The Shaman as Hero and Spiritual Leader: Richard Adams’ Mythmaking in *Watership Down* and *Shardik*

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**Abstract**
Focuses mainly on *Shardik*, calling it “a demanding novel which explores the possible ways of responding to the emergence of the transcendental and mythic into ordinary existence.” With *Watership Down*, it justifies the importance of intuition, mystical, and transcendental experience.

**Additional Keywords**
Adams, Richard. *Shardik*—Moral and religious aspects; Adams, Richard. *Watership Down*—Moral and religious aspects; Valerie Protopapas; Bonnie GoodKnight

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THE SHAMAN 
AS HERO AND SPIRITUAL LEADER: 
RICHARD ADAMS' MYTHMAKING IN 
WATERSHIP DOWN AND SHARDIK 
by Edgar L. Chapman

(1)

Richard Adams's Shardik is a demanding novel which explores the possible ways of responding to the emergence of the transcendental and mythic into ordinary existence. Adams's work in general seems to be an imaginative justification and defense of the importance of the intuitive, the mystical, and the transcendental experiences in a time of pragmatism and scientism. Both Watership Down and Shardik are novels which both create myths and offer justification for myth's existence. It was Fiver's vision which inspired the rabbits to leave their original warren, and which provides them with guidance along the way. And the tales of "El-Ahrairah," the rabbit hero and redeemer, and his constant companion Badger entitle the novel with a hero myth—a hero with a thousand faces and wiles—which inspires the fugitive rabbits. The stories of "El-Ahrairah" include a creation story, various trial stories, including a trip to the underworld, and a redemption story, all of which help to create courage and cunning in the rabbits who settle on Watership Down.

Thus a culture led by an imaginative leader who listens to his shaman, and sustained by a vigorous myth is more likely to survive, Adams implies, than a culture of intellectual decadence and hopeless resignation to fate (Cowslip's warren). And an intuitive culture is also superior to a culture trusting in organization and militarism (Woundwort's culture). The result of an over-reliance on militarism is a kind of social or international madness (the attempt to destroy one's own species if it fails to conform to one's organization); and finally personal madness (self-destruction in combat for the sake of combat).

This theme has obvious implications for the human readers of Watership Down. At a time when many think that man stands at a crisis of his history the question of human survival itself is being raised. Adams clearly implies that there is no hope in decadent intellectualism that stresses the negative and hopeless nature of man's plight, no matter how clearly or elegantly it is written and art does—nor is there real hope in those who counsel toughness and force as answers to the problem of individual or societal survival (although there is a place for physical strength and courage).

Adams's choice of a rabbit society as a metaphor for human problems of survival works effectively to embody his these. Nothing seems so poignantly satirical as a rabbit society devoted to secrecy and militarism, since rabbits are hardly, despite their courage, well equipped for aggression. (Nothing, that is, except human societies which adopt such strategies.) Again, nothing seems so poignantly pathetic as a rabbit society eating well, but waiting patiently for the slaughter, trying to repress the knowledge that their life is shortened and subject to an inevitable fate; yet despite this attempt at repression, their entire existence is poisoned by the truth.

On the other hand, since rabbits are non-aggressive species who rise to heroism only on special occasions, they serve adequately as an image of human heroism which most enlightened people can identify with. Since enlightened moderns (for the most part) tend to distrust warriors and warrior cultures (as I would say), we might be more uneasy about the heroism of a society of wolves (for example). Adams's choice of heroes here is comparable to J.R.R. Tolkien's use of Hobbites at the center of Lord of the Rings: in Frodo and Sam, Tolkien created heroes that everyone can identify with. Tolkien's warriors, however, have not been universally admired; they have led to the claim that Tolkien
romanticizes and glamorizes war. Adams, at any rate, escapes that charge.

