The Journey from Innocence to Experience
Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* as a female Bildungsroman

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Introduction

Your moment of freedom was yesterday.
You made a decision. You set in motion
Forces in your life and in the lives of others
Which cannot be reversed
(Buckley, 1974: 274\(^1\)).

In this essay, Philip Pullman’s trilogy *His Dark Materials* is analysed primarily by using the model of the Bildungsroman. The reason for my choice of novel is mainly that I enjoy reading fantasy fiction such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and especially *Harry Potter* books. But since several essays already have been written about those novels, it would be interesting to explore a novel that has not yet been analysed as much. What I find most interesting with Pullman’s trilogy is that he has a female protagonist while the three other mentioned fantasy works primarily have a male protagonist (although there are female protagonists together with males in the *Narnia Chronicles* and *Harry Potter*). In Pullman’s trilogy, we meet the protagonist and our female hero – Lyra in the first book, *Northern Lights*, and we follow her journey through book two, *The Subtle Knife*, and until the very end in book three, *The Amber Spyglass*. There is a male protagonist in *His Dark Materials* too, but we meet Will for the first time in book two (and one can choose to look at him as a helper or a subordinate character, which I do).

What I find most interesting concerning the Bildungsroman is, according to Jerome Buckley’s view concerning the Bildung narrative, its lack female protagonists. His work concentrates (with one exception, see page 4 and 9) on works written solely by men recounting a male protagonist. Therefore it will be interesting to examine if or how the plot or sequence of events has to change when the protagonist is female. A Bildungsroman with a female protagonist may not be able to use precisely the same line of action as a male.

Thus, my aims with this study are to examine if *His Dark Materials* narrative follows the typical Bildung elements and consequently is a female Bildungsroman. Furthermore, are Campbell’s patterns of the hero journey represented in *His Dark Materials*? If so, how are they represented?

\(^1\) Quote from T.S. Eliot’s *Cocktail Party*
“The Space-in-Between” – a search for one’s identity

Myths do not die, they change
(Comte, 1991: 14).

This essay approaches Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* by using the critical perspectives of Jerome H. Buckley and Joseph Campbell. Campbell’s and Buckley’s theories will both be applied to analyze the structure of *His Dark Materials*, although the latter will be used more frequently since my main purpose is to study the trilogy as a Bildungsroman. I will concentrate my study mainly on the first book *Northern Lights* and the last part of the third book, *The Amber Spyglass* (the reason for this decision will be described in the beginning of the analysis).

The pattern of the hero/quest story is the most frequently encountered story pattern, re-used and re-worked in one text after another (Hourihand, 1997: 13). In what follows, there will be a presentation of Campbell and Buckley. I will present a summary of their work concerning the journey of the hero and how this journey is constructed. Later in this essay, these structures will be applied to *His Dark Materials*. Since women are not taken into consideration as heroines by Buckley and Campbell, the female perspective will be illuminated by the work of two female critics: the article “Plath’s The Bell Jar as Female Bildungsroman” by Linda W. Wagner (1986) and Susan Fraiman’s book *Unbecoming Women* (1993).

**Campbell and *The Hero with a Thousand Faces***

It is stated in *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Mythology* (Comte, 1991) that “myths are found in every country” and that people all over the world have adopted the myths’ “framework to strengthen their origins, unite their communities and, indeed, to affirm their identity” (1). In the book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), Campbell presents the universal story of the hero by comparing mythological, religious, folklore and fairy tale heroes. According to Campbell, the hero story will always be one and the same “beneath its varieties of costume” (4). Campbell states that all hero stories derive from myths and that “the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation – initiation – return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth”. In other words, “the adventure of the hero normally follows the pattern”
described above: “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (30, 35).

The departure of the hero begins with an inescapable call to adventure, often proclaimed by the “herald”. This call, Campbell states, “rings up the curtain, always, on a mystery of transfiguration – a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth.” At this stage in time, when the hero receives the call, the hero’s “familiar life horizon has been outgrown” and there is no denying that it is time for the hero to pass the first threshold to “a zone unknown”. It is likely that the hero was destined to go and, in many cases, his course of action has been “prophesied at his birth” and therefore, “the moment he was ready” and received the call “the proper heralds automatically appeared” (51, 58, 56).

A refusal of the call will end up in a negative way for the hero, but if the hero does not refuse the call, the journey will begin with an encounter “with a protective figure” which Campbell calls the supernatural aid, “who provides the hero with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass” (69). Once this occurs, it is time for the crossing of the first threshold, beyond this point “is darkness, the unknown and danger” (77).

After the initiation of the journey, when the hero has traversed the threshold, he must “survive a succession of trials” (97). The hero enters the belly of the whale where he can be seen as dead to the outside world, but he is very much alive except he must go inside himself, an inner journey and from this he will come out as reborn. This theme of death is common to myths, Campbell states that “only birth can conquer death – the birth, not of the old thing again; but of something new” (16).

When crossing the return threshold the hero has departed “out of the land we know into darkness; there he [has] accomplished his adventure. […] his return is described as a coming back out of that yonder zone. Nevertheless […] the two kingdoms,” the one we know and the one we do not know (often seen as the kingdom of the Gods) “is actually one. The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know. And the exploration of that dimension, either willingly or unwillingly”, is the purpose of the hero’s journey so that he can return home “transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed” (20, 217).

Campbell states that the hero, in the end, can achieve either a microcosmic or a macrocosmic triumph. In fairy tales it is often “the youngest or a despised child who becomes master of extraordinary powers and prevails over his personal oppressors” and achieves therefore a microcosmic triumph. In myths, however, the hero (presumably an adult one might add) “brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole” and consequently achieves a macrocosmic triumph (38).
General information about the Bildungsroman

Bildungsroman is a German term which can be translated into English as a “novel of formative education” (Encyclopædia Britannica Online). The purpose of the Bildungsroman is to follow a person’s (often a male) development from a child or adolescence to an adult. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* written by Goethe and published in 1795 is considered to be an early prototype of the form Bildungsroman (Ne.se).

In *Seasons of Youth – the Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, Buckley has studied the development of the English Bildungsroman and identified the steady recurrence of certain motifs in the texts. Buckley has analysed novels written between 1849 and 1959. According to Buckley, the term Bildungsroman was not in general use until quite late in the nineteenth century (13, 28, 269).

