

# Dark Forces, Identity Crisis and Ethical Choice in Growing up: An Ethical Literary Study of *I was a Rat!* and *The Amber Spyglass*

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**Abstract:** Philip Pullman's works present sharp observation and profound exploration of the problems children face in our time. Adopting a perspective of ethical literary criticism, of its theory on ethical identity and ethical choice in particular, this paper takes a close reading of *I was a Rat!* (1999) and *His Dark Materials III: The Amber Spyglass* (2000), with a focus on their children protagonists' identity crisis. It aims to navigate the dark forces behind—the media and the fundamentalist religion—and their operation of power. Based on this analysis, this paper elucidates the ethical orientation of Pullman's works to our own world penetrated with forces alike and to the new ethical problems children face in the new century. It argues that the two books have their ethical value in presenting to children the world with no simplification of its ethically complicated and questionable state, and thereby putting those unopposed “truth” under scrutiny and inviting serious reconsideration of humanity. Growing-up, as Pullman presents in his novels, entails constant choices through which children acquire ethical consciousness and realize their ethical existence.

**Key words:** Ethical Literary Criticism; Philip Pullman; Dark Forces; Identity Crisis; Ethical Choice

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**标题:** 黑暗势力、身份危机与成长中的伦理选择: 文学伦理学批评视域中的《我过去是只老鼠》与《琥珀望远镜》

**内容摘要:** 作家菲利普·普尔曼的作品对当代儿童面临的各种伦理问题有着深刻的反映和深入的剖析。本文在文学伦理学批评的理论视域下, 重点以伦

理身份和伦理选择的理论视角解读普尔曼的小说《我过去是只老鼠》（1999）与《黑暗物质之三：琥珀望远镜》（2000）。本文聚焦小说中主人公的身份危机，剖析导致危机的两大势力——媒体及原教旨主义宗教势力——及其权力运作，指出普尔曼意在引导读者反思被相同势力浸淫的现代社会中儿童面临的新的伦理问题。本文认为，普尔曼小说的伦理价值在其向儿童呈现了真实世界中复杂、混乱的伦理现状，从而引导读者重新审视绝对的“真理”并思考人的本质。普尔曼将成长表现为不断进行伦理选择，从而形成伦理意识，实现人的伦理本质的过程。

**关键词：**文学伦理学批评；菲利普·普尔曼；黑暗势力；身份危机；伦理选择

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In his elucidation on the moral value of children's literature, Jack Zipes exalts Phillip Pullman for his works present the dark forces of our time, their threat to our world, and the deceit they tell our children.<sup>①</sup> Pullman's works foreground a lot of ethical issues confronting children today, the moral power of which, however, has not been profoundly explored and appreciated in China today. Within the theoretical paradigm of ethical literary criticism, this paper takes a close reading of *I was a Rat!* (1999) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), the last book of the trilogy *His Dark Materials*, with an objective to navigate the dark forces and the identity crisis they pose to children. It is also the aim of this paper to illuminate how the fictional catastrophe tactfully alludes to the moral disaster children experience in the new century. It argues that the two books present children a reality with no simplification of its ethically complicated and questionable state, and thereby invite serious reconsideration of what is true and what it takes to be human. Growing up, as Pullman presents in his novels, entails constant choices through which children acquire ethical consciousness and realize their ethical existence.

## I

When the narrative begins in *I was a Rat!*, the paradoxical scenario in which a little boy claims that he was a rat brings the identity problem to the fore. Though the appearance presents him as human, his claim and scruffy behavior like that of a rat's strongly suggest the different. Who is he? Is he a boy or a rat, or a boy/rat hybridity? The identity problem thereby forms the ethical knot around which the

whole narration revolves.

The boy coming from nowhere starts his civilization process the moment he steps into Bob and Joan's house. Bob and Joan name the little boy "Roger"—a name Bob wants to give his own son if he has one. This naming process implies the ethical relationship built between Bob, Joan and Roger, as that between parents and children, and thus gives Roger an identity as a human boy and as Bob and Joan's foster son. With his new name, Roger starts to claim "I'm a boy" and that he is going to stay a boy (*I was a Rat!* 27). To adapt to his human identity, Roger endeavors to learn social rites and codes: he learns to eat like human, to walk with clothes on, to say thank you and sorry when necessary, and to refrain from his rat behavior. Meanwhile, however, there are forces overwhelmingly push him to the opposite side, and the newspaper *Daily Scourge* is one of the most powerful among them. It pins down the identity of human-rat hybrid on Roger for sensational story sells. And that causes Roger's identity crisis by having him confused of who he really is and by cornering him to chaos where he is made to resume the animal nature.

