

# REINTERPRETING GOOD AND EVIL IN FANTASY: A CASE STUDY ON *HIS DARK MATERIALS* AND *GOOD OMENS*

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## ABSTRACT

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The contrast between good and evil is a widely recognized characteristic of fantasy fiction. The growing number and influence of religious references and creative interpretations in fantasy literature indicate the need to analyze the distinction between good and evil that is often present in these works. The literary works chosen for this study are *Good Omens* (1990) by Pratchett and Gaiman, and Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, consisting of *Northern Lights* (1996), *Subtle Knife* (1998), and *Amber Spyglass* (2001). These two works examine the reinterpretation of the fall and the judgment day. These works review, mock, and challenge religious figures such as God, angels, and demons as well as the conventional understanding of good and evil. This study examines how the two works depict the author's distinct perspective, the protagonist's journey, and their challenge to the concept of moral standards. The religious allusions in these works comprise the portrayal of changing ideas and the interpretation of the absolute good and evil binary in fantasy literature. Therefore, our approval of the new version of evilness and its development entails more than just instructing children to differentiate superficially between what is morally correct and incorrect. The intricate portrayal of evilness in fantasy literature aimed at children could greatly enhance their ability to comprehend and integrate the multifaceted nature of human circumstances, hence fostering their cognitive growth.

**Keywords:** Fantasy literature; children's literature; contemporary literature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The biblical mythical story centers on the genesis and ultimate destiny of the world. Fantasy work for children uses the story of God's creation and subsequently destruction of the world in new light. These reinterpretations have the potential to influence young readers. The ideological interpretations are the focus of this study. The debate between the presentation of youthful innocence and the modern reinterpretations of morality in both works reflects the current integration of religious traditions, which leads to the purpose of studying these literary works as a representation of the trend in children's literature.

The contemporary perception of religious belief in society has markedly deviated from previous eras in which religious scripture was integrated into daily life. Literary works from various periods, including Milton's (1674) *Paradise Lost*, Brown's (2006) widely read novel *The Da Vinci Code*, and Clare's (2008) young adult fantasy adventure *Mortal Instrument: City of Bones*, from the alluring Satan and the descendant of Christ to the miracle of runes magic on fallen angels exemplify the expansion of imaginative interpretation from the

16th-century to contemporary perspectives on God, scripture, and religious miracles. This trend suggests that imaginative interpretation through fantasy fiction will continue. In the chapter "Writing Fantasy Realistically," (Pullman & Mason, 2019). Pullman stated that he is not a person of faith but agrees with the importance and ability of a story to convey "the formless flow of life." The inclusion of a new interpretation of Christian themes and characters in many books has implied the need for a comprehensive analysis of the content and depiction of religious concepts and ideologies in these literary pieces. The two literary works selected for this study are *Good Omens* by Pratchett and Gaiman, which first appeared in 1990, and the *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Pullman, which was published in 1996, 1998, and 2001. The first work, *Good Omens* is a reinterpretation of an old debate between good and evil. *Good Omens* (Pratchett & Gaiman, 1990) is a humorous fantasy novel that depicts the imaginary interaction between an angel, a demon, and a human. The contradictory forces, symbolizing virtue and evil in the biblical narrative, make a mutual decision to collaborate to prevent the coming Armageddon. The oppressive modern life, the biblical Armageddon, and the by-chance possibility of their mission to prevent an anti-Christ child all ridicule their desire to save the world without divine intervention. The second work, *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Pullman (1996, 1998, 2001), depicts the constant internal struggle between good and evil in the main character. This trilogy follows the adventure of a young girl across different imaginary worlds. The work is widely recognized as one of the most controversial anti-religious fantasy novels for both children and adults because of its interpretation of the fall and the reinterpretation of the existence of God and the nature of angels.

The two works adopted their authors' unique perspectives on religious beliefs. When asked about the topic, all three authors: Pratchett, Gaiman and Pullman openly identified as atheists (Goodreads, 2024). Pullman (Pullman & Mason, 2019) expressed his interest in the religious story and criticized the previous generation's fantasy works, such as *The Lord of the Rings*, for their lack of character depth and moral truthfulness. Indeed, his exploration and reimagination of the Christian story resulted in the religious reader reaction to shun these works. *His Dark Materials* and *Good Omens* are attempts by the authors to interpret and critique the creation and Armageddon of the world, specifically in relation to religious interpretation. As Hollindale (1995) observed, the three levels of ideology in a book consist of "the explicit message conveyed by the author, the unquestioned assumptions made by the author, and the ideologies prevalent in the author's society" (p. 362). Therefore, the author's atheistic stance serves as an integral component of the work's underlying worldview. Curiously, the work does not deny—but rather affirms—the significance of the biblical narrative. Pratchett's interview statements (Rubin, 2019) affirmed his stance on the acknowledgment and understanding of being "culturally" or "morally" Christian.

Furthermore, it is important to consider the author's portrayal and the psychological impact of the text, as well as the work's positioning as a publication intended for children. The distinction between good and evil serves as an integral aspect of the pedagogical purpose of children's literature. Indeed, Hunt (2005) has summarized the debate on the study of children's books: the book people, who seek to amuse, versus the pedagogical people, who seek to educate. This paper uses literary analysis supported by the book people and moral-development theories to examine the portrayal of evil in two literary texts, focusing on the effect of biblical representation. It explores how this fantasy depiction contributes to the model of moral development, with a particular emphasis on the author's stance and the work itself.

## 2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This research explores the correlation between fantasy fiction and its tendency to reinforce archetypes and stereotypes associated with notions of good and evil. Although the general readers accept the fantasy works on religious matter, the suspicion and the possibility of its influence is a topic of interest to many researchers. The distinction between right and wrong is central to the reading analysis and the reasoning of the text. In this study, *His Dark Materials* and *Good Omens* offer a representation of the author's unique position, the protagonist's adventure, and the development of moral reasoning. By applying Kohlberg's (1994) theory of moral development in a cross comparison between the two works on the topic of biblical reference, this research hope to explain the main characters' development and their influence on the understanding of good and evil.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The moral development of a child, according to Kohlberg, is divided into the following three levels: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional (or adulthood). In Kohlberg's (1994) theory of moral development, the acknowledgment of the preferred behavior—and the difference between a small child in the

preconventional stage and a young adult in the conventional stage—helps parents guide their children as they develop their moral character. For example, parents with younger children in the preconventional stage might work on rule obedience, whereas they might teach older children about social expectations. Postconventional morality is distinguished by an individual's comprehension of universal ethical principles (Cherry, 2022). Postconventional morality refers to the ethical framework in which individuals make decisions based on their personal beliefs about what is morally correct rather than just according to societal norms and regulations (Kohlberg, 1994, p. 43).

