

Animal Farm: A Fairy Story (1946)

George Orwell (1903-1950)

AUTHOR BIO

George Orwell is the pseudonym of Eric Arthur Blair. He was born to British colonists in India and educated at private schools such as Eton. His early experiences with elitism, snobbishness, and imperialism there made there him suspicious of entrenched class systems. As a young man he fought for the socialist cause during the Spanish Civil War. However, he never viewed the Soviet Union as a positive representation of socialism. He criticized both capitalism and communism through novels and essays. His most famous works, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, both challenge oppression and totalitarian governments.



GENRE

Animal Farm is a novella written during WWII. It is an allegory, dystopia, and fable.

CONTEXT

Animal Farm represents the uprising of the working class during the Russian Revolution in the early 1900s. Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown and replaced by a series of socialist/communist leaders, including Stalin, who eventually cost more Russian lives than the old regime.

Causes of the revolution:

- to gain more land for peasants and bread for workers
- the gross inequality between classes
- to end Russia's involvement in WWI, which had cost 1.7 million lives

PLOT

Old Major, a prize-winning boar, gathers the animals on the farm and tells them of a dream he has had in which all animals live together with no human beings to control them. The animals greet Major's vision with great enthusiasm. When he dies only three nights later, three younger pigs—Snowball, Napoleon, and Squealer—formulate his principles into a philosophy called Animalism. The animals battle the neglectful farmer Mr. Jones and run him off the land. The cart-horse Boxer commits his great strength to the prosperity of the farm.

At first, the farm prospers. Snowball teaches the animals to read, and Napoleon takes a group of young puppies to educate them in the principles of Animalism. When Mr. Jones tries to take back his farm, the animals defeat him again in the Battle of the Cowshed. Napoleon and Snowball struggle with each other for influence among the other animals. Snowball wants to build a windmill, but Napoleon opposes the plan. At the meeting to vote on whether to take up the project, Snowball gives a passionate speech. At Napoleon's signal, nine attack dogs—the puppies that Napoleon had "educated"—burst into the barn and chase Snowball from the farm. Napoleon assumes leadership. From that point on, he asserts, the pigs alone will make all of the decisions.

Napoleon changes his mind about the windmill. The animals, especially Boxer, strive to complete it. After a storm, the animals find the windmill toppled. Napoleon claims that Snowball returned to the farm to sabotage the windmill. Any animal who opposes Napoleon's leadership meets instant death at the teeth of the attack dogs, under the charge of aiding Snowball. Napoleon begins to act like a human—sleeping in a bed, drinking whisky, and trading with neighboring farmers. The original Animalist principles strictly forbade such activities. Squealer, Napoleon's propagandist, convinces the other animals that Napoleon is making things better for everyone—despite the fact that the common animals are cold, hungry, and overworked.

Mr. Frederick, a neighboring farmer, dynamites the rebuilt windmill. A battle ensues, during which Boxer is wounded. He later falls while working on the windmill. 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 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 humans—walking upright, carrying whips, and wearing clothes. 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. Looking in at the party through the farmhouse window, the common animals can no longer tell which are the pigs and which are the human beings.

CHARACTERS/SYMBOLS

THE ANIMALS

- **Old Major (pig) = Karl Marx/Vladimir Lenin.** First character to inspire the other animals to rebel against the humans. Dies early in the book. His ideals live on, though corrupted by later leaders. Marx wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, “Let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries, unite!”
- **Pigs = Bolsheviks**
- **Snowball (pig) = Leon Trotsky.** Passionate visionary who tries to spread ideas about Animalism to other farms. His idealism is his downfall. He uses only logic and rhetoric to gain influence, which is no match for Napoleon’s brute force. Snowball is not perfect however. He believes pigs are superior to other animals.
- **Napoleon (pig) = Joseph Stalin.** Present at all the early meetings of the new government but does little to contribute to the initial battle or ideology. He never shows interest in the strength of Animal Farm itself, only in the strength of his power over it. Over time, he uses propaganda, brute force (dogs), and unfair trials to eliminate his enemies and gain absolute power.
- **Squealer (pig) = propagandists.** Misuses language to justify Napoleon’s actions. His name also implies he squeals on enemies of Napoleon.
- **Sheep = people who mindlessly believe and repeat Napoleon’s propaganda.** Most known for chanting “4 legs good, 2 legs bad.”
- **Puppies = Stalin’s secret police.** Both are brainwashed from birth to support a tyrant.
- **Boxer (horse) = workers.** Boxer embodies many good qualities like dedication, loyalty, and hard work,

but is also naïve and unable to recognize how he is being exploited. His two mottoes are “I will work harder” and “Napoleon is always right.”

- **Clover (horse).** Clover often suspects the pigs of violating one or another of the Seven Commandments, but she repeatedly blames herself for misremembering the commandments.
- **Benjamin (donkey).** 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.

THE HUMANS

- **Mr. Jones = Tsar Nicholas II.** Mr. Jones neglects his animals while he lives in a comparative life of luxury, just like the royals neglected the peasants. The tsar was overthrown and he and his family shot.
- **Mr. Frederick = Hitler.** The tough, shrewd operator of Pinchfield, a neighboring farm. Mr. Frederick proves an untrustworthy neighbor.
- **Mr. Pilkington = capitalist governments of England and the US.** The easygoing gentleman farmer who runs Foxwood, a neighboring farm. Mr. Frederick’s bitter enemy.

OTHER SYMBOLS

- **Building the windmill = USSR’s rapid move to industrialization.** The Soviet Union began its first 5-year plan in 1928.
- **The barn/wall with commandments painted on it = the collective memory of a nation.** Changes over time.
- **Animal Farm = Russia/USSR.** In a larger context, any human society/government.
- **Animalism = Communism**
- **Battle of Cowshed = Russian Civil War**

THEMES

- Hypocrisy
- Oppressed become oppressors
- Class structure
- The dangers of a naïve working class
- Absolute power corrupts
- Abuse of language/propaganda