With *Daily Scourge*, Pullman has his target levelled against press in our time. He has the discourse of *Daily Scourge*'s coverage "strongly reminiscent of British tabloids such as *The Sun* or *The Daily Mirror*" (Joosen 199). Its announcement of the Prince's engagement, for instance, with the diction "The Playboy Prince," is an epithet that the "popular press associates with Prince Edward of Britain or Prince Albert of Monaco" (Joosen 199); thereby Pullman strings an easy association between the *Daily Scourge* with the newspaper in the real world, for which, to use McLuhan's words, "news was not only to be reported but also gathered, and, indeed, to be made" (McLuhan 211), and making the news implies "a world of action and fictions alike" (212). In *I was a Rat!* the report of Roger as a hybrid monster is an action of making news, making seamy news in particular. In a fiction-like way, with words like "subhuman creatures" and "evil and bloodthirsty" for sensational effect. As such, *Daily Scourge* makes up a story about Roger's identity, by only spreading the evil and monster side while blocking out facts to other effects. The fabricated stories, instead of news based on facts, cause Roger's identity crisis with the not correct-informed readers calling for his extermination.

The assertion of the *Daily Scourge* is not only a reminiscent of newspaper, but also an innuendo of all the media forms in our time. The escalation of transmitting speed made possible by new technology brings about an era of implosion in which media is the message, for "it is by the technological support that each 'message' is in the first place transitive towards another 'message,' and not towards a

human reality” (Baudrillard, *The Uncollected Baudrillard* 42). This implosion of information, however, “rather than producing meaning, it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning...it is a circular process—that of simulation, that of the hyperreal. The hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished”(Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 80, 81). In Roger’s case, the real existence and the endeavor he makes to form a human identity disappear in the implosion of information among newspapers. After the report of Roger as a human-monster, “other papers joined in, the publicity campaign was built up,” before long the monster was “the main topic of every newspaper” (*I was a Rat!* 122); data, words, pictures, abstract signs bounce back and forth between those papers, circulating and strengthening the human-monster image while stop short of reaching out of this simulation of reality. This “circular process”, as Baudrillard explains, goes against “the objective ‘message’ of real information, of meaning,” and “neutralize the lived, unique eventful character of that which it transmit, to turn it into discontinuous ‘message’, a sign which is juxtaposable among others” (Baudrillard, *The Uncollected Baudrillard* 42). In Roger’s case, the implosion of information among newspapers blurs the boundary of the real and the simulation of the real. Roger’s real, multi-dimensional existence disappears in the process of media transmission, with phantasmagoric character cast on him, so abstract that can be labelled on anyone else. In the implosion of information simulating the identity of Roger, the real existence of Roger goes absent from the public eye.

Besides, Pullman presents how media conspire with political, intellectual and legal forces to have its fabricated “fact” turned into truth unopposed. With the great public involvement created by the *Daily Scourge*, politicians smell their chances. The unpopular Prime Minister takes a close interest in the monster news for “it was a great help to have something else on the front pages of the papers, and even better to have something new for the public to hate” (*I was a Rat!* 118). Thus the Chief Scientist is sent to “find the monster as loathsome as possible and to spin out examination for as long as possible” (*I was a Rat!* 118). In order to avoid the newspaper turning public fury towards them, the Government decides to hold a tribunal under a High Court Judge. The alliance of important powers thereafter has been accomplished; Roger’s identity as a hybrid monster has now been made a scientific truth proved, an issue on political agenda and a legal case to be solved. The great forces conspire together and negate Roger’s effort to become a human boy. At the end of the story, the criticism levelled against media and its complice made more obvious through Roger’s words, “‘I could go on being a boy,’ said

Roger, ‘If only they’d let me. I can do it quite well most of the time, except when they make out I’m something else under earth.’” (*I was a Rat!* 160)

## II

In *The Amber Spyglass*, written at the beginning of the 21st century, fundamentalist religion is dealt with as another force under question, and thereby brings us to reconsider the “truth” created by power institutions, by extreme religion in particular, in our own world. Like in *I was a Rat!*, Pullman focuses on the identity crisis those forces instigate for children.

