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How does Richard Adams, in his book *Watership Down*, use rabbits to convey humanity?

Candidate Number:

Extended Essay
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ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to scrutinize the ways in which the rabbits in *Watership Down* represent human tendencies in order to be able to answer the following research question:

How does Richard Adams, in his book *Watership Down*, use rabbits to convey humanity?

It addresses this question by firstly examining the metaphorical warrens which clearly exemplify different human government regimes and their successes and failures. The regimes include those of a dictatorship, a democracy and an anarchy. Clear allusions to human examples of these types of government regimes are also presented in order to prove the reflection of humanity.

The essay then proceeds by discussing the rabbits' culture, being strikingly similar to human cultures by having their own religion and language. It also shows how Adams has used extracts from famous works in the beginning of each chapter in order to connect the human culture with the rabbits'.

Furthermore, a thorough analysis of the human traits projected through the rabbits is deliberated as they portray courage, common sense, compassion and altruism which are not to be found in ordinary rabbits but is a mere manifestation of humanity. It also deals with the fact that the rabbits evolve as the story progresses and rely on miracles, which are usually classified as human tendencies.

Finally the essay reveals a personal opinion of the book and its impact, as well as concluding the issues and arguments presented by proving that *Watership Down* is a story written with characters that are rabbits, as means to describe humanity.

Word count: 255

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I. Introduction

Watership Down depicts the lives of rabbits whose long journey begins with Fiver's, a seer's, vision of their home filled with blood and death. Based on this, Fiver's brother Hazel helps to gather a group of rabbits who sets out to find a new home. These tiny pilgrims are then forced to face unspeakable dangers; predators, humans and a torn community of rabbits until they finally find their warren, called Watership Down. Consequently, after having realized that they will need does, female rabbits, in order to secure the warren's future, they take on a new journey to a neighboring warren, Efrafa, to ask for some. Unfortunately they come up against an even more dangerous adversary than predators, namely a group of hostile rabbits.

It has always been speculated about the fact that humans are descended from animals and that the striking similarities between them should not be overlooked. Therefore, the reason for which this book is of analytical value is that it is able to portray human characteristics and fallacies by using rabbits as protagonists.

Moreover, one can only speculate as to why Adams chose rabbits to tell a story about people. One of the main reasons why this could be an effective way of conveying a meaningful lesson is that the rabbits are neutral. They are neutral in a sense that they are similar to many human aspects, but are in no way identical to them. This makes them a lot easier to relate to as opposed to if the rabbits had been religious Christians or Muslims etc. This neutrality also creates a non-accusing atmosphere because even though it is possible to claim that Efrafa is the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin's regime, it is never mentioned. This fact will prevent children from blaming people and even countries for past mistakes. On the other hand, they will still understand that there are such atrocities in the world and learn from them.

Furthermore, a thorough investigation of the anthropomorphic rabbits will be carried out in order to prove that Adams employs rabbits to express humanity.

II. Warrens as Metaphors

The first trace of human influences in the book can be found in the various warrens encountered by our heroic rabbit pilgrims. The warrens follow certain policies equivalent to human governments. One of these warrens, called Efrafa, is a totalitarian state ruled by the ruthless dictator General Woundwort. Through means of a secret police, called the Owsla, and brutal laws he is able to control everyone in his warren, with his only rationale for this being that it is for their own safety. The fact that this rabbit dictator exploits strict laws and a secret police in order to gain total dominance, can be alluded to many totalitarian dictatorships in human history such as Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany and Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union. Both Stalin and Hitler used force in order to prevent resistance and remain in control.

Similarly, General Woundwort effectively punishes anyone who tries to leave the warren. A concrete example of this is the rabbit Blackaver whose failed attempt to escape cost him dearly. He is to be guarded around the clock and is displayed at daytime in order to stand as an example to the others, but also to be able to recite his misdoings: "Every Mark should see how I have been punished as I deserve for my treachery in trying to leave the warren."¹ This sort of treatment can be seen in human prisons. An example of this kind is the story of Slavomir Rawicz who escapes from a Soviet prison in Siberia during Stalin's regime, which he later describes in his book *The Long Walk*. Similarly to the rabbits in Efrafa the prisoners in the Siberian prison would suffer severe consequences if they were to try to escape: "the prisoner was left in no doubt that a deviation off course to right or left would mean death from the carbine or pistol of the guards marching two paces behind him"²

Another warren worth mentioning is the one referred to as, "Crowslip's warren". This warren clearly demonstrates a society without any type of government. Although the rabbits in the warren have access to rare food such as lettuce and carrots their warren is not prospering. Their numbers are declining and the protagonists are able to detect a depressed atmosphere: "They all

