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The motif of animal – human transformation in Colleen Houck’s *Tiger’s Curse* fantasy series

Abstract. The motif of human – animal transformation is present in many mythologies. Stories created in different cultures explore a variety of human – animal shifters: werewolves, tiger – men, swan – maidens, berserkers. The intent of this paper is to analyze in what way shifters from various mythologies are interwoven into the *Tiger’s Curse* fantasy series by Colleen Houck, a contemporary American author. The paper aims to provide a typology of these characters and examine the nature of their transformations. Shape-shifting in the world created by Houck is inspired by mythologies and stories from all over the world, with a focus on Asian lore. Transformations of human characters vary from the voluntary, when the person is able to change their form at will, to the involuntary, when the transformation is forced upon the body of the host, from inborn abilities, to curses or other magical occurrences. The shifters may be individuals who are aware of their abilities, or people who have no recollection of changing shapes. There seem to be multiple reasons for the use of this motif. Animal – human transformations allow writers to explore the dual nature of human nature, delve into the animal mentality, or introduce magic into fantasy narratives.

Keywords: human-animal transformation; *Tiger’s Curse*; Colleen Houck; shifters; fantasy; tiger; dragon

1. Introduction

The motif of animal – human transformation is a popular one, used widely in both literature and art. Throughout the ages, the theme has reappeared in mythologies from around the globe. In Scandinavian tales shifters such as Bear – Men also known as “Berserkers” and Swan – Maidens appear; in India, there are Tiger – Men; in Ireland,

Seal – Women or Selkies (Smith 1894, 1). The list of different shifters is a long one, as stories of human-animal transformation have been created since the beginning of time in all quarters of the globe.

One of the most established shifters in Western culture is without a doubt the werewolf. Its first appearances date back to ancient times. In Greek myths, one can find the story of Lycaon, a cruel king of Arcadia who tried to deceive Zeus, the ruler of Olympus, into consuming human flesh. For Lycaon the wolf skin was a form of punishment brought upon him by the gods, a curse passed on to his sons, and their children (“Lycaon” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

The werewolf was also extensively used in French tales. Literary works in which the shifter appears can be dated back to the 12th century. The motif appears in “Bisclavret”, one of the poems from a collection of narrative poems “usually referred to as the *Lais* of Marie de France”. “Bisclavret” is a curious tale about a baron who is wrongly trapped in the skin of a wolf by his wife. The man regains the ability to change into his human form because of his gentleness and loyalty towards the King (Freeman 1985, 288 – 295). Although this particular work portrays the shifter as the hero of the story, in some later texts emphasis is put on the terrifying nature of the wolf. In 15th century French – Canadian folktales, the loup-garou was introduced as the symbol of the “civilized man gone savage” (Ransom 2015, 254). The different versions of the werewolf tale all have one thing in common. The loup-garou is always a man who has displeased God or burdened his society in some way. The stories were used as cautionary tales as the threat of becoming a loup-garou was supposed to discourage settlers from integrating with the native inhabitants of Canada and straying into the wild (Ransom 2015, 254–255). There are various origin stories of the curse. In some the transformation begins with the loss of civilization, in others it is the devil’s work, there are also stories of the curse being passed on by a bite from the infected host.

By analyzing the first myths and tales one can see that there are two types of shifters. The voluntary ones, who are fully aware of their transformations (maybe can even control them), who keep their human conscience even as animals, and have acquired their abilities by birth, or some kind of magic. In contradiction, there are the involuntary ones, who are often not aware of their abilities, and cannot understand their actions. The latter ones may be more dangerous, as they have no idea what they are doing, and are fully taken over by the beast they turn into (Smith 1894, 5).

The reasons for the transformation of man into beast can vary. On the basis of the werewolf, as the most commonly analyzed shifter, one can see the sheer diversity of aspects leading to the metamorphosis from man to beast. However, usually the change is a form of punishment, a curse. It may be seen as a degradation of people into ‘lesser’ creatures or the limitation of one’s freedom.

