SuperSummary™

The Tale of Despereaux

Kate DiCamillo

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Summary

Kate DiCamillo's middle grade fantasy novel *The Tale of Despereaux* (2003) chronicles the adventures of Despereaux, an exceptionally tiny mouse who becomes the biggest of heroes in the fictional Kingdom of Dor. The novel won the Newbery Medal in 2004 and was adapted into a film of the same name in 2008.

Other works by this author include *The Beatryce Prophecy*, *Beverly, Right Here*, and *Raymie Nightingale*.

Plot Summary

Even though most mice are born blind, Despereaux is born with his eyes open, focused on the light shining through the castle windows. He avoids other mouse activities, preferring to read fairy tales and sit by the foot of the castle's Princess Pea. Despereaux's family eventually hears of his infractions and puts him before the Mouse Council, who sentences him to death by rat-infested dungeon.

The narrative shifts backward in time a few years to introduce Roscuro, a rat who exemplifies a less bloodthirsty spirit than the others, and who is also obsessed with bright light despite being condemned to lurk the dungeon. He holds resentment for Pea because he startled Queen Rosemary and caused her death during a banquet. In retaliation, King Phillip outlawed rats (and soup) throughout the kingdom, forcing Roscuro deeper into the darkness.

The narrative shifts further back to introduce Miggery Sow, born to a poor family (her mother dies young). Mig is sold into slavery and constantly beaten around the ears, resulting in her poor hearing. She wishes to be a princess as beautiful as Princess Pea. Upon becoming a paid servant at the castle, Mig is convinced by Roscuro to partake in a revenge plot to kidnap the princess.

Despereaux escapes the dungeon with a kind jailer's help and overhears Roscuro's plan. He is intercepted by Cook, who orders Mig to cut off the mouse's tail.

In the middle of the night, Roscuro leads Mig—armed with a kitchen knife—to Pea's room—as he plans to imprison her in the dungeon forever. Roscuro believes this will soothe his broken heart by means of revenge.

Despereaux attempts to alert the king of danger, but the latter refuses to listen to a mouse due to mice's association with rats.

Realizing that no one can save the princess but him, Despereaux arms himself with a spool of red thread to mark his path in the dungeon and a needle to defend against the rats.

On the way to the dungeon, Despereaux comes across the Mouse Council. The Council is unrepentant, but Despereaux's father begs for his forgiveness. Despereaux grants it and concludes that he does not care what others think as long as *he* does the impossible, important, and full of light.

Despereaux encounters Cook making illegal soup; he gives the mouse a spoonful. This raises Despereaux's courage, and he marches into the dungeon and meets the mean-spirited Botticelli. The rat plays mind games with the mouse, taunting him with friendship before leading him through piles of mouse bones and drooling rats.

Despereaux arrives to see Pea, Mig, and Roscuro in a power struggle. Pea expresses sympathy for Mig, and the two girls cry over their lost mothers while Roscuro grows angry at his loss of control over the situation. Despereaux takes advantage of the moment and places the tip of his sword on Roscuro's heart, but Pea pleads with him to show mercy. She promises Roscuro that if he leads them out of the dungeon, she will reward him with soup—an act of love and comfort. The rat breaks down and agrees. The other rats retreat to the darkness, disgusted.

Afterward, Despereaux and Pea remain friends, Roscuro is granted access to the lit areas of the castle, and Mig is reunited with her father—who promises to cherish her as he would a princess.

The story ends with a realistic version of "happily ever after."

Chapter Summaries & Analyses

Part 1, Chapters 1-15

Part 1: "Book the First: A Mouse Is Born"

Chapter 1 Summary

The story begins with the birth of an exceptionally small mouse, who is the only one of his litter to survive. The lone mouse is born to a French mouse named Antoinette, who declares the birth a "disappointment." Thus, young Despereaux receives his name "for all the sadness, for the many despairs in this place" (12). Despereaux's older siblings remark on his large ears and open eyes—unusual for a newborn mouse. The children's father, Lester, assumes something is wrong with Despereaux because he is looking directly at the sun reflecting "onto the ceiling in an oval of brilliance" (13). Antoinette swears off having more children because they "ruin" her looks, and Lester assumes Despereaux will die from frailty. The narrator, however, foreshadows that he will live.

Chapter 2 Summary

Despereaux Tilling lives beyond his first few days to everyone's surprise, and he quickly becomes the talk of the mouse community. His aunts and uncles observe his ears and the small size of his body, doubting his being born with open eyes because such a thing is "impossible" for a mouse. Despereaux carries a handkerchief due to his sickly demeanor, and he behaves differently from other mice: He obsesses over music and sunlight rather than crumbs of cake. His mother reminds him that these un-mouselike traits are further evidence of him being a disappointment.

Chapter 3 Summary

Despereaux's siblings try to teach him how to be a better mouse: His brother Furlough teaches scurrying, but Despereaux finds himself distracted by the beautiful stained glass windows; his sister Merlot teaches him how to nibble paper in the library, but Despereaux reads the words on the page instead, too mesmerized by the story to eat it. Despereaux mulls over the phrase "Once upon a time…" and continues to read the story of a beautiful princess and a brave knight. Unbeknownst to him, the narrator foreshadows the mouse needing to be brave like the knight in order to combat the dungeon rats.

Chapter 4 Summary

Despereaux's siblings give up on their brother, leaving him to spend his days reading stories and listening to King Phillip's music, which "sounds like heaven" and "smells like honey" (27). He even defies the one major mouse rule of hiding from humans by getting closer to the source of music. The king thinks Despereaux is a bug, but Princess Pea correctly identifies him as a mouse. She begs her father to continue playing, and he obliges as the small mouse inches closer.

Chapter 5 Summary

While Despereaux listens, Pea touches his head. Their eyes meet, and the mouse falls in love. The narrator interjects: While it is ridiculous for a mouse to fall for a human, a princess no less, love is "powerful, wonderful and ridiculous" (32). Furlough scurries by and notices his brother breaking the rule about avoiding humans, so he goes to tell their father Lester.

Chapter 6 Summary

Lester and Antoinette discuss what to do with their wayward son. At first, Lester denies that he is Despereaux's legitimate father and blames his faults on Antoinette's French blood. He decides to let the Mouse Council determine a proper punishment. To summon the Council, Lester beats a rhythm on a small thimble-drum.

Chapter 7 Summary

In the meantime, Despereaux is picked up by Pea. She declares her intention to keep him, but the king objects: "They are related to…rats. You know how we feel about rats. You know of our own dark history with rats" (39). He tells Pea that it is her responsibility to her mother and royalty itself to never associate with rodents. Pea begins to cry, and in an effort to comfort her, Despereaux breaks the second major mouse rule: never speak to a human. The king responds in anger, saying that there are rules about mice not talking to humans, before stamping his foot near Despereaux. He flees, but not before telling the princess his name and "I honour you!"—despite the king yelling back, "Rodents know nothing of honour" (39-40). With a bow, the lovesick mouse scurries away.

Chapter 8 Summary

The Mouse Council—made up of 12 honored mice and a "Most Very Honoured Head Mouse"—gathers at the sound of Lester's drum. Furlough and Lester report Despereaux's behavior, and Despereaux is sentenced to the dungeon. Lester says nothing in his son's defense but cries at his fate. The Council decides to offer Despereaux a chance to deny his crimes. The narrator speaks directly to the reader, hinting that this scene is a perfect example of the word "perfidy" (treachery).

Chapter 9 Summary

Furlough finds Despereaux in the library, where he is reading a story in search of "happily ever after." Furlough tries to get Despereaux to see the Council, but the latter only describes his love for Princess Pea. Eventually, Despereaux allows himself to be led to his presumed death.

Chapter 10 Summary

The entire mouse community gathered for Despereaux's trial. As rumors of his crimes spread throughout the crowd, Despereaux's previous lovesickness fades to fear. The Head Mouse challenges Despereaux to recount his crimes, but the latter says he did nothing inherently wrong—so he doesn't deny the charges. The Head Mouse asks if Pea touched him: Not only does Despereaux admit to this, but he says he broke the community's rules out of love. He refuses to denounce these crimes and is sentenced to the dungeon amid angry chants for his punishment.

Chapter 11 Summary

With a different rhythm of the drum, Lester summons the threadmaster. Confused as to why he's being punished for a beautiful thing like love, Despereaux begins to doubt the existence of happily ever after. The threadmaster apologizes to Despereaux, but says he has to do his job. As he places a loop of red thread around the small mouse's neck, he asks if the princess is as beautiful as he imagines. He whispers his approval of Despereaux's "courtly love…based on bravery and courtesy and honour and devotion" (61)—and Despereaux is shocked to hear of another mouse who knows fairy tales. Nonetheless, he braves himself for what's to come.

Chapter 12 Summary

In the final stage of Despereaux's sentencing, the drumbeat changes to a menacing "*Boom, boom, boom*" (62). Despereaux sees his mother Antoinette and "concentrates on not being a disappointment" (63); she faints dramatically. Antoinette's last word to her son is "adieu;" the narrator notes that it is a sorrowful word, less comforting than offering to go in Despereaux's place. Two hooded mice approach Despereaux to lead him to the dungeon.

Chapter 13 Summary

The red thread tied around Despereaux's neck feels tight as the three mice travel. Despereaux asks if he can have a final word with the princess, but one of the hooded mice laughs—revealing him to be Furlough. When they reach the dungeon, Furlough makes a speech about the accused wearing the red thread of death, and Despereaux suddenly feels himself falling down the dungeon stairs into the darkness with only two words on his mind: perfidy and Pea.

Chapter 14 Summary

Despereaux picks himself off the ground and immediately notices a rank smell and a darkness so deep that he wonders if he still exists. The mouse considers fainting, but reminds himself of the threadmaster's words to have "honour, courtesy, devotion and bravery" (74). As Despereaux steps forward, he recalls a fairy tale out loud. A booming voice responds to him from beyond, and he faints out of fear.

Chapter 15 Summary

Despereaux awakens in the palm of Gregory, the jailer who looks after the dungeon without getting lost by following a rope tied to his ankle. The mouse requests to be let go, but Gregory insists that the bloodthirsty rats will kill him. Despereaux says he is in love, and in response, Gregory shows him a dirty mound of soup spoons and bowls buried in the dungeon after Queen Rosemary's death: "The king loved the queen and the queen died; this monstrosity, this junk heap is the result of love" (79). Despite his history of standing by when previous mice were sent to the dungeon, Gregory swears to help Despereaux if he tells a story. He says stories are light, and "Light is precious in a world so dark" (81)—making one an adequate exchange for helping the mouse live.

Part 1, Chapters 1-15 Analysis

In Book the First, the reader is introduced to the first main character, the titular Despereaux, a mouse so frail and underestimated that he hardly resembles a traditional hero. Despereaux recognizes his own differences and how he is treated by others in his community; he feels like an outsider. Thus, Despereaux welcomes the noble ideals in his books. The simplicity of fairy tales—the fact that the knight in shining armor always saves the princess in danger—appeals to his love of light and artistic beauty. So great is this love that he falls for Princess Pea—a ridiculous development that is nevertheless noble in its pure devotion.

The rhythm of the drum that precludes Despereaux's trial is especially chilling considering it's his own father beating it. The rhythm slows down to usher the dramatic next step of the small mouse's punishment—and later ends in a "*Boom, boom, boom*" (62). The Council's declaration of death by dungeon is so absurdly harsh that it accurately represents the idea of perfidy. Through an understanding of perfidy, or the betrayal inherent in Despereaux's family, the reader is alerted to the idea of morals (taught in fairy tales or otherwise) and whether or not they are accurately represented in organized laws and punishments.

This moral confusion, the paradox that Despereaux sees in his own trial between the upholding of morals and the absence of love, weakens his faith in fairy tales and happy endings. The impossible beauty and joy of such stories fade with the realization that assumptions about identity and institutional rules alike do nothing to focus on moral goodness.

The complex reality of love, with all its regrets and sorrows, is represented by the stack of dirty soup spoons and dishes in the dungeon—making Despereaux more aware of the dangers of love than before he risked his life for the very concept.

Part 2, Chapters 16-23

Part 2: "Book the Second: Chiaroscuro"

Chapter 16 Summary

In Book the Second, the narrator introduces a rat born in the castle several years before Despereaux. Chiaroscuro—whose name means the arrangement of darkness and light together—differs from other rats, who prefer darkness. One day, Roscuro (as he likes to call

himself) nibbles on Gregory's rope, and the jailer scares him off by lighting a match and burning his whiskers. Since then, Roscuro "showed an abnormal, inordinate interest in illumination of all sorts" (88). He theorizes to his friend Botticelli Remorso that the meaning of life *is* light. Botticelli is more focused on being a "real rat" (91), which involves activities like torturing prisoners and causing suffering.

Chapter 17 Summary

Roscuro poises to torture a prisoner, but when the dungeon door opens and the staircase is flooded with light, he is paralyzed with awe: "The rat called Chiaroscuro did not look away. He let the light from the upstairs world enter him and fill him" (93). A soldier throws a red cloth after the prisoner, and Roscuro becomes obsessed with the beauty of it framed against the light. He wants to go upstairs where there is more light, but Botticelli warns him that upstairs is for mice. Botticelli persuades Roscuro to steal the prisoner's red cloth as a means of torture, and the latter tries to convince himself he desires the cloth alone and not the light.

Chapter 18 Summary

Roscuro sidles up to the prisoner and talks to him, telling him to imagine him as a consoling voice in the darkness, "a voice that cares" (99). The prisoner admits to being a cow thief, but his most regretful crime is that he traded his daughter for the red tablecloth, a hen, and a handful of cigarettes. Roscuro inches closer, questioning the prisoner before biting his cloth and scurrying away. The man yells for it back, saying the red cloth is all he has. Roscuro tries to delight in the successful trick, but quickly realizes the red cloth pales in comparison to his memory of light. He concludes that he must go upstairs, as no prize will compare to the beauty of light.