¹ Adams, p.322

² As quoted in Thomason p.350

seem terribly sad. I can't think why, when they're so big and strong and have this beautiful warren. But they put me in mind of trees in November."³ Although a perfect warren to the naked eye, the rabbits in Cowslip's warren have to deal with problems different from those of predators and lack of food, namely man. This particular man exploits Cowslip's warren to its fullest by leaving extravagant food for them in the woods and killing all potential predators only so that he can kill one or two of them as he pleases. This fact, even though well known among the inhabitants of the warren, is kept quiet and anyone who mentions it is instantly punished. By ignoring reality, they are living in a pseudo-paradise ultimately leading to their deaths. They have consciously exchanged freedom for familiarity since they are aware of the man hunting them but choose to stay since there will always be food and no predators. As they have grown accustomed to this way of living they have forgotten how to be "real" rabbits. They do not know how to find their own food and are dependent on the man. They do not function as a society either since cooperation and decision-making does not occur regularly as there is no need. The warren does not even have a Chief Rabbit, a leader, which also highlights the fact that their society has no sense of structure: "'We don't call anyone Chief Rabbit,' he said, 'It was Cowslip's idea to go and see you this afternoon, so he was the one who went.'"⁴ Although it can be argued that the rabbits' leader is the man, he cannot keep the society intact. The rabbits have therefore forgotten how to think for themselves which has ultimately changed them from a society to a group of rabbits.

This type of government can be compared to an anarchical society where there is no leader or laws. A human example similar to this is the community of Freetown Christiania in Denmark where people, more or less, do as they please.⁵ This controversial way of ruling has become the anomaly of today's governing regimes since its lawless policies indirectly encourage crimes such as cannabis trade. This abnormality and uniqueness can therefore be compared to "Cowlip's warren" where they stand out from regular rabbits by constructing artistic structures, not having any concrete rules or leader, not worshiping rabbit mythology in the same way and by laughing,

³ Adams p.91

⁴ Adams p.86

⁵ www.christiania.org/inc/guide/?lan=gb&side=10

which is all very unnatural to ordinary rabbits: “Then he [Cowslip] laughed...Hazel’s first idea was that Cowslip was showing the symptom of some kind of disease.”⁶

As Adams describes the structures of totalitarianism and the flaws of having no government, he also touches on the principles of democracy. When our protagonists finally find their warren, Watership Down, they create a fair and effective democratic community. Their leader, Hazel, is cunning, fair-minded and encourages free speech. Also the fact that all the rabbits play a part in the development of the warren highlights the structured nature of their way of living. The way Hazel, or democracy, ultimately triumphs in the end enforces the fact that democracy prevails.

Based on this, Watership Down can be described as a reflection of human society and the corporate state. It can therefore be plausible to believe that Adams used the warrens as symbols for different kinds of government.

⁶ Adams p.90

⁷ Yanarella & Sigelman p.54

III. A Similar Culture

Another crucial human element in the book is the way the rabbits have created their own culture. This culture distinguishes itself through the rabbits' way of communicating. As a way of socializing, the rabbits tell stories of the mythical El-ahrairah, who is something of a divine role-model. This role-model is very hard to define since he takes on so many important roles in the novel. He can be compared to Jesus Christ, since he acts like a prophet by speaking to God, but also because he leads his people. Moreover, El-ahrairah is an inspiration to the other rabbits and is someone who brings hope and unity to his people, much like Jesus Christ. This hope that they bring is manifested in the idea that anything is possible. Jesus Christ proved this by cheating death and resurrecting, El-ahrairah by being able to get what he wants through wits and tricks.⁸ An example of this is when El-ahrairah is able to steal lettuce from a King's guarded garden: "And from that day to this, no power on earth can keep a rabbit out of a vegetable garden, for El-ahrairah prompts them with a thousand tricks, the best in the world."⁹ On the other hand, it would be more accurate to claim that he is more like a rabbit-Hercules from the Greek mythology. This is because he is a bit superior to the rest of the rabbits, in terms of wits, not strength- but he is not genuinely divine. Also the fact that El-ahrairah is famous for defying God and deceiving people could strengthen this connection to Hercules.

Evidently, in order to have a prophet, a God is a needed and Lord Frith, in *Watership Down*, is the equivalence of this.¹⁰ Similarly to humans, the rabbits use this God to explain the unexplainable, like how the Earth was created: "Long ago, Frith made the world. He made all the stars too and the world is one of the stars."¹¹ In comparison to the following quote from the Old Testament in the Bible it is easy to notice the resemblance: "In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth..."¹²

⁸ Timmerman p.96

⁹ Adams p.110

¹⁰ Timmerman p.95

¹¹ Adams p.37

¹² Genesis 1:1

Another reference to the Bible can be seen when Dandelion tells a story similar to that of Noah's Ark: "about a time when Frith had to go away on a journey, leaving the whole world to be covered with rain. But a man built a great, floating hutch that held all the animals and the birds until Frith returned and let them out."¹³ This then indicates that Adams used the Bible as an influence in order to create the rabbits' own mythology, which proves the human origin.

