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ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN RICHARD ADAMS' *WATERSHIP DOWN*

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work written using solely the sources and literature properly quoted and acknowledged as works cited.

V Českých Budějovicích dne 6.5.2024

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Nováková Aneta

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## **Anotace**

Bakalářská práce se zaměřuje na antropomorfismus v románu *Daleká cesta za domovem* (*Watership Down*, 1972) Richarda Adamse. V první části se práce věnuje antropomorfismu jako fenoménu a jeho vnímání v historickém kontextu, převážně pak v literární tvorbě a pop kultuře, také prozkoumá vyobrazení králíků v různých kulturách. Samotná analýza se zaměří na antropomorfizované zvířecí hrdiny knihy *Daleká cesta za domovem* s důrazem na jejich psychologii, chování a sociální životy, včetně mezidruhové vztahy a jimi utvořené společnosti. Pozornost bude věnována i mytologii králíků a nadpřirozeným schopnostem, kterými některá zvířata v příběhu oplývají.

**Klíčová slova:** antropomorfismus; Richard Adams; *Daleká cesta za domovem*; zvířata v literatuře

## **Annotation**

The bachelor's thesis focuses on anthropomorphism in the novel *Watership Down* (1972) by Richard Adams. The first part of the thesis explores anthropomorphism as a phenomenon and its perception throughout history, especially in literature and pop culture, as well as the portrayal of rabbits across different cultures. The analysis will concentrate on the anthropomorphized animal heroes in *Watership Down*, emphasizing their psychology, behaviour, and their social lives, that includes both interspecies relationships and the societies they form. Attention will also be given to the mythology of rabbits and the supernatural abilities possessed by some animals in the story.

**Key words:** anthropomorphism; Richard Adams; *Watership Down*; animals in literature

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## Introduction

The concept of anthropomorphism has been and continues to be profoundly examined within the expanding field of animal studies, a scientific domain that is progressively gaining on popularity and recognition. Animal studies study the relationship between humans and non-human species across various disciplines including art and literary studies. It analyses how the animals are represented in stories throughout history and how the said representation was affected by the historical and cultural context, and simultaneously how the work could have impacted the general public's perception of animals. Among such well-known impactful stories, we can find Richard Adams's novel *Watership Down* (1972), which tells a story of anthropomorphized animals, rabbits to be exact, and their journey to find a new home in the British countryside.

Richard Adams was a British novelist; his literary works, whose attract a diverse readership span from children to adults. Apart from being a writer, he was also a civil servant, where he worked in the Department of Environment, and an animal rights activist (Ousby 6). He published several nonfiction books, all of which's, except for his autobiography *Days Gone By* (1990), focal point is nature and the environment. Examples of such works are: *Nature Through the Seasons* (1975) and *Nature Day and Night* (1978) (both cowritten with Max Hopper), *A Nature Diary* (1985) (a Richard Adams's collection of fauna), or *Voyage Through the Antarctic* (1982) (a travelogue Adams cowrote with Ronald Lockley, documenting their journey through the Antarctic and its wildlife). It is no wonder that his love for nature and his passion for the cause of helping animals and saving the environment has bled into his literary works, both fiction and nonfiction, where it often serves as the main theme, or the nature even portrays the main protagonist itself. While not all of Adams's works focus on nature as the main element, in the ones that do the reoccurring motifs in the stories are nature vs civilization and the cruelties of humankind committed against non-human

creatures and the world around us. Adams tended to use his work to raise awareness of such unethical practices. To achieve this, he employed various levels of anthropomorphism in his animal heroes within his fictional narratives, aiming to evoke empathy in his audience for the mistreated beings. This have led to him being known by some as “the author known for reinvigorating the genre of anthropomorphic fiction” (Pallardy). The phenomenon of anthropomorphism can be observed in various degrees in most of his fiction where animals play a significant role. Among such works belongs for example: *Watership Down* (1972), *Shardik* (1974), *Plague Dogs* (1977), and *Traveller* (1988).

*Watership Down* was Richard Adams first and most famous novel. Originally, he made up the story for his daughters, Juliet and Rosamond, while on a long car drive. The story captured the girls’ interest so much that they insisted on writing it down. However, getting the story published was not an easy feat at first as Adams was turned down by several publishing houses before it was finally accepted by Rex Collins, where it was classified as a children literature despite the graphic descriptions of violence in the lives of the rabbits (Ousby 6).

I selected *Watership Down* as the subject of my bachelor thesis among all the mentioned books because the anthropomorphism depicted in the story is uniquely crafted, distinct from any other work by the author. Richard Adams created an intricate immersive world of rabbits with fantastical elements, yet the story feels grounded within the limits of our own reality, just outside our perception where the author functions as a mediator pulling back the veil in order for us to be able to get a glimpse of this wonderful realm. This is unlike any other author’s work as in his other books the animal stories are still closely interlaced with humans. But while there are some major plot points caused by the doings of humans, for the most time they are absent from the story, allowing the rabbits to have more presence and to exist in their natural habitat. The rabbits even have their own language, mythology and even animal prophets, while navigating in a complex society of the warrens. As most anthropomorphized



stories, *Watership Down* has been classified as a children literature, despite its graphic depictions of violence and mature themes such as the authoritarian regime, that are much better suited for more mature audience; a curse that seems to befallen many of animal stories as they tend to be viewed as childish, especially if the species depicted is perceived by the general public as “cute” and “docile”, which is a category rabbits for sure fall into.

My aim is to examine the anthropomorphization of the rabbits in the novel and to demonstrate how it affects their representation. A special focus is paid to the psychology of the animal heroes, arguing that the rabbits retain much of their natural instinctual behaviour, while also being given psychological aspects typical for humans. Additionally, I intend to determine whether the anthropomorphism is solely rooted in their psychology or if there are instances of unnatural physical behaviour exhibited by the animals.

In order to proceed, the first chapter is dedicated to anthropomorphism itself. It deals with the theoretical part and is divided into two subsections. The first subchapter introduces a definition of the term, which is then followed by a discussion of the issues of anthropomorphism containing arguments in favour of and against attributing human characteristics and behaviour to animals, while mentioning how the attitude towards this phenomenon has changed throughout the history. The last part of this chapter summarizes the symbolic depiction of rabbits across different cultures and pop-culture and analyse how the protagonists being specifically rabbits might affect the anthropomorphism of them.

The second chapter deals with the behaviour and psychology of the rabbits. Under the first section, I present examples of comparisons between rabbits and humans provided in the book while commenting on them. The internal mental processes of the rabbits and humanlike mentality such as critical thinking and ability to plan for the future are understood to be a part of the psychology of the rabbits and a separate subchapter is dedicated to this. I pay attention to how the rabbits behave, try to draw a line to what extent are their action instinctual and

realistic, how the effect of anthropomorphism manifests in the text. The second chapter's focal point is the culture of the rabbits. Under this chapter I include the language of the rabbits and its unique aspects, including terminology of the rabbits. Under this chapter I also incorporate a subchapter dedicated to the names of the rabbits, their analysis and what purpose does it serve in the storytelling.

In the next chapter I move on the topic of the rabbits as social creatures, where I try to analyse the relationships between rabbits and other animals and to what extent is the depiction realistic. The last chapter is dedicated to rabbits as a community, with the first subchapter focusing on the relationships among the rabbits, hierarchy and structure of different warrens depicted in the story, while also briefly discussing their culture and customs. The last two subchapters pay attention to the mythology, or analysis of the myths within the story and how it affects the rabbits in terms of anthropomorphism to be precise, and the supernatural aspect of the book, namely the animal prophets.

# **1 The Phenomenon of Anthropomorphism**

## **1.1 The controversy of anthropomorphism**

I believe that it is important to start with the definition of what anthropomorphism exactly is. Across various dictionaries, the definition of the term slightly differs, from one another, and each could fit more appropriately into various disciplines. However, the essential parts stay immutable and that is that anthropomorphism is the process of ascribing non-humans with human-like characteristics. For my thesis I decided to follow the definition from the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995): “The showing or treating of animals, gods and objects as if they are human in appearance, character or behaviour” (“Anthropomorphism” 49). This definition mentions both ‘showing’ (how we choose to portray the animals) and ‘treating’ (our attitude towards them), includes animals and inanimate objects as recipients, and incorporates both physical and psychological attributes ascribed to them, as well as character.

Now that it has been established that anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human characteristics to non-human, it is obvious that this phenomenon has been present in human culture for a very long time, seemingly since the beginning. However, it is no question that how we perceive our fellow non-human inhabitants of our world and our relationship towards them has changed drastically throughout history, from prey and source of livelihood to companionship. Obviously, this has affected the conversation around anthropomorphism. The aim of this chapter is to serve as a brief introduction into this conversation; it will give a quick overview of how the perception of the term has changed throughout the history and acquaint the reader with some of the arguments in favour of anthropomorphism and against it, as to this day the issue of anthropomorphism remains to be surrounded by controversy.

