

*The Tale of Despereaux*  
by Kate DiCamillo

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion  
by Charles Andrews



# TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introduction	3
Quick Card	5
Questions about Structure: Setting	7
Questions about Structure: Characters	9
Questions about Structure: Conflict and Plot	13
Questions about Structure: Theme	18
Questions about Style	21
Questions about Context	23
Suggestions for Writing Assignments	24
Story Charts	25

# INTRODUCTION



CenterForLit’s teacher guide series is intended to assist teachers and parents in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. It is important to note that they are **not** intended to be workbooks for the student, but rather models and guides for discussion leaders. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, CenterForLit’s flagship literature seminar. Though the concepts underlying this approach to literary analysis are explained in detail in that seminar, the following brief summary presents the basic principles upon which this guide is based.

The *Teaching the Classics* approach to literary analysis and interpretation is built around **three unique ideas** which, when combined, produce a powerful instrument for understanding and teaching literature:

**First:** All works of fiction share the same basic elements — **Context, Structure, and Style**. A literature lesson that helps the student identify these elements in a story prepares them for meaningful discussion of the story’s themes.

**Context** encompasses all of the details of time and place surrounding the writing of a story, including the personal life of the author as well as historical events that shaped the author’s world.

**Structure** includes the essential building blocks that make up a story, and that all stories have in common: Conflict, Plot (which includes *exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and conclusion*), Setting, Characters, and Theme.

**Style** refers to the literary devices used by authors to create the mood and atmosphere of their stories. Recognition of some basic literary devices (alliteration, simile, personification, metaphor, etc.) enables a reader not only to understand the author’s themes more readily, but also to appreciate his craftsmanship more fully.

**Second:** Because it is approachable and engaging, *children’s literature* is the best genre to employ in teaching the foundational principles of literary analysis. Children’s books present these building blocks in clear, memorable language, and are thus treasure mines of opportunities for the astute teacher—allowing him to present Context, Structure, and Style with ease to children and adults alike. Having learned to recognize these basic elements in the simple text of a classic children’s story, a student is well prepared to analyze complex works suitable for his own age and level of intellectual development.

**Third:** The best classroom technique for teaching literary analysis and interpretation is the *Socratic Method*. Named after the ancient gadfly who first popularized this style of teaching, the Socratic method employs the art of questioning, rather than lecturing, to accomplish education. Based upon the conviction that the process of discovery constitutes the better part of learning, our program uses well-placed questions to teach students how to think, rather than dictating to them what to think.

The *Teaching the Classics* seminar syllabus supplies a thorough list of Socratic questions for teachers to use in class discussion. The questions are general enough to be used with any book, but focused enough to lead the

student into meaningful contemplation of the themes of even the most difficult stories. Questions on the list are arranged in order of difficulty: from grammar-level questions which ask for the mere fact of a story, to rhetoric-level questions which require discussion of ideologies and transcendent themes. Properly employed, this list can help teachers engage their classes in important discussions of ideas, and can also provide a rich resource for essays and other writing assignments! Used in conjunction with a good writing program, *Teaching the Classics* produces **deep thinkers** at any age.

The questions used in this guide have been taken directly from the Socratic list, and will therefore be familiar to the seminar alumnus.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at [www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics](http://www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics).

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Andrews", with a long, sweeping underline.

Adam Andrews, Director  
The Center for Literary Education  
3350 Beck Road  
Rice, WA 99167  
(509) 738-6837  
[adam@centerforlit.com](mailto:adam@centerforlit.com)

