

## REIMAGINING POSTHUMAN ECOLOGIES IN *THE TALE OF DESPERAUX*

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### **Abstract**

Children's literature refers to the body of written works and illustrations produced with the primary purpose of entertaining, educating or instructing young readers. These texts have the potential to unsettle the boundaries between human and non- human world. Anthropomorphism refers to the practice in which human emotional and behavioural features are attributed to non- human animals and objects. Kate DiCamillo's *Tale of Desperaux* (2003) is a children's fantasy novel that tells the story of a small mouse possessing human like qualities that connects the human and animal world. Intersecting the concept of anthropomorphism and cyborg theory, the paper offers a wide platform to discuss posthuman ecologies. Grounded in the theories, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) and *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016) by Donna Haraway, the paper explores how anthropomorphism, cyborg identity and multispecies kinship converge in the novel.

**Keywords:** Anthropomorphism, cyborg, kinship, posthuman ecologies

Children's literature's delight in imagining and prioritizing the subjectivity of the non- human characters offers a crucial site for posthuman thinking. It can potentially influence and shape the growing sensibilities of young minds. Young readers are introduced to posthuman characters like talking animals, objects with feelings and animals with human emotions. Anthropomorphism describes the tendency to imbue the real or imagined behaviour of non-human agents with human- like characteristics, motivations and emotions.

Anthropomorphic characters can act like humans in the way that they can speak the human language. The social interaction between those characters operates in a humanely. Thus the difference between both species gets dissolved, leading to equalization of two species. As they are beyond human and animals, those characters ultimately perceived as posthuman.

Donna Haraway, an anthropologist and cultural critic, is widely known for her seminal essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985). Haraway challenges the idea of anthropocentrism, emphasizing the autonomy and complexity of non- human systems. Her works unfold new priorities for fostering a relationship between human – animal, animal- machine and nature – culture. In the essay *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016), Haraway offers a new kind of political and ethical framework that she calls the “Chthulucene” which highlights the interconnectedness of all living beings and the importance of “ making kin” across species boundaries.

*The Tale of Despereaux* (2003) by Kate DiCamillo is a children’s novel that tells the story of a small mouse possessing human like qualities. The central character of the novel is Despereaux Tilling, a brave little mouse who embodies human emotions like courage, love and imagination. This hybrid identity of fusing two species world in Haraway’s idea makes the mouse a cyborg. Intersecting the concepts of anthropomorphism, cyborg and multispecies kinship the paper is divided into three areas.

Firstly, it outlines the theoretical framework of Haraway. Secondly, it analyses the key motifs in the novel through Haraway’s concept and finally it concludes on how the novel can be reimagined beyond anthropocentric boundaries. The main concepts the paper investigates from the theory “Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene” (2016) by Haraway includes kinship, Chthulucene, Sympoiesis and tentacular thinking.

The anthropomorphic mouse in the novel symbolizes Haraway’s concept of cyborg as it resist the rigid boundaries between human and non- human. Despereaux, the protagonist of the novel is identified with difference in character from others in the mouse community, according to his siblings. They reminded him of his identity saying “You’re a mouse and not a man” (DiCamillo, 21). By falling in love with a human princess, Despereaux serves as both contrast to the animal while mirroring the human. Despereaux’s interest in music and storytelling mimics the human world. Posthuman ecologies serve as a broad term which defies anthropocentric world view, embracing interspecies relationship.

The idea of kinship, according to Haraway is a possible strategy to regain the fractured present. ‘ Make kin’ is the slogan she proposed “ to make- wish, become- with, compose- with – the earth- bound” ( Haraway 2016) , she broadens the term beyond ancestry or genealogy. It offers broader horizons of kin – making with extra – human bodies. Kinship leads to circulation of knowledge between species that are conceived under a similar condition of humanity. Tracing the novel brings out many incidents to substantiate this concept. The basic recognition a

human being starts with his / her name, the characters in the mice community is given names and positions in the family. The idea of attributing human factors can be seen throughout the novel. Despereaux's relationship with human, Princess Pea disrupts the traditional boundaries between species, culture and gendered behaviour. "The Princess smiled at Despereaux again, and this time, Despereaux smiled back. And then something incredibly happened: The mouse fell in love" (DiCamillo 30).