The first ever recorded academic discussion of anthropomorphism is credited to Greeks all the way back to 500 B.C., the discussion was based on the notion that, as Jay Blanchard

puts it, “the unknown must be similar to the known if thoughts or actions are to be understood, expressed or made bearable, furthermore, for actions or thoughts to be understood, the unknown must be related to life as humans know it” (587). In other words, anthropomorphism was viewed as an attempt to understand the unknown by comparing it to familiar, this certainly still rings true even in today’s climate surrounding the term. However, as Claire Parkinson points out, it was not until the first decades of the twentieth century that anthropomorphism had come to be associated with the attribution of uniquely human qualities to other non-human animals as up until that point, approximately the second half of the nineteenth century it described ascribing those attributes and form to deities and other mythical beings (2). This attribution is understood by many as a natural psychological process that is even more observable, as Blanchard points out, especially in younger children. But with the rise of animal studies this attempt at identification has come to be recognized as highly problematic as observed by Kari Weil: “as a process of identification, the urge to anthropomorphize the experience of another, like the urge to empathize with that experience, risks becoming a form of narcissistic projection that erases boundaries of difference” (19). The argument is that by making animals more human-like, their unique qualities and individual experiences are being ignored, risking losing sight of them as beings in their own rights. This can be especially noticeable in family-friendly environments (like Disney for example), where animals are turned into products for entertainment, and their individual complexity is overlooked.

Maybe this connection contributes to the notion of anthropomorphism being viewed as childish and sentimental. Yet, as observed by Richard Ryder, “the words ‘anthropomorphism’ and ‘sentimentality’, both widely used in twentieth century Britain to disparage those who treated non-human animals in ways considered to be only appropriate to humans, were unheard in this context until after Darwin’s day” (164). These two words began to be

associated together after the Darwin's age and the rise of science that followed. Ryder suggests in his text that those were used as a "the animal exploiter's defences against the logical implications of Darwinism", as one form of treating animals in a human-like manner (using them as proxies in research) was not considered anthropomorphic, while expressing concern for the well-being of the animals in the same context was sometimes dismissed as sentimental anthropomorphism (164). Parkinson ascribes this to a dualism of "feminization of emotion" and "masculinized discourse of scientific objectivity" (5). According to Parkinson and other feminist scholars, the feminization of emotion refers to associating emotion with feminine qualities resulting in the negative view of anthropomorphism being linked to the idea that it is too emotional or sentimental, traits traditionally associated with femininity, while the masculinized discourse of scientific objectivity is the opposite, where scientific objectivity is portrayed as a more masculine quality, claiming that scientific thinking is often seen as rational, objective, and unemotional. Therefore, the negative view of anthropomorphism is built on this contrast, suggesting that anthropomorphism is emotional and feminine, contrasting with a more rational and masculine scientific perspective that distances itself from what is perceived as more primitive, a view that still prevails in majority of social circles.

The sentimentality of anthropomorphism remains as the greatest criticism of the phenomenon as it is seen as a mere "self-indulgent expression of misplaced emotions towards other species" (Parkinson 8). Emotions have been criticized and diminished as primitive and not as advanced as human intellect. This criticism is linked to a belief in the idea that humans are exceptionally evolved. According to this perspective, emotions are often associated with a "primitive" past in the evolutionary process, the fear of going back to a more primitive state is present in stories that connect emotions with behaving like animals; this way of thinking has a long history, dating back to ancient philosophers like Plato (Parkinson 10). The odd part is

that while “emotion is conceived of as animal-like, yet animals have historically been denied the capacity for emotion and in some spheres, emotion still remains a specifically human characteristic” (Parkinson 10). Parkinson points out that some people criticize emotional connection to animals, thinking that having emotions means you are not thinking rationally; they create a separation between emotions and reason, suggesting that emotions are unreliable and can be easily manipulated (9). In this way of thinking, anthropomorphism is seen as a way to manipulate emotions.

In literature, sentimentalism has been thought of as a “lesser” form of literature produced by women or popular writers that, through convention, stock characters and rhetorical devices aimed to arouse the emotions (Nyman and Schuurman 66). Science and “serious art” in western cultures widely rejects anthropomorphism and dismisses it for its sentimentality (Parkinson 2). For the exact reason anthropomorphism has been accused of being immature and childish, therefore only fit for younger audiences, which can be observed even in the case of Richard Adams’s novel *Watership Down* as the novel is classified as children literature despite its mature themes and violent descriptions.

According to Parkinson, history shows us that anthropomorphism reflects how we understand ourselves and our understanding of what it means to be a human. The anthropomorphism of Victorian Britain unveils the hierarchies of that time’s societies and sensibilities the same way that today’s contemporary anthropomorphism reflects the social and cultural norms and attitudes of today (Parkinson 22). Parkinson claims that the way we think about anthropomorphism does not necessarily provide that much insight into human-animal relationships, but instead tells us more about the norms of that time as an “object of discourse that relies on the notion that humans are different from other species” (22). By the early 20th century, practices that humanized animals were criticized in science and serious art, yet they continued to still be embraced in popular culture. Early twentieth-century western

science actively avoided attributing qualities to animals that were considering uniquely human, while serious art and literature refused sentimental anthropomorphism of the nineteenth century. This rejection was linked to ideas of modernism, professionalism, and credibility, suggesting that human intellectual maturity meant moving towards a rational scientific understanding of the world, which meant away from anthropomorphic tendencies (Parkinson 22). Frans de Waal came with division of anthropomorphism into two categories: naïve anthropomorphism - furthermore distinguishing what he calls paedomorphism (attributing animals with infantile features) and satirical anthropomorphism (stereotyping animals for the purpose of mocking humans) – and animal-centric anthropomorphism. According to him, most of popular culture uses examples of naïve anthropomorphism, which is deemed as innately anthropocentric (“regarding mankind as the centre of existence” “The Oxford Dictionary” 56) as it is based on our limited knowledge of animals and therefore it “attributes human feelings and thoughts to animals based on insufficient information or wishful thinking” (72-73).

Anthropomorphism can be criticized for erasure of difference, simplifying the complexity of the experience of non-human animals and argue that it forces a human framework upon it, throwing all anthropomorphism into the category of “problematic sentiment” disparages its affect while simultaneously failing to address popular narratives that addressed the public concerns and anxieties of their time (Parkinson 39). Arguments in favour of anthropomorphism mention “a capacity for imaginative appreciation of another’s perspective” and its role in “the development of empathetic relationships with other animals” (Parkinson 2). It is no doubt, that anthropomorphism helps raise awareness and concerns for the well-being of animals by engaging our empathy for them, something that was used by many activist writers, including Richard Adams, that used their work with anthropomorphized animal protagonists for that purpose. Moreover, Daston and Mitman point out that in literature

anthropomorphism can be used to explore alternative plots and personalities and to experiment with narrative where not only are the similarities important, but the differences are equally essential (7). For an example we can have a look at fables, a literary genre most notable for anthropomorphized animal protagonists, where “the characters are stripped of characterization down to prototypes; the fox is cunning, the lion is brave, the dog is loyal, etc”, if the story was told with human counterparts, the narrative would fall flat (Daston and Mitman 9). But while fables and their prototypes were popular especially during the Middle Ages, in modern stories the focus has shifted more towards individualism, which again reflects societal norms and attitudes, especially the “modern preoccupation with the individual” (Daston and Mitman 9).

In conclusion, the phenomenon of anthropomorphism has been present in our culture since the ancient Greece, where the ancient philosophers understood it as an attempt to understand the unknown through familiar experience. However, after the Scientific revolution anthropomorphism was viewed as primitive and sentimental. It became associated with the feminization of emotion. During the early twentieth century, western science and serious art rejected anthropomorphism, but it still preserved in the popular culture. Especially in literature, anthropomorphism offers new ways of experimentation with new techniques and narratives. Many activist writers used animal narratives to raise awareness and concerns for the well-being of animals. This ability to evoke empathy for other beings remains to be the strongest argument in favour of anthropomorphism. The demand for animal stories has not decreased, however, the focus of those stories has just shifted to fit our norms of modern age.



## 1.2 Rabbits in religion, cultures and pop-culture

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, in fables, different animal species were used to depict different character prototypes, like for example the fox being cunning and the lion brave. This association of animals with certain traits is common in many cultures and religions. But what about the rabbits? What meaning do they carry in various cultures? And what about their depiction in today's pop-culture? In this subchapter, I try to summarise different traits associated with rabbits across various cultures and religions, as well as commenting on some of the depictions of rabbits in modern western popular culture.

