

Banality in Philip Pullman's Trilogy, *His Dark Materials*

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Abstract—The present article focuses on the concept of Banality introduced by Brian McHale, a contemporary literary theorist from America, in his *Postmodernist Fiction* [1] as a shared feature of postmodern Science Fiction and Fantasy Fiction. Firstly, the concept of Banality is analyzed to provide a panoramic view of the notion for a close reading of *His Dark Materials* in relation to this concept. Next, the researcher focuses to see to what extent the text can be read regarding this element so as to examine the degree to which the text proves to fit into both genres of Science Fiction and Fantasy Fiction and to see if supports are found regarding the text being labeled as a “crossover” novel. Finally, findings of this specific trend of approaching *His Dark Materials*, are presented.

Keywords—Banality, postmodern, Science Fiction, Fantasy Fiction

I. BANALITY

Banality is a shared feature of postmodern science fiction and fantasy fiction. The term was first used by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* [1] as a shared characteristic of the two genres. He defines the term as “the character’s failure to be amazed by paranormal happenings [which] serve to heighten our amazement.” [1]

In these two genres, the reader deals with the worlds which are blends of reality and superficial. The reader who is a person from the world, the world which is “constructed through narrative and through media,” [2] reads the text with their concept of the “real” and the “normal.” Consequently, when they face a paranormal entity, they expect the surprise on the side of the character. Hence if the character fails to be amazed by the paranormal, the reader’s surprise is heightened for they expect to see a type of reaction in the character who is confronted with the paranormal.

Characters’ failure regarding the sense of amazement they could have at the moment of confrontation with a paranormal entity can have its own reasons which are possibly justifiable by the characters of the novel and the conditions they are in but they are not to the concern of the present study.

Although the concept of banality with the discussed attribution may seem new, the character’s failure to be amazed by the paranormal in postmodern fiction is driven from Expressionist fiction writing technique.

Expressionist writers started using “symbolism and dream-like elements in their work[s]” [3] to help them illustrate “alienation.” “They rebelled against priority and “common sense,” against authority and convention in art and

in life.” [4] It is also noted that their use of grotesque and implausible is an important feature of their works. [4] In addition, Farah Yeganeh asserts that fantasy and exaggeration were used by expressionists. [5] Therefore, it is possible to trace the use of paranormal in expressionism known by David Macey as a reaction to realism. [6] It is also possible to see that fictional characters of expressionist works are not amazed by the paranormal.

Looking at Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, for instance, the character wakes up to realize that he is an insect. His family members, though being disgusted because of having an insect at home, show no trace of amazement dealing with the paranormal change and take it for granted as if nothing important has happened. However, the reader feels amazed by the characters in the novel that ignore the paranormal phenomenon.

Overall, in the present chapter, the reader is invited to inspect the text to see if instances of banality are found in *His Dark Materials*, and to examine the text to see which characters in the novel contribute to different moments of banalizing the reader.

II. BANALITY IN *HIS DARK MATERIALS*

Lyra, the female protagonist of *His Dark Materials* is introduced to the reader through the very first line of the novel. She has got a *dæmon* with her who can have different shapes. The reader can see Lyra and the people of her world take these creatures called “*dæmon*” for granted, and they fail to be amazed by such paranormal beings that are always with them and have animal shapes, changing their shape if they belong to children and having fixed shape if they are a part of adults. The whole phenomena belong to the world of paranormal. In addition, the characters in the novel fail, at least, to be amazed by the changing shape of *dæmons* in children and the fact that their shape does not change not in adults. Double paranormal quality of the condition leads the reader to go through the phase of banality for the second time though it is yet almost the beginning of the novel. It is also far from normality that no one in the novel talks about the way and the time *dæmons* are born. The failure of the characters in Lyra’s world to notice the paranormal gap of information can add to the reader’s sense of banality. Moreover, the ability of these animal-shape creatures to speak, to argue, and to be able to reason is connected to the realm of paranormal; however, the fact that it does not amaze the characters in the novel creates banality in the reader.

