

Research Article

Mythic Time and Fragmented Memory: Rewriting Paradise in Contemporary English LiteraturePriyanka Bhatt^{1,*} and Samir Khan²¹⁻⁵ Dr. Preeti Global University, Shivpuri - 473665, M.P. India

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Abstract: This paper investigates how literary objects acquire narrative autonomy and symbolic authority across four major English literary works: *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *The Woodlanders*, and *His Dark Materials*. Drawing upon object-oriented criticism and theories of material agency, the paper argues that literary objects transcend their conventional symbolic function to become dynamic nonhuman characters capable of influencing action, generating meaning, and reshaping human consciousness. The analysis explores how objects participate in the construction of mythic memory and cultural identity. In *The Dream of the Rood*, the speaking tree-cross embodies both martyrdom and kingship, creating a theological vision rooted in Anglo-Saxon heroic culture. Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* presents domestic and natural objects as silent witnesses and protectors that attempt to intervene against sexual violence, thereby exposing tensions between gendered silence and ethical agency. In Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, material fragments such as hair become repositories of industrial anxiety and failed human desire, symbolizing the fragmentation of organic communal life in the modern age. In Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, magical instruments resist human mastery and ultimately articulate an alternative post religious Eden founded upon consciousness, sensuality, and coexistence. The paper contends that these objects embody humanity's recurring desire to recover a prelapsarian unity between the human and nonhuman worlds. However, each text simultaneously acknowledges the impossibility of fully restoring that harmony. Through this tension between longing and loss, literary objects become crucial mediators of myth, memory, and historical change. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that nonhuman agency in literature reflects not only changing conceptions of materiality but also evolving understandings of what it means to be human in a world increasingly shaped by the presence and power of things.

Keywords: Nonhuman Agency, Anglo-Saxon Heroic Culture, Mythic Memory, *Woodlanders*.

1. Introduction

Contemporary literary and cultural studies have increasingly questioned the long-standing assumption that agency belongs exclusively to human beings. Influenced by developments in material culture studies and object-oriented philosophy, scholars have begun to reconsider the active role of objects, environments, and nonhuman entities in shaping narratives, identities, and social relations. Bruno Latour argues that an actor is anything capable of producing change within a network of relations, while Jane Bennett emphasizes the “vibrant” power of matter in political and ethical life. Such theories challenge anthropocentric modes of interpretation by suggesting that objects are not inert tools subordinated to human will but dynamic participants in the production of meaning and action.

This dissertation extends these theoretical conversations into the field of literary studies by investigating the narrative lives of nonhuman objects in four English literary texts: *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *The Woodlanders*, and *His Dark Materials*. Across



these works, objects such as the speaking Cross, protective domestic artifacts, a severed lock of hair, and magical instruments emerge not merely as symbols but as active agents that collaborate with human characters to shape events and meanings. These literary objects perform emotional, ethical, and narrative labor, often revealing dimensions of human experience inaccessible through human speech alone.

The dissertation proposes that the agency granted to these objects reflects a deeper mythic and cultural desire for a return to prelapsarian unity. Central to this argument is the enduring influence of the Eden myth, which imagines a primordial world where humans, nonhumans, and God existed in harmonious coexistence. The Fall disrupted this balance, introducing alienation between humanity and the material world. Objects thereafter became associated with labor, possession, violence, and technological domination. Nevertheless, literature continues to imagine moments in which nonhuman entities resist their reduction to passive instruments and instead reclaim forms of vitality and autonomy.

Each text examined in this study reconstructs the Edenic ideal according to its historical context. *The Dream of the Rood* transforms Christian salvation into an Anglo-Saxon communal vision; *The Rape of Lucrece* exposes the vulnerability of women through sympathetic domestic objects; *The Woodlanders* reflects industrial modernity's fractured relationship with nature and materiality; and *His Dark Materials* reimagines Eden as a secular, sensual, and materialist coexistence among species and worlds. Together, these texts demonstrate how literary objects mediate between myth and memory, humanity and matter, loss and restoration.