Undoubtedly, one of the best-known rabbit symbolisms in our cultural environment is the Easter Bunny. However, in the bible the species does not play an important role, in fact the only mention about rabbits in the Bible are in the Old Testament where it states it is prohibited to eat their meat ("Hopping Through Cultures"). And yet they had become a symbol for the most important Christian holiday. That is due to rabbits being associated with the idea of rebirth, which is probably due to their ability to reproduce at an alarmingly fast rate ("Hoping Through Cultures"). This idea of rebirth and resurrection is present in other cultures as well, as observed by Thomas and Waterman, many Asian cultures, including Indian, Chinese, and Japanese, share a myth of a "rabbit on the moon" rather than "man in the moon" that is popular in the western hemisphere (121). In the Indian myth the rabbit is granted an eternal life on the moon after offering itself as a sacrifice to be eaten, similar legend can be found in Aztec culture as well ("Hoping Through Cultures"). Stoker and Stoker observed that in medieval Europe Catholics thought of rabbits as figures of salvation, because of its small frame and vulnerability "a rabbit becomes an emblem of humankind, which without the saving power of Christ would be incapable of salvation" (267-268). Furthermore, rabbits emerging from their burrows were sometimes seen as "an image of the resurrection of the dead in the Apocalypse, and hence of the end of the process of salvation" (Stoker and Stoker

270). In contrast, ancient Celtic traditions believed rabbits were able to freely travel the underworld and back as they lived in large underground burrows, that were supposedly connected to the realm of the dead, as claimed by Alicia Ezpeleta (52). The Chinese believed rabbits to live incredibly old (hundreds of years in fact) and the hare to be created “from the covering of the pill of immortality” (Ezpeleta 42). The rabbits have also been seen as a symbol of fearfulness, due to them being a prey animal that is easily frightened, yet paradoxically, in some they evoked fear as in some circles they were believed to be bewitched animals and even incarnations of witches (Ezpeleta 52). Rabbits are often associated with good luck and the tradition of using a rabbit foot as a good luck charm, this supposedly dates all the way back to the sixth century BC (Thomas and Waterman 120). In China, the rabbit is believed to be the luckiest of the twelve zodiac animals of the Chinese year. Many of the cultures in Africa and tribes of Native Americans saw rabbits as clever and sometimes a cunning trickster (Ezpeleta 45). Some of the North American Algonquin tribes refused to hunt rabbits, for they were believed to be the guardians of a secret knowledge related to the afterlife (Thomas and Waterman 120). But perhaps the oldest link is that between rabbits and sex (Ezpeleta 31). In ancient Rome, the rabbit was often depicted together with the goddess of love fertility, Venus, and rabbit meat was often added to one’s diet to help with sexual deficiencies (Ezpeleta 31). In ancient Greece, the rabbit was thought of as the best fitting sacrifice for Afrodite and they were often presented as totem of love (Ezpeleta 32). Up until the end of the eighteenth-century rabbits were widely believed to be able to change their sex between male and female (Ezpeleta 31). Rabbits were viewed as a symbol of fertility by North American tribes as well as in medieval Europe (Ezpeleta 32). Simultaneously, white rabbits were seen as a symbol for purity during the Middle Ages and were often included in the depictions of Madonna and Child, this imagery was probably due to the belief of that time that the female rabbit could conceive without a male (Ezpeleta 32). It is most likely that due

to association with purity and vulnerability of the prey, the rabbit is now used exclusively as a symbol of female sexuality, most notably the infamous Playboy Bunny.

Similar associations can be found in modern pop culture of the western world. As already mentioned above, the Playboy bunny is based on the association of rabbits and fertility and feminine sexuality. One of the most iconic rabbits on screen is undoubtedly Bugs Bunny, which embraces the mischievous trickster trope as observed by Baker in “The Rabbit as Trickster” (qtd. in Thomas and Waterman 120). Interestingly enough, the character of Bugs Bunny often engages in cross-dressing, which might tie back to the myth of rabbits being able to switch between male and female sex. Even today rabbits are associated with the world beyond ours, as they are still a symbolic animal in witchcraft, not to mention the most commonly used animal in magic shows. Clemmens and Pettman liken rabbits to being “guardians of portals into alternative universe” (63). They provide the classic magic trick pulling rabbit out of a hat and the white rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll as an example of this. Furthermore, in their text they state that rabbits serve as a “decoy from more disturbing urges and activities”, e.g. in *Donnie Darko* (2001) or John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937), often connected to death and violence (Clemmens and Pettman, 63).

This brief overview shows that for the most part the historical symbolism of rabbits prevails to modern pop-culture. The rabbits are still viewed as a symbol of fertility and female sexuality, tied to witches and magic activities and believed to bring luck. In media aimed at children the rabbits tend to be depicted as tricksters with mischievous side, while in media aimed at more mature audience, these cute creatures are often used in contrast with dark and disturbing themes like death for example, which might have roots in old myths, where rabbits were believed to be able to travel between our world and the underworld. Examining the symbolism of rabbits across various cultures and epochs reveals a striking diversity in interpretations, yet certain similarities persist.

## **2 The behaviour of the rabbits**

### **2.1 The comparison between the rabbits and humans**

In his novel *Watership Down*, Adams chooses to keep the rabbits as realistic as possible, while also telling a story of an epic journey not unlike the tale of Odysseus, which is also referenced in the book and compared to the animal heroes: “Odysseus himself might have borrowed a trick or two from the rabbit hero” (Adams 35). This can be quite tricky since, as DeMello explains, “no human can ever truly get inside the brain of an animal—without dissecting it—and animals cannot answer questions if we ask them how they feel” (DeMello 358). In other words, due to the animal’s inability to express themselves clearly in a way that humans would understand, the humans must rely on their interpretations of animal’s behaviour. However, those interpretations are fundamentally rooted in anthropomorphism. As already discussed in the previous chapter, this process of assigning humanlike characteristics to animals has a lot of nuances to it. It was already established that in literature, anthropomorphism is generally used to explore new stories and narratives and that a certain level of anthropomorphism is necessary when the story is told from the animal point of view. Throughout the book Adams compares the animal protagonists to humans in various ways, usually in order to help his readers to immerse into the world he has created and to highlight the differences between the rabbits and the humankind. In this part of the thesis, I am going to present those passages of comparison before diving deeper into the psychology of the rabbits.

If we look at the description of the physiology of the rabbits, it is clear that there is no difference between the fictional rabbits and their real counterpart in terms of their appearance. When it comes to physiological aspects, Adams points out some obvious differences in rabbits’ and humans’ physiology, for example like when it comes to movement:

A man walks upright. For him it is strenuous to climb a steep hill, because he has to keep pushing his own vertical mass upward and cannot gain any momentum. The rabbit is better off. His forelegs support his horizontal body and the great back legs do the work. They are more than equal to thrusting uphill the light mass in front of them. Rabbits can go fast uphill. In fact, they have so much power behind that they find going downhill awkward... (Adams 133)

Such scenes help remind the reader the protagonists are of a different species. He uses such scenes to help the reader see different situations from different point of view (specifically that of an animal) than he is used to. Other than highlighting the physical differences in their locomotor system, the author uses this scene of rabbits climbing the hill to give the readers an insight into the rabbits' psyche. As the scene continues the author explains that the rabbits do not struggle with bodily fatigue but rather with being in a prolonged state of fear and insecurity caused by not having a height advantage from upright posture like humans, therefore they have to rely on very limited field of vision. It should not come as a surprise that not having a complete awareness of its surroundings is something that causes a great stress to a prey animals like rabbits. The nature of rabbits being prey animals is stressed throughout the whole novel, they are even said to have "thousand of enemies" (Adams 35). Due to this they regard everything as dangerous and their "first reaction is to startle, the second to bolt" (Adams 34). Due to this the rabbits dislike being above ground and away from the safety of their holes:

Many rabbits spend all their lives in the same place and never run more than a hundred yards at a stretch. Even though they may live and sleep above ground for months at a time, they prefer not to be out of distance of some sort of refuge that will serve for a hole. They have two natural gaits - the gentle, lolloping

forward movement of the warren on a summer evening and the lightning dash for cover that every human has seen at some time or other. It is difficult to imagine a rabbit plodding steadily on: they are not built for it. (Adams 34)

The journey the heroes of the novel undergo is not something that would be unnatural for the species, however, as explained above it is something that takes a great toll on them, both physically due to the simple fact that their bodies are not suitable for such a task, which puts a strain on their mental states as well. Humans have no such troubles as their anatomy was designed for endurance.

When it comes to senses, vision is generally the most important out of the five senses for humans. This is not the same case for rabbits, as they “spend half their lives underground in darkness or near-darkness, and touch, smell and hearing convey as much or more to them than sight” (Adams 83). While rabbits have a keen sense of vision as well in order to watch out for predators, the other senses are much more evolved in them, or in animals in general. As a greeting, rabbits sniff each other to get an idea of the other’s nature. This is perfectly illustrated when the group of the strayed rabbits meet Cowslip from the other warren for the first time and Hazel from Cowslip’s smell gets “an impression of good feeding, of health and of certain indolence, as though the other came from some rich, prosperous country” (Adams 73-74).

