

## Revealing Shadows: Using Fantasy to Explore Pullman and Rowling's Views Regarding Censorship

Genres in children's literature have been used to highlight various aspects of a story or to convey important messages. Many authors, such as J.K Rowling and Phillip Pullman, have employed genre to portray and explore difficult concepts such as death, physical illness, moral righteousness, religious beliefs and so forth. In past decades, the content in children's literature has undergone a radical change; where once subjects such as death, the soul and betrayal were unmentionable, recent children's literature authors have embraced these subjects and used generic tropes and conventions to further explore such heavy topics. Although there are many debates regarding censorship in children's literature, it is important to identify how difficult issues are explored within children's texts and the degree of explicitness that surrounds the issues. The above mentioned issues are most specifically and effectively explored in J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and Phillip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*. By analyzing death, betrayal and the soul through the lens of the fantasy genre, it can be seen that although both Rowling and Pullman expose the child to the aforementioned issues, Pullman's approach is more explicit in comparison to Rowling's, who chooses to shelter the child.

Rowling introduces the topic of betrayal through the fantasy genre. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Peter Pettigrew, who was once the friend of Harry Potter's parents, uses fantastical elements to betray Harry, Ron, Pettigrew's own friend Sirius and the wizarding community in general. Pettigrew betrays Harry's parents by breaking the Fidelius charm, which is "an immensely complex spell [in which]...information is hidden inside [a] chosen person, or Secret-Keeper, and is henceforth impossible to find- unless... the Secret-Keeper chooses to

divulge it” (Rowling 152). Pettigrew betrays Ron and the entire wizarding community by faking his own death and residing in the form of Ron's pet rat named Scabbers. Finally, Pettigrew betrays his friend Sirius Black by framing him for the murder of twelve muggles. Pettigrew's betrayal is only possible due to his power to become an animagus, a witch or wizard in the Harry Potter fantasy world who can transform into an animal. Although Pettigrew's betrayal leads to the death of Harry's parents, it is important to note that he does not physically murder them; he simply tells the antagonist of the novel, Voldemort, about their whereabouts. Readers learn this when Sirius says, “it must have been the finest moment of your miserable life, telling Voldemort you could hand him the Potters” (Rowling 271). The fact that Pettigrew did not physically murder his parents helps Harry control his desire to seek revenge; he saves Pettigrew from Remus and Sirius and refrains from chasing Pettigrew after he manages to escape. If Pettigrew had physically murdered Harry's parents, Harry's leniency would have been replaced by anger and a desire for vengeance. While determining the explicitness of an event, it is important to understand which character is directly affected by the event. Although Harry's life is deeply affected by Pettigrew's betrayal, it is his parents that are directly hurt, not Harry himself because Pettigrew was *their* friend, not Harry's. It can therefore be seen that although Rowling feels that betrayal is an important issue that children should be exposed to, it is obvious that she also believes that these ‘adult issues’ belong in the world of adults. By keeping Harry and her readers at a safe distance away from this betrayal, Rowling shelters the child from the consequences that many children who have been betrayed must deal with. This belief, however, is not shared by Pullman, who clearly feels that children have the capacity to deal with more extreme, explicit and personal disloyalties.

In *The Golden Compass*, Pullman also exemplifies the issue of betrayal through the fantasy genre; the reason for betrayal is Dust, a fantastical element within the novel. In her essay, Carole Scott explains dust as: “..‘particles of consciousness’ [which] constitute the physical [expression of] an intelligent life force... [and is] viewed as the essence of goodness, or the epitome of evil, depending on the character’s allegiance and perspective” (100). Unlike Rowling however, Pullman does not censor his work to protect the child reader, but instead, places his main character, Lyra, in one of the most horrible and intense situations of betrayal. In a child’s life, parents are caring figures who are expected to protect and shield their children from harm. In *The Golden Compass* however, Lyra’s father is the one who betrays her when he murders one of the most important people in her life, her friend Roger. He does this to gain access to energy that will allow him to bridge the gap between two worlds. When Lyra learns that she has been betrayed, she is very angry and upset, as seen when readers are given a glimpse into her thoughts: “She could have killed her father; if she could have torn out his heart, she would have done so there and then, for what he’d done to Roger. And to her: tricking her: how dare he?” (Pullman 397). Although Lyra does not predict that her father will deceive her, she is the one who brings Roger to her father’s door, unknowingly betraying her own friend. Readers are exposed to her pain when Pullman explains her feelings: “Oh the bitter anguish! She had thought she was saving Roger, and all the time she’d been diligently working to betray him....” (Pullman 380). Hearing Lyra say that she wishes to kill her own father, in addition to the fact that she betrays Roger, destroys the image of the perfect innocent child. Furthermore, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, betrayal leads to the death of Harry's parents, an experience that is articulated to the readers but, occurs before the series begins. In *The Golden Compass*, however, the reader follows Roger and Lyra through Lyra's betrayal and Roger’s tragic death. It can be

seen, therefore, that Phillip Pullman chooses to explore betrayal in a much grander, deeper and more explicit scale than Rowling. Betrayal is not the only harsh reality that Rowling and Pullman discuss in their texts; death is also heavily explored in their novels.