Chapter 19 Summary

Roscuro ventures upstairs and basks in the light of every room as he wanders the castle. He sees the banquet hall fully decorated and set for a party—the royal family, jugglers, and minstrels enjoying themselves. "Suffering is not the answer. *Light* is the answer" (105), he concludes, and marches straight into the banquet hall.

Chapter 20 Summary

Roscuro jumps onto a crystal chandelier and swings, enjoying the party from above. Suddenly, Princess Pea notices him and screams. He hears the ugliness of the word “rat” and feels so ashamed and insulted that he loses his grip on the chandelier. He falls into the queen’s soup bowl.

Chapter 21 Summary

The queen loves soup, and Cook outdid herself for the banquet. When Roscuro falls into the queen’s soup bowl, she screams and flings her spoon. Roscuro says, “I beg your pardon,” and the queen’s last words are, “There is a rat in my soup” (112). She collapses from a heart attack, and Roscuro slinks away. As Roscuro leaves, he looks back at Pea and sees a look of “disgust and anger” (113)—which breaks his heart. Because of this heartbreak, Roscuro becomes bitter and vengeful.

Chapter 22 Summary

Disheartened by the realization that since he is a rat, he will never be allowed to enjoy the light, Roscuro picks up the queen’s soup spoon and wears it as a makeshift crown. He tells himself that the spoon is beautiful, and that he will one day get revenge. The king yells to find the rat who killed his wife, and Roscuro mumbles that he will be in the darkness of the dungeon.

Chapter 23 Summary

The narrator clarifies that since the queen died while eating soup, the king outlaws the dish out of heartbreak. When the king’s men search the dungeon for Roscuro, they get lost and perish. The king then declares rats “illegal outlaws.” Roscuro creates a cape out of the stolen red cloth and vows to Botticelli that he will make the princess suffer for her scowl. At the same time, Despereaux is listening to the king’s music and falling in love upstairs. Also, a young girl named Miggery Sow arrives at the castle on a wagon. The narrator foreshadows that Miggery Sow will be instrumental in Roscuro’s revenge plot.

Chapters 16-23 Analysis

Book the Second follows the parallel story of Roscuro the rat, another inhabitant of the castle. Like Despereaux, Roscuro has a similar obsession with sunlight—but his discovery came about by violent means. Whereas Despereaux had the opportunity to sneak around the bright library, absorbing beautiful stained glass windows and the privilege of knowledge, Roscuro was condemned to the darkness because he is a rat. Roscuro's discovery came in the form of Gregory scaring him off with a match. This unconventional encounter didn't diminish his spark, however, and he held onto the hope of a light-filled existence for a long time.

When Roscuro faces criticism grounded in reality—like Botticelli telling him sunlight is unsustainable and what he really craves is the prisoner's red cloth—he tries to conform to rat society's demands. He partakes in unfair tactics to steal the cloth but quickly realizes that the tablecloth is a poor substitute for the brightness of sunlight—which is reminiscent of the desire for that which eludes capture or is impossible to begin with (like Despereaux's love for Pea). Roscuro desires revenge not because Princess Pea is allowed to enjoy light but because her judgmental look reminds him of his own social status, which bars rats from enjoying any kind of beauty upstairs.

The king outlawing soup is also an example of misidentifying one's desire (in his and Roscuro's case, processing one's loss) out of overwhelming emotion. It is unrealistic to assume that outlawing a thing means that it suddenly ceases to exist. The king's decree and the soup bowls in the dungeon represent denial of one's emotions: Hiding dirty dishes does not mean he can forget the love and memories he once shared with the queen.

The desire for revenge is often born from a festering pile of loneliness and sadness. Only when characters recognize their own sense of loss in others can they begin to empathize and transcend differences to work together.

Part 3, Chapters 24-33

Part 3: "Book the Third: Gor! The Tale of Miggery Sow"

Chapter 24 Summary

Book the Third continues to go backward in time—this time with Miggery Sow, a young girl born far from the castle. When her mother dies, Mig desperately tries to tell her to stay, but the former retorts, "what does it matter what you are wanting?" (126). Mig's father sells her to a man for a red tablecloth, a hen, and a handful of cigarettes despite the girl's cries. The narrator challenges the reader to keep reading, because "it is your duty" (127) to learn more of Mig's sad life.

Chapter 25 Summary

The man who bought Mig forces her to do chores between random clouts to the ears. After years of abuse, Mig's ears resemble cauliflowers, and her hearing is poor. The less she understands, the more mistakes she makes and the more clouts she receives.

Chapter 26 Summary

On Mig's seventh birthday, she sees Princess Pea, "glittering and glowing on the horizon" (131) in a royal procession moving by her farm home. Mig is so stunned by the show of beauty and the opulence that she doesn't even notice Pea wave. For the first time, Mig experiences hope, like "a small candle had been lit in her interior" (134).

Chapter 27 Summary

That night, Mig shares her experience seeing the royal procession—and her desire to be a princess—with her "Uncle." He laughs at the thought of Mig in a crown and regrets trading his hen for her. Uncle asks Mig if she wants a clout to the ear and she declines, but she receives one anyway. Uncle swears off any more talk of princesses, because no one wants to hear what Mig wants.

Chapter 28 Summary

Years pass and Mig continues to live in indentured servitude, cleaning and receiving clouts to the ears. When the king outlaws soup, soldiers arrive to seize the kingdom's kettles. Uncle lets slip that he owns a girl, and a soldier seizes her as well (as owning humans is against the law). Since Mig's parents are dead, she is taken to the castle to become a paid servant. She is thrilled that she is one step closer to being a princess.

Chapter 29 Summary

Mig feels lucky that on her first day as a servant, she is to deliver a spool of red thread to the princess herself (for her tapestry). Being clumsy, Mig attempts to curtsy and slips on the spool, crashing to the ground. Pea laughs but not in a mocking way. The two girls connect over their deceased mothers and their both being 12 years old. Mig excitedly explains her goal of becoming a princess, and Pea does not disagree—though she gives the other girl a "quick, deep look" (150). A maid chastises Mig for taking so long, saying "You are not destined to be one of our star servants" (151). Mig reasserts her goal, but the maid merely laughs in disbelief.

Chapter 30 Summary

For the first time in her life, Mig has enough to eat, and so she grows plump. She struggles with every domestic task assigned to her, from that of lady-in-waiting to chambermaid to cook's assistant. Out of desperation, the staff assigns Mig to take Gregory's meals to the dungeon. On the day of Despereaux's punishment, Mig descends the stairs with a tray of food for the jailer.

Chapter 31 Summary

Mig bellows a made-up song to keep herself company in the darkness, and Roscuro falls into step with her. The dungeon is filled with unnerving sounds, but since Mig is nearly deaf, she does not hear anything that makes her afraid. She comes across a giant pile of dirty dishes and cutlery before hearing the jailer's voice in the distance.

Chapter 32 Summary

Gregory receives his food from Mig but sounds disappointed that it's not soup. Mig tells Gregory that she wishes to one day be a princess. Roscuro jumps for joy in the shadows, knowing that he can use this to manipulate the girl—but the jailer notices him. He tells Mig that her dream is foolish, but everyone has to believe in a foolish dream, like soup being made legal again. After eating, he sends Mig up with the tray and warns her of the rats. Roscuro plans to bite through Gregory's rope as the next stage in his revenge plot.

Chapter 33 Summary

Just before Mig leaves the dungeon, Roscuro speaks to her. He tempts her with undefined "aspirations," promising to make Mig a princess if she follows his plan. Neither of them notice, however, that Despereaux escaped by hiding in the napkin on Gregory's lunch tray and overheard the entire revenge plot.

Part 3, Chapters 24-33 Analysis

Book the Third focuses on a poor farm girl named Miggery Sow, who was sold into slavery at the age of seven and suffered years of abuse. She has yet to get what she wants, even simple and necessary things like her mother staying alive. It is insult to injury that her means of communicating desire are rendered even more useless with every unjustified blow to the ears.

The narrator warns the reader of the immense tragedy that is Mig's life. Despite experiencing constant misery, Mig still harbors a sense of hope, a "small candle" flickering inside herself. This is similar to Roscuro's encounter with light, the single flame of a match holding so much promise. Although Mig doesn't cling to rat habits to make sense of her desire for light, her circumstances speak to why Roscuro is so quick to turn dastardly in his own pursuit of it: For those not destined by birth to enjoy light, it is sparse, and so is beauty and love.

Like the other main characters, Mig indulges in a ridiculous dream—that of becoming a princess like Pea. The difficulty, the impossibility, of her material situation aside, Mig is perpetually optimistic that she will attain her goal through hard work—a source of light in itself.

Unfortunately for Mig, hard work is not in the cards as she is unsuited for housework. A maid chastises Mig, saying she isn't "destined" to be a serving girl, as if the role has as much import as that of a princess (for better or for worse). Even across different material realities and social stations, the idea of destiny—or the alignment of one's skills with one's so-called true purpose—seems to be an inevitable conclusion.

Part 4, Chapters 34-52

Part 4: "Book the Fourth: Recalled to the Light"

Chapter 34 Summary

Cook shakes the napkin from Gregory's tray, and Despereaux tumbles into a cup of oil. Mig pulls him out by the tail and he wriggles away, dropping to the floor. She swings a kitchen knife at the mouse and severs his tail. This shocks Despereaux back into action, and he scurries "like a professional mouse" (179) back into the pantry. Disappointed with Mig's rodent-killing skills, Cook gives her a clout to the ear.

Chapter 35 Summary

In the pantry, Despereaux weeps out of pain and relief at his unlikely survival. He falls asleep as the sun sets and dreams of its light morphing into a knight. He watches the knight swordfight the surrounding darkness—which manifests as his parents, then the brother who led him to his death, and finally, a rat. Despereaux asks the knight who he is—if he is salvation. The knight says Despereaux already knows the answer, but when the mouse inches closer, the armor is empty. Seeing the empty suit leads Despereaux to believe that he doesn't exist: "it's all just make-believe, like happily ever after" (182).

Chapter 36 Summary

While Despereaux sleeps, Roscuro implements his plan. First, he chews Gregory's rope so the jailer will get lost in the dungeon. Next, he arms Mig with a knife, and the two sneak into Pea's room in the middle of the night. They go over Roscuro's plan: Mig will threaten Pea with the knife but not hurt her. She will lead the princess on a "little journey" to the dungeon. Mig believes Roscuro's lie—that they will swap the two girls' duties and outfits to make the former a princess. The narrator offers insight into Roscuro and Mig's thoughts—the latter wanting her dream so badly that she convinced herself of the ridiculous plan. Roscuro's real plan is to chain the princess in the dungeon, keeping her in the dark forever.

Chapter 37 Summary

Pea dreams of her mother offering her a spoonful of soup when she is suddenly woken up by Mig brandishing a knife. She starts to protest, and Mig explains too much of the plan. Roscuro reveals himself to the princess and threatens to have Mig use the knife as he is in

charge. He taunts the princess, asking if she recognizes him as the rat who killed the queen. Roscuro tells Pea to put on her banquet gown and crown; he crawls up her back to fasten her buttons. Pea licks her lips, still remembering her dream, and quietly promises her mother she has “not forgotten soup” (194).

Chapter 38 Summary

The trio marches silently through the castle with the tip of Mig’s knife pressed against Pea’s back. The princess reflects on her hatred for the rat who killed her mother, and the sorrow left behind. She empathizes with Mig, because she realizes the poor girl wants to be a princess so badly, she allowed herself to be misled.

Chapter 39 Summary

When Despereaux wakes from his dream of the knight, he realizes he is too late to save Pea from being taken. Cook frantically searches for Miggery Sow and yells that Gregory lost his way in the dungeon and died. Cook starts to cry that they can’t even comfort themselves with soup since it is illegal. Despereaux hears Cook cry, “They’ve taken our little darling away. There ain’t nothing left to live for without the princess” (202). Despereaux empathizes with Cook and looks for the king.

Chapter 40 Summary

On his way to find the king, Despereaux stumbles into a Mouse Council meeting. Because he is covered in flour from the pantry and his red thread resembles a trail of blood, the mice think he is a ghost. Lester calls out to his son and admits that he dreams about his sentencing every night. He pleads for forgiveness. Despereaux grants it, “because he sensed that it was the only way to save his own heart, to stop it from breaking in two” (208). Despereaux then turns to the Council and demands that they repent—but he is met with silence. He realizes that there is no point in arguing, because “he knew things that they would never know; what they thought of him, he realized, did not matter, not at all” (208). A stunned Council unanimously votes to forget the ghostly visit. Lester cries at having been forgiven.

Chapter 41 Summary

Despereaux finds the king in Pea’s room, crying for his missing daughter and beating his chest with his crown. Though frightened, Despereaux speaks up, saying he knows where Pea is. The king is dubious, saying that a mouse is one step removed from a rat. He clamps his

hands over his ears when Despereaux reveals Pea's location, calling the mouse a lying, thieving rodent. Despereaux tries to explain Pea's capture by Roscuro, but the king responds that rats are illegal—and therefore, do not exist. He says he hired a magician from a distant land to help. The mouse has an epiphany, thinking that the knight from his dream may be himself. Resolved to become the hero the princess needs, he goes to find the threadmaster.

Chapter 42 Summary

The threadmaster recognizes Despereaux, who shares his plan to save the princess with a spool of red thread. Convinced, the threadmaster ties thread around the small mouse's waist and gives him a makeshift needle-sword. Despereaux learns the other mouse's name: Hovis. He says Despereaux is justified in his quest because he chooses to face danger. Emboldened by Hovis's words, Despereaux leaves for the dungeon.

Chapter 43 Summary

Despereaux pushes the spool of thread throughout the castle. By the time he reaches the kitchen, he is shaking with exhaustion. He gains a second wind upon remembering Hovis's faith in his quest—but stops when he sees Cook making illegal soup. He takes a deep breath and pushes the spool forward. Cook turns around at the sound.

