *Mana* is that which scares human beings beyond their core and that which they seek to undo. The first attempt of humans to lessen their fear of the unknown is through the act of giving a name to the terror they experience, such as when Lyra whispers the word Dust for the first time: “What is Dust?” (Pullman 30). Here, she already realizes it means more than just dust as can be found on unmoved furniture. In this sense, a scream, resulting from the terror of the unknown, becomes the name for the unknown. Since language is something that is graspable and “known”, the actual unknown becomes assuaged through giving it a name. Here the split between a concept (a *name* for something in the real world) and a thing (that which is real in the external world) that has occurred in both mythology and Enlightenment can be seen again. Dust with a capital letter stands apart from dust as humans know it, and therefore, takes on latent unknown capacities that institutions such as the Church, or people such as Lord Asriel or Mrs Coulter seek to undo, demolish or use as a tool for their own end. In that way, ascribing this phenomenon the term Dust, means that language is in essence only an expression of *mana* (Adorno and Horkheimer 11). The purpose of language is thus to provide a sense in humans that everything is known.

This was already present in the age of mythology, but turned “radical” in the age of the Enlightenment. The path to demythologization became ruthless: nothing at all could remain outside of the human sphere of the known world (Adorno and Horkheimer 11). This is

exemplified in the way that mathematics deals with unknown factors in its equations; it turns it into *the* unknown quantity  $x$  (Adorno and Horkheimer 18). By, again, giving a name to represent the unknown, it already transforms the unknown into something familiar or known. This is exactly what happens to the word Dust in the first chapter of *Northern Lights* as will later be established more broadly. Anything that cannot be solved according to mathematics, anything that can *not* be explained, is still represented in mathematical terms. For instance, the square root of a negative number cannot be taken according to the logic of mathematics, but instead of leaving it open, mathematicians have created a term for this occasion as well. Mathematics has become truth and in this way, the enlightened thinkers are bracing themselves against the forces of what they see as the mythical. The underlying theory behind the Enlightenment is positivism, a strand of philosophical thought that stresses that the only way to arrive to truth is by perceiving the actual, external world and using logic or reason to make sense of that world. Everything is made objective (Adorno and Horkheimer 19). This means that enlightened thinking cannot even conceive of a notion of God, deities or supernatural entities since those are not things that can be experienced with our senses. In this sense then, Lord Asriel does not follow through on enlightened thinking fully, since he does seem to believe in a God, or deity that needs to be defeated. He might be a pillar of enlightened thinking in the novel, but he does have his own prejudices from the time period in which he lives as does the time period of the Enlightenment itself.

All in all, enlightened thinkers are thus focused on producing knowledge only on the basis of what is actual, real, that which can be perceived by the senses. By doing so, they leave behind a different way of using knowledge, namely gaining it in order to create meaning for human beings (Adorno and Horkheimer 20). However, the paradox of only gaining knowledge through sensory experience is that knowledge can only confirm what is actual, and hereby, it is doomed to repeat itself. Therefore, the more that rational thought is occupied with



dominating existence and placing itself above it, the more it reproduces it. Consequently, the more that enlightened thinking demythologizes everything, the more it tends to fall back in line with mythology. This is because mythology also believes in the everlastingness of that which is real or can be perceived by the senses. The difference is that mythology expresses it in a different way. Instead of having figured out one of the laws of nature that causes it to become fall in some parts of the world (a scientific explanation of a natural event), mythology expresses this same natural event as being caused by the rape of a goddess and also emphasize the repetition of this event (Adorno and Horkheimer 20).

To conclude, Adorno and Horkheimer show that although the Enlightenment believes itself to be different to everything that came before, it has many similarities with the period of mythology. They argue that mythology is already Enlightenment and Enlightenment reverts back to mythology. Especially in the way in which they approach nature, knowledge and the unknown, the Enlightenment and mythology share more in common than would be assumed at a first glance. This also holds true for Lord Asriel and the Church. Both place themselves apart from Dust in order to have control and mastery over it. Lord Asriel's reason is to use Dust to destroy the barrier between the two worlds in order to defeat the Authority and the Church wants to destroy Dust to keep original sin from taking place.

### *Object-Oriented Ontology*

Object-Oriented Ontology (hereafter referred to as OOO) is a school of thought of the twenty-first century that was started by the thinker Graham Harman, who wrote about the subject in a succession of books. Harman provides a comprehensive introduction to OOO in his book *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* of 2017 which will be the main theoretical source of this thesis. This school of thought will be helpful in exploring what ways Mary Malone's, Lyra's and Will's way of regarding Dust and the world around them is

different from that of the Church and Lord Asriel. The premise is that Harman's OOO heralds a new age in history in the way that it treats and perceives both knowledge, nature and the unknown. It is important to provide a general explanation of some of the most pivotal characteristics of OOO in order to use it as the theoretical basis for one of the sub-arguments of my thesis statement.

The goal of OOO is to be a theory that can explain everything. It proclaims that certain theories of for example the natural sciences can never be theories that explain everything since they base themselves on certain assumptions that OOO takes to be false (Harman 25). It is important to understand first what OOO *rejects* in order to understand what its own viewpoints are. Firstly, OOO refutes the idea of the natural sciences that everything that exists must be physical (Harman 25). The standpoint of the natural sciences is that only the things which are made out of matter and have physical qualities rationally exist. The scientists of the natural sciences dismiss all beliefs of people that are different from their own, including religion, the belief in ghosts or haunted places and even people who are followers of Jungian psychology (Harman 26). However, Harman asserts that to compose a theory of *everything*, absolutely everything should be included, meaning the things that are not physical as well. This, for him, goes further than the belief of some people in immaterial entities and also incorporates non-physical things that literally everyone assumes to be real, such as the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC) (Harman 27). The VOC is a good example of something that is not material, in the sense that the VOC is something *more* than just all the people that worked for it, all the ships it used, and the locations it occupied, but even though it was not a material object, it did exist. Harman coins the VOC as a *form* that persisted.

Secondly, OOO renounces the idea that everything that exists must be basic and simple (Harman 29). If we continue the example of the VOC as an object, natural scientists would argue that it is untrue to speak of one identical VOC that lasted for nearly two centuries

since the company would have undergone many changes so it would be false to assume that there exists such a thing as one VOC. The only things, according to the natural sciences, that truly exist are those tiny particles of which everything is composed. To this, OOO replies that the natural sciences turn a blind eye to what Harman calls “emergence” (Harman 30). When smaller components together create something larger, such as for example a city or a marriage, Harman believes that something has come into existence that is *more* than its parts. A marriage (i.e. the larger object) contains characteristics that do not befit the individual two people who make up the marriage. Those characteristics have *emerged* out of the combination of multiple components (Harman 31). This means that OOO also holds true that non-natural things that have been aggregated together out of multiple things, such as machines, are seen as valid objects.

The third important objection that OOO makes in response to the natural sciences proclaiming they can provide a theory that covers everything is that they assume that everything that exists must be real (Harman 33). The argument here is quite straightforward; a theory that attempts to encompass everything cannot leave out ‘imaginary’ things such as the character of Sherlock Holmes, dreams in the night or worrying about the future. Fiction is a vital part of what it means to be a human (Harman 34). However, Harman stretches the concept of fiction a little bit further and also claims that human beings cannot directly have access to a real object such as a piece of fruit since it is always filtered through our own human brain and senses. Therefore, even supposedly real and material objects are themselves a kind of fiction.

The last, but not least important assumption that OOO debunks is that everything that exists must be able to be captured in literal language (Harman 35). This is a universal human fallacy, for it must be made clear that not only natural scientists, but also historians, philosophers, news agents and also people in their daily lives make literal statements about

objects which have the purpose of transferring information from one human being to the other. OOO does not hold that it is wrong altogether that people communicate and use language to understand what they are communicating about, but it does assert that it is false to believe that anything that cannot be captured in language is necessarily non-existent (Harman 36). Moreover, it claims that “literal language is *always* an oversimplification” since objects constitute to being more than just the features that can be explained in a literal way (Harman 37). The reality is for OOO something that can never be made fully accessible, and therefore, literal language will always not be completely correct when describing it (Harman 38). These characteristics of OOO are central to my reading of *His Dark Materials* since they show that Dust can, through the perspective of OOO, be perceived as a real object. Even though it cannot be seen with the naked eye and even though it is not a simple and basic phenomenon, Dust is, according to OOO, just as much a real object as the poisoned tokay is.