For readers who lack previous knowledge about the term Bildungsroman, formulations such as “the novel of development”, “the novel of initiation” or even “life-novel” might give some clues to readers what a novel within this genre is about.

Male Development – Buckley’s mapping of the Bildungsroman

Buckley has characterized the Bildungsroman and identified several important key elements of a typical novel of development. Although Buckley is aware that not all novels that are considered as Bildungsroman have precisely all these components, he is of the opinion that a novel cannot lack more than two or three of these principal elements to fulfil the requirements of a Bildungsroman (18).

The structure of the Bildungsroman

The typical Bildungsroman follows a strictly chronological order and the tendency of the majority of the novels is that they are autobiographical in character (150, 270). Buckley refers to writings by May Sinclair, the author of *Mary Olivier* and *Arnold Waterlow* – both autobiographical novels. Even “if Mary is the almost literal image of the author” declares Buckley, “Arnold is to be seen as the male counterpart […] very like her [the author] in temperament, but as a man able to take bolder options” (258).

Each of the protagonists must go through certain stages to become mature – what these stages are, will be presented below, but all the men experience, according to Buckley, “privileged moments of insight, epiphanies, spots of time, when the reality of things breaks through the fog of delusion. And each feels a responsibility to change conduct. For each is
what we should now call ‘inner-directed’; each is guided by a sense perhaps inculcated or sharpened by parents and childhood conditioning, and perhaps never freely admitted, but nonetheless remaining latent and strong through all the rebellion of adolescence” (22). About the novel *David Copperfield*, Buckley points out something essential: that almost every character and incident that David encounters may have some final relation to the development of the hero (35).

It is common that the ending of the Bildungsroman “presents problems of indecision and inconclusiveness” (246). “Some of the Bildungsromane² […] end with the death of the Protagonist. Others, […] leave us speculating on the defeat of all positive emotion. Perhaps most, […] conclude more or less uncertainly, with an open question about the hero’s final choice. Only a few […] reach a recognizably happy ending” (23).

Many of the protagonists in the novels, which Buckley considers as Bildungsromane, are from rural communities. They very often come from poor family conditions, if they have a family at all, and it is also very common that the child or adolescent is an orphan. As Buckley states: “[t]he growing child, as he appears in these novels, more often than not will be orphaned or at least fatherless.” If the father is not dead, he will presumably be repelling and trying to “thwart” the child’s “strongest drives and fondest desires” (19). *Mary Olivier* is one example; when the protagonist, at the age of four, “has learned to distrust her mother, to fear her father and to love and envy her brother. Both Mary and Arnold are dominated in youth by a sanctimonious and thoroughly selfish mother” (256, 258). Although there is often the conflict with parents, Buckley states that the central conflict in nearly every Bildungsroman is personal in origin; the problem lies with the hero himself (22).

But if parents are dead or die – or as said above, work against the child and therefore become alienated from it – the child is likely to seek a substitute parent or mentor (19). David Copperfield “though an orphan, is given a memorable series of substitute parents, from the evil Murdstones to the altogether good, gruff Aunt Betsey.” Pip [the main character of *Great Expectations*], also an orphan, finds a substitute father in Magwitch (34, 49).

Buckley is of the opinion that “the defection of the father becomes accordingly the principal motive force in the assertion of the youth’s independence”. He links the fatherless boy to the heroes of romance and folklore, in which the boy “must make his own way resolutely through the forests of experience” (19, 20).

² The plural form of the German term Bildungsroman.
In time the protagonist leaves the rural community of home, to go to the big city – often London in English Bildungsromane – to experience life and grow as a person. He might find the city both sophisticated and corrupt at the same time (253). The protagonist “first enters the city with bewilderment and naiveté; and the city plays a double role in his life: it is both the agent of liberation and a source of corruption”. The city has a lot to offer, variety and newness, but all too often – it “brings a disenchantment more alarming and decisive than any dissatisfaction with the narrowness of provincial life” (20). Buckley states that to Pip the city is a sad disappointment, as is the case with protagonists in other Bildungsromane too (49).

Regarding the protagonist’s development, Buckley talks about the school-without-walls and argues thereby that a person can grow up and gradually discover who he or she is through experience. The educational experiences are made through work or play, travel, nature, adolescent romance and/or imaginative reading (viii, 232).

Buckley uses Richard Feverel and Harry Richmond as examples of novels of “education”. Both these novels are “concerned with apprenticeship to life rather than to trade” and imply that the shaping conflicts of the novels are largely emotional (65). Furthermore Buckley states that the majority of the Bildungsroman heroes learn their deepest lessons from rare moments of insight, “spots of time” that reveal to them new levels of life and meaning (272).

The ambition of many of the protagonists is to find what they are meant to do in life – often they are concerned about which trade they will choose; such as being a writer or a painter – an artist of some kind. This is because of the fact that many of the Bildungsroman in Buckley’s Season of Youth depict the authors’ own life and therefore Buckley states that most English Bildungsromane “describe the unfolding of an aesthetic sensibility” (254).

All of the protagonists, however, need to come to terms with themselves. The importance is that in the end the protagonist’s initiation is complete; he has achieved independence and a measure of self-knowledge and can return home to where it all begun – his parents or wherever home was in the beginning, as an independent, confident individual (278).

Female Development

Not as much has been written about female heroines. I will, however, give a brief overview of what can be expected of girls and women in the Bildungsroman genre.

Wagner and Plath’s The Bell Jar as Female Bildungsroman

In the article “Plath’s The Bell Jar as Female Bildungsroman” (1986), Wagner compares The Bell Jar to Buckley’s principal elements of the Bildungsroman described in Season of Youth.
Wagner is of the opinion that *The Bell Jar* “in structure and intent” is “a highly conventional Bildungsroman. This is because the novel is chronological in its structure and almost entirely about the protagonist’s, Esther Greenwood’s, education and maturation – where “the most important formative incidents occur in the city” of New York (55).

