Bachelor's thesis

NTNU
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

Sofia Aakredalen

The depths of animal consciousness in *Watership Down*

Bachelor's thesis in Lektor i Språkfag
Supervisor: Yuri Cowan
May 2023

NTNU
Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Sofia Aakredalen

The depths of animal consciousness in *Watership Down*

Bachelor’s thesis in Lektor i Språkfag
Supervisor: Yuri Cowan
May 2023

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Language and Literature

Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

Sofia Aakredalen Spring 2023 ENG2502

Instructor: Yuri Allen Cowen

The depths of animal consciousness in *Watership Down*

Bachelor

In a world where rabbits take center stage, Richard Adams weaves a captivating tale of survival, friendship, and the mysteries of animal consciousness in his novel, *Watership Down*. Published in 1972, the story follows the rabbit Hazel and his friends as they attempt to create a new warren following the destruction of their current one, Sandleford Warren, exploring the central theme of animal consciousness. We explore this topic through the eyes of the rabbits, witnessing their ability to comprehend emotional impressions and form complex relationships. Through the use of the six basic human emotions, which according to Sieun An et. al. are happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust, and the incorporation of folklore and legends, Adams brings these seemingly ordinary rabbits to life, forging a powerful connection between the reader and his fictional characters (An, Sieun, et al., 1). In my chosen novel, the rabbits are anthropomorphized through the integration of human emotions and behavior, enabling the reader to forge a deep emotional connection with these seemingly ordinary creatures and explore universal human experiences within animal realm.

The historical relationship between humans and animals is important to grasp before diving into the works of Richard Adams as it enriches our interpretation of the novel's themes and messages, as well as provide us with a broader framework for analyzing the narrative and topics, such as our perception of animals and responsibilities towards the natural world. It helps us understand why Adams' animal narrative is important. Traditionally, the Western view of the relationship between humans and animals has been hierarchical, placing humans above animals. According to Aristotle and Descartes, animals lack reason, moreover allowing humans to be free of any moral reservations they may have towards animals as they can never achieve the same moral significance (Bould, 332). Religion has also played a major role in human perceptions of animals, with the East and West sharing opposing views. Whilst Christianity has been painted by Western traditions, indicating a perception of the relationship as one of supremacy in favor of humans, Buddhism and Hinduism share the belief of reincarnation, further treating animals as they would humans (Bould, 333). In many religions, particular animals are considered taboo, such as the pig in Judaism and Islam. Among Hindus, cows are sacred, and vegetarianism is also widespread (DeMello, 153). As the East and West

have become more interconnected during the twentieth century, new perceptions have begun to develop, both in regard to religion and society in general. Furthermore, in the mid-1970s, cognitive ethology and sociobiology popularized the study of the animal mind. Studies of the individual animal's emotions and needs questioned our treatment of animals, further highlighting topics such as extinction and human destruction of natural habitats (Bekoff et al., xii). Today, animal rights movements are increasingly being initiated, and genetic science has caused humans to study similarities, rather than differences, between humans and animals (Bould, 333). Although meat production has been modernized in the twenty-first century, vegetarianism, and any other act of refraining from eating certain animal products have also become a larger trend (DeMello, 158, 170). Developing moral attitudes and cognitive ethology have sparked ethical discussions, such as extinction and habitat loss, mirrored in the novel through the portrayal of the rabbits' struggles and environmental destruction.