Now that it has been made clear what kind of fallacies OOO intends to avoid, it is next important to understand how OOO defines the term ‘object’, since this term is central to the theory. The definition of the term ‘object’ in OOO should not be taken as something narrow, but rather as something broad (Harman 43). Firstly, OOO professes that, generally speaking, knowledge about things can be divided up into two categories: knowledge about what something is (made of) and knowledge about what something does (i.e. its effect upon other objects). In the search for the definition of the term object, thinkers have grouped themselves on two sides based upon these two different types of knowledge. On the one side stand those who believe that an object is nothing more than the components that constitute it and on the other those who think that an object can completely be defined by the relations and effects it has with and upon other objects. OOO stands neatly in between those two groups and finds something wrong with both views: perceiving objects as solely its components (termed ‘undermining’) cannot explain the already explained term emergence and perceiving objects

only in terms of their effects (termed ‘overmining’) cannot account for any change. That is why for OOO, an object is anything that falls in between these two categories, meaning it is something that cannot be reduced downwards (‘undermining’) or upwards (‘overmining’) (Harman 51). Dust, from the world of *His Dark Materials*, can be seen as such an object too. It consists of its constituent parts and of the effect it has upon the world. What is more, Dust is also an object that has called upon the case of ‘emergence’ of OOO. The sum of its parts together create something larger than merely its parts in the case of Dust. In *The Amber Spyglass*, it creates a flood of Dust streaming out of the world, endangering conscious life all across the different worlds.

One of the pillars of OOO is that it pronounces itself to be a flat ontology, ‘ontology’ meaning that it concerns itself with what things *are* (Harman 54). ‘Flat’ in this case means that OOO’s starting point of philosophy is that it regards and treats objects in an equal way. To OOO, first and foremost, it is important to look at the common characteristics of everything so as to avoid bringing in personal biases or prejudices to the table (Harman 55). Therefore, OOO is opposed to all kinds of thinking that begin with placing objects in any kind of order, as if some objects are inherently different from others. Examples of such thinking are the medieval belief that God stands apart from all other beings it has created or the modern belief that the rational mind stands apart from everything else in the universe (Harman 55-56). What follows from OOO’s flat ontology standpoint is that it also stresses that humans in general are not more important than other objects in the world and that philosophy or ontology should therefore not primarily concern itself with human matters (Harman 56). This makes it a different theory from many modern philosophies that at their basis assume a split between culture (that which is made by humans) and nature.

Next, another aspect of OOO will be elaborated upon further, namely that it places such a high value on aesthetics and art. To understand why, a return to OOO’s rejection of

literalism is required. OOO rejects the literalist idea that a direct connection to reality is possible. This does not mean it believes in outright mysticism, such as practitioners of tarot cards or the like, because Harman states that mysticism has in common with literalism that it also claims to be able to directly approach reality (Harman 62). OOO, in contrast, believes that it is not possible at all to directly come in contact with reality, and furthermore, it holds true that not a direct but an indirect approach to reality is generally best to arrive as close as possible. This belief of OOO draws upon the philosophy of Kant and his distinction between ‘phenomena’ and ‘noumena’. ‘Phenomena’, according to Kant, are things that are open to the human experience, such as events, thoughts and objects; everything that can be perceived (Harman 68). However, Kant believes that there are also things that have a quality or a reality about them that can never be grasped by the human mind (either introspectively or by outward description): he calls them ‘noumena’, or things-in-themselves. For Kant, these phenomena and noumena are only consigned to the realm of human beings, but OOO takes it a little further and states that “all objects have a noumenal side” (Harman 69). Moreover, OOO creates its own terms for these and calls ‘noumena’ real objects and ‘phenomena’ sensual objects (Harman 78). Because OOO adheres to the Kantian idea that things have a noumenal side, it proclaims that there is always a part about reality that cannot be captured. This is where the function of aesthetic experience and the arts come into the picture since art is, according to OOO, able to come close to this thing-in-itself or the real object (Harman 71). First of all, OOO distinguishes between real objects, real qualities (of those objects), sensual objects and sensual qualities. To keep it simple for now, when considering a piece of art, for example a metaphor, there is a real object (the thing-in-itself) with sensual qualities (qualities that can consciously be grasped by the human senses) (Harman 79-81). The example of OOO is the metaphor: ‘the cypress is like the ghost of a flame’. In this metaphor, the ‘flame’ is the thing unto which sensual qualities can be assigned (a flame is warm, reddish orange, moving,

needs oxygen to exist, etc.) and the real object is the ‘cypress’. The true inwardness, the ‘noumena’, of the cypress cannot be grasped by this metaphor, but, and here comes the crux as to why art is so successful in approximating things-in-themselves, there is always one real object in experiencing art that *can* be grasped, namely ourselves (Harman 83). The person who is looking at the art is not merely an observer, but also *engages* with it and brings their own reality to the table. In this way, art can achieve something that literal language cannot, and therefore, OOO places such a high value on it. The novels of *His Dark Materials* can in this sense also be seen as aesthetic objects that approach reality indirectly. Through this realization, the trilogy is seen in a different light. Instead of perceiving it as just another story, it can be seen as a story that tries to capture things that do not normally come to light and is in this way indirectly telling the reader a message.

To conclude, OOO can be used to shed a different light on *His Dark Materials*. Its concept of ‘emergence’, its flat ontology, its belief that objects have agency too will all be useful in investigating to what extent the characters of Lyra, Will and Mary Malone correspond to OOO’s theory.

## Chapter 1: The Paradox of the Enlightenment in *His Dark Materials*

### *The Supposed War between Knowledge and Ignorance*

In order to investigate to what extent the Church and Lord Asriel represent, in that order, the way that Adorno and Horkheimer characterize the age of mythology and the age of Enlightenment, this chapter will start analysing this question by first delving into the main premise or theme of the novel. Ribó defines a theme as a “meaning identified by an interpreter of narrative discourse” (95). This interpreter can either be the reader, the author or a critic and a theme can also be mentioned explicitly in the novel by the narrator as a way for the author to draw attention to it (Ribó 96). In an interview with Philip Pullman that Nicholson and Parsons conducted in London in 1999, he explains that the theme of his book had to do with Lyra as the new Eve figure (119). He elaborates upon this theme, stating that it was his desire to portray the Fall of human kind as something essential, necessary and inherently positive. The reason why the Fall could be painted as positive instead of negative in Pullman’s eyes is that through the Fall, Eve introduced humans to the fruit of knowledge. This is important for our master’s thesis since it will be looked at how different people respond to new knowledge about nature. This concept is then also picked up by other critics, besides Pullman himself, as one of the underlying assumptions of the book, namely that knowledge is the highest good and is preferred above ignorance (Waller 1). In one of the final scenes of *The Amber Spyglass*, this theme is made explicit:

She said that all the history of human life has been a struggle between wisdom and stupidity. She and the rebel angels, the followers of wisdom, have always tried to open minds; the Authority and his churches have always tried to keep them closed [...] And for most of that time, wisdom has had to work in secret, whispering her words, moving like a spy through the humble places of the world while the courts and palaces are occupied by her enemies[.] (Pullman, 1053-1054)

It must be clear from this passage that in *His Dark Materials*, two sides are pitted against one another: on the one hand, the forces of the Church, God and existing institutions that attempt to stifle knowledge and keep people in ignorance and on the other, the forces of the rebel



angels, experimental theologians (another word for scientist in Lyra's world) and others who follow wisdom and attempt to spread knowledge across the world. Through the words that Pullman uses to describe the good force of wisdom, namely "secret", "whispering", "moving like a spy" and "humble places", he creates a sense that the "good" side is always quiet, in the periphery of what is in sight, and a minority as opposed to the "evil" side who are the loudest, in the majority and who occupy the "courts and palaces" (Pullman 1054).

However, this premise of the trilogy of two polar opposites, represented by the Church and its followers on one side and rebel angels and its followers on the other, who are always, moreover, in a "struggle" with another, does not quite hold its ground against the theory of Adorno and Horkheimer (Pullman 1053). If this premise would be taken as true, this would mean that the Authority, all the establishments in all the different worlds of the Church and its followers would represent ignorance and Lord Asriel, since he plays a pivotal role in creating a war against the Authority, would be taken as the most important figure for representing the force of wisdom and knowledge. This slightly differs from the main argument of this thesis, namely that the Church represents the age of mythology and Lord Asriel the age of Enlightenment. Thus, the real question then becomes whether mythology can be linked blindly to ignorance and the Enlightenment to wisdom *and* whether the books uphold their own premise. According to the theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, as has already been explained in the theoretical framework, the answer is much more complex and the Enlightenment and mythology are more alike than would be assumed at first glance.

