

# BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM: INTERSPECIES COLLABORATION AND SURVIVAL IN REBECCA YARROS' *EMPYREAN* SERIES<sup>1</sup>

Vanessa Roldán Romero  
Universidad de Granada

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines Rebecca Yarros' *Empyrean* series, focusing on the human-dragon bond as a posthumanist response to the consequences of the Anthropocene, symbolised in the text by the venins. Through the lens of ecocriticism and critical posthumanism, the article explores the connection between the protagonist, Violet Sorrengail, and her dragon, Tairn, which challenges traditional anthropocentric hierarchies by emphasising interspecies cooperation. The narrative's engagement with themes of mutual dependence, agency, and survival reflects on the broader implications of posthumanist alliances to resist ecological degradation. Hence, this paper aims to contribute to discussions on the environmental crisis, highlighting the need for collaborative, multi-species solutions in the face of the Anthropocene's destructive impact.

**KEYWORDS:** Dragons, Ecocriticism, Critical Posthumanism, Fantasy Literature, Rebecca Yarros.

MÁS ALLÁ DEL ANTROPOCENTRISMO: COLABORACIÓN INTERESPECIES Y SUPERVIVENCIA EN LA SERIE *EMPYREAN* DE REBECCA YARROS

## RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la serie *Empyrean* de Rebecca Yarros, centrándose en el vínculo humano-dragón como una respuesta posthumanista a las consecuencias del Antropoceno, simbolizadas en el texto por los venins. A través de la lente de la ecocrítica y el posthumanismo crítico, el artículo explora la conexión entre la protagonista, Violet Sorrengail, y su dragón, Tairn, la cual desafía las jerarquías antropocéntricas tradicionales al enfatizar la cooperación interespecies. El compromiso de la narrativa con los temas de dependencia mutua, agencia y supervivencia refleja las implicaciones más amplias de las alianzas posthumanistas para resistir la degradación ecológica. Por lo tanto, este artículo tiene como objetivo contribuir a las discusiones sobre la crisis ambiental, destacando la necesidad de soluciones colaborativas y multi-especies ante el impacto destructivo del Antropoceno.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** dragones; ecocrítica; posthumanismo crítico; literatura fantástica; Rebecca Yarros

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Dragons have been among the most enduring and influential mythological creatures in literature, captivating the human imagination across centuries and cultures. Their presence in literary history is not merely incidental; dragons have consistently served as potent symbols, embodying complex ideas and values, probably because, as Margo DeMello explains, “[i]n a worldview there is often, either explicitly or implicitly, a set of assumptions about humanity’s relationship with nature and with other animals” (2012, 319). Often depicted as monstrous and fearsome, Western dragons have traditionally been portrayed as adversaries that test human courage and resilience, thereby reinforcing the distinction between the human and the non-human, the “civilized” and the “wild” (Lethbridge 2018, 10). This symbolic function is deeply rooted in European medieval literature, where dragons are frequently associated with vices such as greed and avarice. A prime example is found in *Beowulf*, where the dragon’s hoarding of a vast treasure underscores its role as a guardian of wealth, yet simultaneously as a representation of destructive greed (Lethbridge 2018, 10).

In Christian iconography, the dragon takes a distinct moral dimension, often depicted as an embodiment of evil and a direct antagonist to the forces of good. This is particularly evident in the legend of St. George, where the dragon symbolises the chaotic and malevolent forces that threaten both the physical and spiritual realms. St. George’s victory over the dragon is not merely a triumph of good over evil but also a reaffirmation of the divine order and the power of faith (Lethbridge 2018, 10). Such depictions have cemented the dragon’s role in Western literature and mythology as a formidable symbol of the Other and as a creature that must be confronted and subdued to restore harmony and order.

Despite their ancient origins, dragons have not remained static symbols confined to the past. Instead, they have continually evolved, adapting to the changing cultural landscapes of different eras. In contemporary literature and popular culture, dragons have experienced a remarkable resurgence, reflecting the genre’s growing fascination with fantasy and myth. This resurgence is particularly notable in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where dragons have become central figures in a wide array of fictional narratives. Unlike their medieval counterparts, modern dragons are often portrayed with greater complexity and variability. Some representations maintain strong ties to traditional myths and legends, reinterpreting these elements within new narrative frameworks. Others, however, introduce innovative aspects, drawing on diverse sources of inspiration, including global folklore, contemporary ecological concerns, and evolving notions of identity and

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otherness, as argued by Sandra Unerman in her overview of dragons in the twenty-first century (2002, 94). For instance, Benjamin Garner explains, *The Hobbit* (1937) depicts the dragon Smaug as a more classical figure of greed and destruction, yet even here, the dragon is endowed with a personality and intelligence that complicates its role as a mere antagonist (2015, 26).