In his novel, Adams humanizes his fictional animals through their experiences of the six basic human emotions, mainly focusing on fear. Allowing fear to be the dominating affect is possibly a conscious choice perhaps linked to our perception of rabbits, and a result of us humans emphasizing their position in the food chain as that is a feature of their nature we are familiar with. Additionally, it is the main contributor to the development of the storyline. Firstly, the rabbits leave their initial warren due to Fiver's fear that something terrible will happen; "'Oh, Hazel! This is where it comes from! I know now – something very bad! Some terrible thing – coming closer and closer.' He began to whimper in fear." (7). He cannot explain why he is afraid, all he has is a feeling. This fear spreads to the other rabbits, and thus the story begins. Throughout their journey, this dominating affect impacts nearly every single one of their actions. Without this emotion, the rabbits would not have felt compelled to find a solution to their fear, moreover hindering the continuance of the story. For instance, they receive a suspicious amount of hospitality as they stumble upon another warren, Nuthanger Farm, on their journey to create their own, with Hazel noting that "There *is* something strange about these rabbits" (79). The warren gradually proves more peculiar, hitting its peak as the Nuthanger rabbits refuse to help Bigwig who got caught in a human snare. Fear creeps in among Hazel and his friends as they realize the death of one rabbit ensures a longer life for another; "[…] if one rabbit dies, the others will live that much longer." (114). Their life in this warren seems as though it will be short, and their human-like features allows them to analyze their fear and act on it, moreover escaping from the strange warren. On the other hand, in his book, Eric Saidel mentions the ability of rats to adapt to obstacles and discover alternate routes (Saidel, 54). Although rabbits are no longer classified as rodents, the two species are

placed together in the monophyletic group of 'Glires', perhaps indicating such adaptation skills amongst rabbits as well (Smith, 8).

Hazel's brother, Fiver, and their friend, Pippin, represent a great deal of the fear expressed in the novel. As a contributor to their appearance as rabbits, fear is seen in all the characters, however, mainly in these two, causing them to appear weak and afraid compared to characters such as Bigwig and General Woundwort; "Most of them still seemed to be more or less all right, but Fiver and Pipkin will have had as much as they can stand before long." (22). While all the rabbits are instinctively afraid, Fiver and Pipkin seem to lack the ability to conquer their fear, oftentimes allowing it to consume them. In chapter 12, "The Crossing", Fiver is described as "dejected and reluctant as a sparrow in the frost." (68), an impression held throughout the novel as his behavior constantly revolves around his fear and suspicions. Pipkin is also portrayed as a small and frightened rabbit; "Dandelion was telling [the story] well and even Pipkin forgot his weariness and danger […]" (28). As they attempt to cross the river after initially leaving their warren, Fiver and Pipkin are exempt from swimming, unlike the other rabbits, and are instead floated on a piece of wood, further contributing to their feeble appearance; "At his shoulder was Fiver, silent and twitching. […] Then he looked at Pipkin, huddled into a fold of sand, more panic-stricken and helpless than any rabbit he had ever seen." (35). The contrast between their fragility and the other rabbits' abilities emphasizes the challenges they face and highlights their roles as characters in need of protection and support.

Anger is also a significant emotion, most often represented through the former Owsla rabbit, Bigwig, and his short temper. Whilst fear is the most realistic emotion of a rabbit, anger contributes to the anthropomorphic characteristics in the novel. The rabbits become frustrated with each other and other rabbits, as well as situations, much like humans will quarrel and feel dejected. For instance, at the end of their stay with Cowslip and his warren, Fiver wishes to leave on account of his fear and anxiety. This results in Bigwig telling him off, accusing his ability to sense danger of ruining something good, rather than improving it; "'And now we've found a fine warren and got into it without even having to fight, *you've* got to do your best to upset everyone!'" (107). Affects of annoyance and anger become further normalized amongst the rabbits as also the rabbit trickster, El-ahrairah, shows apparent signs of frustration in Dandelion's tales. In the one called "The Story of the Trial of El-ahrairah", our rabbit trickster grows angry after discovering a wire placed in the grass by Prince Rainbow; "This made El-ahrairah really angry, for any of his people might have been snared and killed." (166). The quotation highlights the emotional depth of his character, as anger

becomes a natural response, exemplifying the significance of anger as a motivating force in their struggles and survival.