From their first appearances in mythologies, the werewolves, Tiger – Men, and multiple different shifters have become the terrors or heroes of legends, folk tales, fairy tales, romances, fantasy novels and other literary genres. The motif of human – animal metamorphosis has been explored by authors ranging from “Geoffrey Chaucer, (...)

Dante, Shakespeare, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Franz Kafka to a number of contemporary writers such as Michel Butor, Marie Darrieussecq, Michel Faber, or Richard Flanagan” (Gymnich 2006, 70).

Fantasy is a wide genre, with various elements which can be traced to multiple literary types. As stated in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*:

Fantasy is not so much a mansion as a row of terraced houses, such as the one that entranced us in C. S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* with its connecting attics, each with a door that leads into another world. There are shared walls, and a certain level of consensus around the basic bricks, but the internal decor can differ wildly, and the lives lived in these terraced 'houses are discrete yet overheard. (James and Mendelsohn 2012, 1)

This description highlights the diverse specter of elements and motifs that can be included in the fantasy genre. It can be divided into works for young readers, young adults, adults, and those which can be read by all ages. Moreover, it can explore a variety of motifs such as quests, magic, alternate worlds, or reality. Therefore, fantasy writers create 'new' worlds, use characters and motifs found in other literary texts, or introduce new elements of magic into contemporary settings (James and Mendelsohn 2012, 2–3). The flexible nature of fantasy literature allows authors not only to 'borrow' certain elements from other genres but also alter them. This process enriches the motif of human – animal transformation and opens new paths for its interpretation.

Contemporary fantasy writers, although heavily reliant on tales and myths about shifters, have found ways of breaking the mold. In modern fantasy literature human-animal shifters acquire their abilities not only because of a curse. They may be born with the ability to transform into a different shape, or even willingly take part in ceremonies in order to become shifters. What is more, the ability to transform is often times not permanent; it can be limited to certain time frames, given, or taken away by magic (Gymnich 2006, 71–78).

The motif of animal – human transformation has been extensively used in Colleen Houck's *Tiger's Curse* young adult fantasy series. Houck is a contemporary American writer from Salem, Oregon, whose main focus is fantasy and science-fiction. *Tiger's Curse* is the introductory book in Colleen Houck's fantasy series where the author introduces her audience to the concept of “the curse” and the problem the characters have to face because of it. *Tiger's Curse* accustoms the readers with certain Hindu, Chinese and Japanese beliefs, and engulfs them into a fascinating journey to free two brothers from their 300-year entrapment in the skins of tigers. While trying to break the curse Kelsey (an eighteen-year-old girl from Oregon, who was chosen by the Hindu goddess Durga), Ren and Kishan (the Hindu princes changed into tigers) have to complete many gruesome tasks and even venture across realms. During their travels, the main characters encounter many mythical creatures, some of those beings are helpful while others pose a threat. The first volume is followed by *Tiger's Quest*, *Tiger's Voyage*, *Tiger's Destiny* and *Tiger's Dream* again centered on the journeys the main characters take in order to

break the curse. The intent of this paper is to analyze two types of animal-human shifters portrayed in the *Tiger's Curse* series: the voluntary, the involuntary and their functions in the narrative. The analysis will be conducted by comparing mythological and cultural descriptions of shifters with their *Tiger's Curse* counterparts.

2. The Tiger

The first, and most important shifter of the series is the tiger. It is a well-known animal, popular in mythologies around the world, especially in the East. There, it “takes the place of the Lion as the King of Beasts; it represents royalty, fearlessness, ferocity and wrath” (Cooper 1992, 226). For the Hindu, the tiger may be both a creative and destroying force of nature (Sax 2001, 177). It is associated with the god Siva and goddess Durga. “Durga rides a tiger, and Siva wears a tiger skin when depicted in his destructive aspect” (Cooper 1992, 226). In China, there are five different types of tigers with varying attributes. According to Cooper:

The White Tiger represents the West, autumn and the element of metal and is guardian of the graves, frightening away evil spirits (...) The Blue Tiger is plant life, The East and spring; The Red Tiger is fire, the South and summer; The Black Tiger is water, the North and winter; The Yellow Tiger is the center, the Sun, the Ruler (1992, 227).