Gibbs et al. (2007) sociomoral stage theory and Kohlberg's (1994) theory of moral development have proposed two different approaches. On the one hand, Kohlberg's theory supports the analysis of moral development in relation to a child's cognitive development. On the other hand, Gibbs's theory emphasizes the link between life experiences and moral development instead of characterizing it as a developmental stage, as Kohlberg and Piaget have (Bergman, 2006). However, the clear difference between the preconventional stage (which refers to children aged 3 to 7 who are still learning moral values through reward and punishment) and the conventional stage (which refers to children aged 8 to 13 who begin to use moral reasoning), as described by Kohlberg, serves to distinguish the character's development in children's and young adult literature. In a previous study conducted by Bond (2014), Kohlberg's theory was utilized to examine how fantasy literature might effectively convey moral judgment at the postconventional stage. According to Bond's research, the protagonist is likely to defy societal norms if those norms are contradictory to their personal experiences and rational judgment, as indicated by their fantasy encounters. These unbalanced outcomes stimulate a debate on the need for a conclusive depiction of morality and immorality.

An alternative theory in the realm of moral development has improved on Kohlberg's concept. Gibbs's (2003) book *Moral Development and Reality* provided an examination of children's moral development through a novel categorization. Unlike Kohlberg's approach, which relied on children's reactions to a sequence of moral dilemmas, Gibbs emphasized the significance of cognitive development, socialization, cultural influences, and moral emotions in molding children's moral reasoning and comprehension. The findings of Robinson's (2003) reader's response study interview validated that the explicit portrayal of virtue and malevolence in fantasy literature significantly impacts the ethical comprehension and ethical judgment of young readers.

The fantasy genre combines children's adventure with the process of reimagining the contrast between the good and the bad. The two works selected for this study combine their religious presentation with philosophical questions. The existential and philosophical questions link this contemporary fantasy to earlier works in the genre of children's fantasy in the 1950s. Classics Narnia series by Lewis (1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956) and Tolkien's *Lord of the Ring* (1991) focus on the innocent quality of the imaginary world and establish the fantasy space as support for children's clear actions and social values. Tolkien's (1991) works, published post-World War II, reflect the social movement of the "little man" with the creation of a new mythical character, the Hobbit, to represent the perseverance of the middle class in the face of the war. Lewis (1967, as cited in Pullman & Mason, 2019) commented on the relationship between the story and the fantasy world as "the world the story conjures up". In his essay and interview from the collection of essays *Daemon Voices*, Pullman and Mason agreed with Lewis that the creation of the unreal world serves only to explain our world and our experience (Pullman & Mason, 2019, p. 52). As introduced by his explanation of the fantasy world, Lewis's Pevensie children in *The Chronicles of Narnia* escape the war and enter the Christian world of Narnia. Levy and Mendlesohn (2016) discussed the legacy of the Narnia books as compared to the previous fantasy works of Nesbit and Lewis: "In all but one of C. S. Lewis's Narnia books (Lewis, 1952) is the exception the children participate in crucial turning points in Narnian history" (p. 106). While Nesbit's works invite the reader to join in the adventure with the child protagonist, her fantasy world reflects a link between magic and reality, both of which can intervene with each other at any moment. Although Lewis borrowed the adventurous atmosphere of Nesbit's work, the plot of Lewis's seven Catholic fantasy clearly follows the beginning of world creation and ends with the world destruction, judgment day, and his idea of heaven. As discussed through the three major writers of popular fantasy, Lewis (1950), Tolkien (1991) and Nesbit (1995), the presence of the child as a symbol of purity and innocence remains the central focus of the fantasy genre. The serious spiritual stakes of early fantasy in the protagonist's voyage and adventure are part of the intervention that builds the image of the fantasy genre with its presentation of "spiritual redemption" (Swank, 2019).

In *His Dark Materials* and *Good Omens*, however, the emphasis is placed on the child's learning and the right course of action. Apart from selecting these two works of fiction as representative of the progressive development in the fantasy genre, the two works also represent "spiritual and philosophical ideas," which have always been part of the genre (Mendlesohn & James, 2012, p. 3). To examine the connection between fantasy works and religious ideas in fantasy fiction, Feldt (2016) discussed the representation of religion and focused on the difference between the narrative of Christian theology famously recreated in major children's fantasy works and the religious belief it might influence. The selected works in her study included Lewis's *The*

*Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1978), Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* (1991), Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1999), and Pullman's *Northern Lights* (1996). Feldt's (2016) study confirmed the general hypothesis of this work: The 1990s popular fantasy works had a different approach to religious representation than their predecessors. The research confirmed the status of the 1950s fantasy works as representations of important mythical fantasy texts in works for children (Bloom, 2006; Wrigley, 2005). However, the works analyzed the progress from the 1950s and did not focus on the crisis, the post-apocalyptic scenarios in children's literature, or the moral-development influence of fantasy for children. This research further examined moral development and selected the series by Pullman and *Good Omens* by Pratchett and Gaiman (1990) as the main points of discussion and comparison because of the representation of the Christian narrative and their interpretation of the post-apocalyptic scenarios in children's literature.

As proposed by Robinson (2003), the good-versus-evil polarization in fantasy children's literature can often be mistaken for the social model, and not all fantasy literature for children follows the dualistic view of good and evil. However, the reference to the mythical background and the discussion of the Christian narrative in children's literature help to highlight how the works establish the idea of good and evil within the boundaries of social, religious, or cultural ideology. The two selected works, *His Dark Materials* and *Good Omens*, transformed the traditional interpretation of good and evil by questioning the function of religious institutions and myths. The reimagining of the fall and the judgment day in these two works offers opportunities to critique, ridicule, and question religious characters such as God, angels, demons, and the concept of truth as traditionally interpreted according to the Bible.