The identity crisis is represented in *His Dark Material* in a metamorphic expression, the intercision of daemon from children. Daemon is a fictional incarnation of human identity with its human/animal dichotomy. As an integral part of human being in Lyra’s world, the animal form of daemon signifies the corporeal nature. Besides, daemon is an embodiment of conscience on the part of its host legible in combat between good and evil, with moral consciousness as its core. Thus the doubling feature of daemon presents a combination of human identity, as Maria Warner observes that “[a] daemon—like Plato’s daimon—is the personal, metamorphosing, animal familiar that everyone has in Lyra’s world, ...an alter ego who plays the part of conscience, chorus, confidante, subconscious and superego all at once.”<sup>②</sup> Besides the doubling motif, daemon also represents social identity: the rank of the daemon in the animal world corresponds to the social status of its host, as Maude Hines points out that while members of the aristocracy have diverse daemons, servants’ daemons are always canine (39). Using an animal form to present the combination of multiple human identities is not as paradoxical as it appears, for our existence as human being and the relationships it entails in the social network—our relation with the self, with nature and with others—are all closely related to the self’s interaction with its animal nature.

As to children, their daemons, unlike those of the adults, are capable of metamorphosis and will have its form settled till they grow up. In their growing up process, children have “their daemons changing to mood or necessity” (Hines 38); every conscious or unconscious response to the changing conditions and every choice made all cause the transformation of daemons. This transformation demonstrates character and quality formed in the process and also connecting “with growing awareness of multiple selves, contradictions, unpredictability” in a single person.<sup>③</sup> Daemon changing from something weak to something strong, for instance, can be an exhibition of its host’s conscious choice to be strong, to fight against their natural desire or outside evilness. Once grow up, children’s daemon

will settle at a fixed form, an embodiment of children's maturation with their identity formed, as is said in the novel that "when your daemon settles, you'll know the sort of person you are" (*The Golden Compass* 167). A seaman, for example, may have his daemon settle as a seagull, which means he is a kind of "tough old thing" and can "survive anywhere and always find a bit of food and company" (*The Golden Compass* 167).

The intercision of daemon off children therefore is a great threat to children as a repression of their initiative in making choices as to construct their identity. Children with their daemons cut off die quickly; those still alive are losing their human vigor and vitality, "like someone without a face, or with their ribs open and their heart torn out: something unnatural and uncanny that belonged to the world of night-ghast, not the waking world of sense" (*The Golden Compass* 214). Children are turned into soulless, ghastr-like inhabitants, the walking dead with their ethical identity stripped of them.

It is the final book in the trilogy that reveals the motive behind the castration of children: the repression of free will necessary to the construction of absolutism and authoritarianism, to build "a permanent inquisition in every world, run directly from the Kingdom" (*The Amber Spyglass* 61). This absolute power institution is pursued in the name of truth, the theological truth to be more specific, which is brought under question in *The Amber Spyglass*. In *The Amber Spyglass*, the popular perception of Heaven and Hell, Good and Evil in Lyra's world turns out to be the lies fabricated by the first angle. The first angle claims that he is the Creator, It fabricates the "truth" about the Dust, claiming that Dust is connected with Original Sin and must be done away with. The fact is, the so claimed creator and "truth" about sin is to stop the forming of self-knowledge and to protect the authority of the first angle. Through intercision of daemon as to do away with dust, the first angle can have children more credulous and molded to his will, eliminating all the possible rebels and instable factor threatening his authority by preventing "conscious beings of every kind...become dangerously independent" (*The Amber Spyglass* 61).

Fundamentalist organizations are established to spread the fabricated "truth," with priest and nuns, scholars and scientists blinded and brain-laundried as disciples, preachers and the protectors. They conspire together in the name of truth and create a moral dystopia: the church turned into "fanatical persecutor of children, the inventor of hideous machines to slice them apart and look in their terrified little beings for any evidence of sin" (*The Amber Spyglass* 200); sinful act is committed for absolution is granted by the church in advance; Hell is replete with people both good and evil; weapons of large-scale destruction are made to

protect the “truth,” environment deteriorates and Armageddon is on the edge.