For Taoists, this animal represents “harmony with the elements” (Sax 2001, 177–178) and may be placed both as the yin and the yang symbol. As yang the tiger stands for “authority, courage, prowess, military might and the ferocity necessary for protection”; whereas “in its yin aspect the tiger is lunar chthonic, as it is able to see in the dark, and depicts the growing power of the new moon” (Cooper 1992, 226).

While there are multiple tales in which the origins of this mighty predator and its status as “King of Beasts” (Cooper 1992, 226) are explored in Asian folklore, the Hindu mainly rely on the stories told by “the Naga [tribes] of north-east India” (Green 2006, 7). According to their beliefs, at the beginning of time “the ancient scaly pangolin, a wondrous anteater” created tiger and man as brothers. The beast chose to live in the “dark, luxuriant forests”, while his human brother began creating the first village. All was well, until their paths crossed. The man, ignoring his ties to the wild, killed the tiger and left it to die, to be taken away by the river’s currents. “The divine Dingu-Aneni” found the body of the beast and covered its bones for ten years with his own flesh “until hundreds of tigers sprang from the bones and populated the plains and the forest” (Green 2006, 7). In other versions of the legend the man and his brother are still fighting, and peace occurs only when one does not cross the domain of the other.

In literary and poetic works, the tiger has been the focus of many authors. In his poem “The Tyger” William Blake describes the animal as a powerful beast. The poet ponders the question of who could create such a deadly and yet magnificent creature,

while describing his features as a “fearful symmetry” (1794, “The Tyger”). This description proves that despite its fearless and often brutal nature, the beast is worthy of respect.

However, not all portrayals of the tiger evoke awe. In *The Jungle Book*, Kipling creates a negative picture of this animal. Shere Khan, the tiger is “treated with unbridled contempt” (Crane 2014, 381). His character seems to lack any positive qualities and is not acknowledged as the king of the jungle. Instead, the tiger is seen as a villain, who destroys the harmony and peace of the wild. Kipling creates a bloodthirsty beast that poses a threat to its surroundings, needs to be controlled and possibly banished by man (Crane 2014, 381–382).

Colleen Houck uses both myths and literary descriptions to create her tigers. The animals are ‘safe prisons’ for Ren and Kishan, the Hindu Princes who are both encaged and saved by the tiger skins they are forced into. Ren is trapped inside a white tiger with icy, blue eyes, while Kishan has the skin of a black tiger with fiery, golden eyes. The different fur and eye colors represent their character types. Ren is calm, romantic, thoughtful, brave, stable and selfless, while Kishan is emotional and impulsive.

The different colors may also allude to the tigers from Chinese mythology or reflect the real – life situation of Indian tigers. The white tigers have been caught, and bred in captivity since the 20th century, similarly Ren was caught by poachers and spent most of his time in cages (“white tiger” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). In contrast, black tigers are rarities, difficult to glimpse in the wild (“tiger” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). Kishan, just like his real-life counterparts, is mysterious, has never been caught, and spends most of his time wandering the jungle. Houck modified Durga’s mythical tiger by changing his common orange fur into white for Ren, and black for Kishan. Although such tigers exist in real life, they are scarce and nearly extinct. Additionally, the tigers are only vessels for two handsome Indian princes. Therefore, the narrative gains the air of mystery and seems more attractive to modern readers.

Mr. Kadam, the tiger’s friend, advisor, and protector who lived extremely long thanks to his possession of a fragment of the Damon amulet, weathered the curse with his princes. When asked about the importance of tigers in India he said that “the tiger is considered the great protector of the jungle. (...) He will bravely combat great dragons, but he will also help simple farmers. One of his many tasks is to tow rain clouds with his tail, ending drought for humble villagers” (Houck 2011, *Tiger’s Curse* 73–74). This statement had a prophetic quality, as it foreshadowed the role Ren and Kishan would have to take on as protectors of India and guardians of the continuity of time.