*Good Omens* was a collaborative project between Pratchett and Gaiman. In this novel, a child hero is created out of the Apocalypse myth. The narrative unfolds in a post-apocalyptic world as foretold by a prophecy book, *The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*. The novel introduces Aziraphale and Crowley, an angel and demon, respectively, who have been among humans since the downfall of mankind and have developed a genuine fondness for the human lifestyle. The plot revolves around multiple characters, including an angel and a demon detective duo, the son of a destined devil, a man and woman who are descendants of Agnes Nutter, and the four horsemen. All of these parties, who are connected to the impending Apocalypse, ultimately come together at the conclusion of the story. Aziraphale, an angel who was previously tasked with guarding the Eastern Gate of Eden, and Crowley, a demon who was once the serpent that tempted Eve, serve as Pratchett's ironic reinterpretation of the biblical figures. The purpose of the angel and demon team was not to represent the holy order but, rather, to raise Adam Young, who is the Antichrist, as a morally upright human. However, a nun mistakenly places him with an ordinary suburban family. The moral decision made by this young Antichrist is a result of the impact exerted by the world shown in the novel. The narrative highlights the character's journey of personal development. As children develop, their ability to comprehend perspectives that are different from their own, and in this instance, Adam advances from being a child at the preconventional stage in Kohlberg's (1994) levels of moral reasoning. Initially, the boy's perception of the situation is mostly focused on the personal repercussions. Adam learns about his supernatural power and decides to experiment with it according to his desires. A child operating at the subsequent, conventional level demonstrates a greater inclination toward considering the viewpoints of others, which is ultimately accomplished by the story.

The three books in Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series chronicle the adventures of Lyra and Will as they explore several realms that are inspired by Pullman's allusions to death, a pre-human world that resembles Eden in the third novel, and an alternate universe in between. The idea of dust, a substance that replaces the Holy Spirit and God's presence in all living things, is presented in the fictionalized biblical interpretation. The trilogy's first book examines the authority figures' power, the second book centers on the protagonist's evolving worldview and the mythical realm of the dead, and the final book reenacts the biblical account of the fall of innocence and original sin. What distinguishes Pullman's fantasy metaphor is the fusion of the religious story with the scientific explanation of natural growth. Young readers are encouraged to follow their moral lessons and choices in the protagonist's quest.

In her previous studies of biblical interpretation in *His Dark Materials*, Wood (2001) contested the representation of paradise, comparing Lewis's (1950) and Pullman's (1996, 1998, 2001) perspectives on the role of a child in reference to the biblical plot. Wood (2001) and Oziewicz (2010) have compared the phenomenal works of Pullman as disobedience in contrast to the traditional reading of the Bible found in Lewis's works. Instead of denying their interpretation, the significant gap can be further explored by analyzing the presentation of moral development and the dynamic portrayal of extraordinary abilities in the angel, demon, and child protagonists in the two works. Hence, the current research will examine the presentation of evil and the transfer of power from religious figures to ordinary individuals. This research explores the distinct approaches taken in subverting moral expectations and the use of biblical allusions in their respective works. This research explores how both works creatively reimagine biblical allusion. Both works incite a debate about censorship and the frequent use of biblical themes. According to Kohlberg's theory, the explicit portrayal of

good and evil in fantasy literature significantly impacts the ethical comprehension and judgment of young readers. However, the cognitive and analytic development, as supported by Gibbs's (2003) suggestion, are also presented in these two works.

Overall, the selected novels reworked religious figures and biblical themes to support and emphasize the protagonists' journey. Therefore, these books exemplify a key attribute of children's literature by portraying how the young protagonist acquires knowledge and personal development during their adventurous journey. The debate between the presentation of youthful innocence and the modern reinterpretations of morality in both works reflects the current integration of religious traditions, which leads to the purpose of studying these literary works as a representation of the trend in children's literature.

### 3.1 *His Dark Materials* and its fantastic moral interpretation

The *His Dark Materials* trilogy and *Good Omens* allude to the concepts of world creation and the presence of an angel and a demon. The setting of the two novels establishes a parallel universe between our present reality and the imaginary world of the biblical past. Both books mention the idea of world creation as a natural phenomenon, and their shared concerns include the ecological issues in our current world. Pullman's trilogy takes the reader on travels throughout the world, such as through the Oxford of the 1980s and the 2000s, linking these two worlds with another world in between. This fantasy metaphor highlights the link between the past and the world we now live in. By using dust power and fantasy travel, the novel hints at ecological problems and links the metaphor with the theological belief of world creation. Dust is incorporated as a fantastic element that is part holy and part natural. The novel compares the good with the problems of the present world. The fantastical mayhem is transformed into a real problem that can affect our livelihood. The setting and biblical allusions help to further develop and illustrate the new ways of presenting the contrast between good and evil.

This extension of the moral ideas includes the reverse position of the young adult protagonist. Pullman's series presents Lyra not as a person who follows social conventions but as a person who values truth and moral integrity. The first book, *Northern Lights* (Pullman, 1996), presents the conventional extreme through the reimagination of the church organization and the influence of Oxford academia. Applying Kohlberg's moral-development model here implies that the fantastic world setting in Pullman's work is established for children's further development from the conventional idea. In adult and religious establishments, the conventional becomes evil, so that instead of following the usual judgement of society, the critical view of a child becomes the focus of the story. By presenting the evil adult, the moral convention is now unreliable. The simple view of the good-versus-evil presentation no longer applies.