“The important change of location” is also an ingredient. New York is described as filled with “threatening elements” and the setting of New York is “inimical”. This description of the big city “is symptomatic of the ‘foreign’ country’s hostility, shown in a myriad of ways throughout the novel” and “the disappointment of” Esther’s “New York experience is cataclysmic. Rather than shape her life, it nearly ends it” states Wagner (56).

Wagner states that “the conflict with parent or location in the Bildungsroman is secondary to the real conflict”, and refers to Buckley who points out that the conflict is “personal in origin; the problem lies with the hero himself” or herself as Wagner adds. Wagner is of the opinion that Esther struggles to know herself, “to be self-motivated, to become an artist. […] The process is not one of discovering a persona already there but rather creating a persona” (58).

Wagner compares and highlights differences between the female Bildungsroman with the male Bildungsroman. Wagner states that “most female novels of adolescence”, and here she quotes Spacks,³ (1981), “stress the world’s threat more than its possibilities; their happy endings derive less from causal sequence than from fortunate accident”. This can be seen by simply looking at the titles, states Wagner, who interprets *The Bell Jar* as “sinister implications of airlessness, imprisonment, and isolation”, compared to book titles predicting positive future potential as *Great Expectations* or “the self-confidence of *The Artist as a Young Man*” (65).

The crucial role of the parent in a female Bildungsroman shifts from father to mother; in *The Bell Jar* Esther admits to Doctor Nolan that she “hates her” mother (63, 65). “Much of the process of education is imitative” states Wagner, which means “that figures which serve as role models will […] shift from male to female” (65). Therefore, Wagner says, a female Bildungsroman is “peopled more heavily with women characters than with men” but men would be economically, socially and sexually prominent to the woman – according to cultural patterns, this should also be the case since men appear in a female Bildungsroman in the role of the antagonist. In a male Bildungsroman women tend to be “simply omitted”, states Wagner (65).

When it comes to education and choices of occupation, women need to choose between profession and domesticity, where men do not need to make any choice at all. Also, when it comes to sexuality, the novel of development differs between male and female texts. For a male sexual experience is something positive, that is “another step toward maturity” whereas for a female “the move makes a complete change of status. […] Losing one’s virginity unwisely seldom determines the eventual life of the male protagonist; it is the stuff of ostracism, madness, and suicide for a female, however” (65-66).

Finally, Wagner draws the conclusion that when it comes to the generic differences, “the female hero in a woman’s bildungsroman will be ‘destined for disappointment’. And Wagner refers to Pratt\(^4\) (1981) when she states that:

> [t]he vitality and hopefulness characterizing the adolescent hero’s attitude toward her future here meet and conflict with expectations and dictates of the surrounding society. Every element of her desired world – freedom to come and go, allegiance to nature, meaningful work, exercise of the intellect, and use of her own erotic capabilities – inevitable clashes with patriarchal norms (67).

*The Bell Jar*, Wagner says, shows how this clash trapped mid-century women from living “rightful, productive lives” (67).

**Fraiman’s *Unbecoming Women***

Fraiman (1993) criticises Buckley and other male critics who have written about the Bildungsroman genre, since all of them have defined “development in emphatically masculine terms – for the contemporaneous heroine’s relation to choice, mentors, and mastery is rather different”. Fraiman looks at Howe’s\(^5\) (1930) classic developmental path: “[f]irst and foremost […] involves travel” […] “[g]oing somewhere is the thing. And there – in all sorts of tempting variety – is your story”. “The Hero begins his Bildung by leaving home and going abroad”. But Fraiman states that heroines can make this journey “only at the risk (or in the aftermath) of infamy” since “mobility is difficult for women” (6, 7). Women, in novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Pride and Prejudice*, which are among the novels that Fraiman refers to, have little choice when it comes to finding friends and occupation. The options most available have to suit the woman’s husband or husband to be (5, 6).

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In the female Bildungsroman the girl has trouble finding a suitable mentor. Fraiman states that the “mothers are usually either dead or deficient models, and the lessons of older men are apt to have voluptuous overtones”. The female protagonist “may spend the whole novel in search of a positive maternal figure” but in the end the only person that will be her mentor is the man that will become her husband (6).

Concerning sexuality, male heterosexual adventures are favoured and seen as something positive. Fraiman refers to Buckley (17) who writes that “at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting” are characteristic of male Bildungsromane. For a female, however, “sex plays a less positive role”. Until the twentieth century, female protagonists tried to avoid sex outside marriage and to prevent “things” from happening to her. The woman’s “paradoxical task is to see the world while avoiding the world’s gaze” (6, 7).

“The Space-in-Between” – summary

Certainly the Bildungsroman has been defined in terms of works by, about, and appealing to men. (Fraiman, S, 1993: 2, 3).

What makes the reading of Buckley (and Campbell too for that matter) noteworthy, more than the structure of the Bildungsroman, is his totally unproblematic view concerning gender. As Fraiman points out, the heroine’s relation to choice, mentors, sexuality and travel differ in comparison to a hero.

According to Buckley’s book, all heroes are men (if one disregards Mary Olivier who is introduced as a protagonist in the chapter called Later novels of Youth). Generally, I dare say that Buckley does not question the fact that all his heroes are precisely heroes and not heroines. What would happen if there had been a few heroines in Buckley’s book? Would his view of the narrative structure of the Bildungsroman still have been the same? Concerning Mary Sinclair, the author of the novel where Mary Olivier is the protagonist, Buckley does mention that Sinclair wrote autobiographically when it came to Mary. But Sinclair also wrote another novel about Arnold (the author’s alter ego as a male) where there were greater opportunities “to take bolder options” (258) than if the protagonist had been a woman, which, following Buckley’s psychological speculation, Arnold was in reality. Buckley does not go deeper than this concerning gender perspective.

In the context of these gender considerations, the aims of this essay are to examine if the narrative of His Dark Materials, with its female protagonist, follows typical Bildungsroman
elements and as a consequence can Pullman’s story of Lyra be considered a female Bildungsroman? And, furthermore, are Campbell’s patterns of the hero journey represented in the trilogy? If so, how are the patterns represented narratively?