Taking different interpretations of *dæmons* into consideration, the reader may experience banality once more.

Dæmons are considered to be “souls” by the characters in the novel. Lenz asserts that they “are souls in animal form.” [7] Deborah O’Keefe also explains that a dæmon is “an external soul in the shape of a talking animal.” [8] Although having visible soul, or as Squires calls a “personified” soul, is thought of as paranormal in the world we live in, characters in *The Golden Compass* are not amazed by them and take them for granted. Dæmons are identified as human consciousness or human psyche as well. Having both interpretations in mind, one can feel the paranormal quality of their external and physical presence. And since characters fail to be amazed by the paranormal phenomenon, the reader experiences a more extreme moment of banality.

As we go further, it is revealed to the reader that not only does a dæmon follow its human everywhere but also it can read their mind. For instance, once when Pan asks Lyra what she has in mind, she says she has nothing in mind, and tells Pan, “and well you know it.” [9] The character’s failure to be amazed by the paranormal quality of the fact that the dæmon can read its human mind provokes a strong sense of surprise known as banality in the reader. It also takes the reader by surprise to see that people are able to discuss something or even quarrel with their dæmons, and fail to see how contrary to normality the whole thing is.

Going through the novel, the reader meets Lord Asriel who is presenting some information which has to do with Dust. At this point, the reader confronts the notion of “severed child,” [9] which means a child whose dæmon is separated from them. In the context of *His Dark Materials*, such a thing is a concept belonging to the realm of paranormal. However, although everyone in the room feels surprised, Lord Asriel fails to share the feeling with his audience in reaction to this paranormal phenomenon, and this gives the reader another moment of experiencing banality created by Lord Asriel’s failure to be amazed by an extremely paranormal phenomenon.

Talking about the armoured bears of Svalbard, Lord Asriel and some of the masters who are in the Retiring Room do not feel especially surprised to hear they have some human qualities or they are planning to establish a university for bears. The reader is amazed at this point to see how the characters fail to feel amazed by such element from the world of supernatural, and how they take it as a probable phenomenon in the realm of reality.

Introducing the alethiometer, which is explained by Squires as a “truth-telling device,” [10] is also another element contributing to the creation of banality on the reader’s side. The first time the reader gets to know the instrument, it happens through the conversation between the Master Lyra has in Jordan College and the Librarian. Having a device which can tell you about present and future is not something normal and ordinary but rather superficial, and the moment the reader observes that the Librarian, similar to the Master, fails to be amazed by the power of alethiometer, they feel highly amazed. Later in the novel, when Lyra’s Master gives her an alethiometer, she merely seems curious to see what it is and how it works. Alethiometer is not a normal object which can be given to everyone, but Lyra does not seem, at least in this scene, to be

very amazed by it while great sense of wonder exists on the side of the reader. Lyra helps the feeling be reinforced when she shows no surprise when she is told that no more than six of the alethiometers exist in the world, and that others need to have guide books to read the instrument whereas she has to learn it on her own. In other words, not only does Lyra’s failure to be amazed banalize the reader, but also Lyra’s ignorance to the fact that she is a special person adds to the reader’s extreme feeling of astonishment.

Later, the reader feels amazed by the way Farder Coram deals with supernatural and paranormal insect-like spies sent around by Mrs. Coulter to find more about Lyra and where she lives. Quite contrary to Lyra who shows strong resistance against the paranormal happening, Farder Coram has good information about them and is not amazed by their quality. Although he is slightly surprised for he says he thought he would never see one again, he is not amazed by their existence because he knows about the creature well. Here, both Lyra and the reader experience banality since Farder Coram fails to be amazed by the paranormal phenomena.

Farder Coram John Faa, and Lyra’s plan to meet Lapland witches and ask them for help is another paranormal element towards which no character shows wonder, and it makes the reader feel extreme sense of banality. Although Lyra is eager “to know more about the witches,” [9] she does not seem amazed. It is as if she has no wonder regarding this paranormal happening quite like the gyptian men on the boat. Others show their lack of amazement and soon after Farder Coram’s story of his helping the witch is over, they start to turn “their talk to the matter of fuel and stores” [9] which are ordinary issues, as though the story of witches is an ordinary thing to happen similar to other natural normal notions and does not need them to occupy their minds with it.

