



Animal Farm

George Orwell
(1945)

HISTORICAL SETTING

In the late 1930s news reached the West of Stalin's purge trials, which led to the death of three million people and sent many others to forced labour camps. In 1939 Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler, which enabled the Germans to take over Poland and Czechoslovakia. Orwell's indignant reaction to these events caused him to write *Animal Farm*. He expressed his disillusionment with Stalinism and totalitarianism in general in the form of an animal fable, an anti-utopia much influenced by Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, especially in the comparison between men and animals.

PLOT

The book is a short narrative **set on a farm** where a group of oppressed animals, capable of speech and reason and inspired by the teachings of an old boar, overcome their cruel master and set up a revolutionary government. **The pigs lead and supervise** the enterprise under the leadership of Napoleon, a power-hungry pig. At first the animals' life is guided by **Seven Commandments** based on equality; however, these are gradually altered by the pigs who become increasingly dictatorial and arrogate to themselves the privileges previously exercised by humans. At the end all the Seven Commandments are abandoned and only one remains: 'all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others'. The parallels between the plot of the book and the history of the USSR between 1917 and 1943 are clear: each animal symbolises a precise figure or representative type. Yet *Animal Farm* cannot be interpreted only as a satire on the Soviet Union. Orwell had a wider aim in mind: he wanted to write **a satire on dictatorship** in general as the fact he named the ruling pig 'Napoleon' clearly shows.

ANIMALS

Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* primarily as an allegory of the Russian Revolution disguised as an animal fable. The way in which animal characteristics are portrayed is remarkable; besides being a symbol, each animal possesses the traits of its species and Orwell has the ability to view it as if from the inside of its mind and thoughts.

Old Major stands for a mixture of Marx and Lenin: the doctrine he preaches provides the basic beliefs which later become the Seven Commandments. Farmer Jones is Czar Nicholas II: Orwell describes him as a drunk farmer who does not care about his animals and neglects his farm. **Snowball** represents Trotsky and his bravery is an example to the other animals through his inspiring speeches. Orwell also describes his darker side by showing that he is also susceptible to greed. Napoleon is obviously Stalin. He uses terror and force in order to assert and maintain his power over the animals (→ Text Bank 107). The character of **Boxer** stands for the loyal, hard-working man who follows animalism faithfully without understanding its more intricate details completely. His name derives from the Boxer Rebellion, which is linked to the rise of Communism in China. Finally, **the dogs** are a metaphor for the Terror State which Stalin created in Russia as a means of keeping order and crushing political opposition.

THEMES

The tone of the book **blends humour and sarcasm** with horrifying scenes and a painful atmosphere. The book shows how an initial idealism can turn into exploitation and how ordinary people can lose their freedom in small incremental steps. Tyranny is by definition evil, regardless of its political nature.

Key idea

History as fable

Orwell was probably inspired by the vogue of animated cartoons in the previous decade, featuring Mickey Mouse, Porky Pig and Donald Duck, as from other literary sources. The fables of Aesop or La Fontaine were brief parables attached to pointed morals, timeless

and conservative in their wisdom whereas the third and fourth books of *Gulliver's Travels* (→ 3.11) provided him with a model for an extended narrative on larger questions of human society.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the texts and answer the following questions.

- 1 What caused Orwell to write *Animal Farm*?
- 2 What kind of book is it?
- 3 How did Orwell portray the animals?
- 4 What is the tone of the book?
- 5 What is its main theme?
- 6 Where did Orwell draw inspiration to write *Animal Farm*?



Old Major's speech

After the drunken farmer Jones has gone to bed, Old Major calls a meeting of all animals at the big barn. He is a boar, the oldest and wisest animal on the farm.

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Chapter 1

All the animals were now present except Moses, the tame raven¹, who slept on a perch² behind the back door. When Major saw that they had all made themselves comfortable and were waiting attentively, he cleared his throat and began:

'Comrades³, you have heard already about the strange dream that I had last night.

5 But I will come to the dream later. I have something else to say first. I do not think, comrades, that I shall be with you for many months longer, and before I die, I feel it my duty to pass on to you such wisdom⁴ as I have acquired. I have had a long life, I have had much time for thought as I lay alone in my stall⁵, and I think I may say that I understand the nature of life on this earth as well as any animal now living. It is about
10 this that I wish to speak to you.

'Now, comrades, what is the nature of this life of ours? Let us face it: our lives are miserable, laborious, and short. We are born, we are given just so much food as will keep the breath⁶ in our bodies, and those of us who are capable of it are forced to work to the last atom of our strength; and the very instant that our usefulness⁷ has come
15 to an end we are slaughtered with hideous cruelty⁸. No animal in England knows the meaning of happiness or leisure⁹ after he is a year old. No animal in England is free. The life of an animal is misery and slavery: that is the plain truth.

The life of the animals

'But is this simply part of the order of Nature? Is it because this land of ours is so poor that it cannot afford¹⁰ a decent life to those who dwell upon it¹¹? No, comrades,
20 a thousand times no! The soil of England is fertile, its climate is good, it is capable of affording food in abundance to an enormously greater number of animals than now inhabit it. This single farm of ours would support a dozen horses, twenty cows, hundreds of sheep – and all of them living in a comfort and a dignity that are now almost beyond our imagining. Why then do we continue in this miserable condition?
25 Because nearly the whole of the produce of our labour is stolen from us by human beings. There, comrades, is the answer to all our problems. It is summed up in a single word – Man. Man is the only real enemy we have. Remove Man from the scene, and the root cause of hunger and overwork is abolished for ever.

'Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk,
30 he does not lay¹² eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough¹³, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals. He sets them to work, he gives back to them the bare minimum that will prevent them from starving¹⁴, and the rest he keeps for himself. Our labour tills the soil¹⁵, our dung¹⁶ fertilises it, and yet there is not one of us that owns more than his bare skin. You cows that I see before me, how
35 many thousands of gallons of milk have you given during this last year? And what has happened to that milk which should have been breeding up sturdy calves¹⁷? Every drop of it has gone down the throats of our enemies. And you hens¹⁸, how many eggs have you laid in this last year, and how many of those eggs ever hatched into chickens¹⁹? The rest have all gone to market to bring in money for Jones and his men. And you, Clover,
40 where are those four foals you bore²⁰, who should have been the support and pleasure of your old age? Each was sold at a year old – you will never see one of them again. In return for your four confinements and all your labour in the fields, what have you ever had except your bare rations and a stall?

Methodical enumeration of Man's wrongs

1 tame raven. Corvo ammaestrato.

2 perch. Trespolo.

3 Comrades. Compagni.

4 wisdom. Saggezza.

5 stall. Stalla.

6 breath. Respiro.

7 usefulness. Utilità.

8 slaughtered with hideous cruelty. Trucidati con sanguinosa crudeltà.

9 leisure. Piacere, divertimento.

10 afford. Consentire.

11 dwell upon it. Vi dimorano.

12 he does not lay. Non depone.

13 too ... plough. Troppo debole per tirare l'aratro.

14 that will ... starving. Che gli impedirà di morire di fame.

15 tills the soil. Dissoda la terra.

16 dung. Escrementi, letame.

17 sturdy calves. Vitelli robusti.

18 hens. Galline.

19 hatched into chickens. Si sono dischiuse in pulcini.

20 foals you bore. Puledri che hai messo al mondo.



45 'And even the miserable lives we lead are not allowed to reach their natural span²¹.
For myself I do not grumble²², for I am one of the lucky ones. I am twelve years old and
have had over four hundred children. Such is the natural life of a pig. But no animal
escapes the cruel knife in the end. You young porkers who are sitting in front of me,
every one of you will scream your lives out at the block²³ within a year. To that horror
we all must come – cows, pigs, hens, sheep, everyone. Even the horses and the dogs
50 have no better fate. You, Boxer, the very day that those great muscles of yours lose their
power, Jones will sell you to the knacker²⁴, who will cut your throat and boil you down
for the foxhounds²⁵. As for the dogs, when they grow old and toothless, Jones ties a
brick²⁶ round their necks and drowns them²⁷ in the nearest pond.

55 'Is it not crystal clear, then, comrades, that all the evils of this life of ours spring
from the tyranny of human beings? Only get rid²⁸ of Man, and the produce of our
labour would be our own. Almost overnight we could become rich and free. What
then must we do? Why, work night and day, body and soul, for the overthrow²⁹ of the
human race! That is my message to you, comrades: Rebellion! I do not know when that
Rebellion will come, it might be in a week or in a hundred years, but I know, as surely as
60 I see this straw³⁰ beneath my feet, that sooner or later justice will be done. Fix your eyes
on that, comrades, throughout the short remainder of your lives! And above all, pass on
this message of mine to those who come after you, so that future generations shall carry
on the struggle until it is victorious.

65 'And remember, comrades, your resolution must never falter³¹. No argument must
lead you astray³². Never listen when they tell you that Man and the animals have a
common interest, that the prosperity of the one is the prosperity of the others. It is all
lies. Man serves the interests of no creature except himself. And among us animals let
there be perfect unity, perfect comradeship³³ in the struggle. All men are enemies. All
animals are comrades.'

- 21 span. Durata.
22 I do not grumble. Non mi lamento.
23 at the block. Sul tagliere (del macellaio).
24 knacker. Acquirente e macellatore di cavalli vecchi.
25 foxhounds. Cani da caccia.
26 ties a brick. Lega un mattone.
27 drowns them. Li annega.
28 get rid. Liberatevi.
29 overthrow. Rovesciamento, disfatta.
30 straw. Paglia.
31 falter. Vacillare.
32 must lead you astray. Vi deve sviare.
33 comradeship. Unione.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

1 READ the text and write a caption to describe the content of each section.

- Part 1 (Lines 1-17):
- Part 2 (Lines 18-28):
- Part 3 (Lines 29-53):
- Part 4 (Lines 54-69):

2 LOOK at the visual analysis of the text and write down what each highlight and colour represents.



3 DISCUSS the following questions in pairs.

- 1 What are Man's crimes against the animals according to Old Major?
- 2 Orwell quickly characterises some of the animals assembled in the barn. What features does he stress for each of them?
- 3 How does Major connote Man and the animals in his speech?
- 4 Through Major's speech, Orwell displays his deep understanding of the art of persuasion and of how it can be used to move or manipulate the crowds. Sum up the devices used by Old Major.
- 5 The main notion upon which the rebellion is based will prove the flaw in Old Major's thinking. Explain why. You can refer to the plot of the novel.
- 6 What historical figures do you think Old Major embodies?

➤ COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT

4 WRITE a 10/12-line paragraph to discuss the following topic: 'Based upon *Animal Farm*, what deductions can you make about the kind of political system of which Orwell would approve and his attitude towards totalitarianism?'.