# QUICK CARD



<b>Reference</b>	<p><i>The Tale of Despereaux</i>. Kate DiCamillo. (2003) ISBN: 978-0763680893</p>
<b>Plot</b>	<p>A mouse named Despereaux falls in love with the Princess Pea and is exiled to the dungeon for “unmouselike” behavior. There he meets a rat who is strangely attracted to the light and a serving girl who wants to be a princess herself. He overhears their evil plans to capture Pea and escapes the dungeon so that he can return and rescue her.</p>
<b>Setting</b>	<p>The story takes place in a kingdom where soup has been outlawed due to the unusual circumstances surrounding the recent queen’s death (a rat named Roscuro and a bowl of soup being involved). The plot takes place in various locations throughout the King’s palace: the upstairs mice-kingdom, the dungeon lair of the rats, and the kitchens and dining rooms.</p>
<b>Characters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Despereaux: an unusually small mouse who loves to read and listen to music, thus displaying perfectly “un-mouselike” behavior.</li><li>• Chiaroscuro: a rat who became enamoured with the light and longs to escape the darkness of the dungeon.</li><li>• Mig: a near-deaf serving girl, whose ears are “like cauliflower stuck to her head” after years of abuse.</li><li>• Princess Pea: the daughter of the king and an embodiment of light.</li><li>• Gregory: the jailer, a friend to mice, who saves Despereaux during his first trip to the dungeon</li></ul>
<b>Conflict</b>	<p>Man vs Man: Despereaux struggles against the rats to save the princess.</p> <p>Man vs Self: Despereaux, Pea, and Roscuro struggle against the evil within themselves to find forgiveness and grace for their enemies.</p>
<b>Theme</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Courage</li><li>• Overcoming one’s inner darkness</li><li>• Empathy</li><li>• Forgiveness and Vengeance</li><li>• <i>Chiaroscuro</i>: the relationship between light and dark, good and evil</li></ul>

<b>Literary Devices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Juxtaposition</li><li>• Symbolism</li><li>• Direct address</li></ul>
-------------------------	--

# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



*The following questions are drawn from the “Setting” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 80-81 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **Where does the story happen? (1)**

The story takes place in the fictional kingdom of Dor, primarily in the king’s castle. This includes the upstairs walls, where the mice make their home, and the dungeons, where the rats reside. Given that the story is fiction, and includes kings, princesses, and talking animals, we can assume it is a *fairy-tale*.

## **What is the mood or atmosphere where the story happens? Is it cheerful and sunny, or dark and bleak? (1d)**

The mood of the story is whimsical. DiCamillo creates a dichotomy between the “light” of the upstairs and the “dark” of the dungeon. The setting of the story thereby presages the tension between light and darkness in her characters’ hearts, so discussing the differences between the atmosphere of the dungeon and the upstairs is a good jumping-off point to get at DiCamillo’s thematic matter in the story.

The atmosphere upstairs is flooded with light and music and the smell of good foods, which contrast with the foul odor and unnatural silence of the dungeon. Similarly, the people and creatures who live upstairs possess positive characteristics which serve to contrast the dark evil of the rats who live below.

## **Is there anything symbolic about the place where the story happens? (1i)**

As mentioned above, a main theme of the story is the competing forces of goodness and evil within the characters’ hearts. Each character, regardless of the labels assigned to them due to their rank or nature, must choose between forgiveness or revenge, vindication or grace. Notably, darkness is associated with imprisonment. Despereaux observes this struggle when he wonders to himself whether killing Roscuro would truly “make the darkness go away” (262). The contrasting light setting of the castle and dark setting of the dungeon symbolize this conflict between goodness and evil.

## **When does the story happen? (2)**

The action of the story takes place during a difficult time for the kingdom of Dor. The queen has recently passed and, as a result, the king has outlawed soup. Soup, another symbol in the story, represents warmth and light and happiness, and its absence implies a dark age for Dor. (The absence of soup becomes very important when discussing the redemption of the kingdom, so make sure to note this as you discuss the setting.)





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



*The following questions are drawn from the “Characters” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 82-83 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **Who is the story about? (3)**

The story follows the main protagonist, a young mouse named Despereaux Tilling, born in the kingdom of Dor after the Queen’s death. Despereaux is the runt of his mother’s litter, but also the sole survivor. Even so, he amounts to nothing but a disappointment to his parents.

The story also concerns another protagonist, the Princess Pea, who falls prey to the scheming rats and subsequently benefits from Despereaux’s heroics. Pea fulfills the typical “princess” stereotype of all fairytales, being described by more than a few characters as a source of light herself. (The Princess becomes a type or picture of the light each character desires). Yet the Princess is more than a representation of the ideal, having her own internal struggles to overcome in the story.

At this point, it may be beneficial to address the difference between a hero and a protagonist. A hero in a story is the “good guy” who comes to the rescue of the protagonist. The protagonist, on the other hand, is the character who undergoes significant growth or development and is the one around whom the story centers. This story contains many characters who could be the main character, and you should encourage a conversation with your student in which you decide who the story is about. This guide presents a reading in which Despereaux is both a hero and a protagonist, while Princess Pea is a secondary protagonist—but don’t shy away from choosing a different protagonist based on what the text suggests to you. (For example, you could argue that the story is really about Pea, and Despereaux is only a hero). As long as your discussion is rooted in the text, this kind of dispute is the meat of good Socratic discussion!