### *First Impressions: Lord Asriel & the Church*

First glances or impressions are important to establish a character or set of characters for the eyes of the reader. Two things are telling about the way that Lord Asriel is introduced to the reader. Firstly, it is done immediately, in the first few pages of the first volume, leaving

the reader with the impression that this figure will play a big role in the rest of the series and will be important to its plot. Secondly, through the way that he is characterized, he, at least at first glance, neatly matches the ideals of the Enlightenment. The first time he is mentioned in the novel, it is through the eyes of Lyra, as is everything in the novel trilogy. The focalization throughout the novels is completely inwards into Lyra's head and perspective, so the reader only knows what Lyra also knows (Ribó 72). To return to the matter at hand, the way that Lord Asriel is characterized through the effect he has upon Lyra is called direct characterization by effect (Ribó 59). This emphasizes, directly at the start, what kind of an effect, or even sway, he has over other people; something that later turns out to be an important part of his whole persona and is also important for the plot. To return to the fragment, Lyra thinks of him as someone "whom she admired and feared greatly", immediately evoking the idea that he is a powerful figure (Pullman 11). This is augmented by the statements that he is "said to be involved in high politics, in secret exploration, in distant warfare" (Pullman 11). He is clearly an important person, someone of the elite, and moreover, also characterized with the exact terms that were before associated with the "good" side of wisdom by using adjectives such as "secret" to describe him with. This term also places him in line with Enlightenment ideals such as investigation, research and the pursuit of knowledge against all the odds. A couple of pages later, his introduction continues and this time, his looks are described:

Lord Asriel was a tall man with powerful shoulders, a fierce dark face, and eyes that seemed to flash and glitter with savage laughter. It was a face to be dominated by, or to fight: never a face to patronize or pity [...] (Pullman 17)

Through the use of adjectives such as "fierce", "powerful" and "savage", and through the link being made that he has a "face to be dominated by", the overall impression of him is that he is a powerful, wild, and inherently uncontrollable and unpredictable man. Moreover, his own speech, another different way of direct characterization according to Ribó, also underlines this

idea that he has a lot of power and is not afraid to use or exert it: “Yes, here, man. And I shall need a screen and a projecting lantern, also here, also now” and “Don’t question me; just do as I tell you” (Pullman 17; Ribó 58).

Pullman makes the influence that Lord Asriel has over others not only clear by showing the reader how frightened some people are of him or how he treats others, but also by giving him the power to mould the plot itself. This has been noted by the researcher Thomson, who puts forward the idea that Lord Asriel is the character in *His Dark Materials* who functions as a catalyst (162). He is the reason something changes in the world of Lyra, the main character, to begin with and this quick-starts her whole adventure, but moreover, he brings change to the establishment of the university of Jordan College through his various discoveries. This is why, at the beginning of the novel at least, the character of Lord Asriel is an explicit link to the ideals of the Enlightenment and the period in history itself. To shortly repeat, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment believes itself to be the bringer of freedom for human beings through the advance of thought and knowledge and has as its goal to debunk myths (such as the Church’s belief in God). This is precisely what Lord Asriel is aiming to do at the start of the novel, when he visits Jordan College (with representatives both of the College and the Church present); to present his renegade ideas and new discoveries he has made to open up the minds of all present.

In contrast to the new and wild wind that the character of Lord Asriel seems to bring to the story, the effect of the Church is immediately described as quite the opposite. An important difference between how these two actors of the story are introduced, is that the Church is not characterized in a direct way, such as Lord Asriel, but is indirectly characterized through the voice of the narrator (Ribó 57). This instantly creates the image of the Church as a distant actor that is not in direct contact with the reader (yet), but nevertheless exerts a big influence on the story world, which likens the Church to how ‘normal’ people usually see the

people in power: as omnipresent without being actually present. The way that the Church is described by the narrator underlines this very idea: “[...] the Church’s power over every aspect of life had been absolute” (Pullman 31-32). The narrator continues to describe the various different branches of the Church and marks the “Consistorial Court of Discipline” as “the most active and the most feared of all the Church’s bodies” (Pullman 32). It is thus at once established that the Church is a powerful and feared actor in the novel, not unlike Lord Asriel himself except for the fact that Lord Asriel is also associated with positive qualities such as admiration. The Church, however, precisely fits the role of ignorance in the supposed war between ignorance and wisdom in the novel which has earlier been described, because it fits the description of earlier: “while the courts and palaces are occupied by her enemies” (Pullman 1054).

Apart from the Church being established as powerful and feared, another important characteristic is that it is an archaic organization that holds true to traditional norms and values. It has its own traditional way of perceiving the world and attempts to maintain this worldview against all odds. This is how, at first glance, the Church can be linked to the way that the Enlightenment perceives mythology: as a belief that needs to be debunked (but will not allow itself to be debunked so easily). Gooderham identifies this debunking, or at least re-interpreting, of the Christian faith as one of the primary purposes of the novel (156). However, the fact that the Church holds firm to traditional beliefs and will not let itself be dismissed so easily becomes apparent from the first moment the reader is introduced to this actor as well:

Barnard and Stokes were two – how shall I put it – *renegade* theologians who postulated the existence of numerous other worlds like this one, neither heaven nor hell, but material and sinful [...] The Holy Church naturally disapproved of this abominable heresy, and Barnard and Stokes were silenced [...] (Pullman 32)

It should be clear that the Church is represented as an organization that attempts to suppress any opinion or piece of knowledge that does not fit its specific worldview and quickly deems

it as heretical. Finally, through all these different examples of characterization of both Lord Asriel and the Church, it has been shown that at the beginning of the novel, a clear distinction can be made by us between Lord Asriel on the one hand who is the personification of change, and new knowledge, and the Enlightenment and the Church on the other as the personification of tradition, religion and the age of mythology.

*Dust as a Symbol for the Unknown*

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the age of Enlightenment and the age of mythology have something in common. At the heart of their similarities lies both of their inability to see that opposite categories are linked together. As the philosophers themselves state: “But heaven and hell were linked [...] They were bound together like genesis and decline, life and death, summer and winter” (Adorno and Horkheimer 10). However, both enlightened and mythological thinkers perceive these opposites as strictly separate from each other, which disables them to acknowledge the existence of *mana* (from now on termed ‘the unknown’) and forces them to view the world in black and white. Examples of such dichotomies that avoid confrontation with the unknown from the age of mythology are the concepts of heaven and hell, and body and spirit, while the age of Enlightenment introduces dichotomies such as nature and culture, and objectivity and subjectivity. To return to *His Dark Materials*, the concept of Dust can be taken as a symbol for the unknown and both Lord Asriel’s and the Church’s way of responding to it can be seen as a reflection of the way in which both enlightened and mythological thinkers respond to *mana*. The importance of the concept of Dust is made explicit at the beginning of the novel series, again by way of introducing this phenomenon right at the start so that the reader is immediately aware of it. Lord Asriel is supposed to be the bringer of new knowledge to the traditional setting of Jordan College. This setting of Jordan College is modelled after the university of Oxford in our

world. However, in Philip Pullman's world, it is a place of traditional knowledge in line with the thinking of mythology. This is why Lord Asriel is the one to bring new knowledge to this traditional setting by introducing Dust:

[...] it isn't light. It's Dust." Something in the way he said it made Lyra imagine Dust with a capital letter, as if this wasn't ordinary dust [...] (Pullman 24)

Assigning the term 'Dust' a capital letter to begin with already marks the importance of the concept to the characters in the story world and thereby also to the reader. As Adorno and Horkheimer postulate as well, making a change in language about an object of terror speeds its attenuation (Adorno and Horkheimer 11). This makes the object less likely to produce absolute terror. In other words, it is new, unknown territory for all of the characters at this point, both for Lord Asriel, Lyra *and* the Church. Still, Lyra cannot help but remark a certain slight change in tone by Lord Asriel, as we have seen in the quote above: "Something in the way he said it" (Pullman 24). This can be explained by her relation to him as her uncle. As Lyra is eavesdropping on Lord Asriel and his presentation, she notices that the other people in the room, namely the Scholars of Jordan College, note this slight indication of something greater happening too. This is illustrated by the telling reaction of all these Scholars in the room in which Lord Asriel holds his presentation: "'But how-' 'Surely-' 'It can't-' 'Gentlemen!' came the voice of the Chaplain. 'Let Lord Asriel explain.'" (Pullman 24). The Chaplain is here someone who clearly holds authority above people, since the room quiets down as soon as he calls out. However, the tumult that breaks out, as seen above, with all these chattering voices immediately questioning what Lord Asriel is saying, does tell the reader that this piece of knowledge is new and alien to the characters of the story world. The chaos that ensues is just one example of this fact. Here, in this first chapter of the novel series, the strict division between wisdom and ignorance, Enlightenment and mythology, is thus kept intact. Lord Asriel is the one who brings new knowledge to the old, ancient regime of the Church that attempts to dispel such knowledge on grounds of fear.

