

The Golden Compass

by Philip Pullman

Teacher's Guide

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Synopsis

PART ONE: OXFORD

One

Lyra Belacqua, an eleven-year-old girl living at Jordan College, Oxford, sneaks into the Retiring Room, despite resistance from her dæmon Pantalaimo ("Pan"). There, she hides in a closet. In the world of the novel, all humans have a dæmon, an animal manifestation of their soul that takes various forms, depending on its mood and its human's mood. Humans and their dæmons are linked with emotional bonds that if broken cause considerable damage, even death. From their hiding place in the closet, Lyra and Pan see the Master of Jordan College attempt to poison Lord Asriel, Lyra's supposed uncle. Seeing her uncle take a drink of the poisoned wine, Lyra reveals herself and stops him, saving his life.

Two

Lord Asriel shows the resident scholars slides of mysterious elementary particles called Dust. After the meeting, the Master and Librarian discuss the strength of the Church, focusing on two renegade theologians who had postulated the existence of numerous other worlds like their own. The Church had ruthlessly silenced their heresy. The Master and Librarian also discuss how Lyra has a major role to play in this situation, but she must do so innocently. She will also be involved in a great betrayal, where she will be the betrayer and the experience will be terrible.

Three

Lord Asriel travels north to find the Dust, and Lyra continues with her normal life. Jordan College is the center of experimental theology and Lyra, a "greedy little savage," has run of the campus. Her closest friend

is Roger Parslow, the kitchen boy. Meanwhile, for no reason that anyone can imagine, children all over are disappearing. They are picked up by a beautiful lady. Rumors circulate about the kidnappers, whom the children call "Gobblers." Lyra and Roger sneak into the college's crypt. Readers learn that children's dæmons can change shape at will, but adults' dæmons are fixed

into one animal shape. The Gobblers appear in Oxford and kidnap Billy, a little gyptian boy, the son of Ma Costa, a queen among the gyptians. The gyptians are a group of nomadic, canal-boat-dwelling people. Lyra vows to rescue Roger. Lyra meets the beautiful, elegant, and socially prominent Mrs. Marisa Coulter.

Four

Mrs. Coulter takes Lyra away from Jordan College to become her apprentice. The Master of the College gives Lyra a priceless object, an alethiometer, making her swear to keep it a secret. Resembling a golden compass, the alethiometer is a device that can truthfully answer any question the user asks. Although initially unable to read or understand its complex meanings, Lyra takes

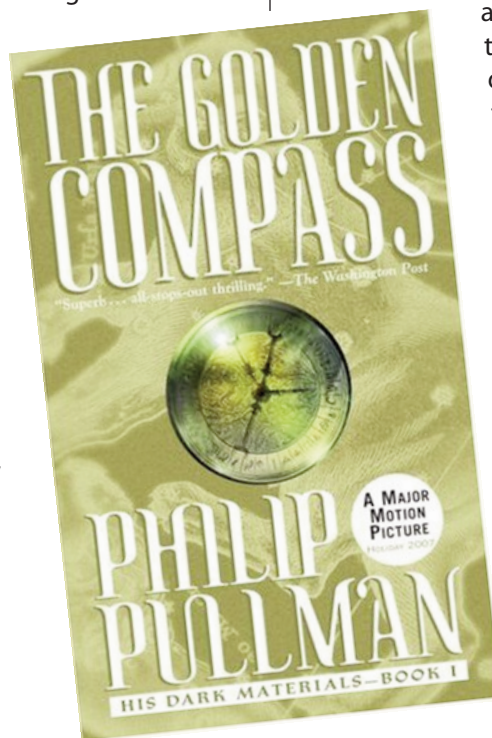
the device with her. Mrs. Coulter buys Lyra beautiful clothing and teaches her all about food and proper social behavior.

Five

Mrs. Coulter holds a cocktail party. Lyra becomes suspicious of Mrs. Coulter's motives when Mrs. Coulter's dæmon searches Lyra's room for the alethiometer. Guests reveal that Mrs. Coulter is the head of the mysterious General Oblation Board—the "Gobblers." It is the organization that is kidnapping children, and it is run by the Church. Realizing that she is in danger, Lyra flees Mrs. Coulter's apartment.

Six

The gyptians rescue Lyra, and Mrs. Costa tells her what they know about the Gobblers: they take the children



up north and experiment on them. There are even terrifying rumors that the people up north, especially the Tartars, eat the children. The gyptians have big meetings called “ropings,” where they discuss the situation and decide what to do.

Seven

At the roping, John Faa, king of the gyptians, leads his people to plan an expedition to the north to rescue the missing children. Lyra learns the truth about her past: Lord Asriel is her father, not her uncle, and Mrs. Coulter is her mother. They had fallen in love, conceived Lyra, and sent her out to be raised by the gyptians. Nonetheless, Mr. Coulter discovered his wife’s infidelity, but before he could kill Lyra, Lord Asriel killed him. Mrs. Coulter turned her back on Lyra; Lord Asriel lost his property but not his life. The gyptian woman wanted to continue raising Lyra, but the courts refused. Lord Asriel had Lyra placed in Jordan College. There, a half-gyptian man had always looked out for her and reported back to the gyptians. All the Masters of the College loved Lyra as their own child; they had attempted to poison Lord Asriel to keep Lyra and the other scholars safe from the Dust and what it will bring. Lyra learns that Ma Costa is the gyptian woman who nursed and sheltered her as a baby.

Eight

Lyra argues that she should be allowed to go on the expedition, but John Faa refuses. Lyra learns how to operate the alethiometer all on her own.

Nine

When John Faa learns that Lyra has learned to read the alethiometer, he reluctantly allows her to accompany them on the expedition to the north.

