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In Watership Down, Richard Adams weaves a number of themes into the fabric of the story, one of the most pervasive being society's treatment of individual talents. Each of the four warrens that Adams describes affects individuals in distinctly different ways and only one, Watership Down, truly appreciates and fosters the unique gifts of its members.

Hazel-rah incorporates this ethic as part of his leadership style and therein lies his success. He relies on the talents of other rabbits when he knows his own to be inferior. Unlike most leaders, he does not have a problem with pride or a runaway ego. When the initial embassy goes to Efrafra, Hazel readily concedes its leadership role to Holly, who is more impressive in appearance and as a speaker. He depends upon Blackberry's superior mind to devise a trick to foil Woundwort, Bigwig's immense strength to defend the warren, and of course Fiver's insight to give him direction. It is significant that when Hazel deviated from this policy, disaster ensued: ignoring Fiver's warning against the Nuthanger raid nearly cost Hazel his life.

Hazel is an organizer. Only he can keep the rabbits together on their migration when several times they would have scattered, such as at the river crossing or in the common. He directs the rabbits' activities because he has the courage to take the initiative. He shows this early on by proposing the recruitment of a large-scale departure from Sandleford rather than simply clearing off with a few friends. He does so out of a feeling of responsibility that if he is escaping a catastrophe, he must help others to do so too. Responsibility, of course, always marks a good leader.

Another mark of a good leader is his protection of the weak. Early on Hazel resolves to protect the rights of the smallest rabbits, Fiver and Pipkin, against a bully like Bigwig. When Strawberry first joins the troupe, Hazel protects him against the others' hostility until he can establish his own niche. He does so again with Groundsel and the other surrendered Efrafrans.

Hazel’s concern for all individuals under his authority manifests itself again in his attention to their health. He takes it upon himself to remove Pipkin’s thorn and clean Buckthorn’s and Holly’s wounds. He cares not only about his community’s social health but its physical health as well.

Hazel’s rule is lax and tolerant, allowing his rabbits great personal freedom. Only once does he coerce his subjects—forcing them to dig a burrow for Kehaar after first discovering him—but that was to save the gull’s life in order to benefit the whole warren later by solving the crucial problem of finding mates. The rest of the time, he holds the reins of power loosely, encouraging discussion and tolerating dissent, and relying on persuasion and consensus formation to arrive at group policies. He leads by example, not force, as Blackberry tells him: “You go in front and take the risks first.” (Richard Adams, Watership Down. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1972, p. 137.) He is the first to begin digging the Honeycomb and the first to forage insects to feed Kehaar.

Yet another of Hazel’s personal traits that makes him a good leader is his openness to change. The Threarah’s conservatism led to his downfall while Hazel’s open mind enhanced his success. Saving a mouse and a seagull was a revolutionary idea scorned by ordinary rabbits, yet Hazel saw it as an innovation which could benefit his community. As it proved, each rescue played an essential role in establishing and continuing the warren. Without them there would have been no does and no early warning of Woundwort’s sneak attack. Hazel was also willing to use innovations such as boats even though he did not understand them. He was a pragmatic rabbit, adopting techniques old or new as long as they served the common good. His approach was 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.

Such is the interplay of society and individual: Hazel’s gifts as a leader shaped the society of Watership Down, which in turn encouraged the expression of the individual gifts of its members. Without Hazel’s exceptional abilities, Watership Down and its rabbits would not have been exceptional either. And if his rabbits had not been talented, Hazel’s leadership would not have been successful.

In contrast, General Woundwort was a very effective leader but not a good one, since he benefited neither the commonwealth nor the individual growth of his subjects. To be sure, he gave them protection and long lives, but their lives were without freedom, excitement, or fulfillment and on the whole seemed without purpose. Woundwort was more interested in rabbits as a quantitative measure of his success as a leader, while Hazel chose a qualitative scale of how happy, free, and compatible his rabbits were.

Woundwort, like Hazel, was an organizer, but he carried this propensity to extremes and organized every facet of a rabbit’s life, whereas Hazel organized rabbits only on a
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When General Woundwort had lost three
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The episode of the fox killing a doe
after the Efrafran escape illustrates the
stifling nature of Woundwort’s system
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and caught a doe, Bigwig tried to tell
Blackavar that he had been right all along,
yet Blackavar had purged the advice from his
mind in what Hyzenthlay described as a common
Efrafran practice. Quite contrary to
Watership Down, Efrafra did its best to stamp
out nonconformity and stifle the individual.

Cowslip’s Warren was stifling in a
different way since it had no physical
coercion or administrative control structure.
Its oppression operated strictly through
psychology and was self-imposed by every
rabbit. Woundwort’s oppression had
psychological effects, but these were by-
products of a crude system of brute force
unlike the sophisticated nets of deception at
Cowslip’s Warren.

The warren of snares was chiefly
occupied with maintaining its self-deception,
and it either discouraged or warped
individual talents towards this goal. Leadership was one stifled talent since, as
Fiver pointed out, a leader must keep his
people from death and the rabbits had
willingly accepted death in return for
prosperity and did not want anyone to lead
them back to sanity and life. Cowslip and
his rabbits attacked Holly’s survivors for
their association with Hazel, since Hazel had
led Strawberry and his own folk away from the
warren after revealing its folly. Leaders
who could see the truth and act on it were to
be crushed at all costs; even asking “Where?”
hinted at the warren’s awful truth and such
inquiry was also stifled automatically.

