

2009 Summer Reading Assignment for English I Honors

Watership Down by Richard Adams

. . . *the little band of rabbits had disappeared into the dim, moonlit night.*

The Novel at a Glance

Watership Down is an epic story with an unexpected cast of characters, a group of rabbits in search of a new warren and a new life. The personification of rabbits is the first thing you will notice about this novel.

Point of View: The omniscient narration is handled in an unusual way. The story is told mostly from the perspective of rabbits.

Setting: The novel takes place in four rabbit warrens in rural England: the doomed Sandleford warren, the warren full of snares, the authoritarian Efrafa, and the idyllic *Watership Down*.

Protagonists: The main characters are a group of rabbits who leave the Sandleford warren in search of a safer place to live. Their leader, Hazel, is the novel's **epic hero**.

Conflicts and Resolutions: As in other novels or epics involving journeys, the action is episodic, with many conflicts, climaxes, and resolutions. The final **climax** is an **epic battle** between the protagonists and the Efracans, members of another rabbit warren.

Themes: Individual freedom is important, but it must be balanced by social responsibility. Humans must show respect for the natural world. Peace is preferable to war. Adams ends his book with this observation: "Rabbits are so human. Or is it the other way round—humans are so rabbit?"

Epics. *Watership Down* should be read as an epic in the tradition of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*. The narrative involves a perilous journey on a grand scale. It celebrates the values of a "nation" much as the *Odyssey* celebrates the values of ancient Greece. The rabbits must rely on the supernatural from time to time, and they have a mythology all their own. Like other epic heroes, the rabbits defend their nation in a great battle that secures the future of their society and all it stands for.

Background

Rabbit Lingo. One way Adams makes his fantasy novel seem realistic is by using a rabbit vocabulary. Adams defines terms in context and includes a Lapine **Research on Rabbits**. Richard Adams acknowledges a debt to R. M. Lockley's book *The Private Life of the Rabbit* for his knowledge of rabbits. Lockley, a naturalist, published his study of wild rabbits in 1964. It's a witty and sympathetic portrait of rabbit life, full of colorful observations—for example, a mother rabbit will fight cats, weasels, and ferrets to protect her kittens; rabbits are gregarious; rabbits see one another "as individuals, each with a personality and a place in the hierarchy" of the warren.

The Black Rabbit of Inlé is the equivalent in rabbit mythology of the Grim Reaper. He delivers rabbits to the afterlife.

Post-Reading Activities

Choose one of the suggestions below to write an 150-200 word paper.

Integrate the novel's plot, characters, and themes in your writing. Give specific examples from the novel to verify your thoughts. Your paper will be graded on thought development, content, and grammar (complete sentences, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and usage).

1. Writing an Animal Epic

Write your own epic set in the world of animals you know something about: dogs, cats, birds, even iguanas or pigeons. Your epic should include a hero or heroine, an adversary, and a perilous journey to reach a goal. Before you start writing, you should research the behavior of the types of animals that you use as characters, just as Adams did for *Watership Down*.

2. Debate

Write a first-hand account of a rabbit debate. The subject is the ideal rabbit warren, and the four debaters are Hazel, the Chief Rabbit of the Sandleford warren, General Woundwort, and Cowslip (from the warren maintained by the farmer). The issues for debate include:

- the role of the Owsla
- how to behave toward other animals
- how to avoid elil
- the distribution of flayrah
- any other issues that you can think of

3. The Lives of Rabbits

Compare and contrast the fanciful account of rabbit life in the novel to what rabbits are really like. Use wildlife texts, encyclopedias, or the Internet. You can choose to use R. M. Lockley's *The Private Life of the Rabbit*. When writing a factual description of rabbit life, consider these questions:

- Where do they like to live?
- How do they relate to one another?
- What relationships do they have with other animals?