The 2010s, in particular, marked a significant moment in the cultural depiction of dragons, as they became prominent figures in various forms of media. TV series like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) brought dragons into general audiences' imagination, not merely as mythical creatures but as complex beings with distinct personalities and agency. The dragons in *Game of Thrones* are integral to the narrative's exploration of power, loyalty, and the bonds between humans and non-humans, challenging traditional notions of dominion and control (Sheridan 2016, 27). Similarly, in the video game *The Elder Scrolls v: Skyrim* (2011) as well as in its online version, the *Elder Scrolls Online* (2014), dragons play a crucial role in the game's expansive world, serving as both adversaries and as beings with a rich, layered mythology that players can engage with. Film franchises like *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010-2019) and *The Hobbit* (2012-2014) further illustrate the versatility of the dragon figure in modern storytelling. In *How to Train Your Dragon*, the relationship between humans and dragons is reimagined as one of potential harmony and mutual respect, subverting the traditional narrative of conflict and conquest. This franchise highlights the possibility of interspecies kinship, presenting dragons as sentient beings with their own cultures and emotions (Sheridan 2016, 24). Their evolution from ancient mythological creatures to central figures in twentieth-century and twenty-first-century storytelling underscores their enduring relevance and the richness of their symbolic potential.

The evolving depiction of dragons in contemporary media not only reflects their enduring relevance but also invites deeper analysis of their symbolic roles and ontological significance, as explored in Alejandro Rivero-Vadillo's recent work. Rivero-Vadillo's analysis offers a compelling framework for understanding dragons within European tradition and contemporary narratives, positioning them within a liminal space that intersects three distinct ontologies. This positioning underscores the complexity of dragons as beings that resist simple categorisation, revealing their unique place in the literary and symbolic imagination. Firstly, since they reside in remote, non-human spaces and exhibit behaviours that align with a natural, untamed existence, they embody the ultimate essence of non-human animality. Secondly, dragons possess human-like qualities, such as the ability to speak human languages and exhibit emotions and behaviours that are traditionally associated with humans. Thirdly, dragons are depicted as possessing divine or preternatural attributes that elevate them beyond mere human or animal classification. Their capabilities, such as fire-breathing, flight, and magical properties inherent in their blood or bones, position them as superior beings, both biologically and transcendently. This aspect highlights their role as entities that transcend human limitations and embody a form of otherness that is simultaneously animalistic, human, and divine (Rivero-Vadillo 2023, 42). Hence, as Rivero-Vadillo argues, this tripartite ontological framework situates dragons as potential incarnations of posthuman subjectivities, embodying



a form of sheer otherness that defies conventional ontological categories. Dragons, in this view, are not merely fantastical creatures but are instead complex symbols that encapsulate the convergence of animalistic, human, and divine attributes. Their symbolic capacities extend beyond those of inanimate objects or machinery, positioning dragons as entities that challenge anthropocentric perspectives and invite reflections on the nature of being and the limits of human understanding (Rivero-Vadillo 2023, 42).

Taking all of the above into account, this article shall focus on Rebecca Yarros' *Empyrean* series, which delves into the complexities of human-dragon relationships, blending elements of fantasy and romance to reflect contemporary fascination with these mythical creatures. Yarros, a bestselling author known for her skilful integration of these genres, has established herself as a prominent voice within the "romantasy" genre. Before venturing into the fantastical realms of the *Empyrean*, Yarros had already built a substantial following through her work in contemporary romance, with over fifteen novels to her name. Her *Flight & Glory* series, among others, showcased her ability to craft emotionally resonant narratives, earning her a loyal readership. However, it was the *Empyrean* series, launched with *Fourth Wing* in 2023, that truly propelled Yarros to new heights of literary fame. This success was notably amplified by the enthusiastic reception from the BookTok community, where readers eagerly shared their passion for the series, helping to cement its popularity among fantasy readers.

Set in the richly imagined fictional kingdom of Navarre, the *Empyrean* series follows the journey of Violet Sorrengail, a young woman thrust into the brutal and demanding world of dragon riders at the Basgiath War College. Central to the series is the exploration of humanimal bonds,<sup>2</sup> of which readers can find three distinct types: dragon-human,<sup>3</sup> gryphon-human, and wyvern-venin. These bonds fall into two clear groups: the collaborative relationships between dragons or gryphons and their human partners, and the destructive alliance between wyverns and venins. Although the gryphons and their fliers are initially portrayed as adversaries, the narrative soon uncovers a deeper truth —the real threat to dragons, gryphons, and human characters comes from the venins, humans who become corrupted after channelling magic directly from the land without the mediation of a dragon or gryphon (Yarros 2023a, 153). These venins, with their artificial dragon-like creatures, the wyverns, wreak havoc on Navarre's borders and beyond, extracting magic and life from the land and therefore killing innocent humans and other species alike. It is worth noting that the *Empyrean* series presents a world that can be understood as existing amidst the Anthropocene, where the consequences of human actions, and particularly the venins', ripple through both natural and magical ecosystems. In

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that this article shall use the expression "humanimal bonds" rather than "human-animal bonds" in order to avoid anthropocentric dichotomies and the dangers of marking humans as non-animal, fostering human exceptionalism.