Other talents were encouraged in
perverted forms to glorify the warren and
mask its folly. The rabbits were proud of
their mosaics and singing and dancing even
though these were unnatural for rabbits.
Theise wise folk and visionaries were
twisted by the warren and its own moral sellout to materialism that they
used their talents to justify and exalt the
warren, not denounce it. Only Fiver, an
outsider, could use his insight to see
through the deception. His counterpart,
Silverweed, worked to conceal and glorify it.

Cowslip’s society, like the others,
harmonized individual talents to serve its own
goals. His warren pursued delusion,
Woundwort’s fostered authoritarian
repression, and Hazel’s promoted freedom.
The Sandleford Warren was something of a mix
between Efrafra and Watership Down and had
the goals of limited freedom and limited
control. The problem with the Threarah’s
society was that it was too old, tradition-
bound, and top-heavy. There was little
appreciation of younger rabbits in the Owsla
and none for outskirters. The Threarah was
too old and cautious, half-believing Fiver’s
prophecy but too worried about preserving his
authority to leave. Conceivably, he could have
dispersed most of the warren in small
groups that would not have attracted elil and
could have settled safely elsewhere, but that
would have entailed a loss of power which he
found unacceptable.

Adams does not delve deeply into the
Sandleford social network, and it would have
been unfair to blame the Threarah for having
a sick society like Efrafra, but the Chief
Rabbit did fail to value the outskirters who
later proved to have outstanding abilities
once given the chance to express them. Adams
carefully constructs the Watership society so
that each rabbit has an important role to
play and fits into a niche in the social
fabric. The achievements of Hazel’s rabbits
are attributable to pioneer vitality and
creativity, a young colony like Carthage or
the U.S. outgrowing and overshadowing the
accomplishments of its fatherland. This
pioneer success is due to the joy of a
newfound freedom, a readiness to change, and
the need to pull together with each member’s
input. Such an ethos allowed Hazel to become
the natural leader of the exiles, and he
perpetuated that ethos at Watership Down.
What had been a couple of rebel Owsla and a pack of harried yearlings became the founders of a dynamic, indomitable new state.

Bigwig was a mere sentry for the Threarah but became captain of the Honeycomb Owsla and defeated Woundwort when even his former superior, Holly, probably could not have done so. Silver was Bigwig's second-in-command, a reliable officer and sturdy supporter who had been teased and mistreated in the Sandleford Owsla. Buckthorn was another sturdy fighter and follower to back up Bigwig: every general needs his troops, and Buckthorn was noted also for being decent and straightforward, a kind of model citizen that every society needs. Together they formed the brute force to support authority (Hazel) when times were tough and rabbits became rebellious as Hawkbite and his friends were in the common.

Holly was part of the Honeycomb Owsla but also played the role of senior statesman. He was well-respected by all the rabbits for his natural authority, tracking ability, judgment, and experience in command and was chosen as leader of the embassy to Efrafra. Other respected advisors were Blackberry and Fiver. Blackberry, a mere outskirter at Sandleford, proved to be exceptionally brilliant and provided the society with clever plans like Bigwig's spy mission in Efrafra and the use of boats. Fiver was both intelligent and intuitive, providing the society with the insight to see through Cowslip's deception and with visionary goals like reaching Watership Down to build a new and better home, though at Sandleford he was dismissed as only a runt. Together the intellectuals helped their people solve their problems through new policies (having bucks dig for themselves in chalk holes on the downs which, saved the rabbits from the elil at night, and Acorn proved especially adept at grubbing insects to feed Kehaar. Pipkin, besides being loyal, proved an expert at compassion and therapy by soothing Holly's anguish in the chalk holes.

Every rabbit had some forte that aided the society. Dandelion's exceptional speed made him useful as a scout, and his story-telling ability provided entertainment during tense moments in addition to keeping alive the rabbits' culture, since stories were the repositories of their wisdom, religion, and history. Bluebell was similar to Dandelion in providing relief in tense moments, especially with humor.

Strawberry played an important role as architect of the Honeycomb, the warren's wonder. He showed the Sandleford survivors that cultural contact can bring in new, better ideas and probably made them more willing to accept the Efrafrans and hutch rabbits. Knowing firsthand the difficulties of fitting into a new society, he took it upon himself to help Boxwood make the adjustment. He was also an eloquent speaker for the embassy to Efrafra and spoke well about the need for rabbits to be natural and cooperate with each other since he knew personally how dreadful an unnatural way of life could be.

Little mention is made of Boxwood but Blackavar is noteworthy as a tracker, an important skill for rabbits. In sum, each rabbit used his special talents to help the others and improve their society. That is why it survived the Sandleford zorn, passed through Cowslip's deception, and cheated and defeated a terrible general all without a single buck casualty. Watership Down's success stands in clear contrast to the shortcomings of the other warrens and Adams' statement that the best society is one which protects and values the individual. It induces people everywhere to ask: are we cheating ourselves by stifling or ignoring the creative gifts of our own "outskirters"?

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