PART TWO: BOLVANGAR

Ten

John Faa and the others plan to head for Lapland. There, they will meet with the witches, whom they need as allies. One group of witches is indebted to the gyptians. Later, Lyra learns that the witches have talked about her for centuries. The witches, very long-lived, believe that Lyra will save everyone, but that she must travel to other worlds to do so. The gyptians also need the renegade bear Iorek Byrnison to accomplish their mission. The bear has been reduced to alcoholism and slavery, his armor taken from him. The bear agrees to work for them if they will recover his armor.

Eleven

The gyptians enlist the aid of Lee Scoresby, the famed plain-talking Texas aeronaut who travels by gas-powered balloons. Lyra helps Iorek recover his armor from the priest’s house, where it is being hidden, and the bear joins the expedition.

Twelve

They find a half-dead little boy named Tony Makarios who has been severed from his *dæmon*. This is intercision, a severed child.

Thirteen

This discovery confirms that the children kidnapped by the Gobblers are having their *dæmons* cut away from them as part of a horrifying experiment. Tony dies and Lyra buries him with decency. Iorek Byrnison reveals that he was king of the Svalbard bears but was exiled because he killed another bear. Now Iofur Raknison is the bear king.

Fourteen

The group is attacked, and Lyra is taken to the experimentation facility in Bolvangar. Lyra cleverly gives her name as “Lizzie Brooks” and tries to act dull-witted to escape identification. Her captors and their *dæmons* are oddly subdued. Lyra is drugged. The next day, she speaks with the other prisoner children and learns that Mrs. Coulter is coming.

Fifteen

Lyra finds Roger and they formulate an escape plan, a hiding place in the ceiling. The witches come and free the severed *dæmons*, who have been held in cages. Mrs. Coulter arrives.

Sixteen

Lyra is caught hiding in the ceiling, listening in on the conversation. The personnel are just about to sever Lyra from her *dæmon*, Pan, when Mrs. Coulter arrives on the scene.

Seventeen

Speaking with Mrs. Coulter, Lyra suddenly understands why all the adults in the facility are oddly blank and incurious: their *dæmons* have been cut away. Mrs. Coulter again tries to steal the alethiometer, but Lyra tricks her and escapes. Lyra sets a fire as a diversion and leads the other children out of the facility. Lee Scoresby rescues Lyra, Roger, and Iorek Byrnison in his hot-air balloon. Lyra meets the witch Serafina Pekkala, whom Farder Coram had loved.

PART THREE: SVALBARD

Eighteen

Now that Lyra has found Roger, she wants to deliver the alethiometer to Lord Asriel, who is imprisoned at Svalbard, the fortress of the armored bears. On their journey to Svalbard, huge bat-like cliff-ghasts attack the balloon. Lyra is thrown out, but lands safely. The armored bears capture her.

Nineteen

In their prison, Lyra meets Jotham Santelia, a mad professor of Cosmology at the University of Gloucester. Later, Lyra cleverly tricks the usurping bear-king Iofur Raknison into allowing Iorek Byrnison to resume his throne by pretending that she is Iorek Byrnison's dæmon. Bears do not have dæmons, and Iofur wants a dæmon more than anything else.

Twenty

The bears fight and Iorek Byrnison kills Iofur Raknison.

Twenty-One

Accompanied by Iorek and Roger, Lyra travels to Lord Asriel's magnificent prison. She is shocked when he inexplicably rejects her and tries to throw her out. Lord Asriel relaxes when he sees Roger. Despite being imprisoned, Lord Asriel is so influential that he has managed to accumulate the necessary equipment to continue his experiments on Dust. Lord Asriel explains the nature of Dust, which the Church has known about for centuries: indeed, it is mentioned in the Bible, which is quoted in the novel. Sin, shame, and death come at puberty, he explains, the moment when someone's dæmon becomes fixed. He also argues that severing children from their dæmons is no different and certainly no worse than the church's old practice of creating castratos. Lord Asriel wants to find the source of Dust, which he believes comes from the other universes that we can see through the Aurora. Lord Asriel argues that Original Sin is the human impulse to destroy things.

Twenty-Two

To Lyra's shock, her father does not want the alethiometer, which she had assumed was her mission to bring to him. Instead, he had wanted a child to use in his experiment, which is why he had tried to reject her: he does not want to kill his own daughter. Instead, Lord Asriel chooses Roger. Riding on Iorek Byrnison's back, Lyra sets off to rescue Roger. She and Iorek travel as far as they can together. Lyra must continue alone.

Twenty-Three

Lyra sees her father separate Roger from his dæmon. Roger dies. This act releases an enormous amount of energy and tears a hole through the sky into a parallel world. Mrs. Coulter arrives and Lord Asriel tries to get her to come with him to the alternate universe. Although they are still passionately in love, she refuses. Lord Asriel walks into the alternate universe. Lyra follows him.

Timeline of Modern Events that Impact Science Fiction

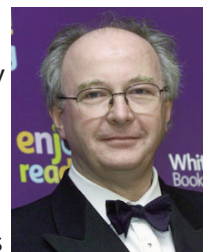
- 1970** Liquid crystal watches go on market
- 1971** CAT scan becomes available
- 1972** Pocket calculator hits market
- 1973** Car airbags introduced
- 1974** Barcodes added on supermarket products
- 1975** Home computers become available
- 1976** VHS and Betamax introduced
- 1977** First complete genetic structure of an organism found (Great Britain)
First flight of the Space Shuttle first commercial flight of supersonic *Concorde* between New York, Paris, London
United States admits testing neutron bomb
Trans-Alaska Pipeline starts oil flowing from Prudhoe Bay to Valdez
- 1978** Louise Brown, first baby conceived through vitro fertilization, is born
- 1979** Graphical user interface developed
- 1980** Sony Walkman introduced
- 1981** Compact disks hit the market
- 1982** Video keyhole surgery first accomplished
- 1983** Synthetic human insulin approved for sale
- 1984** DNA fingerprinting introduced
- 1985** First dotcom registered
- 1986** Laptop computer for sale to consumers
- 1987** Prozac hits the market
- 1988** First Internet virus attack; 10% of online computers disabled
- 1989** Toaster becomes first appliance controlled over the Internet
- 1990** First gene therapy accomplished (four-year-old girl with an immune disorder)
- 1991** Internet browser developed (spawns World Wide Web)
- 1992** Text messaging introduced
- 1993** Global Positioning Satellite introduced
- 1994** Genetically modified tomatoes hit market