Chapter 44 Summary

Seeing no one, Cook returns to her soup, and a breeze carries the delicious smell over to Despereaux. The smell gives him some strength, and he attempts to sneak by Cook again. She spots Despereaux—but to his surprise, she bursts into laughter, relieved that the midnight intruder is a mouse instead of a soldier discovering her illicit soup. Despereaux is surprised that he feels hurt by Cook's laughter rather than grateful she is in no mood to kill him.

Chapter 45 Summary

Cook tells Despereaux to take this opportunity to leave, but he is lured by the soup. In a moment of empathy, Cook brings Despereaux a ladle of soup because "There ain't no point in making soup unless others eat it" (232). The soup is the same as that of the banquet—chicken, garlic, and watercress—and Despereaux reports that it is delicious. He tells Cook of his quest to save the princess, and she laughs at the ridiculousness of it—but wishes him luck nonetheless.

Chapter 46 Summary

The dungeon is darker and smellier than Despereaux remembers, but the soup in his belly and the love in his heart propel him. He decides to tell himself a story: “I will make some light” (237). He tells his own story, that of a mouse who saves a princess from a dastardly rat with a spool of thread. Suddenly, he loses control of the spool and it goes tumbling into the darkness, spinning wildly until it settles at the foot of the rat Botticelli Remorso.

Chapter 47 Summary

A terrified Despereaux pushes on. Following the thread, he comes across Botticelli, who hints that he knows Pea’s location. Botticelli promises to show Despereaux the way out of the goodness of his heart, but he intends to kill him once he is seasoned with tears and “thwarted love” (244). Despereaux feels uneasy, but holds on to Botticelli’s tail as he leads him further into the darkness.

Chapter 48 Summary

As Despereaux follows Botticelli into the dungeon’s maze, he sees the bones and loops of red thread of mice who died. A parade of rats begins to follow the pair. Botticelli protects Despereaux from the crowd by claiming him as his own prize. Despereaux pleads for the rat to lead him to the princess, and Botticelli tells him to open his eyes and see the light ahead.

Chapter 49 Summary

Prior to Despereaux’s arrival, Mig wears Pea’s crown—and Roscuro insults her. He orders Mig to enchain Pea, as he is condemning the princess to darkness like she did him years ago. A confused Mig asks if she will still be a princess after all is done, but Roscuro echoes the painful phrase, “No one cares what you want” (253). Mig cries, saying she wants her mother; Pea comforts her and says she wants her own mother too. Roscuro screams at Mig, but she refuses to do as he says. Roscuro says that if the girls kill him, they will never find their way out of the dungeon. At a standstill, the trio sits and waits until Botticelli arrives with a small mouse.

Chapter 50 Summary

Despereaux shouts Pea's name, and she shouts back. Roscuro blocks Despereaux; Mig swings her knife at Roscuro's head and misses.

Chapter 51 Summary

Roscuro screams, his tail severed by Mig's knife. As the rat flinches, Despereaux points his sword at his heart. Botticelli laughs, and Despereaux pauses, knowing that "as a knight it was his duty to protect the princess. But would killing the rat really make the darkness go away?" (262). Roscuro smells the soup on Despereaux's whiskers and is reminded of the banquet—of his social status, of a future without light. He cries, and the other rats jeer. Pea pleads with Despereaux not to kill Roscuro. Despite not liking Roscuro, Pea promises him soup if he leads the group out of the dungeon. He agrees, and they go upstairs to eat soup together.

Chapter 52 Summary

Roscuro is eventually allowed access to the lit areas of the castle, albeit with a broken heart "mended in crooked ways" (266). He tells Pea of the prisoner with the red tablecloth, and Miggery Sow is reunited with her father, who treats her like a princess for the rest of his days. Despereaux and Pea remain close friends.

Part 4, Chapters 34-52 Analysis

In perhaps his greatest moment of despair, Despereaux loses his tail. He has a dream foreshadowing the arrival of a knight with the power of light. However, the darkness that threatens the knight is not a faceless, frightening entity: The darkness manifests as individuals with whom Despereaux had conflict throughout the story. His conscious actions subconsciously affect the major moral players of his story (i.e., Lester begs for his forgiveness later on). Despereaux fails to see the metaphorical importance of his dream but strives to understand the knight first—wondering about his identity rather than being inspired by his bravery. This is why his reunion with the threadmaster, Hovis, energizes him: Hovis reassures him that he does not need to understand everything, he just needs to stand up for what he believes in and do what's difficult but important. Understanding is not necessary for goodness and love, even if it helps make things easier.

The fact that Despereaux is unable to receive help from the king is pertinent to the theme of mismatched responsibility and social status. Arguably the most powerful individual in the

kingdom, the king is so distraught that it compromises his ability to act. Even as Despereaux finds his strength to face the situation alone, he is mocked by Cook, which hurts him just as much as the loss of his tail. It is unfair that the injured mouse be tasked with saving the princess, but noble Despereaux is more concerned with what is right, not what is fair.

This theme also manifests in the legislative power of the authoritative yet disconnected Mouse Council. Whether those of humans or mice, the novel's institutional powers are ill-advised and ill-equipped to deal with complex, realistic situations. For example, the Mouse Council passes a motion that denies Despereaux ever returned, despite its members clearly witnessing his presence. By the end of this meeting, Despereaux realizes that redemption doesn't go both ways, but he shouldn't feel burdened to change it. In this regard, the characters' fates speak to the realistic ways in which individuals can redeem themselves (i.e., Roscuro moving past his initial desire for revenge) and achieve what they want as well (i.e., Mig does not become a princess but *is* reunited with her remorseful father).

The reemergence of soup is indicative of a new, emotionally vulnerable era in the kingdom for those who loved and lost. It is the smell of soup that elicits an act of empathy from Cook and a moment of reflection from Roscuro. Now, soup can be a means of connection—an enjoyable memory that bridges the past and present—rather than a token of grief.

Character Analysis

Despereaux Tilling

Despereaux is the youngest and smallest mouse of the Tilling family. Born with large ears and a tiny frame, he seems unequipped for castle life. His interests in light and humans (particularly the princess) set him apart from other mice and eventually lead to his condemnation by the Mouse Council. Young Despereaux is frail and sickly, and his mother condemns him to a life of "desperation" as per his name.

As Despereaux accepts the dangerous quest of saving Princess Pea from Roscuro, he gains confidence and courage to the point where he is able to imagine himself as a knight in shining armor. The small mouse traverses the dungeon's maze and his own pain while rescuing the princess, all for the sake of love.

Despereaux does not transform into a ruthless warrior, however (i.e., he spares Roscuro). His greatest strengths are his loyalty and sense of devotion. His diminutive size aside, Despereaux proves an individual with a big heart. He grows as a character, acknowledging his ambivalence toward other mice's opinions of him after surviving the dungeon.

Princess Pea

Princess Pea is the 12-year-old heir of the Kingdom of Dor. As for her conscience, "Like most hearts, it was complicated, shaded with dark and dappled with light" (197). The darkness in her heart came from her mother's death and the soup-related sadness she and her father endure.

Above all, Pea is empathetic and kind, and takes a liking to Despereaux despite his small stature and species. She relies on inner strength and tolerance to turn Mig against Roscuro in the dungeon. She even does the seemingly impossible by convincing Roscuro to abandon his revenge for soup—a symbol of warmth.

Roscuro

Roscuro's full name is Chiaroscuro, which is also a term meaning the artistic balance of darkness and light. The fact that he goes by a nickname is significant, because he prefers to dwell in the darkness out of anger and self-loathing. Roscuro is unlike other rats in that he is

obsessed with bright light, just like Despereaux. Unlike the mouse, however, he is condemned by his nature to dwell in the darkness and pursue evil.

Roscuro convinces himself that his only option (and his best means of revenge for Pea's treatment during the banquet) is to capture something full of light and let it suffer in the darkness. His plan fails, however, when faced with the smell of delicious soup. Roscuro loses his tail to Mig, and retains some gruffness typical of rats, but partially redeems himself in the end and is granted permission to roam the bright rooms upstairs.

Miggery Sow

Miggery Sow is a girl who was named after her father's favorite pig. She experiences many hardships, from her mother's early death to her enslavement to another farm. She is continually abused by authority figures who beat her ears—resulting in them resembling cauliflowers. Mig is not particularly bright but harbors an ambitious dream: She wishes to be a princess like Pea.

Mig is tricked by Roscuro into kidnapping Pea at knifepoint. Her life largely comprises no one listening to what she wants. When she finally breaks under pressure during the kidnapping, she cries for her mother, her greatest wish, even beyond being a princess.

In a way, Mig becomes a princess when she is reunited with her father, who loves and pampers her for the rest of her days.

Botticelli Remorso

Botticelli Remorso is Roscuro's only friend. He has one ear, a heart-shaped necklace with a chain made from mouse whiskers, and is exceptionally disgusting. He is an archetypical rat, obsessed with all means of physical and psychological torture. He believes in his identity, and thinks the meaning of life is suffering and misery. Botticelli attempts to teach Roscuro how to be more ratlike, but the latter lacks the instinctual thirst for blood.

Botticelli is also very cunning, as is common with rats, and uses this skill to persuade Despereaux to grab his tail and follow him to Princess Pea's holding cell.

Gregory the Jailer

Gregory is the castle dungeon's jailer of many years. He is the only human able to navigate the pitch-black maze of cells—his secret being a rope tied around his ankle that allows him to track his movements. Gregory helps Despereaux because he is old enough to remember soup and what it once meant to the kingdom. In lieu of soup, Despereaux spins a beautiful story, full of light, for the old man.

Gregory dies after Roscuro chews through his signature rope as one of the steps in his plan to kidnap the princess.

Hovis the Threadmaster

The threadmaster's name is Hovis, but Despereaux only learns this upon finding him to ask for help. Despite being an administrator of death (i.e., he ties the "red thread of death" around the necks of condemned mice), Hovis says he is merely doing his job. He and Despereaux's conversation reveals their shared love for fairy tales and Princess Pea.

Hovis equips Despereaux with red thread again—but this time, as a means of support in the dungeon rather than a marker of death. He also gives the small mouse a needle as a sword and wishes him luck in his quest.

Antoinette Tilling

Antoinette is Despereaux's mother. She is a dramatic French mouse who wears an exceptional amount of makeup. After giving birth to Despereaux, she claims she is disappointed with the suffering she endured. Later, during Despereaux's trial, she cries and faints—but the performance is more for show than reassurance for her accused son.

Lester Tilling

Lester is Despereaux's father. He initially denies any relation with Despereaux out of shame for the latter's slow development and peculiar habits. He beats a communal thimble-drum as part of the Mouse Council's evaluation of Despereaux's crimes. Despite remaining silent during the sentencing, he comes to regret his actions and begs his son for forgiveness. Despereaux grants it, and Lester cries with happiness.

Themes

Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling

The Tale of Despereaux's characters feel destined to live lives according to the circumstances of their birth and given name. Living up to one's name—or in spite of one's name—is a transformative experience. For the most part, the characters live out their destinies, asserting themselves in the name of goodness and hope at the expense of offending those around them. This endeavor of standing up for what's right is intrinsic to Despereaux's quest to do the "impossible, important task at hand" (218): rescuing Princess Pea.

Despereaux, named after sorrow, is obsessed with light and love. He is condemned to be "disappointing" to his parents because he is nothing like his peers. The other mice constantly remind him of his supposed future: that he will die soon "with his eyes open like that" (15) and his sickly demeanor. The Most Very Honoured Head Mouse condemns Despereaux to death "with a black heart" (56) because of his un-mouselike behavior. Despite all of this negativity, Despereaux finds comfort in the world of fairy tales, "as if it were a spell and as if the words of it, spoken aloud, could make magic happen" (47). This passion defines his future journey as he decides to "be brave for the princess. Even if…there was no such thing as happily ever after" (61). Despereaux recites his own story upon returning to the dungeon—and the repetition of this story, spoken aloud, inspires self-confidence. With the phrase "once upon a time," Despereaux connects with something bigger than himself. By defining his own story, he learns to trust his own strength.

Miggery Sow is named after a pig, but this doesn't stop her from aspiring to be a princess—even when told she is not even "destined to be one of our star servants" (151). Even so, she believes in herself, and her insistence on this eventual reality of royalty is what makes her father's change of heart so impactful.

Words have meaning, symbolically *and* ritually. The act of storytelling positions characters as protagonists and antagonists, heroes and villains, when in reality, storytelling is a means of exploring different individuals on different paths. By uplifting one's own story as if it were a destiny-filled fairy tale, one can reevaluate their actions as either good or evil.

While Roscuro plays into his social status by stirring internalized anger and shame, Despereaux attempts to transcend his name by bringing happiness and hope to Pea and the castle. Pea also resists Roscuro's attempts at defining her destiny, shocked when he reveals, "I will now tell you what your future holds. As you consigned me to darkness, so I consign you, too, to a life spent in this dungeon" (253). She rejects this future, rewriting her story through bravery and empathy for Mig. Overall, names are symbols of social status within certain communities rather than fates set in stone.

Roscuro—or Chiaroscuro—is a complicated case. While Chiaroscuro is named after the artistic balance of darkness and light, his choice to go by a nickname speaks to his denial of self, his desire to be more ratlike out of a resigned sense of destiny—and later, revenge. However, by the end of the novel, Roscuro lives out the destiny of his full name: He is allowed to roam the castle's dark and lit rooms as he pleases. In this sense, the rat both works against and toward the best version of his own story.

Kate DiCamillo encourages her readers to tell their own stories, since "Everything, as you well know (having lived in this world long enough to have figured out a thing or two for yourself), cannot always be sweetness and light" (183). She frames the titular Despereaux's resilience through storytelling (via the narrator and Despereaux's own voice) as proof of the power of perseverance despite the odds.

Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes

The heroes of the novel hardly seem like heroes at all—such being the point. DiCamillo dedicates the novel to "Luke, who asked for the story of an unlikely hero" (4), and this is partially why the protagonist is a tiny mouse. Unlike the picture perfect knights and princesses of Despereaux's books, DiCamillo's characters have flaws that end up being strengths and saving graces.

Despereaux is physically small (even for a mouse), yet he is the only character willing to be a knight, to don the metaphorical suit of armor needed to save Princess Pea—making him incredibly brave despite his size.

Roscuro is also a nonconforming rat, desiring and letting "the light from the upstairs world enter him and fill him" (93) despite Botticelli continually telling him, "We are rats. Rats. We do not like light. We are about darkness. We are about suffering" (95). It is Roscuro's love for

light that sways his final act of the novel.

Miggery Sow's poor hearing is strangely attuned to the sound of Roscuro's voice. This may be an accidental weakness in the context of the story, but she shows just as much strength when she enters the castle basement, unable to hear the terrifying sounds of the dungeon. Her so-called weakness becomes a superpower.

Pea possesses the institutional power of a princess, but when at the mercy of Roscuro and Mig, her greatest weapon is her empathy. The same is true of her father, the king. According to the narrator, the king is flawed and "made ridiculous, unreasonable, difficult-to-enforce laws… But there was one extraordinary, wonderful, admirable thing about the king. He was a man who was able and willing to love with the whole of his heart" (211). Despite having endless institutional power, the king is strongest when honest emotions and interpersonal relationships are involved. What many might see as weakness in a ruler, others see as strength.

It is the characters' nonconforming traits—the traits that mark them as different from their communities—that allow them to persevere where others have not. Despereaux accepts and uses his large ears to lead him elsewhere: "He was listening, with his big ears, to the sweet sound that no other mouse seemed to hear" (19).

The novel features several stories of weakness and turns them on their heads, making different perspectives and shows of vulnerability sources of strength, of love and understanding. In other words, with enough faith in oneself, nothing is impossible.

The Transformative Power of Forgiveness

While there are deep rifts of hatred between certain characters, these rifts also lead to moments of acceptance and forgiveness. This paradox of forgiveness—hurt mixed with joy that somehow heals impossible wounds—mirrors the motif of chiaroscuro that runs throughout the novel.

Early on, Despereaux is offered a chance at redemption by renouncing his supposed wrongs to the Mouse Council—but the former is confident that the pursuit of love is honorable. However, the Council does not offer forgiveness, only a means of avoiding consequences. The small mouse reflects on his sentencing later in the novel, when he appears as a flour-covered "ghost," and realizes he does not *have* to care what others think of him. This

epiphany marks his transformation through forgiveness: By forgiving his father and recognizing the true nature of his community, Despereaux is able to let go of any remaining hurt he may possess.

The recipient of Despereaux's forgiveness, Lester recognizes his drumbeat as that which sentenced his son to death. He is later wracked with guilt over his dedication to rules rather than family. Lester looks like "an old mouse whose fur was shot through with grey" (205) when telling Despereaux that he destroyed the sacred drum out of shame. This destruction symbolizes Lester's regret for his mistreatment of his son and his recognition of the price of tradition.

The paradoxical nature of forgiveness directly relates to the divisions between darkness and light, rodents and humans, peasants and royalty. These differences may seem too great to bridge, but through forgiveness, even the most vengeful of rats is persuaded to seek healing.

Miggery Sow is able to forgive the very father who sold her into slavery, thus healing her and her father's hearts. It is only through the transformative power of forgiveness that Mig is able to achieve her dream of being "treated her like [a princess]" (267)—albeit in a way she didn't expect. While ridiculous at heart, forgiveness can go beyond mere hope and help make a better, more emotionally vulnerable reality.

By grappling with joy and suffering alike, the characters are able to connect with each other to accomplish common goals, like appreciating light and love. Moments before her rescue, Pea becomes "aware suddenly of how fragile her heart was, how much darkness was inside it, fighting, always, with the light" (264), and this urge leads her to reach and touch Roscuro's broken heart. Forgiveness and recognition of others' circumstances and opportunities are transformative tools that provide more light, love, and awareness for all.

Symbols & Motifs

Chiaroscuro

Beyond the literal character of Roscuro, chiaroscuro—the artistic balance of darkness and light—is an enduring motif throughout the novel. The main characters continually move between the brightly lit upstairs and the dark dungeon. This is also a reflection of their flawed, realistic morality: Just like condemning rats to darkness and evil, and mice to light and goodness, is a simplistic categorization, nobody is ever all good or all bad. Every character harbors love *and* hate for different reasons—some personal and some grounded in societal structures.

The two, darkness and light, must remain in balance with each other. Roscuro tries to imprison the princess in the darkness forever, but this would lead to no end. Similarly, Roscuro had no place to go after the banquet (and subsequent anti-rat laws) other than the dungeon's darkness; the darkness he once loathed provided great comfort, just as the sunlight can be inspiring. This duality is a metaphor for the ups and downs, the fair and unfair, the general luck and sorrow of life.

Ridiculous Wanting and Desire

Most of the characters express a ridiculous, yet hopeful sense of desire. For example, Miggery Sow longs for her deceased mother; Pea shares this sentiment. Mig also has a dream that transcends her social status: She wants to be a princess, but since she is an orphan, she is destined to be nothing more than a servant.

Such desires are presented as ridiculous, but possible if one perseveres. Despereaux is a nontraditional hero, but he comes to wear the metaphorical armor of a knight as he saves Pea from the dungeon. Likewise, Pea feels her mother's presence through the reintroduction of soup, the food the latter loved most. Even Mig ends up becoming a princess through familial love, her imprisoned father learning to treasure her always. In these examples, the motif of desire ends up being not so unattainable.

The Color Red

The color red manifests as two prominent symbols: Hovis's spool of thread and the tablecloth sold in exchange for Miggery Sow. The spool is not only the "red thread of death" used for Mouse Council sentences, but it is also the coveted red thread Pea uses for her family tapestry.

Roscuro finds himself fascinated by a new prisoner's red cloth suspended in the sunlight, the color evocative of blood. Despite its brightness, red pales in comparison to the golden color of sunlight; the rat soon realizes he was in love with the sun and not the red cloth. Despereaux also realizes that the blood from his injury and the red of the "thread of death" mean little compared to his quest of saving Pea and restoring light throughout the castle.

Thread

As demonstrated by Despereaux and Gregory's lifelines, different forms of thread help orient characters as they navigate unfamiliar territory. They provide safety and track people's progress—literal and metaphorical.

There is also an artistic side to thread as a symbol: Princess Pea uses red thread in her family tapestry. In doing so, she becomes the author of her own story.

Soup

Soup (and its related silverware) is a somewhat ridiculous symbol of love—but such is the nature of love in the story. Even when the king outlaws soup and kettles, the evidence of his love for the queen does not go away; it merely piles up in the dungeon as a literal monument to his grief. Roscuro also takes the soup spoon from the banquet and wears it as a makeshift crown—which mocks the queen's memory but also serves as the only bit of brightness he can bring back to the darkness where he supposedly belongs.

The kingdom begins to heal when Cook makes the soup served during the banquet. The smell and taste of the dish unite Despereaux, Pea, Roscuro, and Mig in shared memories and understanding.

Unlikely Knight in Shining Armor

While recovering from his injury, Despereaux dreams of an empty suit of shining armor that saves him from darkness—but later realizes he himself must take on the role of knight. The knight symbolizes the ongoing fight for goodness and light in the world, with all light reflecting off of it. This archetype is crucial to the traditional fairy tales that catch Despereaux's eye in the library.

Moreover, the suit of armor acts as an impenetrable barrier that protects the wearer. Despereaux is attracted to this means of protection because of his small size; the armor's literal strength only expands the knight's symbolic power in his mind.

In embodying the knight, one becomes emblematic of all that is good and kind in the face of darkness. Despereaux accepts this responsibility as a hero only need be strong of heart—regardless of literal armor.

The Princess's Tapestry in Progress

Throughout the novel, Princess Pea weaves a tapestry of her family and the Kingdom of Dor. To do this, she requires red thread. Her frequent use of red thread spills over to the mice's culture, as they intercept the spools and use the thread as a symbol of division from the community.

Many characters use forms of thread to symbolize personal stories. Gregory "tells" his story by trailing his rope around the mazelike dungeon. Despereaux feels condemned by Hovis's red thread until he chooses to equip it in defense of the princess. There is also a final symbolic "weaving:" Through four books, the narrator connects the main characters' loose threads to create a tale of empathy and forgiveness.

Important Quotes

1. “The April sun, weak but determined, shone through a castle window and from there squeezed itself through a small hole in the wall and placed one golden finger on the little mouse.”
(Part 1, Chapter 1, Page 13)

In the very first chapter of the novel, Kate DiCamillo personifies the sunlight in order to introduce the idea that young Despereaux is divinely anointed. Even though the light is weak, like Despereaux is small, it is still as beautiful and hopeful as the small mouse is.

2. “Reader, you must know that an interesting fate (sometimes involving rats, sometimes not) awaits almost everyone, mouse or man, who does not conform.”
(Part 1, Chapter 3, Page 25)

This quote introduces one of the novel’s major themes: nonconformity. At this point, it is too early to know what “interesting fates” entails, so the narrator creates tension by foreshadowing. This kind of conspiratorial narration is also a common literary device in fairy tales, where the narrator strings together seemingly unrelated events through the power of omniscience, delighting in these secrets with the reader.

3. “‘Royalty,’ the king said, ‘has many responsibilities. And one of them is not getting personally involved with even the distant relatives of one’s enemies.’”
(Part 1, Chapter 7, Page 39)

The king tries to influence Pea’s sense of personhood by alluding to the authority that is royalty. He sees royalty as duty-bound and above all else, in the same way that Despereaux is ordered to be more mouselike and Roscuro is encouraged to indulge in ratlike evils. Ironically, as Pea exercises empathy by pushing back against stereotypes, she exhibits the more royal, “responsible” attitude her father wishes to instill in her by being intolerant.

4. “Perfidy. Pea. Perfidy. Pea. These were the words that pinwheeled through Despereaux’s mind as his body descended into the darkness.”
(Part 1, Chapter 13, Page 72)

DiCamillo uses alliteration and repetition to mimic the physical sensation of Despereaux tumbling into the dungeon. The cycling of "p" creates a rattling effect when read aloud, embodying the metaphor of a "pinwheel." The latter half of the quote switches to softer "d" sounds, which echo the mouse's soft bounce into the darkness of the dungeon. The sentence ends with less staccato, foreshadowing Despereaux's trek into the unknown.

5. "You are talking to Gregory the jailer, who, in the richest of ironies, is nothing but a prisoner here himself."
(Part 1, Chapter 15, Page 77)

The irony to which Gregory refers is the fact that his rope chains him to the dungeon like a prisoner, but it is also his only means of navigation due to the intense darkness. The rope both confines and frees Gregory as he performs his jailer duties. This echoes the paradoxical split between darkness and light.

6. "Spoons. Bowls. Kettles. All of them gathered here as hard evidence of the pain of loving a living thing. The king loved the queen and the queen died; this monstrosity, this junk heap is the result of love."
(Part 1, Chapter 15, Page 79)

Soup, and its assorted cutlery, is a symbol of love in the novel. When a recipient of love dies—like the queen—that love remains in a (in this case, literal) pile of grief. The pile of soup paraphernalia is a reminder that even though the queen is dead, her memory still lives on via her family's mourning.

7. "Roscuro's parents were having a bit of fun when they named their son. Rats have a sense of humour. Rats, in fact, think that life is very funny. And they are right, reader. They are right. In the case of Chiaroscuro, however, the joke had a hint of prophecy to it, for it happened that when Roscuro was a very young rat, he came upon a great length of rope on the dungeon floor."
(Part 2, Chapter 16, Pages 85 - 86)

Roscuro's parents acknowledge the irony in naming their son after the artistic balance of darkness and light—but more importantly, the narrator agrees that rats have a natural sense of humor. This irony is telling—not just because Gregory's rope marks the start of Roscuro's

journey, but because it shows that rats can recognize social cues like jokes. It raises the question that maybe, even though they express themselves differently, rats may not be as evil as one expects.

8. "As he spoke, Botticelli swung, from the one extraordinarily long nail of his right front paw, a heart-shaped locket. He had taken the locket from a prisoner and hung it on a thin braided rope. Whenever Botticelli spoke, the locket moved. Back and forth, back and forth it swung."
(Part 2, Chapter 16, Page 89)

Botticelli's heart-shaped locket is a symbol of triumph through torture, due to its chain being made of braided mouse whiskers. The fact that he uses it like a hypnotic object is impactful, because any mouse could recognize the horror in front of them while being entranced by its gleam and sway. The object itself holds a greater terror to mice when they recognize its materials. Botticelli knows the impact of this psychological torture, and delights in its subtlety.

9. "'You are looking forward to it because you are a rat, a real rat.' 'Yes,' said Roscuro. 'I am a real rat.' 'Concerned not at all with the light,' said Botticelli. 'Concerned not at all with the light,' repeated Roscuro."
(Part 2, Chapter 16, Page 91)

The repetitive mantra that Botticelli makes Roscuro say aloud is reminiscent of the repetitive motion of the former's locket. Both work together to create a brainwashing effect, one that equates the forcing of one' identity to hypnotic psychological torture. In other words, Botticelli attempts to "correct" Roscuro's mindset by making him identify with a strict category of existence: the perfect rat.