Moreover, Lord Frith in Lapine language literally means "The Lord Sun", which means that the rabbits worship the sun. This fact makes it possible to compare the rabbits to the Aztecs present in central Mexico during the 14th century, who also worshiped a "Sun God".¹⁴ This validates the fact that Adams has taken bits and pieces of human mythology in order to create a rabbit mythology. Lord Frith is also used in everyday speech similarly to the human God(s). By translating expressions such as "For God's sake" into "For Frith's sake"¹⁵, Adams makes this human influence even more apparent to the reader.

Another well-known reference character in the book is the Black Rabbit of Inlé who can be compared to the Grim Reaper since they are both the psychopomps (guides of souls) in death. There are multiple numbers of religious belief systems in human cultures which have a spirit of some kind whose purpose is to escort souls to the after-life. This similarity is yet another reason for believing that Adams based many of his characters and ideas on already existing examples from the human world.

This mythology or religion promotes unification among the rabbits and also gives inspiration to new innovative ideas by learning from El-ahrairah. Similarly to human cultures, the myths help to interpret events that cannot be fully understood. A concrete example of this from the novel is when Holly and his friends, all part of Hazel's warren, escape from Efrafa and end up being chased by the Owslan guards. Fortunately for Holly, they manage to pass a railway track just before a train comes. This train eventually hits the Owslan guards, killing them and ending the

¹³ Adams p.216

¹⁴ Von Hagen p.159

¹⁵ Adams p.62

chase. When Holly later re-tells the story to Hazel and the others, he describes the train as a miracle from Lord Frith: “Lord Frith sent one of his great Messengers to save us from the Efracan Owsla.”¹⁶

According to Denis de Rougemont, from “Love in the Western World”, myths also create a purpose and a place: “a myth expresses the rules of conduct of a social or religious group. It issues from whatever sacred principle has presided over the formation of the group.”¹⁷ This quote strengthens the fact that the rabbits have become more of a society thanks to its mythology and also that they are represented by the myths that they believe in, which can also be applied to human situations. It can therefore be argued for that the Lapine mythology presented in the novel is similar to many human mythologies.

Since mythology is a part of our culture, as is our language and this human factor is also presented in the novel. The rabbits have created their own Lapine language and it is clear that the other animals, apart from the rabbits, also have their own language. “Mice do not speak Lapine, but there is a very simple, limited *lingua franca* of the hedgerow and woodland.”¹⁸ The fact that the rabbits need language in order to communicate highlights the human elements in the book since rabbits normally communicate through body language, whereas humans also rely on verbal communication similarly to the rabbits in the book. This makes the rabbits seem more human. This Lapine language is an innovative form of the English language with additions of words in order to supplement the already existing vocabulary. These new words are basically substitutes for things which the rabbits have a difficulty in grasping.¹⁹ These things usually fall in the category of modern day technology, such as “hrududu” which can be translated into some sort of motorized vehicle.²⁰ By using these words it is also possible to derive the rabbit’s feelings towards these objects, “Hrududu” being hard and onomatopoeic and “elil”, meaning predator, being very similar to the word “evil” etc.

¹⁶ Adams p.249

¹⁷ Rougemont p.18

¹⁸ Adams p.153

¹⁹ Hunt p.429

²⁰ Hunt p.430

Another way of verifying the connection between the rabbits and humanity is by examining the quotes in the beginning of each chapter. The quotes are well renowned extracts that describe what is to happen in the following chapter. This theory can be proven in the very first chapter:

CHORUS: Why do you cry out thus, unless at some vision of horror?

CASSANDRA: The house reeks of death and dripping blood.

CHORUS: How so? 'Tis but the odour of the altar of sacrifice.

CASSANDRA: The stench is like a breath from the tomb.

Aeschylus Agamemnon.²¹

It becomes very clear that this extract describes what happens in the first chapter. This is when Fiver has his vision of the warren being covered in blood. So “the house” could refer to the warren and “the tomb” as well since it implies that the warren will become a tomb full of dead rabbits. “The vision of horror” is clearly addressing Fiver’s vision. The events of the first chapter can also be compared to the actual content of the story of Agamemnon. Agamemnon is briefly a story of revenge. Clytaemnestra, Agamemnon’s wife, is vengeful because her husband sacrificed their daughter at Aulis so that he and the Greek fleet could sail to Troy safely in order to fight the Trojans. As Agamemnon returns, he brings with him a captive, a Trojan princess named Cassandra. Cassandra suspects Clytaemnestra’s plot of murderous revenge on both herself and Agamemnon and so tries to warn the Chorus of Elders. Unfortunately, they do not believe her and Clytaemnestra succeeds in murdering them. This plot is very similar to that of the first chapter in *Watership Down*. Clytaemnestra symbolizes the, to the naked eye, safe and familiar warren. Cassandra plays the role of the seer who predicts these deaths, which is why she can be compared to Fiver. Using a well-known reference like this to describe the rabbits emphasizes Adams use of allegory between the rabbit culture and the human culture which instantly enables people to draw connections between the two.