In addition to dramatizing the central importance of the shaman’s visions and the life sustaining myths in a successful culture, Adams himself ventures boldly into an image of numinous reality in the conclusion to Watership Down. At his death, Hazel is visited by El-Ahrairah, who conducts Hazel to the “other world” of transcendence. This is a moment which can, I think, arouse something of that haunting joy that C.S. Lewis spoke of so often. B dik’s animals for his myth Adams does show himself to be an author of fantasy and mythopoetic work; if Kipling is a mythopoetic writer, so is Adams.

The question has been raised whether Watership Down is indeed a mythopoetic book at all. The spectre of Beatrix Potter and her cautionary tale of Peter Rabbit has been raised, presumably because both have Lapine characters. It seems to me that this is merely a red herring or cottomtail, if you will, representing an obtuse reader response. Peter Rabbit is simply a satirical fable. It doesn’t create any kind of myth. But I would offer the opinion that Watership Down is certainly mythopoetic in its passages dealing with the rabbit redeemer. I would go further. I would assert that if Kipling, who in the Jungle Books built a mythology of animals, care of considered mythopoetic, then Richard Adams in Watership Down has certainly written a mythopoetic book.

Generally, however, Adams does not venture into visions of the world of transcendence, but rather shows how the world of transcendence impacts the world of time and phenomenal experience. In Shardik, Adams develops this theme much farther. Shardik traces the sequence of events that follows a new revelation of divine power in the human world; it shows the effect of this revelation on many, and the way the transcendent incarnation of the sacred world is misunderstood and abused; the novel shows a kind of triumph of the transcendental force over those who destroy it; and it shows how a series of mythic events are then memorialized in myth; finally, the novel suggests the redeeming social and human value of myth. The tale bears a more complex burden of meaning than Watership Down. I shall try to suggest some of this meaning.

As a setting for Shardik, Adams projects an imaginary empire of Bekla, a primitive human world without horses and without writing, somewhat isolated, and containing one major nation and several smaller semi-independent provinces and towns. This world is a rather static one, until the presence of the divine erupts into it at its fringe on the island of Ortelga, in the person of Shardik, a huge bear who appears suddenly. Fulfilling Ortelgan myths that such a bear is holy, Shardik appears to be an overpoweringly holy figure to the hunter who first sees him.

This is Kelderek, a simple man receptive to the divine presence. His naive and simplicity—as well as his necessary innocence—are signified by his nickname, “plays-with-the-children.” Not only is Kelderek a hunter, however, he is a potential shaman, though as yet unrecognized as such by his people, who receive practical leadership from their Chieftain, the Baron, and instruction in myths and healing from a female Shamanic priestess, the Tuginda.

What is a shaman? In Watership Down, he was one who saw visions and foretold events by going into a mystic trance. (Fiver, it will be recalled, was virtually a non-combatant in the climax between Woundwort’s forces and Hazel’s warren, because he had gone into one of his deepest trances and was so motionless that the invaders were sure that he was dead.) But I would like to define shamanism more clearly, or at least draw upon the insights of a great scholar. In the strict sense, according to Mircea Eliade, a shaman is a primitive religious leader and mystic who has mastered a “technique of ecstasy.” He may also be a healer, a “psychopomp,” and he may also be a priest, mystic, and poet. A true shaman has mastered a certain method of healing or vision or magic; he isn’t necessarily an ordinary medicine man or priest; he may exhibit a unique mastery of some spirit or mythic animal, and the exercise of his power is a sign of his calling or vocation. Historically, shamanism is associated with the nomadic tribes of North Asia and Central Asia, but in a wider sense the shaman type has been found in many cultures, most notably among North American Indians.

Finally, it may be added that the shaman partakes of the most intense and perhaps the most primitive and spontaneous kind of mystical experience in his visionary trances. Kelderek makes the initial discovery of Shardik, seeing the bear for the first time and believing him to be the incarnation of the “power of God,” whose reappearance had been foretold by ancient Ortelgan legend. Not only does Kelderek discover Shardik first, but he becomes the special priest and friend of Shardik. The Ortelgan experience with Shardik is a series of revelations and initiations into the various possible relationships between man and his vision of the potency of the divine.