Sensory perception is intricately linked to our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. The estrangement of the humankind from nature is hinted at throughout the novel. Most notably in the following passage:

... though how the rabbits judged the passing of the time is something that civilized human beings have lost the power to feel. Creatures that have neither clocks nor books are alive to all manner of knowledge about time and the

weather; and about direction, as we know from their extraordinary migratory and homing journeys. The changes in the warmth and dampness of the soil, the falling of the sunlight patches, the altering movement of the beans in the light wind, the direction and strength of the air currents along the ground. (Adams 55-56)

Both humans and rabbits (or other animals) have the ability to perceive time, however, how they do it is widely different. The animals have to rely on nature's phenomenon's such as weather, sun, etc. Something that the early humans had in common, but with the rise of technology this has changed as it not only became easier to tell the time but also more accurately, which allowed punctuality necessary for new way of living. Today, people are dependent on technology, whereas rabbits and other animals utilize their senses and instincts and connection to the nature. Interestingly, when Hazel and his company stay at Cowslip's warren, not only do they find a different culture and customs, but the other rabbits behave in a strange way as well. The rabbits from the other warren are described to even dance and "sing like birds" (Adams 91), something that the heroes find unnatural. But most importantly, the rabbits there are able to laugh, which strikes the protagonists as odd as "the phenomenon of laughter is unknown to animals" (Adams 90). Upon first witnessing this, the rabbits are taken aback with Hazel thinking of it as a symptom of some kind of disease and Blackberry interpreting it as aggressive. To highlight how much unnatural it is the laughing is even described as "eerie". Laughter here is used as a tool to show how the rabbits strayed from their wild ways and as they lost touch with nature similarly to humans, they took on more of their characteristics.

Adams also compares rabbits to humans in terms of internal processes. This is, for example, illustrated on page 169:

Rabbits are like human beings in many ways. One of these is certainly their staunch ability to withstand disaster and let the stream of their life carry them along, past reaches of terror and loss. They have a certain quality which it would not be accurate to describe as callousness or indifference. It is, rather, a blessedly circumscribed imagination and an intuitive feeling that Life is Now. (Adams 169)

Although Adams claims that this is an ability that the rabbits and humans have in common, it certainly manifests vastly differently in the species. Humans tend to spend a lot of time dealing with their inner conflicts and feelings and it is not uncommon for certain individuals to live in the past or to be overly occupied with the future. While rabbits are capable of creating strong bonds between themselves, in case of losing a loved one they are able to move on quite quickly, as showcased in the scene where the other rabbits thought Hazel to be dead. The rabbits show symptoms of grief for a short period of time, with the exception of Fiver who seems depressed, before continuing without Hazel. Why Fiver is the exception might be an attempt to make the character more relatable for readers, as he is supposed to be the closest with Hazel as they are brothers, therefore it helps the audience sympathize with him in situations where the reaction of the others could be interpreted as indifferent or even rather cold. This is of course done under the assumption, as observed by Barbara Hardy Beierl, that “the reader identifies psychologically with the fictional characters and this dynamic stimulates and nurtures his/her ‘sympathetic imagination’” (215). With Fiver already being exceptional and more fictionalized with his prophetic visions, he is a great candidate to bring a little of humanity into the story.

The intimate relationships between bucks and does, of course, take on a different form than human romantic relationships. While “the kind of ideas that have become natural to many male human beings in thinking of females – ideas of protection, fidelity, romantic love



and so on – are, of course, unknow to rabbits” (Adams 256). Male rabbits simply do not think of does that way, and even though they “they form exclusive attachments much more frequently than most people realize” (Fiver and Viltthuril can serve as an example of exclusive mating pair), the does are considered just as “breeding stock for the warren” (Adams 256). When few does unfortunately lose the on the journey from Efrafa to Watership Down, the others do not mourn and instead see a victory in being able to bring in more does than they have thought possible, therefore what is “one doe more or less” (Adams 393).<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, Adams provides an extensive repertoire of comparison between the rabbits and human beings in his text, ranging from physiological aspects to psychological. This helps the reader understand the animals in his story better, showing us not only what sets the rabbit heroes apart but also what they have in common with human beings. Additionally, those comparisons are often in favour of rabbits, rather than humans. By showing how rabbits and humans are alike and different, Adams gives us a deeper look into the characters and adds more depth to the story.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed feminist reading see for example Roberta Grandi’s paper “‘Anyway, What’s a Doe More or Less’ Androcentrism in *Watership Down* (1972) and *Tales from Watership Down* (1996) by Richard Adams”

## 2.2 How the rabbits think, or the ability of critical thinking

This chapter focuses on the internal mental processes of the rabbits and humanlike mentality such as critical thinking and ability to plan for the future. In real life rabbits as prey animals rely heavily on their instinctual behaviour, which is in many cases the instincts to run. This is very prominent even within the rabbits in the *Watership Down*. However, the rabbits in the story showcase a certain level of critical thinking skills as well. On several occasions they display an ability to carefully think the situation through while considering different possibilities and outcomes, much like humans do.

In the story, the main characters fall into archetypes. Every single one is given a unique personality quirk and talent, such as Bigwig being of a bigger stature and with affinity to fighting and generally rougher personality than the other rabbits of the main cast. On the contrary Fiver and Pipkin are runts, however, their strength lies in Fiver's supernatural powers and Pipkin's loyalty. Blackberry is the most intelligent rabbit out of all of them, while Dandelion is the fastest and tells the best stories. Throughout the story, the rabbits choose carefully when it comes to distribution of tasks with the decision built on the unique talents of the individuals. This ability shows that the rabbits are able to not only realize their own strengths and weaknesses, but also take them into an account when constructing a plan in order to guarantee a success as much as possible.

With the main cast being divided into different archetypes, Hazel falls into the category of a leader. Leaders often are forced to make difficult decisions, be able to explain their arguments in a persuasive way and be a good strategist, all of which are not only capabilities that Hazel possesses, but also abilities that are considered to be a good example of critical thinking. In other words, Hazel earns his title as a Chief rabbit by having higher critical thinking skills than the others. Early on he is showed to be able to make quick decisions even under pressure, such as volunteering as a distraction when escaping Nuthanger Farm. This

showcased not only his ability to make decisions on a whim, but his bravery and self-sacrifice as well, two attributes that are not commonly associated with prey animals especially and could be considered as purely human characteristics.

Throughout the story, the rabbits display their ability to learn from previous experiences, for example when they use a piece of wood to help the smaller and weaker members of the group to get over the river after leaving the warren. One of the rabbits, Blackberry, is able to realize that flat woods floats and uses it as a tool, Baldwin states that “he sees it not simply as an object by itself but in terms of what it could become” (42), a skill that is notorious for humans and documented in a few animal species, but not in rabbits, which makes it another example of anthropomorphism. After successfully crossing the river using the wood, the rabbits make a note to remember it as “it might come handy some time” (Adams, 50). And come handy it does, as they use this tactic once again in their plan while fleeing Efrafa.

The rabbits are also capable of learning from each other. In the warren with the snares, where the protagonists find themselves during their journey to Watership Down, the local rabbits teach them to carry food. This is thought of as unnatural for them as Fiver compares them to “squirrels trotting along with nuts”, but Hazel opposes him with the argument that they have “copied a good idea from the squirrels and that makes them better rabbits” (Adams 98). Later, they use this learned behaviour for their own interest when befriending Kehaar by bringing him things to feed on. Similarly, when building new burrows, Hazel copies the idea of “honeycomb” from the previous warren since he enjoyed the community perks that come with having somewhat of a common room, and he uses the help and knowledge of Strawberry, a rabbit from said warren that joins the group, to build it. The rabbits are clearly capable of retaining an information from their previous experiences, while also pick and choosing the learned behaviour for their own benefits.

Planning for the future is a characteristic commonly associated with humans and is thought of as something that differentiates them from other animals. True, some animals are known to prepare for winter or migrate, but most would agree that this is an instinct rather than conscious thought. That is not the case of the rabbits in the story. On several occasions they consider multiple possibilities for the future and different outcomes. In most of those scenes, Hazel figures as the voice of reason. He recurrently chooses the survival and welfare of the group over the individual. This is for example demonstrated when Hazel realizes the fate of the warren if they will not obtain any does as “no does means no kittens and in a few years no warren” (Adams 195). When freeing the domesticated does from Nuthanger Farm he also argues against leaving one of the does behind even if it means risking the lives of his own rabbits: “If it was a buck, I’d say yes... But we need this doe” (Adams 228). He is aware that in their current situation they need to obtain more females if their warren is to survive in the future. It is evident that Hazel is able to evaluate if the potential gains are worth the cost in the long run, not just in the immediate future. Similarly, he saves the life of a small mouse in hopes of a possible future alliance. This seems foolish to others as they do not see his vision and do not understand how they could use an alliance with a different species. However, forming an alliance with Kehaar ends up being a crucial element in their plan in obtaining does from Efrara. This kind of thinking of probabilities and remote future is anthropomorphic, yet necessary for the story.