**His Dark Materials**

*His Dark Materials* is a trilogy and consists of the novels: *Northern Lights*\(^6\) (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997) and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). It is written by the English author Philip Pullman (born in 1946) who is “one of England’s most outspoken atheists” and in his trilogy he uses fantasy as a “springboard for exploring cosmic questions about the purpose of human life and the nature of the universe” (Miller, 2005).

*His Dark Materials* takes place in multiple universes and has two protagonists; Lyra and Will. Lyra is from a parallel universe – another Oxford, whereas Will is from our world. A great difference between Lyra’s world and ours is that Lyra’s soul, or a part of it, exists in the shape of an animal called a dæmon, while we have our soul inside ourselves. When people in Lyra’s world are young their dæmons’ shapes shift depending on their human’s frame of mind. Lyra’s dæmon is called Pantalaimon and he shifts into various forms during the trilogy, until he finally settles in the end of *The Amber Spyglass*. When a dæmon settles, it will take the form of an animal that best mirrors the personality of its human – and the human will be considered an adult once the dæmon has settled.

Pullman declares that he wanted to tell a story about what it means to grow up and become adult, the experience all of us have and all of us go through. I’m telling a story about a realistic subject, but I’m using the mechanism of fantasy. […] Just as Lyra is growing up, accumulating new experiences and seeing the world in a wider and more complex way, so the reader is doing as well. The structure of the trilogy is mirroring the consciousness of a growing, learning, developing consciousness (Weich, 2000).

**The Story of Lyra**

For that which once existed is no more, and that which was not has come to be; and so the whole round of motion is gone through again. (Campbell, 1949: 29).

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\(^6\) The novel is also known as *The Golden Compass*; but I have chosen to use the name *Northern Lights* concerning the first novel of the trilogy, since I use the edition published by Scholastic Ltd in 1998 called *Northern Lights*. 
The protagonist in *His Dark Materials* is named Lyra; she is an eleven year-old-girl and an orphan living at Jordan College in Oxford. As a person she is very extrovert, full of energy and certainly a born leader. Lyra’s characteristics are more “suitable” for a boy than a girl. Lyra is described as a boasting barbarian who clambers on roofs, spits and races through the narrow streets of the city while stealing apples and waging war. For the most part she is a coarse and greedy savage like a half-wild cat therefore tomboy is an epithet that suits her well.

**Separation**

The call to adventure comes in the first few pages of the first book, *Northern Lights*, when Lyra has sneaked into a room which is forbidden for females to enter. While she is hidden in a wardrobe she sees the Master of Jordan College poisoning a bottle of Tokay⁷ which is meant for Lyra’s uncle Lord Asriel. When Lyra stops her uncle from drinking the wine, he lets her stay hidden in the wardrobe from where she can take part of a meeting about the North. The meeting awakes her interest and longing to go on an expedition up North herself. When she asks to go with her uncle on his next voyage, he refuses to take her along and when he departs Lyra has to stay.

In Oxford, and the rest of the country, children have disappeared. The abductors are called *Gobblers*. One day Lyra’s best friend, the kitchen boy Roger has disappeared and Lyra is decisive when she tells Pantalaimon that they will rescue him.

Rumours imply that *the Gobblers* bring the children up North. Lyra wants to go there and the opportunity to travel reveals itself in the form of a woman Mrs Coulter who is a female Scholar and explorer. Mrs Coulter makes a great impression on Lyra with her intelligence, history of travel and not the least, her beauty. “Mrs Coulter had such an air of glamour that Lyra was entranced. She could hardly take her eyes of her” (67). Mrs Coulter is in the need of a personal assistant and Lyra is thrilled when she is asked to come with her to her home in London. Before she leaves, however, the Master of the college sends for Lyra and gives her an alethiometer⁸ and tells her not to show it to anyone, especially not to Mrs Coulter.

**Initiation**

When Lyra leaves her home in Oxford to live with Mrs Coulter in London, she crosses the first threshold. In London she is introduced to all the right people, mingling at fancy parties

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⁷ Hungarian wine

⁸ A truth-measure device which looks very much like a compass.
and is taught things a woman ought to know such as putting on lipstick and scent, how to wash one’s hair and so on. But when the charm of novelty has passed, London is not that fabulous anymore and Lyra longs to travel up North and save her friend Roger.

At a cocktail party, Lyra finds out that the brain behind the Gobblers is Mrs Coulter. In finding this out, Lyra makes a decision, she and Pantalaimon will run away. Lyra and Pantalaimon escape from Mrs Coulter’s residence and London.

On the run, Lyra and her dæmon are almost captured by Turk traders, but are saved by the Gyptians. Many Gyptian children have been captured by the Gobblers and the Gyptians are going to a meeting where they will decide who will travel North to save the children. Mrs. Coulter knows by this time that Lyra is gone and people are looking for her everywhere. Lyra is therefore hidden by the Gyptians. While she is travelling with the Gyptians she meets Farder Coram and John Faa and they tell Lyra things she did not know about herself and her background. It turns out that she is not an orphan after all: “Your father never perished in no airship accident, because your father is Lord Asriel” (122). As it turns out her father is her “uncle” and her mother is no other than Mrs Coulter. “Mrs Coulter?” said Lyra, quite stupefied. “She en’t my mother?” (122, 125). Lyra struggles with the new knowledge. “To see Lord Asriel as her father was one thing, but to accept Mrs Coulter as her mother was nowhere near so easy” (131).

On the way to the Gyptian meeting, Lyra finds a mentor in Farder Coram who teaches her how to read the alethiometer. Or actually, he gives her clues on how it works. The device is very rare and normally it takes wise men a life-time to learn its functions, even needing a handbook to accomplish the task. But she does not give up and whenever she is alone, Lyra takes out the alethiometer and pours over it “like a lover with a picture of the beloved. So each image had several meanings, did it? Why shouldn’t she work them out? Wasn’t she Lord Asriel’s daughter?” (133).

During the Gyptian meeting, Lyra tries to convince John Faa and the other leaders that she can help them to save the children. She has all kinds of reasons to motivate her coming along. To begin with has she always intended to save her friend Roger and now the Egyptian children too. She knows lots of useful things that might come in handy during the trip. She can navigate and she knows what parts of a bear that is eatable but most importantly a child might be needed to save the other children. Although she comes up with many different reasons for her to come along, she is denied to go. It is not until Lyra foresees, with the help of the

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9 An old and wise Gyptian man.
10 The King of the Gyptians.
alethiometer, that a Gyptian man will die, which he does. It is then that John Faa realises that she can be of great help and brings her along, although he is troubled about bringing Lyra since there are only trouble and danger ahead.

