

Good Grief: Emotional Symbolism in Kate DiCamillo's *The Tiger Rising*

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### Good Grief: Emotional Symbolism in Kate DiCamillo's *The Tiger Rising*

On a fateful day in Florida, Rob Horton finds a tiger in the woods. This discovery of a golden tiger in a grey wood begins a journey of emotional growth for Rob and the characters of *The Tiger Rising*, by Kate DiCamillo. Rob's mother has passed away, leaving Rob and his father depressed and suppressing their grief. At school, Rob's new-found friend Sistine copes with her own suppression through dysfunctional anger. The housekeeper, Willie May, guides and advises the children as they deal with their emotions. As these characters encounter the tiger, each responds in a different way. When Willie May shares the story of releasing her pet bird, Cricket, the idea of the bird enters the story, adding another layer of potential reaction and response from the characters. These two animals—the tiger and the bird—become emotional symbols. Each character's interaction with the animals corresponds to subsequent interactions with his or her own feelings. The struggle between suppression and emotional freedom is at the core of this symbolism. Because the animals appear in cages and in the wild, the characters struggle with the idea of caging or freeing their own emotions. In the end, the release of the animals leads to the subsequent release of suppression in the characters' emotional lives.

#### **Rob**

Rob is the main character of the book. After the death of his mother, his father moved them from Jacksonville to Lister, Florida, in an attempt to forget their pain. At the beginning of the book, he lives at the Kentucky Star Motel, helping his father take care of the grounds. Rob's emotional state for most of the book is characterized by intense suppression, which has led to depression and somatization. These problems in Rob's emotional health become clear in his interaction with the tiger.

Rob's suppression is apparent from the first chapter of the book. Michael Lawler suggests that many people struggle with repression—the unconscious reaction of burying certain thoughts, emotions, or memories—during the grieving process (201). However, Rob's treatment of his emotions is deeper and more aggressive than repression. While repression instinctively buries emotions and thoughts, suppression purposefully ignores them (Lawler 201), which is exactly what Rob does. He has his own conscious and intentional coping mechanisms to help him suppress thoughts of his mother: "Rob had a way of not-thinking about things. He imagined himself as a suitcase that was too full . . . He made all his feelings go inside the suitcase; he stuffed them in tight and then sat on the suitcase and locked it shut. That was the way he not-thought about things" (DiCamillo 4). Rob learns this coping mechanism from his father, who practically forces suppression upon him. When Rob expresses his grief in tears at his mother's funeral, his father slaps him, stating, "There ain't no point in crying . . . Crying ain't going to bring her back" (DiCamillo 4). From this point on, Rob does not allow himself to cry, wish, or think about his mother. Such aggressive suppression is alarming in such a young boy. Therapist Leslie Greenberg, however, sees these sorts of reactions as strategies for "blocking emotions" and sees them as "survival efforts and attempts to enhance coping" (Greenberg 162). These suppressive techniques help Rob cope with daily life. After all, he has no one willing to work through his grief with him and no emotional education to fall back on. For the time being, Rob's only way to remain functional and sane is to suppress the grief of his mother's death.

Nevertheless, Rob's behavior and thought processes exhibit alarming signs of childhood depression. Depressed children have "[c]ontinuous feelings of sadness or hopelessness" ("Depression in Children"), which describes Rob's feelings for much of the book. They also tend to struggle with social withdrawal ("Depression in Children"). Rob deals with bullying, which

could be either a cause or a symptom of his isolation. However, he certainly tends toward withdrawal, as seen in his excitement when the principal tells him not to come to school for a few days: at the prospect of staying home and avoiding his classmates, Rob declares that he is “free” (DiCamillo 17). Studies suggest that this eagerness to withdraw, specifically from school, is a symptom commonly associated with adolescent depression (Thapar et al. 255). It seems that Rob’s overall emotional and behavioral state tends toward depression.

The rash on Rob’s legs, which bothers him throughout the novel, is most likely connected to his depression. Sometimes, depressed children have “[p]hysical complaints . . . that don’t respond to treatment” (“Depression in Children”). Medically, this condition is called “somatization.”

A ‘somatizer’ is defined as a patient who complains of bodily symptoms which cannot be explained by the degree of organic pathology present . . . Somatizers most frequently complain of painful sensations, head and neck pressures, and a variety of other discomforting sensations that are felt by the patient to be physical in origin despite the absence of demonstrable organic pathology on repeated objective studies such as physical examination, laboratory testing, X-rays, etc. (Shipko 195)

Rob suffers from a seemingly incurable rash on both of his legs. The interaction between Rob and Mr. Phelmer indicates that doctor’s visits and medications are ineffective:

“Have you been using that medicine you told me about? The stuff that doctor in Jacksonville gave you? Have you been putting that on?”