- 1995** Toy Story, the first entirely computer-generated feature film, is released
- 1996** The Hubble Ultra Deep Field photograph reveals some 10,000 galaxies at a distance between 2.5 billion and 10.5 billion light years from earth
- 1997** Dolly the sheep, first mammal cloned from an adult cell, is born
- 1998** First segment of the International Space Station launched
- 1999** Electronic reusable paper invented
- 2000** Y2K panic sweeps the world
- 2001** Implanted microchips give sight to three blind men
- 2002** Iris (eye) scanners first used for airport security cosmic background radiation revealed to be polarized
- 2003** Human Genome Project publishes the complete human genetic sequence in the journal *Nature*
- 2004** Sedna, a large orbiting body, is discovered and revealed to be just one of many new planetoids
- 2005** NASA launches Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter
- 2006** Scientists decide that Pluto is not a true planet Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter lands
- 2007** NASA's Dawn Mission begins eight-year, 3.2 billion-mile journey to the beginning of the solar system
Apple releases the iPhone, a multimedia and Internet-enabled cell phone that includes a camera, portable media player, text messaging, and visual voicemail

Author Sketch

Philip Pullman was born in 1946 in Norwich, England. His father was an airman for the Royal Air Force; his mother, a homemaker. As a child, Pullman lived all over the world. For example, when most children would be in kindergarten, Pullman had left England for Zimbabwe (then called Rhodesia), where his father was working. Tragically, Pullman's father died soon after when the plane he was piloting crashed. As a result, Pullman and his brother went to live with their grandparents in Norfolk while his mother tried to find work in London. Only much later did Pullman learn that his father's death was a suspected suicide, as the pilot had run up huge gambling debts and was involved in extramarital affairs.

Several years later, Pullman's mother remarried and the family moved again, this time to Australia. A few years later, the family moved back to England, settling in Wales. There, Pullman became interested in drawing as well as writing, his first love.



Pullman earned his B.A. from Oxford University in 1968, a scholarship student. He majored in poetry, but soon decided that he wanted to write prose. He started a novel, supporting himself by working at a clothing store. Two years after graduation Pullman married Judith Speller; the couple has two sons. To support his family, Pullman earned his teaching degree from Weymouth College of Education and took a position teaching middle school in Oxford. He taught for twelve years. In 1978, Pullman published his first novel, *Galatea*, and then turned to writing and producing plays. But soon after, he returned to his first love, storytelling, publishing *Ancient Civilizations*, a book for young adults. This was followed by *The Ruby in the Smoke*. Writing in *British Book News Children's Books*, critic Peter Hollindale said, "This is a splendid book. ... It is a first-rate adventure story." Pullman himself claimed, "With *The Ruby in the Smoke* I think I first found my voice as a children's author." He published several other books, all successful, but it was "His Dark Materials" that catapulted Pullman to international fame. The first volume was published in the United Kingdom in 1995 as *Northern Lights* and in America the following year as *The Golden Compass*.

Both children and adults flocked to the novels. Critic John Rowe Townsend wrote in *Horn Book*: "To younger readers they offer narratives of nonstop excitement with attractive young central characters. Adolescents and adults, putting more experience into their reading, should be able to draw more out. There are features of "His Dark Materials" that will give older readers a great deal to think about."

In an interview with Julia Eccleshare in *Books for Keeps*, Pullman discussed the background of "His Dark Materials": "What I really wanted to do was *Paradise Lost* in 1,200 pages. From the beginning I knew the shape of the story. It's the story of the Fall, which is the story of how what some would call sin, but I would call consciousness, comes to us. The more I thought about it the clearer it became. It fell naturally into

three parts. Though it's long, I've never been in danger of getting lost because the central strand is so simple."

Critic's Corner

Considered a writer of great range, depth, and imagination, Pullman is recognized as one of the most talented creators of children's literature to emerge in the last twenty-five years. Under the title *Northern Lights*, *The Golden Compass* received the Carnegie Medal, Great Britain's highest literary award specifically for children's literature. Further, the judges of the Carnegie Medal chose *The Golden Compass* as one of the ten most important children's novels of the past 70 years. Not surprisingly, the novel received ecstatic reviews.

For example, writing in the *Books for Keeps*, critic Julia Eccleshare said: "The weaving together of story and morality is what makes *Northern Lights* such an exceptional book. Never for a moment does the story lose ground in the message it carries." In her *Horn Book* review, critic Ann A. Flowers called *The Golden Compass* an "extraordinary, compelling fantasy. ... Touching, exciting, and mysterious by turns, this is a splendid work." John Rowe Townsend in the *Horn Book* concluded: "This [novel] has weight and richness, much that is absorbing and perceptive, and ample food for serious thought. It has flaws; but a large, ambitious work with flaws can be more rewarding than a cabined and confined perfection and 'saying something truthful and realistic about human nature' is surely what all fiction, including fantasy, should be trying to do."

While writing *Northern Lights/The Golden Compass*, Pullman knew that he was creating a significant work. He told Julie C. Boehning of *Library Journal*, "I felt as if everything I'd read, written, and done in my whole life had been in preparation for this book."