Their first stop is in Trollesund, a town in Lapland, where the witches have a consulate. The Gyptians believe that there would be no use trying to rescue the captive children without the help of the witches. After arriving in Trollesund, Lyra and Farder Coram look for Dr. Lanselius the Witch-Consul, who, when he learns that Lyra has an alethiometer and that she can read it, puts her up for a test. Lyra has to find the correct spray of cloudpine, which belonged to Serafina Pekkala, among several. Without any problem at all, Lyra manages the task and brings Dr. Lanselius the correct piece of cloudpine. In managing this, yet another secret about Lyra is revealed, although Lyra herself is not the one told, only Farder Coram is present when the witches’ prophecy is spoken of. According to the witches, something that has been spoken of for centuries, a child with a great destiny will come. The child will fulfil its destiny, not in this world but far beyond. Without this child, all will die and more importantly, she must fulfil her destiny in ignorance of what she is doing, only then can she save everybody else.

After the meeting with Dr. Lanselius, Lyra meets the aëronaut Lee Scoresby who has signed up with the Gyptians and she manages to save Iorek Byrnison from the captivity of humans and leads him to his hidden armour. He therefore promises to give Lyra his help and goes north with them to Bolvangar, where the kidnapped children are being held captive.

On the way Lyra finds a little boy, Tony Makarios, in a fish-house. The boy is holding on to a dried fish since his daemon is missing. This is the time Lyra realises that “intercision” is parting a human being from his or her daemon. When Lyra sees Tony, a severed child, she is certain that being parted from one’s daemon must be the worst thing in the world. The boy dies within a few hours, leaving Lyra sad, furious and sickened at the thought of the Gobblers’ malice.

The party of travellers, the Gyptians, Lyra, the panserbørn and the aëronaut, continue their journey. Lyra has the time to think about her parents. “Lyra feared Mrs Coulter and thought about her often. And whereas Lord Asriel was now ‘father’, Mrs Coulter was never ‘mother’” (232).

Not far from Bolvangar, the group is attacked by the Tartars; they capture Lyra and bring her to Bolvangar, where she meets Roger and has a personal encounter with the

11 A panserbørn_A bear wearing a suit of armour.  
12 A feared tribe.
machine, a silver guillotine, that severs children from their daemons. In the last second Mrs Coulter enters the room, sees her daughter in the guillotine and manages to rescue her. During the time she spends with Mrs Coulter, questioning her about the severing and knowing that the woman in front of her is giving her answers which are lies, Lyra questions how she could ever have found Mrs. Coulter so fascinating and clever. Lyra escapes from Mrs Coulter, finds Roger and leads him and the other children away from Bolvangar. A fight starts among the rescuers and the defenders. In the commotion Lyra, Roger and Iorek flee away in Lee Scoresby’s balloon. Lyra’s mission is accomplished however, since Roger is safe and sound with her.

Suddenly the balloon is under attack too; Lyra is captured by armoured bears and, luckily for her, brought to where they all were heading, to Svalbard where Lord Asriel is being held captive. On Svalbard Lyra outwits the king of the bears, Iofur Raknison, and at the same time helps Iorek to regain his rightful place on the throne. With the former king beaten and Iorek in charge, Lyra’s father is released and she asks him why he never told her that he was her father and tells him that she would “have been so proud” to have him as a father. Lord Asriel then tells her that he doesn’t “want to be interrogated by and condemned by an insolent child” (368). Lyra is close to tears, “if she was the sort of girl who cried”, but she manages not to. Instead she is disappointed when she explains to him that she went through all kinds of trouble to get to him (since she believes that the purpose of giving the alethiometer to her, was to pass it on to him), and she says that when he saw that she was there, he almost fainted as if he had seen some horrible thing he never wanted to see again. In her anger she tells him that he is not her father. She claims to love Farder Coram and even the armoured bear Iorek more than she loves her own father. Her father, Lord Asriel, tells her that if she is going to be sentimental he will not waste his time talking to her.

The next morning she wakes up, realising that both her father and Roger are gone. Then she remembers her father’s words, explaining how to make a bridge through the Aurora into another universe; “the energy that links body and daemon is immensely powerful: and to bridge the gap between the worlds needed a phenomenal burst of energy”. She realises that she has brought him Roger “Oh, the bitter anguish! She had thought she was saving Roger, and all the time she’d been diligently working to betray him…” For the first time Lyra shakes and sobs “in a frenzy of emotion” (380).

All alone below the Aurora, Lyra is too late to save Roger. He has been killed by Lyra’s father, who has harnessed the power of the intercision to open a gateway to another universe. Lyra “felt wrenched apart with unhappiness. And with anger, too; she could have killed her
father: if she could have torn out his heart, she would have done so there and then, for what he’d done to Roger” (397).

*Northern Lights* ends with Lyra and Pantalaimon deciding to find Dust\(^{13}\) before Lord Asriel does, and stop his plans. With this task in front of her “Lyra and her daemon turned away from the world they were born in” leaving behind them […] “pain and death and fear. […] Ahead of them lay doubt, and danger, and fathomless mysteries” but they both “looked towards the sun, and walked into the sky” (398, 399).

In the second novel called *The Subtle Knife* we meet Will for the first time. By coincidence he finds a hole in space which takes him to another universe\(^{14}\) and the town Cittàgazze where he meets Lyra. After a fight with an old man in the Tower of the Angels, Will becomes the bearer of the Subtle Knife – a knife that can cut through the fabric between worlds, which makes it easier to travel between universes.

In the end of novel three, *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra and Will stand before their biggest challenge yet. They have to enter the land of the dead and to be able to enter they must leave their souls behind. This means that Lyra has to leave her beloved Pantalaimon. Both of them are crying, screaming in pain. Lyra moves across the water into the land of the dead, leaving Pantalaimon bitter cold and frightened on the muddy ground – alone.

