

PLOT OVERVIEW

Old Major, a prize-winning boar, gathers the animals of the Manor Farm for a meeting in the big barn. He tells them of a dream he has had in which all animals live together with no human beings to oppress or control them. He tells the animals that they must work toward such a paradise and teaches them a song called “Beasts of England,” in which his dream vision is lyrically described. The animals greet Major’s vision with great enthusiasm. When he dies only three nights after the meeting, three younger pigs—Snowball, Napoleon, and Squealer—formulate his main principles into a philosophy called Animalism. Late one night, the animals manage to defeat the farmer Mr. Jones in a battle, running him off the land. They rename the property Animal Farm and dedicate themselves to achieving Major’s dream. The cart-horse Boxer devotes himself to the cause with particular zeal, committing his great strength to the prosperity of the farm and adopting as a personal maxim the affirmation “I will work harder.”

At first, Animal Farm prospers. Snowball works at teaching the animals to read, and Napoleon takes a group of young puppies to educate them in the principles of Animalism. When Mr. Jones reappears to take back his farm, the animals defeat him again, in what comes to be known as the Battle of the Cowshed, and take the farmer’s abandoned gun as a token of their victory. As time passes, however, Napoleon and Snowball increasingly quibble over the future of the farm, and they begin to struggle with each other for power and influence among the other animals. Snowball concocts a scheme to build an electricity-generating windmill, but Napoleon solidly opposes the plan. At the meeting to vote on whether to take up the project, Snowball gives a passionate speech. Although Napoleon gives only a brief retort, he then makes a strange noise, and nine attack dogs—the puppies that Napoleon had confiscated in order to “educate”—burst into the barn and chase Snowball from the farm. Napoleon assumes leadership of Animal Farm and declares that there will be no more meetings. From that point on, he asserts, the pigs alone will make all of the decisions—for the good of every animal.

Napoleon now quickly changes his mind about the windmill, and the animals, especially Boxer, devote their efforts to completing it. One day, after a storm, the animals find the windmill toppled. The human farmers in the area declare smugly that the animals made the walls too thin, but Napoleon claims that Snowball returned to the farm to sabotage the windmill. He stages a great purge, during which various animals who have allegedly participated in Snowball's great conspiracy—meaning any animal who opposes Napoleon's uncontested leadership—meet instant death at the teeth of the attack dogs. With his leadership unquestioned (Boxer has taken up a second maxim, "Napoleon is always right"), Napoleon begins expanding his powers, rewriting history to make Snowball a villain. Napoleon also begins to act more and more like a human being—sleeping in a bed, drinking whisky, and engaging in trade with neighboring farmers. The original Animalist principles strictly forbade such activities, but Squealer, Napoleon's propagandist, justifies every action to the other animals, convincing them that Napoleon is a great leader and is making things better for everyone—despite the fact that the common animals are cold, hungry, and overworked.

Mr. Frederick, a neighboring farmer, cheats Napoleon in the purchase of some timber and then attacks the farm and dynamites the windmill, which had been rebuilt at great expense. After the demolition of the windmill, a pitched battle ensues, during which Boxer receives major wounds. The animals rout the farmers, but Boxer's injuries weaken him. When he later falls while working on the windmill, he senses that his time has nearly come. One day, Boxer is nowhere to be found. According to Squealer, Boxer has died in peace after having been taken to the hospital, praising the Rebellion with his last breath. In actuality, Napoleon has sold his most loyal and long-suffering worker to a glue maker in order to get money for whisky.

Years pass on Animal Farm, and the pigs become more and more like human beings—walking upright, carrying whips, and wearing clothes.

Eventually, the seven principles of Animalism, known as the Seven Commandments and inscribed on the side of the barn, become reduced to a single principle reading “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” Napoleon entertains a human farmer named Mr. Pilkington at a dinner and declares his intent to ally himself with the human farmers against the laboring classes of both the human and animal communities. He also changes the name of Animal Farm back to the Manor Farm, claiming that this title is the “correct” one. Looking in at the party of elites through the farmhouse window, the common animals can no longer tell which are the pigs and which are the human beings.

CHARACTER SKETCH

Napoleon

From the very beginning of the novella, Napoleon emerges as an utterly corrupt opportunist. Though always present at the early meetings of the new state, Napoleon never makes a single contribution to the revolution—not to the formulation of its ideology, not to the bloody struggle that it necessitates, not to the new society’s initial attempts to establish itself. He never shows interest in the strength of Animal Farm itself, only in the strength of his power over it. Thus, the only project he undertakes with enthusiasm is the training of a litter of puppies. He doesn’t educate them for their own good or for the good of all, however, but rather for his own good: they become his own private army or secret police, a violent means by which he imposes his will on others.