10. "A curse, an insult, a word totally without light. And not until he heard it from the mouth of the princess did Roscuro realize that he did not like being a rat, that he did not want to be a rat."
(Part 2, Chapter 20, Page 109)

Roscuro seeks revenge on Princess Pea after she calls him a rat and scowls—but it's not the category itself that bothers him, it's the implication of her disgust. To him (and the interconnected communities throughout the castle), a rat is evil and nothing else. This

perspective helps Roscuro orient his hate toward the princess; he hates her because of the stereotype she plays into, not because he was upset she spotted him at the party.

11. "Did you think that rats do not have hearts? Wrong. All living things have a heart. And the heart of any living thing can be broken."
(Part 2, Chapter 21, Page 113)

With this quote, the narrator breaks down the boundaries between humans and rodents. Each species is socially confined to a separate area of the castle depending on their rank and influence—but regardless, all hearts harbor good and bad. Morality does not depend on one's given identity—rather one's actions and qualities.

12. "'Yes,' said Roscuro. 'I will have something beautiful. And I will have revenge. Both things. Somehow.' There are those hearts, reader, that never mend again once they are broken."
(Part 2, Chapter 22, Page 116)

Roscuro is not being selfish for its own sake—rather, he misunderstands the potential consequences of what he wishes to do. Once his heart is broken, his anger leads him to desire both the light and a dark, hurtful revenge that contradicts his original goal. These goals are so divergent that they do not mend his heart; they split his heart further in two.

13. "Every action, reader, no matter how small, has a consequence. For instance, the young Roscuro gnawed on Gregory the jailer's rope, and because he gnawed on the rope, a match was lit in his face, and because a match was lit in his face, his soul was set afire."
(Part 2, Chapter 23, Page 117)

DiCamillo draws connections between plot points in a way that emulates the weaving of a literary tapestry. The reader most likely picked up on some connections on their own, but the fact that the narrator explicitly points them out provides an emotional respite during an otherwise taxing journey.

14. "This is the danger of loving: No matter how powerful you are, no matter how many kingdoms you rule, you cannot stop those you love from dying. Making soup illegal, outlawing rats, these things soothed the poor king's heart. And so we must forgive him."
(Part 2, Chapter 23, Page 119)

This quote connects the theme of love (through the symbol of soup) with the theme of forgiveness as a means of healing. The narrator calls the reader to empathize with the king's emotional state as a first step to forgiving the ridiculousness of his decisions, because at their heart, love and grief are both ridiculous.

15. "Uncle: 'Do ye want a good clout to the ear, then?' Mig: 'No, thank you, Uncle, I don't.' Alas, Uncle seemed to be as entirely unconcerned with what Mig wanted as her mother and father had been. The discussed clout to the ear was always delivered."
(Part 3, Chapter 25, Page 129)

Mig constantly voices her wants, yet no one seems to listen; others tend to insult her and do the opposite of what she says. This imbalance of communication, of power, is nothing short of abuse and sets the tone for Mig's story—and makes her eventual happy ending all the more satisfying.

16. "'What'll we eat? And what'll we eat it with?' 'Cake,' suggested the soldier, 'with a fork.' 'And wouldn't that be lovely,' said Uncle, 'if we could afford to eat cake.'"
(Part 3, Chapter 28, Pages 140 - 141)

To the king, the outlawing of soup is a fancy driven by grief, but it has significant implications for the citizens of the kingdom, who can't afford to eat much else. This failure to recognize societal difference may be accidental, but it reveals the cracks in the king's judgment—like how he believes there are no rats just because they are outlawed.

17. "She was twelve years old. Her mother was dead. Her father had sold her. Her Uncle, who wasn't her uncle at all, had clouted her until she was almost deaf. And she wanted, more than anything in the world, to be a little princess wearing a golden crown and riding a high-stepping white horse."
(Part 3, Chapter 28, Page 143)

This description of Miggery Sow's humble beginnings compared to her opulent dream of being a princess draws a stark contrast. There is little to zero chance that she will become a princess, but this doesn't lessen her happiness at the thought.

18. "'Aspirations', my dear, are those things that would make a serving girl wish to be a princess."

(Part 3, Chapter 33, Page 170)

Roscuro's statement to Miggery Sow is particularly alluring because *it is difficult to pin down. By framing hopes or wishes as "aspirations," he doesn't change their meaning, but does sound more authoritative. To a naive girl like Mig, such flowery language helps convince her that Roscuro's plan is destined, or at least possible.*

19. "The story is not a pretty one. There is violence in it. And cruelty. But stories that are not pretty have a certain value, too, I suppose. Everything, as you well know (having lived in this world long enough to have figured out a thing or two for yourself), cannot always be sweetness and light."
(Part 4, Chapter 36, Page 183)

The narrator warns the reader of impending fear and sadness. But rather than making the reader put down the novel, this warning encourages them to read courageously alongside Despereaux as he treks the dungeon once more. This connection between protagonist and reader heightens the story's tension.

20. "She wanted—oh, how she wanted. And it was because of this terrible wanting that she was able to believe in Roscuro's plan with every ounce of her heart."
(Part 4, Chapter 36, Page 187)

This quote illustrates Miggery Sow's mindset as she is offered her dream by the dastardly Roscuro. The narrator notes that it is Mig's sense of fairy tale wonder that makes her so easy to exploit. Desire—ridiculous or otherwise—fuels almost every character's actions; even strange decisions can be traced back to emotional situations.

21. "Despereaux was amazed to have exactly what was in his heart spoken aloud by such a ferocious, mouse-hating woman as Cook."
(Part 1, Chapter 39, Page 202)

Despereaux expresses empathy for Cook in a rare moment of vulnerability. Considering Cook previously yelled that the only good mouse is a dead mouse, Despereaux assumed the worst—but their shared longing (for the missing Pea, light in general, etc.) reveals to him that they have a similar softness in their hearts.

22. “Despereaux stood before the Mouse Council and he realized that he was a different mouse from the one who had faced them the last time. He had been to the dungeon and back up out of it. He knew things that they would never know; what they thought of him, he realized, did not matter, not at all.”
(Part 4, Chapter 40, Page 208)

This quote reveals Despereaux’s immense character growth. The mouse no longer faints or attempts to argue as he is now confident in his beliefs—and that he does not have to prove the validity of them (or anything) to anyone.

23. “You don’t have to know. You just have to feel compelled to do the thing: the impossible, important task at hand.”
(Part 4, Chapter 42, Page 218)

The threadmaster Hovis offers this advice to Despereaux as he outfits him with a needle as a sword. This statement reassures Despereaux as it lets him know that he does not need *to know everything about the future (i.e., the symbolism behind his dream of the knight) to be brave. The mouse can trust his own heart and instincts to do what is right.*

24. “He had expected Cook to kill him. Instead, reader, she had laughed at him. And he was surprised how much her laughter hurt.”
(Part 4, Chapter 44, Page 230)

Most mice rules focus on physical safety, but this moment examines Despereaux’s need for emotional safety. Cook doesn’t attempt to cut Despereaux, but he still feels hurt because her laugh carries with it the implication that he’s a helpless, irrelevant mouse.

25. “His eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and he moved down the stairs more quickly, more surely, whispering to himself the tale of a devious rat and a fat serving girl and a beautiful princess and a brave mouse and some soup and a spool of red thread. It was a story, in fact, very similar to the one you are reading right now, and the telling of it gave Despereaux strength.”
(Part 4, Chapter 46, Page 237)

Despereaux whispers his own story aloud to give himself strength—reminding himself that his quest is, in its own way, a fairy tale that will hopefully have a happy ending. By accepting his position as an unlikely hero, Despereaux energizes himself. His telling of a familiar story also

mirrors how stories are told and passed on for future generations to tell.

Essay Topics

1. In the coda, Kate DiCamillo writes, “I would like it very much if you thought of me as a mouse telling you a story, this story, with the whole of my heart, whispering it in your ear in order to save myself from the darkness, and to save you from the darkness, too” (270). What darkness is DiCamillo referring to? Why do you think DiCamillo chose to tell the reader this at the end of the novel?

2. Despereaux recounts his own unfolding story when braving the dungeon on his own terms, in order to give himself strength. Which parts of your own story give you strength when things feel impossible, and why?

3. Gregory believes he is a prisoner of the dungeon, even though some would call him its master because he is able to navigate using a rope. He remarks on the irony of his situation: The thing that helps him (the rope) is also that which confines him. What other ironies exist in characters’ lives, and do they consider them opportunities or hindrances? What does this say about their attitudes?

4. When soup becomes illegal, soldiers collect the kingdom’s kettles with an apology of “just doing my job.” Hovis also apologizes to Despereaux for “doing his job” when affixing the red thread of death. How do these clashes of personal morals play into the novel’s treatment of destiny?

5. Despereaux and Roscuro’s tails are both severed over the course of the story. How do their scenes differ, and what do their reactions say about them?

6. How does the novel explore the theme of empathy through shifting perspectives?

7. Soup is a significant symbol of love in the novel. What are some other symbols of love? What symbolizes love in your own life?

8. Why do you think Chiaroscuro chooses to go by Roscuro? Why do you think he continues to do so even when he's allowed to roam upstairs?

9. Who would you consider the main character of the novel? Compare the different characters' perspectives and try to recount the general plot from another's untold point of view.

10. In describing the castle's mazelike dungeon and the jailer who patrols it, DiCamillo draws an allusion to the Greek myth of the Cretan Labyrinth. What similarities and differences in symbolism—and potential themes—do you see?

Teaching Guide

Teacher Introduction

The Tale of Despereaux

- **Genre:** Fiction; middle-grade fantasy/adventure
- **Originally Published:** 2003
- **Reading Level/Interest:** Lexile 670L; grades 3-6
- **Structure/Length:** 4 parts; 52 chapters; approximately 267 pages; approximately 3 hours, 30 minutes on audio
- **Protagonist/Central Conflict:** Despereaux Tilling is a small mouse with large ears, in love with music, stories, and a princess named Pea. The story follows his adventures as he navigates the world of the castle, including the dungeons, ultimately leading to his quest to rescue Princess Pea.
- **Potential Sensitivity Issues:** Themes of rejection and loneliness; scenes of mild peril; cruelty toward animals; physical and verbal abuse

Kate DiCamillo, Author

- **Bio:** Born 1964; renowned American children's author; work is often characterized by elements of magic and adventure; her books are widely read and have been translated into multiple languages; received numerous awards for her contribution to children's literature; served as National Ambassador for Young People's Literature; continues to write and inspire young readers
- **Other Works:** *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2000); *The Tiger Rising* (2001); *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* (2006); *Flora & Ulysses* (2013)
- **Awards:** Newbery Medal (2004); Boston Globe–Horn Book Award for Excellence in Children's Literature (2004)

CENTRAL THEMES connected and noted throughout this Teaching Guide:

- **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling**
- **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**
- **The Transformative Power of Forgiveness**

STUDY OBJECTIVES: In accomplishing the components of this Teaching Guide, students will:

- Develop an understanding of the social and cultural contexts surrounding nonconformity that incites Despereaux's conflict.
- Analyze paired texts and other brief resources to make connections via the text's themes of **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling**, **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**, and **The Transformative Power of Forgiveness**.
- Plan, design, and construct visual media to provide fairy tale recommendations based on text details.
- Analyze and evaluate the plot and character details to draw conclusions in structured essay responses regarding empathy, Chiaroscuro, and other topics.

BEFORE READING

Reading Context

Use these questions or activities to help gauge students' familiarity with and spark their interest in the context of the work, giving them an entry point into the text itself.

Short Answer

What are the pros and cons of nonconformity? What might be the social consequences of those who refuse to conform?

Teaching Suggestion: *Despereaux, the novel's protagonist, is unable to conform to his mouse community because of his unusual behavior and interests. He is sentenced to the dungeon by the Mouse Council for refusing to apologize for breaking the rules of the mouse community. Consider discussing the positives and negatives of conformity and allowing students to speculate about the consequences of nonconformists before exploring the resources.*

- This 5-minute video explores conformity and nonconformity in society.
- This article describes the psychological effects of nonconformity.

Short Activity

Use prior knowledge and experience to create a poster with descriptions of the perfect hero. Use these guiding questions to help in your design.

- What would the perfect hero look like?
- What behaviors might the perfect hero have?
- What kind of character flaws could a hero possess?
- Should a hero have physical strength?
- What might be a hero's thoughts on morality?

Teaching Suggestion: *Despereaux is an unlikely hero. He is smaller than his peers, has unusually large ears, and is interested in humans. These qualities isolate him from the mouse community who eventually condemn him to death. Nevertheless, Despereaux does become a hero by rescuing Princess Pea from the evil rat community. Consider discussing the qualities of a hero both physically, mentally, and emotionally. Students may find it beneficial to have a sample poster to look at with a drawing depicting the hero and the characteristics the hero should possess surrounding the drawing. It may be helpful for students to brainstorm ideas prior to creating their poster. Consider referring to the posters as the novel progresses to assess whether students have changed their thinking on what defines a hero.*

Personal Connection Prompt

This prompt can be used for in-class discussion, exploratory free-writing, or reflection homework before reading the novel.

Have you ever had a goal or dream that others might find ridiculous? What was your dream? What were you willing to overcome to achieve it?

Teaching Suggestion: *Despereaux, though a mouse, has a romantic fascination with Princess Pea. This romantic attraction becomes the driving force behind his decision to battle the rats in the dungeon to rescue her. Consider discussing impossible goals and dreams and how they might influence actions. These could be very personal questions for some students, so it might be best to allow students to respond independently in a journal, and then, when discussing it, to have smaller group discussions or pair-share.*

DURING READING

Reading Questions & Paired Texts

Reading Check and Short Answer Questions on key points are designed for guided reading assignments, in-class review, formative assessment, quizzes, and more.

Part 1, Chapters 1-15

Reading Check

1. What word does Antoinette frequently use and is described as her favorite word in the novel?
2. What does the king believe Despereaux is when he first sees him?
3. Who does Despereaux form a romantic attachment to?

Short Answer

Answer each question in at least 1 complete sentence. Incorporate details from the text to support your response.