Other Books by Philip Pullman

Galatea, 1978
Ancient Civilizations, 1978
Count Karlstein, or The Ride of the Demon Huntsman, 1982
The Ruby in the Smoke, 1985
The Shadow in the Plate, 1987, published as *Shadow*

in the North, 1988
How to Be Cool, 1987
Spring-Heeled Jack: A Story of Bravery and Evil, 1989
The Broken Bridge, 1990
The Tiger in the Well, 1990
Frankenstein, 1990
The White Mercedes, 1992
Sherlock Holmes and the Adventure of the Limehouse Horror, 1993
The Tin Princess, 1994
Thunderbolt's Waxworks, 1994
The Gas-Fitter's Ball, 1995
The Wonderful Story of Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp, 1995
The Firework-Maker's Daughter, 1996
Clockwork, or All Wound Up, 1996
The Subtle Knife, 1997
I Was a Rat!, 2000
Puss in Boots: The Adventures of That Most Enterprising Feline, 2000
The Amber Spyglass, 2000
Lyra's Oxford, 2003
Sally Lockhart Slipcase (omnibus; contains *The Tin Princess*, *The Tiger in the Well*, *Shadow in the North*, and *The Ruby in the Smoke*), 2004
The Scarecrow and His Servant, 2005

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British Book News Children's Books, March, 1986, Peter Hollindale, review of *The Ruby in the Smoke*, pp. 33-34; December, 1986, Peter Hollindale, review of *The Shadow in the Plate*, pp. 30-31; March, 1988, Peter Hollindale, review of *How to Be Cool*, p. 30.

Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, February, 1994, Roger Sutton, review of *The Tin Princess*, pp. 199-200.

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Horn Book, March-April, 1992, Nancy Vasilakis, review of *The Broken Bridge*, p. 211; July-August, 1996, Ann A. Flowers, review of *The Golden Compass*, pp. 464-465; September-October, 1997, Ann A. Flowers, review of *The Subtle Knife*, pp. 578-579; January, 2000, review of *I Was a Rat!*, p. 82; July-August, 2002, John Rowe Townsend, "Paradise Reshaped," p. 415.

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General Objectives

1. To understand the novel's make-believe world
2. To analyze the dæmons
3. To assess each character's personality
4. To trace the novel's sequence of events
5. To appreciate the novel's suspense
6. To find examples of cruelty
7. To find examples of compassion
8. To understand the novel's title
9. To recognize the significance of setting
10. To describe the author's theme or message

Specific Objectives

1. To compare and contrast the world of the novel with our own world, especially each world's religious and belief systems
2. To understand how the dæmons function and why each person in this make-believe world is so attached to his or her dæmon
3. To analyze Lyra's great courage and suitability as an epic hero
4. To trace how Lyra begins her mission to save the world and the adventures she has on her mission
5. To discover the identity of Lyra's parents and their history
6. To explore the relationship between Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter
7. To understand Dust
8. To determine what Lord Asriel wants to achieve by entering the alternate universe
9. To parallel *The Golden Compass* to *Paradise Lost*
10. To understand the author's message about Original Sin

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Philip Pullman's style, present the following terms and applications to the novel:

Fantasy: a kind of writing that describes events that could not take place in real life. Fantasy has unrealistic characters, settings, and events. *The Golden Compass* is a fantasy because the entire premise is make-believe: people cannot have dæmons, visible manifestations of their souls. Talking bears, witches, and devices that accurately foretell the future are all elements of this fantasy as well.

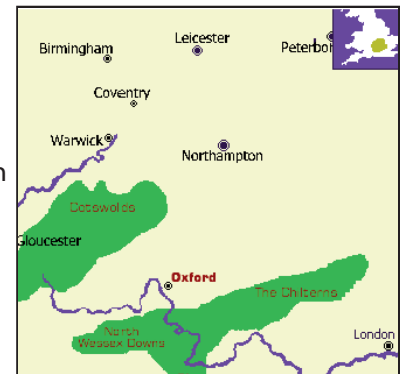
Suspense: the feeling of tension or anticipation an author creates in a work. Authors create suspense by unexpected plot twists. This keeps readers interested in the story and makes them want to read on to find out what will happen. *The Golden Compass* is rich in suspense, as readers press on to discover who is snatching the children and why. Who are the Gobblers? What do they want with the children? These questions—and many more like them—combine to create an exciting and suspenseful narrative.

Heroes: the literary characters whom we admire for their noble traits, such as bravery, selflessness, or

cleverness. Eleven-year-old Lyra Belacqua is a delightful hero because she is practical, unimaginative, realistic, and savage. She presses ahead and does what needs to be done, such as recovering Iorek Byrnison's armor from the priest's cellar. She is loyal (rescuing her best friend, Roger), clever (figuring out how to operate the alethiometer), and courageous (insisting she be taken on the dangerous trip north). In short, she is an ideal hero, which makes for gripping reading.

The Importance of Setting

In *The Golden Compass*, Pullman creates a unique make-believe world. In many ways this world is similar to our own, but it includes a fascinating mix of old technology and future inventions. The old technology, for instance, includes naphtha lamps and zeppelins. The future technology includes atomic vessels and a synthetic fabric called "coal-silk." In addition, this world features monsters and magic, witches and Dust. Most importantly, Pullman's world is populated by humans and daemons in animal form united by emotional bonds. If severed, both the humans and daemons are badly, even fatally, damaged. The action of the novel traverses far and wide across this setting. The setting is crucial to the action, functioning almost as a character itself.



The action opens in Jordan College at the University of Oxford. Jordan College is fictional, but the University of Oxford is real. Pullman loosely based Jordan College on the real Exeter College at Oxford, his alma mater. Oxford, the oldest university in the English-speaking world, is based in Oxford, England. Its roots go back at least 900 years.