<sup>3</sup> Please note that this article uses the expressions "human/dragon" and "dragon/human" interchangeably to avoid reinforcing any anthropocentric bias.

this context, the gryphon riders, called “fliers,” are revealed as defenders who fight against the venins in areas where the protective wards created by dragon-human bonds are not present.

Given these elements, this article argues that the *Empyrean* series explores a posthumanist alliance between humans and dragons as a strategic response to the Anthropocene’s environmental destruction, symbolised by the venins. The series demonstrates how mutual dependence and shared power between species can resist the damaging consequences of ecological degradation. By shifting the narrative from human supremacy over nature to one of interspecies cooperation, the *Empyrean* series explores the Anthropocene’s destructive impact and suggests that alliances between species may be the only path to survival.

## 2. VENINS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE: POISONING THE LAND AND LIFE

The venins in the secondary world of Yarros’ series pose a common threat to all forms of life, human and otherwise, including the mighty dragons. The name “venin,” which, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary means “any of the various toxic substances in snake venom” (“venin”), is already suggestive of their destructive effects on the land and all forms of life. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the symbolic connection between venins and the historical associations of dragons with serpentine traits. As Louise W. Lippincott explains, “ancient dragons were considered [...] as large, exotic snakes” (1981, 2). This connection positions venins as figures embodying some of the most negative attributes that can be ascribed to dragons, almost as their inverted counterparts. The venins’ aspect, characterised by the “[d]istended red veins spidering all around bright red eyes,” further reinforces their mythical-like and sinister nature. However, the main character eventually learns that they are pretty much real in her world only by the end of the first novel. At one point in the first novel, the main character is asking Tairn, a big black dragon that is primarily featured in the story, about these venins and their wyverns, to which he reacts by stating that they are poisonous “abominations” (Yarros 2023a, 437).

The connection between the venin characters in Yarros’ series and poison can be related to the issue of the Anthropocene and its poisonous and deadly effects on all forms of life. The Anthropocene, is a geological epoch in which there has been a significant shift in the relationship between humans and the global environment. In this context, the human species has become a decisive and direct actor in the ongoing climate crisis (Steffen et al. 2011, 843). Moreover, originally proposed as a geological era, has deeply affected current studies related to the environment and nonhuman. Flore Coulouma, for instance, explains the connection between ecocide and the Anthropocene, commenting that the collapse of human societies in the past hundred thousand years has resulted “either from genocide or ecocide, the destruction of their natural habitats” (2020, 160). Hence, in Yarros’ text, we find that the venin-turned humans and their destructive consequences on the land and



all forms of life can echo extra-textual humans who, in the Anthropocene, poison their own habitat.

Donna Haraway takes Steffen et al.'s rather general definition of the Anthropocene further, and elaborates on the Anthropocene as a pivotal moment defined by "the destruction of places and times of refuge for people and other critters" (Haraway 2015, 160). Because of this, Haraway argues that the Anthropocene should be made as short as possible, and proposes to move on to the Chthulucene, an epoch that aims to blur boundaries and that includes "the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus" (2015, 160). In other words, the Chthulucene is the epoch resulting from the rejection of anthropocentric attitudes, including the exploitation of the more-than-human without ethical consequences. As Braidotti succinctly summarises, "in advanced capitalism, animals are disposable bodies traded in a global market of posthuman exploitation" (Braidotti 2009, 530). In the case of Yarros' text, we find that the venins do not only poison the land they extract magic and power from but also any kind of organic life on it, specifically that life showing some sort of link with the territory, effectively turning anything that is non-venin into a disposable body and creating a deeply dangerous situation for the planet and its inhabitants of the planet, including human and dragon characters, which resonates with the consequences of the Anthropocene.

Moreover, venins are presented as the actual villains of the series not only because, unlike other humans, they do not need any non-human animal to channel the magic that emanates from the land, but also because of the consequences of channelling such magic without the interference of another species. As the text first explains "[t]he venin 'suck the land dry of magic'" (Yarros 2023a, 318). This blatant exploitation of the land in a way in which the venins do not use any other species as an intermediary could echo Plumwood's critique on how anthropocentrism often provides an instrumentalist view of nature, treating it as lacking autonomy and agency, thus justifying its exploitation and the human mastery over nature (Plumwood 1993, 106).