“Yes, sir,” said Rob . . . [H]e knew something Mr. Phelmer did not know. He knew that his legs would never clear up. (DiCamillo 16-17)

Despite the physical nature of the malady, physical medications have no effect. Rob seems certain that his rash is incurable. However, the motel's cleaning lady, Willie May, has a different diagnosis: "You keeping all that sadness down low, in your legs. You not letting it get up to your heart, where it belongs. You got to let that sadness rise on up" (DiCamillo 37). Willie May's prophetic advice aligns with the results of studies done on somatization. Modern medicine has made the connection between somatization and a condition known as alexithymia: one study states that somatizers "showed a marked difficulty in finding appropriate words for describing feelings. In addition, alexithymics gave endless complaints of physical symptoms" (Shipko 193). Since he seems to have difficulty naming his feelings, Rob might suffer from alexithymia: for instance, at one point it takes him several minutes to remember the feeling—and then the name—of happiness (DiCamillo 52-53). Since he is not used to feeling his emotions, it is naturally difficult for him to identify them. Interestingly, strong emotions or emotional situations often cause Rob's legs to itch (DiCamillo 44, 52, 100). In a particularly significant instance, when Sistine tells him she hates him, he never names the feeling that he has. Rather, he considers his physical response: "He felt [her words] on his skin like shards of broken glass. He was afraid to move. He was afraid of how deep they might go inside him . . . Rob shrugged. He bent and scratched his legs as hard as he could. He scratched and scratched, digging his nails in deep, trying to get to the bottom of the itch that was always there" (100-101). Whatever nameless emotion he feels in this scene manifests itself in the itch in his legs, suggesting a strong connection between his alexithymia and somatization.

Rob's response to the discovery of the tiger corresponds to his emotional state. One of his defining responses to the tiger is wonder: at the first encounter, Rob has difficulty believing the reality, thinking of it as "a magic trick" (DiCamillo 2). This reaction is consistent with Rob's

interaction with deep emotion. When he begins to tell Sistine the truth about his mother, he refers to words like “Caroline” and “cancer”—words that call up the grief he has suppressed so long—as “magic words” (DiCamillo 78). Like the tiger, deep emotion causes a sort of wonder in Rob. Throughout the book, Rob is nearly obsessed with the tiger, thinking about it constantly: almost as constantly as he “not-thinks” about his mother. In fact, he has a mental image of the tiger sitting on the “not-thinking” suitcase to keep it closed, which introduces a tension in the symbol that continues throughout the book: though the tiger often seems to symbolize raw emotion (and though the characters often respond to it as they respond to their emotions), it sometimes also acts like a symbol of suppression, as in this case. Either way, Rob’s constant wonder at the tiger reflects his constant (though often suppressed) wonder at his own grief, as well as the grief of others. Moreover, he wants to choose “the right person to tell” (DiCamillo 38) about the tiger: someone who will believe him and be as fascinated as he is. This desire points to his need to be understood by someone who values and wonders at deep emotion.

Parallel to Rob’s wonder is his fear of the tiger. He seems to have some healthy fear of the tiger as a wild animal, though he is consistently haunted by the idea that the tiger might not exist. At one point, the rain keeps Rob indoors, and he is relieved, wondering, “What if he went looking for the tiger and he was not there?” (DiCamillo 28). Rob is also terrified of letting the tiger go. He is thankful when Willie May advocates for allowing the tiger to stay caged (DiCamillo 99). This feeling is comparable to his relief when Willie May does not have a “real” cure for his legs (DiCamillo 37): he does not want to cure his legs or take the necessary steps to do so. His fear of facing the tiger wild and uncaged mirrors his fear of facing his own emotions. He feels safe with the tiger behind bars, where he can wonder at it in relative security, but to release the tiger—symbolic of his own emotions—is too dangerous and unpredictable to risk.

Before he can let the tiger go, Rob has to find the motivation to overcome his fear. By the end of the story, he seems to feel safe in his relationships, which in turn gives him the security to let go of the tiger and his own emotions. Throughout the book, he builds enough trust with Willie May and with Sistine to show them the tiger, to open his suitcase, and to share his “magic words” (78). With their help, he makes the connection between his sadness and the tiger at a pivotal point in the book:

As they walked back to the Kentucky Star, Rob thought about what Willie May had said about the tiger rising on up. It reminded him of what she had said about his sadness needing to rise up. And when he thought about the two things together, the tiger and his sadness, the truth circled over and above him and then came and landed lightly on his shoulder. He knew what he had to do. (DiCamillo 101)

Rob consciously suppresses his sadness, and when he decides to release the tiger, it seems that he symbolically decides to release his sadness as well. He surrenders his coping mechanisms. He is willing to do what Leslie Greenberg calls “falling apart” (162). Rob has seen Sistine fall apart when she sobs outside the tiger’s cage (DiCamillo 80), and perhaps this provided an example for him of letting his emotions show in front of others. Sistine, in any case, is the most obvious reason that he’s freeing the tiger: “He reached into his pocket and pulled out the keys and held them in front of [Sistine], proudly . . . ‘I’m going to do it,’ he said. ‘I’m going to do it for you’” (DiCamillo 103). He’s willing, now, to risk the things he has run away from for so long. Rob is forming relationships that matter more than his fears.

When he lets the tiger out, anger is one of Rob’s first reactions. His first bout of rage comes up without much apparent cause. Though the door to the cage stands open, the tiger does not leave, prompting an aggressive response from Rob: “‘Go on!’ Rob shouted, suddenly furious.



