

Shardik Short Guide

Shardik by Richard Adams

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Characters

The main characters reflect both the tensions and the ambiguities of the novel. Shardik is a powerful creature, but whether his power stems from God or Nature is never clear. Shardik is always viewed from afar. The author (although he knows what happens in the minds of rabbits and dogs) never takes the reader inside Shardik. Thus his actions occur without clear motivation.

Shardik's chief priest and priestess, Kelderek and the Tuginda, profess no doubts. They sense the bear's divine power and plan, and they entrust their lives to it. Kelderek is the more developed of the two; in the course of the novel he undergoes an interesting transformation. Before Shardik comes, Kelderek is a mere hunter, despised by the Ortelgans as a permanent adolescent whose nickname is Kelderek-Playwith-the-Children. As soon as Kelderek identifies the bear as the long awaited Shardik, he gains stature: He becomes first priest, then chief priest, and ultimately king. He directs the Ortelgans to victory. He surrenders those titles willingly when Shardik flees Bekla, interpreting the flight as the god's abandonment of an unworthy people.

Kelderek wanders in despair until Shardik saves the children; with this revelation Kelderek senses that the divine purpose has been accomplished.

Although Kelderek is the character whose thoughts the reader most often shares, he is curiously unreflective. It is clear that he does not realize all the implications of the unfolding events.

Some of those implications are realized instead by a series of Beklan leaders. The first is the Beklan Commander at the Battle of the Foothills. He is a good man, a wise leader, and an officer loyal to his duty; he is as ready to use his troops on construction projects that benefit small villages as he is to take them on campaign. Nonetheless, he is slaughtered by Shardik. The second is Elleroth, a Beklan nobleman who leads the battle against the Ortelgans after the capital falls. Elleroth is handsome, cultivated, and brave. He fights to preserve civic order rather than personal power; he fearlessly confronts those he regards as fanatics and plots intelligently (although unsuccessfully) to topple the Ortelgan rulers with a minimum of bloodshed. The last is Siristro who oversees the efforts to rebuild society after Shardik's death and the Ortelgan's collapse. These three characters offer an admirable view of a cultivated society striving to maintain order.



Social Concerns/Themes

Shardik tells how the presence of a monstrous bear inspires a subject island people to overthrow the ruling empire. Confident that this bear is Shardik, the promised incarnation of divine power, the Ortelgans capture the capital of Bekla. They are led by Kelderek, who first discovered Shardik.

While Kelderek ministers to the captive bear, the Ortelgans consolidate power throughout the empire and begin to rule harshly. Shardik suddenly escapes from Bekla. Following him into the countryside, Kelderek discovers that Ortelgans have allowed the slave trade to flourish. When Shardik perishes in the act of saving some children from a slaver, Kelderek believes that this is God's revelation: children must be cared for if society is to flourish.

Fundamentally Shardik is a novel about human misery. From the opening description of a forest fire, destruction is the constant occurrence of the novel.

Shardik is the antithesis of *Watership Down* (1972), showing the ravaging rather than the reestablishment of community. The novel is filled with riveting scenes of death and devastation: the sack of the capital city, the slaughter of a Beklan army, Shardik's destruction of his temple, and Genshed's torture of enslaved children.

Although the novel ends with Shardik's revelation about children, this commandment is only a hope rather than an accepted principle.

Thematically, the novel is a puzzle.

Shardik may or may not be divinely ordained. The bear's actions in overthrowing the empire and freeing the children can be interpreted as deliberate or as accidental. If Shardik is divine power incarnate, this power is both awesome and murderous; it is responsible for the death of thousands of innocent people and allows the Ortelgans to act for ill as well as good. Insofar as they are a chosen people, the Ortelgans are unstoppable. They are also uncontrollable, using their newly acquired power to act more imperiously than the Beklan empire.

The central conflict in the novel is between the Ortelgans and the Beklans who represent intuitive and rational ways of knowing. The Ortelgans accept the divinity of Shardik on faith; they act instinctively, without thinking of consequences, trusting to providence.

The Beklans determine their actions by weighing pros and cons, by taking logical steps to perceived ends. The Ortelgans lack a sense of history and aesthetic appreciation; the Beklans possess a strong sense of civic identity and cultivate civilized pleasures. Ambiguity and polarity have led reviewers to speculate about Adams's meaning. Is Shardik a historical commentary, an allegory of the coming of Christ, and of the impact of Christianity upon a pagan Roman empire? Is Shardik a contemporary tract about



revived religious fundamentalism in a technological world which thinks it left the idea of faith far behind? Is Shardik a philosophical meditation upon the power that myth holds upon human imagination even in a scientific age? Is Shardik a timeless warning, the book of a new prophet who lashes a society that, despite its notable accomplishments, continues to abuse and neglect its children?



Techniques

Shardik presents, in one way, a microcosm like the lapine universe of Watership Down. Bekla is a completely realized alternate world. Adams gives it language, culture, geography, and history. The novel offers therefore a total involvement and immersion in a world strange, wonderful, and terrible.

Shardik, like Watership Down, offers frequent natural description. Adams's prose is filled with long passages of scenic description, and the narrative often pauses for a paragraph-long metaphor or simile. Its purpose in Shardik, though, is to create the sublime rather than the pastoral. The landscape, like the events unfolding on it, is beyond human control. Whether it is divine wrath or lucky political rebellion that is ravaging Bekla, the reader is aware that the action is a life-and-death struggle. Shardik is the epic of Bekla, the story of a turning point in the history of a civilization.



Related Titles

Maia (1985) is an odd sequel to *Shardik*. It tells of events in Bekla, but the story occurs at a time before *Shardik*'s coming. It continues the theme of the enslavement of children, but instead of depicting physical cruelty, it recounts the hedonistic life of a fifteen-year-old concubine named Maia. Although this novel explores the corrupt core of a civilized empire, it totally lacks the attention to natural landscape and the epic vocabulary that gives *Shardik* its power. Almost twelve hundred pages long, *Maia* reads like a combination of Robert Graves's *I, Claudius* (1934) and Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* (1966). That this mixture of ceaseless political intrigue and constant amorous adventure will attract the same favorable response from readers and critics as *Shardik* seems doubtful. *Maia* is ultimately redeemed at the novel's end, but after more than a thousand pages no one may care.

Maia seems to lack a strong central conflict upon which an elaborate plot can be erected.



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