Bigwig and the Efafran leader, General Woundwort, embody much of the anger in the novel. As our narrator states, Bigwig's biggest enemy is perplexity, causing him to grow angry. He is further described as impatient and short-tempered, once again resulting in anger; "'You silly blockhead!' cried Bigwig. 'We'll all be finished!'" (35). As a result of his short temper and aggression, Bigwig is usually 'cheerful at the prospect of action' (68), a trait leading him to visit the dangerous warren of Efrara in the disguise of an Owsla officer, where he meets General Woundwort. Shaped by the lust for revenge and driven by anger, Woundwort holds no sympathy or sense of understanding. He rules his warren with fear and threats, keeping his subordinates under total control. Much of the anger expressed in the novel is a result of General Woundwort and Bigwig meeting, further challenging each other's patience and strength; "'You dirty little beast,' said Woundwort. […] 'We'll settle with you here.' […] 'You crack-brained slave-driver,' answered Bigwig. I'd like to see you try.'" (357). We can see Bigwig's annoyance starting to develop early on as he struggles with the superiority of Woundwort, despite his role as an Owsla officer being of pretend; "He still disliked addressing Woundwort as 'sir', but since he was supposed to be an Efrafan officer, he could not very well do otherwise. […] Bigwig swallowed his annoyance." (335). These encounters emphasize the intense rivalry and animosity between the two characters, with their anger fueling their determination to confront and overcome each other. Furthermore, it underscores the complex dynamics and power struggles within Adams' rabbit world, shaping character relationships and contributing to the overall tension and narrative progression of the novel.

Happiness and sadness are mostly represented as relief and disappointment, often related to the outcome of the situations the rabbits find themselves in. Happiness is a dominating emotion each time the rabbits succeed, for instance in escaping Efrara or discovering shelter, and sadness often shows itself after a plan goes bad or the passing of the rabbits. A moment of happiness and relief is for instance when Hazel and his friends are welcomed into Cowslip's warren. They have left their safe warren in Sandleford and embarked on an unknown journey based on a mere feeling Fiver had one evening. After a long and challenging travel, they have found shelter and good company; "'I never dreamt we'd reach a place like this. You've got wonderful judgement, Hazel.'" (75). Furthermore, they are later on excited by the view standing on top of a hill, a concept we know to be human; "'Why are you sitting up there?' 'Because I can see,' replied Dandelion, with a kind

of excited joy. 'Come and look! You can see the whole world.'" (124) They also seem to enjoy social times of listening to Dandelion's stories, indulging in entertainment; "Still, a little entertainment would be all to the good and raise their spirits." (265). This sense of happiness and enjoyment contributes to the human-like characteristics of the rabbits, further allowing the reader to gain an understanding of their personalities and emotions and develop sympathy.

Sadness and disappointment are a reoccurring theme in Adams' novel. In order to create an interesting and capturing storyline, the characters are constantly met with an uphill, facing one challenge after another. Times of disappointment are for instance when their plans prove unsuccessful, such as the plan to bring back does from a nearby farm. After a series of events, Hazel is eventually shot and hides in a drain. With their forerunner gone, the other rabbits feel a surge of sadness and bewilderment; "When Pipkin had planted in himself, like some sombre tree, the knowledge that Hazel would never return, his bewilderment exceeded his grief." (228). The passing of a rabbit will clearly inspire great sadness. Bigwig is also presumed dead at some point in the novel, causing Pipkin to cry out, revealing another human-like feature; "'It's a great pity, but we'll have to leave him.' 'Oh, Bigwig,' cried Pipkin […]." (438). The actual death of the doe, Thethuthinnang, also fills Hazel with sadness. Again, we notice an anthropomorphic characteristic as Hazel finds it sad to hear of the passing of a rabbit he hardly knew, merely due to it being a sorrowful concept; "The news depressed Hazel." (380). The use of the word 'depressed' suggests the depth of Hazel's emotional response, moreover, illustrating the profound impact of sadness.

As the 'leader' of the group, Hazel carries heavy emotions of both sadness and relief with him through most of the novel as he feels a certain responsibility for his fellow rabbits (Welch, 48). The making of decisions usually lands on Hazel, forcing him to make final calls that could determine his own fate and that of those around him. Although he never wishes to be perceived as 'Chief Rabbit', this role naturally befalls him as he is the one to trust Fiver and encourage an escape; "The other replied with a question. 'Are you called Chief Rabbit?' Hazel found this awkward to answer." (73). The outcome of these decisions will likely impact Hazel the most, whether that is in the form of relief or disappointment. For instance, when defending their warren from the intrusive Efrafans, Hazel retains his brave exterior despite his lack of hope; "His thoughts were very sad. Indeed, they were desperate. Although he had spoken resolutely in front of the others, he knew only too well how little hope there was of saving the warren from the Efrafans." (411). Regardless of the outcome, Hazel would feel responsible, illustrating his sense of duty and readiness to bear the consequences of his choices.