With religious truth put under question in *The Amber Spyglass*, the book invites us to reconsider power institutions in our modern world which claim to have truth at their hands. In this sense, the *Amber Spyglass* continues Pullman’s exploration in *I was a Rat!* of those dark forces capable of fabricating “reality” and “truth” and posing a great threat to children. In his lecture on the republic of Heaven written in 2000, Pullman writes “of all the dangers that threaten us at the beginning of the third millennium...one of the biggest dangers of all comes from fundamentalist religion”(qtd. in Tucker 124), and he picks out in particular the threats posed by extremists and terrorists. In a broader sense, the criticism encoded in *The Amber Spyglass* is leveled against all power institutions claiming to have truth at its hand with the tendency to authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

### III

*I was a Rat!* and *The Amber Spyglass*, written at the threshold of a new millennium, can be perceived as Pullman’s prophecy for the Twenty First Century. With the adventure of his protagonists, Pullman suggests ways of confronting those dark forces with ethical choices. Pullman shows that children can survive the challenge and can make the right choice to realize their moral maturation.

Ethical literary criticism grounds growing-up on its terminology of humanity as a composition of Sphinx Factor. Sphinx Factor is composed of human factor and animal factor: the animal factor “is the designation to the animal nature human being retains through evolution,” and the “human factor is the ethical consciousness that helps man realize its moral existence”(Nie 274,275) <sup>④</sup>. Thus growing-up entails two necessary stages: the first stage of natural selection and the second stage of ethical choice. Natural selection is a result of evolution, which gives man their human body. Ethical choice thereafter enables the forming of moral consciousness, and realizes human beings’ ethical identity. As to children, their birth is the result of natural selection through which they get the human form and inherit the animal nature retained through evolution. Compared with adults, children’s cardinal goal is to satisfy the natural instinct and therefore they are more of a natural being. In growing up, children start maturation and socialization process, the most important part of which “is the formation of moral consciousness”(Nie 267). The two stages of growing up as elucidated in ethical literary criticism is a further development of Rousseau’s theory on adolescence. Rousseau holds that “we are born twice”; “the first time for existence, the second for life,” and while children’s major work is to explore the physical world, adolescence need to raises their awareness of the self as

a moral being related with others in a social network. <sup>⑤</sup>

In *I was a Rat!* and *His Dark Materials*, children are depicted with their nature as ethically complicated and immature. Jossen points out that Pullman compares Roger to an animal, but pardons his behavior by “explaining that he merely follows his instincts, acting not as an immoral but as an amoral being” (205). From the perspective of ethical literary criticism, Pullman’s depiction of children presents a notion of childhood “as a stage of moral unconsciousness; Children are more of natural existence, closer to animal, lacking in moral consciousness” (Nie 269). In *I was a Rat!*, the metamorphosis from rat to a little boy can be seen as a metaphoric presentation of natural selection, and Roger’s first claim that “I was a rat” hints the animal nature retained thereafter. Roger acquires human body, but his scruffy habit shows his unawareness of humanity, and he himself has no great difference from animal. Roger is described as weak and vulnerable, a very “little boy” who is still at the starting point on the road of socialization and civilization. At this stage, Roger’s choices are mostly natural choices, and that’s why he constantly makes innocent mistakes though he tries really hard to accommodate to human society. What Pullman emphasizes in *I was a Rat!*, thus, is the fact that after the stage of natural selection, ethical consciousness needs to be developed as to grow up into a real human being, the first step of which is to distinguish man from animal, to know their difference, as shown through Roger’s choice of being a boy in the boy/rat options and of staying as a boy by learning the social rites and codes of manner while refraining from his rat’s habits.

Roger’s identity crisis caused by media and its complice is Pullman’s observation of the difficulty of growing up in the modern world where media, for commercial interests, are more attractive to the animal side of man and the sensational effect it causes, and where “biographers, satirists and journalists are eager to cut down anyone who might otherwise seem to be setting a reasonably good or possibly even a heroic example”(Tucker 117). For little children like Roger whose ethical consciousness is yet formed, this morally questionable environment manipulated by those powers thus transmits confusing information to them as to what it really means to be a human being. Under the pressure of those forces, the worst scenario, like what happens to Roger, is that children are forced to choices that satisfy their animal nature and unable to realize their ethical maturation.