Cross-Curricular Sources

Fiction

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Peter S. Beagle, *The Last Unicorn*
Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*
Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*
Ursula K. Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea*
C. S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia*
Patricia A. McKillip, *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld*
Michael Moorcock, *Elric of Melnibone*
James Morrow, *Towing Jehovah*
Philip Pullman, *The Amber Spyglass*
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J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*
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Frank M. Robinson, *Science Fiction of the 20th Century: An Illustrated History*
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Audiocassettes

The Golden Compass
The Amber Spyglass

DVDs/TV

How to Be Cool, Granada-TV, Great Britain 1988.
The first three books in the "His Dark Materials" series have been optioned by New Line Cinema for production as motion pictures.
Two plays based on "His Dark Materials," adapted by Nicholas Wright, were produced at the National Theatre, London, 2003- 04.

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Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass* includes these aspects:

Themes

- courage
- destiny
- freedom through knowledge
- good vs. evil
- the importance of loyalty
- justice
- morality
- Original Sin
- the power that organized religion exerts on the independent mind
- souls

Motifs

- alternate realities
- betrayal
- dæmons, monster, magic
- danger
- Dust
- friendship
- great love and passion
- mystery
- myth and legend
- scholarship

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the book. Explain the meaning of each. Page numbers indicate

the context from which the item is taken.

1. "As I understand it, the Holy Church teaches us there are two worlds: the world of everything we can see and hear and touch, and another world, the spiritual world of heaven and hell." (pp. 27-28) *(Here, the Librarian and Master are discussing the religious issues at the center of the novel. Pullman based The Golden Compass on John Milton's Paradise Lost, the epic 17th century poem. Milton's epic concerns the Judeo-Christian story of the Fall, Satan's temptation of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from Eden. Just as John Milton wrote Paradise Lost to "justify the ways of God to man" (1.26), arguing the importance of faith and decency, so Pullman grapples with the issues of Original Sin, fate, and the existence of two separate worlds, which form the novel's primary concerns and its climax.)*
2. "No, no, that's the saddest thing; she will be the betrayer, and the experience will be terrible." (p. 29) *(From the very beginning of the novel—Chapter 2—readers learn that Lyra will be the hero, and at the center of the great theological conflict in the novel. In fact, she functions as the Savior of the novel's make-believe world.)*
3. "It's an alethiometer." (p. p.65) *(In this scene, the Master gives Lyra a special tool before she embarks on her great adventure. The tool, one of Pullman's imaginative creations, is a complex device that tells the truth. Only a handful of these devices have been made and only a select few scholars can learn to read the machine's portents, which they do by studying arcane documents. Readers get further confirmation that Lyra is indeed extraordinarily special because she figures out how to read the alethiometer on her own, and with relative ease.)*
4. "Your father never perished in no airship accident, because your father is Lord Asriel." (p.108) *(Lyra is astonished to learn that the man she had always known as her uncle is her father. Later, she is even more shocked to learn that the cruelly beautiful and ruthless Mrs. Coulter is her mother. The discovery of an astonishing parentage is a staple of adventure stories, most recently in the Harry Potter novels, another factor that sets Harry as well as Lyra apart from the other characters.)*
5. "The witches have talked about this child for centuries past," said the counsel. (p. 154)

(The topic of this discussion is Lyra. Because the witches live in a region where the veil between the alternate worlds is very thin, they hear immortal whispers every now and again. They have heard of a child whose great destiny can only be fulfilled in a far-away world. Indeed, without this child, everyone will perish. This conversation further adds to Lyra's destiny as the savior of the universe.)

6. He was clutching a piece of fish to him as Lyra was clutching Pantalaimon, with her left hand, hard, against her heart; but that was all he had, a piece of dried fish; because he had no dæmon at all. (p.187) *(For the first time, readers see a child with its dæmon cut away. This scene is remarkable for the quality of its writing, how Pullman conveys both the horror and pathos of the scene. The detail of the dried fish is masterly, as the image of the desiccated fish echoes the image of the desiccated little boy, withered because his soul is gone. The lad will shortly die.)*
7. Everything she'd heard about the bear-king added up: the mighty Iofur Rakinson wanted nothing more than to be a human being, with a dæmon of his own. (p. 292) *(Pullman weaves in elements from many literary traditions, including Norse myths and fairy tales. For example, in this scene, he couples the bear kings of traditional Scandinavian tales with the legends of non-humans who yearn to become human. Likely the best-known of these stories is the tale of Pinocchio.)*
8. The Magisterium decided that Dust was the physical evidence for original sin. (p. 325) *(Lord Asriel argues that Dust is a physical particle, what we now call Dark Matter. Despite what its name suggests, Dust has consciousness. As it falls from the sky, Dust is drawn to people and things. This attracted the attention of the Church, which decided that Dust is the physical manifestation of Original Sin. By the end of the novel, we get glimmers that Dust is good, not evil: in fact, it confers wisdom and consciousness. In this installment of the trilogy, Dust is called "Rusakov particles" after the man who discovered them.)*

9. "Human beings can't see anything without wanting to destroy it, Lyra. That's original sin." (p.331)
(Although Lord Asriel is speaking here, readers can assume that he is serving as the author's mouth-piece, Pullman making a plea for more kindness and tolerance in the world.)
10. "If Dust were a good thing. ... If it were to be sought and welcomed and cherished. ..." (p. 350)
(The novel ends on this note, as Lyra thinks for herself, the mark of a true hero. She steps into the alternate world to see if her supposition is correct, among other goals.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. What is a *dæmon* in this novel? What is the relationship between a *dæmon* and a human?
(Dæmons are visual manifestations of a human soul. Each person has a dæmon, which takes an animal shape. Humans and their dæmons cannot be separated without causing grievous harm, even death, to both parties.)
2. Who are Lyra's birth parents?
(Her father is Lord Asriel; her mother is Mrs. Coulter.)
3. When do *dæmons* adopt their final shape? Why is this important in the novel?
(Dæmons assume their final shape during puberty. This is important because it means that children rather than adults make the best subjects for Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter's experiments.)
4. What is the alethiometer? How is it used?
(It is a device that tells the truth about events, but only certain people can learn to read its many arcane symbols. Only six of these devices were made.)
5. Why do the gyptians support Lord Asriel?
(Lord Asriel has done many favors for them, including interceding with the Turks for the life of Sam

Broekman, allowing gyptian boats free passage through the canals on his property, and defeating the Watercourse Bill in Parliament, to the gyptians' lasting benefit.)

Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. What qualities make Lyra an ideal hero?
(As with many heroes of children's novels, she was raised an orphan, which gives her independence and a lack of family ties. In addition, she is courageous, bold, adventurous, and rebellious—like Eve in the Garden of Eden. She is also headstrong and innocent, important qualities in a children's hero.)
7. How does Mrs. Coulter's *daemon* reflect her appearance and true personality?
(Her daemon, a golden monkey, has Mrs. Coulter's rich and beautiful exterior, as well as her tricky and evil character.)
8. What is the relationship between Lord Asriel and Mrs. Coulter?
(They are united in their great passion as well as their power, intelligence, cunning, and determination. Nonetheless, they have different goals and in the end, when Mrs. Coulter refuses to go into the other world with Lord Asriel, he rejects her.)

Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. What does Lord Asriel's name mean?
(Pullman took the name from Asrael, the Biblical angel. In the Bible, Asrael's appearance heralds the apocalypse. In addition, he is the angel of death who cuts souls from human bodies. In the same way, Lord Asriel intends to create his own apocalypse by not only cutting Roger's soul from his body but also by waging war on God.)
10. How does Pullman invert the traditional symbolism of witches?
(Witches have traditionally been symbols for evil and darkness. In this novel, however, they are symbols of light, goodness, and freedom.)

Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Create two broadcasts: the first, the Church's version of Roger's death; the second, the true version of events.
12. Working with some classmates, discuss whether or not you would have followed Lord Asriel at the end of the novel.

Across the Curriculum

Art/Music

1. Make a model of the golden compass. Use descriptions in the novel as your guide as you draw this fascinating device.
2. Choose a scene from the novel that you found especially dramatic. Find background music that increases the tense mood. Play the music while you read the scene to the class.
3. Make a diorama of Lord Asriel's "prison" in the north.
4. Mrs. Coulter takes Lyra shopping when the girl comes to live with her. Design some clothes or clip pictures from fashion magazines that Mrs. Coulter would buy for Lyra. Also include some outfits that Mrs. Coulter and Lyra would wear at Mrs. Coulter's cocktail party.
5. In this novel, a dæmon is a reflection of your soul as well as your lot in life, such as your social class and your occupation. For instance, sailors often have dæmons in the shapes of birds. Draw your dæmon. Be ready to explain why you chose this specific creature.

Language Arts

1. The Golden Compass is the first novel in Pullman's trilogy "His Dark Materials," comprising *The Golden Compass*, *The Subtle Knife*, and *The Amber Spyglass*. Read the second or third novels in the trilogy and in an essay, explain what they add to your understanding of the characters, setting, plot, and conflict.
2. In interviews, Pullman has maintained that he used fantasy in *The Golden Compass* to make starkly realistic points about human nature. For instance, he told *School Library Journal*: "When I found myself writing this book, what I wanted to do was to use the apparatus of fantasy in order to do what writers of realism are more typically interested in doing, namely, to explore this business about being a human being—what it feels like and what it's like, what it means for us to grow up, to pass away from our childhood, to suffer, to learn, to grow, to develop, to die, and so on. And

that's what I mean by saying that it's not really a work of fantasy. It's as realistic as I could make it." In an essay, explain which aspects of the novel you believe are realistic and which ones you see as fantastic.

3. Pullman has written two more books to follow the events in *The Golden Compass*. Without reading either of those books, predict what you think will happen in them. Focus on Lyra's adventures and her fate.
4. Write a newspaper article for the make-believe *Oxford Journal*, explaining what has been happening to the children in the town.
5. Imagine that you were one of the witches described in this novel. In a diary or journal entry, explain how you would use your powers.
6. Pullman has often contrasted his anti-Christian slant to the pro-Christian slant of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* series. Read one of Lewis's books. On a chart, compare and contrast it to *The Golden Compass*.

Geography and History

1. The Tartars, a group of Turkic people of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, are an important group in the novel. Find out more about their history, population, and culture.
2. Report on the University of Oxford, including its location, history, admission policy, and class offerings. You may wish to start by exploring their website at <http://www.ox.ac.uk/>.
3. The book opens with some scholars meeting at Oxford. They no doubt wear academic gowns, as is the custom in many elite British colleges. Make a chart showing the different academic gowns and the ranks they denote, including undergraduate, masters, and doctorate.
4. Explain how the dæmons in this novel are related to the medieval tradition of witches' "familiars."
5. The gyptians in the novel are more similar to Gypsies than Egyptians. In fact, the name "John Faa" comes from a 15th century song about a gypsy prince. Find out more about gypsies, including their past as well as their present. Share what you learn with

The Golden Compass Philip Pullman

the class as a display.

Science/Math

1. Bears do not have souls in this novel, but they do have opposable thumbs. Find out why opposable thumbs are so significant to human development.
2. Lyra often feels cold while soaring through the north. How cold is cold? Make a chart showing the ten coldest places on earth. Include their coldest temperatures.
3. The Auroras are natural colored light displays most often seen in the polar zone. In the north, they are called aurora borealis and the northern lights. Explain their cause, focusing on the collision of charged particles.
4. On a world map, show where Oxford, England, and Lapland are located. Then calculate the distance between them.
5. What are zeppelins? Are they still being used? Make a poster display showing "All You Need to Know about Zeppelins."

Debate/Drama

1. The Golden Compass was published in Great Britain as *The Northern Lights*. In a roundtable discussion, explore which title you like better and why. Brainstorm some additional titles for the novel as well.
2. Improvise a scene in which you and a group of classmates hold a meeting of the Oblation Board to discuss how to deal with the problem of Lyra.
3. Choose one chapter in the novel and present it as a reader's theater.
4. In a speech, argue that Mrs. Coulter should accompany Lord Asriel to the alternate universe at the end of the novel.
5. Working with your classmates, debate whether or not Lord Asriel should be stopped.