For example, Lyra's disagreement with the moral justification of children's experiments represents her ambivalent position. *His Dark Materials* extends the restriction of moral ideas. Lyra's disagreement about the moral justification of children's experiments led to the reverse position of the (delete child) protagonist, not as a person following social conventions but as a representation of liberal goodness. The child and adult binary developed further from simple good and evil. In a scene at the end of the first book, Lord Asriel, Lyra's father, wishes to connect the parallel worlds. The cost is Roger's life—the one friend Lyra is on a quest to save throughout the book. The reunion of her father and mother pales in comparison to her moral duty. The new worlds open as Lyra learns of the evil in her parents and the secrets of the power dynamics of the world she has never known: "She heard her parents talking: Her mother said, 'They'll never allow it.' Her father said, 'Allow it? We've gone beyond being allowed, as if we were children. I've made it possible for anyone to cross, if they wish'" (Pullman, 1996, p. 415). It is revealed that they are the children, and their own child is the adult who failed to prevent their moral mistake.

The postconventional moral quest regarding dust is part of a child's responsibility to solve the world's problems. Lyra's judgment of her father (and of all adults) is based on her limited understanding of the situation. Further development of her own postconventional interpretation arises as she finds a better way to save her dead friend and the world. The attempt is further supported by creating a new balance between the living and the dead and supporting the flow of dust, as Lyra succeeds in supporting liberal power in the second book of the trilogy. The child protagonist, like Lyra, creates a new awareness of the moral problem in young readers. By not repeating their parents' mistake of hurting people and our ecology, the protagonist demonstrates that all human beings share a collective responsibility for creating a greater good.

From this example, the old archetypes in the young adult hero changed from their previous ways of observing society's moral code to their self-discovery amid the postconventional stage of Kohlberg's theory. A heroine such as Lyra could become the new norm of contemporary trends in children's literature. As discussed in this third stage of moral development, the universal and ethical principle of justice is achieved "prior to society" (Kohlberg, 1981, p. 22). Therefore, the changing binary of good and evil is apparent. Since the 1950s children's literature, which directly educated young readers, modern works utilize a new approach to the fantasy archetype plot. Good and evil are still elements of the child's development, as Nodelman (1992) has



summarized in the various views of fantasy story patterns and their connection to the study of children's fiction. His commentary on the different nature of the fantastic relates the child protagonist, who leaves home to seek adventure and returns home in triumph, to the purpose and lesson of the story. In this paper's discussion of Pullman's works, the triumph in this archetypal plot is no longer simple. The young protagonist's adventure now fits differently and develops further as the fantasy imagination broadens its concern about the world.

The discussion of fantastical elements in Pullman's reinterpretation of the Bible is particularly notable regarding the concept of dust. According to Tolkien (Flieger & Anderson, 2008), there are three facets of meaning in fairy stories: supernatural, nature, and human nature. The three facets of fairy stories in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy focus on the story's fantasy elements, which are related to the supernatural, nature, and human nature. In the first book, the scientist and church in Lyra's world struggle to define dust:

It was discovered by a Muscovite...a man called Rusakov, and they're usually called Rusakov Particles after him. Elementary particles that don't interact in any way with others—very hard to detect, but the extraordinary thing is that they seem to be attracted to human beings...some human beings more than others. Adults attract it, but not children. At least, not much, and not until adolescence.

(Pullman, 1998, pp. 88-89)

The reinterpretation of dust from the Bible as part of the building elements to convey the children's innocence which makes the fantastic element play an important role in the plot development and links the biblical reference to scientific experimentation and discovery.

Apart from the dust elements, the interpretation of the fantastic, in Pullman's work, includes the comparison on different world views from different times. In the second book of the trilogy, Dr. Mary Malone, a scientist in a world similar to the 21st-century world we live in, identifies particles as "a form of conscious and spiritual matter that exists everywhere throughout the universe" (Pullman, 1998, p. 182). In this trilogy, dust is compared to our human consciousness, and this fantasy element allows for the discussion of adults, God, reality, the afterlife, and science. The first book highlights its status as a supernatural, fantastical element, while the second book links the element to nature and human nature which matches the three areas were suggested to be discussed in fantasy by Tolkien. This fantasy reimagining touches on supernatural implications; dust is linked to God, who is reimagined and whose existence and meaning are open to discussion. The shadow, or dust, is a fantasized version of many things. The element's last appearance in the third book suggests its essential quality as part of the natural cycle and balance. The moral decision between good and evil no longer applies, as dust and humans are closely connected through this new analogy of "the fall." The mystery of dust is what drives Lyra in the first book; the quest ends when the innocent Lyra represents Eve in the human recognition of self and love.

The reinterpretation of the Bible's meaning through depicting Lyra and Will as Eve and Adam is the book's interpretation of the fall, not as a sin. Dust and the reinterpretation of its function support the human existence, and the supernatural power of these elements also drives Lyra's aethalometer, the truth-telling instrument in this trilogy. The instrument works by the power of dust; it is a prophecy and assistance, and it shows the truths about every world. Instead of highlighting God's supernatural power as pure goodness, the fantasy world of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy links the conventionally institutionalized power of God with the fantasy elements and allows the child protagonist to interact with and interpret their experience with supernatural forces. Through the use of the aethalometer, dust, and Lyra's rebellious character, the implication of these fantasy elements supports a new interpretation of the creation myth.

Through illustrating the nature of dust, Pullman highlighted the power of nature in agreement with natural evolution. In this sense, the trilogy directly denies the existence of God as the creator but explains the natural function of dust. The observation of human nature and psychological change is likewise reflected in dust. Pullman reflected on the middle ground of moral choice through the fear and evil thoughts of a grown man that influence the soul-eating Spectre to hunt humans and their diet of dust in the second book. This zombie state in between life and death is contrasted with the pure, or dust-free, state of the children. The multiple meanings in fantasy elements were praised in Tolkien's *On Fairy Stories* (Flieger & Anderson, 2008), as these fantasy elements not only communicate concepts but also discuss and reflect the state of things in the world. The three interpretations of dust, linking this fantastical element with the Bible, nature, and human nature listed above, allow for the personified dark matter, or speaking dust, who knows all truths and decides right and wrong. Thus, the three books linked through these fantasy elements create multiple meanings and serve as the fantasy metaphor of good and evil reimagined from the natural elements.