Lastly, surprise and disgust are not necessarily represented through a specific character but are associated with certain situations. As Douglas P. Leatherland points out, Adams does not exaggerate the animals' anthropomorphic features by clothing them and having them interact with humans (Leatherland, 166). Instead, he has them adopt human activities and traditions, such as religion and storytelling. Stories of the great El-ahrairah and the terrible warren of Efrara tend to inspire affects of surprise and disgust, often spread equally amongst the rabbits. Moreover, the rabbits are aware of the element of surprise, implementing it into their elaborate plans; "'It might get the better of even a big rabbit if it took him by surprise.'" (142). In chapter 23, the rabbits rescue a bird named Kehaar, in hopes of him proving useful later on. This bird inspires both surprise and disgust among Hazel and his friends as this is completely new territory; "Kehaar's habit of fouling his own nest had always disgusted Hazel." (189). His strength does not stop impressing the rabbits; "'[…] and we shall have Kehaar with us, if that appeals to you at all.' There was a buzz of surprise." (253). These instances demonstrate how emotions, such as surprise and disgust, shape the rabbits' perception of the world and their interactions with unfamiliar beings.

Why are Adams' fictional animals written with such anthropomorphic features? In the following paragraph, I will present three possible explanations for humanized animals in fiction, finally arguing that Adams' animals are a result of all three. Firstly, our knowledge of animal consciousness is limited. If one is writing a book about a person, the author can ask the person for advice to create accuracy. However, we are not able to ask animals and gain an understanding of their perceptions of the world. Therefore, we write with limited knowledge, often drawing on stereotypes and imagination. We then also add human-like features as that is something we are familiar with. Secondly, giving fictional animals anthropomorphic features will often increase excitement, moreover, create an interesting storyline. If Adams were to allow the storyline to unfold through the rabbits' realistic behavior, it would likely not develop much. Additionally, the readers become more invested in the story if they get a sense of who the characters are, further suggesting they need personalities. By giving the animals human-like characteristics, it becomes natural to relate and sympathize with them, again inspiring interest. Lastly, another reason behind anthropomorphic features in fictional animals can be to convey a meaning relevant to humans. The storyline or message could parallel humans and our issues, with the animals either representing animals and the repercussions forced on them, or humans and the consequences forced on us.

The exaggeration of fear in *Watership Down* could act as a sign of our limited knowledge. What we know for certain about their behavior is their comprehensive fear

towards anything new, and this emotion is therefore clearly highlighted in order to enhance their realistic features. As mentioned, the storyline is driven forward by the rabbits' fear. However, their decision to act on their fear requires the ability to form coherent thoughts and evaluate consequences. Without implementing such anthropomorphic features, Adams' novel would likely consist of inaudible eating of grass and the occasional sprint to the nearest shelter. Finally, the novel seems to hold a meaning significant to humans. Leatherland points out the 'symbols of human destruction', addressing the use of human objects. (Leatherland, 183). Objects that humans have discarded and turned into trash are encountered by the rabbits, compulsorily playing a role in their world as well. The incorporation of a burned-up cigarette and an old tire draw a connection between our actions and how they impact animals. Although the repercussions are negligible, we are still being made aware of the connections. Additionally, despite it being fiction, writing from the perspective of the rabbits may also lead us to gain a larger understanding of their lives and value. The encounter with human objects evokes emotional responses and raises awareness of human impact on animals as it emphasizes the rabbits' vulnerability and the emotional consequences of human behavior, further inviting the reader to empathize with the emotional experiences of the rabbits. Thus, the anthropomorphic features of Adams' animals are a result of limited knowledge, an increase in excitement and the conveyance of an underlying message.