On filtering the narrative, Despereaux and his actions underlines the concept of Chthulucene. Chthulucene according to Haraway focusses on the inseparable link between humans and non humans to create a viable future for the damaged planet. It is an alternative to the word Anthropocene which prioritize human beings. "The Chthulucene is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen — yet" (Haraway, 2016: 55). The mouse in the novel communicates to humans making him aligned to the species fluidity. "Despereaux, seeing her tears, broke the last of the great, ancient rules of mice. He spoke. To a human" (DiCamillo, 40). Despereaux's actions defies the rigid rules of the mouse community, thus ostracized him to the dungeon by the mouse council. The dungeon however can be equated with the damaged world by Haraway. The dungeon is portrayed as a place of darkness in the novel and the characters are forced to "stay with the trouble". The dungeon transforms into an ecological web where mice, rats and humans are entangled. The dungeon is guarded by a human jailer named Gregory who promised to save Despereaux in return of a story. "Stories are light. Light is precious in a world so dark. Begin at the beginning. Tell Gregory a story. Make some light."(DiCamillo, 79). The story highlights the relationships between human and animals, reflecting how both the species share emotions, desires and vulnerabilities. The story becomes a "trouble" in Harawayan sense is when the anthropocentric order gets disturbed. This trouble is healed when sympoiesis occurs, when disparate species recognize their fate and engage in collaborative entanglement.

Haraway introduces sympoiesis as a principle of "making-with" contrasts with autopoiesis or self-making. This ideology emphasizes that nothing exists in isolation. "Sympoiesis enfolds both the difficulties and the possibilities of living and dying together, in reciprocal, entangled and open- ended ways." (Haraway, 2016). The story of Despereaux, Princess Pea and Miggery Sow are sympoietic. The bravery of Despereaux, the betrayal of Roscuro, the misguided dream of Miggery Sow are not individual events, but intertwined stories which leads to the notion of 'worlding-with'. Despereaux escapes the dungeon with the help of a human jailor named Gregory demonstrating unexpected dependence between two species. The

relationship between Desperaux and Princess Pea can be defined as sympoietic, characterised by their shared language of music and stories. The mice and humans are meant to be enemies; Desperaux and Princess Pea form their friendship, the rigid rules of the animal world. This interspecies relationship causes the destruction and the renewal of the dungeon. Despereaux's bravery is about his willingness to risk his life for Princess Pea and his nature of forgiveness towards Roscuro create a new narrative that foster healing, growth and transformation beyond species boundaries.

The character of Miggery Sow transforms from an antagonist to sympoietic nature. Sow was sold into servitude by her father, this made her feel worthless and craved to be loved and respected. The dream of becoming a princess made her ally with Roscuro who wish to take revenge on Princess Pea. This incident exemplifies how the vulnerability and sufferings lead to personal growth. Desperaux inspired from human stories act as a knight and eventually rescues princess from dungeon. The survival of princess, thus offers a way to learn to live and die in a responsibility on a damaged Earth. Haraway emphasizes the collective responsibility urging us to confront environmental destruction through 'response-ability,' a capacity for thoughtful, collaborative action that transcends human exceptionalism.

Donna Haraway uses the term tentacular thinking as a counter-term and critique of a usually dominated anthropomorphic form of thinking. "Tentacularity is about life lived along lines—and such a wealth of lines—not at points, not in spheres. The inhabitants of the world, creatures of all kinds, human and non-human, are wayfarers"; generations are like 'a series of inter-laced trails.' (Haraway 32, Ch 2). The narrative of the novel explores the possibility of ecological rather than the individualized consciousness speculated upon the tentacular. The non linear structure binds the disparate lives of Desperaux, Roscuro, Princess Pea and Miggery Sow together allowing multispecies co-creation of a new world. This echoes the rejection of species boundaries which Haraway describes as "the muddle of messy living and dying".

The symbolism of soup acts as the most potential ecological tool in the novel. Soup, beyond the idea of sustenance, functions as a tentacular narrative which affects the characters in different situated ways. The soup-induced shock leads to a catastrophic ecological disruption in the narrative. Looking into three characters, Roscuro, King Phillip and the Cook, the soup triggers different emotions. For Roscuro, the aroma of soup acts as an embodiment of his longing for light and hope beyond the darkness of dungeon. For King Phillip, soup is associated with the trauma caused due to Queen's death. Soup, for the Cook, functions as a medium of skill and identity. The ban on soup in the kingdom forms the absence of

meal into the loss of selfhood. Thus, soup can be defined as a tentacular connector sharing sensory culture of eating across the species.

The novel concludes where Despereaux and Princess Pea forgives their enemy and regaining the light in the kingdom of Dor. The act of forgiving lends itself to triggering response - abilities in multi-species worlds. By weaving diverse narratives together, the novel enable possibilities of “becoming-with”- an interconnected approach to human and non- human life. Despereaux's life offers a powerful example of posthuman ecology achieved through tentacular thinking. There are limitations and criticism in this field of study offering a wide scope of research.

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