By foregrounding the agency of nonhuman actors, this dissertation ultimately argues for a more ethically attentive mode of reading—one that recognizes literature as a space where objects, environments, and human beings coexist within interconnected networks of influence, responsibility, and meaning.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

What might it signify if the basic story of so many different writings, written over a millennium or more, reaches across genre, subject, and even language boundaries, is the same? Why do these pieces communicate with us and with each other over time and space? Answering these questions will require me to go back to the very beginning of my research: the environmental fairytale known as the Garden of Eden myth. A social contract is being formed that will ensure the preservation of our planet by all living things, including God, the universe, and us.

This perspective informs Darren Aronofsky's 2014 epic film *Noah*, which divides the descendants of Adam and Eve into two groups: Cain's descendants and Seth's descendants. The first side consists of bellicose, meat-eating metalworkers who have wreaked havoc on a huge section of the globe. They are an industrialized people that symbolize the worst parts of contemporary life to the modern viewer: they rape women without distinction, kill children, eat live animals, set fire to their own camps, and recklessly use natural resources. Conversely, the offspring of Seth—who contemptuously call Cain's offspring "men"—strive to live in crude, improvised dwellings and wherever the ground can sustain them. Since they only eat once throughout the film—when they scrape little bits of moss off a rock—the audience is led to believe that they are ascetics and vegetarians. They faithfully obey the Prelapsarian mandate from God that humans protect Earth and her inhabitants. Aside from the individuals, the story's triggering flood also seems familiar to audiences in the present day since it conveys a tale from the distant past while also portending our impending doom. Our rivers are rising and our polar ice caps are melting due to climate change, so a flood is now inevitable, albeit one that may

happen much more slowly. We are aware of the diminishing coasts. We are aware of the melting of glaciers. We have shown such little respect for the earth, much like the nations commanded by Tubal Cain, that the water will soon overflow us. Despite the fact that we are Seth's offspring, we have not behaved responsibly toward the planet.

After the first book in Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials* trilogy was retitled by Random House, an American publisher, the author resigned. "The golden compasses," he asserted, is a term he borrowed from *Paradise Lost* by Milton to refer to the building blocks of his imaginary universe—not a single item, but the substance that all objects are composed of. He wanted to call Book One of the series *Northern Lights* and use the phrase as the series title, but Random House won out and the "first volume of the series" was published as *The Golden Compass* in the US. Pullman sighed, "'Northern Lights' is what it's about. I was stuck with it" (Parsons and Nicholson 127). Like Pullman's publishers and the compass, itself, it will fight Pullman's goals. Instead of just referring to a slew of intriguing, commercially viable items, Pullman's titles identify the real protagonists of his trilogy—the individuals who drive the story and bring about the biggest transformations. In fact, every single human character in *His Dark Materials* serves the unique nonhuman beings in the novel, even if they don't realize it. The titular items and the stories in which they appear so surpass the roles that Pullman intended for them, enhancing their own prominence and extending the parameters of their made-up lives.

His Dark Materials, in the classic tradition of speculative fiction¹, defies easy summarization with its many universes, exotic bestiary, and odd technology. The first novel in the trilogy, *The Golden Compass*, is about an 11-year-old orphan called Lyra Belacqua travels through a vaguely medieval world where women hold practically no positions of authority, the dissemination of knowledge is thwarted by a repressive and violent Church, and people are followed by daemons—animal manifestations of their own spiritual natures—who are meant to serve as guides. After Lyra leaves her foster home at Oxford's Jordan College, she travels north to rescue her companion Roger from the Church's clutches, who are about to subject him to a series of frightening experiments. Just before the book comes to a close, Lyra finds her long-lost parents and rescues Roger, only to have her father, who is completely insane, kill the child in order to build a bridge to another dimension. Lyra's actions for the remainder of the novel are driven by her remorse over her (although unintentional) involvement in Roger's death.