## **What does the character look like? (3c)**

Despereaux has a small frame, big ears, and curious eyes. His singular outward appearance mirrors the interior difference of his personality from other mice. This story examines the destiny of those souls who fail to “conform,” and Despereaux is the chief example. Along with his ridiculous appearance, Despereaux sports a singularly un-mouselike attitude that gets him into all sorts of trouble: he refuses to scurry, he stops to listen to human music, and he won’t eat the pages of a book because he loves to read.

As noted above, the Princess partakes of the light imagery employed throughout the book. This is important as the “light,” or rather the goodness and beauty which attend her, becomes so desired that it leads many to try to steal and hoard it for themselves. For example, Roscuro attempts to do so by locking her in the dungeon. In this way, the goodness manifests an opportunity for darkness and evil.

Everyone in the story must face the “darkness” in themselves. The princess herself has to confront her darkness when she forgives both Miggery Sow and Roscuro, her captors. This theme of confronting your

inner darkness is prevalent throughout the book, and DiCamillo sets it up in her description of Pea.

Among other characteristics like sweetness and beauty, the author makes a point to note her sharp eyes. Pea always notices the mice and rats before anyone else. This could be suggestive of both physical and emotional perception.

**Is the character a part of a social group? If so, what do you know about this group? What motivates this group? What do its members feel to be important? (3l)**

Despereaux is a mouse. As a mouse, he must follow and uphold certain rules and standards. When he fails to do so, the mouse council (and his own family) exile him to the dungeon. This kind of sentence spells certain death for a mouse, so it tells us a lot about mouse society. They are terribly frightened of anything different from themselves; they are motivated by concern for their survival; and above all else, they believe conformity to this way of life is paramount. When Despereaux fails to conform in each of these respects, even his own family condemns him.

The Princess is not just human, but royalty. This places her in a social group defined by her grieving father, the King. What is important to him, we discover, is a hatred of rats and a condemnation of all things “soup.” The King adopted these priorities after a rat named Roscuro dropped into the Queen’s bowl of soup and gave her such a fright that she died on the spot. The King and princess’s “darkness” exists in the way they each nurse their grief, allowing it to lead them to rash and foolish decisions. The King outlaws soup and rats. The Princess adopts his hatred of rats, which she must overcome at some point in the story to save herself from her self-consuming spite.

**Is the character a type or archetype? Is he an “everyman” with whom the reader is supposed to identify? Are his struggles symbolic of human life? (3p)**

The author notes that an interesting fate such as Despereaux’s “awaits almost everyone, mouse or man, who does not conform” (25). By lumping everyone’s fate in with Despereaux’s, DiCamillo paints her mouse protagonist as an “everyman” (or everymouse). This suggests that her protagonist is a character to whom all non-conformists can relate.

**Who else is the story about? (4)**

The primary antagonist in the story is a rat named Chiaroscuro (or “Roscuro” for short). Like Despereaux, Roscuro’s destiny is determined by his nature. He is a rat, and as a rat there are things that he must love and things that he must hate. Boticelli, a mentor of sorts to Roscuro, instructs him to hate the light, to love the darkness, and to seek out the suffering of others. Similar to his mouse counterpart, however, Roscuro has little interest in conforming to his unchosen rat path. Roscuro instead has a strange interest in the light after Gregory the jailer sticks his face in a lit match. This prompts him to seek the world of light above the dungeon, where he finds a banquet, a party, and a sharp-eyed princess. Delighted by the festivities (and the princess herself, who he admires as a source of light), Roscuro climbs onto the chandelier to survey and enjoy the party. There the princess spies him and shrieks. After falling off the chandelier into the Queen’s bowl of soup, causing her death, Roscuro turns to run—but before he does, he stops to get one last glimpse of the light-filled Princess. Her hateful look breaks his heart, and he vows revenge. Roscuro is a foil for Despereaux. (*A foil* is a character who mirrors or closely contrasts another character in a story, usually the protagonist. This close relationship creates an implicit comparison through which the reader can more easily identify and understand the qualities of the protagonist).