In summary, through Pullman's interpretation of religious authority and dust, its natural and biblical meaning becomes the scorn power ideology. The authorities of the church in the story are afraid that they will lose their power and prevent the spread of knowledge and the existence of dust. If people know the truth—

that humans are created by dust, not God—the church will lose its power. Instead of using magical elements to present all good power or all evil power (Robinson, 2003), Pullman's fantasy reinterprets dust and places it on neutral ground. Pullman also reimagines the loss of innocence in the Garden of Eden and highlights a new meaning of the fall to support an extended fantasy of the parallel universe that includes God and the underworld as part of the protagonist's moral experience and decisions in the parallel world.

### 3.2 *Good Omens*: Reminding us of the end of the world

While *His Dark Materials* reinterprets the dust particle and the human loss of innocence, *Good Omens* offers a direct commentary on the representation of good and evil and its lack of influence on the child. The angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley embody the concept of good and evil and represent the book's imagination with biblical reference. The two main characters adapt and mock the good and evil actions of this era. Their first-hand account of the biblical past, the demon's unintentional fall, and their observation of the present world as individuals directly questions the concept of pure goodness and evil.

Crowley thumped the wheel... That's how it goes: you think you're on top of the world, and suddenly they spring Armageddon on you. The Great War, the Last Battle. Heaven versus Hell: three rounds, one fall, no submission. And that'd be that. No more world... Just endless heaven, or, depending on who wins, endless hell. Crowley didn't know which was worse... But Crowley remembered what heaven was like, and it had quite a few things in common with hell. You couldn't get a decent drink in either of them, for starters. And the boredom you got in heaven was almost as bad as the excitement you got in hell.

(Pratchett & Gaiman, 1990, p. 24)

The book's discussion of symbols of good and evil are reinterpreted from the old moral concept with the physical reality of the everyday world. The demon expresses his human side and blames his fate. He now lives like a rock star and monitors mischief by hacking the internet and traffic system. The angel Aziraphael waits for people to be good and collects historical artifacts and different versions of the Bible as a hobby. In the angel and demon's attempt to raise the son of the devil, the boy's moral choice is, ironically, not a result of these supernatural being's nature but the result of their experience of living on Earth. The novel further mocks modern life as an already corrupted but enjoyable world. With the impending Apocalypse, the decision to save the world comes from the human qualities of all of the characters—human, angel, and demon. The discussion of the birth of Adam and the coming Apocalypse as a result of human error are embodied by Crowley's speech saying: "most of the great triumphs and tragedies of history are caused, not by people being fundamentally good or fundamentally bad, but by people being fundamentally people" (Pratchett & Gaiman, 1990, p. 33). Thus, the irony of destruction and creation in *Good Omens* highlights the importance of human input rather than the necessity to be good.

Consequently, in this interpretation of good and evil, humans are the center of power, possibilities, and development. The chapter structure of the book outlines the development of the events in the story with the seven days of world creation, and in turn, it narrates the last seven days before the Apocalypse. The book ends with the world saved and successfully restored before the usual restful Sunday. Toward the end of the book, the angel and demon also predict that the next Apocalypse will be "Heaven and Hell against humanity?" and that God himself might change his mind, get rid of his power, and decide to stay human (Pratchett & Gaiman, 1990, p. 461). Apart from the discussion of the moral concept, the world creation myth and world destruction are also no longer a problem of the divine.

In keeping with the structure and tone of the book, the angel and demon observe the growth and development of the protagonist, and in this case, Satan's human son decides not to destroy the Earth based on his moral deduction. Kohlberg's (1994) postconventional moral development is further developed in Adam, the main character of *Good Omens*. While Lyra displays individuality, Adam displays stage three, postconventional morality according to Kohlberg. The concept includes the child, Adam "working towards a conception of a good society" (Cherry, 2022). Adam, the devil's son, did not embark on an important quest to save the world, but he found scientific magazines for children entertaining and, by chance, discovered his ability to reimagine the possibilities of our world through the discovery of Atlantis, the imaginary tunnel for the people of Tibet to appear in England.

Well, some of them went to Tibet, and now they run the world. They're called secret masters. They've got this secret underground city called Shambala and tunnels that go all over the world, so they know everything that goes on and control everything.

(Pratchett & Gaiman, 1990, p. 263)

In the setting of the coming Apocalypse, the only hope is invested into raising the devil's child. However, the foolish demon and angel raised the wrong child, and the attempt to offer input in influencing the child is of no use. However, a simple family raising a child to value creativity and discovery turns out to be enough to save the world.

The book structure completes the seven days of impending destruction, and the characters in the novel discuss man's fall. The beginning of the book also condemns the religious opinion of the fall in the conversation between the angel Aziraphael and the demon serpent Crowley. Criticizing God's plan and questioning the part they play, whether it has gone correctly as planned or both the demon and angel do humans a favor in creating trouble, the serpent says, "I think it's a bit of an overreaction, to be honest." "I mean first offense and everything; I can't see what's so bad about knowing the difference between good and evil anyway" (Pratchett & Gaiman, 1990, p. 3). The angel giving away the flaming torch and the demon luring Adam and Eve to the forbidden fruit both wonder in this first scene whether they had done the right thing or if the punishment had been justified.

To clarify, the quoted material above highlights the moral choice of Adam, the first human, compared to Aziraphael the angel and Crowley the demon. The discussion supports the development of postconventional stage according to Kohlberg by creating a human-like perspective in this imaginary biblical character. By recreating the moral choice as a decision between good and evil, the two different characters no longer represent good and evil; they represent different interpretations, with no one being certain of what they did as right or wrong. They represent contemporary human nature, debating between themselves about following the divine plan and destroying the Earth as we know it.

Resulting from the book discussion of the moral standpoint of a demon and an angel, the question of God's authority, the intention of divine interference, and the possibility of learning demonstrated the importance of Adam, the anti-Christ reincarnated on Earth. The child became an important part as the novel addresses the problem of deciding what is good or evil with its reference to the Bible, and it progresses the apocalyptic theme with a prophecy book. The comical and ironic situation of predicting the future and recording the past is the main purpose of the Bible. Referencing the nature of the Bible texts, in the prophecy book within the book of the novel, the text suggests an open-minded point of view in seeking truth and recording true experience. The progress of the child protagonist as well as the angel and demon characters provide an ironic comment on truthfulness and humans' inability to predict any course of action in the present world.