He shook the cage harder. He yelled. He put his head back and howled, and he saw that the sky above them was thick with clouds, and that made him even angrier. He yelled louder; he shouted at the dark sky. He shook the cage as hard as he could” (DiCamillo 107). This anger probably stems from Rob’s depression; he has kept his feelings suppressed for so long that now they are flooding out, even without much causation. Chip Dodd explains in his book, *The Voice of the Heart*, that “depression is the nonexposure experience. It keeps our passions at bay so that we don’t expose the wishes revealed in our vulnerability . . . depression is directly related to avoided anger, which takes us away from dealing with deeper sadness, loneliness, hurt, or fear” (Dodd 84). The release of his suppression allows Rob to break through his depression and feel, first and foremost, the anger that he’s been avoiding. The next bout of anger he experiences has a powerful cause: when he sees that his father has killed the tiger, “he felt something rise up in him, an anger as big and powerful as the tiger” (DiCamillo 110). This time, his anger leads to action, which Dodd again addresses in his book: “Anger helps us pursue full life by exposing the substance, desires, and commitments of our hearts. Anger works to enhance relationships by building bridges of intimacy with others” (Dodd 79). Although his anger comes out almost violently, it provides the only honest and meaningful connection he has had with his father since his mother’s death: “Rob . . . opened his suitcase. And the words sprang out of it, coiled and explosive. ‘I wish it had been you!’ he screamed. ‘I wish it had been you that died! I hate you! You ain’t the one I need. I need her! I need her!’” (DiCamillo 111). In this outburst, he is able to admit what he really wants and needs, at the same time admitting how he feels hurt by his father’s neglect. Anger is what allows Rob to break through to his own emotions and, therefore, to his own healing.

Rob experiences profound emotional healing at the release and subsequent death of the tiger. He is able to let go of his suppression and, therefore, the emotions he has pushed down for so long. At the funeral of the tiger, Rob can find a closure he never had at his mother's funeral: he is allowed to grieve, to touch the body, to cry (DiCamillo 114). In showing his sadness, he also accepts how much his mother really meant to him. Dodd explains this experience in *The Voice of the Heart*:

Sadness is the feeling that speaks to how much you value what is missed, what is gone, and what is lost. It also speaks of how deeply you value what you love, what you have, and what you live . . . Sadness speaks directly to our need to grieve for what is gone. If we grieve genuinely, we eventually come to accept life on life's terms. (69-70)

Because of his previous inability to feel his sadness, Rob never truly admitted how much his mother meant to him or how deeply her death affected him. Now, however, Rob tearfully confesses, "I need her" (DiCamillo 112) and lets himself experience the full range of emotion that accompanies that confession. At the funeral, he connects with his father: "Rob leaned into his father, and it felt, for a minute, like his father leaned back" (DiCamillo 116). This interaction is profoundly different than at his mother's funeral, when his father refused to enter into any vulnerability or intimacy. Rob also watches the sun "[show] up in time for another funeral" (DiCamillo 117), like his mother's, but this time it "danced and flickered on his arm" (117) rather than being "so sunshiny that it hurt his eyes" (32). The language surrounding the sun is now benevolent, even playful, rather than painful. The funeral, therefore, further cements the emotional healing that Rob experiences at the death of the tiger.

### **Sistine**

Rob meets Sistine at school, where she is initially aggressive and withdrawn. As the book carries on, however, the two learn to trust each other and become friends. Though Sistine's emotional state is characterized by some instances of suppression, she exhibits much more emotional openness than Rob. Initially, Rob's comparison of Sistine to the tiger reveals her emotional health, and later her direct interactions with the tiger deepen this revelation.

An important aspect of Sistine's emotional openness is her anger. From the moment Sistine appears in the book, she talks consistently about her father's abandonment as well as the things she hates about the town or the people around her (DiCamillo 11-12). In her interactions with the other children in the school, Sistine is violent and aggressive. She even tells Rob, "I want to get in fights . . . I want to hit them back. Sometimes, I hit them first" (DiCamillo 94). Though Sistine does exhibit dysfunctional rage, as in this example, her anger nevertheless allows her to open up to the people around her (Dodd 79). Upon meeting Sistine, no one needs to wonder what matters to her or what she is passionate about. She is furiously open about her life and her feelings from the moment she sets foot in Lister, Florida.

Sistine's openness to life also manifests in her appreciation of beauty. She loves to admire and wonder at things. This appreciation first appears when Rob shows her his carvings. Though Rob expects a dismissive or angry response, Sistine surprises him by admiring his work in a voice that "sound[s] different, lighter" (DiCamillo 44) and is "full of wonder" (DiCamillo 45). Sistine shows this same love of beauty when she discusses the Sistine Chapel and what it looked like when her parents took her there "[w]hen they were still in love" (DiCamillo 58). In response to Rob's questions, Sistine declares that the Chapel is better than pictures: "It's like—I don't know—it's like looking at fireworks, kind of" (DiCamillo 58). She cannot exactly verbalize the feelings the Sistine Chapel gives her, but her appreciation of it is clear. This open-

hearted, breathy wonder is surprising coming from Sistine, who is notoriously angry and aggressive. However, it fits with her wild, open-hearted approach to life: she is not afraid to feel and experience life fully. The depth of her anger at the bad things in her life is matched by her appreciation of the beautiful things.

Sistine takes this same bold approach in her relationships. As discussed before, she is clear about who she is from the very beginning. In addition, once another person proves his or her loyalty—as Rob does when he tries to stop the other children from bullying her—Sistine pursues honest and open relationship without hesitation. With Rob, for instance, she insists that he trust her as she has trusted him. When he is reticent to reveal any information about his mother, Sistine responds, “You don’t know how to talk to people. I told you about my father and my mother and Bridgette, and you didn’t say anything. You won’t even tell me about your mother” (DiCamillo 48). Though this approach is forceful, it shows how much Sistine values transparency in relationships. She is not interested in being friends without being vulnerable and open. When Rob does tell her that his “mama’s dead” (DiCamillo 49), Sistine “gives a quick, professional nod of her head” and—significantly—“[steps] toward him” (DiCamillo 49). She is fully willing to resume intimacy as soon as the other person shows his interest. In addition to pressing for intimacy, however, Sistine truly realizes others’ value. When she sees Rob’s carvings, she declares, “You’re a sculptor . . . You’re an artist” (DiCamillo 44). Likewise, when she receives wise advice from Willie May, she calls her “a prophetess” (DiCamillo 84). This ability to recognize the talents and value of others, along with her intense desire for intimacy, shows Sistine’s deep care for the relationships in her life.