However, as the story progresses, this distinction gets more blurred as the story suggests that both the Church *and* Lord Asriel are in fact ignorant of the workings of Dust, just like Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the Enlightenment shares more common ground with that which it criticizes (the age of mythology) than can be perceived at first glance. Their ignorance is characterized by their response to this new phenomenon of Dust. The central question of the trilogy, already from the beginning of Chapter one *Northern Lights*, becomes: What is this mysterious phenomenon called Dust? And, maybe even more importantly, is it something that should be celebrated or feared? Whenever a new piece of information about nature is slowly being revealed by inquisitive human beings, others take up this investigation, following their urge to unravel this mystery fully in order to regain a sense of security through knowledge. This is precisely what *His Dark Materials* showcases. Both the Church, Lord Asriel and the heroes of the story such as Lyra, Will and Mary Malone all seek to understand Dust. In this way, Dust can be seen as a manifestation of what Adorno and Horkheimer call *mana*. To repeat, Adorno and Horkheimer describe this phenomenon as everything “primal and undifferentiated, it is everything unknown and alien” (Adorno and Horkheimer 10). While the actors in the story all have the same mission, namely, to understand Dust, their approaches and ultimate goals differ from one another. *His Dark Materials* reveals the innate common ground of three approaches when it comes to responding to new knowledge about nature, but also shows how this same starting point diverges in three essentially different reactions.

Thus, the first shared reaction of each of the different sets of characters, namely the Scholars of the Church, Lord Asriel and Lyra, are described by Adorno and Horkheimer as a natural and human thing to do. Their reactions to the name-dropping of the word Dust foreshadow the actions of these three sets of characters later in the trilogy. Lord Asriel is the calm scientist, wishing to know in order to use it; the Church is shocked and horrified by something

that can shake the Christian worldview and Lyra is filled with childlike curiosity and wonder, and simply wants to know about this mysterious phenomenon. Like has already been mentioned before, the reader experiences everything through the main character Lyra's eyes. *His Dark Materials* makes use of her through inward focalization, meaning that the story is told through Lyra's particular worldview (Ribó 72). Thus, the reader follows Lyra's curiosity about Dust and the North as she pleads to Lord Asriel: "I want to see the Northern Lights and bears and icebergs and everything. I want to know about Dust. And that city in the air" (Pullman 30). In this way, the different responses to the unknown of the three eras in history, namely mythology, Enlightenment and post-anthropocentric thinking are already contained in the first chapter.

The rest of this chapter will focus mainly on the perspective of the Church and Lord Asriel, as the perspective of Lyra, Will and Mary Malone will be saved for the second chapter of this thesis. To return to the main question at hand that Adorno and Horkheimer's theory forces us to face: is it possible to connect ignorance blindly to the age of mythology as western scientists nowadays connect wisdom to the Enlightenment? Adorno and Horkheimer at least argue that God and the rational mind (the prime focus of the Enlightenment) have more in common than would be assumed at surface value. Their hypothesis is that the way that both God and the rational mind are distant from the world aids them in exerting power and influence over that world in a similar fashion (Adorno and Horkheimer 6). God and the rational mind are both able to gain dominion over nature by way of distancing themselves from nature as if they are not part of it themselves. This gives them a bird's-eye view of the situation; a gaze to look down upon the rest of the world. The effect of this is that nature is reduced to something which has a purpose *for* the one in power (God or the rational mind) instead of existing in-itself and for-itself (Adorno and Horkheimer 6). These ideas of Adorno



and Horkheimer can be translated to the events happening in relation to the Church, Lord Asriel and Dust in *Northern Lights*.

*The Church, Lord Asriel and their Barren Cold Objectives*

To begin with the Church, in the first volume *Northern Lights*, the organization of the Church in the world of Lyra is portrayed in a mysterious and scary manner. The reader is only introduced to the (horrific) actions of the Church and not to its motives or to its characters directly for the largest part of *Northern Lights*. The only advocate of the Church the reader is introduced to early in the novel is Mrs Coulter, but soon it becomes clear that she has her own motives and does not strictly adhere to the Christian doctrine. This means that the reader is only able to gain the perspective of the Church from a distance and does not receive an insider's look, leaving the Church's real morale completely in the shadow. Meanwhile, Mrs Coulter is given a closer look by the narrator as she is made into the main antagonist of the first volume of *His Dark Materials*. As has been seen in the introduction, the plot follows Lyra unto a journey after her missing friend Roger and her uncle Lord Asriel, complete with depictions of a gyptian folk, armoured polar bears and the mysterious boy with no daemon. *Northern Lights* ends in a cold and barren setting: the North. Although, according to Ribó, this setting should be considered a "functional" setting, chosen to further the plot in the unfolding of events, something about the barren cold reveals symbolic meaning as well (Ribó 39). This is because it is introduced to the reader with an atmospheric description. Through the eyes of Lyra, using inward focalization in Ribó's words (72), the reader's first glimpse of the headquarters of the Church's Oblation Board comes into view:

She was horribly stiff and cold, but she managed to pull herself upright enough to see that the sledge was driving swiftly between a row of high poles, each carrying a glaring anbaric light. As she got her bearings, they passed through an open metal gate at the end of the avenue of lights and into a wide open space like an empty market-

place or an arena for some game or sport [...] They were outside a low building, or a range of low buildings over which the snow lay deeply [...] (Pullman 202)

Through Lyra's eyes, the buildings described are a nightmare for a child: metal everywhere, "glaring" lights and an empty feeling all over the place, as if no-one lives there. On top of that, the fact that this setting is in the North, the snow and cold also increase the eerie feeling the reader receives when the highly fortified base of the Oblation Board is introduced through the eyes of Lyra. Moreover, the building is also described as "perfectly flat and smooth and white" (Pullman 202). The setting evokes the feeling of a cold, unwelcoming clinical space in the middle of the barren cold in the northern climate. Robinson also notes that using this kind of location is reflective of the barren experiments they are performing there on children (40). However, the attendants of this experimental clinical space are uncannily friendly: "'Come in quickly,' he said. 'It's warm and comfortable. Don't stand out in the cold.'" (Pullman 203). This is to ensure that the children who come in there do not register the eerie atmosphere as being made by the inhabitants but by the setting of the North itself. Mrs Coulter easily fools the children, as she is described firstly as "a beautiful young lady whose dark hair falls shining delicately under the shadow of her fur-lined hood" (Pullman 40). Not only is she continuously described as beautiful throughout the trilogy, she is also described as very well-educated and of importance to political issues. Lyra, at the beginning of the novel, immediately takes a liking to her and begs to be taken with her to the North. However, as soon as Lyra discovers her malign intentions, she runs away. At the moment in time where Lyra then finally has arrived at this eerie hospital that was just described, she is still fearful of Mrs Coulter and her allies from the Church. Because, in *Northern Lights*, the focalization is completely inwards into Lyra's head and point of view, the reader is immediately aware that this situation is bad and that Lyra herself is in danger (Ribó 72). Such inward focalization is a smart way of making sure that the Church on the whole remains distant. A small child such as

Lyra would never come into contact with important people of such a large organization, but she *would* come into contact with Mrs Coulter.

Mrs Coulter and the Oblation Board in general are known to Lyra for their bad reputation: stealing children from people and doing something with their daemons. This she learns through the rumours that are spreading around the gyptian folk, such as Billy Costa missing, as well as through her encounter with a little boy in the North. Especially this last encounter convinces her of the malignant intentions of the Church and Mrs Coulter:

The little boy was huddled against the wood drying-rack where hung row upon row of gutted fish, all as stiff as boards. He was clutching a piece of fish to him as Lyra was clutching Pantalaimon, with both hands, hard, against her heart; but that was all he had, a piece of dried fish; because he had no daemon at all. The Gobblers had cut it away. That was *intercision*, and this was a severed child [...] (Pullman 183)

Again, through indirection characterization, the Church and especially the branch of the Oblation Board, are through Lyra's knowledgeable eyes set apart as dangerous and malicious beings. It can also be seen that the "clutching Pantalaimon" and the way that the boy is "clutching a piece of fish to him" is the same. By using the word "clutching" twice, it is also easily shown that the "piece of fish" is a substitute for the lost daemon of the little boy. Lyra concludes: "that was *intercision*, and this was a severed child". Here, the intention of *His Dark Materials* to re-interpret Christianity also shines through. Gooderham notes that it is Pullman's intention to overtly criticize and debunk the Christian religion through re-inventing Christian institutions and practices (156-157). The "severed child" does not only serve as a plot device to create shock value and tension, it is also a symbol for so much more. Ribó notes that a symbol can be anything that represents something else, and is, furthermore, interpretable in different manners by different readers (90).