The bear is driven into the Ortelgan country as sanctuary from a great fire, perhaps an omen of some mythic event or series of events. For Kelderek the bear’s coming is an event that manifests the divine will especially since Shardik saves him from a leopard. But the other Ortelgans react somewhat differently. The Baron, leader of the Ortelgans, wants to fear either of bears or divine revelation. An exceptionally strong-willed man who lives his life on the plane of natural reason, the Baron defers the matter to the current priestess, the Tuginda, in the hope that she will do something about Kelderek and the Bear that will resolve the problem in a fashion not too embarrassing to him. To his dismay, however, the Tuginda regards the Bear as a true messenger from God, and conceives it to be the duty of her and her priestesses to care for Shardik. Only Kelderek and the priestesses who believe in the mystery of Shardik dare risk personal injury in caring for the bear. They are able to approach Shardik and touch him without serious injury. Malathya, the most beautiful of the younger priestesses, herself with Shardik. Like the Baron, she does not want her comfortable world disturbed; moreover, when she realizes the care for the bear, she fears for her life. Lacking faith in the mystery she is supposed to serve, she flees Ortelga, not knowing that outside her province, she will be doomed to an exile of hardship and prostitution.

The Tuginda also fears Shardik’s return, but regards the service of the divine bear as her necessary responsibility:

“...yes, I am afraid too; but at least I can thank God that I have never forgotten the real, the true work of the Tuginda—to be ready, in all sober reality for the return of Shardik.”

Unlike the Baron, she recognizes the imperative of transcendental revelation; unlike Malathya, she constantly looks for a fulfillment of her people’s myths.

For the younger Ortelgans, the coming of Shardik signals a new era of totem, a symbol of Ortelgan resurgence. Against the wishes of the Tuginda, they convince Kelderek to take Shardik on a war of liberation against the empire of Bekla. Through a series of fortuitous incidents, which appear to demonstrate the divine power of Shardik, the Ortelgan army is victorious; the most important event in which the bear figures is his killing of the Bekla general. The first part of the novel ends with the victorious Ortelgans marching toward the capital of the Bekla empire, which they propose to conquer.

The second book of the novel opens five years later when the Ortelgan forces rule the Bekla empire under the nominal leadership of Kelderek (now called Credrick) who has been elevated to the status of priest-king. Shardik has now become a national symbol of their victory and conquest, and a hated symbol of tyranny to the other peoples of the empire. Kelderek, seemingly unaware that he is merely a figurehead, cares for the bear, and still maintains his mystical rapport with the animal. Vaguely dissatisfied despite
the widespread acknowledgment of Shardik as the power of God, Kelderek longs for some further revelation from Shardik that will explain human existence.

At the same time, we learn that the Ortelgan rule in the Beklan empire is unjust, and that, without much understanding of his act, Kelderek has legalized an archaic slave trade throughout the empire to maintain its economic stability. This section of the novel ends with the Beklan empire falling into civil war, when Elleroth, a rebellious prisoner, performs an act of blasphemy at a ceremony honoring Shardik: he hurls a live coal into the cage where the bear sleeps. Terrified, the bear breaks loose from his captors and goes on a trail of destruction through the city, before fleeing into the countryside.

It is obvious that the use of the bear as a symbol of conquest and Ortelgan supremacy is an abuse of the divine. By permitting the mythic bear to be used in this fashion, Kelderek has allowed the incarnation of the divine to be abused, and showed an improper understanding of it. But it is here that Adams begins a perceptive treatment of Kelderek's further initiations into a better understanding of man's relationship to the holy.