Despite her openness in these areas, Sistine still deals with a significant amount of suppression, especially when it comes to her parents. Though she is open about the situation with

her father, she nevertheless denies the most painful part: that he is not coming back for her. She continually tells the people around her, “My father is coming to get me” (DiCamillo 12). She expects her father to take her away from the South, which she hates “because the people in it are ignorant” (DiCamillo 11), and she declares that when he comes, “[h]e’ll set this tiger free” (100). Apparently, Sistine sees her father as a form of escape, a figure who will save her from her situation and fix the problems she’s facing. When people challenge this fierce belief, Sistine invariably calls them liars (DiCamillo 61, 100). In reality, she is lying to herself, telling herself a story that she knows is not true: after all, she later admits, “He’s not coming to get me” (DiCamillo 105). She uses this story as a coping mechanism to suppress a truth that is too painful for her to face at the moment.

As she suppresses her pain by seeing her father as a sort of savior, Sistine also villainizes her mother. Studies show that stress in such a tumultuous mother-daughter relationship is natural, as divorce and parental conflict often cause strain in child-parent interactions (Amato and Cheadle 1141). Because her mother is the parent who is present, and because Sistine is relying on her perception of her father to soothe her pain, Sistine focuses her aggression on her mother. In fact, Sistine might have learned her aggressive and accusatory behavior from her mother. Amato and Cheadle explain that “through modeling verbal or physical aggression, parents ‘teach’ their children that disagreements are resolved through conflict rather than calm discussion” (1141-1142). This parroting of behavior is clear in Sistine’s interactions with her mother: when her mother references “Her father, the liar,” Sistine immediately lashes out with the exact same wording, declaring, “You’re the liar” (DiCamillo 61). In this brief interaction, her mother’s tendency to blame others is clear; this trait carries on to Sistine, who often lashes out at others instead of facing her own pain.

With two highly uncertain and strained parental relationships, Sistine is probably coping with insecure attachment issues. Konishi and Hymel explain that unreliable parental figures often affect a child's view of self and others, resulting in "a model of self as unloved and rejected and/or a model of others as unloving and rejecting" (54). These beliefs can lead to behavior issues and dysfunctional anger (54), both of which Sistine experiences. She idolizes her father, who left her and her mother for another woman, and she villainizes her mother, who is understandably disgruntled and resentful. Most likely, Sistine feels trapped and hopeless, and she copes with these feelings through denial and anger. In the midst of this, Willie May gives her diagnosis, which seems both brutal and crucial: "Ain't nobody going to come and rescue you . . . You got to rescue yourself" (DiCamillo 84). With this advice, Willie May attempts to break through Sistine's denial about her own insecure attachment to both of her parents. She encourages Sistine to face the reality she knows to be true: that she cannot fully blame her mother or fully rely on her father.

Because of her intensity and passion, Sistine is directly compared to the tiger, unlike any other character in the book. Rob continually connects Sistine to the tiger, beginning with a dream. In this dream, Rob is standing in the forest, and the tiger, with Sistine on its back, runs past him "deeper and deeper into the woods" (DiCamillo 30). In some cultures, "[t]o 'ride a tiger' symbolizes to encounter and confront dangerous and elemental forces" (*Illustrated Encyclopedia* 173). Sistine's willingness to confront danger is clear throughout the book. She is eager to fight the other children at school, eager to release the tiger from the cage, and—most threatening to Rob—eager to connect to her own and others' emotions. This emotional aspect taps into an "elemental" and even fantastical vein in the book. Rob seems to sense an inexplicable attraction or force in Sistine: "Every secret, magic word he had ever known—*tiger*

and *cancer* and *Caroline*—every word in his suitcase seemed to fall right out of him when he stood before Sistine” (DiCamillo 78). Like a magnet, she pulls his emotions out of him, causing him to see in her a magical element. This is comparable to Rob’s description of the tiger as “a magic trick” (2) earlier in the book. In Rob’s mind, Sistine and the tiger are intensely connected because of their magical, dangerous attributes.

Perhaps the more obvious connection between Sistine and the tiger is her fierceness and anger. Rob compares the “fierce light” (75) of the tiger’s eyes to Sistine’s. *The Dictionary of Symbols* states, “Generally speaking, the tiger conjures up notions of strength and savagery . . . As a hunting-creature, it is . . . a symbol of the warrior caste” (1007). Sistine clearly reflects the tiger in these ways. Her anger is strong and aggressive, and she fights in situations when Rob runs (DiCamillo 20-21). His comparison of this girl he cannot understand to the majestically fierce tiger, therefore, makes sense.

Sistine’s own response to the tiger is, initially, similar to Rob’s: wonder. Her awe, however, is not tempered by disbelief like Rob’s. When Rob first sees the tiger, “he was afraid that the tiger would disappear,” and “the whole way home . . . his brain doubted what he had seen” (DiCamillo 2). When Sistine first hears of the tiger, however, her response contains no doubt whatsoever: she simply asks, “Where?” (DiCamillo 42). This reaction further illustrates Sistine’s openness to life. On first seeing the tiger, her response is similar to when she saw Rob’s carvings: “Oh . . . He’s beautiful” (DiCamillo 50). Sistine then recites the poem “The Tyger” by William Blake: “Tyger, tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night” (1-2). This poem marvels at the cruelty, fierceness, and beauty of the tiger, and some critics claim that it attributes “divine and noble qualities” (Baine 566) to the tiger. The language connected to Sistine’s response to the tiger is wonderful, bordering on the fantastical and religious. Her wonderful

attitude continues until after the tiger's death, when Sistine declares, "He was the prettiest thing I've ever seen" (DiCamillo 113). She is awed by the tiger without fearing him, much like her response to emotion.