This symbol of the severed child from his daemon is one example of how the Church of *His Dark Materials* seeks to undo the effect of Dust. Bird notes that the way that every daemon receives a fixed form in the world of Lyra can be equated with our own conception of

children going from an innocent child to an experienced adult (116). However, the Church has a more pessimistic view of this transformation, since they believe that Dust is the root cause of original sin (Bird 116). Just like Adorno and Horkheimer argue, the Church lives in a world guided by mythology and seeks to undo anything unknown. Any form of *mana* that cannot be understood by way of the Christian faith, needs to be destroyed. According to Bird, Dust could be a symbol for growing sexual awareness, which would be a hindrance to how the Church would want to let children grow up (Bird 116). The Church values innocence, and Dust is their enemy, because it helps children to grow from children into adults. Hereby, it does more than just keep Dust from gaining “power” over children, it also keeps children from forming their own identity when one takes the fixing of the daemon as part and parcel of identity formation. This way of perceiving the daemon/child relationship is also adhered to in the novel itself:

“Why do daemons have to settle?” Lyra said. “I want Pantalaimon to be able to change for ever. So does he.” “Ah, they always have settled, and they always will. That’s part of growing up. There’ll come a time when you’ll be tired of his changing about, and you’ll want a settled kind of form for him.” (Pullman 144)

A sailor tells Lyra in this passage about the need for a fixed daemon and also enunciates that it will help Lyra decide what kind of person she is. The severed child, in contrast, is notably an unhappy child that does not have a will of its own in *His Dark Materials*. Like the example already given tells us, the boy without his daemon is afraid and sad, whilst not knowing what to do with one’s self. Therefore, the protagonists see Dust as vital for life, while the Church is still frozen in its belief that Dust must be the root cause of original sin. When Lyra confronts the advocate of the Church in *Northern Lights*, Mrs Coulter, with her ideas, it becomes clear that Mrs Coulter does not want Lyra to know anything about the subject. Later in the novel, Lyra will also find out that Mrs Coulter is truly her real mother. However, right now, Mrs Coulter merely shrugs Lyra’s ideas about Dust off with a maternal voice:

Lyra... Lyra, Lyra. Darling, these are big difficult ideas, Dust and so on. It's not something for children to worry about. But the doctors do it for the children's own good, my love. Dust is something bad, something wrong, something evil and wicked. Grown-ups and their daemons are infected with Dust so deeply that it's too late for them. They can't be helped... but a quick operation on children means they're safe from it. Dust just won't stick to them ever again. They're safe and happy [...] (Pullman 240).

The story that Mrs Coulter tells to Lyra is to keep her from knowing the truth about Dust and the experiments. She uses her innocence as a child against her, and fools her with a made-up story about Dust being evil and wicked, so that Lyra might follow her instead of her own will power. This is done because Mrs Coulter still believes that Lyra does not know the truth about Dust yet and is still an innocent child. Words like “darling” and “my love” indicate the way that Mrs Coulter belittles Lyra (Pullman 240). Furthermore, Dust in this scene is clearly being made into a disease, which words such as “infected” and “operation” insinuate. The doctors that sever children from their daemons are made into heroes and the nurses into guardians for the children, while in reality the opposite is true. Making Mrs Coulter into the advocate of the Church is a clever plot device for the first volume, but through the whole of *His Dark Materials* it is shown that the Church merely uses Mrs Coulter as their puppet to further their own ends. There are a couple of other examples when the Church in the background plays its game while in the foreground innocents die, such as how Lee Scoresby encounters advocates of the Church who are willing to die for “the martyr's palm!” (Pullman 460). It is only much later in the novel trilogy that one as a reader really encounters the most important people of the Church. In the chapter “Pre-emptive Absolution”, the novel finally shows a glimpse of important people of the Church directly instead of indirectly. In this passage, it then finally becomes clear what the Church's real aim and take on Dust is:

The Oblation Board sought to understand the effects of Dust: we must destroy it altogether. If in order to destroy Dust we also have to destroy the Oblation Board, the College of Bishops, every single agency by which the Holy Church does the work of the Authority – then so be it [...] (Pullman 705)

Here, it becomes clear that the Church's motives are much bigger than could ever be thought of in volume one of *His Dark Materials*. They do not only seek to "help" children, they seek to destroy Dust altogether. This is also the first time that the Church is not a far-off actor anymore, but takes on a personal note through direct characters. The fact that the Church would even sacrifice part of its own structure in order to destroy Dust shows how serious the Church is about this item. As Bird also notes, Dust is connected to "guilt, shame, and sin" for the advocates of Christianity (Bird 116). The way that the Church seeks to undo Dust is reminiscent of the way in which religions in our world have sought to undo the effects of scholarship and teaching. However, this does not mean, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, that religion (i.e. mythology) is different than the Enlightenment itself. Whilst this Church follows the Authority (another name for God) in their quest to keep intact the way that the world had functioned up until now, proponents of the Enlightenment do the same thing in this trilogy. It is *for* something else, that they seek to understand Dust, just like the Church. An example that the Church follows this kind of reasoning is quite clear through the character of Father Gomez. He is shown to be the perfect disciple of the Church; *for* the Church, he seeks to understand and obliterate Dust. Dust in this sense can be seen as a manifestation of *mana*: it is an unknown component of everyday life and too complex to be pinned down (Adorno and Horkheimer 10). The mythology-based religious faith of the Church in *His Dark Materials* cannot do anything other than attempt to destroy it, for they see it, as has already been mentioned, as the root cause of original sin. Through the character of Father Gomez and the chapter "Pre-emptive absolution", Pullman shows that the Church in his trilogy is not afraid to sacrifice themselves for the "greater good" of destroying Dust. Father Gomez is the prime example *and* marionette of the Church in this instance, since he follows Mary Malone and eventually also the children into the land of the *mulefa*, little creatures that have their own culture in a different world than Lyra's. The protagonists, to

clarify, have earlier in the story obtained a knife that can cut windows between different worlds. Father Gomez is there to kill Lyra, since she is, in all the stories of the Church, destined to be the new Eve figure. Father Gomez works for the Church, and sees Dust as a means to bring about the new Fall of humankind. That is why he is so motivated to pursue and kill the protagonists in the story, especially Lyra. His cruel intentions towards anything unknown and his tendency to instrumentalize them to receive what he wants become evident in this example:

The other birds had stopped as soon as the first one fell, and stood watching it, and watching the man too. There was a quick, ferocious intelligence in their eyes. They looked from him to the dead bird, from that to the rifle, from the rifle to his face. He raised the rifle again, and saw them react, shifting backwards clumsily, crowding together. They understood. [...] If they knew what death was, thought Father Gomez, and if they could see the connection between death and himself, then there was the basis of a fruitful understanding between them. Once they had truly learned to fear him, they would do exactly as he said [...] (Pullman 958)

The focalization happens here through the eyes of Father Gomez, the follower of the Church and the bringer of death to Lyra and her friends. Through his eyes, the reader senses clearly that the birds are more than just birds; they contain a “ferocious intelligence”. Moreover, they understand what gunshots mean through learning that one of their own was killed by it. As soon as Father Gomez realizes this, it becomes dangerous for the birds themselves. They could do nothing but do his bidding, since they would otherwise all be killed. Father Gomez shows no remorse, neither in his actions or his thoughts, since he believes in the Church and its mission to destroy Lyra and Dust in its wake. That is why Father Gomez is pleased that he can manipulate the environment around him to arrive quickly at his desired goal. Thus, it is clear that the intentions of the Church and those of Lord Asriel have a lot of things in common.

This is where this thesis will revert back to Lord Asriel again and his enquiry into Dust. Researchers such as Waller have delved into the science in *His Dark Materials* and

concluded that Lord Asriel is pitted against the Authority (the God-like figure of the trilogy). In his particular case, he is actively conducting scientific research against the Church's active recuperation of the Christian faith (Waller 3). However, Lord Asriel and the institution of the Church in the trilogy do not differ as much as one would assume. At the climax of *Northern Lights*, Lyra has defeated the Oblation Board and escaped together with Roger, but still thinks her uncle needs to receive the alethiometer from them. However, as she arrives at Lord Asriel's place, he begins to act strangely. His first immediate reaction to the children at his doorstep is: "He staggered back and clutched at the mantelpiece" (Pullman 308). This characterization of such a fierce, dominating man, as has been expounded upon earlier in this chapter, is telling of his indignation that the children arrived at his doorstep. Normally, he is someone who is never taken aback by other people and always remains his posture. That is why the fact that he is this time so upset because of their arrival is so telling. Later, it becomes clear what his true intentions are towards them, but before that, he exclaims: "Get out! [...] Turn around, get out, go! *I did not send for you!*" (Pullman 309). His immediate dissatisfaction of seeing the children is alleviated a second later when Roger steps into the picture as well: "after a moment Lord Asriel passed a hand across his brow and recovered slightly. The colour began to return to his cheeks as he looked down at the two children" (Pullman 309). It seems that he had almost gotten sick, since it is implied that he is recovering because the "colour began to return to his cheeks", but it is still the question why he got sick in the first place. A little while later, it becomes perfectly clear. The father of Lyra has plans to use Roger for his own ends to defeat the Authority. Dust is just a pawn to defeat the king in his own game for Lord Asriel. Here, the point of my thesis becomes crucial. Lord Asriel is as much unrelenting as the Church in his own objectives and intentions, and furthermore, his so-called experimental theological enquiry resembles mythological thinking as well. First of all, because he believes that the Authority (God) exists, but more importantly, because he uses his