While *I was a Rat!* emphasizes the initial stage of growing up, *His Dark Materials* is concerned with older children at the threshold of adolescence. Through the two protagonists Lyra and Will, *The Amber Spyglass* shows the moral implication of being a human and presents growing up as a constant choice-making



process, just as Tucker observes that Lyra and Will set an example of the fact that “all human beings have to make important choices throughout their lives, the better they choose, the better it will ultimately be.” (114)

Considering that the very ethical crisis is caused by lies preached as truth in *The Amber Spyglass*, it is quite natural that Pullman has truth as its quintessential core in Lyra’s adventure. As a mischievous child, Lyra has a specialty to make up innocent lies and make them sound genuine like truth. When Lyra confronts Harpies at the land of the Death, she quite naturally chooses to lie to them, but this time Lyra learns her lesson. The harpy “no-name” reacts violently to Lyra’s lies and attacks her while calling her Liar; The harpy is so furious that “the word echoed back from the great wall in the fog, muffled and changed, so that she seemed to be screaming Lyra’s name, so that Lyra and liar were one and the same thing” (*The Ambers Spyglass* 293). The pun of Lyra’s name shows Pullman’s moral intention for “the whole episode is a reminder that Lyra’s very name...can also be heard as ‘liar’ as well” (Tucker 109). Through all her childhood, lying is a handy solution Lyra knows and capable of making to protect herself and to survive, but at the Land of the Death Lyra gets her epiphany as a ritual of maturation: She realizes that lies do not work: “I can’t do it anymore—I can’t do it! I can’t tell lies! I thought it was so easy—but it didn’t work—it’s all I can do and it doesn’t work” (*The Amber Spyglass* 294). And thereafter Lyra chooses to tell the true story of human experience to those ghosts and harpies thirsty for the liveliness of it. It is Lyra’s true story that feeds the evil-cultivated harpies with warmth and kindness. They discard their intension to kill and instead try to help those ghosts to enter the other world: “It was true. Because we had no idea that there was anything but wickedness. Because it brought us news of the world and the sun and the wind and the rain. Because it was true” (*The Amber Spyglass* 317). Lyra learns from her choices “the necessity of evolving a true and creative imagination, as distinct from a fanciful one” and “this capacity of shaping meaningful stories with unmediated experience is what Percy Bysshe Shelly called ‘the great instrument of moral good’” (Lenz 7). This instrument of moral good is different from reality mediated and “truth” fabricated by power institutions. Lyra’s different choices and their consequences decode the moral implication that in truth there lie the good and the beautiful.

Through Lyra’s choice, Pullman presents what he sees as the genuine truth. Different from those manipulated by power institutions as unopposed moral regulator, truth is “drawn on knowledge of what it is really like to be alive, aiming to get everything exactly right as she sees and feels it” (Tucker 109). It is Pullman’s moral solution to a time with reality mediated through media, with “truth”

fabricated to control, a time in which “human life and its meaning are devalued, and in their place various individuals and objects, rituals and traditions are invested with ultimate value”(qtd. in Leet 175). The ghosts, when entering into the new world, urge Dr. Mary Malone to tell true stories, “They need the truth. You must tell them true stories, and everything will be well” (*The Amber Spyglass* 432).

From unmediated life experience come lessons important to learn, just like Mary learns through her own choice of stopping being a nun that flesh and earthly love is beautiful, something integral to humanity, and just like Lyra and Will learn from their choices that dark forces are inevitable and they cannot escape to a utopia world but should take their responsibility to set things right. Pullman reveals to children the causes of evil in their own world, and the alternative way of growing up in search of the genuine truth, as Tucker points out “Lyra stands for the author himself, and his corresponding efforts to get at what he sees as the genuine truth in his imaginative vision of the world, however much this might offend various interested parties along the way” (109).

In *I was a Rat!*, Pullman unveils to his children readers a world in which media simulates the reality, with little kids at the stage of natural selection as the most vulnerable victims. In *The Amber Spyglass*, Pullman continues his observation of reality and truth mediated through power institutions and once again warns his children readers of an ethically questionable world. Unlike *I was a Rat!*, Lyra and Will are presented as heroic example bravely taking initiatives; they are “shown throughout to be independent, largely insulated from social influences and very much their own creations” (Tucker 117). With these two moral examples, Pullman makes it clear that it is our choice and deed decide who we are, and defines what is good and what is evil; growing up into a morally mature adults does not mean to preach and judge with virtuous codes but to practice them in daily choices, just as his character Mary Marlonne makes clear that “good and evil are names for what people do, not for what they are” (*The Amber Spyglass* 447).

### 【Notes】

① See Jack Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002) .

② ③ Qtd. in Maria Warner, “Magic and Transformation in Contemporary Literature and Culture,” The Robb Lectures in 2004. <<http://www.auckland.ac.nz>>.

④ Quotations from Nie are all translated by the author of this paper.

⑤ Qtd. from Jean-Charles Seiguret, *Dictionary of Literary Theme and Motif A-J*, <<https://books>>.

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