The two brothers find that the only way to break the curse is by completing tasks given to them by Durga, a Hindu goddess whose steed is a tiger named Damon. Similarly, as in the original myth about Durga, the tigers are created to fight evil and defeat the demon Mahishasur. The brothers are given the ability to transform into tigers not as a curse, or prize but because they have to fulfill their roles in the prophecy. Houck alters the original Hindu myth, where Durga defeats Mahishasur on her tiger. In her version of the story, Durga is aided by Kishan Ren and Kelsey. The goddess needs a steed; thus, Kishan takes on the role of Damon. Kelsey transforms into a mirror ver-

sion of Durga and Ren takes his place as her tiger. Together the protagonists take on their destined roles to battle the demon and complete their quest by defeating Mahishasur. Thus, the ability to shift into tigers allows the Hindu princes to prolong their lives in order to take on the role of protectors of India. Their story emphasizes the role of one's destiny as something unavoidable; yet Houck shows readers how specific points in one's life can be reached by following different paths.

Young adult fantasy literature, to which the *Tiger's Curse* series belongs, functions as an inclusive genre which captures the attention of a wide range of readers; from children who have not quite yet entered adolescence, to adults who nostalgically revisit familiar motifs. It uses supernatural elements as significant and sometimes crucial elements of the plot. This combination of the magical with the contemporary is a steppingstone for YA fantasy literature (Wilkins 2019, 1 – 16). The 'curse' of transforming into tigers is tactically placed on the two main characters, who are said to be selected by a goddess, this is a direct usage of the "Chosen One convention" which allows for the spotlight to be placed on the main characters' "discovering their identity and their purpose" (Wilkins 2019, 26). Additionally, the ability to transform allows Ren and Kishan to successfully finish their quest, and complete the trials prepared for them by Durga.

In her books Houck adheres to the classical motif of humans being transformed into animals because of a curse. The princes are transformed into tigers, and initially they see their fate only as some sort of punishment, a burden they have to lift from their shoulders. At the same time, the transformation can be seen as salvation. The goddess Durga shifts Ren and Kishan into tigers to save them, and so that they can complete their role in the prophecy that was assigned to them long before they were born. Houck mixes certain aspects of human-animal transformation previously used in literature; in her series the men are trapped but also saved by the tiger skins, they don't lose their human conscience, and yet Kishan tends to lean into the tiger's wild nature. Their metamorphosis is a process they can control; nevertheless, they are restricted by the curse and can only be in their human form for a limited amount of time. The shift from man to beast, when executed in the time frames given to the princes, is only mildly uncomfortable; however, when running out of time Ren and Kishan are forcefully and painfully transformed into their tiger forms. This presentation of the shift from human to animal form is unique as it has both aspects of traditional transformations and takes on new, original qualities.

The placement of the curse upon Ren and Kishan, although generally seen as a burden, allowed the protagonists to live the life of a tiger. Like many Indian beasts they experienced gradually increasing deforestation and the attributable decreasing food supply. Kishan managed to survive in the wild because of his dark coat. Black fur allowed him to be less visible while hunting than ordinary tigers. Ren was not as fortunate; because of his white fur he was captured by poachers and sold to a circus. Ren's experience mirrors that of many tigers, caught, imprisoned and forced to perform for the entertainment of people. As stated by the protagonist "I was whipped, poked, and prodded. (...) A tiger doesn't naturally want to jump through a flaming hoop or have a man's head in his mouth. Tiger's hate fire, so the tiger has to be taught to fear the

trainer more than he fears the flame” (Houck 2011, *Tiger's Curse* 285–286). Ren's ability to transform into human form after the first element of the curse is lifted provides an animal's commentary on imprisonment. It shows that captive wild animals listening to people are mostly guided by fear, not love or respect.