While the basic structure remains that the protagonists from both the *His Dark Materials* series and *Good Omens* leave their houses and learn through experience, their daemon and their rise to power are undermined by their subconscious concerns about the future of the world. In essence, the comparison between the present world setting and the reference to the fall of men reminds us that the carefree world of Adam and Eve is gone and that the new hero and heroine only seek power to change the chaos brought upon humans with their own economic power. *Good Omens* uses the reference to the four horsemen as the hero's prophecy to satirize the distance between the present-day reader and the biblical text and their understanding of the concept of calamity being ridiculed in the riding of the four bike men.

In the events leading to the climax of the story, before Adam decides to save the world, the four biblical characters from the book of Revelation are satirized with the four bike men they meet at a gas station. Different from the omniscient narrator on Adam, the discussion of Adam's opinion on the characters dismissed their importance: "What I mean is they are the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, right?" "Right, four bikers of the Apocalypse. War, Famine, Death, and the other one, Pollution" (Pratchett & Gaiman, 1990, p. 335). The unknowing foil character of the four riders, the rest of mankind in the story, is unaware of the crisis going on—not from the biblical text far away from their everyday lives, and not from the perspective of the children growing up without reading these fantasy reinterpretations. The weighty concepts of the world's calamities, such as war, famine, death, and pollution, are further compared with the problems of today, such as grievous bodily harm, embarrassing personal problems, and answering phones. The four human riders of the Apocalypse in *Good Omens* summarize the apocalyptic world we are living in and the fall of social and public values as the end of the world.

The book of Revelation depicts judgment day with a hierarchy relationship between God on the throne and the four horsemen being released into the world as a warning (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Rev. 6:1-8). The first woe in the Bible is unknown to the well-being of the peaceful world, while the plague and famine are reimagined as a new form of diet, and the present world is unknowingly moving and living with the horsemen. The rendition of the beginning and end of the world in the fantasy works might be contrary to the writing of religious belief, but the understanding and the calamity involved are reimagined in a way that connects the reader to the problems of the world in which they are living.



### 3.3 Reflecting the growing child in fantasy children's literature

As demonstrated in the previous section's discussion of the texts' religious interpretations, the presentation of the child protagonist characters in these two texts can be analyzed using moral-development theory. The analysis poses distinct approaches to biblical myth, which in turn highlight specific issues regarding the depiction of young adult target readers and their place and agency within the midst of this debate. The comparison of the child's moral development with the protagonist imparts an image of the development of a character's agency, the use of magical and supernatural elements to support character development, the use of supernatural entities, and the development of fantasy literature for children as a mode of moral education.

Pullman's subversive representation of the disobedient child in Lyra and Will as a representation of Adam and Eve utilizes a religious motif to influence our reading of the young adult character. While their status in the myth is provoking, as discussed by Wood (2001), once the adventure quest ends, Lyra is the one who takes lessons and relearns her place in the world. Conversely, the disobedient child in *Good Omens* ultimately has good motivations to save the world. Under Kohlberg's (1994) lens, Lyra, Will, and Adam receive a moral education and retain their moral agency. Gibbs (2003), however, emphasized the importance of creating moral environments, promoting moral reasoning skills, and facilitating opportunities for moral reflection and moral decision-making. The setting in the fantasy worlds in both works is the Apocalypse. Fantasy is a literature of empowerment (Pierce, 1996), and the powerful portrayal of child characters in these two novels highlights moral and behavioral development. In other words, it is not the obedient or disobedient child that is being portrayed in the world of children's literature that matters, but the circumstances or the condition of the fantasy world that encourages the child protagonist and child reader to develop their own moral decisions.

Regarding the presentation of the protagonists, the significant difference between the two works is their use and interpretation of the fantastic and how the relationship supports and develops the main character's moral choice against the adults. In *His Dark Materials*, good and evil in human nature are represented in the characters' actions and each character personal daemons animal. The first noticeable aspect of the trilogy is that the characters fall into one of two categories: adults or children. The reader can differentiate adults from children based on their daemons. Children's daemons are more powerful; they can change their forms into many things, while adults cannot. The children, with their developing demons in *Subtle Knife* (Pullman, 1998), are safe from Spectre, which feeds on adults' lives. This observation highlights the inherent dissimilarity between the nature of children and adults. Their personalities and cognitive processes are still in the process of developing and maturing. What sets children apart from adults is their ability to imagine and their lack of conformity to societal norms. The setting and the character's stronger status in the novel enhance the protagonist's ability to comprehend and integrate the multifaceted nature of human circumstances. The imaginative portrayal of the settled daemon and the child's unlimited possibility fosters the development and potential of children. The novel also uses the representation of a human's soul or passion, the daemon, as a mirror of scorn and pity toward man (Flieger & Anderson, 2008), as it can reflect the human's psychological state.

Hence, the portrayal of the supernatural entities—angels and demons—in Pullman's trilogy does not consistently symbolize the dichotomy of good and evil. With angel characters, Pullman brings out the true human nature, featuring all the emotions: love, hate, fear, and jealousy. Human choice and decision form the basis of all of the moral issues in Pullman's work; regardless of the character's status—the protagonist, the antagonist, or the supporting characters—each is subjected to the central theme of consciousness and responsibility. Morality is not emphasized, and thus the reader's analytical position in the two stories yields different outcomes. While *His Dark Materials* focuses on the portal journey of Will and Lyra using angels as assistants, the *Good Omens* plot is driven by the constant debate between the angel Aziraphael and the demon Crowley.

Overall, the two novels challenge the moral standard and the absolute ideals of good and evil. In both works, the opposing forces of good and evil serve as a critique of moral development. The distance between the child characters and their adult counterparts in these two works emphasizes the child's agency. They can arrive at their moral choice, and the moral development they achieve directly reflects the author's support for the child rather than the adult characters. The novel's fantasy setting allows Lyra to be free from the influence of adult society. The child protagonist in *His Dark Materials* is less constrained by social rules. The story replaces society's moral condition with another child and retains the sense of adventure and the child's autonomy. Their decisions often do not conform to the adult's decisions or moral expectations. On the contrary, the clear division between the debate of the angel and the demons and the growing and learning experiences of the child protagonist in *Good Omens* offers a direct attempt to examine the impact of outside influences, whether social, hellish, or heavenly. In using the three different plot lines, the novel rarely discusses the influence of home. The moral upbringing is a special case for this human child. The novel discusses the process of moral condition but does not use the fantasy nature of the text to achieve the protagonist's growth and development. Adam's maturity develops naturally in the face of doom.

