

ANIMAL FARM BY GEORGE ORWELL

THE AUTHOR:

George Orwell was the pen name of **Eric Blair**, a British political novelist and essayist. Born in 1903 to British colonists in **Bengal, India**, Orwell received his education at a series of private schools, including **Eton**, an elite school in England. His painful experiences with snobbishness and social elitism at Eton, as well as his intimate familiarity with the reality of British imperialism in India, made him deeply suspicious of the established class system in English society. As a young man, Orwell became a socialist, speaking openly against the excesses of governments east and west and fighting briefly for the socialist cause during the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939.

Unlike many British socialists in the 1930s and 1940s, Orwell was not enamored of the Soviet Union and its policies, nor did he consider the Soviet Union a positive representation of the possibilities of socialist society. He could not turn a blind eye to the cruelties and hypocrisies of Soviet Communist Party, which had overturned the semifeudal system of the tsars (Zar) only to replace it with the dictatorial reign of Joseph Stalin. Orwell became a sharp critic of both capitalism and communism, and is remembered chiefly as an advocate of freedom and a committed opponent of communist oppression. His two greatest **anti-totalitarian novels**—*Animal Farm* and *1984*—form the basis of his reputation. Orwell died in 1950, only a year after completing *1984*, which many consider his masterpiece.

ANIMAL FARM

Orwell's dystopian novel, *1984* attacks the idea of totalitarian communism by painting a terrifying picture of a world in which personal freedom is nonexistent.

Animal Farm, written in **1945**, deals with similar themes but in a shorter and somewhat simpler format. A "**fairy story**" in the style of Aesop's fables, it uses animals on an English farm to tell the history of Soviet communism. Certain animals are based directly on Communist Party leaders: the pigs Napoleon and Snowball, for example, are figurations of Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky, respectively. Orwell uses the form of the fable for a number of aesthetic and political reasons. To better understand these, it is helpful to know at least the rudiments of Soviet history under Communist Party rule, beginning with the October Revolution of 1917.

In February 1917, **Tsar Nicholas II**, the monarch of Russia, abdicated and the socialist Alexander Kerensky became premier. At the end of October, Kerensky was ousted (deposed/overthrown), and **Vladimir Lenin**, the architect of the Russian Revolution, became chief commissar. Almost immediately, as wars raged on virtually every Russian front, Lenin's chief allies began jockeying for power in the newly formed state; the most influential included **Joseph Stalin, Leon Trotsk**. Trotsky and Stalin emerged as the most likely heirs to Lenin's vast power. Trotsky was a popular and charismatic leader, famous for his impassioned speeches, while the taciturn Stalin preferred to consolidate his power behind the scenes. After Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin orchestrated an alliance against Trotsky that included himself. In the following years, **Stalin** succeeded in becoming the unquestioned dictator of the Soviet Union and had Trotsky expelled first from Moscow, then from the Communist Party, and finally from Russia altogether in 1936. Trotsky fled to Mexico, where he was assassinated on Stalin's orders in 1940.

In 1934, Stalin's ally Serge Kirov was assassinated in Leningrad, prompting Stalin to commence his infamous purges of the Communist Party. Holding "*show trials*"—trials whose outcomes he and his allies had already decided—Stalin had his opponents officially denounced as participants in

Trotskyist or anti-Stalinist conspiracies and therefore as “enemies of the people,” an appellation that guaranteed their immediate execution. As the Soviet government's economic planning failed, Russia suffered under a surge of violence, fear, and starvation. Stalin used his former opponent as a tool to placate the wretched populace. Trotsky became a common national enemy and thus a source of negative unity. He was a frightening specter used to conjure horrifying eventualities, in comparison with which the current misery paled. Additionally, by associating his enemies with Trotsky's name, Stalin could ensure their immediate and automatic elimination from the Communist Party.

These and many other developments in Soviet history before 1945 have direct parallels in *Animal Farm*: Napoleon expels Snowball from the farm and, after the windmill collapses, uses Snowball in his purges just as Stalin used Trotsky. Similarly, Napoleon becomes a dictator, while Snowball is never heard from again. Orwell was inspired to write *Animal Farm* in part by his experiences in a Trotskyist group during the Spanish Civil War, and Snowball certainly receives a more sympathetic portrayal than Napoleon. But though *Animal Farm* was written as an attack on a specific government, its general themes of oppression, suffering, and injustice have far broader application; modern readers have come to see Orwell's book as a powerful attack on any political, rhetorical, or military power that seeks to control human beings unjustly.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Napoleon - The pig who emerges as the leader of *Animal Farm* after the Rebellion. Based on Joseph **Stalin**, Napoleon uses military force (his nine loyal attack dogs) to intimidate the other animals and consolidate his power. In his supreme craftiness, Napoleon proves more treacherous than his counterpart, Snowball.

Snowball - The pig who challenges Napoleon for control of *Animal Farm* after the Rebellion. Based on Leon **Trotsky**, Snowball is intelligent, passionate, eloquent, and less subtle and devious (immoral, deceitful) than his counterpart, Napoleon. Snowball seems to win the loyalty of the other animals and cement his power.

Boxer - The cart-horse whose incredible strength, dedication, and loyalty play a key role in the early prosperity of *Animal Farm* and the later completion of the windmill. Quick to help but rather slow-witted, Boxer shows much devotion to *Animal Farm*'s ideals but little ability to think about them independently. He naively trusts the pigs to make all his decisions for him. His two mottoes are “I will work harder” and “Napoleon is always right.” He symbolizes the naïve working class.