In his very name, Roscuro embodies the story’s concern with the relationship between lightness and darkness. *Chiaroscuro* describes an effect used by artists, especially painters of the Italian Renaissance like Leonardo da Vinci, in which shadow, or dark shading, is used to draw attention to light and dimension. Thus, DiCamillo suggests that suffering and evil (the “darkness”) are necessary to a fully-orbed and beautiful vision of life. (Consider that Roscuro is prompted to pursue the light after an experience involving physical pain.) Interestingly, Sandro Boticelli, the Renaissance painter, preferred to emphasize clear lines and ideal forms in his art, and was criticized for eshewing the effects of *chiaroscuro* by da Vinci.

The other antagonist of the story is a girl named Miggery Sow (or Mig for short). Mig is a poor girl who endures years of mistreatment by her family. Her father sells her for cigarettes and a red cape, and her new owner abuses her, clouting her about the ears till she is nearly deaf. This treatment leaves her a rather dull, simple-minded creature, in whom neglect has created a desire for love and light that drowns out reason and morality. Sadly, Mig becomes the pawn in Roscuro’s evil scheme, believing the rat to be capable of making her a princess. Her name suggests the brutish nature she has developed as a result of her abuse.

**What actions does he/she take to oppose the protagonist? (4c)**

Having nursed his broken heart with hateful thoughts and plans for revenge, Roscuro meets Mig and, seeing her simple-mindedness, convinces her that he can make her a princess if she helps him abduct the Princess Pea. Mig’s secret hope to be a princess blinds her good sense, and she listens to the rat’s counsel. Under Roscuro’s direction, the pair sneak into the Princess’s room at night and, wielding a large knife, lead her into the very heart of the dungeon.

**Has the antagonist always opposed the protagonist? If not, what caused his opposition? (4k)**

As noted above, Roscuro did not always hate the princess. Initially, he left the dungeon in search of more light, having found no sport in causing the suffering of men. When Roscuro sees the princess at the banquet, he describes her: “And the little princess! How lovely she was! How like light itself!” (104). Roscuro loves the light that is the princess. However, her hateful look breaks his heart when he falls into the queen’s soup and causes her death. This broken heart is manifested in his desire for revenge.

**What are the antagonist’s surroundings? Are they related to his character? Did the author put him there on purpose? (4.n)**

Roscuro lives in the dungeon which mirrors and amplifies his rat character. The dungeon is a dark place full of foul smells and evil intent. Like his environment, Roscuro’s rat people are chiefly concerned with torturing unfortunate souls in the dark depths. Roscuro’s surroundings also mirror the darkness and bondage that overwhelms him when his heart breaks and he leaves behind his innocent love of the light.

**NOTES:**

---

---

---

---

---

---



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



*The following questions are drawn from the “Conflict” and “Plot” sections of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 84-86 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **What does the protagonist want? (5)**

Despereaux falls in love with Princess Pea in the beginning of the story, and the author tells us he desires to honor her. When Despereaux overhears Roscuro’s plan, he wants to save her.

Princess Pea wants her mother back. This introduces the darkness in her heart, since she feels hateful toward the rats that stole her mother from her. To overcome the darkness within her, she has to forgive Roscuro in the climactic scene.

## **What does the antagonist want? (5)**

Roscuro initially desires the physical light of the world beyond the dungeon, but also the good things that the light represents such as laughter, love, and happiness. After his heart is broken by the Princess’s withering stare, his desire for these good things is twisted and perverted into a drive for revenge. Roscuro reveals in the climactic scene his desire to steal the princess for himself, hiding her in the dungeon forever.

Miggery Sow thinks she wants to be a princess, but truly all she desires is a mother-figure who will care about what she wants for a change. Notice that Mig and Pea both want the same thing: a mother. This becomes important when the Princess is called upon to have empathy for Mig.

## **Do the protagonist’s objectives change throughout the story? How? Why? (5f)**

Despereaux’s objectives change dramatically throughout the story. In the beginning, he is a small mouse enamoured with fairytales, who falls in love with a princess and wants to honor her. He is equally concerned, however, with the opinions of his family and by the fact that they betray him to his exile.