Her lack of fear for the tiger drives Sistine to desire closeness to it. She comes close to the cage while Rob stands back and warns her (DiCamillo 50); she is eager to "go see the tiger" whenever possible (78); even after its death, she strokes its fur and encourages Rob to "go ahead and touch him" (113). All of these interactions are consistent with Sistine's open-hearted desire to experience life, to be as close to it as possible, and to run with her emotions when they come.

Her last response to the tiger is anger, not at him, but at his situation. The injustice of the cage infuriates her: she nearly shouts at Rob, "What's he doing out here?" (DiCamillo 113). Her anger drives her to a correct moral response: action (Dodd 82). Because of her anger, she knows that the situation is unjust and wants it set right. Her reaction starkly contrasts Rob's: because of his inability to face his anger, Rob has no desire to let the tiger go. Sistine, on the other hand, allows herself to feel her anger, which in turn allows her to fully grasp the need for action.

Though Sistine is determined, from the beginning, to let the tiger go, her determination belies her suppression. She declares, "You can't stop me from letting this tiger go. I'll do it without the keys. I'll saw the locks off myself" (DiCamillo 79). In fact, Sistine knows that she is helpless to save the tiger, but she refuses to accept this: after her tough declarations, she rattles the cage, beats her head against it, and begins to sob. This display of emotion indicates that she realizes she can't let the tiger go but also cannot bear her own helplessness. Perhaps she feels that the tiger's trapped situation represents her own, hence her refusal to accept it. She reverts to relying on her father to come back and fix the situation: "I can't wait for my dad to come and get me. When he gets here, I'm going to make him come out here and set this tiger free. That's the



first thing we'll do" (DiCamillo 79). Though she is determined to feel her emotions, Sistine won't admit her helplessness in terms of her relationships. She can do nothing, but she cannot bring herself to face that fact.

As they begin to release the tiger, Sistine admits—for the first time—the most painful truth she knows: "I don't want to talk about my father . . . He's not coming to get me" (DiCamillo 105). Before, Sistine could not stop talking about her father, but now she begins to release her suppressed anger and frustration. She begins to let go of her father. Now, she exhibits an ability to have intimacy without dysfunctional anger. In apologizing to Rob, she is even gentle: "I didn't mean what I said before, about you being a sissy. And I don't hate you. You're my best friend" (DiCamillo 117). She is still the same Sistine—honest and heart-felt—but now her last walls have fallen, parallel with the release and death of the tiger.

### **Willie May**

Willie May, the housekeeper at the motel, is the only character in the book whose emotional state is not characterized by suppression. Her wisdom and openness draw Rob to form an almost familial bond with her, and he relies on her for advice and comfort. Because of her emotional openness at the beginning of the book, Willie May does not change significantly after the release of the tiger, but her interactions with the tiger nevertheless reveal her emotional state.

Certainly, Willie May experiences an amount of healthy anger. Her situation and past anger her, but they have not driven her into hiding. When she sees a bad situation, she is honest about it. She tells Rob, "Ain't nobody wants this job. I'm the only fool Beauchamp can pay to do it" (DiCamillo 36). Though she accepts her circumstances, she nonetheless admits her irritation. Similarly, when she sees Sistine, she declares, "I know you. You ain't got to introduce yourself to me. You angry. You got all the anger in the world inside you. I know angry when I meet it.

Been angry most of my life” (DiCamillo 82). Willie May’s anger differs from Sistine’s, however, in the way she wears it. Unlike Sistine, she bears no hostility toward others. Her interactions with the children are blunt but not unkind, and she never rages like Sistine. She neither runs from her anger nor uses it to hide from the truth, which allows her to pursue intimacy with others without aggression (Dodd 79). Overall, she provides a healthy picture of dealing with anger.

This honesty spills over into her interaction with her past. Like Sistine, she has trauma from her relationship with her father, but she does not hide from it. She talks about her father beating her simply and matter-of-factly: “I got beat by my daddy” (65). However, her openness further along in the conversation indicates that she feels pain at the memory of Cricket and her father. Rob asks if she ever saw the bird again, and she responds, “Nuh-uh . . . sometimes, he comes flying through my dreams, flitting about and singing” (65). This wistful statement reveals a vulnerable piece of Willie May’s inner life. It shows that her past is still painful to her. When Rob gives her the carved statue of Cricket (the bird her father beat her for releasing), she says, “[I]t soothes my heart, just the same” (DiCamillo 92). Even in her most painful remembrances, Willie May is open and vulnerable.