Forced to pursue Shardik into the hills, Kelderek embarks on an exhausting journey of the spirit. The bear creates havoc among the villages of the hills, and suffers from their attacks because, Kelderek realizes, of Kelderek's follies. Although his pursuit of the bear seems hopeless, he has no choice; he has become the "prisoner of Shardik," in Adam's words.\(^4\)

In a deep humiliation of spirit, Kelderek follows Shardik to the frightening ravines called the "Streels of Urtah." After Shardik emerges, he is looked upon by the people dwelling thereabouts as a being set apart, beyond the reach of any man's vengeance, and destined to follow a strange fate and Kelderek also assumes this status. Later he meets the Tuginda, the mother priestess of Ortelga once more, and from her learns the "legend of the streels," which clarifies Kelderek's experiences. The mystery of the streels is their role in the "brining of retribution upon the wicked--those, that is, for whom such retribution has been ordained by God."\(^15\) The streels, ravines which seem bottomless, are compared to the mouth of hell by many.\(^16\) Those who enter the streels are nearly always killed by the villagers nearby--if they don't go mad wandering in the wilderness of the streels. Adam's imagination is especially powerful when he describes this landscape which represents one of the waste places of the spirit.

On rare occasions, however, a fugitive's life is spared in the streels, and such a person is thought to be destined by God to some special act of redemption or self-sacrifice. Kelderek believes that his experience with the streels is a punishment for his sin of misusing Shardik: his crime--as the Tuginda puts it--is "subjecting the power of God to the power of men."\(^17\) Fearing that he now bears some fateful responsibility, he now takes on the Tuginda's burden, that of searching for Shardik. (It is a burden his own actions have forced upon him, as he realizes.)

Kelderek's wanderings bring him into contact with Elleroth, the rebel who fomented the revolution against Shardik and Kelderek's rule, and now a leader of the army restoring order to the Beklan world. Moved by his own mysterious purposes, Elleroth, now called T's-kominton, spares Kelderek's life, but exiles him to the wasteland beyond the Vrako river. Still pursuing Shardik, Kelderek passes from humiliation to despair, and at last comes the city without law and without hope, Zeray.

Zeray is a city of outlaws and outcasts where chaos rules most of the time, but it is also a city without illusions. Yet here Kelderek rediscovers hope and purpose, for he meets the priestess, Melathys, who had fled from Ortelga at the coming of Shardik. After hardships and prostitution, Melathys had fallen under the protection of the Baron, Ortelga's one-time leader, who had by his strength and leadership established a modicum of order in Zeray. Her experiences and the Baron's strength have helped her to rediscover her human dignity; and she helps Kelderek see that a measure of human self-respect can be maintained in the most depressing circumstances. Both Kelderek and the priestesses have lost their innocence, as they realize, but the possibility of love between them exists, and begins to grow. But a final initiation awaits Kelderek. Having discovered guilt, humiliation, despair, the loss of illusions and hope, he still must confront the worst imaginable instance of human evil.

He meets the worst evil in the novel--the inhumanity of man--in the slaver, Genshed, into whose hands he falls on a journey back to Ortelga. Genshed is an unlicensed slaver who deals almost entirely in children; believing in nothing, he makes cruelty and destructiveness his only amusements. Genshed usually castrates his boy slaves, mutilates the girls, and delights in schooling his assistants in cruelty. Destroying innocence is his personal vocation. There is no romantic glamour about this man, as there so often is in mythic depictions of evil (as in Sauron and Satan, for instance). Genshed is what the scriptures call a 'mystery of iniquity' for which there is no natural or reasonable explanation.\(^18\) Preserving Kelderek for one of his dab and pointless cruelties, Genshed at last meets Shardik who, worn and wounded from his many encounters with pursuers, destroys Genshed in a final climactic encounter.

Shardik too is killed in his fight with Genshed, yet releases Genshed's slaves; hence Kelderek sees in Shardik's death the revelation he had been searching for. The bear at last receives his apotheosis by becoming a redeemer figure: Shardik, the savior of children.