The first book of the trilogy, *The Golden Compass* ends where Lyra and her father, Lord Asriel, step into a new world. *The Subtle Knife* begins in Will Parry’s world which is similar to the one the reader belongs to. Will who is a ten-year-old child of a lost explorer, comes across an entry to another world. The time he sees the entrance,

Will knew without the slightest doubt that the patch of grass on the other side was in a different world. He couldn’t possibly have said why. He knew it at once, as strongly as he knew that fire burned and kindness was good. He was looking at something profoundly alien. [11]

However, the reader who lives in a world similar to this finds it paranormal to see an entry to another world, and is markedly amazed by Will’s failure to be amazed. Not only does Will fail to resist the paranormal, but also he tries to enter the new world willingly and with no hesitation.

In Cittągszce, Will and Lyra meet some children who do not have any dæmons with them. The reader expects Lyra to feel surprised for to Lyra, it is impossible that people have no dæmons but she fails to feel so, as if she is used to people

with no dæmons, and this gives the reader the feeling of being banalized.

Moreover, when the children of Cittągszze speak about the Specters who have attacked their city and eat adults but cannot harm children, no special reaction is seen in Lyra or Will despite the paranormal nature of the event.

Later, for Lyra, getting to Will's world is another experience of paranormal but although she is slightly surprised by the noise and cars in Will's Oxford, she fails to be surprised in confrontation with something which is superficial in her world.

The next instance of banality is created in the reader's mind when they see Lyra telling Will all about her world and the events she has been through, but Will shows no trace of amazement towards what he hears and it leads the reader to feel banalized.

Later, Will and Lyra once more drive the reader towards banalization when Will is chosen to be the bearer of the "subtle knife," but the children are not much surprised by the paranormal happening.

In addition, when they hear that they can cut through worlds using the subtle knife, they fail to be amazed by the paranormal power of the knife and its bearer as if it is a usual and commonly accepted thing to happen. They are not even surprised to know that the bearer cannot leave the knife and has to carry it till the next bearer takes it away from him.

The following instance of banality is experienced by the reader while Dr. Grumman, or John Parry as his real name is, and Lee Scoresby are speaking. While John, Will's lost father, is telling Lee how he has come to this world, he mentions that when he came to this world, he saw his dæmon, Sayan Kötör there. The notion is expected to surprise Lee, a person from Lyra's world to whom what John describes is much of paranormal, but he fails to be amazed and that reinforces the reader's amazement to the extent McHale calls banalization.

The next person who creates a new sense of heightened wonder in the reader is Lyra. At the time Will and Lyra were fighting with a group of children who thought Lyra and Will should not have taken the subtle knife away, they see Serafina Pekkala's dæmon. In reply to Lyra who told the dæmon to ask Serafina to come down for help, the dæmon told them that the witch needs to be in the sky to be safe from the Specters, and that the clan has already lost a witch who was killed by the spirit invaders known as "Specters." Dealing with witches, it may seem paranormal that a witch is vulnerable and can get killed by the Specters who are a type of spirits, but there is no sign of wonder or amazement in Lyra and Will. Their failure to be amazed by such paranormal happening makes the reader of *The Subtle Knife* more amazed.

Moving back to Will's world, the reader meets Mary Malone and her colleague Oliver Payne talking about the authorities' evil plan to "manipulate consciousness." Though it does not have a plausible nature, Oliver fails to be affected or be amazed by its paranormal nature and it gives the reader, who lives in a world similar to the one belonging to them, a strong sense of banality.

The reader is next banalized by what Ruta Skadi, who has just come back to her clan and the children, starts telling them about what she has just learned about the universe. The first paranormal piece of information is the existence of other worlds in other worlds who live short and there are some male ones among them. Here, the reader expects to see the witches who live long and are all female beings to be amazed by what they hear from Ruta, but the members of Serafina's clan as well as the two children fail to be amazed leaving the reader doubly amazed.