I have chosen chapter 34, called "General Woundwort", as my specific passage to engage with from the primary literature. In this chapter, we are offered the backstory of the tyrannical leader of Efrafa, General Woundwort; "Some three years before, he had been born – the strongest of a litter of five […]" (301). As we are told of his time as a kitten, we discover the kindness afforded to him by a human, nursing him to life after a difficult escape. Despite this kindness, Woundwort grows up wild and aggressive, clearly shaped by anger and revenge, rather than gratitude; "But Woundwort grew up very wild and, like Cowper's hare, would bite when he could." (302). His hostile features keep developing as he grows older, leading him to kill the current chief of his first warren, moreover paving the way for his gruesome acts as a leader; "In combat he was terrifying, fighting entirely to kill, indifferent to any wounds he received himself and closing with his adversaries until his weight overbore and exhausted them." (302-303). As Randy C. Welch notes, the leadership of General Woundwort opposes that of Hazel through his exploitation of his rabbits, rather than relying on their talents and allowing them to grow (Welch, 48). Ruling with fear, the undefeated rabbit creates a warren unlike any other, Efrara, controlling the members' every move and forbidding them all from leaving. Bigwig's plan to infiltrate the warren is also included in this

chapter. As in the book in general, fear is the dominating emotion in this chapter, induced by Woundwort, and expressed through the rabbits of Efrafa.

While fear is the dominating emotion in this chapter, making an analysis of the chapter especially relevant for my paper, the human-like features are also worth mentioning. “When he had explored the limits of his own strength, he set to work to satisfy his longing for still more power in the only possible way – by increasing the power of the rabbits about him. He needed a bigger kingdom.” (303). It is likely that a rabbit in the real world seldom dreams of creating a kingdom in which it fearfully rules over its members, forbidding them from leaving; “He would allow no rabbit to leave the warren.” (303). Much like in stories surrounding humans, an antagonist or a foil will add excitement. By including General Woundwort and his terrible ways, the readers are increasingly encouraged to root for the protagonist(s), simultaneously as they become increasingly less fond of the antagonist. This will stimulate interest. As an antagonist the reader is supposed to dislike, Woundwort is given a distinctive personality with prominent human-like features. We are told of his upbringing, as if he were a human child, further learning about his cunningness and intelligence. He induces fear and craves loyalty, ruling over the rabbits with an iron hand; “Woundwort watched over them with a tireless zeal that won their loyalty even while they feared him.” (303). Moreover, he introduces a council and a team of intellectuals to exercise authority, as well as physically marking the inhabitants with Marks that determine their eating regulations. Efrara is a warren shaped by human ideas, a warren created by Woundwort, further highlighting the anthropomorphic features represented through his character and achievements.

In my selected passage to engage with from the secondary literature, mythology will be the central theme, linking it to the rabbits’ way of connecting their emotions to their collective identity and understanding of the world. The passage I have chosen to engage with is the chapter called “Mythology and the Supernatural” from the thesis *Deconstructing Anthropomorphism: The Humanimal Narratives of Kenneth Grahame, Beatrix Potter, and Richard Adams* written by Douglas P. Leatherland. As the title suggests, this chapter discusses the anthropomorphic features of Adams’ rabbits by focusing on the novel’s mythology and the supernatural aspects of the rabbits’ behavior. The most significant part of their mythology is Frith the sun god, the core of what one could call their religion. As Leatherland states, he created the earth and its creatures in his image, resembling the beliefs of Judeo-Christianity and Islam;

> “So we can surmise that Adams’ rabbits believe somewhat that Frith created El-ahrairah and his people in his own image […] This presents an obvious analogue to the anthropocentric and

> anthropomorphic Judeo-Christian and Islamic belief in deity that assumes human form […].” (181).

In her paper, Elisabeth Kynaston even goes as far as to assert that Adams is in fact writing about Christianity (Kynaston, 26).

Leatherland continues the analysis of the novel’s mythology by shedding light on El-ahrairah, the legendary rabbit trickster told of in Dandelion’s tales, functioning as a figure the rabbits can relate to and cheer for. In his analysis, Leatherland argues that through the other characters identifying with and learning from him, they pick up his anthropomorphic features, moreover normalizing these characteristics and emotions amongst the rabbits; “By placing El-ahrairah at the centre of rabbit mythology, however, Adams’ rabbits each internalize this anthropomorphic trope and the trickster archetype thus becomes normalized, a “natural” characteristic of each rabbit in the novel.” (183). The analysis further highlights El-ahrairah’s anthropomorphic characteristics by mentioning his ability to communicate across species, shedding light on his supernatural capabilities, as well as his cunning idea to use a disguise, a concept created by humans;

> “The trope of animals in disguises also recurs in the stories of El-ahrairah. […] The most symbolic use of disguise is in ‘The Story of El-ahrairah and the Black Rabbit of Inle’, in which El-ahrairah loses his tail, whiskers and ears to the Black Rabbit in a game of bob-stones.” (183).