Yet another task must be accomplished. After crossing the waters, the harpies guarding the gate to the land of the dead must let you in. In return they want something from you. In this case, Lyra offered to tell them a story, and she makes one up, since she is in the habit of nearly ever tell the truth. But the harpies are not fooled; they scream at her and call Lyra a liar. In fact, one harpy seems to scream Lyra’s name so that “Lyra and liar were one and the same thing” (308). Luckily they manage to sneak in, and among thousands and thousands of ghosts they find Roger and Lyra tells him that she did hear Dr. Lanselius talk about the prophecy about her and that her mission is to “help all the ghosts out of the land of the dead for ever” (325). With living beings entering the land of the dead, there is a lot of commotion. To calm everyone down, Lyra tells the true story of her journey from Oxford to the present. Even the harpies sit silent and listen, and it turns out that true stories about life nourish them. A bargain is made with the harpies, their mission will be to guide the ghosts out into the open

\(^{13}\) Dark Matter.

\(^{14}\) In *Northern Lights* Serafina Pekkala’s demon Kaisa tells about multiple universes; “Witches have known of the other worlds for thousands of years. You can see them sometimes in the Northern Lights. They aren’t part of this universe at all; even the furthest stars are part of this universe, but the lights show us a different universe entirely. Not further away, but interpenetrating with this one. Here, on this deck, millions of other universes exist, unaware of one another…” (Pullman, 1995: 187).
again, but only if the ghosts in exchange will tell the harpies their true life stories “as a fair
and just payment for this guidance” (334). Together with the harpies, Lyra and Will lead the
ghosts out from the land of the dead; the first ghost to leave is Roger, who with a laugh of
surprise finds himself “turning into the night, the starlight, the air… and then he was gone,
leaving behind such a vivid little burst of happiness that Will and Lyra was reminded of the
bubbles in a glass of champagne” (382).

The final and last challenge, before returning home, is for Will and Lyra to leave each
other since they have fallen in love. They are confused and overwhelmed by happiness at the
same time, suddenly without knowing how it happened they are kissing passionately, and with
fast beating hearts they embrace each other. Will and Lyra are together and around them there
is nothing but silence, “as if all the world were holding its breath” (492).

Concerning the prophecy, Lyra was meant to fall in love to stop the Dust from
disappearing from the worlds. The problem is that Dust, which is essential to all conscious
life, is disappearing from the worlds through all the “windows” that have been made by the
Subtle Knife throughout the years. When Lyra and Will are reunited with their now settled
demons they are told that they have to close all these windows, which means that not a single
window to another world/universe can stay open or be opened even for the shortest amount of
time. And since Lyra and Will are from different worlds one might think that the problem is
easily solved; they just decide in whose world they want to live and that is it. However, this is
the problem. A person cannot live longer than approximately ten years in a world which is not
his/her own. For a short while, ten years together felt like an option, but Will is the one who
realises that neither of them would be able to survive if the other one would die. The only way
to spend their whole lifetimes together is to go on living, not together, but apart.

In the overwhelming situation, Lyra decides to ask the alethiometer what is the right thing
to do, but she finds out that she cannot read it anymore. She is struck by this inability and
realises that she has lost her ability to read the alethiometer forever.

After their decision, they are told that one “window” can be left open. They know it has to
be the one they opened for the ghosts in the land of the dead. So in the end, Lyra and Will
sacrifice their happiness, for the sake of all the souls in the universes.

Return
In returning to Jordan College, the only home Lyra has ever had, she is two years older and
surprised that the Master’s servant, who has been her enemy for as long as she could
remember “greeted her so warmly and shook her hand with both of his: was that affection in
his voice? Well, he had changed.” When the Master and a female Scholar\textsuperscript{15} ask her about her travels, she makes them promise that they have to believe her when she tells them. Since she knows that she has not “always told the truth”. But she states that: “I could only \textit{survive} in some places by telling lies and making up stories” (542).

From being used to living in the moment, suddenly Lyra has to plan for her future. She misses her ability to read the alethiometer but is told that it is a skill she can master all over again; through “long practice, yes. […]” but “what is worth having is worth working for” (523).

The female Scholar looks at Lyra and believes she looks “defiant as well as lost” and admires her. The Master on the other hand sees that “the child’s unconscious grace” is gone and instead Lyra looks “awkward in her growing body” (544).

While alone, Pantalaimon is leaping through the branches of a tree, far off from Lyra, a witch-ability\textsuperscript{16} that Lyra and Pan “painfully-acquired” when Lyra entered the land of the dead. “Once, she would have revelled in showing it off to all her urchin friends, and making them goggle with fear, but Will had taught her the value of silence and discretion”. She ponders about the future and the girls in her future school. They might be more intelligent than she is and more sophisticated. They surely know a lot more about things important to girls of her age. She could not tell them anything about what she has been through. “They’d be bound to think her simple and ignorant” (546).

Lyra is astonished that she could love someone as much as she loves Will and in the end both of them had realised that “the republic of heaven” has to be built where we are, not where we might be heading later, since “this life in this world” matters the most “because where we are is always the most important place” (548).

\textsuperscript{15} The Female Scholar is named Dame Hannah Relf and the Head of a women’s college. In the beginning of \textit{Northern Lights}, Lyra meets her but considers her “quite uninteresting”. Lyra “regarded female Scholars with a proper Jordan disdain: there \textit{were} such people but, poor things, they could never be taken more seriously than animals dressed up and acting a play” (Pullman, 1995: 66, 67).

\textsuperscript{16} Witches and their dæmons can have great distances between each other, without being hurt. For people in Lyra’s world this ability would seem as if they were severed – and probably scare people.
In this section, I will compare the stages of Lyra’s development with Buckley’s elements of the Bildung narrative and also demonstrate how Campbell’s pattern concerning the hero quest exists in *His Dark Materials*.

I have concentrated my study on the first book *Northern Lights* since almost all of Buckley’s elements of the Bildungsroman and Campbell’s stages of the hero journey can be traced in that book alone, but lacks the ingredient where the protagonist has reached full maturation and returns home. Therefore the last part of book three, *The Amber Spyglass*, has been included in the discussion to complete the journey of development. Book number two, *The Subtle Knife*, focuses for the most part on Will, whom I have decided to regard as a subordinate character to Lyra and as a result book two is not as important as book one and three in my analysis.