The ability of critical thinking is not exclusive to the main cast. The rabbits under Efrafra’s regime are showed to think for themselves as well, even though this behaviour is discouraged, as showcased by Blackavar and Hyzentlay, both of which join Hazel’s warren in the end. Blackavar suggests killing all of the patrol as “they mustn’t report back to the General”, predicting the outcome that otherwise they would be the ones getting killed later on

(Adams 396). Hyzenthlay is aware of the high stakes of the situation and the probability of the information getting to the general and that is why she urges Bigwig to keep a low profile:

They mustn't be told until a very short time before we run - not just Nelthilta, but all of them. No one can keep a secret in a warren and there are spies everywhere. You and I must make a plan ourselves and tell no one but Thethuthinnang. (Adams 334)

She is also the one to select the does from Efrafa as she has the best knowledge of her fellow does and is able to do so with the lowest risk of getting caught. General Woundwort is a great example of advanced thinking as well, as his whole regime in Efrafa is built on the ability to assume a danger and different possibilities and predicate their outcome.

### **3 The Culture of the rabbits**

#### **3.1 The language of the rabbits**

In the text, three languages appear: English, or the language of the narrative and the human characters; Hedgerow, which is a sort of shared language among various animal species; and Lapine, or the language used exclusively by the rabbits. Animals being given any language is a prime example of anthropomorphism, because despite animals being able to communicate with each other, the majority of the communication across a wide range of species is non-verbal, and even their verbal way of communicating is unlike ours. Yet in the story, the rabbits are given a distinctive language with similar linguistic rules of human languages. This not only makes the story more interesting for the human reader, but also enriches the world building in the book. It both familiarizes the rabbits to the reader, while simultaneously giving them their own culture. The use of the Lapine terminology in the speech of the rabbits, either untranslated, or as definitions provided in the form of footnotes at the beginning of the book, creates an even richer world.

What Adams does is that he, as Roberta Grandi puts it, “first postulates the existence of an animal language, secondly he tries to convey a different perspective on reality thanks to the possibility of using words which do not exist in English, thirdly he translates it for the reader” (179). Not only that, but Adams also makes the reader learn the language by “introducing terms in Lapine and explaining their meaning and usage, then he systematically repeats them along the narration so that the reader can become familiar with their use” (Grandi 179). The rabbits use Lapine when talking about their day-to-day life, such as the words “silfay” (feed above ground) or “hraka” (droppings). One of the most used words is the word “elil”, an umbrella term used for the enemies of the rabbits, such as “homba” (fox), or “pfeffa” (cat). They also use “Inlé” (moon) and “Frith” (sun) when telling the time, e.g. “Fu-Inlé” means “after moonrise” and “Ni-Frith” is “noon”. An interesting word is “hrududu”, which means

tractor or any other motor vehicle. It is an onomatopoeic word that conveys what motor sounds like to rabbits. The Lapine language is mostly presented in the text as just individual words rather than full-fledged speech with grammar. With the exception of the inflectional suffix “-il” being used to indicate plural (on page 393 the singular “homba” changes to “hombil” when plural), there are no other grammatical rules implied in the text. Other than Lapine terminology, Adams offers his readers a closer look at the rabbits’ culture by swapping phrases like “die/be killed” with “stop running” (Adams 374), or by including original idioms used by them: e.g. “you’re trying to eat grass that isn’t there” (Adams 347) or “secrets go faster than moles undergrounds” (Adams 350). Those idioms are quite similar to their regular equivalents and it is quite easy to guess their meaning, however, the idioms have been modified to fit the rabbits’ culture in a way that is familiar to them. This ties to what Walt Wolfram describes as language being an “identity marker”, not just a communication tool (175). For rabbits, stories are a big part of their culture, they use them to pass time and “raise their spirits” (Adams 110). Yet, when in Cowslip’s warren Dandelion tell a classic story about El-ahrairah, he is met with a rather cold reaction as the residents of this warren reject traditional culture of rabbits, and instead of stories about El-ahrairah they prefer poems “about their own lives there” (Adams 111). Moreover, during the passages of the main group sharing stories of El-ahrairah, they use Lapine words quite frequently, as opposed to the poems told by Silverweed. The rabbits from Efrafa are also described to have a “efrafan accent” that gets stronger when under pressure (Adams 391).

The main heroes do not converse with just other rabbits, but with different species as well. To communicate with other species, they use the Hedgerow language, “a very simple, limited lingua franca of the hedgerow and woodland” (Adams 153). Hazel uses it for example when talking to the mouse he saved since “mice don’t speak Lapine” (Adams 153). The mouse’s speech is noticeably simpler, yet still quite similar to how the rabbits talk, possibly

due to both species belonging into the rodent family. For example, this is how the mice speech is described:

“E say is a come a justa now on a morning side. I not a see.” (Adams 413)

Especially when compared to Kehaar’s speech. Despite speaking Hedgerow as well, his style of speaking is described as “exotic” and “the accent was strange and guttural, the speech distorted”, overall difficult to understand and the rabbits being able to “catch only a word here and there” (Adams 189). Kehaar’s speech is also often complimented with onomatopoeic words meant to imitate gull screeches for example in:

“Come keel — kah! kah! — you come keel — yark! — t’ink me finish — me no finish — ‘urt you damn plenty—” (Adams 189)

Despite the implications of the whole story being in Lapine and the text just being translated into English by the narrator for the sake of the human reader, there are dialogues between human characters as well. However, their speech has been slightly modified to distinguish it from the way the rabbits speak and perhaps to suggest how the rabbits might perceive human speech. The following example is a dialogue between the men on Nuthangers farm before they shot Hazel:

“There’s ol’ woild rabbit, look!”

“Ah! Reckon rest of ours ain’t s’ far off. Got up there with ’un, see? Best go’n ’ave a look.” (Adams 229)

The utilization of multiple languages not only enhances the richness of the narrative world but also serves as a reflection of the characters' identities and cultural nuances. The rabbits' use of Lapine terminology in their speech and the incorporation of original idioms offer insight into their unique culture.



### 3.2 Names of the rabbits

Again, the fact that the rabbits have names is another example of anthropomorphism, yet it is necessary for the story, as the reader needs it to be able to distinguish the characters from each other. When it comes to names of the rabbits, it is evident that the names are in most cases connected to the nature, usually to flowers or other kinds of plants or trees (e.g. Hazel or Blackberry), or less often it is inspired by the rabbit's appearance (e.g. Bigwig, Silver and Blackavar). Some rabbits are only known by their Lapine names with no English equivalent, for example: Hyzenthlay, Threarah, Thethuthinnang, and of course the folk hero of the rabbits, El-ahrairah.

It is heavily implied that all rabbits have names in Lapine, but throughout the story they are addressed by the English equivalent of the name for the sake of the human reader. Those who are not referred to by an English name, have longer names with longer meanings that cannot be translated into an element found in the nature. Interestingly, two examples of this are does from Efrara; with Hyzenthlay meaning "Shine-dew-fur" or fur shining like dew (Adams 243), and Thethuthinnang, which is translated as "movement of leaves" (Adams 327). Other does from Efrafa, Nelthilta and Thrayonlosa, have a name only in Lapine, however, the meaning of their name is never revealed. Threarah is a chief rabbit from the original warren, his name means "Lord Rowan Tree" (Adams 22). It is also stated that he is always referred to as "*The* Threarah – perhaps because there happened to be only one threar, or rowan, near the warren, from which he took his name" (Adams 22). The meaning of his name is also explained in the text itself rather than in the footnotes (like the names of the does), perhaps hinting at his importance and status. He shares the title of "-rah" with El-ahrairah, whose name is translated to "The Prince with a Thousand of Enemies" (Adams 35). Throughout the story this title is given to Hazel as well ("Hazel-rah"), as he gains the respect of his fellow rabbits and finds his place as a chief rabbit. The suffix "-rah" is clearly given to names of

certain rabbits to show that they have earned the respect of others and the higher status of importance in the hierarchy of the rabbits.

Some rabbits, like Bigwig and Pipkin, have both their English and Lapine names known to the reader. When Bigwig is introduced, the audience is quickly informed that his Lapine name is “Thlayli”. Interestingly though, throughout most of the book he is referred to with his English name, but when he is in Efrafa, he introduces himself and is referred to by the rabbits of Efrara by his Lapine name, however in the narration he is still being referred to as “Bigwig”, even in Efrafa. Pipkin is first introduced in Lapine as “Hlao”, which is said to mean “any small concavity in the grass where moisture may collect - e.g., the dimple formed by a dandelion or thistle cup” (Adams 29), and throughout the story he is often referred to as “Hlao-roo” by Hazel, probably as a form of endearment, considering that the suffix “-roo” is probably supposed to mean “little”, if going by Fiver’s Lapine name “Hrairoo”, which means “Little Thousand” (Adams 17). But unlike Pipkin, Fiver is only referred to by his Lapine name once throughout the whole story (after finding Hazel after he has been shot and thought of as dead), even the meaning of his name is explained in the form of footnote rather than in the text itself, like Pipkin’s. Fiver is an interesting case, because he is the only one, with the exception of El-ahrairah, whose name does not translate to something that can be found in nature, or something to do with his appearance. Fiver’s name is said to mean “Little Thousand” because there were more than five kittens in his litter, but rabbits “can count up to four” for numbers five and above they have the word “hrai”, meaning “a lot” or “a thousand”, and because Fiver is a runt, his name is said to mean “the little one of a lot” (Adams 17). Perhaps his name having the same stem as the one of El-ahrairah’s hints at his importance in the story and his strong connection to the spiritual powers.