Leatherland finishes the chapter by commenting on the function of this mythology, further stating the role of religion and legends as ‘a fantastical way of allowing nonhuman characters […] to perceive the meaning of the world around them and the lives of their species in a coherent way.’ (184). Although this mythology is non-anthropocentric, it very much resembles that of human beliefs, with similarities to religions, such as Judeo-Christianity and Islam, and ancient mythologies, such as those of the Egyptians and the Aztecs (Leatherland, 182). By composing their own stories and legends, the rabbits create a framework that assists them in making sense of their emotions and experiences. The broad range of El-ahrairah’s emotions, such as anger and bravery, become a source of inspiration and guidance, helping them navigate their own challenges and overcome adversity. In other words, the mythology allows the rabbits to connect their own experiences and feelings to the central figures. Additionally, the stories become a source of comfort, generating happiness and a sense of unity.

In his novel, *Watership Down*, Richard Adams entwines the six basic human emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise and disgust) into the everyday life of the rabbit

Hazel and his companions, as they navigate their way to a new warren by comprehending and analyzing their surroundings. By anthropomorphizing the rabbits and assigning them distinct personalities shaped by these emotions, Adams allows us to delve into their inner worlds and forge deep emotional connections with the characters. Through the detailed depiction of emotions, the story offers a nuanced understanding of animal consciousness. It calls into question the notion that animal emotions are limited and encourages us to consider the complexity and depth of their emotional lives. Similarly, the comprehensive mythology serves as a lens through which we can examine the rabbits' emotional experiences, offering symbolic representations and moral lessons that transcend the boundaries of their animal existence. Simultaneously, the exaggerated anthropomorphic features, such as an oppressed village and comprehensive mythology, also lead us to contemplate the level of fictional purposes behind these characteristics and emotions, as their function might be to develop the plot, engage the reader or convey a message related to our relationship to the natural world. This transforms *Watership Down* from a tale of rabbits to a moving examination of animal consciousness, bridging the gap between human and animal.

Reference list:

Primary literature:

Adams, Richard. *Watership Down*. Penguin Books, 1972.

Secondary literature:

An, Sieun, et al. "Two Sides of Emotion: Exploring Positivity and Negativity in Six Basic Emotions across Cultures." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 8, 2017.

Bekoff, Marc, et al. *The Cognitive Animal: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives on Animal Cognition*. The MIT Press, 2002.

Bould, Mark. *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. *Edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint.* Routledge, 2009. (pp. 331-340)

DeMello, Margo. *Animals and Society. An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*. Second ed., Columbia University Press, 2021.