Alternate Assessment

1. Design a poster for a movie version of *The Golden Compass*.

2. Write a critical review of the novel for publication in the school newspaper.
3. Explain how Lyra functions as savior in the Judeo-Christian tradition.
4. Create a blog or web page for fans of the novel. Solicit your readers' opinions of the novel and post them for others to share.

Vocabulary

Match each word from the novel to its meaning. Write the letter of your choice in the space provided.

- | | | |
|-----|----------------|---|
| ___ | 1. dais | A. ridiculous |
| ___ | 2. somber | B. calm |
| ___ | 3. ritual | C. throne |
| ___ | 4. agog | D. garbled |
| ___ | 5. etiquette | E. nimble |
| ___ | 6. agile | F. ceremony |
| ___ | 7. wrangle | G. someone who steals a throne or kingdom |
| ___ | 8. entice | H. tempt |
| ___ | 9. glee | I. manners |
| ___ | 10. incoherent | J. serious |
| ___ | 11. ludicrous | K. merriment |
| ___ | 12. malodorous | L. smelly |
| ___ | 13. stout | M. argue |
| ___ | 14. placid | N. heavy-set |
| ___ | 15. usurper | O. astonished |

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Match each description with a name or word from the list. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------|
| A. Lord Asriel | F. Ma Costa |
| B. Mrs. Coulter | G. John Faa |
| C. Lyra Belacqua | H. Iroek Byrnison |
| D. Pantalaimon | I. Serafina Pekkala |
| E. Roger | J. Lee Scoresby |

- _____ 1. the girl who receives the alethiometer
- _____ 2. the deposed bear king who regains his rightful throne
- _____ 3. the woman who runs the Gobblers
- _____ 4. the gyptian woman who nursed Lyra
- _____ 5. Lyra's dæmon
- _____ 6. Mrs. Coulter's lover
- _____ 7. the beautiful witch who had loved Farder Coram
- _____ 8. Lyra's best friend
- _____ 9. king of the gyptians
- _____ 10. the aeronaut who flies gas-filled balloons

Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

Circle the term that best completes each of the following statements.

- Lyra is (eleven, sixteen) years old when the novel opens.
- Lyra lives at the University of (Cambridge, Oxford) in Great Britain.
- Lord Asriel shows the resident scholars slides of mysterious particles called (Dust, Daemons).
- Someone is kidnapping children. Most people call the mysterious kidnapers (Witches, Gobblers).
- Mrs. Coulter takes Lyra away from Jordan College to become her (apprentice, daemon).
- The Master of the College gives Lyra a priceless object, (a golden monkey, an alethiometer), swearing her to keep it a secret.
- The gyptians have big meetings called (parleys, ropings) where they discuss the situation and decide what to do about it.
- The renegade bear Iroek Byrnison has been reduced to alcoholism and slavery, his (claws, armor) taken from him
- At the experimentation facility in Bolvangar, Lyra cleverly gives the false name (Adele Starminister, Lizzie Brooks) and tries to act stupid to escape identification.
- To Lyra's shock, at the end of the novel her father wants a (child, bear) to use in his experiment.

Part III: Motivation (20 points)

Complete each phrase with a reason or justification.

- Lyra and Roger sneak into the college's crypt to ...
- Lyra becomes suspicious of Mrs. Coulter's motives because ...
- John Faa and his people plan an expedition to the north to ...
- The Master of the College had attempted to poison Lord Asriel to ...
- Lyra cleverly tricks the usurping bear-king Iroek Byrnison to ...
- Lord Asriel is able to set up a magnificent lab in prison because ...
- Lord Asriel argues that Original Sin is really ...

8. At the end of the novel, Lord Asriel rejects Lyra because
9. Lord Asriel tries to convince Mrs. Coulter to come with him to the alternate universe because
10. Lyra goes into the alternate universe because

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Which elements in this novel are realistic? Which ones are fantasy? Describe at least two of each.
2. What is the author's message about organized religion in this novel?
3. Compare and contrast Lyra and Lord Asriel. How are they similar and different?
4. Summarize the plot. Be sure to describe the main events, not the minor details.

- _____ 9. Pantalaimon I. the armored bear
_____ 10. Lord Asriel J. Lyra's birth mother

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

1. What is the author's message about good and evil in this novel?
2. To Pullman, what does it mean to be human? Use examples from the novel to make your point.
3. Explain how Lyra makes an ideal hero for a fantasy novel. Give at least three examples and reasons to support your argument.
4. Write a review of The Golden Compass for the school newspaper, explaining why you would or would not recommend it for other people your age.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. E | 11. A |
| 2. J | 7. M | 12. L |
| 3. F | 8. H | 13. N |
| 4. O | 9. K | 14. B |
| 5. I | 10. D | 15. G |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. A |
| 2. H | 7. I |
| 3. B | 8. E |
| 4. F | 9. G |
| 5. D | 10. J |

Part II: Sentence Completion (20 points)

- | | |
|---------------|--------------------|
| 1. eleven | 6. an alethiometer |
| 2. Oxford | 7. ropings |
| 3. Dust | 8. armor |
| 4. Gobblers | 9. Lizzie Brooks |
| 5. apprentice | 10. child |

Part III: Motivation (20 points)

1. have some fun and perhaps make some mischief
2. Mrs. Coulter's dæmon searches Lyra's room for the alethiometer
3. rescue the missing children
4. keep Lyra and the other scholars safe from the Dust and what it will bring
5. allow Iorek Byrnison to resume his throne as king of the bears
6. he has tremendous power, even while being held prisoner
7. the human impulse to destroy things.
8. he does not want to use her in his experiment.
9. he still loves her passionately
10. she is courageous and curious