Willie May’s personal emotional honesty allows her to understand the emotions of others. She seems to have an incredibly high level of emotional intelligence. Scholars Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso describe a four-branch model of emotional intelligence, dividing it into “the ability to (a) perceive emotion, (b) use emotion to facilitate thoughts, (c) understand emotions, and (d) manage emotion” (199). Her ability to do the last—manage emotion—seems to allow her to do the other three well. This high level of emotional intelligence is most apparent when she diagnoses both Rob in his suppressed sadness (DiCamillo 37) and Sistine in her dysfunctional

anger (82). Whether vocally or mentally, both children deny the emotions with which she diagnoses them, but the truth of her words comes to light later. Because of her emotional intelligence, Willie May knows what is going on beneath the surface. When Rob starts asking about caged animals, “Willie May look[s] at him over the top of her glasses. She stare[s] at him hard” (DiCamillo 64). Intuitively, she knows that Rob is hiding something—a fact which, significantly, Rob’s father never picks up on. She can tell when people are being honest, when they are hiding things, and when they are suppressing emotions. When Sistine yells angrily at Rob, Willie May comforts him: “She don’t mean it . . . She don’t mean none of what she say right now” (DiCamillo 100). She truly does seem to be a sort of emotional “prophetess” (DiCamillo 84), as Sistine calls her. The comparison to Rob here is striking: after intuitively knowing that Beauchamp is scared and that Sistine’s father is not coming back, Rob thinks, “He must . . . know somewhere, deep inside him, more things than he had ever dreamed of” (DiCamillo 105). In this way, Rob is similar to Willie May, knowing things that people cannot even recognize about themselves. Rob, however, must discover this knowledge as it comes out of him reflexively, whereas Willie May walks in the power of her knowledge daily. Most likely, Willie May’s emotional intelligence is a result of her emotional openness, whereas Rob’s suppression denies him access to his emotional intelligence.

Willie May’s response to the tiger is foreshadowed by Rob’s feeling that she is someone who is “capable of believing in tigers” (DiCamillo 38). He knows that she will not doubt him. Nor does she. Immediately, she responds to Rob with full and undoubting belief: “Do Jesus! . . . Why don’t you all show me where you got this tiger locked up in a cage?” (DiCamillo 97). If the tiger represents emotion, Willie May’s readiness to believe in the tiger corresponds to her ability to feel and experience emotions openly: as shown when she expresses her anger at her job (36)

or her sadness at losing Cricket (65). She makes no attempt to suppress them, much as she makes no attempt to deny the existence of a tiger in the woods of Lister, Florida. When she sees the tiger, she attributes its fierceness to an act of God: “Ain’t no reason to doubt the fierceness of God when He make something like that” (DiCamillo 98). Her reaction is reminiscent of Sistine’s breathless recitation of Blake’s poem, which is thick with religious allusion and language. Like Willie May, the poem attributes the tiger’s fierceness directly to God: “What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (Blake 3-4). Willie May’s wonder, then, seems directly connected to her capacity for belief, whether in the possibility of a tiger in the woods or in a Creator God.

Willie May also feels anger at the tiger’s captivity. She asks, “Who was the fool who caged this tiger up?” (DiCamillo 98). Her use of the word “fool” signals her anger here, as it does earlier in the book (36). It is apparent that she thinks whoever caged the tiger is not only senseless but in the wrong. Moreover, she seems to be disillusioned with the idea of morality. In response to Sistine’s desire for justice, Willie May mutters, “Right ain’t got nothing to do with it . . . Sometimes right don’t count” (DiCamillo 99). She sees clearly the injustice of the situation and allows it to anger her, and her anger is compounded by the helplessness she feels.

Rather than rail against the cage, however, Willie May accepts the situation she faces, which is probably the most striking difference between her anger in this scene and Sistine’s. Whereas Sistine’s helplessness fuels her anger and her rage, Willie May’s helplessness drives her to open acceptance of the situation. She recognizes both that the situation is unjust and that she cannot change it. She tells the children, “And the truth is: there ain’t nothing you can do for this tiger except to let it be” (DiCamillo 99). This philosophy of acceptance is consistent with how Willie May deals with her emotional life: she acknowledges her feelings, and she lets them be.

There is one difficulty in analyzing Willie May's response to the tiger: according to the emotional symbolism, Willie May's response should be to let the tiger go, since her advice to the children has been to let their emotions "rise on up" (DiCamillo 37). All allegories are inconsistent at some point, however, and Willie May's response is consistent with her role as a wise adult who would not want a hungry tiger roaming free in the woods with the children, as well as with the philosophy of acceptance she lives by in other areas of her life.

Willie May is the only character who shows no significant change after the tiger's release—probably due to her emotional openness and intelligence beforehand. Whereas each other character has significant emotional blockages to overcome, Willie May is in touch with her emotions through the entirety of the story and, therefore, remains a static character even after they let the tiger go. In a small detail that might signify some change, she puts the statue of Cricket in the grave of the tiger (DiCamillo 116). Since Cricket is representative of a painful memory, perhaps this burial signifies that Willie May is letting go of some of her past. Regardless, it results in no noticeable change in character, which is perhaps the point: even the most emotionally mature character in the book is still letting go of the pain of her memories, still learning to heal emotionally. Though she has much less foundational emotional work to do, Willie May is still on a journey.

### **Rob's Father**

Rob's father is perhaps the most complex character in the book. While his emotional state is clear, his interactions with the tiger and the consequent symbolism are confusing and seemingly contradictory. However, a close reading suggests that his violent reaction to the tiger corresponds to his emotional health, while at the same time signifying the death of his suppression.

Rob's father's emotional state is characterized by the same suppression that Rob exhibits, a similarity that is apparent in his interaction with his son. He refuses to let Rob cry (DiCamillo 3, 66), and he never talks about his wife (DiCamillo 59). Tragically, his suppression of his own grief is so aggressive that he forces it onto his son. Studies have shown that depression in a parent leads to greater risk of depression in the child or adolescent (292), and that is exactly what is happening here. Because Rob's father refuses to face his own sadness, he cannot cope with Rob's. His denial leads to increased suppression, and therefore depression, in both of them. When he slips and accidentally reminds himself of his wife, he chastises himself and cuts off the memory: "[Rob's] father started to whistle 'Mining for Gold.' It was a sad song he used to sing with Rob's mother . . . His father must have remembered, too, because he stopped halfway through the song and shook his head and cursed softly under his breath" (DiCamillo 34). His suppression of the memory of his wife is so intentional that it seems likely that he has his own "suitcase," as Rob does. In a desperate attempt to avoid pain, he refuses to face the memory of her and therefore refuses to grieve her death.