Squealer - The pig who spreads Napoleon's propaganda among the other animals. Squealer justifies the pigs' monopolization of resources and spreads false statistics pointing to the farm's success. Orwell uses Squealer to explore the ways in which those in power often use rhetoric and language to twist the truth and gain and maintain social and political control.

Old Major - The prize-winning boar whose vision of a socialist utopia serves as the inspiration for the Rebellion. Three days after describing the vision and teaching the animals the song “Beasts of England,” Major dies, leaving Snowball and Napoleon to struggle for control of his legacy. Orwell based Major on both the German political economist Karl **Marx** and the Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Ilych **Lenin**.

Clover - A good-hearted female cart-horse and Boxer's close friend. Clover often suspects the pigs of violating one or another of the Seven Commandments, but she repeatedly blames herself for misremembering the commandments.

Moses - The tame raven who spreads stories of *Sugarcandy Mountain*, the paradise to which animals supposedly go when they die. Moses plays only a small role in *Animal Farm*, but Orwell uses him to explore how communism exploits **religion** (Orthodox) as something with which to pacify the oppressed.

Mollie - The vain, flighty (impulsive, capricious) mare who pulls Mr. Jones's carriage. Mollie craves the attention of human beings and loves being groomed and pampered. She has a difficult time with her new life on *Animal Farm*, as she misses wearing ribbons in her mane and eating sugar cubes. She represents the **petit bourgeoisie** that fled from Russia a few years after the Russian Revolution.

Benjamin - The long-lived donkey who refuses to feel inspired by the Rebellion. Benjamin firmly believes that life will remain unpleasant no matter who is in charge. Of all of the animals on the farm, he alone comprehends the changes that take place, but he seems either unwilling or unable to oppose the pigs.

Muriel - The white goat who reads the Seven Commandments to Clover whenever Clover suspects the pigs of violating their prohibitions.

Mr. Jones - The often drunk farmer who runs the Manor Farm before the animals stage their Rebellion and establish *Animal Farm*. Mr. Jones is an unkind master who indulges himself while his animals lack food; he thus represents **Tsar Nicholas II**, whom the Russian Revolution ousted.

Mr. Frederick - The tough, shrewd (cunny, astute) operator of Pinchfield, a neighboring farm. Based on **Adolf Hitler**, the ruler of Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, Mr. Frederick proves an untrustworthy neighbor.

Mr. Pilkington - The easygoing gentleman farmer who runs Foxwood, a neighboring farm. Mr. Frederick's bitter enemy, Mr. Pilkington represents the **capitalist governments of England and the United States**.

Mr. Whymper - The human solicitor whom Napoleon hires to represent *Animal Farm* in human society. Mr. Whymper's entry into the *Animal Farm* community initiates contact between *Animal Farm* and human society, alarming the common animals.

Jessie and Bluebell - Two dogs, each of whom gives birth early in the novel. Napoleon takes the puppies in order to "educate" them.

Minimus - The poet pig who writes verse about Napoleon and pens the banal patriotic song "Animal Farm, Animal Farm" to replace the earlier idealistic hymn "Beasts of England," which Old Major passes on to the others.

MAIN THEMES

The Corruption of Socialist Ideals in the Soviet Union

Animal Farm is most famous in the West as a stinging critique of the history and rhetoric of the Russian Revolution. Retelling the story of the emergence and development of Soviet communism in the form of an animal fable, *Animal Farm* allegorizes the rise to power of the dictator Joseph Stalin. In the novella, the overthrow of the human oppressor Mr. Jones by a democratic coalition of animals quickly gives way to the consolidation of power among the pigs. Much like the Soviet intelligentsia, the pigs establish themselves as the ruling class in the new society.

Although Orwell believed strongly in socialist ideals, he felt that the Soviet Union realized these ideals in a terribly perverse form. His novella creates its most powerful ironies in the moments in which Orwell depicts the corruption of Animalist ideals by those in power. For *Animal Farm* serves not so much to condemn tyranny or despotism as to indict the horrifying hypocrisy of tyrannies that base themselves on, and owe their initial power to, ideologies of liberation and equality. The gradual disintegration and perversion of the Seven Commandments illustrates this hypocrisy with vivid force, as do Squealer's elaborate philosophical justifications for the pigs' blatantly unprincipled actions. Thus, the novella critiques the violence of the Stalinist regime against the human beings it ruled, and also points to Soviet communism's violence against human logic, language, and ideals.

The Societal Tendency toward Class Stratification

Animal Farm offers commentary on the development of class tyranny and the human tendency to maintain and reestablish class structures even in societies that allegedly stand for total equality. The novella illustrates how classes that are initially unified in the face of a common enemy, as the animals are against the humans, may become internally divided when that enemy is eliminated.

The Abuse of Language as Instrumental to the Abuse of Power

One of Orwell's central concerns, both in *Animal Farm* and in *1984*, is the way in which language can be manipulated as an instrument of control. In *Animal Farm*, the pigs gradually twist and distort a rhetoric of socialist revolution to justify their behavior and to keep the other animals in the dark. The animals heartily embrace Major's visionary ideal of socialism, but after Major dies, the pigs gradually twist (distort) the meaning of his words. As a result, the other animals seem unable to oppose the pigs without also opposing the ideals of the Rebellion. By the end of the novella, after Squealer's repeated reconfigurations of the Seven Commandments in order to decriminalize the pigs' treacheries, the main principle of the farm can be openly stated as "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." This outrageous abuse of the word "equal" and of the ideal of equality in general typifies the pigs' method, which becomes increasingly audacious as the novel progresses.

Orwell's sophisticated exposure of this abuse of language remains one of the most compelling (powerful) and enduring features of *Animal Farm*, worthy of close study even after we have decoded its allegorical characters and events.