1. What is unusual about the incidents surrounding Despereaux's birth? Why are these details important later in the narrative?
2. How might Antoinette's character be described? What evidence from the novel supports your description?
3. What are the mouse rules Despereaux breaks and what are the consequences? Why might these rules be important to the survival of the mouse community?
4. How do fairy tales affect Despereaux's behavior?

Paired Resource

History of Fairy Tales

- This 6-minute video explores the history of fairy tales and the shift from adult audiences to children.
- Consider viewing the video beginning at 1:07.

- Shared themes include **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling** and **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**.
- **How were fairy tales told prior to taking on a literary form? When did the audience of fairy tales shift from adults to children? How do fairy tales relay important messages? What is the significance of fairy tales to Despereaux?**

"Fairy Tales and the Awakening of the Moral Imagination"

- This article explores the role of morality in fairy tales.
- Shared themes include **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling** and **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**.
- **Why are fairy tales more effective in producing morality than communicating moral principles? How does Despereaux develop a form of morality from reading fairy tales? What moral principles might his family members lack?**

Part 2, Chapters 16-23

Reading Check

1. What does Roscuro imagine to be the meaning of life?
2. What does the king declare about all rats after Roscuro's accident?
3. Who does the narrator claim will be pivotal to Roscuro's revenge plot?

Short Answer

Answer each question in at least 1 complete sentence. Incorporate details from the text to support your response.

1. What does Botticelli define as being a "real rat?" What do real rats do?
2. What is Roscuro in pursuit of when he leaves the dungeon? What are the consequences of his actions?
3. What comparisons can be made between Roscuro's character and Despereaux's?

Paired Resource

"The Psychology of Revenge"

- This 3-minute video explores the psychology of revenge and how to use it to succeed.
- Shared themes include **The Transformative Power of Forgiveness**.
- **What is the impact of revenge on the brain? How does revenge become problematic? What is Roscuro's motive for seeking revenge? How might it impact him psychologically?**

Part 3, Chapters 24-33

Reading Check

1. What are Mig's ears described as resembling?
2. Who does Mig see on her seventh birthday?
3. What is Mig asked to deliver to Gregory after she "fails" in her domestic duties?

Short Answer

Answer each question in at least 1 complete sentence. Incorporate details from the text to support your response.

1. What types of physical and emotional abuse are inflicted on Mig? How do these abuses exacerbate her living situation?
2. What does Mig likely find attractive about the idea of becoming a princess?
3. How does Mig reinforce the idea of ridiculous dreams in the novel? Who else has ridiculous dreams?

Paired Resource

"Hope Theory"

- This 4-minute video explores the Hope Theory and why hope is beneficial in achieving goals.

- Shared themes include **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling** and **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**.
- **Why is hope an important element in goal achievement? Which characters have hope in the novel? How do they develop strategies to help them achieve their goals? Do you think they will succeed in achieving their goals?**

Part 4, Chapters 34-52

Reading Check

1. What does Mig threaten Princess Pea with?
2. What does Princess Pea promise her mother she has not forgotten as she is taken captive by Roscuro?
3. What do the Council Members believe Despereaux to be when they see him again for the first time after his sentencing?

Short Answer

Answer each question in at least 1 complete sentence. Incorporate details from the text to support your response.

1. How does Roscuro convince Mig to go along with his plan to kidnap the princess? How is it reminiscent of the behaviors Roscuro was taught in rat training?
2. Why is forgiveness important to Despereaux? What other characters grant or receive forgiveness?
3. How does Despereaux display signs of heroism?

Recommended Next Reads

Charlotte's Web by E. B. White

- This novel is about a pig who realizes that he is being raised to be eaten when an unlikely friend intervenes.

- Shared themes include **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes** and **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling**.
- Shared topics include helping others, becoming a hero, and perseverance.
- *Charlotte's Web* on SuperSummary

Redwall by Brian Jacques

- This novel is about a group of animals who scramble to defend the peaceful abbey of Redwall after a band of cutthroats demands the property for themselves.
- Shared themes include **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**.
- Shared topics include anthropomorphism, honor, and court politics.
- *Redwall* on SuperSummary

Reading Questions Answer Key

Part 1, Chapters 1-15

Reading Check

1. Disappointment (Chapter 1)
2. A bug (Chapter 4)
3. Princess Pea (Chapter 5)

Short Answer

1. Despereaux is an exceptionally small mouse when he is born, is the only mouse of his litter to survive, has large ears, and is born with his eyes open. Lester believes something is wrong because Despereaux is staring directly at the sun after he is born. These details further reinforce Despereaux's unusual traits as he grows. He loves sunlight and music more than the other mice and is too distracted by the things he loves to learn to be a "proper" mouse. For example, when his siblings try to teach him to nibble the pages of a book, Despereaux instead reads the book. Despereaux's mouse rebellion becomes the catalyst for his assigned punishment in the dungeon. (Chapter 3)

2. Antoinette may be described as a selfish character. She immediately calls Despereaux a "disappointment" upon his birth, and then swears off having children because it will ruin her appearance. She continues to describe Despereaux as a disappointment and the narrator takes the time to explain that while Antoinette appears sorrowful that Despereaux has been sentenced to death, she did not offer to go in his place—reaffirming her selfish nature. (Chapter 12)
3. Despereaux approaches humans and speaks to Princess Pea both of which break the mouse rules. Lester, unsure of how to punish Despereaux, turns him over to the Mouse Council where he is sentenced to the dungeons and presumably his death because of the wicked rats in the dungeon. These rules might be important to the mouse community because anonymity allows the community to survive within the castle walls. The king does not like any creature that is related to rats and has attempted to eliminate them. (Chapter 7)
4. Despereaux, having read fairy tales rather than nibbling on the pages of books, is inspired by the brave knights and beautiful princesses in stories. When he first meets Princess Pea, he immediately falls in love, and he also claims to honor her—something that is likely derived from one of his stories about knights. At times he doubts that happily ever after exists, and he draws strength from the threadmaster's own knowledge of courtly love, bravery, courtesy, honor, and devotion, which Despereaux identifies as coming from fairy tales. Because of these descriptions from fairy tales, he attempts to be brave in the dungeon and face his fate. (Chapter 11)

Part 2, Chapters 16-23

Reading Check

1. Light (Chapter 16)
2. Illegal outlaws (Chapter 23)
3. Miggery Sow (Chapter 23)

Short Answer

1. The purpose of the rats in the dungeon is to torture and inflict suffering on the prisoners. For example, when a red cloth is thrown into the dungeon, Roscuro is convinced by Botticelli that he should steal it to torture the prisoner. Roscuro acts as though he is a friend of the prisoner before stealing the cloth—the only thing the prisoner has left. (Chapter 18)

2. Roscuro escapes the dungeon, finding no satisfaction in torture, to find the light. His obsession with light causes him to climb on a chandelier in the dining hall where he is startled by the screams of Princess Pea and lands in the queen's soup. He speaks to the queen to excuse his mishap, but the queen dies of a heart attack after the encounter. Because of Roscuro's actions, the residents of the castle are determined to hunt down the rat and kill him. Roscuro's own personality changes when he becomes vengeful and bitter after seeing the look of disgust on Princess Pea's face. (Chapter 21)
3. Roscuro and Despereaux are both attracted to light and neither fit into their communities. Despereaux, unlike Roscuro, has never been trained by the other mice to be vengeful and cruel. When Roscuro is confronted with his nonconformity the consequences of his actions cause him to slip into conformity while Despereaux takes on the consequences of his actions, believing he did nothing wrong. (Chapter 21)

Part 3, Chapters 24-33

Reading Check

1. Cauliflower (Chapter 25)
2. Princess Pea (Chapter 26)
3. His meals (Chapter 30)

Short Answer

1. Mig's mother and father do not seem to care about her. Her mother tells her that it doesn't matter what Mig wants on her deathbed—a sentiment that is frequently repeated to Mig by the other characters. Her father sells her into servitude after her mother's death where she is often clouted on the ears, causing hearing damage, as well as verbally abused. She is later taken to the castle, where the cook and the prisoner also abuse her, dismissing her desires and berating her performance as a housekeeper. These abuses further exacerbate Mig's hardship because she cannot hear well enough to follow instructions—causing more abuse. (Chapter 30)
2. Mig first encounters the princess "glittering and glowing on the horizon" (Chapter 26). Mig begins to desire to become a princess probably because of the beauty, admiration, and respect the title would grant her. This idea is supported by the characters often telling Mig no one cares about her or what she wants. (Chapter 26)

3. Mig's dream is to become a princess, a notion that is thought of as ridiculous by the rest of the characters. Ridiculous dreams are a common theme in the novel as Despereaux is in love with the human Princess Pea and Roscuro dreams of living in the light. (Chapter 29)

Part 4, Chapters 34-52

Reading Check

1. A knife (Chapter 36)
2. Soup (Chapter 37)
3. A ghost (Chapter 40)

Short Answer

1. Roscuro convinces Mig that she will swap places with the princess if she agrees to help him trap the princess in the dungeon. Roscuro's tactic is reminiscent of his training where he was taught to learn of the prisoners' desires before taking away the one thing they want most. Mig wants most to become a princess, and Roscuro exploits that dream. (Chapter 36)
2. Despereaux grants forgiveness to his father because he believes it is the only way to save his own heart and prevent it from breaking in two. Princess Pea later extends forgiveness to both Roscuro and Mig—realizing their desires were warped in a way that motivated their actions. (Chapter 40)
3. Despereaux, though admittedly scared, realizes the princess has been stolen while he was sleeping. He timidly approaches the king to tell him where Princess Pea is, but the king laughs at him. Despereaux realizes that he is the knight in this story and seeks out the threadmaker who encourages him to face danger. He confronts Roscuro in the dungeon and, though he does not directly rescue the princess, he displays signs of great heroism. (Chapter 41)

AFTER READING

Discussion/Analysis Prompt

Explore the author's use of wants and desires in the novel. How are the characters each motivated by their own desires? Why do their desires have a tendency to make them oblivious to the truth? How do the characters' pursuit of desires have both positive and negative outcomes?

Teaching Suggestion: *Students may find it beneficial to analyze the questions by first determining the characters who feel a strong desire for something and the possible reason those desires exist. Students can then compare how each of the characters is made oblivious by their desires and what the outcome is for each.*

Differentiation Suggestion: *English learners may benefit by accessing a visual approach to the questions. Consider asking students to organize the prompt into a 3-column chart with (character desires/"blind spots"/outcomes) as headers. It may be helpful for students to work in small groups to complete the chart. Students can generate ideas with one person writing/dictating their assessments.*

Activities

details from the text over the course of the activity.

"Fairy Tale Recommendations"

In this activity, students will assign fairy tales to Despereaux's family members based on text details.

Think of the ways in which Despereaux's character is built by reading fairy tales. Consider his family members and their lack of moral reasoning. What fairy tales might you recommend to each of Despereaux's family members so that they might develop character traits that match Despereaux's? Create a list of fairy tales in a slideshow presentation that you would recommend to Lester, Antoinette, Furlough, and his other siblings. Then explain what each of these fairy tales might offer to Despereaux's family members.

- Consider character traits such as love, nonconformity, compassion, self-sacrifice, and acceptance.
- What qualities do you believe Despereaux's family members lack?

- What fairy tales might you recommend to help family members develop their character?
- In what way will these fairy tales help family members?
- Create a slideshow presentation with the character and the fairy tales you might recommend for each character.

Share a few of the fairy tales you identified that may help Despereaux's family members and explain why they represent a moral or standard of behavior Despereaux's family may lack.

Teaching Suggestion: *Students may find it beneficial to analyze the character traits of Antoinette, Furlough, and Lester before selecting fairy tales that offer a lesson they might benefit from. Encourage students to consider more than one fairy tale for characters that are lacking in more than one character trait.*

Differentiation Suggestion: *Students who require an additional challenge may analyze other characters in the novel such as the king, Roscuro, and Mig to determine the fairy tales that may help them to develop character traits that align with Despereaux's.*

Essay Questions

Use these essay questions as writing and critical thinking exercises for all levels of writers, and to build their literary analysis skills by requiring textual references throughout the essay.

Differentiation Suggestion: *For English learners or struggling writers, strategies that work well include graphic organizers, sentence frames or starters, group work, or oral responses.*

Scaffolded Essay Questions

Student Prompt: Write a short (1-3 paragraph) response using one of the bulleted outlines below. Cite details from the text over the course of your response that serve as examples and support.

1. Chiaroscuro means the artistic balance between light and darkness.

- In what ways does Roscuro display signs of light and darkness in his character? (*topic sentence*)

- Provide two examples in which Chiaroscuro represents light and two ways in which he represents darkness.
- In your concluding sentence or sentences, explain whether you believe Chiaroscuro is an appropriate name for the character.

2. Despereaux and Roscuro's tails are both severed over the course of the story.

- What do the reactions of the two characters indicate about their personalities? (*topic sentence*)
- Explain the similarities and differences in the scenes where Roscuro and Despereaux severed their tales.
- In your concluding sentence or sentences, explain what the reactions of the two characters indicate about their personalities.

3. Consider the characters that demonstrate empathy through their shifting perspectives.

- How does the novel explore the theme of empathy? (*topic sentence*)
- Explain the purpose of empathy in the novel and which characters display empathy and why.
- In your concluding sentence or sentences, explain why the author chose to use empathy as a theme for the novel.

Full Essay Assignments

Student Prompt: Write a structured and well-developed essay. Include a thesis statement, at least three main points supported by text details, and a conclusion.

1. Despereaux recounts his own unfolding story when braving the dungeon on his own terms to give himself strength. Consider how Despereaux draws strength from his own story. Which parts of your own story give you strength when things are difficult? Describe the strength you glean from your own story and explain why it gives you strength in two or three paragraphs. In your essay, make a connection to the theme **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling**. Support your comparison with specific evidence from the passage.