But there has also been a pattern to Kelderek's experiences. Mircea Eliade tells us that shamans undergo a very complicated series of initiations when they are being cleansed of the profane and becoming confirmed in their vocation. Sometimes, these experiences come in a long bout of psychosomatic illness, during which they have dreams of being tortured by evil spirits, of dying, of being dismembered, and then being resurrected. The "fundamental pattern of all initiations," says Eliade is lived out in the shaman's dreams: "first, torture at the hands of demons or spirits, who play the role of masters of initiation; second ritual death, experienced by the patient as a descent to Hell or an ascent to Heaven; third, resurrections to a new mode of being--the mode of 'consecrated man,' that is, a man who can personally communicate with gods, demons, and spirits...."\(^19\) What shamans ordinarily experience in their sicknesses and dreams, Kelderek has experienced on the plane of human experience. Spared by divine action in the person of Shardik, he has been symbolically resurrected as a "consecrated man."

Adams's novel concludes with Shardik's life now transformed into a myth of redemption. Kelderek and Melathys perpetuate the myth by becoming the devotees of Shardik. Kelderek, now governor of Zeray, attempts to redeem its
waste and chaos by making it a refuge for children. Kelderek's life now is devoted to the preservation of innocence and reverence for Shardik; the myth of Shardik is honored by annual rituals at Zeray.

Under the rule of Elleroth, the Beklan empire prospers, and attempts to establish trade with its distant neighbors. In the final section of the novel, an emissary from a distant land comes to visit Zeray, and despite being a sophisticated, skeptical, he affirms the strength of the Cult of Shardik. Thus Kelderek's life with Shardik has a series of initiations into the false use or abuse of the divine and the true value of the relationship with the divine. Though Kelderek is a solitary spiritual seeker, it is easy enough to see analogies between his life and the history of many major religions, like Judaism and Christianity.

Shardik is a more grim and somber novel than Watership Down, and undoubtedly will never be as popular with the general reader. In some ways, it is a more irritating book, and it is certainly not as "pleasant" in its effect. But like Watership Down, Shardik asserts the importance for life of powerfully felt religious myth.

If Shardik is an allegory of spiritual education, it differs considerably from Pilgrim's Progress. Pilgrim's Progress describes the obstacles to maintaining religious faith; Shardik, however, indicates that we can abuse and misuse our image of God, even when we think we are honoring it. A parallel contrast might be drawn with C.S. Lewis's Till We Have Faces. In that novel Oruel's human jealousy causes her to resent and reject the intrusion of the divine and transcendent world into her life. In Shardik, the presence of the divine is accepted, but then perverted into the means for establishing a human tyranny. In fact, Kelderek's naive response to Shardik's coming is responsible for nearly all the evils he must later confront.

All of Kelderek's adventures with Shardik are of course open to other interpretations. In the world of Bekla every spiritual and mythic event is ambiguous, as in our world; to the sceptic, everything that happens of mythic significance may be accidental. But to the eye of the intuitive and initiated, "superstition and accident manifest the will of God,"—to quote the epigraph that Richard Adams borrows from C.G. Jung.

There is also something ftaguously ambiguous about the way it responds to and uses the incarnation of the divine in this world. It may pervert the divine revelation into an excuse for a crusade or holy war, and thus advance the cause of destruction rather than the cause of life.

Yet Richard Adams, in creating the myth of Shardik, makes it clear that there is a divine revelation, an intrusion of transcendence into the world of time. In both Watership Down and Shardik, Adams describes the power of spontaneous religious experience in the visions of the shaman. He also attempts to demonstrate the importance and lasting significance of religious myth in human life. After all, Kelderek's work in honoring the memory of Shardik and re-claiming the city of Chaos, Zeray, may last longer than what the best efforts of the Baron—the strong natural man—could produce. This religious myth not only gives meaning to Kelderek's life, but assures a continuity of social purpose.