In addition, the representation of social standards in fantasy settings replicates the power dynamic between children and adults in real society. The main difference between how the two fantasy narratives (*His Dark Materials* and *Good Omens*) differentiate right from wrong is the narrative distance. While Pullman presents the child's experience, Gaiman and Pratchett's three plot lines allow us to see the interaction between the child and the adult, as well as other social aspects coming into play in the decision between right and wrong or something in between. According to Gibbs (2003), social-moral development begins with the establishment of rules. In setting social standards, the child learns and receives experiences through the debate on what is the appropriate course of action.

*Good Omens* directly emphasizes the main plotline: the observation of an angel and a demon trying to influence the child, the anti-Christ reincarnated. The unique aspect of this situation is that the two depictions of adults engage in ongoing discussions regarding what is considered suitable, which frequently leads to mistakes. Furthermore, the roles are reversed, with the devil being responsible for positive outcomes and the angel's forgetfulness causing unfortunate incidents. The indecisive adult roles of the angel and demon serve as a representation of humans' perspectives on the present world. Gibbs (2003) referred to a child's moral development in this early stage as the standard or immature morale. To negotiate and overcome their egocentric selves, people must mature and understand the moral justifications behind their actions. This later stage is only achieved with the developing sense of self and identity and thus assumes the more developed age group of the child. Lyra from *His Dark Materials* describes this experience in her adventurous journey through different worlds, witnessing many deaths. Arguably, the difference between the two works' emphasis is a direct result of their fantasy narratives. The Portal quest<sup>1</sup> and, later, Intrusive<sup>2</sup> adventure Lyra and Will undergo stresses the importance of maturity, while the intrusive action of the fantastic elements in *Good Omens* only helps the child reader to better understand the fantastic expansion of the existing model of good and evil.

In reading fantasy text as a biblical allusion, we are placing limitations on the interpretation and the child protagonist. In these two works, our protagonist serves as a prototype that stimulates the reader's new interpretation of their own moral compass. *Good Omens* uses apocalyptic literature and the figure of the anti-Christ as a representation of the child. The main character, Adam, is named in reference to the first human and is placed on Earth by Satan to begin the Apocalypse. The child's development is influenced by the countdown to world destruction and the mismatch of influences, and in doing so, Pratchett and Gaiman (1990) stress the human quality and the child's interpretation of the moral and social code. However, the literary elements and fantastic function of the book also present the child character outside of the religious belief and social concerns.

The child representation in Adam then serves to represent the possibility of an innocent child, one not without evil but with the sense of friendship and camaraderie that is common in adventure stories. The moral idea established by this trope is the psychological approach to the children's character's development. Learning to be good with their peers also provide an interesting example of role-playing and role models for children. The use of characters in reference to the Bible creates no effect on the children from *Good Omens*, but it creates a pattern of rebellion for the child escaping from authority, like Lyra and Will from *His Dark Materials*.

Using a character with a twist puts the readers in the analytical position to perceive the biblical reference in these two stories as a good influence and an homage to the Western cultural heritage. By showing the reinterpreted action and inviting the reader to witness it, the books stimulate moral agency in child readers and influence the child's developing consciousness. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, as Bettelheim (1976) claimed, "The imagery of fairy tales helps children better than anything else in their most difficult and yet most important and satisfying task: achieving a more mature consciousness to civilize the chaotic pressures of their unconscious" (1976, p. 45). The different narrative distance, as the reader follows closely with Lyra and Will but observes Adam and his friend only in the major events in *Good Omens*, allows the reader to experience a different angle of the child protagonist. As Bettelheim (1976) argued, fantasy stories and fairy tales promote the use of imaginative responses; thus, the distance of possibility in which the space of fantasy does not prohibit the child protagonist from forming their own will must induce more positive results for the child's behavior. Instead of pushing the fantasy text into becoming a negative psychological influence, it is more fruitful to understand the use of the narrative mode in fantasy works, which benefits moral development and the solving of everyday problems. By positioning our concerns into the fantasy world, readers will hopefully better understand the situation because it represents the real world in disguise.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Portal* or *Quest* fantasies, Farah Mendlesohn (2008)'s book *Rhetoric of Fantasy* (p. 1) describes a group of works where characters leave a familiar home and journey into a new land, typically with the help of a guide to complete their task and return to their home. Although portal fantasy does not have to be quest fantasy, Lyra begins her quest before she goes through a portal at the end of the first book in the trilogy.

<sup>2</sup> In *Intrusive Fantasy*, Mendlesohn (2008, p. 114) categorized the fantastic or supernatural as one that intrudes into or invades a familiar world. The intrusion generates threat, conflict, and change to drive the story forward.

The apocalyptic theme and tradition in literature revolve around the eye of the seer, who can predict the future. Lyra's status in *His Dark Materials* and the character of Agnes Nutter in *Good Omens* highlight the debate between the perspectives of an adult and a child seer. The emotional bond of the young adult reader displayed in Lyra matches Gibbs's (2003) explanation that emotions such as empathy, guilt, and shame contribute to the development of moral judgment and behaviors. The lack of emotion in Agnes Nutter is fulfilled by the book's concentration on the tradition of apocalyptic prophecy, the double fold of meaning and reading in the book of prophecy passed down through Agnes Nutter's family, and the collection of the Bible and prophecy book by the angel book collector, Aziraphale. In other words, the prophecy of the end of the world has been predicted in both the Bible and the apocalyptic prophecy, but it is the young adult characters such as Adam and Lyra who go beyond these predictions and create a new possibility for the future. Debating the presentation of good and evil in both novels reflect their different claims about moral development. While Lyra's lies and truth-telling compass help reveal a possible way out, a prophecy book in *Good Omens* can, at most, be entertaining. The unpredictable guess regarding the apocalyptic future in Adam's case helps the reader see that his character traits and development as a child under the influence of a good and evil influence are indeed important in both sarcastic and realistic ways.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In summary, the dilemma of acceptance for children's fantasy literature and its implication of moral and religious themes depends on the standpoint we take toward the work of literature produced for children. The two works discussed were published in the genre of children's literature, although later in America, the trilogy was published as a work for adults. The genre's burden of caring for the development of the child has been demonstrated through this paper's discussion. While the expansion of choices in the presentation of evilness observed in contemporary children's fantasy fiction differs from the didactic approach of the 1950s, it has nevertheless been driven by a deliberate and well-intentioned decision of the authors developing the genre. However, the previous version of the young adult protagonist and the fantasy depiction of a clear moral code and religious persona did not provide conclusive or representative results of moral interpretation needed for today's society. The mixed nature of the works studied demonstrates the genre's evolution in terms of its ability to reflect children's experiences and perspectives as they mature. This work has analyzed the references that the fantasy works for children make toward religious ideas and personas in the hope that our analysis will clarify the use of religious ideas and demonstrate that the reading of such a text and its interpretation bring more good and less harm.