In case of El-ahrairah’s name it is said that “the stresses are the same as in the phrase ‘Never say die’” (Adams 36). Adams often uses phrases to help familiarize the important

names in Lapine, often tied to a higher meaning. Like with El-ahrairah, the phrase “Never say die” hints at his perseverance and ability to withstand any danger that come his or his people’s way by using his wits. Even though it seems like everything, and everyone is out to get them, despite all that the rabbits manage to not only survive, but also thrive. Similarly, the pronunciation of Efrafa is compared to the word “Majesty”, probably tying in the totalitarian regime of General Woundwort.

## 4 Rabbits as social creatures

### 4.1 Interspecies relations

Interspecies relationships refer to interactions, bonds, and collaborations between different species of animals, often occurring in natural environments or human-managed settings.

These relationships can range from mutualistic and symbiotic, where two different species benefit from their association with each other, to predatory and competitive. The ecosystem is described as diverse, with each species having its role in it. As the story unfolds, rabbits encounter different representatives of the animal kingdom, ranging from allies like gulls and mice to fearful predators, and of course humans.

The way the rabbits interact with other animals differs depending on the species. But generally, as prey animals, they approach unknown hesitantly and with caution. As Sarah Stebbins says in her paper on anthropomorphism, “instinctual mechanisms operate to coordinate behaviour with members of our own species, but they also operate to coordinate behaviour with members of other species” (119). It is in rabbits’ nature to beware of other animals as they consider a large percentage of them to be dangerous. However, they seem to be on neutral terms with other small animals, usually other rodents like them, such as hedgehogs and mice. The rabbits do not particularly engage with the hedgehog, except passing a comment when coming across a roadkill: “What harm does a yona do to anything but slugs and beetles?” (Adams 59). This demonstrates a certain level of empathy and a neutral relationship between the two species. As Hazel affirms: “Rabbits don't usually have much to do with them, but their enemies are our enemies, for the most part. I think we ought to do all we can to make these creatures friendly” (Adams 171). The protagonists form a positive relationship, a sort of allyship, with mice after Hazel rescues one from a kestrel. It appears as an act of kindness and understanding between the two species, something a reader might expect from a human hero. Additionally, Grandi points out the striking contrast of the

rescue scene being an interlude between the arrival of Holly and Bluebell after surviving the destruction of the Sandleford warren and their disturbing retelling of the terrors committed by men, saying that:

Thus, the saving of the field-mouse is juxtaposed to the brutal extermination of the rabbits performed by men. In *Watership Down*, while human animals heartlessly torture, slaughter, take captive and enforce subjection on earth others, non-human animals do not inflict unnecessary violence (except for the ‘unnatural’ General Woundwort (Adams, 470)), are capable of fostering fruitful interspecies relationships and even form alliances with non-elil fellows.

(Grandi 173)

Despite the rabbits not inflicting unnecessary violence unlike the humans, as Grandi points out, the alliances they form with other species is not done out of their altruistic nature. The rescue of the mouse is not done out of selfless reasons, but rather the rabbits, or Hazel to be precise, see an opportunity in it with a vision of self-gain as they “can’t afford to waste anything that might do them good” (Adams 171). After saving the mouse, other rabbits even question the intentions as “these small animals are more to be despised than relied upon” (Adams 171). Similarly to humans, they see mice more like pests than animals worth saving, even though the mouse proves to be incredibly helpful and warns them about General Woundwort’s arrival, returning the favour. When it comes to Kehaar, he is seen as a highly valuable ally and worthy of helping for his ability to fly. The rabbits clearly see helping another species as a trade. As Grandi puts it: “what *Watership Down* portrays is not a disinterested, purely chivalrous solidarity but, rather, a respectful, non-exploitative confederacy of mutual help and collaboration between different species” (173). While solidarity is a prominent theme throughout the novel, the nature of this solidarity is more complex than a simple display of chivalry or altruism. There is a certain level of selfishness in

acting so in hopes of receiving benefits in return, however, it never comes at the expense of the other species.

Of course, non-elil species are not the only animals the rodent protagonists' encounter. As the word "the thousand" suggests, the rabbits have many natural predators that they need to beware of. This is not the case for humans as apex predators. With the story taking a place in a British countryside, rabbits' natural predators include for example foxes, birds of prey, cats, and dogs. All of which, the main cast encounters throughout the story. Each encounter goes differently depending on the species and the rabbits' attitude towards them. They do not seem that alarmed by for example the kestrel or cats, as they are significantly smaller predators, and a larger rabbit can put up a good fight and even win over them. Bigger rabbits, such as Bigwig, even pride themselves in being able to overpower cats and go as far as actively attacking them. It might seem foolish to risk one's life just for their ego, especially for a small prey animal such as rabbit, such behaviour is more typical in humans. The rabbits also pride themselves in their cunning, and as was already touched upon in previous paragraph, they sometimes view themselves above other animals. As Grandi puts it: "the rabbits are not immune to a certain form of speciesism" (167-168). To clarify what is meant by the term "speciesism", Singer defines it as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those members of other species" (6). Speciesism is a characteristic often seen in humans; it involves the belief in human superiority over non-human animals. This belief is often supported by arguments such as our capacity for speech and tool usage, perceived higher emotional intelligence, and other criteria that prioritize human traits when evaluating non-human animals in terms set by us. In *Watership Down*, the speciesism takes form in comments and prejudices such as that foxes "stink" (Adams 41) and dogs are "malicious, disgusting brutes" (Adams 401). Additionally, in the

story of Rowsby Woof, the dogs are also portrayed as naïve and easy to trick. In contrast, the rabbits think of themselves highly and pride themselves in their trickery.

However, the species with which rabbits come into conflict the most is humans. They are also the ones who affect their lives at much greater scale than other species. While predators hunt rabbits for food, meaning they “take a rabbit and take no more until they are ready to hunt again” (Adams 417), the humans cause the destruction and mass execution of the Sandleford warren, all just for “high class modern residences” (Adams 20). In other words, “human beings are the only creatures whose behaviour is both gratuitous and catastrophic” (Grandi 168). Not only are the humans responsible for the Sandleford warren’s destruction, “but the life of the other two warrens which the rabbits get to know during their wandering are profoundly upset, denatured by the actions of the humans” (Grandi 168). The warren with snares is in exploitive relationship with the farmer who feeds them. This has the effect of “their natural resourcefulness and their propensity for tricks are forsaken and replaced by a melancholic resignation and a forced oblivion of their fate” (Grandi 168). The semi-domestication has a deteriorating effect on the rabbits, which causes them to lose their identity. The actions of humans indirectly affect the completely unnatural regime in Efrafa imposed by General Woundwort in fear of men. Interestingly, the abnormal warrens that rely heavily on anthropomorphism, are enforced in those unnatural ways by humans themselves.

Needless to say, that the rabbits’ interactions with other species, be it mutually beneficial alliances or predatory, even though that the encounters are influenced by their instincts, they are heavily anthropomorphized. The anthropomorphic elements are evident in the rabbits' interactions with other species, as they navigate a human-like power hierarchy. Their attitudes toward other species reflect biases and prejudices akin to those observed in human societies. The humans are also the ones who have the greatest effect on the organization of rabbit societies, amplifying the anthropomorphism in their structure.

## **5 Communities of the rabbits**

### **5.1 The hierarchy of warrens and the value of an individual**

Rabbits are social animals that live in groups called warrens. They live in those communities, do not act independently but rather for the good of the whole group. In this aspect, while humans are also considered social creatures, they think and act much more independently, but form stronger intimate bonds within their own kind than the rabbits in the book, who put more effort into creating a strong community as a whole, but do not focus on the close relationships between the individuals within. There are four major warrens that play a significant part in the story: the Sandleford warren, Cowslip's warren, Efrafa, and the warren of Watership Down. All of those societies differ in hierarchy and customs. This chapter will examine the differences and similarities among the various rabbit communities.

Early on it is established that the warren is run by so called Chief Rabbit, a leader that is at the top of the hierarchy and who is responsible for the decisions of the whole warren. In the Sandleford warren the Chief Rabbit is Threarah. From his exhaustive description the reader gets a good idea of his rule in the warren. Not only is he told to be incredibly strong in his prime, he is also considered to possess a "level-headedness and a certain self-contained detachment, quite unlike the impulsive behaviour of most rabbits" and he "never lets himself become excited by rumour or danger" (Adams 22). He is also described as "ruthlessly driving out every rabbit who seemed to be sickening" during the onslaught of myxomatosis and "has resisted all ideas of mass emigration and enforced complete isolation on the warren, thereby almost certainly saving it from extinction" (Adams 22). This ability to keep his cool and ruthlessness is rarely associated with rabbits and is easy to see why he would stand out among his peers. It is unnatural for an animal like rabbit to behave this way, the behaviour is anthropomorphized to fit the human idea of what makes a good leader.