Ruta next refers to her meeting with Lord Asriel in his chamber where she tries to learn more about his plans and activities. Lord Asriel, based on what Ruta tell him, is trying to challenge the Authority, meaning God in the context of both Will and Lyra's worlds, and to fight against him, and asks the witch all to join him. In Will and Lyra's world God is defined by church as super power, a type that can never be fought, so Ruta's words should trigger, even if not much but a bit of, amazement in them but no trace of wonder is seen in them. This causes more excitement in the reader.

Thirdly, she describes how she could hear a grandfather cliff-ghast telling the young ghast around that Lord Asriel would be the winner of the war, and he will destroy the Authority. It also is a paranormal notion introduced to the reader through Ruta, but characters fail to be amazed by this third piece of information as well.

The second book of the trilogy ends where Will, who has now lost his father and cannot find Lyra, meets two *Bene elims* whose name in Will's language mean 'angle.' Although angles are paranormal beings, and it is the first time he meets such creatures, Will fails to be amazed by their presence and this leaves the reader in the state of banality almost at the end of the second book of *His Dark Materials*.

In *The Amber Spyglass*, banality is seen when in several cases characters of the novel fail to be amazed by the paranormal phenomena they face.

Firstly, the novel starts where Will learns more about Balthamos and Baruch, the two angles who came to take him to Lord Asriel. However, he made them accept to help him to find Lyra before going to Lord Asriel. They tell Will what they know about the paranormal, but the information cannot amaze Will.

The next time Will fails to be amazed by the paranormal is when he understands he can see angles if there is smoke or fire but this as well does not amaze him.

In addition, Lord Asriel, who as what McHale asserts in *Postmodernist Fiction*, seems to have accepted all the paranormal "quite matter-of-factly" [1] fails to be amazed by all paranormal he sees around: angles coming to help him, the strange army he has got, the secret he was told by Baruch about Metatron and the Authority, and several other things. Although by now, the reader is also used to a great deal of paranormal, they seem to experience more sense of wonder than Lord Asriel and his people.

Baruch, one of the two angles is killed far away from Balthamos but "Balthamos felt the death of Baruch the moment it happened. He cried aloud." [12] This is not a normal ordinary thing to happen, but when Will takes it for

granted and does not seem amazed or shocked, it gives the reader an excessive sense of banality.

Balthamos does not forget Baruch's death.

Sometimes his grief would become too strong for him to put up with, and he'd leave the boat and fly high among the clouds, searching for any patch of light or taste of air, any shooting stars or pressure ridges that mind remind him of experiences he had shared with Baruch.

Acting this way can be perceived to be justifiable merely within the realm of paranormal but Will, who is the closest to Balthamos at the time being, does not feel amazed by the angle's paranormal reaction towards the loss. Consequently, once more the reader tends to experience banality in the course of the novel.

Tialys and Salmakia are two strange creatures with fatal poison in their spurs. They are sent to help save Lyra and Will. Will, Lyra, and Ama, the village girl who found a powder to wake Lyra up are there in the cave when the two creatures arrive and try to keep them safe from Mrs. Coulter. The whole attack happens so quickly that the children "had no time to be astonished" [12] That is to say, in order to react logically to save their life, they have to prevent being amazed by the paranormal to be able to concentrate on the best thing they could to be safe. The quick reaction of the children whose requirement was not to resist the paranormal can drive the reader towards a new type of experiencing banality.

Going half through *The Amber Spyglass* so far, the reader meets Iorek who is trying to mend Will's subtle knife. The knife is broken into pieces and Iorek is asked to mend it. The fact that an armoured bear is the only person who can mend the magic knife does not amaze Will and Lyra by its paranormal nature and it creates banality in the reader. Trying to mend the subtle knife, Iorek needs Will's concentration but he can feel that Will has no concentration on the shape. "The edge!" roared Iorek. "Hold the edge in line!" He meant *with your mind*, and Will did it instantly," [12] with no sign of being amazed knowing that the bear can read his mind and understand he has no concentration. The failure to feel amazed by the paranormal opens the gate of being banalized to the reader.