After he returns from the dungeon the first time, Despereaux has grown. His father sees him and begs forgiveness for his perfidy, and Despereaux forgives him “because he sensed that it was the only way to save his own heart, to stop it from breaking in two. Despereaux, reader, spoke those words to save himself” (208). This scene is crucial for Despereaux’s character because it shows the redemptive power of forgiveness. This not only foreshadows the Princess’s forgiveness in the climax, but also becomes the pivotal moment in Despereaux’s own struggle against the darkness of bitterness. Roscuro, Despereaux’s foil, gives into the bitterness in his soul because of his broken heart. Despereaux, however, forgives the mouse least deserving of it, redeeming his father and himself in the same act. After this moment, Despereaux says of the mouse high council, “He knew things

that they would never know; what they thought of him, he realized, did not matter, not at all” (208). Letting go of this concern for the opinions of his people frees Despereaux to be the nonconforming, forgiving mouse-hero that he is. When Despereaux comes to an understanding of forgiveness, he is equipped not only with the confidence to save the princess from her physical plight but also to lead her to her own experience of forgiveness, saving her soul.

**Why can't he have it? Do physical or geographical impediments stand in the character's way? (6a)**

Despereaux struggles against rats and men, as well as his own size, to save the princess. Additionally, he has to save himself from the trap of bitterness and hatred that ensnares Roscuro, the Princess, and Mig. As noted above, Despereaux only really frees himself to be the hero Princess Pea needs when he forgives his father and leaves behind his concern and fear of the mouse council. This kind of selfless love and understanding is exactly the model Princess Pea needs, and she is enabled in turn to show the same redemptive love and forgiveness to Roscuro and Mig.

Answers to this question will range in depth depending on the age of students. Don't worry if you only get as far as Despereaux's size and strange attributes. Even these observations can get you and your student into a conversation about the power of forgiveness in the struggle against evil and darkness.

**What kind of conflict is this? (6g-k)**

The conflict in the story is chiefly Man vs. Man, but also contains elements of Man vs. Himself, since each character has a personal struggle against inner darkness.

**What other problems are there in the story? (7)**

The other main problem in the kingdom results from the King's foolish decree, outlawing soup. Soup, as mentioned earlier, is a symbol of good times, life, light, and happiness. The king allows his grief to harden his heart, causing him to do rash things. This conflict happens in the background of the story, and resolves parallel to the main conflict in the dungeon. When the cook makes his outlaw soup, the smell calls each character “back to the light,” symbolizing the redemption taking place in their lives as a result of forgiveness and empathy. Just as Mig, Roscuro, and the Princess overcome their inner darkness, the kingdom, too, is made whole with the reemergence of soup.

**What happens in the story? (8)**

After Despereaux's birth, he is sentenced to exile in the dungeon because he talked to a human, failing to uphold mouse customs. Once in the dungeon, he overhears an evil plot to kidnap the princess, and with the help of Gregory the jailer he escapes upstairs to warn the king. Meanwhile, Chiaroscuro the rat begins to put his plan into action.

At this point the reader learns the origin of this evil rat and why he harbors so much hatred for the princess. In brief, Roscuro was born in the dungeon before Despereaux, and had a fascination with light after having his whiskers singed off by Gregory. Unable to embrace the dark life of all rats, Roscuro follows the light upstairs and invites himself to a party. While hanging from a chandelier, the princess spies him and calls out, “a rat!” This sounds so stunningly ugly to him that he loses his

grip and falls into the queen's bowl of soup, causing the poor woman to die of fright. The queen's death changes a lot for the kingdom of Dor. The king in his grief outlaws all rats and all things soup. As Roscuro escapes the room, he looks back to catch a glimpse of the Princess, whose hateful stare breaks his heart in two and starts him down the evil path of bitterness and revenge.

Meanwhile, Miggery Sow, a mistreated peasant sold into slavery by her own father, comes to the castle to serve the princess. Mig has never received kind treatment by anyone, being in fact deaf after so many years of abuse (her "uncle" used to clout her on the ears, giving them the appearance of cauliflower stuck to the sides of her head). Mig wants so badly to be a princess that, when Roscuro the rat whispers sweet lies in her ear, she forgets the warning of Gregory the jailer to "beware a rat" (165). Mig joins Roscuro in his plan under the delusion that she will get to take the Princess's place. After Roscuro chews through Gregory's rope, which keeps him from getting lost in the dungeon, the two go quietly upstairs to kidnap the princess.