In comparison of the Chief Rabbit of Efrafa with Threarah, there are a lot of similarities between the two, with the General Woundwort appear to be an extreme version of Threarah. He excels in strength, fearlessness and is always prepared to face a danger head on. Woundwort is also described by other rabbits to be “unnatural” and so is his rule in Efrafa (Adams 470). His rule is a tyrant one, where he enforces fear in his rabbits and uses it to control them. The rabbits from much freer warren describe it as “you can’t call your life your own: and in return you have safety – if it’s worth having at the price you pay” (Adams 241). The ways of Efrafa rely on full control of every individual, even at expense of the happiness and quality of life both of individuals and the community as a whole. The does that escape from Efrafa suggest that “much of their frustration and unhappiness in Efrafa had been due simply to not being allowed to dig” (Adams 398), in other words, they had been denied their natural behaviour, causing them a great stress. Further proof of this is Hyzenthlay in Efrara not being ready to mate (Adams 336), yet once she finds herself in more natural community where she is allowed to act on her instincts, she is soon “heavy with young” (Adams 416). Abiding their natural behaviour is even look down upon in Efrafa, as showcased by Chervil when he explained Bigwig why the rabbits bury their droppings (something rabbits normally do not do): “they want to be natural, the anti-social little beasts” (Adams 320).

In contrast, Cowslip’s warren, or the warren of the snares, is unnatural as well, but in the opposite direction and that is that it appears to lack a Chief Rabbit:

They had no Chief Rabbit – no, how could they? – for a Chief Rabbit must be El-ahrairah to his warren and keep them from death: and here there was no death but one, and what Chief Rabbit could have an answer to that? (Adams 125-126)

The natural hierarchy of rabbits was lost in this warren, as well as they true identity as wild rabbits. The absence of a Chief Rabbit and the acceptance of the snares reflect a departure

from the instincts typical for wild rabbit communities. The role of the Chief Rabbit seems to be replaced by the human, who feeds them, as he is the one who decides their fate.

In other warrens the hierarchy is very clear. In the Sandleford warren, the Chief Rabbit is on top, followed by Owsla (a privileged position that is granted to bigger rabbits for their strength), the regular rabbits, and outskirters who are often bullied. Baldwin describes it as a warren that “denies them freedom, free will, and the opportunity for self-fulfilment and self-consciousness” (39). Efrafa shares some similarities with this arrangement, but with much stricter regulations and a more rigid structure. Efrafa also has its own version of the Owsla, however, the ones with the most influence within the hierarchy is the Council, where each member of the Council “has some special thing he looks after” (Adams 241). And of course, the General Woundwort is the head of the Council. Apart the administrative control structure, the rabbits in Efrafa use a harsh physical coercion, using fear to keep others in line.

The last rabbit community that plays a significant role in the story is the warren of Watership Down, where Hazel is chosen as a Chief Rabbit. The characteristics of make Hazel a good leader were already discussed in previous chapter, as he embodies the archetype of what of what is typically perceived as a strong leader by humans. However, looking at the structure of hierarchy of this group of rabbits, it is clear that there is none, or at least not in the sense that can be observed in the other warrens. While Hazel is considered to be the leader of the group, there is no Owsla and the rabbits are rather equal to one another and are rather looking up to Hazel for guidance than a strict authority. As already discussed, the strong suite of Hazel’s leadership lies in recognizing different strengths and talents of the individuals of the group. If compared to Efrafa, Hazel fosters the potential of an individual, while Woundwort did, what Randy Welch describes as “its best to stamp out nonconformity and stifle the individual” (Welch, 49). When compared to the warren of the snares, one might argue that they also festered a society build on the talents of the individuals with how highly

they speak of their poets. But they were primarily focused on upholding the warren's self-delusion that it "either discouraged or warped individual talents towards this goal" (Welch, 49). Hazel and his warren stand out among the others for creating a democratic society that truly values the unique talents of its members, fostering their potential rather than suppressing it. That being said, Hazel's ego is small enough to recognize the good things in other warrens and adapts them in his own for further betterment, showing he is not afraid of innovation. Welch describes Hazel's approach to leadership as "an eclectic one: copying Cowslip's great burrow and Woundwort's hole concealment practices as useful inventions while rejecting the grimmer aspects' of both societies" (Welch, 48). Rather than rigidly adhering to traditional ways or blindly following the practices of others, Hazel carefully considers what will benefit them and eliminates the harmful aspects.

Each of the four warrens depicted by Adams impacts individuals in different ways, but the warren of Watership Down genuinely recognizes and nurtures the unique talents possessed by its members. In doing so they destabilize the hierarchy that can be seen in the Sandleford warren and is brought to an extreme in Efrafa under the General Woundwort's tyrant rule. Such a strict rule is seen as unnatural for rabbits, but so is the disestablishment of Chief Rabbit in the warren of snares as its member has lost a sense of selves. However, Hazel's warren does so successfully by establishing a certain kind of democracy. All in all, those rabbit societies might serve as an allegory for human societies, with Efrafa representing totalism and Watership Down opposing it as a democratic society.

## 5.2 Different warrens, different customs

It was already touched upon in previous chapter that when the main heroes came to Cowslip's warren, they experienced a big culture shock. While regular rabbits enjoy stories of El-ahrairah, the rabbits in Cowslip's warren prefer poems, dancing, singing and mosaic (all of which are highly anthropomorphized behaviours). All of those things are considered unnatural for rabbits, yet the rabbits in the warren of snares praise them. Those "talents were encouraged in perverted forms to glorify the warren and mask its folly" (Welch 49). Other than that, the warrens also differ in the architectural design in their warrens. Hazel later decides to recreate this structure, called Honeycomb (a sort of common room to share stories with others), in their own warren with the help of Strawberry, a refugee from Cowslip's warren.

Regarding the culture of rabbits, apart from stories, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, the rabbits are shown to have an affinity for theatrics. For example, when Blackberry reveals to other that Hazel is alive, he enjoys the attention and even makes dramatic pauses, "enjoying the effect" (Adams 251). Such behaviour is indicative of anthropomorphism. The rabbits even, much like humans, have games as a form of entertainment. One such game, called "Bob-stones", a "traditional gambling game" (Adams 280) is mentioned in the book, therefore it would fair to assume the existence of more of games. Much like human gambling, Bog-stones have its own rules, clearly imitating the human version.

Adams gives the animals a creative mind and uses it to not only deepen the lore, but also to make the rabbit societies more familiar to a human reader by basing a part of the rabbits' culture on human customs, such as giving them a similar form of entertainment.

### 5.3 Myths

The tales the rabbits tell each other are an important aspect of the book. As John Pennington puts it, “the stories as a whole create the mythic backdrop for the lapine culture” (Pennington, 41). Not only do they offer an insight into the rabbits’ culture, provide a dispersion from the main plotline, but the tales are closely intertwined with the narrative itself. This chapter will focus on the myths within the story and try to analyse them in terms of its position in the culture of the rabbits, its connection to the narrative as a whole, and how it might be influenced by the depictions of rabbits in different cultures of the real world.

Early on, it is clear that, much like in humans, the tales play a significant role in the culture of the rabbits. Joan Bridgman says that “the tales are necessary to the rabbits to explain the world to the rabbits, to confirm their self-image, to promote courage, to give amusement and entertainment, to help them face their deepest fears, and to provide an archetypal world” (15). It seems it is their go to activity to pass time, they use it both as a dispersion and motivation, and a big part of their identity rely on the belief in El-ahrairah. The rabbits of Cowslip’s warren do not believe in El-ahrairah, therefore they do not find an enjoyment in his tales as they lack “conviction” (Adams 111). For the rabbits the myths are also a religion. In that case, one might read the interaction between the warrens as a cross between believers and non-believers, or atheists. The myths then serve the same function as does faith for humans. It provides them with hope in their dire needs: “each story in the rabbit world needs interpretation, and the rabbits use these stories and their myths- to provide stability and hope in their quest for a new beginning” (Pennington 40). The non-believing rabbits have no hope, and therefore they tell themselves that there is a “dignity in accepting their fate” while they wait for slaughter (Adams 111). Pennington describes it as an ontological void of Nothingness; “Cowslip's warren has crossed the boundary, but they have moved from wilderness to civilization, and as a result they exist in a horrible gap, believing

nothing” (43). He then goes on to explain that the mosaic and poems are only an art for art’s sake with no benefits of the myths of El-ahrairah provided to those whose believe in them. As written by John Peters in his paper: “while the Watership Down rabbits see the possibility of overcoming the many obstacles placed in rabbits’ paths, the rabbits of Cowslip’ warren do not” (59-60). The rabbits see themselves in El-ahrairah, the myths make them believe that if the folklore hero can survive, so can they. Almost all of the stories featured in the book are about survival, which seems reasonable for such creatures as rabbits to make up stories about, as Charles Meyer call El-ahrairah, an “indestructible rabbit” (149), who always manages to trick his enemies, to cope with the danger they face in everyday their lives every day.