Nevertheless, we must recall that Kelderek's better understanding of Shardik came after humiliation of spirit, despair, and his meeting with Genshed. Hence, Adam's work implies that the best revelation of the divine comes to us out of those religious myths shaped by our experience of spiritual suffering. As the historian of religions, Mircea Eliade might suggest, our perception of the real nature of the sacred and the holy comes after we have been confronted with the experience of the worst offered by the profane world, and understood the divine pattern that makes meaning of all existence.
abused events that seem to show some sort of cosmic injustice, their work seems to offer only a counsel of resigned despair.

I refer here to the widespread revulsion against violence in any form, other than a criticism of violence, in the arts, or for that matter, in social and international relations. Even violence on behalf of the innocent, and against those who have shown that they feel contempt for humans, provokes an outcry from some liberal humanitarians, who also deplore hunting in all forms; despite a propensity to eat beef, pork, and poultry regularly. A larger part of the public seems to deplore violence in principle, but to be fascinated with it in motion pictures and television shows, especially when it is meretriciously glamorized. While I deplore violence, I believe that it is an illusion to believe that we can live in a world without it (without a drastic transformation of man and the conditions under which he lives); and as it is a part of reality, it can be a part of art. I myself could easily identify with a species more capable of killing than rabbits, but I doubt that Adams's book would have received such widespread acclaim, and perhaps would have been less interesting if he had used a more aggressive species.

The claim that Tolkien glamorizes war is an easy and obvious one, especially since he treats war in the traditionally epic fashion. Curiously, however, it occurs more often in oral statements than in print. This may be so because some of those who are negatively disposed toward Tolkien, like Lin Carter in Imaginary Worlds (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973) are in no position to make the charge, since it can be so easily turned against their own books, not to mention some of the authors he championed, like Edgar Rice Burroughs, or Robert E. Howard. However, such warriors as Aragorn and Rohan do not open Tolkien to this line of attack, despite the fact that it is San and Frodo's cunning, endurance, and resourcefulness which destroy Sauron in the ring war. Adams, however, is less open to the charge; his rabbits mainly win by courage, guile, and resourcefulness.

In some of the stories in the Jungle Books, a human being, Mowgli, is at the center, although he really has no conception of what human life is. Others however have animal protagonists, and they are certainly mythopoetic. Some beast stories are certainly mythopoetic, although Tolkien in his essay of fairy tales considered them not to be fairy tales, and hence by implication not mythopoetic. Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale about Chanticleer and Reynard certainly seems to me to be mythopoetic. The fact than many beast fables are merely satiric does not exclude the possibility that some may grip the imagination as myths. Only a pedant would argue otherwise.

The "mystery of iniquity" theme contains the assumption that some forms of evil defy rational or psychological explanation. Dostoyevsky frequently wrestles with this problem in his novels, particularly in exploring such characters as Stavrogin in The Possessed and old Karamazov in The Brothers Karamazov. Shakespeare's Iago, for whose actions most ordinary explanations are unsatisfactory, may be another illustration in literature.

Mircea Eliade, Rites and Symbols of Initiation (New York: Harper and Row, 1958, Harper Torchbook edition), translated by Willard Trask, p. 91. See also Eliade, Shamanism, 33-35, for a general discussion of initiation patterns; and see the pages following that for examples.

One of my students, who has not read the book, has already reported that his impression was that the critics had found that Adams had "fallen on his face" in this work. It is easy to believe that the book will be less commercially successful than Watership Down.

Mircea Eliade tells us in The Sacred and the Profane that the central theme of religious initiation is "Generation, death, and regeneration" (or rebirth), and that experiences of psychic chaos and death in the "profane" or non-sacred world are often preparatory to experiences of rebirth. The Sacred and the Profane (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955; reprinted, Harper Torch books, 1961), translated by Willard Trask; pages, 195-197, and in fact, the entire last chapter have some relevance.