Despereaux has a near scrape with the cook and, after losing his tail, runs to the throne room to warn the king. On the way, Despereaux runs into his family, who were chiefly responsible for his exile in the beginning. His father begs for forgiveness, and Despereaux forgives him. He does this for himself as much for his father, and DiCamillo makes a point to notice that the act works a kind of salvation for both parties. This done, Despereaux pleads with the king to help him, but the king does not trust a mouse. On his own, Despereaux returns to the dungeon after receiving red thread and a needle from the threadmaster. While sneaking through the kitchen, he finds the cook making soup, and the cook shares some with him. Then, after tumbling down the stairs into the darkness, Despereaux is led by the evil rat Boticelli to the place where Roscuro and Mig are holding the princess. After Roscuro drops his façade of ever planning on making Mig a princess, Mig deserts her companion and stands with Pea. In the same moment, Despereaux runs into the room to save Pea and holds Roscuro at needle-point.

At this climactic moment, Roscuro smells the soup-aroma from the kitchen and swoons. Despereaux wonders internally whether killing Roscuro will solve anything, and the Princess sees Roscuro's need and desire for redemption. She forgives him, as Despereaux forgave his father, and she leads the whole party upstairs to have soup. With the Princess's return to safety, the kingdom is restored and the soup flows once again. Despereaux is forever friends with Pea, and Roscuro gets to have soup whenever he wants. Mig is reunited with her penitent father, and they all live happily ever after.

### **How is the main problem solved? (9)**

The main problem that every character faces is the struggle to find the light, both externally and internally. Roscuro seeks the light in the world above where there is soup and parties and the princess. After his heart breaks, he resorts to trying to steal the light of the princess for himself. Despereaux fights to honor the princess and overcomes physical dangers. Mig and the princess both struggle against the dark emptiness born of a motherless childhood. It is only through the redemptive work of forgiveness in the story that each character "returns to the light." When Pea forgives Roscuro, she saves herself and him, just as Despereaux does when he forgives his father. The same goes for Mig, whose repentant father returns to treat her like a princess. Similarly, the king, overjoyed to have his daughter back, finds it in his heart to repeal his laws, legalizing soup and even allowing a rat at his table.

**How are the protagonist’s obstacles finally overcome? (9b)**

Forgiveness triumphs over revenge and darkness in this story when Pea forgives Roscuro, in turn leading her father to undo the rash decrees that broke the kingdom of Dor.

**What events form the highest point or climax of the story’s tension? Are they circumstantial events, or emotional ones? Is the climax a spiritual or physical one? (9d)**

The climax occurs when Princess Pea forgives Roscuro and has Despereaux spare his life. It happens circumstantially, because each key character is in the same physical place and the tension of the physical conflict is at its highest. It is also an emotional climax, however, since it is the moment where Pea and Despereaux are confronted with the choice between forgiveness and revenge. When the princess recognizes in Roscuro the desire for light, twisted though it is, she takes pity on him and spares his life. Despereaux himself wonders before this, “would killing the rat really make the darkness go away?” (262). So the climax is both physical and spiritual: physical, because the action of the plot builds to the moment where Despereaux has the villain Roscuro at the point of his mouse-sword; emotional, because it is not violent action but forgiveness and mercy that resolves the conflict.

**How does the story end? (10)**

When the princess spares Roscuro, the surrounding rats are disgusted by the “foul smell” of mercy and forgiveness, and so they all leave, allowing for the group of characters to return safely upstairs. Mig is reunited with her father, and enjoys a life with a parent who truly cares for her. Roscuro gets to eat all the soup he wants. The king lifts the ban on soup, and Despereaux and the princess remain the best of friends.

**How does the solution of the conflict affect each individual character? (10d)**

Roscuro at first does not believe the sincerity of the princess’s offer of soup, saying, “don’t torment me” (264). But her promise convinces him, and he accepts the forgiveness offered. The effect of this forgiveness on the princess is linked to Despereaux’s episode with his father: “I think, reader, that she was feeling the same thing that Despereaux had felt when he was faced with his father...She would never like the rat, but she knew what she must do to save her own heart” (264).