2. Gregory believes he is a prisoner of the dungeon even though some would call him its

"master" because he is able to navigate with a rope. The situation is ironic because the rope helps him but also confines him. Consider other ironies that exist in the characters' lives and describe whether they are hindrances or opportunities and make a connection to the theme **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**. Provide at least two examples from the novel providing specific quotes from the text to support your analysis.

3. In the coda, Kate DiCamillo writes, "I would like it very much if you thought of me as a mouse telling you a story, this story, with the whole of my heart, whispering in your ear in order to save myself from the darkness, and to save you from the darkness, too." In an essay of two main points, explain what DiCamillo means when she makes this statement, and why DiCamillo chose to write her statement at the end of the novel. Substantiate your answer by citing relevant information from the text.

Cumulative Exam Questions

Multiple Choice and Long Answer Questions create ideal opportunities for whole-text review, unit exam, or summative assessments.

Multiple Choice

1. What best explains why Despereaux is described as an unlikely hero?
A) He is very small for his age and disliked by his peers.
B) He does not have the strength and courage he needs.
C) His family has very little faith in his capabilities.
D) He lacks the knowledge to carry out a rescue.

2. What is the catalyst for Roscuro's resentment toward Princess Pea?
A) His mistreatment by the other rats
B) The lack of sunlight in the rat's den
C) The king's hatred of the rat community
D) His inadvertent involvement in the queen's death

3. The author describes the king as "unintelligent," but what clues provide the reader with this knowledge prior to that admission?
A) The king outlaws soup after the queen dies while eating it.
B) The king sings silly songs to Princess Pea before she goes to bed.

C) The king refers to Despereaux as a bug, while he is clearly a mouse.
D) The king will not listen to Despereaux because he is similar to a rat.

4. What motivates Despereaux to defend Princess Pea?
A) His friendship with her
B) His willingness to be brave
C) His romantic attachment to her
D) His respect for the king

5. Who serves as a foil—or the opposite—of Despereaux's character?
A) Mig
B) Roscuro
C) Princess Pea
D) The king

6. What makes Mig particularly vulnerable to Roscuro's manipulation?
A) Her strong desire and lack of intelligence
B) The cook's verbal abuse and dismissal of her wants
C) Her difficulty hearing and understanding him
D) The abandonment of her father

7. What does thread represent in the novel?
A) A bridge
B) Hope
C) A guide
D) Unwinding of fate

8. What best describes the strategies of the rats that live in the dungeon?
A) They are wholly unaware of what is happening in the castle.
B) They are clever and compassionate.
C) They do not have the skills to carry out a kidnapping.
D) They pretend to be friendly for the sake of torture.

9. Why is light an important motif in Despereaux's story?
A) It describes all that is good in the world.
B) It is what the characters see before they die.

C) It helps the characters make good choices.
D) It represents the characters' desires.

10. What is soup symbolic of in the novel?
A) Compassion
B) Desire
C) Love
D) Loss

Long Answer

Compose a response of 2-3 sentences, incorporating text details to support your response.

1. Many of the characters have ridiculous dreams they act on to achieve their goals. Were any of the characters able to achieve their ridiculous dreams? What statement might DiCamillo be making about fairy tales?
2. How does the novel explore nonconformity? Is nonconformity a good or a bad thing in the novel?

Exam Answer Key

Multiple Choice

1. A (Various chapters)
2. D (Various chapters)
3. A (Various chapters)
4. C (Various chapters)
5. B (Various chapters)
6. A (Various chapters)
7. C (Various chapters)
8. D (Various chapters)
9. A (Various chapters)
10. C (Various chapters)

Long Answer

1. Roscuro, Despereaux, and Mig each have ridiculous dreams. Roscuro's dream is to live in the daylight, and he is granted this dream at the novel's conclusion but does not have the opportunity to inflict his revenge on Princess Pea. Despereaux dreams of being in a relationship with Princess Pea, but only manages to remain her friend. Mig's dream of becoming a princess never comes to fruition, but she is treated as a princess by her father when they reconnect. DiCamillo may be making a statement about the unreasonableness of fairy tales and the true desires behind ridiculous dreams. For example, Mig desires to be a princess because she has been mistreated all her life—her desire is fulfilled through the relationship she develops with her father. (Various chapters)
2. Despereaux is the primary example of nonconformity in the novel. Of all the characters, Despereaux resists the laws of his community, their perspectives, and their behaviors. When Despereaux is given the chance to recant his beliefs and behavior to save his life, he decides to stand by what he believes in. Roscuro also displays signs of nonconformity but eventually begins to conform to his rat community after he inadvertently kills the queen by seeking the light. Nonconformity is generally a good thing in the novel, but there are severe consequences for those who fail to conform. (Various chapters)

Introduction

The Tale of Despereaux

- **Genre:** Fiction; middle-grade fantasy/adventure
- **Originally Published:** 2003
- **Reading Level/Interest:** Lexile 670L; grades 3-6
- **Structure/Length:** 4 parts; 52 chapters; approximately 267 pages; approximately 3 hours, 30 minutes on audio
- **Protagonist/Central Conflict:** Despereaux Tilling is a small mouse with large ears, in love with music, stories, and a princess named Pea. The story follows his adventures as he navigates the world of the castle, including the dungeons, ultimately leading to his quest to rescue Princess Pea.
- **Potential Sensitivity Issues:** Themes of rejection and loneliness; scenes of mild peril; cruelty toward animals; physical and verbal abuse

Kate DiCamillo, Author

- **Bio:** Born 1964; renowned American children's author; work is often characterized by elements of magic and adventure; her books are widely read and have been translated into multiple languages; received numerous awards for her contribution to children's literature; served as National Ambassador for Young People's Literature; continues to write and inspire young readers
- **Other Works:** *Because of Winn-Dixie* (2000); *The Tiger Rising* (2001); *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* (2006); *Flora & Ulysses* (2013)
- **Awards:** Newbery Medal (2004); Boston Globe–Horn Book Award for Excellence in Children's Literature (2004)

CENTRAL THEMES connected and noted throughout this Teaching Guide:

- **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling**
- **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**
- **The Transformative Power of Forgiveness**

STUDY OBJECTIVES: In accomplishing the components of this Teaching Guide, students will:

- Develop an understanding of the social and cultural contexts surrounding nonconformity that incites Despereaux's conflict.
- Analyze paired texts and other brief resources to make connections via the text's themes of **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling**, **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**, and **The Transformative Power of Forgiveness**.
- Plan, design, and construct visual media to provide fairy tale recommendations based on text details.
- Analyze and evaluate the plot and character details to draw conclusions in structured essay responses regarding empathy, Chiaroscuro, and other topics.

Before Reading

Use these questions or activities to help gauge students' familiarity with and spark their interest in the context of the work, giving them an entry point into the text itself.

Short Answer

What are the pros and cons of nonconformity? What might be the social consequences of those who refuse to conform?

Teaching Suggestion: *Despereaux, the novel's protagonist, is unable to conform to his mouse community because of his unusual behavior and interests. He is sentenced to the dungeon by the Mouse Council for refusing to apologize for breaking the rules of the mouse community. Consider discussing the positives and negatives of conformity and allowing students to speculate about the consequences of nonconformists before exploring the resources.*

- This 5-minute video explores conformity and nonconformity in society.
- This article describes the psychological effects of nonconformity.

Short Activity

Use prior knowledge and experience to create a poster with descriptions of the perfect hero. Use these guiding questions to help in your design.

- What would the perfect hero look like?
- What behaviors might the perfect hero have?
- What kind of character flaws could a hero possess?
- Should a hero have physical strength?
- What might be a hero's thoughts on morality?

Teaching Suggestion: *Despereaux is an unlikely hero. He is smaller than his peers, has unusually large ears, and is interested in humans. These qualities isolate him from the mouse community who eventually condemn him to death. Nevertheless, Despereaux does become a hero by rescuing Princess Pea from the evil rat community. Consider discussing the qualities of a hero both physically, mentally, and emotionally. Students may find it beneficial to have a*

sample poster to look at with a drawing depicting the hero and the characteristics the hero should possess surrounding the drawing. It may be helpful for students to brainstorm ideas prior to creating their poster. Consider referring to the posters as the novel progresses to assess whether students have changed their thinking on what defines a hero.

Personal Connection Prompt

This prompt can be used for in-class discussion, exploratory free-writing, or reflection homework before reading the novel.

Have you ever had a goal or dream that others might find ridiculous? What was your dream? What were you willing to overcome to achieve it?

Teaching Suggestion: *Despereaux, though a mouse, has a romantic fascination with Princess Pea. This romantic attraction becomes the driving force behind his decision to battle the rats in the dungeon to rescue her. Consider discussing impossible goals and dreams and how they might influence actions. These could be very personal questions for some students, so it might be best to allow students to respond independently in a journal, and then, when discussing it, to have smaller group discussions or pair-share.*

During Reading

Reading Check and Short Answer Questions on key points are designed for guided reading assignments, in-class review, formative assessment, quizzes, and more.

Part 1, Chapters 1-15

Reading Check

1. What word does Antoinette frequently use and is described as her favorite word in the novel?
2. What does the king believe Despereaux is when he first sees him?
3. Who does Despereaux form a romantic attachment to?

Short Answer

Answer each question in at least 1 complete sentence. Incorporate details from the text to support your response.

1. What is unusual about the incidents surrounding Despereaux's birth? Why are these details important later in the narrative?
2. How might Antoinette's character be described? What evidence from the novel supports your description?
3. What are the mouse rules Despereaux breaks and what are the consequences? Why might these rules be important to the survival of the mouse community?
4. How do fairy tales affect Despereaux's behavior?

Paired Resource

History of Fairy Tales

- This 6-minute video explores the history of fairy tales and the shift from adult audiences to children.
- Consider viewing the video beginning at 1:07.

- Shared themes include **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling** and **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**.
- **How were fairy tales told prior to taking on a literary form? When did the audience of fairy tales shift from adults to children? How do fairy tales relay important messages? What is the significance of fairy tales to Despereaux?**

"Fairy Tales and the Awakening of the Moral Imagination"

- This article explores the role of morality in fairy tales.
- Shared themes include **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling** and **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**.
- **Why are fairy tales more effective in producing morality than communicating moral principles? How does Despereaux develop a form of morality from reading fairy tales? What moral principles might his family members lack?**

Part 2, Chapters 16-23

Reading Check

1. What does Roscuro imagine to be the meaning of life?
2. What does the king declare about all rats after Roscuro's accident?
3. Who does the narrator claim will be pivotal to Roscuro's revenge plot?

Short Answer

Answer each question in at least 1 complete sentence. Incorporate details from the text to support your response.

1. What does Botticelli define as being a "real rat?" What do real rats do?
2. What is Roscuro in pursuit of when he leaves the dungeon? What are the consequences of his actions?
3. What comparisons can be made between Roscuro's character and Despereaux's?

Paired Resource

"The Psychology of Revenge"

- This 3-minute video explores the psychology of revenge and how to use it to succeed.
- Shared themes include **The Transformative Power of Forgiveness**.
- **What is the impact of revenge on the brain? How does revenge become problematic? What is Roscuro's motive for seeking revenge? How might it impact him psychologically?**

Part 3, Chapters 24-33

Reading Check

1. What are Mig's ears described as resembling?
2. Who does Mig see on her seventh birthday?
3. What is Mig asked to deliver to Gregory after she "fails" in her domestic duties?

Short Answer

Answer each question in at least 1 complete sentence. Incorporate details from the text to support your response.

1. What types of physical and emotional abuse are inflicted on Mig? How do these abuses exacerbate her living situation?
2. What does Mig likely find attractive about the idea of becoming a princess?
3. How does Mig reinforce the idea of ridiculous dreams in the novel? Who else has ridiculous dreams?

Paired Resource

"Hope Theory"

- This 4-minute video explores the Hope Theory and why hope is beneficial in achieving goals.

- Shared themes include **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling** and **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**.
- **Why is hope an important element in goal achievement? Which characters have hope in the novel? How do they develop strategies to help them achieve their goals? Do you think they will succeed in achieving their goals?**

Part 4, Chapters 34-52

Reading Check

1. What does Mig threaten Princess Pea with?
2. What does Princess Pea promise her mother she has not forgotten as she is taken captive by Roscuro?
3. What do the Council Members believe Despereaux to be when they see him again for the first time after his sentencing?

Short Answer

Answer each question in at least 1 complete sentence. Incorporate details from the text to support your response.

1. How does Roscuro convince Mig to go along with his plan to kidnap the princess? How is it reminiscent of the behaviors Roscuro was taught in rat training?
2. Why is forgiveness important to Despereaux? What other characters grant or receive forgiveness?
3. How does Despereaux display signs of heroism?

Recommended Next Reads

Charlotte's Web by E. B. White

- This novel is about a pig who realizes that he is being raised to be eaten when an unlikely friend intervenes.