It is also worth noting that the consequences of this channelling, and by extension mastery, of the magic and nature in the series are deadly, as graphically described as it takes place during a battle against venins and wyverns:

The wave of death pushes forward from the venin, flowing outward and catching up with the fleeing civilian in the middle of the road. He falls, then screams soundlessly, curling in on himself as his body becomes nothing but a husk of a shell [...]. The venin has even more power now. (Yarros 2023a, 442)

Unlike dragon and gryphon riders, who obtain their magic through the animal they ride and who actually choose the human who will be able to channel magic, venins directly extract magic from the land, which seems to be the source of magic in this universe (Yarros 2023a, 153). The environmentalist critique of the deadly consequences of the unchecked exploitation of natural "resources," which eventually make the exploited areas poisonous to humans and other animals (Coulouma 2020, 167), is reinforced in Yarros by the fact that magic is in the land. Coincidentally, magic is here connected to life and, whereas dragons and gryphons

channelling of magic towards their human riders does not result in the death of the land or the life standing on it, venins extract magic and life from the biosphere. Hence, the venins, who extract magic from the land, exploiting nature directly without a dragon or gryphon, can be seen as echoes of the anthropocentric practices that have led to our current geological period and its pernicious effects.

Furthermore, the wyverns are also presented as victims to their masters, the corrupted humans known as venins. To begin with, “venin created [the wyverns] to compete with dragons and instead of channelling *from* them, channel power *into* them” (Yarros 2023a, 433) (emphasis in original). Moreover, these animals are instrumentalised to allow these humans to fly and attack from the air, as well as to survey large areas of land (Yarros 2023b, 566), being then emblematic of a more anthropocentric and utilitarian approach to interspecies relationships. As Plumwood explains, under anthropocentrism, humans often objectify the more-than-human, reducing anything deemed “as close to nature than to reason” as the Other, an object that can be used and disposed of by the human Self. The venins create wyverns as instruments of power rather than partners, objects to be instrumentalised and exploited by their masters, as Val Plumwood argues slaves are (1993, 137).

Furthermore, these wyverns are completely dependent on their creators. This is evident when, in the course of a battle against venins and their multiple wyverns, the protagonist kills one venin, with lethal consequences for the wyverns:

*“They’re falling,”* Tairn says, and I jerk my gaze from my side to see three wyvern tumble from the sky and crash to the earth.

Riderless wyvern.

Created by venin.

And they all died because I killed one venin. (Yarros 2023a, 457)

The death of several wyverns upon the death of their creator exposes a tactical vulnerability and highlights the fundamental difference in comparison to the human-dragon bond. This creation and control paradigm reflects an anthropocentric view where non-human entities are reduced to mere tools for human ends who are wholly dependent on their owners. As the only agent in the partnership (Plumwood 2002, 105), once the master dies, the slave is denied any kind of agency, and therefore dies, too. Given that the venins created the wyverns “to compete with dragons” (Yarros 2023a, 433), wyverns can be used to illustrate the consequences of the venins’ anthropocentrism, further providing an environmental critique of capitalistic modes of exploitation nature, which is here seen as property.

It is in this context, that this article approaches the analysed text from a critical posthumanist perspective,<sup>4</sup> which seeks a rejection of anthropocentric

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that this article adopts the perspective of critical posthumanism as understood by Rosi Braidotti to analyse Yarros’ novels, emphasizing its relevance in the study of human/other-than-human forms of life, both biological and technological. Specifically, this discussion focuses on how critical posthumanism can be applied to examine humanimal relations within the narrative.



hierarchies and a focus on the concept of *zoe* — which is the “dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself” that includes human and more-than-human life (Braidotti 2013, 60) — as elucidated by Francesca Ferrando (2020, 156). In contrast, *bios* refers exclusively to human life, excluding any other forms (Braidotti 2008, 180). In short, as Braidotti argues, in traditional Western thought, “[b]ios is almost holy, whereas *zoe* is certainly gritty” (Braidotti 2008, 177). Critical posthumanism, as understood by Braidotti, challenges this association in Western philosophy that confines *bios* to the human realm and assigns *zoe* to other forms of life. Given that Braidotti contends that posthumanist ethics are post-anthropocentric and *zoe*-centred (2013: 194), to follow posthumanist ethics implies the dismantlement of hierarchical dichotomies and the subsequent oppression of the Other.

