

Religion in Literature: Milton, Blake, Pullman

James Middleditch sets Philip Pullman's acclaimed novel in the context of Milton and Blake, arguing that all three use literature to fight the forces of repression.

Northern Lights by Philip Pullman is the first part of the epic and increasingly complex His Dark Materials trilogy. It could be seen as an adventure story to be read by teenagers and children who want to take a step beyond the Harry Potter series. It could be seen as an adult fantasy novel; indeed, a version with a more 'adult' cover is available. In time it will come to be seen as 'the novel of the film', and for some A Level students, as one of their coursework texts. Perhaps less well-known is the fact that Northern Lights is one of the latest in a long line of literary texts that challenges the forces of repression in society.

This article aims both to highlight the ways in which Pullman opposes the repression of the human spirit, and to trace the roots of this movement back to the novel's stated influences, John Milton and William Blake. By discovering the objects of these authors' criticisms, one can see how the minds of readers are a constant battleground in which ideas of freedom and repression are fighting for support.

Lyra's forebears

Before exploring the rich vein of literary history behind the novel's plot and characters, let's look at what can be detected very close to the surface of the novel. As the first of the trilogy, Northern Lights introduces us to Lyra, who must navigate her way through a fantasy alternative universe in which 'the Church' is stealing children for experimentation and in which her father is beginning to wage war against God Himself. Readers with an awareness of Milton and Blake will quickly see their influences; a previous War against Heaven was described in Milton's Paradise Lost, while Lyra herself is evocative of Blake's own 'Little Girl Lost' Lyca, who likewise walks the blurred line between innocence and experience in his Songs.

Targetting tyrannical religion

Pullman himself identifies his target as 'organised theocratic tyrannical religion', a repressive force present in our own world and presented in Northern Lights as 'the Church' of Lyra's world. It is in Pullman's presentation of this Church and its devious agents that the author's tone becomes clear. Representatives of the Church such as Sister Clara are shown to be 'brisk, blank, sensible'. These cold, clinical adjectives establish an enemy who shows an unhealthy and ultimately dangerous interest in the changes that occur during puberty. The chillingly named 'Experimental Station' at Bolvangar is presented as a frightening hybrid of prison, hospital and laboratory: 'brilliantly lit, with the glint of shiny white surfaces and stainless steel'. Pullman delivers these descriptions, with their sinister combinations of sibilance and assonance, as if through clenched teeth. This Church is no provider of spiritual comfort and warmth, but instead is depicted as a cold, desperate organisation fusing science and religion to torture children as they enter the 'sinful', sexual phase of adolescence.

Breaking boundaries

The crucial question is then raised in the reader's mind of what relationship the Church of Lyra's universe has with its parallels in our own reality. We do not visit our own reality in the story until the second book, but the climax of Northern Lights is about breaking down boundaries, in more ways than one. For just as movement between universes becomes possible at the novel's end, we begin to realise that Pullman's depiction of the Church in Lyra's reality has important links to repressive forces that still exist in our own world. The mind of the reader has been prepared, through the unreal but uncannily familiar alternative world of Lyra, for a subsequent literary assault on repression in our contemporary society. Fiction and reality have blurred, and the centuries-old conflict begins to emerge into the open.

The shadow of Paradise Lost

One of the strongest influences on Pullman's trilogy (indeed it provides His Dark Materials with its overarching title), is Paradise Lost by John Milton. The author's acknowledgements in the final volume credit Paradise Lost as such, while Asriel's War against God can be seen as an attack to follow Satan's original one. As well as providing a narrative sequel, Pullman can be seen to continue and develop Milton's concerns about society. Milton, writing in the 17th-century, was concerned by the barriers that can exist between individuals and their worship of divinity. As with Pullman, the focus of Milton's criticism is not religion itself, but the hypocrisy and repression sometimes exercised in religion's name; as Douglas Bush has commented, for Milton:

the great root of all man's evil and sin is pride, his great need is religious humility.

Rejecting original sin

One of the most important theological crossing points between Milton and Pullman is their belief in humanity as a positive force, rather than the intrinsically sinful race of some schools of religious thought. The Fall of Mankind, brought about by Eve's response to the temptation of the serpent, is presented by Milton as being a necessary event, providing humanity with the chance to experience life, make choices, and deal with consequences. Banished from Paradise, Adam and Eve experience melancholy underpinned by a sense of adventure for what lies ahead:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon; The world was all before them

Book XII Lines 645-6

Pullman agrees with this view and creates Lyra as a direct spiritual descendent of the exiled pair; throughout Northern Lights she is presented as cheeky, disobedient and wilful, embodying the flawed humanity that Milton and Pullman are defending.

'The Church is cold'

Another influence acknowledged by Pullman is William Blake, and traces of the Romantic poet's brave criticisms of society's repressive forces can be felt throughout the trilogy, beginning with the presentation of Lyra and her enemies in *Northern Lights*. Writing a century after Milton, Blake sympathised with his disappointment over the human weakness, repressiveness and hypocrisy present in organised religion. Like Milton, Blake was deeply spiritual, and the articulation of his concerns over the cruelty and neglect present in society became a dangerous pursuit, with his *Songs* subject to legal scrutiny and even, in some cases, suppression. 'The Little Vagabond', for example, declares 'the Church is cold,/But the ale-house is healthy and pleasant and warm', a comparison that echoes Pullman's own presentation of the Church in *Northern Lights*. This poem, one of the most controversial of his *Songs*, expands on this melancholic irony, as comfort, happiness and reconciliation is sought in the places condemned by the church, because it is absent in the churches themselves.

Pullman's Blake - fighting repression

Blake's concern about the harsh, punitive nature of organised religion is allied to his abhorrence of sexual guilt and repression and here too, one sees in Pullman's narrative, the influence of Blakean ideas. Pullman, writing a further two centuries later, celebrates Blake for his vision, and, thankfully, is able to take his literary crusade against repression further, without fear of punishment or censorship. Pullman lists the human traits he opposes as 'intolerance, fanaticism, cruelty', traits that lead to the focus of Blake's anger; in the words of Peter Ackroyd, 'the general restriction of the human consciousness.' Pullman's use of themes and quotations from Blake can be seen to unite the two authors across time, to shame individuals and groups who are the forces of repression into realising their own negative influence, with the hope that they may change as a result.

Literature's radical hope

Northern Lights can therefore be seen as a spiritual successor to the literary works of both Milton and Blake. All three writers focus their criticisms on the forces of repression they see in their own societies and, between them, form a front-line, facing repression as it evolves across the centuries. Often this evolution has been manifest in the worst excesses of organised religion and repressive regimes; but the works of Milton, Blake and Pullman are also there, potentially providing a literature of hope and a radical, alternative world view to those who suffer in silence.

Full, free, uninhibited

Here in the present day, whatever role *Northern Lights* takes for its reader - innocent adventure novel for children, entertaining distraction for adults, coursework text for students - it is important to be aware of its role in the continuing battle between literature and repression. *Northern Lights* continues the campaign of Milton and Blake by challenging aspects of society that cause pain and restriction, encouraging us to be brave in defending our right to live a full, free and uninhibited adventurous life.

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