While the placement of Indian tigers as the animal forms of the two protagonists has both traditional and aesthetical value, the role of protectors of India assigned to Ren and Kishan offers a commentary on the nation's current state of affairs. The tigers are awakened because the country needs to be saved from both external threats and internal destruction. Although the external threat, the demon Mahishasur and Lokesh the man who becomes him, is conquered by Kelsey and the brothers in an alternate time, the internal problems highlight the current troubles of India. The author briefly mentions limitations placed upon the Baiga, and other ethnic groups from India, she also highlights the problematic issue of deforestation and its consequences for said groups, local flora, and fauna. The tigers offer help to the Baiga, trying to lessen their troubles. The didactic input of such elements, though brief, may awaken a sense of awareness and responsibility in readers.

3. The Dragon

The dragon, unlike the tiger, does not have its 'real-life' counterpart. Although there is a multitude of animals, or more specifically, reptiles such as the bearded dragon, the seadragon or the Chinese water dragon named after the creature, there has never been any kind of proof of the mythical dragon's existence. According to J.C. Cooper, “the dragon (...) is probably the most complex, widespread and ambivalent of mythical monsters, appearing in the mythology and symbolism of all nations” (1992, 83). Originally, the beast was viewed as a guardian of humankind. In the East, the creature was said to rule over the elements and see to the harmonious existence of all creatures. Later on, this perception changed. In medieval Europe, the dragon became a bloodthirsty beast, a collector of gold. Because of this shift in perception, the mythical creature gained dual symbolism. “In the Orient it maintains its beneficent aspects, representing celestial power; in the West it is evil, chthonic and baleful” (Cooper 1992, 83).

The difference between the representations of the dragon is not limited to its nature. In the West, the dragon is a winged beast with the body of a serpent, four or two legs, batlike ears, and a tail. Its most common portrayals may be found in the paintings of Paolo Uccello, such as *Saint George and the dragon* from about 1470. The beast is also visible on the Flag of Whales. In contrast, the Eastern dragon does not have wings, it has the body of a serpent and often is depicted with a beard. In Hinduism, the creature is associated with power and the spoken word, it also represents progress and can be connected to at least two of the Gods in the Hindu pantheon.

The beast is present in nearly all mythologies of the Orient; however, it is most prominent in China. There it can represent “the masculine yang power”, “the supernat-

ural infinity”, “the rhythms of nature” and “the divine power of change and transformation” (Cooper 1992, 86). Furthermore, different Chinese beliefs place the dragon in a multitude of different roles and incarnations. As stated by Cooper, it is the head of the “Four Spiritually Endowed”, also known as the guardians of the four geographical directions. What is more, the dragon is “one of the twelve symbolic creatures of the Zodiac” (1992, 86). For the Chinese, dragons are sacred, as they influence all aspects of nature and life, and may even have access to the universe. Additionally, the dragons are said to “represent the five regions: North, South, East, West and Center” (Cooper 1992, 86). As guardians of the world, they have different names, roles, traits and habitats.

The Celestial dragon T'ien Lung lives in the sky, (...)it represents infinite supernatural power and is the vital spirit; Fu-tsang guards hidden treasure (...), symbolizes the fertilizing rain and the East, the sun (...), the Mang depicts power. (...) Li is hornless; it lives in the sea and controls the deeps and symbolizes the scholar, while Chiao lives in the mountains or on land and depicts the statesman (Cooper 1992, 86).

In literature, the dragon is usually the hostile antagonist people need to fight in order to survive. It is often described as a dangerous and vicious creature, a plague to humankind. One of the earliest texts with a dragon antagonist is “Beowulf”. There, a beast called “eorðdracan” is mentioned, it is connected with death as after being robbed by a man it flies after nightfall burning villages and wreaking havoc. It is a danger to humans, an evil that has to be defeated. However, despite its negative depiction, the dragons’ actions are somehow understandable. The wrath of the beast, although terrible and deadly, is not without reason, and could have been avoided (Keller 1981, 219–222).