The sense of banality is reinforced when once more, Iorek is able to read Will's mind and understands that he has no concentration once again. Iorek is trying to put the pieces of the knife together, but the problem is that

if he couldn't hold it in his full consciousness together with all the others, then the knife would simply fall apart as if Iorek had never begun.

The bear sensed this, too, and paused before he began heating the last piece. He looked at Will. [12]

The paranormal for the second time, similar to the first one, does not initiate amazement in Will and it helps heighten the reader's amazement.

However, Will's failure towards being amazed by the paranormal does not stop there. A few pages later, when Will tries to avoid answering Iorek's question regarding the place Lyra and he plan to go next, the armoured bear understands and asks him to be honest. At this point, the reader is in the phase of banality created by Will's failure to be amazed by the fact that Iorek can read in his eyes that he is not telling him the truth. The sense of banality is created for the third time with no particular chance to get out of the first and the second ones.

Mulefas also contribute to the creation of banality in the reader. They are very practical beings to whom Mary's "research, the laboratory, the discovery of shadow particles" [12] and the things of that type seem paranormal but the reader who is not able to trace any sign of amazement by these creatures towards the paranormal is led into a new phase of banality or heightened amazement.

Lyra meets her Death which seems to be against normality, but she fails to be amazed by the paranormal. Lyra's warm and fearless welcome to her Death and her interest to ask the Death some questions regarding the way she can get to the place where she can find Roger in the world of the dead truly amazes the reader to a great extent.

As soon as Lyra, Will, and the two Gallivespians enter the world of the dead, they start to talk to ghosts there as if it is how normal life should be while since it is a paranormal happening, they all fail to be amazed by it. It makes the reader banalized, and the feeling of heightened amazement is reinforced by seeing ghosts communicating with Lyra and Will as if the presence of a human being who is alive is a normal thing to happen in the world of the dead.

The next time the reader is to be banalized is when they hear about Will having a visible *dæmon*. Having a *dæmon* in Will's world is paranormal, but Will, who has already become a part of the paranormal as he has been exposed to so many paranormal happenings, fails to be amazed by it, but the reader feels highly amazed by seeing that the character who is similar to them fails to be affected by the startling quality of the paranormal.

The other moment in the novel that a character fails to be amazed by a paranormal is when Mary, in her dream, walks and talks to Serafina about Will, Lyra, and a lot of other things with no awakening of sense of wonder in Mary. Not only does Mary seem not to be amazed by the paranormal, but also she is not amazed why Serafina calls her "sister" for a witch only calls other witches her sisters. This leaves the reader in a great sense of banality almost at the end of the novel where they feel banalized by Lyra who goes back to a world once real to her. However, since Lyra has spent a long time among the paranormal and is used to paranormal, normal world seems to be strange to her. In other words, the reader expects to see Lyra amazed when she is back to Jordan College, but she fails to be amazed and it gives the reader the final sense of banality.

III. CONCLUSION

Having studied the trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, one can vividly see the constant existence of “banality” in all three books. Since “banality” is one of the major shared features of postmodern Science Fiction and Fantasy Fiction, *His Dark Materials* can be claimed to well fit the two genres in this respect. On the other hand, constant and natural application of the technique in the novel can place the novel in the category of “genuine” postmodern children’s fiction.

In addition, due to the fact that “banality” is a concept which is shared equally by “adult” and “children” postmodernist Science Fiction and Fantasy Fiction, one may tend to consider this as one of the reasons the novel is, by many critics [13], regarded as a “crossover novel” to prove that its being a “crossover” is not merely determined by its “actual readers” in the market but by the application of the technique shared by adult and children postmodernist Science Fiction and Fantasy Fiction.

Overall, reading *His Dark Materials* in between lines can well reveal the multi-generic quality of the novel as well as the literary support for placing the novel into the category of contemporary “crossover” fiction.

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