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|------|
| 1. T | 6. T |
|------|------|

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 2. F | 7. F |
| 3. T | 8. F |
| 4. F | 9. F |
| 5. T | 10. T |

Part II: Identification (20 points)

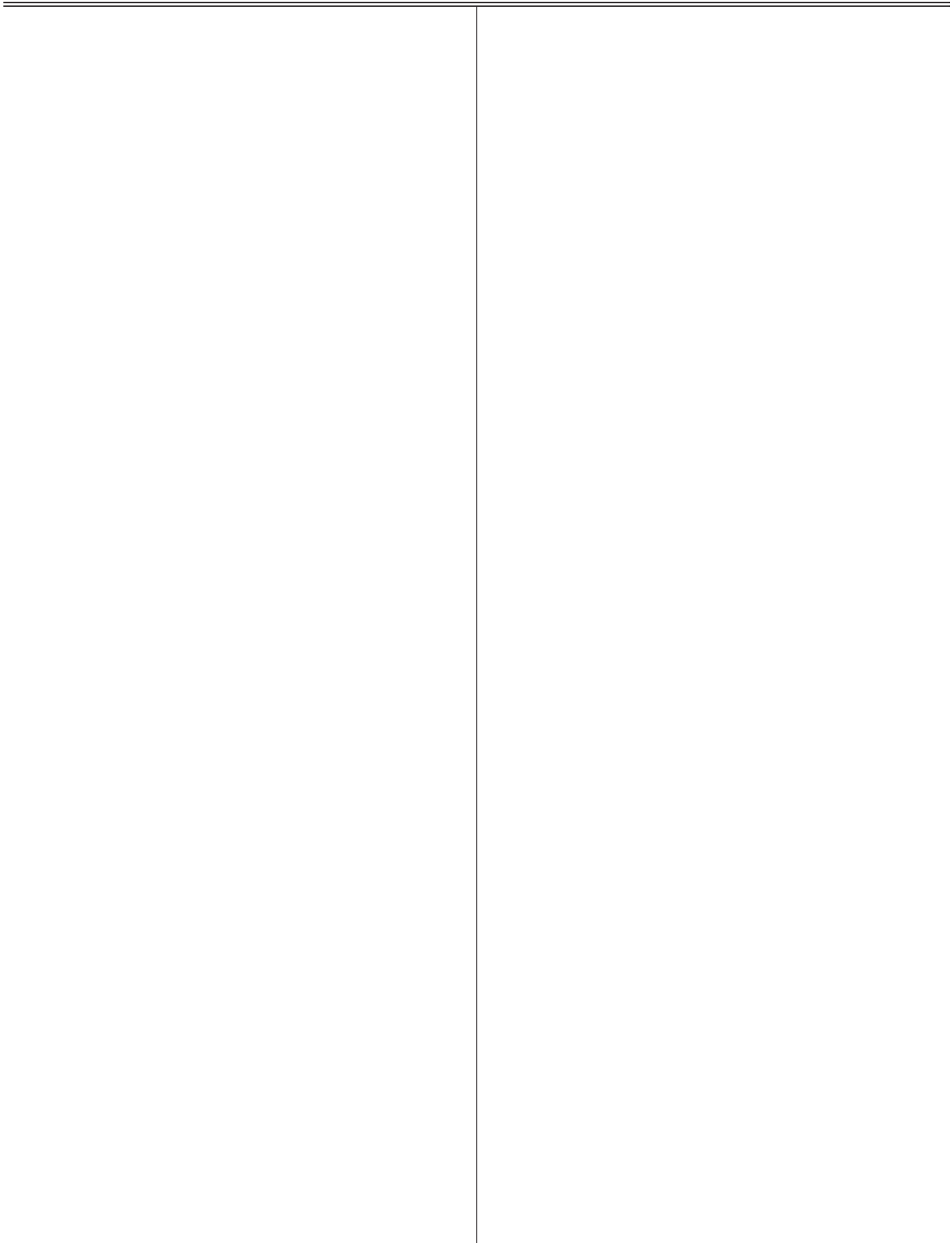
1. The alethiometer is the magical device that enables Lyra to find out the truth about events. Only six of these devices were created and can only be used after extensive study, but Lyra is able to teach herself its mysteries. This is further evidence of her special qualities.
2. Dæmons are animal familiars that contain the souls of their human counterparts. They take the form of their owners' character. For example, a sailor is likely to have a dæmon in the shape of a seagull. Every human has a dæmon and they cannot be separated without causing serious injury or even death to one or both parties.
3. Dust is awareness or consciousness. The Church links Dust to Original Sin and would like to wipe it out to eliminate all awareness of sin. The author suggests that we must have Dust—the awareness of sin and ability to sin—in order to be fully human.
4. Iorek Byrnison is the armored bear. His armor, like the armor of all the bears in this book, functions as his dæmon, the outward manifestation of his soul.
5. The Aurora Borealis is the border between the two worlds, the edge where the dividing line is very thin. The witches can pass through the lights, back and forth between the worlds, but humans cannot—until Lord Asriel opens the way by separating Roger from his dæmon.

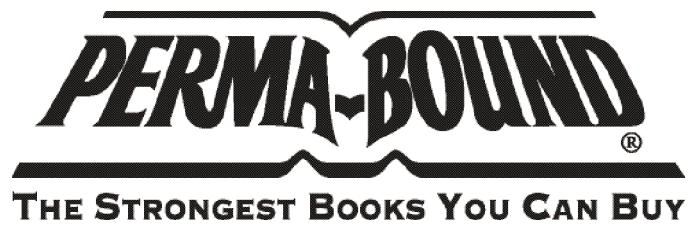
Part III: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. E | 6. C |
| 2. D | 7. I |
| 3. A | 8. H |
| 4. J | 9. B |
| 5. F | 10. G |

Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.





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