**Does the resolution offer any particular perspective or understanding of the story’s themes? (10f)**

The way that mercy and forgiveness, as opposed to violence and revenge, resolves the conflict really points to the heart of DiCamillo’s theme: forgiveness triumphs over revenge, and darkness cannot overcome the light—though it often, paradoxically, engenders and emphasizes the light’s presence (chiaroscuro). These are two central examples, but you might discuss courage, non-conformity, hope, and empathy as other thematic possibilities.

**NOTES:**

---

---

---

---





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



*The following questions are drawn from the “Theme” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, page 87 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.*

## **What does the protagonist learn? (11)**

Despereaux learns about courage, bravery, and the importance of forgetting what other people think about him—his peers, especially. When he demands repentance from the mouse-council, who, of course, refuse him, he remarks that it no longer mattered what they thought of him. It is this knowledge that truly enables Despereaux to have forgiveness for his father. Similarly, his newfound confidence leads him to question whether killing Roscuro will actually fix the darkness. Despereaux’s story is a sort of coming-of-age. Through his experience, Despereaux learns that forgiveness and empathy are the only ways to truly combat darkness and evil.

The princess comes to similar maturity in the climax of the story, learning as Despereaux does that revenge and hatred do not solve the problem of darkness, but rather spread it in oneself.

## **Is he ennobled? (11c)**

Despereaux is ennobled by his choice to brave the darkness of the dungeon to save the princess. He additionally gains honors from the princess and the king, being responsible for the princess’s return, which sparks the reinstatement of soup to the kingdom. On a deeper level, readers look to Despereaux’s empathy and ability to truly fight against the darkness as marks of his noble heart.

Rather than give into the hatred and hurt that controls Roscuro, Despereaux is able to forgive, forget, and have mercy. These are all the marks of a noble knight. This is a good opportunity to discuss the nature of nobility and also to point out that one’s size does not dictate the courage of one’s heart. The theme that bravery, courage, and hope can come from the smallest of people, runs throughout the novel.

## **What do other characters learn? (12)**

The princess learns like Despereaux that forgiveness is more powerful than bitterness, and that only through mercy can she save herself and Roscuro. Roscuro, for his part, is called back to the light. When the princess extends forgiveness and mercy to him, the darkness brought on by the hurt inside him is healed and replaced with light. Roscuro finds the strength to accept mercy and abandon his dark purposes.





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



The following questions are drawn from the “Literary Devices” section of the Socratic List, found in Appendix A, pages 88-90 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus.

**Does repetition play a role in the story?**

**Does the author use sound words to tell her story? (14a)**

*Onomatopoeia*: “The drumbeat continued. Boom, Boom, Boom. Boom, Boom, Boom” (65).

**Does the author use common words and phrases in uncommon ways? (15)**

*Understatement*: “The discussed clout to the ear was always delivered... delivered, I am afraid, with a great deal of enthusiasm on Uncle’s part and received with absolutely no enthusiasm at all on the part of Mig” (129).

*Direct Address*: “Reader, do you believe there is such a thing as happily ever after?” (58)

**Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader’s mind? (16)**

*Imagery*: “The darkness had a physical presence as if it were a being all its own” (75).

*Personification*: “...the name of his beloved was immediately swallowed up by the darkness” (74).

**Does the author provide any clues early in the story of things to come in the plot? (17a)**

*Foreshadowing*: “If the rat had not looked over his shoulder, perhaps his heart would not have been broken. And it is possible, then, that I would not have a story to tell. But, reader, he did look” (113).

**Does the author use any objects, persons, pictures, or things to represent an idea in the story? (17i)**

DiCamillo uses *symbolism* to great effect in this story. Her chief symbols are Light, Darkness, and Soup. She uses the imagery of the light and the darkness to represent the struggle between goodness, courage, forgiveness, and mercy against bitterness, hatred, jealousy, and revenge. Additionally, soup becomes so associated with the good times of the kingdom of Dor that it becomes a symbol of peace, goodness, hope, and health.

**NOTES:**

---

---

---





# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



*Hints for effective writing assignments can be found on pages 73-74 of the Teaching the Classics syllabus and Chapter 6 of Reading Roadmaps.*

1. How does Despereaux save the princess?
2. Why does Despereaux's physically small and odd appearance matter to the substance of the story's themes?
3. Throughout the story, DiCamillo uses light and dark imagery as symbols. What do these symbols represent, and how do they illustrate the story's theme?
4. What does Roscuro want? What opposes him? Does he get what he wants—why or why not?
5. What is the role of soup in this story? What does it do literally in the plot, and how does it come to represent the story's themes?