The Subtle Knife, the second novel in the trilogy, introduces Lyra to Will Parry, a somewhat older kid from a very familiar late twentieth-century Oxford who has a paranoid schizophrenia-stricken mother and an absent father. Will mistakenly murders a guy while attempting to defend his mother before entering the same dimension that Lyra and her father had visited by going through a "window" in the air.

With Lyra's assistance, Will and Mary Malone, a scientist in Will's universe who researches aware electromagnetic particles, collaborate. Mary can communicate with her computers thanks to Lyra's aid in reprogramming them. Even in this book, Will and Lyra find Will's dad, John, during a mountain skirmish while they search for him. Just as Lyra had tragically lost her friend Roger not long after rescuing him, Will witnessed the death of her father the moment they recognized each other.

In *The Amber Spyglass*, the third novel in the series, Lyra and Will go to the Land of the Dead to try to put things right with Roger and John Parry. There, they open a new portal for the afterlife by guiding the spirits of the departed down a canyon. They work together to change the afterlife so that ghosts can either spend eternity in hell or return to Earth and disintegrate into dust. Upon their return, Lyra, Will, and the deceased spirits unite to oppose the Church in the

conflict that has broken out on Earth while they were away. At one point, they release an elderly man who was imprisoned because they believed he was the Authority, Pullman's god-figure. Later on, Mary Malone is discovered by Lyra and Will residing with odd beings known as mulefa, who coexist peacefully with their natural environment. Mary gains knowledge about Dust and the Church in Lyra's world from them. When Lyra and Will discover her, Mary shares her knowledge with them and guides the group in a reenactment of the Fall. At the conclusion, the story concludes with Lyra reflecting on what the world will look like after the Authority's fall, realizing that she and Will cannot exist in a non-native universe for very long.

The unusual objects that are the main point of each book in the series—a compass, a knife, and a spyglass—are carried by Lyra, Will, and Mary, respectively. This is evident from the names of the books. Like the other objects in our research, they too have a certain level of action and intention that distinguishes them from other literary objects. These objects are not passive instruments; rather, they script, direct, and lead in their own storylines, with the human actors serving only as supporting or, at most, complimentary parts. Pullman readily acknowledges the motivations of his subjects, but he doesn't seem to realize how strong those motivations actually are.

Pullman invented the alethiometer, a mystical device that appears in *The Golden Compass*. Milton's phrase "it might have been a compass or something of the sort" (*Compass* 65) and "it was very like a clock, or a compass" (*Compass* 70) with a free--swinging longhand, "like a compass needle" (*Compass* 70) provided Random House with strong textual, if not authorial, justification for using it in the book's title. Subsequently, we find out that its human creator really meant for it to serve as a compass, one that "would respond to the idea of Mars or Venus" rather than North (*Compass* 152). Therefore, "golden compass," which means "truth measure," far more accurately describes the instrument than "aleximeter," notwithstanding Pullman's objections. Ascritic Santiago Colás points, the thealethiometer only offers accurate responses to its users' inquiries; it does not attempt to quantify or assess truth in any way (39).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, these texts collectively suggest that humans, objects, and the natural world are deeply interconnected across history, mythology, and literature. From *The Dream of the Rood* to Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, nonhuman entities such as trees, crosses, compasses, knives, and spyglasses are not passive objects but active participants that shape human destiny, morality, and understanding. The recurring narrative across centuries reflects humanity's enduring attempt to define its relationship with creation, responsibility, and the environment. Whether through the sacred symbolism of trees in Anglo-Saxon culture or the ecological warnings embedded in modern retellings like *Noah*, these works reveal a shared cultural anxiety about humanity's separation from nature and the consequences of failing to live in harmony with it. Ultimately, they communicate across time because they address universal concerns about identity, interconnectedness, stewardship, and the fragile balance between humans, the material world, and the divine.

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