²¹ Adams p.15

Furthermore, based on the evidence presented, it can be assumed that the rabbit's culture has its origin in several human cultures of today's society.

IV. Rabbits with Human Traits

A clear reference to humanity is the human traits projected through the protagonists. These human traits are rarely seen among animals which makes the uniqueness of them easier to pinpoint. Common sense, courage, compassion and altruism are all a part of a personal opinion of which these distinguished human traits are and these traits are all major ingredients in the protagonists' personalities. A concrete example of when these traits are demonstrated in the book is when Bigwig decides to bring Blackaver, the prisoner in Efrafa, with him to Watership Down even though he is only supposed to bring back does, female rabbits. This compassion and kindness cannot be seen in an ordinary rabbit situation since they usually tend to follow the "every man for himself"-attitude. This then emphasizes these human traits mentioned above, making the rabbits appear to be more human.

A more specific human trait would be a human's expertise in adapting. Humans, as well as other animals, have a way of evolving in accordance with the environment and the circumstances. This also applies to the rabbits in the book, where they cross a river on a raft, which has never been done before, and dig a warren despite the fact that that is a job for does, female rabbits.

Furthermore, the fact that the protagonists are willing to indulge in outer-species relations in order to achieve some extra aid in their never-ending adventure, is also a way of adapting. An example of this is when Hazel realizes that Watership Down needs does in order to survive and decides to befriend a hostile, injured bird so that he can help: "The bird. The bird will go and search for us."²² This strengthens the assumption that in order for the rabbits to survive, they have to adapt to their current circumstances. This can be seen in many human examples, for example in cases of emigration, where the person in question is forced to adapt to the current society and customs.

Furthermore, believing in miracles and relying on God could also be seen as a human habit. This aspect is also well presented in the book, like the train-incident with Holly. This type of belief in

²² Adams p.196

miracles often occurs in times of change and fear. A type of change could be a pilgrimage, much like the rabbits'. A similar human example of this is found in "The Archetype of Pilgrimage", by Jean Dalby Clift and Wallace B. Clift, where relying on God and miracles is also a part of surviving the pilgrimage: "I prayed. After a time, the first of my miracles occurred. The snow storm stopped, the wind died down, and the sky cleared leaving only a huge full moon in the sky. I took that to be a sign that I would survive."²³

Even though there are a lot of human traits present in these tiny pilgrims, Adams' research on rabbits was not in vain since "the plot degenerates into the adventures of animals with human brains."²⁴ Finally, it is plausible to claim that Adams gives the rabbits a consciousness similar to a human consciousness; otherwise he keeps them as rabbits.

²³ As quoted in Thomason p.349

²⁴ As quoted in Thomason p.348

V. Conclusion

In conclusion it is possible claim that Adams, with the use of anthropomorphism, is able to make the rabbits of *Watership Down* reflect humanity. He is able to do this by having the warrens stand as metaphors for human governments, creating a culture similar to human ones, presenting the rabbits with human qualities and having clear references to human works in every chapter. This is not merely a well constructed stylistic device to make people understand the importance of informing children of the truth and learn from past mistakes, but it is also a way of presenting it in a neutral way. This is the reason why *Watership Down* can be looked upon as a book of self-criticism and revelations, though presented in a very subtle way. This strategy has been used many times before since it is very effective to exercise anthropomorphic fictions in order to criticize political and social abuses²⁵. This is also the reason why the humanization of fables can be seen as an expression on human society. Moreover, as seen in many other fable-like fictions, such as *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, animals are ideal tools for moral tales.

Moreover, according to Adams himself he “derived early the idea that one must at all costs tell the truth to children, not so much about mere physical pain and fear, but about the really unanswerable things.”²⁶ Thomas Hardy, a writer, called this truth “the essential grimness of the human situation”²⁷ and so Adams chose a tale about rabbits to explain just that.

A personal reaction to this book is that one is never able to look the same way at a rabbit again. A rabbit is now someone with a personality, an agenda and a story. Despite the fact the rabbits are fictional and a major deviation from what ordinary rabbits are like, it is still difficult not to relate to and learn from them. *Watership Down* does so much more than tell a fictional story about rabbits, it enlightens.

²⁵ Hunt p.429

²⁶ As quoted in Thomason p.337-338

²⁷ As quoted in Thomason p.338

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