The motif of a dragon as a monster has often been used and is present in various literary texts. It was especially popular in Norse legends but also can be found in texts such as Tolkien’s *Hobbit* series, where Smaug represents the forces of evil. In contrast to the first tales about ‘evil’ dragons, contemporary writers sometimes make it a likeable creature. In J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* Series, the author combines elements of Eastern and Western lore while creating dragons. The creatures described in the *Harry Potter* series are neither good nor evil; they possess instinctual animal-like responses. Therefore, they can be classified as neutral characters. However, “Rowling incorporates the Oriental dragon’s benevolence into her works in order to highlight the moral objectivity of her own dragons. For instance, the hide, heartstrings, and blood of dragons are used for the benefit of wizardkind” (Berman 2008, 54). As for the Western characteristics, the dragons in the *Harry Potter* series attributed “their conventional role as guardians and their reputation for ferocity” (Berman 2008, 55).

The dragons represented by Houck in *Tiger’s Voyage* have characteristics mostly taken from Eastern mythologies, which the writer modified by adding her own ideas upon the existing lore. The first time the reader is made aware of the existence of dragons, is when Mr. Kadam and the protagonists finish translating the third prophecy, with a fragment referring to the creatures:

Seek dragon kings of oceans five
From cardinal compass as you dive:
Dragon of Red – Unveils the stars that move in astral time;
Dragon of Blue – Bestows the range that straightly points the way;
Dragon of Green – Prepares the mind to see right through the dime;
Dragon of Gold – Watches the town that's hid beneath the waves;
Dragon of White – Unlocks the doors that lead to icy lights (Houck, *Tiger's Voyage* 72).

After reading the prophecy, the protagonists assume that the dragons they have to meet will be helpful. However, the only thing they can be sure of is that they need to acquire some attributes from the creatures to help them on their journey. While searching for information about the creatures they have to face, Mr. Kadam finds entries where the significance of the dragons' color is described. According to his research:

black dragons are considered evil and deceptive. Reds are associated with (...) blood, temper, anger, love, fire, passion (...). Blues are more peaceful. (...) Golds (...) hoard wealth. Greens can heal (...) but also cause earthquakes, spew acid, and eat humans. Whites are reflective and wise; (...) tell half-truths, [and] are omens of death (Houck 2011, *Tiger's Voyage*, 256).

While creating hypotheses about the dragons, Houck used not only mythological beliefs, but also the symbolism of colors. Therefore, she gave the red dragon traits such as anger, love and passion; peacefulness to the blue dragon; or greed to the gold one. Even though the characters tend to rely on their research, when confronted with the dragons, not all facts are confirmed.

The creatures which the protagonists meet on their path have different approaches when it comes to their ability to shift and vary also in their opinion of humankind. The first, Lóngjūn, is the Red Dragon of the West. It is described as a snake with black underbelly, bearded cheeks, "four short, taloned legs", "shiny scales", and "great long-lashed eyes" with red irises and black pupils (Houck 2011, *Tiger's Voyage*, 264–265). It is responsible for the stars and constellations. Although it is kind towards Kelsey and the brothers, it offers to help them only if they repair one of its stars and tries to trick them in a game of chess. Upon landing in its palace in the stars Lóngjūn changes into his human form, Kelsey describes him as "black skinned and beautiful with red eyes and red robes" (Houck 2011, *Tiger's Voyage* 270).¹ It is noteworthy that Houck gave her dragons the ability to change into human form. In the series, the creatures are powerful entities, able to change forms and bend time. They are shifters who are not bound by any rules or regulations. Lóngjūn finds pleasure in his ability to change forms and often uses his human skin while inside his palace in the stars.

