

Pullman and renunciation (SPOILER)

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 27 Aug 1956

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Adam Stephanides — 27 Aug 1956, 20:42

on 5/25/01 2:22 PM, eli wrote:

That didactic purpose I can appreciate, but he weakens it by forcing the story. He tried to set up "Cold Equations"-style plot mechanism which threatens global disaster to _coerce_ Will and Lyra's decision -- rather than letting us see what their own wisdom leads them to decide. That's a lesser story.

It's exactly like "The Cold Equations": the author stacks the deck to force a "tragic" choice upon his characters, which when examined more closely is not really forced at all. There has to be a name for this type of scene, where the characters frantically come up with ways to escape the choice the author wants to force upon them, and an all-knowing authority figure comes up with ad hoc reasons why they won't work.

I remember that my reading experience when I hit this was not one bit high-mindedly didactified, but was on the same mechanical level as his setup: but but but the Dust ecology is not at risk, because brief openings don't leak on the scale of the natural influx we've seen

Right; it doesn't add up. There are billions of people on Will's world alone. All these people won't produce enough Dust to keep one tiny window open without Lyra and Will devoting their lives to uplifting people? If the creation-destruction ratio is that bad, all the Dust should have leaked away in the three hundred years since the Subtle Knife was created.

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creating Specters is no problem with a little help, since the angel has said she can deal with those. If it had occurred to Will and Lyra that the obstacles were not absolute, they could have gone on to ask more interesting questions: what if everybody did it? are we special, to justify it?

Yes, they are. They saved the universe, for Pete's sake. Doesn't that entitle them to a break? And in any case, "everybody" isn't in the same position as Lyra and Will, since everybody hasn't already met their one true love in another world.

And the question Pullman didn't dare to ask them: even if we can, should we?

Pullman does discuss this a little, at the very end, where Lyra says that if she and Will had "put themselves first," they wouldn't have been able to build the Republic of Heaven. But as Moloney pointed out in his review, valorizing this sort of renunciation conflicts with Pullman's overall anti-religious message.

--Adam