- Shared themes include **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes** and **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling**.
- Shared topics include helping others, becoming a hero, and perseverance.
- *Charlotte's Web* on SuperSummary

Redwall by Brian Jacques

- This novel is about a group of animals who scramble to defend the peaceful abbey of Redwall after a band of cutthroats demands the property for themselves.
- Shared themes include **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**.
- Shared topics include anthropomorphism, honor, and court politics.
- *Redwall* on SuperSummary

Part 1, Chapters 1-15

Reading Check

1. Disappointment (Chapter 1)
2. A bug (Chapter 4)
3. Princess Pea (Chapter 5)

Short Answer

1. Despereaux is an exceptionally small mouse when he is born, is the only mouse of his litter to survive, has large ears, and is born with his eyes open. Lester believes something is wrong because Despereaux is staring directly at the sun after he is born. These details further reinforce Despereaux's unusual traits as he grows. He loves sunlight and music more than the other mice and is too distracted by the things he loves to learn to be a "proper" mouse. For example, when his siblings try to teach him to nibble the pages of a book, Despereaux instead reads the book. Despereaux's mouse rebellion becomes the catalyst for his assigned punishment in the dungeon. (Chapter 3)
2. Antoinette may be described as a selfish character. She immediately calls Despereaux a "disappointment" upon his birth, and then swears off having children because it will ruin her appearance. She continues to describe Despereaux as a disappointment and the narrator

takes the time to explain that while Antoinette appears sorrowful that Despereaux has been sentenced to death, she did not offer to go in his place—reaffirming her selfish nature. (Chapter 12)
3. Despereaux approaches humans and speaks to Princess Pea both of which break the mouse rules. Lester, unsure of how to punish Despereaux, turns him over to the Mouse Council where he is sentenced to the dungeons and presumably his death because of the wicked rats in the dungeon. These rules might be important to the mouse community because anonymity allows the community to survive within the castle walls. The king does not like any creature that is related to rats and has attempted to eliminate them. (Chapter 7)
4. Despereaux, having read fairy tales rather than nibbling on the pages of books, is inspired by the brave knights and beautiful princesses in stories. When he first meets Princess Pea, he immediately falls in love, and he also claims to honor her—something that is likely derived from one of his stories about knights. At times he doubts that happily ever after exists, and he draws strength from the threadmaster's own knowledge of courtly love, bravery, courtesy, honor, and devotion, which Despereaux identifies as coming from fairy tales. Because of these descriptions from fairy tales, he attempts to be brave in the dungeon and face his fate. (Chapter 11)

Part 2, Chapters 16-23

Reading Check

1. Light (Chapter 16)
2. Illegal outlaws (Chapter 23)
3. Miggery Sow (Chapter 23)

Short Answer

1. The purpose of the rats in the dungeon is to torture and inflict suffering on the prisoners. For example, when a red cloth is thrown into the dungeon, Roscuro is convinced by Botticelli that he should steal it to torture the prisoner. Roscuro acts as though he is a friend of the prisoner before stealing the cloth—the only thing the prisoner has left. (Chapter 18)
2. Roscuro escapes the dungeon, finding no satisfaction in torture, to find the light. His obsession with light causes him to climb on a chandelier in the dining hall where he is startled by the screams of Princess Pea and lands in the queen's soup. He speaks to the queen to excuse his mishap, but the queen dies of a heart attack after the encounter. Because of

Roscuro's actions, the residents of the castle are determined to hunt down the rat and kill him. Roscuro's own personality changes when he becomes vengeful and bitter after seeing the look of disgust on Princess Pea's face. (Chapter 21)
3. Roscuro and Despereaux are both attracted to light and neither fit into their communities. Despereaux, unlike Roscuro, has never been trained by the other mice to be vengeful and cruel. When Roscuro is confronted with his nonconformity the consequences of his actions cause him to slip into conformity while Despereaux takes on the consequences of his actions, believing he did nothing wrong. (Chapter 21)

Part 3, Chapters 24-33

Reading Check

1. Cauliflower (Chapter 25)
2. Princess Pea (Chapter 26)
3. His meals (Chapter 30)

Short Answer

1. Mig's mother and father do not seem to care about her. Her mother tells her that it doesn't matter what Mig wants on her deathbed—a sentiment that is frequently repeated to Mig by the other characters. Her father sells her into servitude after her mother's death where she is often clouted on the ears, causing hearing damage, as well as verbally abused. She is later taken to the castle, where the cook and the prisoner also abuse her, dismissing her desires and berating her performance as a housekeeper. These abuses further exacerbate Mig's hardship because she cannot hear well enough to follow instructions—causing more abuse. (Chapter 30)
2. Mig first encounters the princess "glittering and glowing on the horizon" (Chapter 26). Mig begins to desire to become a princess probably because of the beauty, admiration, and respect the title would grant her. This idea is supported by the characters often telling Mig no one cares about her or what she wants. (Chapter 26)
3. Mig's dream is to become a princess, a notion that is thought of as ridiculous by the rest of the characters. Ridiculous dreams are a common theme in the novel as Despereaux is in love with the human Princess Pea and Roscuro dreams of living in the light. (Chapter 29)

Part 4, Chapters 34-52

Reading Check

1. A knife (Chapter 36)
2. Soup (Chapter 37)
3. A ghost (Chapter 40)

Short Answer

1. Roscuro convinces Mig that she will swap places with the princess if she agrees to help him trap the princess in the dungeon. Roscuro's tactic is reminiscent of his training where he was taught to learn of the prisoners' desires before taking away the one thing they want most. Mig wants most to become a princess, and Roscuro exploits that dream. (Chapter 36)
2. Despereaux grants forgiveness to his father because he believes it is the only way to save his own heart and prevent it from breaking in two. Princess Pea later extends forgiveness to both Roscuro and Mig—realizing their desires were warped in a way that motivated their actions. (Chapter 40)
3. Despereaux, though admittedly scared, realizes the princess has been stolen while he was sleeping. He timidly approaches the king to tell him where Princess Pea is, but the king laughs at him. Despereaux realizes that he is the knight in this story and seeks out the threadmaker who encourages him to face danger. He confronts Roscuro in the dungeon and, though he does not directly rescue the princess, he displays signs of great heroism. (Chapter 41)

After Reading

Explore the author's use of wants and desires in the novel. How are the characters each motivated by their own desires? Why do their desires have a tendency to make them oblivious to the truth? How do the characters' pursuit of desires have both positive and negative outcomes?

Teaching Suggestion: *Students may find it beneficial to analyze the questions by first determining the characters who feel a strong desire for something and the possible reason those desires exist. Students can then compare how each of the characters is made oblivious by their desires and what the outcome is for each.*

Differentiation Suggestion: *English learners may benefit by accessing a visual approach to the questions. Consider asking students to organize the prompt into a 3-column chart with (character desires/"blind spots"/outcomes) as headers. It may be helpful for students to work in small groups to complete the chart. Students can generate ideas with one person writing/dictating their assessments.*

details from the text over the course of the activity.

"Fairy Tale Recommendations"

In this activity, students will assign fairy tales to Despereaux's family members based on text details.

Think of the ways in which Despereaux's character is built by reading fairy tales. Consider his family members and their lack of moral reasoning. What fairy tales might you recommend to each of Despereaux's family members so that they might develop character traits that match Despereaux's? Create a list of fairy tales in a slideshow presentation that you would recommend to Lester, Antoinette, Furlough, and his other siblings. Then explain what each of these fairy tales might offer to Despereaux's family members.

- Consider character traits such as love, nonconformity, compassion, self-sacrifice, and acceptance.
- What qualities do you believe Despereaux's family members lack?

- What fairy tales might you recommend to help family members develop their character?
- In what way will these fairy tales help family members?
- Create a slideshow presentation with the character and the fairy tales you might recommend for each character.

Share a few of the fairy tales you identified that may help Despereaux's family members and explain why they represent a moral or standard of behavior Despereaux's family may lack.

Teaching Suggestion: *Students may find it beneficial to analyze the character traits of Antoinette, Furlough, and Lester before selecting fairy tales that offer a lesson they might benefit from. Encourage students to consider more than one fairy tale for characters that are lacking in more than one character trait.*

Differentiation Suggestion: *Students who require an additional challenge may analyze other characters in the novel such as the king, Roscuro, and Mig to determine the fairy tales that may help them to develop character traits that align with Despereaux's.*

Use these essay questions as writing and critical thinking exercises for all levels of writers, and to build their literary analysis skills by requiring textual references throughout the essay.

Differentiation Suggestion: *For English learners or struggling writers, strategies that work well include graphic organizers, sentence frames or starters, group work, or oral responses.*

Scaffolded Essay Questions

Student Prompt: Write a short (1-3 paragraph) response using one of the bulleted outlines below. Cite details from the text over the course of your response that serve as examples and support.

1. Chiaroscuro means the artistic balance between light and darkness.

- In what ways does Roscuro display signs of light and darkness in his character? (*topic sentence*)
- Provide two examples in which Chiaroscuro represents light and two ways in which he represents darkness.

- In your concluding sentence or sentences, explain whether you believe Chiaroscuro is an appropriate name for the character.

2. Despereaux and Roscuro's tails are both severed over the course of the story.

- What do the reactions of the two characters indicate about their personalities? (*topic sentence*)
- Explain the similarities and differences in the scenes where Roscuro and Despereaux severed their tales.
- In your concluding sentence or sentences, explain what the reactions of the two characters indicate about their personalities.

3. Consider the characters that demonstrate empathy through their shifting perspectives.

- How does the novel explore the theme of empathy? (*topic sentence*)
- Explain the purpose of empathy in the novel and which characters display empathy and why.
- In your concluding sentence or sentences, explain why the author chose to use empathy as a theme for the novel.

Full Essay Assignments

Student Prompt: Write a structured and well-developed essay. Include a thesis statement, at least three main points supported by text details, and a conclusion.

1. Despereaux recounts his own unfolding story when braving the dungeon on his own terms to give himself strength. Consider how Despereaux draws strength from his own story. Which parts of your own story give you strength when things are difficult? Describe the strength you glean from your own story and explain why it gives you strength in two or three paragraphs. In your essay, make a connection to the theme **Creating Your Own Destiny Through Storytelling**. Support your comparison with specific evidence from the passage.

2. Gregory believes he is a prisoner of the dungeon even though some would call him its "master" because he is able to navigate with a rope. The situation is ironic because the rope helps him but also confines him. Consider other ironies that exist in the characters' lives and

describe whether they are hindrances or opportunities and make a connection to the theme **Nonconformity and Unlikely Heroes**. Provide at least two examples from the novel providing specific quotes from the text to support your analysis.

3. In the coda, Kate DiCamillo writes, "I would like it very much if you thought of me as a mouse telling you a story, this story, with the whole of my heart, whispering in your ear in order to save myself from the darkness, and to save you from the darkness, too." In an essay of two main points, explain what DiCamillo means when she makes this statement, and why DiCamillo chose to write her statement at the end of the novel. Substantiate your answer by citing relevant information from the text.

Multiple Choice and Long Answer Questions create ideal opportunities for whole-text review, unit exam, or summative assessments.

Multiple Choice

1. What best explains why Despereaux is described as an unlikely hero?
A) He is very small for his age and disliked by his peers.
B) He does not have the strength and courage he needs.
C) His family has very little faith in his capabilities.
D) He lacks the knowledge to carry out a rescue.

2. What is the catalyst for Roscuro's resentment toward Princess Pea?
A) His mistreatment by the other rats
B) The lack of sunlight in the rat's den
C) The king's hatred of the rat community
D) His inadvertent involvement in the queen's death

3. The author describes the king as "unintelligent," but what clues provide the reader with this knowledge prior to that admission?
A) The king outlaws soup after the queen dies while eating it.
B) The king sings silly songs to Princess Pea before she goes to bed.
C) The king refers to Despereaux as a bug, while he is clearly a mouse.
D) The king will not listen to Despereaux because he is similar to a rat.

4. What motivates Despereaux to defend Princess Pea?

A) His friendship with her
B) His willingness to be brave
C) His romantic attachment to her
D) His respect for the king

5. Who serves as a foil—or the opposite—of Despereaux's character?

A) Mig
B) Roscuro
C) Princess Pea
D) The king

6. What makes Mig particularly vulnerable to Roscuro's manipulation?

A) Her strong desire and lack of intelligence
B) The cook's verbal abuse and dismissal of her wants
C) Her difficulty hearing and understanding him
D) The abandonment of her father

7. What does thread represent in the novel?

A) A bridge
B) Hope
C) A guide
D) Unwinding of fate

8. What best describes the strategies of the rats that live in the dungeon?

A) They are wholly unaware of what is happening in the castle.
B) They are clever and compassionate.
C) They do not have the skills to carry out a kidnapping.
D) They pretend to be friendly for the sake of torture.

9. Why is light an important motif in Despereaux's story?

A) It describes all that is good in the world.
B) It is what the characters see before they die.
C) It helps the characters make good choices.
D) It represents the characters' desires.

10. What is soup symbolic of in the novel?
A) Compassion
B) Desire
C) Love
D) Loss

Long Answer

Compose a response of 2-3 sentences, incorporating text details to support your response.

1. Many of the characters have ridiculous dreams they act on to achieve their goals. Were any of the characters able to achieve their ridiculous dreams? What statement might DiCamillo be making about fairy tales?
2. How does the novel explore nonconformity? Is nonconformity a good or a bad thing in the novel?

Multiple Choice

1. A (Various chapters)
2. D (Various chapters)
3. A (Various chapters)
4. C (Various chapters)
5. B (Various chapters)
6. A (Various chapters)
7. C (Various chapters)
8. D (Various chapters)
9. A (Various chapters)
10. C (Various chapters)

Long Answer

1. Roscuro, Despereaux, and Mig each have ridiculous dreams. Roscuro's dream is to live in the daylight, and he is granted this dream at the novel's conclusion but does not have the opportunity to inflict his revenge on Princess Pea. Despereaux dreams of being in a relationship with Princess Pea, but only manages to remain her friend. Mig's dream of

becoming a princess never comes to fruition, but she is treated as a princess by her father when they reconnect. DiCamillo may be making a statement about the unreasonableness of fairy tales and the true desires behind ridiculous dreams. For example, Mig desires to be a princess because she has been mistreated all her life—her desire is fulfilled through the relationship she develops with her father. (Various chapters)

2. Despereaux is the primary example of nonconformity in the novel. Of all the characters, Despereaux resists the laws of his community, their perspectives, and their behaviors. When Despereaux is given the chance to recant his beliefs and behavior to save his life, he decides to stand by what he believes in. Roscuro also displays signs of nonconformity but eventually begins to conform to his rat community after he inadvertently kills the queen by seeking the light. Nonconformity is generally a good thing in the novel, but there are severe consequences for those who fail to conform. (Various chapters)