The second dragon described in *Tiger's Voyage* is Qīnglóng, the Blue Dragon of the East. It is responsible for the waters of the seas and oceans. As observed by Kelsey, "though similar in size to its brother, [the] blue dragon looked different. Its head was longer, narrowing more at the nose. Instead of a black beard, its cheeks and brow were

covered in feathers that (...) shimmered like fish scales in brilliant blues and purples”, it had similar feathers and scales on the rest of its body, it moved like “a kite on the wind” and “gripped the air” with “sharp golden talons” (Houck 2011, *Tiger's Voyage* 288–289). Unlike Lóngjūn, Qīnglóng does not show any kind of kindness towards the travelers. He seems rather bothered by their presence and cannot wait to get rid of them. Despite having the same abilities as his brother, Qīnglóng does not change forms. He is proud of his original skin and sees humans as creatures of the ‘worse’ kind.

The third dragon seen by the protagonists is Lüsèlóng, the Dragon of the South. It is responsible for the lands and creatures that inhabit them. It has a brown, knobby head, and a long crocodile snout with pointed teeth. Lüsèlóng has golden eyes, large antlers at the back of its head, a long snake-like body covered with scales resembling leaves and a brown beard (Houck 2011 *Tiger's Voyage* 358–359). Although Lüsèlóng gladly uses metamorphosis to change his appearance, he views his forms as disguises that enable him to play different roles. For him, his human body is just a costume. He treats people in a similar way to his disguises, amusing and easy to replace.

Jīnsèlóng is the fourth dragon Kelsey, Ren and Kishan encounter. It is the Dragon of the North. Houck describes it as a creature with a “triangular mouth”, “sharp white teeth”, “scales made of golden discs”, “four long spikes protruding from the back of its head and a trail of smaller spikes starting at its nose and travelling along its spine” (2011 *Tiger's Voyage* 418–419). Jīnsèlóng has the traits of a typical Western dragon. It is greedy and concentrates mostly on collecting treasures for his underwater palace. He uses his human form as a means to an end. For him his appearance is a weapon during trades; it also enables him to clean and polish his treasures. Otherwise, Jīnsèlóng prefers his dragon body as it is big and shiny.

Among the five dragons, the most interesting one turns out to be Yìnbálóng, the White Dragon of the Center. Unlike the other dragons, he welcomes Kelsey and the brothers in his human form. He had a “tall frame”, “white hair”, “a prominent brow”, “thin lips”, a “wizened face (...) full of expression”, and “icy blue” eyes, “almost translucent and (...) full of curiosity” (Houck 2011 *Tiger's Voyage* 442). Additionally, he answers some of the questions asked by the protagonists. He explains that he and his brothers were born in the five oceans. Lóngjūn, the Dragon of the Stars, in the Pacific; Qīnglóng, the Dragon of the Waves, in the Southern Ocean; Lüsèlóng, the Dragon of the Earth, in the Indian Ocean; Jīnsèlóng, the Dragon of the treasures of the Earth, in the Atlantic, and he, the Dragon of Ice, was born in the Arctic. Yìnbálóng describes their parents as “Mother Earth and Father Time”, Yìnbálóng also tells the characters of the duties the dragons are tasked with. From his explanations, the readers are made aware of the fact that dragons govern the Earth and all that is connected to the proper functioning of our planet.

The White Dragon seems to understand and value humankind. He uses his ability to change shapes as a gift and cherishes all of his skins. When in its true form, Yìnbálóng is described as magnificent, “Its dragon claws were blue, as were its eyes. Its underbelly shimmered like the aurora borealis. The scales on its back looked like white

diamonds (...), the two horns on the back of its head looked like long icicles” (Houck 2011, *Tiger's Voyage* 460–461).

While designing her dragons, Houck gave them both mythical and self-invented attributes. The shapes and physical traits of the creatures are heavily based on Chinese mythology, where the colors and specific appearances of dragons are diversified. The writer used elements of lore such as the Chinese belief about five dragons guarding different parts of the world and expanded it by adding a story about their creation, ancestry and role in the world. When naming the dragons, Houck used existing Chinese dragon names and placed them in a different setting. Interestingly, despite using physical traits of dragons from Eastern mythologies, Houck intertwines the creatures' colors with Western color symbolism. Therefore, in the novel, red stands for anger, love, passion and fire; blue can be connected with water, calmness, sadness and melancholy; green symbolizes nature, rebirth, growth and envy; gold can be associated with wealth, elegance, luxury and sometimes greed; while white represents purity, coldness, simplicity and wisdom.