### 3. DRAGONS AS AUTONOMOUS AGENTS: RESISTING ANTHROPOCENTRIC CONTROL

In Yarros’ *Empyrean* series, the traditional dragon-slayer trope, in which a male hero triumphs over a dragon to prove his courage and rescue a helpless figure, is notably subverted. This trope typically symbolises the triumph of human civilisation and masculine heroism over a monstrous, chaotic force (Sheridan 2016, 19). However, rather than positioning Violet Sorrengail, the protagonist, as a slayer of dragons, the series reframes her role as a protector, challenging the inherent human/nonhuman power dynamics. During the pivotal Threshing event,<sup>5</sup> Violet overhears her rival, Jack Barlowe, plotting to kill a young, defenceless female dragon that cannot even breathe fire yet. Her decision to intervene and protect the dragon from this unjust attack marks a fundamental departure from the narrative dominant until the twentieth century, where dragons are merely adversaries to be conquered. As Violet states, the dragon is “going to die just because it’s smaller, weaker than the other dragons” (Yarros 2023a, 162), which highlights her empathy and sense of justice. This act not only subverts the dragon-slayer narrative but also inverts the traditional role of the knight, as it is now a female one who saves the dragon, a symbol of both vulnerability and strength. The emphasis on protection over conquest arguably redefines the relationship between humans and dragons, portraying the latter as beings worthy of respect and care rather than as enemies to be vanquished.

Moreover, the human character’s act of empathy challenges the anthropocentric expected human-dragon relationship of the dragon-slayer trope. Her actions echo the concept of the “sympathetic imagination,” as discussed by Brenda Deen Schildgen, which the academic draws from J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* (1999). Coetzee’s notion allows humans to connect more deeply with

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<sup>5</sup> The Threshing is the moment in the series when humans walk in front of the willing to bond dragons, sometimes chosen by a dragon, sometimes killed by a dragon, and sometimes simply ignored (Yarros 2023a, 43).





non-human entities by imagining their emotions and experiences, despite the limits of this capacity (Schildgen 2005, 323). That is to say, although the sympathetic imagination can have its limitations (Attridge 2019, 39), it also remains a powerful tool for understanding members of other species (Carretero-González 2021, 851). Thus, the series shifts the focus from domination to empathy, allowing for a potentially deeper engagement with other species, materially real and otherwise.

It is important to note, however, that Violet is far from being the perfect knight. Despite her strong moral stance, she is physically unable to overcome all of her attackers. After knocking one of them unconscious, forcing Jack to flee (Yarros 2023a, 165), her broken arm and leg prevent her from stopping the final attacker. At this critical juncture, Tairn, a massive black dragon, arrives and kills the remaining humans by breathing fire (Yarros 2023a, 166). This moment deepens the subversion of the dragon-slayer trope, as it is not only Violet who saves the dragon but also the dragon who ultimately saves her. This reversal of the conventional human-dragon relationship further challenges the traditional narrative in a two-fold manner.

However, the reversal of the dragon-slayer trope also raises the question of agency and of whether dragons are eventually turned into slaves for humans, in a traditional case of master-slave dynamic, particularly as wyverns are indeed constructed as slaves. Generally speaking, agency can be defined as “an intentional exertion of power, involving more than merely action or reaction. With agency comes choice and responsibility because it is rooted in free will” (Scott 2009, 46). This concept is especially pertinent in fictional representations of non-human species, as McFarland and Hediger argue, where intentional decision-making and accountability beyond mere reaction are key issues (2009, 1). Likewise, Plumwood criticises systems that limit agency to human-like consciousness, arguing that such frameworks foster exploitative models of control, turning the nonhuman Other into slaves (2006, 118). In the *Empyrean* series, dragons demonstrate deliberate action and resist being reduced to mere tools, contrasting sharply with the depiction of wyverns as passive entities entirely controlled by their creators.

In Yarros’ *Empyrean* series, the autonomy of dragons is first suggested by their self-naming practice, which challenges the potential dangers of naming other species. While it is true that a name provides a member of a species with individuality (Charles 2014, 717), naming otherised entities can also be used as a means to control them, William J. Adams, for instance, explains that “colonialism promoted the naming and classification of both people and places, as well as nature, in each case with the aim of control” (2004, 24). Similarly, Haraway argues that naming often serves as a means to reduce animals to mere tools or extensions of human desires (Haraway 2008, 220). However, in Yarros’ narrative, dragons assert their identities independent of human influence, as illustrated when Violet bonds with the black dragon Tairneanach (also referred to as Tairn). The dragon introduces himself with a full declaration of his name and lineage:

*“My name is Tairneanach, son of Murtcuideam and Fiaclanfuil, descended from the cunning Dubhmadinn line.”* He stands to his full height, bringing me eye level with the canopy of trees around the clearing, and I squeeze a little tighter with my

thighs. “*But I’m not going to assume that you’ll be able to remember that once we reach the field, so Tairn will do until I inevitably have to remind you.*” (Yarros 2023a, 169)

This moment is pivotal, as it underscores that dragons in Yarros’ series are not merely passive entities under human control, nor are they reduced to the status of pets who are given names by their human counterparts. By illustrating that dragons name themselves and so, resist human-imposed labels, the text paves the way for a non-anthropocentric relationship, one where dragons are potentially recognised as autonomous beings rather than merely instruments of human will; their degree of independence aligns with posthumanist ideals of non-anthropocentrism and of decentring the human figure (Braidotti 2016, 22). Such transformation is a crucial element in establishing a non-anthropocentric bond that honours the complexity and autonomy of dragons in the *Empyrean* series.