This dogged suppression results in a poor adjustment as Rob's only remaining parent, which leads to difficulties for both of them. Clearly, Rob's father models grieving very poorly for his son. Parental modeling is crucial in the grieving process: "Studies have shown that positive adjustment by the caregiver is strongly related to positive adjustment by the child" (Hope and Hodge 109). Because of his own inability to cope with his wife's death, however, Rob's father is entirely unable to help his son through this process. As a result, both live in a constant state of emotional suppression. One of the most critical factors—and, in this case, most critical failures—of parental guidance in grief is communication. Research suggests that open and honest communication between parent and child significantly reduces the chance of

depression and anxiety on the part of the child (Hope and Hodge 109). Rob's father refuses to provide this resource for his son, however, and exhibits hostility toward any attempt to remember his wife. This poor adjustment makes the grieving process harder and more complicated for both of them.

In addition, Rob's father increases the difficulty of the grieving process by changing nearly everything about their lifestyle. Studies suggest that, after the death of a parent, "the more changes occur, the greater the risk of future problems for the child" (Doran 396). It is best for the child to have the continuity of a familiar lifestyle to be able to adjust after parental death. Rob's father, however, moves them both from Jacksonville to Lister, resulting in a new school for Rob, a new job for his father, and a new town for both of them. Rob sums up this decision when he tells Sistine, "My dad says it don't do no good to talk about it. He says she's gone and she ain't coming back. That's why we moved here from Jacksonville. Because everybody always wanted to talk about her. We moved down here to get on with things" (DiCamillo 59). The tragic irony, however, is that the move away from their hometown and the memory of the mother makes it more difficult for them to "get on with things" (59). This unfortunate decision, however, is apparently common in grieving families, especially when the mother has died: fathers have a more difficult time adjusting to the new emotional responsibilities (Doran 396). Rob's father certainly makes some crucial errors, inhibiting his son's grief.

The father's response to the tiger is revealing on a number of levels. Significantly, Rob never considers telling his father about the tiger, though he tells Willie May and Sistine. Rob's determination to only tell "the right person" (DiCamillo 38) indicates that he does not think his father will believe him. Probably, he is correct in his assumption. Like Willie May's emotional openness allows her to believe Rob, his father's active suppression would make it difficult for

him to accept the reality of Rob's tiger. In addition, his father never suspects that anything unusual is going on with Rob, whereas Willie May seems to know that something significant is happening as soon as Rob asks her about caged animals (DiCamillo 63-64). This blindness correlates to his father's emotional unawareness.

In their first actual interaction, Rob's father shoots the tiger. This violent reaction is profoundly consistent with his response to emotion elsewhere in the book, as seen when he slaps Rob to stop his crying (DiCamillo 3). Apparently, encountering emotion brings out a protective instinct in him. Physically, as when he shoots the tiger, this instinct is necessary to keep the people around him safe. However, emotionally, as when he slaps Rob, it is certainly misguided and harmful: the only person he protects is himself.

The killing of the tiger, however, seems to result in a symbolic death of suppression for both Rob and his father. For the first time, there is emotional openness and honesty between the father and son: after Rob says that his mother is the one he needs, his father responds, "I need her, too . . . But we don't got her. Neither one of us. What we got, all we got, is each other. And we got to learn to make do with that" (DiCamillo 110-113). Both are now able to admit their pain and work together, rather than against each other. Moreover, Rob's father becomes open to the idea of talking about and remembering his wife. Though he admits, "Saying her name pains me," he nevertheless tells Rob, "I'll say it for you . . . I'll try on account of you" (DiCamillo 119). The death of the tiger opens his eyes to his son's desperate need for connection in grief, and now he is prepared to go through the difficulties of mourning. Both of them learn to accept the good with the bad, as shown in Rob's reflection on his father's hands: "They were the hands that held the gun that shot the tiger. They were the hands that put the medicine on his legs. They were the hands that had held him when he cried. They were complicated hands, Rob thought"



(DiCamillo 120). Rob and his father are beginning to see that things can be both good and sad. This emotional honesty and healing, however, could only come about after the death of the tiger and, therefore, the symbolic death of suppression in the father-son relationship.

## **Bird**

### **Willie May**

Willie May's memory of Cricket introduces the symbol of the bird, which carries on throughout the book. This symbol is deeply connected to Willie May and her emotional state, as well as to her past. Through this story, Willie May reveals a slice of her childhood that may give some explanation for her present character.

She tells the story of freeing Cricket (DiCamillo 64), which is consistent with her own emotional freedom and openness. The story hints at pain and abuse in Willie May's childhood. Perhaps Cricket taught her how to grieve the pain she experienced, as the tiger did for the children. Traditionally, birds often represent the soul or spirit (*Illustrated Encyclopedia* 21), and the color green can be symbolic of childhood innocence (*Dictionary of Symbols* 451). Altogether, Willie May's release of the little green bird may represent her own loss of innocence as she experiences abuse and mistreatment at the hands of her father. On the other hand, her recovery of Cricket (in the form of Rob's carving) may represent her determination to maintain a free, innocent spirit, which she accomplishes through her emotional openness. Regardless, the statue of Cricket "soothes [her] heart" (DiCamillo 92). This story is foundational in establishing Willie May's emotional maturity and openness.