Death is always a difficult issue to discuss, especially in children's texts. Most often, children's literature will include the death of a family member or friend, but will focus on the grieving and the process of moving on, not the literal process of dying. In this respect, Rowling is similar. She uses the fantasy mode to portray death, which, in the Harry Potter world, either occurs through natural causes or a killing curse called Avada Kedavra. Throughout *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and the rest of the series, Rowling does not give a firsthand account of what it feels like to die via the killing curse. However, readers are aware that it is a fast process; the victim is dead within seconds, which suggests very little suffering. In the books, physical death is separated from the death of the soul; both do not die at the same time. In addition, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, death does not happen to any of the child characters; Rowling purposely keeps a comfortable distance between the child reader and death. She also takes the time to teach her audience how to cope with death. When Harry sees an image that he believes is his dead father, his headmaster Dumbledore does not deem him crazy or warn him to stay away from the dead; instead, he encourages Harry to think and honour his parent's memory. He explains to Harry that his "father is alive in [him and that in] a way, [he] did see [his] father [that] night [because he] found him inside [himself]" (Rowling 312). In her essay about the archetypal hero, Lana Whited states that "Although James Potter's death separates him from his son, Harry's feelings about his father are not ambivalent. He identifies with his father and sees him as a protector" (111). This theme, in which the dead act as Harry's guardians, resonates throughout the series, especially in the fourth and seventh novels where Rowling uses

it as a device to further the plot. Another way that Rowling throws a positive spin on death is through the Dementors, whose presence replays the last few moments of Harry's parents' lives in his head. Although this is a sad and scary moment, Rowling lightens the mood by showing the optimistic side of reliving his parents' dying moments through exposing Harry's thoughts to her readers: "terrible though it was to hear his parents' last moments replayed inside his head, these were the only times Harry had heard their voices since he was a very small child" (Rowling 180). Although Rowling does place importance on exposing children to death, she chooses to shed a positive light shed upon the issue. This sheltering is quite different from Pullman's approach to exemplifying death in *The Golden Compass*.

The way in which death is portrayed in *The Golden Compass* is shocking and forces one to question whether or not his text can be considered a children's novel. In *The Golden Compass*, death not only occurs through natural causes but also through a fantastical process known as 'intercision'. Although this process is mainly used to separate the soul, known as the daemon, from the human body, it also affects the physical life of the human. In this respect, when a person dies as a result of this process, death occurs for both the physical being and the the soul. When Lyra comes across a young boy who is dying after having his daemon cut away from him, she describes his death as a painful, drawn out process: "that little boy died...he couldn't settle, he couldn't stay in one place; he kept asking after his daemon...he closed his eyes finally and fell still, and that was the first time he looked peaceful," (Pullman 218). As seen, Pullman describes this pain as both internal and external. To further expose the pain and fear associated with both betrayal and death, Pullman uses Lyra to voice her fears about death soon after a near-death experience: "... they'd kill me out of vengeance... Why do they do these things to children, Pan? Do they hate all children so much, that they want to tear them apart like this?"

Why do they do it?” (Pullman 389). Furthermore, in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Rowling ensures that no child character dies, as it is too emotionally distressing for children to cope with. Pullman, on the contrary, not only vividly describes the murder of Roger, but does so from Lyra’s point of view as she holds Roger while he literally dies in her hands: “her heartbeats, leaping in anguish with Roger’s—tight-clutching hands—his body, suddenly limp in hers” (Pullman 393). As one can see, although both authors believe that death is an issue that children must be exposed to at an early age, Rowling chooses to portray the positive and negative aspects of death. By doing so, she not only teaches children about death, but also how to cope with the death of a loved one; rather than scare the child, she chooses to teach that healing is possible. Pullman, on the other hand, exposes the child to the explicitly gruesome and horrific circumstances that death can occur in, placing emphasis on the fact that young children can die as well. It is obvious that Pullman believes that children have the capacity to handle explicit information at its worst. The final topic that both Rowling and Pullman spend a great deal of time discussing in their novels is the concept of the soul.

One can argue that the philosophical concept of the soul can be too much for even adults to comprehend, let alone children. However, both Rowling and Pullman use the fantasy mode to help them tackle this topic and present it to child readers. Both authors invent fantastical creatures to help children understand the value of the soul; Rowling introduces soul-sucking creatures called Dementors whereas Pullman invents creatures called Daemons. Although Rowling introduces the soul in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, it is clear that the concept is not fully understood by the juvenile characters and readers. It can be assumed then, that Rowling believes that children should understand the importance of the soul, but do not have the capabilities to fully grasp the idea. When Professor Lupin, the Defense Against the Dark Arts