new-found knowledge on Dust for his own ends. Instead of finding out how Dust works for true scientific enquiry, he uses Dust as a means to open up a new dimension. He does not perceive Dust with the viewpoint of curiosity, but rather as a useable source that he can defeat the Authority with. That Lord Asriel and his enlightened reasoning revert back to mythology becomes very clear at the end of *Northern Lights*. Still in that barren cold setting of the North, he conducts his final experiment to receive access to the so-called city in the sky of the Aurora. This event is conducted in secret, away from Lyra's eyes, but through her interaction with the butler, the reader already receives a glimpse of the frantic behaviour and ideas of Lord Asriel: "He's been almost in a delirium since you went to bed. I've never seen him so wild [...] He's got the boy, miss!" (Pullman 321). Here, Lord Asriel's true nature shines through. He does not care if he sacrifices lives to get what he himself deems important. This is enlightened thinking in its truest form according to the theory of Adorno and Horkheimer: instrumentalizing everything in order to meet a scientific breakthrough. Dust has become an instrument, just like Lyra's friend Roger. Lord Asriel's cruelty to the boy becomes clear only moments later: "[Roger] tried again, crying and pleading, begging, sobbing, and Lord Asriel took no notice except to knock him to the ground" (Pullman 331). This does not differ much from the way in which the Church has sent Father Gomez after the children to murder them. What becomes utterly clear at the end of *Northern Lights* is that most grown-ups, at least in Lyra's world, are so fed up with their own ideas about the world and about Dust that they commit crimes because of it. This is in line with Adorno and Horkheimer's statement that mythology and Enlightenment are intertwined like night and day (Adorno and Horkheimer 8). In the rationale of the Enlightenment and mythology, it is clear that in both, the same end is sought albeit through different means, but their main stance remains the same. It does not matter how, but the Church and Lord Asriel will do everything they can to either use Dust or destroy it. The middle ground seems far off, at least at the end of *Northern Lights*. And so it

also seems that the difference between knowledge and ignorance, mentioned earlier in this chapter, is blurred in so far as that Lord Asriel *and* the Church both seem ignorant towards the consequences of their respective end goals. Lord Asriel belongs to the “higher class” of specimen in Lyra’s world and is not the one that can spread true knowledge of Dust around the world. Thus, even though the Church and Lord Asriel seem polar opposites between knowledge and tradition when one looks at the passage from the beginning of this chapter, in reality they are more alike than would be thought of at first glance. Both perceive their ends as more important than the means, and both seek to make the strange unknown “Dust” known so that they can either use or destroy it altogether. Rather, Lyra and her friends are the ones that seek to truly understand Dust for what it is, and do so in a far better and humanely manner than Lord Asriel or the Church ever could.

## Chapter 2: Mary Malone, Lyra, Will and the Understanding of Dust

### *Meeting the Protagonists: Lyra, Will and Mary Malone*

Earlier, it was mentioned how the Church and Lord Asriel conduct their secret and cruel experiments up north. Lyra, the main protagonist of the trilogy and especially of the first volume *Northern Lights*, also goes North, but for entirely different reasons. She is still a child, and what is more, curious about the world that goes beyond her nurturing at Jordan College. At the beginning of the first chapter of *Northern Lights*, the reader gets introduced to her because she is for the most part the focalization point of the novels (Ribó 72). She is introduced as a curious and perceptive child who seeks out danger. The first line of *Northern Lights* reads: “Lyra and her daemon moved through the darkening Hall, taking care to keep to one side, out of sight of the kitchen” (Pullman 9). That she is a rebellious and brave child already is evident in this first sentence. They, Lyra and her daemon, have the courage to move through “a *darkening* Hall” and are sly, preferring to keep out of sight of the kitchen lest they get caught snooping around Jordan College. A little bit later in the first novel, when the word Dust and the North are introduced, Lyra shows an immediate interest in these new, unknown phenomena and begs her uncle Lord Asriel to be taken with him to the North. When he refuses, she finds her own way through Mrs Coulter.

Her interest in these phenomena, however, is much unlike that of Mrs Coulter, Lord Asriel and the Church institutions. This is also something that the researcher Robinson notes when she speaks of Lyra’s will to go beyond Jordan College into the wide world. Her most important statement, to this thesis, in this part of the novel is that she immediately asks: “What’s Dust?” as soon as Lord Asriel is done speaking to the important people in the room of Jordan College (Pullman 30). Here, Lyra asks the same question that everyone else in the novel attempts to find out: What is Dust exactly? However, her exploration and curiosity towards Dust is different than that of the Church and of Lord Asriel. Whereas Lyra is curious

and has childlike wonder, the other two have more malign intentions, as has been shown in Chapter 1. This thesis presupposes that Lyra and her friends and allies such as Will and Mary Malone, have a different view of Dust than the other two groups and that this view coincides with the view of the philosophical strand of Object Oriented Ontology by Harman.

Before it is analysed why this is the case, it will first be argued that Will Parry and Mary Malone are other people who share with Lyra this same curiosity and wonder. They are, just like Lyra, interested in Dust and its ramifications for unselfish reasons. They have no ulterior motives to destroy Dust, like the Church, or instrumentalize it for their own ends, just like Lord Asriel. To start with Will and quickly introduce him, he is established as a character in the second volume of *His Dark Materials* and is vital to the story from that point onwards, becoming the second main protagonist fast. Unlike Lyra, who has not witnessed harsh and cruel things from the adult world, Will knows the hardships of adulthood too early. His mother is hinted to have a mental illness, and he is from a very early age a carer for her: “Will realized slowly and unwillingly that those enemies of his mother’s were not in the world out there, but in her mind” (Pullman 361-362). Here, it becomes clear that the enemies that his mother invents for Will as a sort of game are not a game at all, but something that is only happening in her mind, which is a sign of her mental illness. To return to the plot of *His Dark Materials*, at first, Will has selfish reasons to go away from his own world, since he is being followed by strange men who want his father’s letters with secret information, but as the plot thickens, he is found to be a friend of Lyra and a protector of the information they gather about everything and anyone they encounter. Will gains the subtle knife in combat, needing it to switch it for Lyra’s alethiometer (a truth-seeking instrument). When he is told that he is now the bearer of the subtle knife by the old bearer, hence the title of the second volume that is called *The Subtle Knife*, his humble nature shines through as he tells the old bearer: “But I – we only came here because – there was a man who stole something of Lyra’s, and he wanted

the knife, and he said if we brought him that, then he'd..." (Pullman 506). Here, Will has just fought another guy who wanted to have the subtle knife for himself and he has lost two of his fingers. The old bearer tells him he is now the new bearer of the subtle knife, but his reaction, as seen above, is one of denial. He cannot accept it and names why he has fought for the subtle knife. So, it is clear here that Will is a humble person who has no ulterior motives whatsoever regarding the subtle knife. It is evident that he, just like Lyra, is trying to protect something of value and helping out a friend. They are not even remotely intent on finding out what Dust is at that point in the novel. They are two humble, but brave children who per accident come across vital phenomena in both of their worlds.

Later in *The Subtle Knife*, Mary Malone comes into the picture. She is immediately connected to the phenomenon of Dust, for she is a scientist of Will's world who is researching Dust. She calls Dust "Shadows" (Pullman 432). She has already found out a great deal about Dust on her own in her lab, but lacks funding for her project. When Lyra visits her lab and can communicate with her "Shadows", Mary is taken aback. Mary goes to her own physicist partner and pleads her case with him:

And the point was, Oliver, she was communicating with them. They *are* conscious. And they can respond. And you remember your skulls? She told me about some skulls in the Pitt-Rivers Museum – she'd found out with her compass thing that they were much older than the Museum said, and there were Shadows – "Wait a minute. Give me some sort of *structure* here. What are you saying?" [...] (Pullman 553)

Immediately, Mary Malone is characterized by her words and manner of speaking as a true scientist and, possibly, a bearer of enlightened thinking in the two last volumes of the trilogy. However, this thesis argues that Mary is different than enlightened scientists in a couple of ways. Here, in this first introduction, she is instantly set apart as different than her partner researcher Oliver. While he is portrayed as logical illustratively by asking for some "*structure*", she is set in a different light for the reader. She is passionate about her subject and willing to go through great lengths to pursue her scientific experiment with the

“Shadows” that are so similar to the Dust we know from *Northern Lights*. Her passion can be easily read through this first example, the way her sentences string together is chaotic and messy, but her pure heart glues itself to her character by her clear interest and curiosity in the subject.