The symbol of the caged bird is reminiscent of Maya Angelou's famous book *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Especially since Willie May is the only black character in the book, and moreover a black woman, it seems significant that she is the one to introduce the symbol of

the bird. Maya Angelou's book addresses the inherent struggle of black females in America, and yet there is nonetheless a universal element to the symbol of the caged bird: it "speaks to something in the universal American 'little me within the big me'" (Bloom 1). Though Willie May has had a particularly painful past, doubtless due in part to her identity as a black woman, she nonetheless open-heartedly accepts that everyone has their struggles. She wonders aloud to Rob, "Who don't know something in a cage?" (DiCamillo 66). Maya Angelou's symbol as reflected in *The Tiger Rising* points to the universal difficulties of humanity.

### **Rob**

Though Willie May maintains the primary connection with the symbol of the bird, this symbol carries over into Rob's experience. Since Willie May has such a profound influence on Rob and his emotional health, he continues to find emotional growth through the symbol that she introduces. In a profound way, the symbol of the bird connects Rob to his own emotions as well as to the memory of his mother.

The first of Rob's connections to the bird is when Willie May compares him to one. She says that his shrugging reminds her of a bird trying to fly away (DiCamillo 36). This language indicates Rob's emotionally trapped state: he wants to fly away but is unable to. This language resurfaces later in an interaction with Sistine, after Rob has shown her the tiger for the first time. He remembers Willie May's comparison of him to the bird, and it "[strikes] him as funny now" (DiCamillo 53). He and Sistine both laugh, and Rob suddenly realizes that he is happy—an emotion he barely recognizes. At this point in the story, he has told Sistine about his mother and shown her the tiger, which are emotionally vulnerable steps of which he was not capable originally. This joyful reaction to Willie May's comparison may signify that Rob is beginning to break out of the emotional birdcage in which he has been trapped.

Throughout the book, the bird is also connected to Rob's mother. At one point, Rob remembers her voice and compares it to "a small bird flying over the solid world" (DiCamillo 34). The more compelling connection, however, is in Rob's memory of his father shooting a small bird when Caroline seemed opposed to it. This scene reveals yet another instance of Rob's father telling him not to cry: "It's just a bird" (DiCamillo 66), he says. However, it seems that the bird, for Rob, is connected to his mother and, perhaps, the more "feminine" emotions—like sadness—as opposed to the "masculine" emotions of the tiger—like anger. In this memory, his feminine emotions, which align with those of his mother, are minimized and repressed. Interestingly, the caged bird is historically associated with femininity and repression. This connection is apparent in Maya Angelou's novel and is present in other literature as well. In a paper on the caged bird symbol, Emily Joy Clark mentions, "[M]any narratives by women writers of the nineteenth century contain allusions to birds" (200). Clark's research specializes in Hispanic literature, another historically oppressed and marginalized group. Evidently, the bird is commonly used to symbolize oppression, but it seems specialized to women. Rob's father suppresses these feminine emotions connected to the bird. In addition, he suppresses the memory of Caroline herself, not allowing himself or Rob to talk about her. In crucial ways, then, the bird connects to both the feminine emotions in Rob and the memory of his mother herself.

In addition, Cricket is inextricably tied to the color green, which *Herder's Dictionary of Symbols* states can represent the feminine in some cultures (91). The green of Cricket's plumage prompts another memory in Rob of his mother, when they were lying on the ground looking up at the tree leaves. Rob's mother states, "I have never in my life seen a prettier color of green" (DiCamillo 87). After Rob calls it the "first-ever green," his mother says, "You and me, we see

the world the same” (87). This moment between Rob and his mother, sparked by the green of the bird’s feathers, shows tenderness and wonder: both gentle, feminine emotions.

The last mention of Cricket (or birds in general) is in Rob’s dream at the end of the book. Interestingly, only Cricket “rises up” out of the grave, though he was buried there together with the tiger (DiCamillo 120). Perhaps this indicates that the masculine emotions tied to the tiger can, eventually, be laid to rest. However, the sadness and wonder connected to the bird continue on, adding beauty to life. Rob describes it in a fantastical sense: “The bird flew higher and higher until he disappeared into a sky that looked just like the Sistine ceiling” (120). This description indicates the depth of Rob’s wonder at the emotions that he is now able to experience freely and without suppression.

### **Conclusion**

Kate DiCamillo’s *The Tiger Rising* is a profound picture of the journey toward emotional growth. The symbolism of the animals provides the characters with a tangible way to work out their suppression, anger, and sadness. By releasing Cricket, Willie May sets an example of emotional honesty for the children. By freeing the tiger, Rob and Sistine face the grief they have suppressed and denied. By killing the tiger, Rob’s father symbolically destroys the suppression that has stunted his own emotional health, as well as his son’s. In their interactions with the animals, the characters learn to work through the grief that permeates their lives. They begin to understand themselves and each other, which leads to intimacy and healing in their relationships. Kate DiCamillo’s touching work shows that grief cannot and must not be escaped: in fact, honest engagement with grief is the only way to find emotional healing and freedom. Rob, Sistine, and Rob’s father must press into their pain, sadness, and anger in order to move through it. In doing so, they provide a beautiful picture of processing grief in a healthy way. This story is a testament

to the freedom and catharsis of opening the cage door, releasing the bird, and letting the tiger rise on up.

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