Being Alone:
Experiences of Isolation in the Imaginary Worlds of “His Dark Materials”

Graham Law
Waseda University

Abstract:
Because of its apparently unlimited freedom both to play with material settings and to explore the human consequences, fantasy fiction seems an appropriate context in which to consider the relationship between being alone and feeling alone. In other words, to consider the extent to which isolation as a psychological experience is shaped by isolation in the physical sense.


https://www.literarygeographies.net/index.php/LitGeogs
Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy

* at the **narrative** level, a series of novels founded on the idea of a multiplicity of parallel worlds (like the 'Narnia' Chronicles of the Christian apologist C.S. Lewis, of which it is in many respects a deconstruction)

* at the **philosophical** level a Blakean critique of the dichotomization of body and soul typical in the Christian tradition

* at the **psychological** level a sustained analysis of the experience of sexual maturation
The characteristics of social interaction ...

1) ... within the virtual classroom
* using a laptop camera at home occasionally brings alien beings into view or even into the conversation = house-mates, family members, domestic animals,

2) ... throughout the imaginary worlds of Pullman’s fantasy novels
* preoccupied with the physiological and psychological complexities of the state of being ‘alone’
  = in adjectival form, attributed to a human or humanized agent, and with the various senses of unaccompanied, single-handed, or solitary \((OED\ A.1.a-c)\),
  = this term occurs in this sense more than 50 times in the course of a narrative not far short of 400,000 words.
The apparently neutral phrase ‘imaginary worlds’ taking a dialectical position between --

  = not fictional spaces created by the literary imagination but socio-cultural landscapes “constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe” via migrations en masse
  = contemporary equivalents of the ‘imagined communities’ that Benedict Anderson described as generating a sense of affiliation to the nation-state during an earlier phase of modernity
  = facilitated by digital communications in a transnational media environment

* ‘virtual worlds’ from Michael Saler’s *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (2012)
  = referring to works of narrative fiction, but defined in such a way as to leave novels like Pullman’s on the margins
  = distinguishing earlier works of fantasy from the virtual worlds of the imagination that “emerged at the turn of the century [...] to secure the marvels that a disenchanted modernity seemed to undermine”
  = emphasizing the roles of media franchising and fan involvement in creating the “persistent and communal habitation” that “transforms an imagined world [...] into a virtual world”
Pullman’s “His Dark Materials” Trilogy (1): The three volumes

= the first volume of the trilogy, *The Golden Compass* [originally, *Northern Lights*], is set entirely in “a universe like ours, but different in many ways”

= the second, *The Subtle Knife*, begins in “the universe we know”

= the whole of the third, *The Amber Spyglass*, moves between not only these two similar worlds but also among a diverse multitude of others.
Pullman’s “His Dark Materials” Trilogy (2): The two young protagonists

* the girl Lyra, from the “universe like ours, but different in many ways”, introduced at the start of Vol.1
* the boy Will, from “the universe we know”, introduced at the start of Vol.2

= both acquire the ambiguous status of nomadic pseudo-orphans
= the trilogy opens/closes in Lyra’s Oxford, but resists the ‘home/away/home’ structure common in children’s literature

Will & Lyra in the BBC series “His Dark Materials”
Factors that distinguish Lyra’s world from ours

1) **historically**, that the Protestant Reformation has failed to take place and thus Western belief and knowledge systems are still under the control of a unified Church

2) **economically**, that contemporary geopolitical conflicts center not on the oil fields of the Middle East but on the coal and gas mines of the Far North

3) **biologically**, that there exist a number of advanced life forms unknown to our science

![The Northern Lights]
Unfamiliar life forms in Lyra’s world

1) fierce ice bears with technological and linguistic capacities

2) female flying witches living close to nature with life-spans measured in centuries

3) daemons, alter egos in animal form that accompany all human beings from birth to death
   = typically of the opposite sex from the human
   = able to change their physical nature at will during childhood
   = taking on the fixed form of a particular species at the time of puberty

Lyra and her daemon, Pan (in BBC series)
Close encounters of Lyra (and her dæmon Pantalaimon) with dæmonless beings (1)

A) Forming a strange allegiance with Iorek, an exile from the chivalric kingdom of the armoured ice bears
   = “He had no dæmon. He was alone, always alone. She felt such a stir of pity and gentleness for him that she almost reached out to touch his matted pelt”
   = Iorek’s suit of armour, which is self-manufactured and essential to his identity as a warrior, functions as an existential equivalent of the human’s dæmon