Yarros’ text eloquently underscores its dragons’ autonomy through their power to choose their human companions, which is central to the narrative throughout the series. As the character of Professor Kaori points out, humans have no control over these choices: “[n]othing about who dragons choose is up to humans,” Kaori assures me. “We only like to maintain the illusion that we’re in control” (Yarros 2023a, 180). This illusion of control resonates with academic critiques of anthropocentrism, such as Sarah McFarland’s assertion that denying other species’ agency reinforces “the human supremacist *illusion*” (McFarland 2018, 95). This claim disrupts human dominance, positioning dragons as primary decision-makers, thus dismantling anthropocentric views of superiority.

In the unique case of two dragons bonding with one human, the series further highlights dragon agency. Despite the frantic attempts of human authorities to undo the bond —depicted by their “screaming at each other” (Yarros 2023a, 178) and the protagonist’s childhood friend, Dain, severely warning her that the human generals “are going to make you choose” (Yarros 2023a, 183)— the dragons’ decisions are final and outside human control; as Professor Kaori’s confirms, “[I’m] [n]ot sure why they’re fighting about it, though. The decision won’t be up to them” (Yarros 2023a, 180). This moment further reinforces the idea that human authority is here subordinate to the dragons’ will, as it is finally begrudgingly accepted by the humans who are fighting about the issue, with their representative stating that:

“While tradition has shown us that there is one rider for every dragon, there has never been a case of two dragons selecting the same rider, and therefore there is no dragon law against it,” he declares. “While we riders may not feel as though it is... equitable” —his tone implies that he’s one of them— “dragons make their own laws.” (Yarros 2023a, 188)

Through these narrative choices, Yarros’ text criticises anthropocentrism by exposing the illusion of human control over dragons. The series demonstrates that humanity’s perceived dominance over nature is fundamentally flawed, as seen in the dragons’ clear autonomy and independent decision-making. A sharp contrast is drawn with the venom-wyvern relationship, where the wyverns are depicted as



lacking any agency. They are portrayed as mere extensions of their creator's will, existing solely to follow commands and, ultimately, dying when their creator dies, like broken puppets (Yarros 2023a, 457). This contrast between dragons and wyverns highlights a critique of hierarchical power structures, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of interspecies relationships, where agency is distributed among all beings rather than concentrated in human control.

Moreover, it is important to highlight that the venins who create and control these wyverns are humans who decided to channel directly from the source, the land, and so they became corrupted; as the venom-turned character of Jack Barlowe states, "I made [my choice] the second I saw her [...] bond the most powerful dragon available at Threshing. Why should *they* determine our potential when we're capable of reaching for fate all on our own?" with "they" referring to dragons (Yarros 2023b, 787; emphasis in original). Hence, Yarros' text presents dragons as autonomous beings with significant agency. Far from being instruments of human —or venom— will, the dragons in the *Empyrean* are active participants in shaping their relationships with humans, which is not accepted by the venins.

#### 4. MUTUAL DEPENDENCY AND SHARED SURVIVAL: DRAGONS AND HUMANS AS ALLIES

It is important to note that one of the consequences of the human-dragon bond is that the human characters gain a telepathic link with their dragons, a connection initiated and controlled by the dragons themselves. This telepathic capacity, which is selectively granted to the humans that dragons choose to bond with, reveals the dragons' autonomy. They maintain a complex telepathic network, allowing them to communicate selectively among themselves. As Tairn explains, "[d]ragons only sense each other mind-to-mind when we allow it. As long as they stay downwind, the others will know they're here but won't be able to identify how many or who has come" (Yarros 2023b, 740). This control over their telepathic communication highlights that the bond originates from their agency, not from human influence.

Once formed, the telepathic connection between humans and dragons is central to their interdependent relationship. This concept is not new, having been explored in works like Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonflight* and its sequels, where dragons and humans share telepathic links that enhance mutual survival (Unerman 2002, 97) and, more recently, in Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance Cycle* (2003-2011). However, Yarros' portrayal diverges by focusing on the influence of this bond on identity and power dynamics. Unlike McCaffrey's genetically engineered dragons, who are created to serve human needs, Yarros' dragons seem to retain greater autonomy, with a land of their own and their capacity to disobey human commands, as they only follow the ruling of their own, the *Empyrean* (Yarros 2023a, 182). Hence, we can observe a post-anthropocentric view where dragons and humans exist as equal partners in a shared network of communication. The bond in *Empyrean* thus foregrounds the dragons' independence in shaping the terms of their relationship with humans.