El-ahrairah is an “figure of rebellion who embodies the survival powers of the weak against the strong” (Bridgman 13). He does so by using trickery. As a small defenceless rabbit, he stands no chance against his enemies in a combat. Instead, he has to rely on his speed and tricks; “El-ahrairah is a trickster, ... and rabbits will always need tricks” (Adams 111). This ties to other famous depictions of rabbits as tricksters in popular culture. Adams continues the tradition of the classical portrayal of rabbits as trickster figures. However, despite all his trickery and cunning, he cannot trick Death, or the Black Rabbit of Inlé, when he travels to his realm (again, this correlates with the Celtic belief that rabbits were able to freely travel to the underworld and back). Death is very familiar to prey animals such as rabbits that lie at the bottom of a food chain, they know it is inevitable. Maybe that is why the embodiment of death in their mythology is another rabbit rather than one of the elil, presumably the leading cause of death. Bridgman writes in her paper:

Death is thus cleansed of fear. It is seen as unavoidable, even familiar. All rabbits have become accustomed to the idea of the Black Rabbit as the gateway to death in their legends and stories. (Bridgman 12)

Possibly trying to make the idea of death more comforting, the rabbits created a figure that is familiar to them. This depiction of death as a rather benevolent figure can be seen in many different cultures and literatures, perhaps it reflects our own effort to make death less terrifying.

The rabbits unsurprisingly use their religious tales for the same reasons as humankind. Building on that, Grandi makes the comparison between *The Bible* and “The Story of the Blessing of El-ahrairah”, pointing out that Frith (the sun but also a god to rabbits) created “the world, the stars, and all living creatures” (165), and that at the beginning, just like in Eden, the animals were created equal:

Frith made all the animals and birds, but when he first made them, they were all the same. The sparrow and the kestrel were friends and they both ate seeds and flies. And the fox and the rabbit were friends and they both ate grass. And there was plenty of grass and plenty of flies, because the world was new and Frith shone down bright and warm all day. (Adams 37-38)

This idyll is destroyed by El-ahrairah and his rapidly growing number of people, forcing Frith to punish them by giving other animals “the desire to hunt and slay and eat the children of El-ahrairah” (Adams 38-39). “The original sin, the act of defiance against the god is performed by the rabbits” (Grandi 166), here the rabbits are a substitute for the human characters in *The Bible*, and like humanity, they must bear the weight of the punishment. Unsurprisingly, Adams chooses “the original sin” to be the rabbits’ fertility, alas the oldest symbolism of a rabbit. As already discussed, for centuries the rabbits we used as symbols of fertility and sex. They have been associated with female sexuality in particular, however, Bridgman argues that “while rabbits have been etymologically related to the female sex, in Adams' novel they are related, by his handling of the mythic element, to the male” (Bridgman 16), introducing a unique twist on the tradition.

The places where the myths are told play an important role as well as all these tales occur “at crisis points in the novel” (Peters 61). “The Story of the Blessing of El-ahrairah” unfolds amidst the uncertainties of the dark wood shortly after their departure from Sandleford. In Cowslip's warren, discomfort and suspicion arise among the Watership Down rabbits, prompting the narration of “The Story of the King's Lettuce.” Following the destruction of the Sandleford warren, Holly and Bluebell tell “The Story of the Trial of El-ahrairah”. Just before Bigwig's infiltration of Efrafa, the tale of “The Story of El-ahrairah and the Black Rabbit of Inlé” is shared. Upon their return from Efrafa, the rabbits tell “The Story of Rowsby Woof and the Fairy Wogdog”, and during Bigwig's defense of the burrow, he narrates “The Story of El-ahrairah and a Fox”. The last one is exceptionally important as “the myth told as background to the besieging tale in the foreground forms a commentary on the foreground action” (Bridgman 56). The tale mirror what happens in the real world.

To conclude, “at crucial junctures in the narrative, El-ahrairah provides the example through which the rabbits can transcend the difficulties and dangers of their exist” (Peters 61). *Watership Down* demonstrates the pivotal role of storytelling in shaping the culture and identity of the rabbits within the narrative. In constructing his myth, Adams incorporates elements from the real world, often relying on rabbit symbolism across different cultures, but also basing it on human religion and transferring it into his animal world.



## 5.4 Animal Prophets

The myths in *Watership Down* might at first glance seem like just tales the rabbits tell each other; however, the ending implies the existence of this spiritual world and as the novel progresses “the connection between the two worlds grow stronger” (Bridgman 8). This is where the role of animal prophets comes in. While many animals are associated with the spiritual world, the ability to foresee future has been predominantly assigned to human characters in media.

Fiver is the most important prophet figure in the story. He is the one who urges others to leave the warren and the one who chooses Watership Down as their new home. But he is not the only character with supernatural powers. All the warrens have their community “local shaman”; Watership Down warren of course has Fiver, Cowslip’s warren has Silverweed, and in Efrafra the role belongs to Hyzenthlay (Bridgman 12). These characters “can journey to the transcendental world and bring back information and foreknowledge” (Bridgman 12). Mircea Eliade says on the topic of shamans that “it is consoling and comforting to know that a member of the community is able to see what is hidden and invisible to the rest and to bring back direct and reliable information from the supernatural worlds” (Eliade 509). Their powers manifest primarily in form of visions, usually warning them about upcoming dangers, but sometimes they also take form of a gut feeling telling them whether the course of action is right or wrong. Prophetic visions are not limited only to the shaman characters. Hazel, who plays a completely different role in the story, is also shown to possess those abilities on occasions. Hazel’s dreams of Bigwig with yew berries, that are like “blood-red drops, red droppings hard as wire” foreshadows what happens later in the chapter when Bigwig is caught in the snare (Adams 116). There are also mentions of other rabbit prophets with a “second sight” (Adams 158). These powers also seem to be hereditary, as one of Fiver’s offsprings possesses them and warns others about a man approaching.

## Conclusion

Richard Adams is known for his fiction with anthropomorphized heroes, yet *Watership Down* handles the aspect of anthropomorphism unlike any of the other author's work. In my thesis I examined the anthropomorphism in the novel, with a special focus on the psychology of the rabbits and their culture, including the myths that appear throughout the story.

In order to do so, I firstly explained the term of "anthropomorphism", its history and the debate surrounding it. Even though anthropomorphism has been around since the ancient Greece, there remains a lot of controversy around it. Despite it, the process of anthropomorphism is inevitable as our perception is inherently limited to what is familiar to us, and it is challenging for us to conceptualize something beyond our immediate comprehension. In the end, humans must force their own perception of the world onto the animals in an attempt to understand them. This is especially true when it comes to arts, such as literature.

The rabbits in the story differ from their real-life counterparts especially in terms of their psychology. The rabbits in the story show a capacity for critical thinking and future planning that goes beyond their instinctual behaviours as prey animals. This is necessary as the obstacles they encounter on their journey to a new home require them to use strategy, learn from their past experiences, and predict possible outcomes. The author also provides scenes of comparison between the animal heroes and human beings, in both physiological and psychological aspects. This helps the human reader to understand the characters better. This process of familiarisation is used when it comes to the culture of rabbits as well, where Adams bases a significant part of the rabbits' culture, such as forms of entertainment, on human customs. Similarly, the animals are given their own languages. This again familiarizes the reader with the characters, while simultaneously creating a unique aspect to the rabbits. The use of the Lapine throughout the story helps indicate how the reader gets absorbed in the story

as in the process he starts to learn the terminology. The language also serves as identity marker as it is presented slightly differently in different warrens. On the topic of language and identity, the rabbits are given names, each of those names is inspired by nature, with the exception of Fiver.

The structure of hierarchy of the rabbits differs in different warrens depicted in the book. Each of those rabbit societies can be used as an allegory for human societies. The humans in the story also have a significant influence on the organization of rabbit societies, further enhancing the anthropomorphic aspects within their structures. The effects of anthropomorphism are evident in the interspecies relations as well, as they display biases and prejudices similar to those in human societies.

The rabbits in the story create myths of survival, those serves both as an entertainment and religion to the rabbits. They shape their identity around them, rely on them for survival, but also use them to comfort themselves in dire situations. The mythology of the rabbits in the novel ties in a lot of symbolism and myths about rabbits in the real world, such as rabbits being depicted as tricksters or as symbols for fertility. The novel also has supernatural elements, where several characters assigned with the role of a local shaman and are able to transcend their consciousness to the other world in the form of prophetic visions, which drives the story forward.

The portrayal of rabbits is both realistic and anthropomorphic. The rabbits keep many characteristics of their real-life counterparts, while also being given some human attributes. In the story they also adopt human concept such as democracy or religion. Adams does not use anthropomorphism in a way that makes the protagonists into human beings in animal bodies or cartoonish caricatures, as he keeps the harsh realities of the rabbit life that distinguish them from humans. His use of anthropomorphism serves to bring the animal protagonists closer to the human reader, not to erase their otherness.

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