B) Developing a friendship with Serafina, the queen of a clan of witches
   = witches in Lyra’s world possess dæmons, but have the uncanny ability to separate themselves by vast distances from their lifelong companions
   = the witch’s ability to separate from the dæmon results from a fearsome initiation ritual
   = “There’s a region of our north land, a desolate, abominable place […] To become a witch, a girl must cross it alone and leave her dæmon behind. Having done it, they find that their dæmons were not severed […] they are still one whole being; but now they can roam free”
Close encounters of Lyra (and her dæmon Pantalaimon) with dæmonless beings (2)

C) Coming face-to-face with Tony, a human child of her own age who has in fact been severed from his dæmon = part of an experimental program sponsored by the Church, and implemented by the woman who Lyra has recently learned is her mother, to test whether such an operation can prevent the onset of sexual desires seen as the source of original sin

= Lyra traumatically encounters Tony cowering in a drying shed, “clutching a piece of fish to him as Lyra was clutching Pantalaimon, with her left hand, hard, against her heart; but that was all he had, a piece of dried fish; because he had no dæmon at all”

D) Bravely entering a new world and meeting Will, who has also just crossed over from his own world

= Strangely this time Lyra shows little fear on discovering that Will has no visible soul-companion

= “You have got a dæmon. [...] Inside you. [...] You wouldn’t be human else. You’d be … half dead. We seen a kid with his dæmon cut away. You en’t like that. Even if you don’t know you’ve got a dæmon, you have […] your dæmon en’t separate from you. It’s you. A part of you.”

= the boy can only stare at “the skinny pale-eyed girl with her black rat dæmon now sitting in her arms” feeling “profoundly alone”
Lyra and Will apart from their soul companions

* setting themselves the impossible mission of visiting the “the land of the dead” to liberate the souls of the deceased
  = including Lyra’s dead friend Roger and Will’s dead father

* Lyra belatedly comes to understand that it will be impossible for her dæmon to accompany her there
  = she thinks of “her dear Pan waiting there alone, her heart’s companion, watching her disappear into the mist” and descends “into a storm of weeping”

* Will begins to experience the same emotions of unbearable separation and loss
  = He begins to understand “whatever his dæmon was, she, too, was left behind”
  = so that the two anguished children see “their own expression on the other’s face”

Crossing the River Styx to enter Hades in Classical Mythology
Lyra and Will together

* Lyra and Will embark on their final quest to recover her soul-companion, Pan
* they discover that his has now taken on an external form and that their dæmons have shared the desolation together
* the two dæmons, like the young witch’s through the initiation ritual, now too have the ability to “roam free”
* the two dæmons resist a reconciliation and remain hidden from view
* “There was no sign of the dæmon shadows anywhere. They were completely alone.”
* Lyra and Will, “eager to be alone with each other”, find their comradeship changing imperceptibly into passion
* their daemons settle in the fixed animal forms they will retain for life and reveal themselves to the young couple

The effects of the arrows of Cupid/Eros in Classical Mythology
Lyra and Will together but apart

* No simple romantic happy ending
  = Unlike in Appadurai’s thought, ecology seems to be the enemy of multi-culturalism in Pullman’s imaginary universe

* Lyra and Will learn that every window opened to allow passage between the worlds needs to be closed again to save the ecosystem

* AND neither will be able to dwell permanently in the world of the other without mortal consequences
  = “we have to build the Republic of Heaven where we are, because for us there is no elsewhere”

* Lyra is the first to reconcile herself to this destiny and accepts it with a simple “Yes ... alone”
* Will feels “a great wave of rage and despair […] All his life he’d been alone, and now he must be alone again, and this infinitely precious blessing that had come to him must be taken away almost at once”

* but, before parting, the lovers find a romantic spot that exists in both their worlds, “a wooden seat under a spreading, low-branched tree” in the Botanic Gardens opposite Magdalen College, Oxford
  = they agree as long as they live to go there both once a year, at midday on Midsummer Day, to be alone together in their now forever separated worlds.
Elements missing from this overview of the trilogy

* major **characters** like Farder Coram, Lee Scoresby and Mary Malone
* technological **devices** like the golden compass, subtle knife, and amber spyglass
* ethnic **groups** like the gyptians, *mulefa*, and Gallivespians
* ethical **concepts** like the conscious elementary particles known in different worlds as Dust, Shadows, or *sraf*

= but no map can be as detailed as the territory it represents

Conclusions

* simply entering the virtual spaces created in works of the literary imagination can serve as welcome relief from the exigencies of our lives under the pandemic
* more, engaging with imaginary worlds of fantasy fiction may represent not so much escape from feeling alone, as therapy deriving from re-imagining the nature of being alone

* the other parallel universe novel that we will study together in isolation, is one of C.S. Lewis’s 7 ‘Narnia’ stories
Works Cited

Primary

Secondary