Later in *The Subtle Knife* and *the Amber Spyglass*, we see her bravely venturing into new worlds as she comes in contact with the *mulefa*, creatures in a different world that are able to perceive “Dust” or “Shadows” differently than humans do. Her first contact with the *mulefa* is again an example of her kindness and curiosity:

So they had language, and they had fire, and they had society. And about then she found an adjustment being made in her mind, as the word *creatures* became the word *people*. These beings weren't human, but they were *people*, she told herself [...] “Thank you,” she said to her ... her what? Her steed? Her cycle? Both ideas were absurdly wrong for the bright-eyed amiability that stood beside her. She settled for – friend [.] (Pullman 749)

Her thinking about and her talking to these creatures called the *mulefa* is immediately different than one could imagine how Lord Asriel would have responded or perhaps Mrs Coulter. Instead of seeing them as a vehicle for more information, or using their wisdom for her own ends, she decides to befriend them and pursue her scientific interest with integrity instead. At these first pages of her encounter with them, this is already clearly visible. She ponders about their language, their culture and decides to see them not as a “steed”, nor a “cycle”, but a “friend”. Later on, she is able to make, together with them, the amber spyglass, with which she is able to see and perceive Dust as golden floating particles. This is also the title of the last book, namely *The Amber Spyglass*. As a true scientist, she also discovers that these particles are floating in the wrong way, and she decides to want to do something about this matter. So, Lyra, Will and Mary Malone all three prove to be brave, kind and above all, courageous protagonists who delve into the subject of Dust with no ulterior motives in their minds.

*The Phenomenon of Dust and OOO*

As mentioned earlier, this thesis connects *His Dark Materials* to Object-Oriented Ontology (hereafter referred to as OOO), the philosophical strand of Harman, in order to show that after modernity and post-modernity, a different way of perceiving unknown phenomena came into existence. Through the whole of *The Subtle Knife* and *the Amber Spyglass*, the reader learns, along with the two children and Mary Malone and their various encounters with witches, armoured polar bears, and Will's father, about Dust and its ramifications. When thinking of OOO and its main principles, the concept of emergence is relevant considering the phenomenon of Dust. Dust is, in truth, as Mary Malone finds out, a set of floating particles, but together they form something bigger. This could be called the *emergence* of a certain form that is more than the sum of its parts (Harman 30). Dust does not comprise of one single floating particle, it rather forms a whole in and of itself with the rest of the world. It is ingrained in the very fabric of being, as the protagonists find out. One very clear example is that of Mary Malone in the big trees in the world of the mulefa:

She braced herself against a branch and took out the spyglass. Through it she saw two quite different movements in the sky. One was that of the clouds, driven across the moon in one direction, and the other was that of the stream of Dust, seeming to cross it in quite another. And of the two, the Dust was flowing more quickly and at much greater volume. In fact the whole sky seemed to be flowing with it, a great inexorable flood pouring out of the world, out of all the worlds, into some ultimate emptiness [.]  
(Pullman 1028)

Dust is here inevitably more than the sum of its parts. Its likened to a “flood pouring out of the world” in a perfect metaphor for a stream of particles flowing in only one direction. Dust seems to have emerged as one big flood or river, flowing directly into “some ultimate emptiness”. What is more, it is not only flowing to a particular point, it is flowing out of “all the worlds”. This is the climax of Mary Malone's adventure with the mulefa, as she discovers that the whole world is in danger because of the Dust particles floating in the wrong direction so that they cannot fertilize the treepod trees that the mulefa use for the making of their

wheels. It becomes clear here too that Dust has a will of its own. While at first glance in volume one, it had been described as “dark intentions” as Bird points out as well, here, it is clear that Dust is more than just a simple particle that floats around. It is conscious and alive with meaning. This also coincides with the theory of OOO about objects. Objects, to freshen up our knowledge of OOO, are things that can either be understood for their constituents or for their relations and effects. In clear language, this means that Dust can be considered an object according to OOO theory, since it is “more than its pieces and less than its effects” (Harman 53). In this branch of thought, Dust, but also the unknown society of the *mulefa* can be seen as objects in space rather than objectified species or objectified particles. With this kind of thinking at hand, it becomes even more clever what Pullman has done to the Christian faith, because now the reader might be able to grasp that Pullman is not only criticizing the Christian faith, but also the whole of enlightened modernity at hand. Another clear example of this, is through following Lyra and Will on their journey to the world of the ghosts, precipitated by a weird encounter with a man that Lyra wants to talk sense into:

“Excuse us for being in your house, but we had to escape from the men who were coming. I’m sorry if the startled you. I’m Lyra, and this is Will, and these are our friends, the Chevalier Tialys and the Lady Salmakia. Could you tell us your name and where we are?” This normal sounding request seemed to bring the man to his senses, and a shudder passed over him as if he were waking from a dream. “I’m dead,” he said. “I’m lying out there, dead. I know I am. *You* ain’t dead. What’s happening? God help me, they cut my throat. What’s happening?” (Pullman 853).

Like OOO states, not everything that can be perceived is a material, physical entity. These two qualities are clearly also not attributable to ghosts. Lyra and Will, together with OOO’s theory, undermine the Westernized thinking of the Enlightenment almost purely by existing. These ghosts are but forms that persist and what is more, they are just as real as any object that can be touched by our sensitive fingertips or our feet. Even fictional characters such as Lyra and Will are existent according to OOO. This completely debunks both the mythological and the enlightened way of thinking.



A weird encounter with a man that is dead neatly emphasizes such sentiments. The man is even self-conscious as he proclaims: “I’m lying out there, dead”, making the reader think twice about this weird situation, together with the two protagonists. “*You ain’t dead. What’s happening?*” is the next thing that is uttered by the stranger, since nobody understands how passing away works. However, in this fantasy world, this is evident: your death stays with you, sometimes close, sometimes far away, but never leaves your side. When you die, your death has caught up and takes you away. In the chapter “The Harpies” in *the Amber Spyglass*, Lyra and Will find out what it means to die. Even in such circumstances, the fairness and integrity of their souls shine through: “If we killed [the toad], we’d be taking it with us” [...] “It wants to stay here. I’ve killed enough living things. Even a filthy stagnant pool might be better than being dead” (Pullman 880). This is also in line with one of the key components of OOO, namely the flat ontology that was explained earlier in the thesis. All objects are to be treated on an equal basis as individual beings or even individual objects with agency. The toad is no less than a human and a rock no less than a toad. This way of thinking is illustrated by Will’s humility to the toad perfectly.

Thus, on their way to the land of the dead, they meet a man on a river who tells them they need to come aboard with him, leaving their precious daemons behind. The use of a river makes one think of the river of the Styx in old mythological ways of thinking, but the way that they die is so literal that it once again becomes symbolical:

Then suddenly there was the boat. It was an ancient rowing boat, battered, patched, rotting; and the figure rowing it was aged beyond age [...] He let go of an oar and reached his crooked hand up to the iron ring set in the post at the corner of the jetty. [...] There was no need to speak [...] (Pullman 882)

This crossing to the land of the dead is the hardest for Lyra, since Will’s daemon is inside of him instead of an animal that stays with him. When they need to cross to the world of the dead on that little boat with that gruesome man, they doubt themselves at first, but in the end

they agree. Going aboard is the only sensible thing to do if they are to find Roger and Will's father. It is clear, furthermore, that this boat is not a normal boat, but one meant for passage to the world of the dead. Verbs such as "battered", "patched", "rotting" and "crooked" emphasize this. What is more, it is such a rueful occasion that there "was no need to speak" any more. This clearly illustrates how strong and how forceful the bond between Lyra and Pantalaimon truly is. When they are separated, it is not without shedding some (invisible) tears, as kids will do. Not after long, Lyra and Will are officially dead.

When looking at this piece of literature, one could notice that the phenomenon of the daemons and the land of the ghosts are just as unknown to the reader as Dust is to Will and Lyra. However, in OOO's branch of thinking, these entities need to be taken into account. One can take daemons as a symbol for one's soul, as becomes clear with Will's feelings on the boat. However, the symbolic meaning of daemons and dust goes further than that, as Anne-Marie Bird enunciates in her article. As she puts it, it is "some kind of powerful energy that connects and activates both mind and body" (118). This kind of energy is evil and blasphemous for the Church in *His Dark Materials* and desirable for Lord Asriel to use as a tool to create his "republic of heaven" (Pullman 824). Bird carries on with her argument and posits that Dust is a force that starts a process of "awakening" of the body and the soul. Therefore, Dust is, according to Bird's beliefs, not "bad" per se, but rather a bridge between innocence and experience; children and adults. As Dust is able to connect the body to the mind and the other way around, it is truly able to transcend the soul and therefore, it is a connector of opposites (Bird 121).