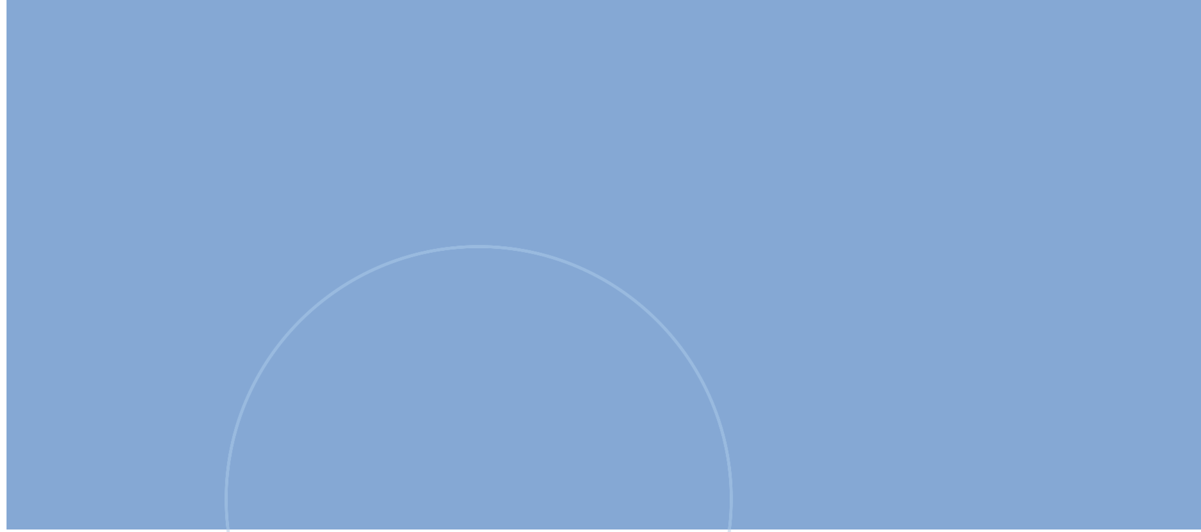
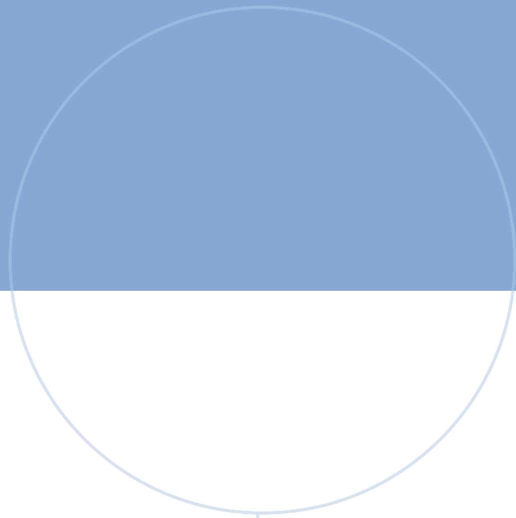
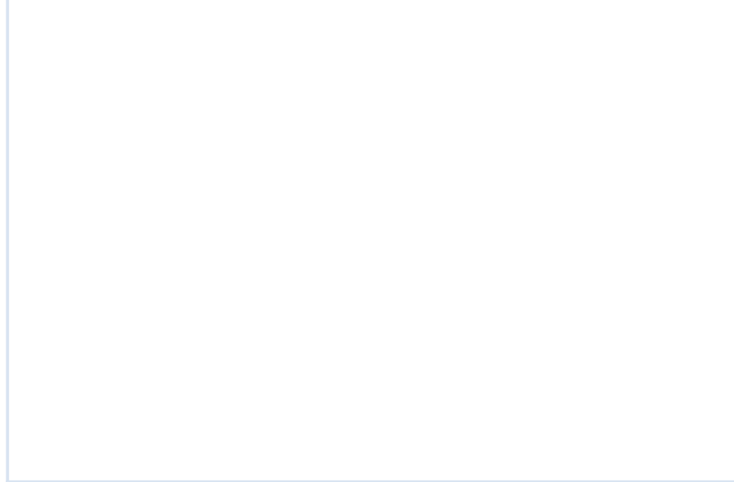
Kynaston, Elisabeth. *A Symphonic Discussion of the Animal in Richard Adams' Watership Down.* Lund University, 2020. Available at: https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=9035103&fileOId=9035111

Leatherland, Douglas P. *Deconstructing Anthropomorphism: The Humanimal Narratives of Kenneth Grahame, Beatrix Potter, and Richard Adams*. Durham University, 2019. (pp. 166-223). Available at: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/12978/.

Saidel, Eric. Animal Minds, Human Minds. In M. Bekoff, & C. Allen, & G. M. Burghardt (Eds.). *The Cognitive Animal: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives on Animal Cognition*. The MIT Press. 2002. (pp. 53-57).

Smith, Andrew T. *Lagomorphs: Pikas, Rabbits, and Hares of the World*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

Welch, Randy C. *Watership Down: The Individual & Society*. Mythlore, vol. 13, no. 4 (50), 1987. (pp. 48–50).

Norwegian University of
Science and Technology