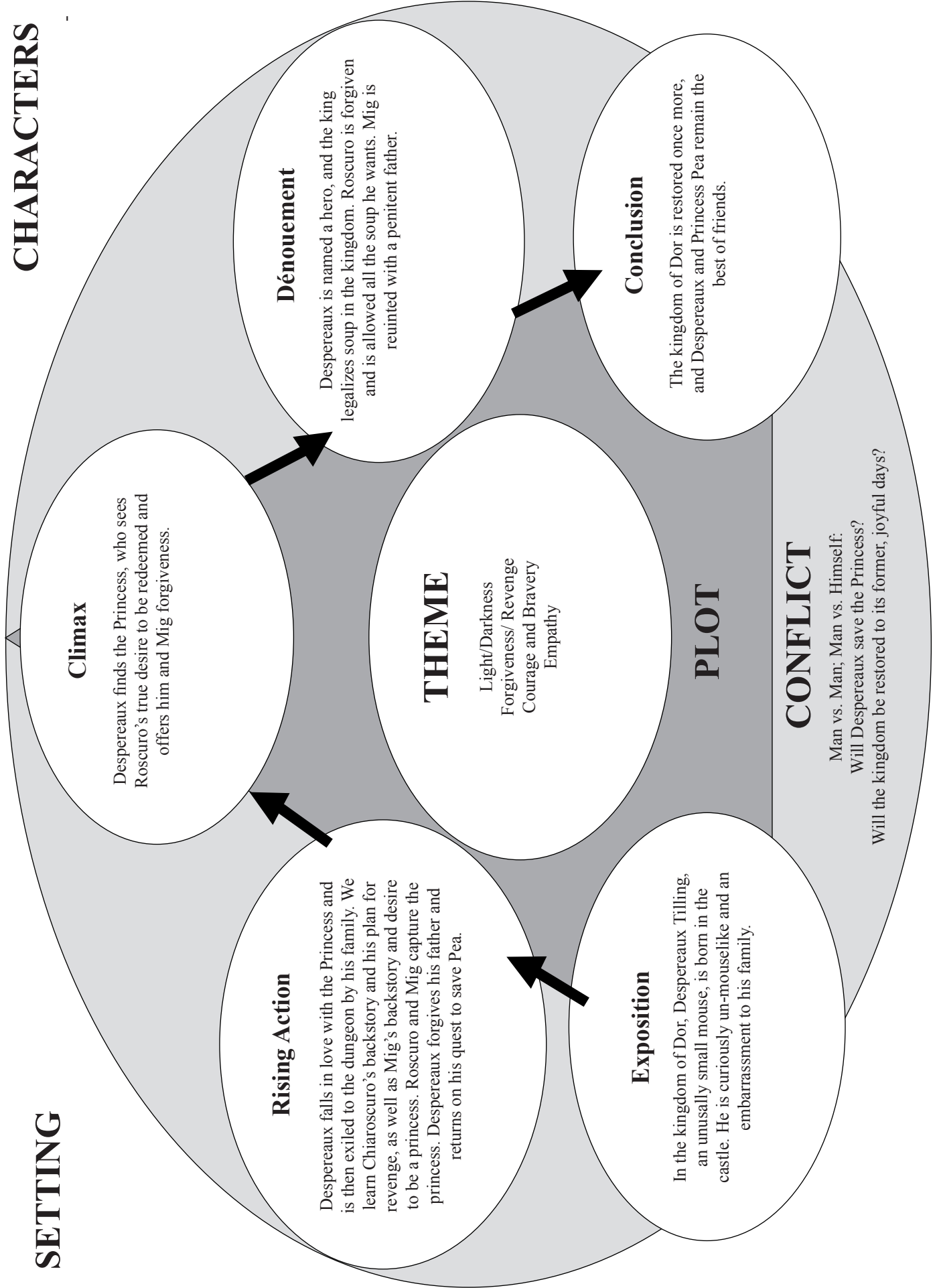
# STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central conflict. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected—even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

# Story Chart: *The Tale of Despereaux*



# Story Chart: *The Tale of Despereaux*

**SETTING**

**CHARACTERS**