The structure of *His Dark Materials*

We meet the protagonist Lyra, for the first time as an eleven year old girl and leave her two years later when she is a thirteen year old girl with a settled daemon.

*His Dark Materials* is a work of fantasy and not autobiographical, which Buckley states that the majority of the Bildungsromane, in his study, are. But since he declares that *not all* Bildungsromane have to be autobiographical, he claims that a Bildung narrative can be fictional. As Buckley describes, almost every character and incident that the hero encounters may have some final relation to the development of the hero, which is the case with Lyra.

**Separation**

According to Buckley, several protagonists in his study are orphans, come from rural communities and are often from poor conditions. Lyra is an orphan living in a rural community, Oxford, although she is not poor – she has a relative, her uncle Lord Asriel, who works with politics and science and therefore she is brought up under reasonable conditions at Jordan College.

According to Campbell, the hero’s journey begins with the so called “call to adventure”. In our heroine’s case, this call comes to Lyra in the very beginning, when she by a
coincidence finds herself in a room where the Master tries to poison her uncle. If that incident had not been observed by her, she would never have saved her uncle and her curiosity of the North would never have been awakened. But that is not enough; the second call (if there may be more than one) is when her best friend Roger is abducted by the Gobblers. Now she feels that she has got to leave and rescue him. Mrs Coulter shows up and offers Lyra the opportunity to leave, for London at first, but then to the North. Before she leaves the Master, who can be considered what Campbell calls “supernatural aid”, hands Lyra the alethiometer an “amulet against the dragon forces” she is about to meet; the alethiometer will guide her on her way as soon as she finds the ability to read it.

Initiation
It is now time for Lyra to enter what Campbell calls “the first threshold”, which will take her beyond the safe surroundings of home and bring her to “the unknown and danger”. This is exactly what happens to the hero of the Bildungsroman; Lyra leaves the security of home – and as most bildung heroes do – she enters the big city. At first, Buckley states, the protagonist “enters the city with bewilderment and naiveté” but it does not take long before the city proves to be “a sad disappointment” (Seasons of Youth, 49). For most heroes, the city plays a double role in the protagonist’s life: “it is both the agent of liberation and a source of corruption” (Seasons of Youth, 20). For Lyra, London is very different from Oxford. Instead of playing outdoors with friends, Lyra is indoors at fancy parties among grownups. She discovers that Mrs Coulter is not whom she appears to be; she is instead the brain behind the Gobblers and Lyra realises it is dangerous to be around Mrs Coulter, and so she leaves. To find out that the one person you know in the entire city has been untrue to you must feel like the greatest betrayal.

In leaving, I dare say that Lyra crosses the threshold to “the unknown and danger” yet again, but this time out into the wild with the Gyptians. Among them Lyra develops a close relationship to Farder Coram. When she finds out that she is not an orphan and learns who her parents are she is torn emotionally. She finds it easier to accept Lord Asriel as her father, but to accept Mrs Coulter, a liar and a child abductor, as her mother is not easy. As Buckley states: if the child feels alienated from its parents “the child is likely to seek a substitute parent or mentor” (Seasons of Youth, 19). I believe Lyra feels alienated in two ways: from her friends and from her parents. The alienation from her friends shows in the way she makes up stories about her parents and her past; she is a remarkable liar and maybe she lies to create some kind of security about her self, because she does not really know who she is and does
not feel that she truly fits anywhere. The lies maybe started so that she could gain power and authority among the children, to feel that she had a function to fill somewhere. When it comes to her parents, it is pretty clear that Lyra feels alienated from them; she does not know them and I presume she feels betrayed by the fact that they have left her believing for years that she is an orphan. When she confronts her father, in the end of *Northern Lights*, and asks him why he did not tell her that he was her dad, he simply dismisses her by saying that he doesn’t “want to be interrogated by and condemned by an insolent child” (*Northern Lights*, 368). Lyra talks back and tells him that a father should love his child.

You don’t love me, and I don’t love you, and that’s a fact. I love Farder Coram, and I love Iorek Byrnison; I love an armoured bear more’n I love my father. And I bet Iorek Byrnison loves me more’n you do (*Northern Lights*, 368).

She grows even more distant from her father when he deceives her by killing her friend Roger. From having disliked her mother, which is the opposite to what male bildung protagonists do, who usually are in conflict with their fathers, Lyra also starts to dislike or even hate her father. In the end, she dislikes both her mother and her father. During her travels with the Gyptians, Lyra has found both a mentor and maybe even a father figure in Farder Coram, since he takes the time to listen to what she is saying and is interested in her. He also gives her clues and advice on how to read the alethiometer.

According to Campbell the hero must, when the crossing of the threshold is made, stand up for a test or “successions of trials” (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 97). It is also likely that the hero has been destined to go on his journey ever since he was born. In many instances, his course of action has been “prophesied at his birth” states Campbell (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 56). This is exactly the case with Lyra. After arriving at Dr. Lanselius in Trollesund, she is tested. She passes the test and by doing this, proves that she is the child that the witches have talked about “for centuries past” (*Northern Lights*, 175). The prophecy says that Lyra is the child that will save us all. She is the bearer of “a great destiny that can only be fulfilled elsewhere – not in this world, but far beyond” and without her, all shall die (*Northern Lights*, 175).

Dr. Lanselius’ test is not the only ‘trial’ Lyra has to go through. Her entire journey from her departure from Oxford until her return is filled with trials. Buckley talks about “the school-without-walls” where a person can grow up and gradually discover who he or she is through experience from play, travel and adolescent romance (*Season of Youth*, viii, 232). In Buckley’s study, the male protagonists often have “at least two love affairs or sexual
encounters, one debasing, one exalting” because to males, sex plays a positive role (Season of Youth, 17). Females, however, do not have the same opportunities. Fraiman states: “until the twentieth century, female protagonists tried to avoid sex outside marriage and to prevent ‘things’ from happening to her” (Unbecoming Women, 7). Lyra is the protagonist in a twenty-first century novel, but even for her, sexuality is something she encounters only once throughout the trilogy: with Will in the end of The Amber Spyglass. It is understandable that her encounters with sexuality are very few, since she is very young but I still believe that even if she had been in her older teens, she would not have had more than one sexual encounter – otherwise, since she is a woman, she could easily be vilified. In the world’s eyes, a woman better abstain from sex as long as possible. Maybe, because of this social prescription, Lyra does not fall in love until the very end. This also marks another difference in Lyra from male protagonists; they can experience sexual encounters without being in love, whereas a woman only gives herself to the man she loves – or her husband if she forced into a marriage and has to fulfil her marital duty. Male and female sexual encounters are not often seen and experienced in the same way.

