

Book Summary

ANIMAL FARM

(PUBLISHED 1945)

I ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born Eric Arthur Blair in Motihari, Bengal, India, on June 25, 1903, George Orwell was the son of a British civil servant and belonged to what he considered 'the lower-upper-middle class.' He returned to England with his mother in 1905 and attended a fashionable preparatory school before winning a scholarship to Eton, where he first demonstrated an apparent animosity toward convention and authority. Consequently, as a form of rebellion, Orwell decided against continuing his studies at either Oxford or Cambridge and instead enlisted with the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, a decision that would permanently affect his philosophical perspective, political consciousness, and creative legacy.

Orwell returned to England in 1927, ostensibly on leave after serving overseas for five years. Within a month of his arrival he resigned his post, announcing to his parents his intention of becoming a writer. Attracted to a bohemian, artistic lifestyle, he traveled to Paris in 1928, where he lived for eighteen months. He started a career in journalism in Paris, but did not fully realize his literary potential until after his return to England. His work began to appear in *The Adelphi*, most notably with the publication in 1931 of his enduring and masterful essay 'A Hanging.' His first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, was rejected by several publishers, including T. S. Eliot of Faber and Faber, before it was reluctantly accepted by Victor Gollancz and released under the pen name of George Orwell in January 1933. As a result, Orwell continued to use this pseudonym for the remainder of his life and literary career, never legally changing his given name, however.

Despite high praise from critics for a relatively unknown author, the book was commercially unsuccessful and disheartening to Orwell. Undaunted, he earned his livelihood as a journalist while continuing to publish both fiction and non-fiction. At this point Orwell left England on assignment to observe and fight in the Spanish Civil War, where he was seriously wounded, necessitating his return to England in 1938. Later that

year, Orwell wrote about the experience with horrific realism and perception in *Homage to Catalonia*.

In 1939 Orwell published *Coming Up for Air*, the first of his novels to attain commercial success. This personal triumph, however, was soon overshadowed by the outbreak of the Second World War. Denied military service for reasons of health, Orwell was nonetheless active in civil defense.

During the war years Orwell originated the idea for *Animal Farm*, a novel that was initially rejected by British and American publishers, who feared the repercussions of promoting a work critical of the Soviet Union, then a military ally. When *Animal Farm* finally appeared in May 1945, however, it met with an unprecedented public reception. As a result, Orwell achieved overnight recognition and financial independence.

In 1947 Orwell settled on the island of Jura off the west coast of Scotland. Here, although physically ill and increasingly pessimistic about the state of the world, he completed *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a work of immense critical and cultural importance. The novel was published in 1949 just months before Orwell's premature death from a tubercular hemorrhage on January 23, 1950.

II OVERVIEW

Conceived and written as satire, *Animal Farm* is generally acknowledged as presenting many of Orwell's views on humanity and politics. The novel relates the overthrow of a farmer's tyrannical rule by the animals in his barnyard and the animals' aborted efforts to establish an 'egalitarian' society. Clearly alluding to political events in Russia from the Revolution to World War II, *Animal Farm* primarily attacks the extremes of Stalinism, yet goes beyond to dissect the anatomy of revolution and the lure of power. The ponderous political implications of the novel, however, are deftly interwoven into a fantastic tale of animals that talk, walk on their hind legs, write laws, spout propaganda, and commit crimes, all in the name of equality. Once the animals attain their freedom and begin to organize the farmyard, it becomes obvious that their behavior parodies human political and social hierarchies.

III SETTING

The novel takes place on Manor Farm, which is renamed Animal Farm after the animals expel Mr. Jones, the farmer, from its grounds. It is a typical barnyard, except that the animals have assumed the farmer's tasks. Their aspirations are high; they write seven commandments on the wall of the barn, including 'All animals are created equal,' and 'Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy,' and thus stake their claim. They build a windmill—an object of much contention—that is rebuilt several times after being destroyed by a storm and then by a band of farmers with dynamite. Originally, the

animals pledge to preserve the manor house as a museum, but as the power structure becomes more unbalanced, the pigs move into the house, which becomes their domain. The farmhouse symbolizes the new totalitarian rule of the pigs and is indeed indicative of the 'revised' commandment: 'All animals are created equal but some animals are more equal than others.' Orwell, by restricting all the action to the farmyard, creates a microcosm of society.