It is in the context of the Anthropocene, which turns all *zoe* into vulnerable subjects, that Rosi Braidotti advises to “cultivate one’s empowerment and to affirm one’s interconnections to others in their complexity” and form posthumanist<sup>6</sup> alliances (2009, 531). In line with Braidotti’s ideas, Donna Haraway proposes “Make Kin Not Babies!” (Haraway 2015, 161). Hence, despite the differences in their approach to dismantling anthropocentrism, both Braidotti and Haraway defend the need to change this anthropocentric view and focus on the *zoe*, which, I argue, could be the case in Yarros’ series, as the venins kill nonhumans and humans alike, and so all forms of life, all *zoe*, is threatened. In this regard, I argue, the series explores the possibility of a posthumanist kind of alliance between dragon and human characters in order to resist the pernicious effects of the corrupted humans, the venins, on land and animal characters.

In this sense, the telepathic connection between dragons and their riders extends beyond mere communication of thoughts. As Violet learns, while she can shield her mind from the dragon’s influence, a complete separation is not possible (Yarros 2023a, 267). Tairn’s assertion, “I am continuously with you” (Yarros 2023b, 384), underscores the depth of this connection. The dragon is capable of accessing Violet’s sensory experiences, as demonstrated when Tairn perceives an assassination attempt through her eyes (Yarros 2023a, 219). This immersive awareness not only deepens their bond but also highlights the complexity of their shared existence, where both entities experience a form of co-embodiment.

Through this bond, Yarros’ narrative challenges the hyperseparation between species that is central to anthropocentric discourses. In Val Plumwood’s words, “[t]he further and more radically we separate ourselves from nature in order to justify its domination, the more we lose the ability to respond to it in ethical and communicative terms” (2002, 2). The telepathic bond in the series dissolves these separations, fostering an integrated relationship between humans and dragons built on empathy and shared agency. This empathy, first exhibited when Violet saved the young dragon, is deepened by the telepathic link. Moreover, it is crucial to recognise that the human-dragon bond does not simply invert the traditional master-slave dynamic seen in the venom-wyvern relationship. Inverting the roles without challenging the structure of oppression would only perpetuate the system of dominance (Meaney 2006, 253). While dragons rely on humans for protection in certain circumstances —particularly when safeguarding their eggs —their dependence is mutual. Humans also require the strength and abilities of dragons for survival, especially in the perilous world of the *Empyrean* series.

The series explicitly underscores that dragons bond with humans not out of subjugation like the wyverns, who are never allowed to accept or reject the bond in the two first novels of the series, but out of necessity for assistance in protecting

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6 Critical Posthumanism here is understood as a post-anthropocentric and *zoe*-centred philosophy in which the human(ist) subject ceases to be the focus of study and the human/non-human hierarchy is rejected (Braidotti 2013, 194).

their breeding grounds —vulnerable areas where their eggs are safeguarded until hatching. These breeding grounds are located within the human kingdom of Navarre. Violet Sorrengail, the protagonist, reflects early in the narrative and before she learns of the existence of venins beyond popular stories and myths, “[i]f they didn’t need us puny humans to develop signet abilities from bonding and weave the protective wards they power around Navarre, I’m pretty sure they’d eat us all and be done. But they like protecting the Vale —the valley behind Basgiath the dragons call home— from merciless gryphons and we like living, so here we are in the most unlikely partnerships” (Yarros 2023a, 53).

As the protagonist’s understanding of the situation deepens, she learns that the gryphons are not the actual enemy. Instead, the primary threat comes from the venins and their wyverns. The kingdom deliberately concealed the wards’ limitations from its citizens, leaving the rest of the world unprotected and reliant on gryphons and their “fliers” for defence. When Violet questions why her people refuse to aid those beyond the wards, Xaden, the protagonist’s love interest, reveals the grim truth: “[b]ecause the only thing that kills venins is the very thing powering our wards” (Yarros 2023a, 424). In other words, if they help those beyond the wards, they also endanger their own security.

Furthermore, the series reveals that this ethical dilemma extends to the dragons as well. As Tairn tells Violet when discussing the matter, “[t]he Emyrean remains divided on whether or not we should get involved” (Yarros 2023b, 95). This statement reveals the crucial role humans play in supporting the dragons because of their signet abilities, even as the dragons retain ultimate control over the bonding process and over whether to help those beyond the wards or not. Moreover, the protagonist and her group challenge both human and dragon characters who prioritise the protection of their own species within the confines of the wards. Their rebellion leads to the destruction of the place where humans are trained to become riders to protect the wards, all while remaining unaware of the existence of venins and wyverns (Yarros 2023b, 745). By opposing this exclusionary stance, they may exemplify a zoe-respecting attitude —one that values and defends all forms of life, regardless of species or geographical boundaries.