While male protagonists stay in the city and develop there, women are often placed outside the city, in the countryside (as in Jane Eyre for example). In Lyra’s case, she makes a short visit to the big city of London, but soon leaves in order to go into the countryside and even further away into the wild of the North. The idea behind situting women in the wild can be that there are not as many temptations outside the city: not as many people, not too many men to fall in love with and because of them fall in disgrace.

Campbell claims that the hero, after passing of the first threshold, has to survive trials and one of these trials is what Campbell calls “the belly of the whale” where the hero can be seen as dead to the outside world, but in reality he is on an inner journey to find a new self and come back to the world as reborn (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 97). When Lyra enters into the land of the dead, she also is entering “the belly of the whale”. This is one of the greatest ordeals for Lyra through the trilogy. She has to leave Pan, a part of her soul, behind – a torturing experience that demands both courage and strong will. When she finally reunites with Pantalaimon, she and he are both changed. Until Lyra (the name resembles the noun liar) enters the land of the dead she has lied frequently and often avoided telling the truth. As the story develops, she learns that truth is the ultimate way to move forward. In her confrontation with the harpies, she also learns that telling the truth is in the end what will set us all free. Pan has in the meantime almost figured out his settled form. They are very much on the threshold to completing their journey.
Return
When crossing the return threshold, the hero has been “out of the land we know into darkness; there he [has] accomplished his adventure”, states Campbell (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 217). Lyra has returned from a long journey where she has survived several trials; she has used her wit and imagination and escaped from captivity both in the care of Mrs Coulter and from Bolvangar and the bears of Svalbard. She managed to save the children at Bolvangar and her friend Roger – although her mission concerning him was not fulfilled until she frees the souls from the land of the dead. Her commitment in saving her friend is admirable, she never gives up.

According to Buckley, the important task for the hero is to come to terms with himself or herself. In the end the person has achieved self-knowledge of who they are and what they are meant to do in life and can return home as an independent and confident individual. However, Lyra’s journey has made her aware of others too and not just herself. The child she was in the beginning was very self-indulgent, trying to define herself through made up stories. She played pranks on people, did things without thinking of the consequences. This impulsive side of her may be a positive quality when it comes to understanding the alethiometer. A child simply does things, does not have the same self-awareness as an adult who would see the impossibility of reading a device who no one else can read without guidance. As a child, nothing is impossible and when Lyra finds out that her father is Lord Asriel, she becomes even more confident in her own abilities. “Wasn’t she Lord Asriel’s daughter” I can do it, she thinks (*Northern Lights*, 133). In returning to Oxford, she is more insecure and concerned about what people might think about her and she has lost her power in reading the alethiometer, but she now knows that she can regain the ability by working hard at it. Buckley mentions that the ambition of many of Bildungsroman protagonists is to find what they are meant to do in life, mostly professionally. Since the prophecy is fulfilled, and she has managed to save the universes, I believe Lyra’s occupation is decided. She will be a Scholar, learn to read the alethiometer and master it once again.

In returning to Oxford, Lyra is also calmer and more respectful. Lyra herself notes that the Master’s servant, who had been her enemy for as long as she could remember “greeted her so warmly” and she thinks to herself that “Well, he had changed (*The Amber Spyglass*, 542).” In reality it is probably her own attitude and her behaviour that have changed.

Campbell states that “the solemn task and deed […] is to return” home “transfigured, and teach the lesson he [the hero] has learned of life renewed”(*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 20). In Lyra’s case, the mission is to “build the republic of heaven” on earth. Because what
she has to teach other people is that “this life in this world” matters the most “because where we are is always the most important place” (The Amber Spyglass, 548).

Campbell is of the opinion that the hero can achieve either a microcosmic or a macrocosmic triumph. Lyra manages to achieve both. When she, as a child, saves the children at Bolvangar, in her own universe, she accomplishes a microcosmic triumph. While she, as an adult – with a settled daemon – saves all the universes, by falling in love with Will and later sacrifices that love in order to let the ghosts out from the land of the dead, she achieves a macrocosmic triumph. Her deed affects everyone, irrespective which universe they live in. By bringing Dust back, Lyra releases “again […] the flow of life into the body of the world” (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 40).

Conclusion

Can His Dark Materials be considered a female Bildungsroman? I would definitely reply to that question in the affirmative. Almost all of Buckley’s elements are represented in the trilogy. The novels are not autobiographical, but as Buckley himself points out, not all Bildungsromane are. The story is narrated in a chronological order, from beginning to end; there are no narrative flashbacks and no flash forwards. Lyra is an orphan, comes from a rural community (Oxford) and leaves for the big city (London), which she in time finds to be disappointing. She later leaves the city and travels further into the wild and dangerous unknown. She develops as a person through “the school-without-walls” while she meets all different kinds of people and other creatures, goes through struggles and falls in love. She achieves her mission in life, as she has been prophesised to do, and returns home to Oxford with a new understanding of life and herself. She has learned that one has to work for what one wants to achieve in life and to make the best of the means available in the life we live.

Campbell’s patterns of the hero myth are also found in the text about Lyra. The departure with the call to adventure is fulfilled when Lyra decides to save Roger. The supernatural aid is the Master handing her the alethiometer. Crossing the first threshold is achieved when she travels with Mrs Coulter to London, but Pullman develops the story further and actually lets Lyra cross the threshold to the unknown three times (included the journey to London) when he lets her go to the dark and desolate North and also when the bridge through the Aurora brings her to another universe. Lyra enters the belly of the whale when she descends to the
land of the dead and leaves her soul. Finally, Lyra crosses the return threshold as a whole new person, an adult.
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