The controversy over the difference between children's fantasy literature's implication of moral and religious themes was discussed in Bond's (2014) *The Perception of Good vs. Evil in Fantasy Novels*. Bond supported the idea that good and evil in fantasy works are portrayed as intrinsically moral values such as caring, generosity, greed, and envy. These traits can be seen in many of the protagonists as they choose between conflicts of interest in themselves or others around them. The case study of Lyra, Will, and Adam has presented the intrinsic values in these children and put the adults on the other side of the moral scale. The detail of this study further illustrates the common traits in Pullman's, Pratchett's, and Gaiman's work that question the old immoral normality created by adults. The child, because of their accumulation of experiences, made a more morally sound decision. By promoting the development of the child protagonist in the story, fantasy literature for children supports the development of a new moral standard for today's young readers.

The debate wavers in favor of a clear separation between good and evil, but in a new, disguised, and more subtle form. The choice of fantasy books for children continues to provide a safe space for the attempt to bend and improve social-moral standards for young readers. As the fantasy genre continues to depict religious personas, Wood (2001) has supported the fantasy's works by Pullman as a broadening of philosophical ideas and the inclusion of moral sources other than religious texts. The fantasy presentation not only incorporates religious concepts but also explores parallel universes, dark matter, and string theory, lending the piece a cutting-edge, scientific, intertextual quality. The inclusion of a more general philosophical approach highlights the work's fantasy elements and supports the non-conclusion interpretation of its religious allusion.

The protagonist's development throughout the two books is characterized by a multitude of choices they must make based on moral, scientific, and ethical considerations. *Good Omens'* depiction of angels and demons, as well as Pullman's depiction of humans like angels, has created a new effect on fantasy for children compared with the traditional 1950s view. As each book's journey brought Lyra through the human world, human experience, heaven, and purgatory, these adventures contributed to the child's understanding of life as a cycle in which everyone, including the angels and God, falls. Lyra embarks on a quest to save her friend and

learn the truth about human nature. The story pattern of children's fiction follows a cycle of the hero's journey.<sup>3</sup> The good in a child's innocence is contrasted with the evilness of the world. The same passage of growth also holds true in Adam's case. The child grows out of this reluctance, his rebellious but truthful state of innocence, and learns the experience of decision-making along the way. The conclusion of this debate is presented in Lyra's growth. The learning and experience are the most valued outcomes of the book's lesson, while the representation of biblical and religious themes comes in second.

In the same studies of biblical interpretation in *His Dark Materials*, Wood (2001) argued over the representation of paradise, comparing Lewis's and Pullman's perspectives of the role of a child in reference to the biblical plot. Compared with the 1950s version of fantasy retellings of the Bible, the phenomenal works of Pullman are concluded to present disobedience. When compared with the older interpretation of the Bible in Lewis's work, in *Good Omens* (1990), the question about the righteousness of the fall would be interpreted as disobedience as well. However, the more recent adaptation of the *Good Omens* series embraces irony. Although the book's religious reading is strict, the popular acceptance of the series is said to represent the contradictory situation of contemporary society in the British Isles (Rubin, 2019). These more recent acceptances of religious adaptation in the fantasy genre represent the changes in the reading, as *Good Omens* and *His Dark Materials* lead the reader away from focusing on religious references and attempt to provide a more updated version of an answer to how to determine what is good and bad in life. Pratchett's tale of a demon and angel working together to stop Armageddon functioned as an answer to the disobedient reading of this fantasy. Instead of addressing the topic of belief as Pullman did, the sarcasm of the present world in *Good Omens* tries to make the reader reflect on the contemporary situation.

This work provides a close examination of religious references and agrees with Robinson's (2003) study. Using plot comparison and children's interviews, Robinson concluded that the works of the fantasy genre, from Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* to Rowling's *Harry Potter*, provide a too-simplified version of good and evil. The study indicated that the simple view influences the child's perception of the real world. Therefore, our support of their growth is no longer teaching them simply to know from appearance what is right or wrong. This work proposes the case study of *His Dark Materials* and *Good Omens* as a more complex representation of good and evil in fantasy works for children, which will contribute more to the child's development in recognizing and synthesizing the complexity of human conditions. To enhance future research, the investigation of readers' responses, similar to Robinson's (2003) study, should be extended by specifically examining the portrayal of evilness. As clarified in this research, the discourse surrounding the portrayal of evilness is not linked to religious representation but rather concerns the acceptability of societal moral norms. Further research can concentrate on the portrayal of evil and the timeline of its evolution throughout different eras, as well as its potential depiction in current literature aimed at children. This study aimed to foster comprehension of the importance of children's literature. The concept of evil is an important aspect of the epistemological philosophy of the genre, although it is not the only one. Other aspects, such as mental development and sexuality, also play a major role in the narrative and frequently provide additional depth to the portrayal of child characters for young readers.

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<sup>3</sup> The movement of the monomyth, separation, initiation, and return (Campbell, 2014, p. 30), corresponds exactly to the "basic plot" of children's fiction, identified as home, away, and homecoming (See Nodelman, 1992).

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