Furthermore, the interdependency between humans and dragons is emphasised through the deadly consequences of this bond. As the series states early on “[o]nce bonded, riders can’t live without their dragons, but most dragons can live just fine after us. It’s why they choose carefully, so they’re not humiliated by picking a coward, not that a dragon would ever admit to making a mistake” (Yarros 2023a, 53). In short, “[a] dragon without its rider is a tragedy. A rider without their dragon is dead” (Yarros 2023a, 13). This bond is existential, as seen when Violet’s friend Liam dies shortly after his dragon, Deigh, is killed in battle. Right after the dragon dies, we read: “Liam’s raw scream shatters my heart, and Tairn flares his wings, banking hard to keep us from the same gruesome fate” (Yarros 2023a, 450). Even though he is uninjured, since his dragon has just died, he will follow him in death in minutes. This portrayal underscores a mutual dependency where the human’s survival is directly tied to the dragon’s. Likewise, by marking the human’s life as



dependent on the nonhuman's, this situation would challenge human exceptionalism, with human life no longer being above other forms of life.

While this mutual dependency could be interpreted as an instrumental relationship, where dragons leverage humans to protect their vulnerable eggs and humans rely on dragons for survival, the balance of power is more complex. Violet grapples with the paradox of dragons bonding with human riders despite the risks it poses to their young and the fact that dragons are more powerful than humans:

"I still don't understand why the Empyrean would ever agree to let dragons bond human riders, knowing they'd have to guard their own young not only against gryphon fliers but the very humans they're supposed to trust."

"It's a delicate balance," Tairn replies, banking left to follow the geography. "The First Six riders were desperate to save their people when they approached the dens over six hundred years ago. Those dragons formed the first Empyrean and bonded humans only to protect their hatching grounds from venom, who were the bigger threat. We don't exactly have opposable thumbs for weaving wards or runes. Neither species has ever been entirely truthful, both using the other for their own reasons and nothing more." (Yarros 2023b, 50)

This dialogue encapsulates the essence of the human-dragon alliance: rather than a naïve "friendship," we find an alliance born out of necessity, where both species leverage their unique strengths to survive. Humans needed the dragons' power and the magic they could channel through them, while dragons required humans' dexterity in weaving wards and runes, which were crucial in protecting against the venom, a common enemy. These runes, as potent as the magic humans channel through dragons, are vital for the survival of both species (Yarros 2023b, 617). Hence, the human-dragon bond embodies what Donna Haraway refers to as "messy relating," where power is not centralised but distributed in a complex web of interconnections in which "the partners do not precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with" (2008, 17). In other words, they are not defined by their isolated power but by the interconnectedness and the symbiotic relationships they cultivate. This relational dynamic reflects the broader idea of posthumanist alliances, which challenge the anthropocentric model of domination over nature and propose a more cooperative, multi-species approach to survival. By embracing this model, the series suggests that such alliances may be the most effective way to resist the deadly consequences of the Anthropocene, represented within the narrative by the venins.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Rebecca Yarros' *Empyrean* series reconfigures traditional human-non-human relationships through its depiction of bonds between humans and dragons, offering a profound critique of anthropocentrism. Whereas in classical literature





and mythology, dragons have typically been portrayed as monstrous adversaries, reinforcing a binary distinction between the human and non-human, Yarros' text subverts this dynamic by presenting dragons as sentient, autonomous beings who form reciprocal bonds with humans, challenging established hierarchical systems of control. This critique of anthropocentrism aligns with contemporary ecocritical and posthumanist thought, particularly the work of theorists like Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway, who argue for a rethinking of human-animal relationships based on empathy, shared agency, and mutual respect.

At the heart of *Empyrean* is the telepathic bond between Violet Sorrengail and her dragon, Tairn. This bond exemplifies a dynamic of interdependence, where neither species dominates the other, directly opposing traditional anthropocentric perspectives. Instead of reducing dragons to mere tools for human use, Yarros portrays them as active participants in their relationships with humans, reshaping the narrative surrounding these mythical creatures.

The series also criticises anthropocentrism through the characterisation of the venins and their dragon-like creatures, the wyverns, who embody a destructive and exploitative relationship with nature. By extracting magic directly from the land, the venins illustrate the environmental devastation associated with the Anthropocene. Their approach starkly contrasts with the symbiotic bonds between dragons and humans, highlighting the consequences of treating nature as a resource devoid of agency.

Thus, Yarros' text explores a non-anthropocentric alliance between humans and dragons as a strategic response to the environmental destruction associated with the Anthropocene, exemplified by the venins. Through the intricate portrayal of telepathic bonds, the series reveals how mutual dependence and shared power between species can effectively combat the damaging consequences of ecological degradation. By shifting the narrative from a framework of human supremacy to one that emphasises interspecies cooperation, the *Empyrean* series not only highlights the destructive impact of the Anthropocene but also posits that such alliances are essential for survival. Hence, Yarros' narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the necessity for collaboration across species boundaries in the face of ecological crises, advocating for a future where empathy and shared agency pave the way toward a more sustainable coexistence.

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