IV THEMES AND CHARACTERS

Modeled on a relatively simple premise, the novel begins as the animals of Manor Farm unite against farmer Jones to overthrow his tyrannical rule. Understandably ecstatic over their sudden and rather unexpected good fortune, the animals create a new order for the future based on equality and equity. The paint is hardly dry on their barnyard manifesto, however, when the hated forces and attitudes that triggered their revolt begin to reemerge, eventually to destroy their dream of emancipation. Orwell undoubtedly passes judgement on the fate of revolution by comparing ideological promises with their practical application.

In essence, Orwell does not condemn revolution but agonizes over the betrayal of its ideals. Possessing superior knowledge, the pigs assume leadership of the farm, taking a first step to replace the tyranny of the past with a new and more terrifying threat for the future. The pigs learn to control the means of communication and literally create their own truth to dispense to the inhabitants of the farm; this is perhaps the most pessimistic aspect of the novel. In the end, pigs are indistinguishable from farmers and the ideals of the revolution seem distant in the face of terror, manipulation, and despair.

Appearing in a dream, the birth of revolution was the inspiration of old Major, a pig renowned for his wisdom and benevolence. But as the dream becomes reality, the responsibility of the revolution falls on the two most 'preeminent' pigs, Snowball and Napoleon. Thinly disguised, these represent the principals behind the emergence of Soviet Russia—Major and Snowball are Lenin and Trotsky, and Napoleon is Stalin.

Although a clear distinction is made at the beginning of the novel between Jones, as the representative human, and the community of animals inhabiting the farm, the focus quickly shifts to the animals once Jones is overthrown and specifically to the rivalry that develops between Snowball and Napoleon.

The novel follows the ruthless Napoleon in his quest for individual power. Driving Snowball into exile, Napoleon imposes his oppressive authority on the animals through his manipulation of language, as demonstrated by Squealer, the voice of the revolution who is capable of turning 'black into white,' and the menacing presence of a private army of fierce watchdogs capable of enforcing adherence to his regime.

The failure of the revolution is largely the result of self-defeatism, cynicism, and the inability of the animals either to recognize or resist the oppression imposed on them by Napoleon. Even the basic goodness of the animals, as characterized by the horse Boxer,

the symbol of strength, self-sacrifice, and trust, cannot overcome the demise of idealism into blind allegiance and delusion.

V LITERARY QUALITIES

An extremely disciplined writer, Orwell consistently used language to enhance the development of plot while providing insight into thematic concerns. This is especially true in *Animal Farm*, an imaginative examination of the interaction of language and political method. Written in a pure, subtle, and simplistic style, *Animal Farm* evokes descriptive imagery and stunning clarity of purpose. Although the novel begins with a relatively light tone, it gradually evolves into a menacing and debilitating void. Coming full circle, the novel ends with a tremendous sense of futility and loss as even the memory of the revolution fades into quiet and passive oblivion.

Orwell conceived of *Animal Farm* as an allegorical beast fable, drawing on a literary convention attributed to Aesop and dating from the seventh century BC. Popular in almost every literary period, the beast fable is most often designed to satirize human folly as well as to provide moral instruction. An avid reader, Orwell was undoubtedly influenced by the work of the seventeenth-century French writer La Fontaine and in his own century by Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* and *Just So Stories*.