teacher, describes the function of a Dementor, Harry automatically mistakes the loss of a soul with physical death as can be seen when Lupin states: "Dementor's kiss...it's what Dementors do to those they wish to destroy utterly...they clamp their jaws upon the mouth of the victim and suck out his soul", to which Harry responds by saying: "What—they kill?" (Rowling 183). To help readers understand what life is like without a soul, the Dementors' aura acts as a metaphor for a person who has lost their soul; they are dark, cold, and unhappy because they have nothing to live for. Interestingly, the loss of the soul is not what horrifies Harry or his peers; it is the feeling of emptiness. The child is not invested in the idea of the soul, but rather, of life and personality. Instead of clearly separating these concepts, Rowling shelters the child character, and reader, by keeping them at a distance from this confusing and slightly scary topic. In addition, Dementors only perform a Dementors' kiss as a punishment and so, a child does not have to worry about losing their soul unless they have been misbehaving. By doing this, Rowling shifts the focus from the concept of the soul to the common and familiar theme of good vs. evil. Pullman approaches this philosophical issue in a much deeper and overt way.

Instead of describing life without a soul, Pullman decides to tackle this issue by portraying the soul as a physical being. Although very controversial, it can be seen that he uses the fantasy mode to portray the soul in a way that children can understand. The daemon, which is a physical animal attached to each person, is the literal embodiment of a person's soul. A daemon cannot be touched by another, it cannot be separated from its human counterpart and most importantly, neither part can survive without the other: "A human being with no daemon was like someone without a face, or with their ribs laid open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of nightghasts, not the waking world of sense" (Pullman 214). Pullman uses the daemon to explain the concept and importance of the soul to

child readers. To understand the concept, the reader must invest in these daemons, which is not difficult because Pullman gives them a personality, a voice, a character, and an identity. As Hines states in her essay, “Daemons make people legible to others as well as themselves....The idea of the daemon is so natural that Lyra relies on it to imagine reading a person’s face”(38). By using the daemons as a means to describe the soul, Pullman takes the time to explain how important the soul is before attempting to explain how a person is without one. This is different from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* because Rowling explains what it feels like to be without a soul before explaining what a soul is. Therefore, when Pullman describes the painful feeling that humans feel when their daemon is far from them, the readers feel the pain with Lyra:

“It was such a strange tormenting feeling when your daemon was pulling at the link between you; part physical pain deep in the chest, part intense sadness and love... The pain in Lyra’s heart grew more and more unbearable, and a sob of longing rose in her throat... she knew she would rather die than let them be parted and face that sadness again; it would send her mad with grief and terror... ‘I couldn’t believe how much it hurt’ (she says to Pan)” (Pullman 195-196).

The above quotation occurs during a passage where Pan and Lyra were (physically) far from each other. This passage was placed only a few pages before readers discover Sam, a child who had been separated from his daemon through intercision. At this point, the readers have already invested in the idea of the daemons as a character in the novel and have fully come to understand the relationship between daemon and human. Thus, the intercision process is torturous and horrifying to all readers, even though it is fantastical. In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, losing your soul is a punishment. In *The Golden Compass*, the children who lose their daemons have no choice and do no wrong; it is something that is taken away from them without



warning or permission. Although scary and explicit, it is obvious that Pullman believes that children can handle such intense subject matter if presented in the correct way.

After analyzing *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* and *The Golden Compass*, it can be seen that both J.K Rowling and Phillip Pullman use the fantasy genre to explore ideas of betrayal, death and the concept of the soul within their texts. Betrayal in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* happens by Peter Pettigrew who breaks a powerful spell and uses his animagus form to trick others. In *The Golden Compass*, Lyra's father betrays her in order to bridge the gap between the two worlds, using the power that comes from separating the daemon and the human. Rowling uses the fantasy mode to explore death via the killing curse but also takes the time to discuss how to grieve and come to terms with death in a positive light. Pullman, on the other hand, explores death in the most explicit and horrific way: through the painful process of slicing apart daemon from human, soul from body and dying a slow tortuous death. Finally, the authors tackle the concept of the soul through unique creatures. Rowling employs the use of Dementors to describe to the child readers what it feels like to not have a soul. Pullman uses daemons to help readers become familiar and attached to the soul as a character before brutally slicing it apart from its other half, leading each half to its own destruction. As one can see, although both authors find it important to discuss these topics and expose them to children, their opinions about the explicitness and degree of censorship varies. While J.K Rowling shelters the child to some extent, Phillip Pullman daringly asks the child to challenge him or herself and find the capacity to understand such large topics through an openly explicit text.

## Works Cited

- Hines, Maude. "Second Nature: Daemons and Ideology in The Golden Compass." *His dark materials illuminated: critical essays on Philip Pullman's trilogy*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. 37-47. Print.
- Pullman, Philip. *The Golden Compass*. New York: Random House, 1995. Print.
- Rowling, J. K.. *Harry Potter and the prisoner of Azkaban*. Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 1999. Print.
- Scott, Carole. "Pullman's Enigmatic Ontology: Revamping Old Traditions in His Dark Materials." *His dark materials illuminated: critical essays on Philip Pullman's trilogy*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005. 95-105. Print.
- Whited, Lana A.. *The ivory tower and Harry Potter: perspectives on a literary phenomenon*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003. Print.