In the end, Dust could thus very well be a connection point between Heaven and Hell, between life and death and even between child and adult. However, unlike the Church and Lord Asriel, when Lyra, Will and Mary Malone discover Dust and what it is meant for (connecting the mind to the body in a conscious state of being), they use it to save the world

instead. This means that they have to make a huge sacrifice at the end of the novel: separating from one another. At the cusp of puberty and adulthood, Lyra and Will have, indeed, fallen in love, but as soon as they have found it, they must relinquish it altogether when they find out the truth about the problem with Dust.

*Polar bears, the Authority and OOO*

OOO's flat ontology lends itself neatly to the whole of *His Dark Materials* as well. The fact that polar bears, called panserbjorne, witches and the like exist and are taken as equals to the human characters of the trilogy is one brief example of the flat ontology thinking of OOO. What is even more clear is its insistence upon objects with objectives of their own. In one famous example, the panserbjorne Iorek Byrnison warns Will of the possible ramifications of the use of the subtle knife: "I don't like that knife," Iorek said. "I fear what it can do. [...] With it you can do strange things. What you don't know is what the knife does on its own. Your intentions may be good. The knife has intentions too." (Pullman 798). Here, Iorek, an armoured and talking polar bear, is equal to any human being and what is more, has advice to give to Will. This advice of warning him for the intentions of the knife underlines OOO's belief that certain objects have an effect upon other things and that they have, above all, agency. Therefore, this example shows that OOO's object-theory and flat ontology coincide with the thinking of the protagonists of the novel and their integrity towards new knowledge about unknown phenomena such as Dust, but also such as the alethiometer of Lyra, the subtle knife of Will and the amber spyglass of Mary Malone. All three protagonists bear an instrument with them that possibly has its own uses and own agency in OOO's view. They are all considered objects, since they are constituted of certain parts *and* have an effect upon the world. This is yet again another example of how Lyra, Will and Mary Malone are the perfect examples of post-Enlightenment thinking. Instead of seeing their instruments as

merely useable objects, they garner respect for them and use them only to do good. However, even in that state of mind, *His Dark Materials* shows to be even more clever and presupposes that those objects have goals on their own. Thus, the trilogy in and of itself is drenched in OOO's way of thinking.

Another illustration of OOO's different way of perceiving the world being present in the trilogy is through the character of the Authority. When indirectly being mentioned by the revered people of the Church or by Lord Asriel, he is said to be a great man: the angel of all angels according to their belief system. This coincides with the Church's and the Enlightenment's belief that there is a hierarchy to be followed. What is more, God and the mind were said to be alike according to Adorno and Horkheimer, since they both try to dominate nature. This holds true, as has been argued, for characters of the Church and Lord Asriel too. However, OOO's way of thinking forms a stark contrast with this type of thinking, since it would never posit that nature and human beings are different in hierarchy from one another. This is something that its flat ontology would not tolerate. Therefore, God, or what *His Dark Materials* terms the Authority, would in OOO's view merely be one of many objects instead of an important figure. This view is perpetuated by the clear symbolism in *His Dark Materials*. When the Authority, the archangel, is finally shown to the reader, it is clear how unimportant he really is:

Will saw her hands pressing against the crystal, trying to reach to the angel and comfort him; because he was so old, and he was terrified, crying like a baby and cowering away into the lowest corner [...] Demented and powerless, the aged being could only weep and mumble in fear and pain and misery [...] (Pullman 993)

It is clear that the Authority is here described how he actually had evolved to look over time. The description tells the reader he is "old", "terrified", "demented" and "powerless". What is more, he is no great angel towering with his strength above the rest of them, but rather a feeble creature that is likened to a baby. This undoes the belief of the Church and of Lord

Asriel all at once of the war against the great Authority and heaven and undoes the symbolism of such beliefs that is present at the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, as mentioned in chapter one. According to OOO's belief, the Authority clearly exists and is an object, but no more than for example Will or Lyra. Therefore, the Authority has gained a symbolic meaning, namely that *His Dark Materials* seems to posit that God does not stand above the rest but is merely revered with no reasoning behind it at all. This undoes the great war against Heaven from Lord Asriel's side and the war for heaven of the Church's side. Here, Lyra, Will and Mary Malone slip between these great wars being fought and teach the reader that those wars are really about nothing at all.

No traces of enlightened thinking can be found in this kind of reasoning. Rather, Will and Lyra show Mary Malone and she in turn them that life is about doing good instead of evil. Although Mary Malone is hesitant at first to talk about such moral subjects as a scientific researcher, she slowly finds out through her encounters with the mulefa and with Lyra and Will that there is nothing more important than morale. Lyra puts this very succinctly in her first meeting with Mary Malone: ““You *got* to think about [good and evil],” said Lyra severely. “You can't investigate Shadows, Dust, whatever it is, without thinking about that kind of thing, good and evil and such.”” (Pullman 435). Therefore, the characters of Mary Malone, Will and especially Lyra go beyond mythological and enlightened thinking and take on a stance that is similar to OOO's theory about everything. Through their integrity, true curiosity and kindness, they are able to save the world in *His Dark Materials*.

## Conclusion

This master's thesis investigated how Dust is a symbol of how different groups of characters align with different concepts of knowledge of nature, and has done so through a theoretical framework of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, named OOO. This thesis found that the Church's way of thinking about Dust coincides with mythological thinking and Lord Asriel's coincided with enlightened thinking, although the two also overlap in ways. The Church's way of believing in God and his final word about Dust being the cause of original sin and holding that belief above all else is exactly akin to the way in which mythological thinking allows for human beings to set God apart from everything else in a way to keep the unknown somehow familiar to them. What is more, Lord Asriel's way of seeing Dust as a phenomenon to instrumentalize in order to end the reign of the Authority is also congruent to a certain extent to Adorno's and Horkheimer's philosophy. By separating God, or reason, apart from the thing that is being investigated, it still allows enlightened human beings to make a distinction between the two, resulting in over-instrumentalization of the world, according to the two thinkers. These types of thinking are different from how Lyra, Will and Mary Malone view and in turn, treat, Dust and the world, as has been argued in chapter two of this thesis. Harman's OOO can be applied to the way in which Lyra, Will and Mary Malone view the world. Their integrity to beings that are not our own and their insistence upon the existence of Dust and also objects such as ghosts, the mulefa, and the liveliness of objects such as the subtle knife, are an example of this.

That Lord Asriel can be equated with the Enlightenment and the Church with the age of mythology has been shown in Chapter one of this thesis. To start with Lord Asriel, at the beginning of *Northern Lights*, he is presented as the bringer of new ideas and knowledge to the setting of Jordan College. This already links him to the Enlightenment. What is more, he

desires to instrumentalize Dust for his own gain; to make a bridge between two worlds. This instrumentalization also falls neatly in line with the ideals of the Enlightenment. As for the Church in *His Dark Materials*, they are congruent with the age of mythology. This is the case because they hold true to their traditional beliefs about Dust and silence everyone who forms an obstacle to this. They seek to understand Dust in order to be able to destroy it, even if it means that they have to destroy themselves to do so. This is in line with the way in which, in the age of mythology, people believed so much in God that they would do anything for it. As for how OOO can be applied to *His Dark Materials*, a couple of examples were mentioned in Chapter two of this thesis. Dust can be seen as an object with an agency of its own according to the theory of OOO. What is more, ghosts, polar bears and witches are treated the same as the other characters, making the way in which they are treated in line with OOO's flat ontology. Apart from that, in OOO's view, the Authority is not seen as someone high above the rest, but as one of many objects, and this is also exemplified by the way in which he is portrayed in the novels; as a frail being.

As for the limitations of this master's thesis, there are a couple. First of all, this thesis solely used Adorno and Horkheimer's work on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to look into to what extent certain sets of characters in *His Dark Materials* resembled the Enlightenment and the age of mythology, leaving out other sources that might have helped to look into what the Enlightenment and the age of mythology entail. Furthermore, this thesis only addressed the novel trilogy and left the HBO series untouched. Further research could include the HBO series and could investigate how it differs from the novels in the way in which it represents the characters of Lord Asriel, the Church, Lyra, Will and Mary Malone.

All in all, it can be said that the characters and institutions that have been mentioned in this thesis do to a certain extent coincide with different concepts of knowledge about nature. In what could be called the 'God-gaze', Lord Asriel and the Church perpetuate old

mythological and enlightened thinking patterns that perceive, according to the Frankfurt philosophers, God and reason as an extension of the way in which human beings attempt to mitigate their fear of the unknown. So, in *His Dark Materials*, this is shown symbolically through their obsession and objectification of Dust. Furthermore, Will, Lyra and Mary Malone's way of curious, kind thinking can be equated with OOO's theory of everything in the way that they seek above all else to have respect for unknown factors of nature, including Dust, and to place those phenomena on the same height as their own problems and ideas.



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