Orwell clearly descends from an impressive lineage of English satirists, particularly those of the eighteenth century including Dryden, Swift, and Pope. *Animal Farm* is consistently and appropriately compared to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as having the capacity to simultaneously delight while pointing an accusing finger at the limitations of human kindness and decency. In the twentieth century, satire is generally utilized in the fictional narrative as it is in *Animal Farm* to criticize with the ultimate goal of improvement. In this capacity, Orwell joins company with such diverse writers as Evelyn Waugh, Mark Twain, Sinclair Lewis, and Aldous Huxley. Integrating political and artistic purpose, Orwell's beast fable proved a radical departure from his previous work but an extremely successful literary vehicle and quite possibly his most distinguished creative achievement.

VI SOCIAL SENSITIVITY

During the mid-1930s, Orwell like many of his literary contemporaries, became increasingly more perceptive of the social and political concerns of the age. Clearly a turning point for Orwell, this period would ultimately define his artistic purpose and direction as a writer and simultaneously crystallize his prophetic vision of the future. Unquestionably a literary extension of Orwell's political development, *Animal Farm* is most often identified as a satire on totalitarian communism and the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin. Orwell recognized the ability of emerging political regimes to replace poverty with a form of security based on social and economic servitude. Committed to

the preservation of intellectual liberty, Orwell further realized the inherent danger of sacrificing this ideal to governmental control. Orwell's primary concern by the close of the decade was to discover the proper medium through which to communicate his message.

VII TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the pigs' idea of 'animalism.' What happens to this theory as the novel progresses?
2. Boxer and Clover, the two cart-horses, are described as the 'most faithful disciples.' What makes them such?
3. Why is the windmill such an important object in the novel?
4. Examine the novel's ending and particularly the final paragraph. Has Napoleon compromised the integrity of the farm?
5. Why is the song "Beasts of England" important to the animals in the beginning of the novel? Why is the song later abolished?
6. What happens to the original Seven Commandments? Why are they later revised?
7. Discuss how the events of the Battle of the Cowshed are changed later in the novel in order to present Snowball in a bad light.
8. Why are the sheep taken to a corner of the farm in the end of the novel and kept there for a week?
9. Compare Snowball and Napoleon. Why do they disagree? Do you think the farm could have functioned with both pigs as leaders?
10. Moses, the tame raven, speaks of Sugarcandy Mountain. What is its significance? Why do the animals hate him?

VIII IDEAS FOR REPORTS AND PAPERS

1. Research the Russian Revolution of 1917 and its origins. What similarities do you see between it and the events in *Animal Farm*? Are the major characters in each of the revolutions alike? Why or why not?
2. Why does Napoleon take great efforts to downplay Snowball's contributions to the rebellion and to denounce his memory? List the episodes in which Squealer and Napoleon retell events in order to discredit Snowball. Why do the other animals believe them?
3. Read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and discuss any similarities it has to *Animal Farm*.
4. The animals react differently to the revolution—some are trusting, some resist. Discuss the way Orwell characterizes the different breeds of animals. Are they symbolic of the different classes of humans?

5. How do the pigs take advantage of the other animals' lack of intelligence? Explain some of the situations where the pigs use this to their advantage. How is language important to the pigs and the novel in general? Would the revolution have been more successful if all the animals were indeed equal?

IX RELATED TITLES/ADAPTATIONS

Similar in thematic content to *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is both an indictment of political oppression and a vigorous attack on the corruption of language. Throughout the novel, Orwell is relentless in his disparaging analysis of totalitarian society. More impressive, however, is his ability to demonstrate the use of language as a tool of government to exercise and ensure control over its people. Deprived of access to their historical and cultural traditions, the inhabitants of Orwell's world become enslaved to the immediacy of existence.

Animal Farm was made into an animated cartoon in 1954, directed and produced by John Halas and Joy Batchelor and released by Louis de Rochemont Associates. Presented as a full-length adult satire, the film was considered an artistically successful rendering of Orwell's book made into vivid and realistic animation. A superb creative achievement, the film is executed with technical precision and visual brilliance, distinctly reminiscent of the 'Disney' style. The thematic elements of Orwell's novel remain consistent in the film and quite possibly are enhanced by the striking contrast of presenting political satire in the medium of cartoon.

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