Although he is most directly modeled on the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, Napoleon represents, in a more general sense, the political tyrants that have emerged throughout human history and with particular frequency during the twentieth century. His namesake is not any communist leader but the early-eighteenth-century French general Napoleon, who betrayed

the democratic principles on which he rode to power, arguably becoming as great a despot as the aristocrats whom he supplanted. It is a testament to Orwell's acute political intelligence and to the universality of his fable that Napoleon can easily stand for any of the great dictators and political schemers in world history, even those who arose after *Animal Farm* was written. In the behavior of Napoleon and his henchmen, one can detect the lying and bullying tactics of totalitarian leaders such as Josip Tito, Mao Tse-tung, Pol Pot, Augusto Pinochet, and Slobodan Milosevic treated in sharply critical terms.

Snowball

Orwell's stint in a Trotskyist battalion in the Spanish Civil War—during which he first began plans for a critique of totalitarian communism— influenced his relatively positive portrayal of Snowball. As a parallel for Leon Trotsky, Snowball emerges as a fervent ideologue who throws himself heart and soul into the attempt to spread Animalism worldwide and to improve Animal Farm's infrastructure. His idealism, however, leads to his downfall. Relying only on the force of his own logic and rhetorical skill to gain his influence, he proves no match for Napoleon's show of brute force. Although Orwell depicts Snowball in a relatively appealing light, he refrains from idealizing his character, making sure to endow him with certain moral flaws. For example, Snowball basically accepts the superiority of the pigs over the rest of the animals. Moreover, his fervent, single-minded enthusiasm for grand projects such as the windmill might have erupted into full-blown megalomaniac despotism had he not been chased from Animal Farm. Indeed, Orwell suggests that we cannot eliminate government corruption by electing principled individuals to roles of power; he reminds us throughout the novella that it is power itself that corrupts.

Boxer

The most sympathetically drawn character in the novel, Boxer epitomizes all of the best qualities of the exploited working classes: dedication, loyalty, and a huge capacity for labor. He also, however, suffers from what Orwell saw as the working class's major weaknesses: a naïve trust in the good intentions of the intelligentsia and an inability to recognize even the most blatant forms of political corruption. Exploited by the pigs as much or more than he had been by Mr. Jones, Boxer represents all of the invisible labor that undergirds the political drama being carried out by the elites. Boxer's pitiful death at a glue factory dramatically illustrates the extent of the pigs' betrayal. It may also, however, speak to the specific significance of Boxer himself: before being carted off, he serves as the force that holds Animal Farm together.

Squealer

Throughout his career, Orwell explored how politicians manipulate language in an age of mass media. In *Animal Farm*, the silver-tongued pig Squealer abuses language to justify Napoleon's actions and policies to the proletariat by whatever means seem necessary. By radically simplifying language—as when he teaches the sheep to bleat “Four legs good, two legs better!”—he limits the terms of debate. By complicating language unnecessarily, he confuses and intimidates the uneducated, as when he explains that pigs, who are the “brainworkers” of the farm, consume milk and apples not for pleasure, but for the good of their comrades. In this latter strategy, he also employs jargon (“tactics, tactics”) as well as a baffling vocabulary of false and impenetrable statistics, engendering in the other animals both self-doubt and a sense of hopelessness about ever accessing the truth without the pigs' mediation. Squealer's lack of conscience and

unwavering loyalty to his leader, alongside his rhetorical skills, make him the perfect propagandist for any tyranny. Squealer's name also fits him well: squealing, of course, refers to a pig's typical form of vocalization, and Squealer's speech defines him. At the same time, to squeal also means to betray, aptly evoking Squealer's behavior with regard to his fellow animals.

Old Major

As a democratic socialist, Orwell had a great deal of respect for Karl Marx, the German political economist, and even for Vladimir Ilych Lenin, the Russian revolutionary leader. His critique of *Animal Farm* has little to do with the Marxist ideology underlying the Rebellion but rather with the perversion of that ideology by later leaders. Major, who represents both Marx and Lenin, serves as the source of the ideals that the animals continue to uphold even after their pig leaders have betrayed them.

Though his portrayal of Old Major is largely positive, Orwell does include a few small ironies that allow the reader to question the venerable pig's motives. For instance, in the midst of his long litany of complaints about how the animals have been treated by human beings, Old Major is forced to concede that his own life has been long, full, and free from the terrors he has vividly sketched for his rapt audience. He seems to have claimed a false brotherhood with the other animals in order to garner their support for his vision.

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 as something with which to pacify the oppressed.

Mollie

The vain, flighty 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 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.