By giving shape shifting abilities to the creatures the author of the *Tiger's Curse* series created an outsider's point of view on civilization. The dragons presented in *Tiger's Voyage* are more than divine protectors; their human forms and willingness or unwillingness to use them are a reflection of their attitude towards humanity. Lóngjūn and Yìnbálong appreciate humanity, they like their human forms and want to help civilization to progress. Jīnsèlong and Lūsèlong are attracted to the products of humanity, beautiful art, shiny sculptures and fascinating tales; yet, they are proud, and use people as pieces in a board game, playthings or amusing pets rather than intelligent creatures. For them, their human skin is a means to an end. It is a way of easily gaining what they need, and entertainment. Qīnglóng is the dragon who gave up on humanity; he refuses to help and assumes people will destroy the world they live in. He views humans as lesser creatures and refuses to turn into one of them. The dragons, as omniscient beings, provide a critique of the current state of events, and show how people are able to make great progress and accompany it with immense destruction.

As stated in *Tiger's Voyage*, the five brothers weren't always divided on their perception of humanity. Initially, the dragons all wanted to inspire progress and protect the planet. Sadly, the ability to blend into the human world and make observations changed some of their views. After seeing the unstoppable greed of people, Qīnglóng stops trying to prevent overfishing and sea pollution. He decides to ignore human actions leading to disasters, and views people as stubborn, and self-centered pests. In *Tiger's Voyage*, the dragons are not only mythical creatures the protagonists have to face in order to move forward on their journey, but also observers and providers of an objective assessment of the human race. Their didactic purpose may prompt readers into inquiries about ecology, human interventions into nature, and how to protect wildlife. Houck, like many other fantasy authors, hides moral questions in otherworldly situations, making difficult subjects easier for readers to examine and comprehend.

4. Conclusion

The reasons for the usage of human – animal shifters in fantasy novels go far beyond the entertainment factor. This genre allows authors to explore subjects such as “bigotry, greed, religious extremism, politics, abuse, and addiction” along with classical themes like “honor, love, war, revenge, responsibility, otherness, obsession and loyalty” without offending cultural sensitivities (Burcher et al. 2009, 227). In the *Tiger’s Curse* series Houck uses YA fantasy conventions such as The Chosen One, and the series of trials while placing the action of the story in a modern setting in order to “speak to the identities and concerns of young readers” (Wilkins 2019, 65). The tiger skins are both prisons and safe havens for Ren and Kishan. Their transformation shows how each situation can be interpreted with dual meanings. Moreover, forced shifts teach readers humility and empathy. It is easy to disregard life when one does not think about how easily it can be lost.

Moreover, the process of integrating shifters from different mythologies gave Houck’s novels a universal appeal. The creatures seem familiar, yet by altering and blending their characteristic qualities Houck makes them both easily comprehensible and intriguing. The dragons may be described as eternal beings which comment on the present state of the world, share their hopes and disappointments, and give advice to remedy the situation. Their ability to change into people allows them to enter the human world and act as wise, omniscient observers. They also become living archives of the ages, guardians of the past. Houck uses shifters in order to address important contemporary themes such as the crisis of morality and ecological concerns. Moreover, the dragons’ attitudes towards humankind accentuate the evolution of our species in a broader perspective as a process that threatens ecological balance in the world. The creatures’ disenchantment with humanity makes readers question the anthropocentric view of the world. Additionally, shape-shifters also take on the role of monsters. Thus, they can be terrifying, unforgiving, vicious, dangerous, and deadly, presenting these aspects of existence that are hard to control. The characters do not question why a monster is bloodthirsty, as they do not dispute advice given by magical entities. They reenact the myth, hoping the world will be saved.

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