Ref: https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-animal-farm#

[George Orwell](https://www.bl.uk/people/george-orwell) is famous as a political writer, essayist, thinker and, supremely, novelist. One can easily overlook another consistent feature in Orwell’s life – his desire to be a small-holding farmer of an old-fashioned ‘English’ kind. It crops up in rather odd ways.

Living in London during the Second World War, for example, he kept chickens in the backyard (his wife, Eileen, rather resented getting up at dawn, after a night of air-raid alarms to feed them). His longest-lasting residence was a cottage in Wallington, near London, where he kept chickens, goats and geese (a fowl he particularly liked).

Orwell’s happiest years, although he was suffering terribly from terminal TB, were those which, enriched by the runaway sales of [*Animal Farm*](https://www.bl.uk/works/animal-farm) (his first bestseller), he spent on his farm proper, Barnhill, on the Hebridean island of Jura. It did not, alas, last long.

To put it at its simplest, old-fashioned farms were a foundation of the England Orwell loved.

**Political fable and satire**

Animal fables for children are a revered genre. One thinks of Beatrix Potter, *The Wind in the Willows*, Walt Disney and *Sesame Street* offprints.

*Animal Farm* belongs to a quite different tradition. It belongs in a line of moral animal fables which goes as far back as Aesop, and which was brought to its most powerful 20th-century form in Kipling’s *Jungle Book*. One could call it the animal fable based on sociopolitical ideas, aimed at an adult as much as at a child reader.

Kipling – the arch exponent of British imperialism – was a writer with whom Orwell had a lifelong and love-hate relationship. But an even closer connection, as regards *Animal Farm*, was [Jonathan Swift](https://www.bl.uk/people/jonathan-swift). At the age of eight, young Eric Blair (his name at birth; ‘George Orwell’ was his pen name) was given [*Gulliver’s Travels*](http://https/www.bl.uk/works/gullivers-travels) as his birthday present. He found the book the night before and read it in his bedroom, cover to cover. It stayed with him for the rest of his life.

### nimal Farm: a tract with a political motive

Animal Farm, like the first book of Gulliver’s Travels (a satire on Queen Anne’s court), began as a tract with a political motive. Farmer Jones’s Manor Farm is an Orwellian Lilliput, satirising the pretensions of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and its prompt corruption by a new, more ruthless power elite than even the Czarist regime under Ivan the Terrible.

Manor Farm was once owned by aristocrats – lords of the manor. Hence its name. Before the ‘Rebellion’ it has become the property of a gentleman farmer, who is in fact, a drunken, philistine brute, lower, morally, than the animals he owns and exploits.

The clever pigs make the political analysis that the animals slave, and are harvested, for the sole benefit of their owner. What right has Jones to exploit them, their labour and their very flesh on his table? They draw up a political code – ‘Animalism’ (ch. 2). Its slogans are ‘All Animals Are Equal’ (ch. 2) and ‘Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad’ (ch. 3).

The pigs mastermind a successful uprising, calling it a ‘Rebellion’. After much bloodshed the animals take over the farm. Power then has its universal effect. Having ruthlessly secured their leadership, the pigs install a totalitarian state, complete with canine police, thought control, liquidation and purges. They reserve for themselves creature comforts and owners’ privileges.

For the lower animals, life is, if anything, even harder than it was under Jones:

But if there were hardships to be borne, they were partly offset by the fact that life nowadays had a greater dignity than it had had before. There were more songs, more speeches, more processions. Napoleon had commanded that once a week there should be held something called a Spontaneous Demonstration, the object of which was to celebrate the struggles and triumphs of Animal Farm. (ch. 9)

In the fable’s controversial conclusion the pigs – now owners of a highly profitable enterprise (for them and their dogs) – make peace with their ‘fellow’ human farmers. The animals look, in perplexity, through the windows of the farm-house:

The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which. (ch. 10)

The new guiding slogan for the future of the farm is: ‘All Animals Are Equal But Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others’ (ch. 10).

### An enigmatic parable

Like all the best parables (Jesus Christ’s par excellence) Animal Farm is richly enigmatic. Is Orwell only thinking about Stalinist Russia of the 1930s and 1940s? Or is Animal Farm a statement about human society everywhere and at all times?

Socialists, particularly, have objected violently to Orwell’s depiction of the working classes as irredeemably ‘lower’ animals. William Empson (literary critic and close friend of Orwell’s as he was composing Animal Farm) felt that there was a danger that readers might misunderstand the book’s allegory. He wrote, ‘it was horrible to think of the evil men, stinking Tories, who would gain by his telling the truth.’[[1]](https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-animal-farm#footnote1)

Within Orwell’s animal kingdom there is no real equality – despite the proclamations of ‘Animalism’ (‘All Animals Are Equal’) – and no potential for class mobility among the lower orders: the sheep will always bray slogans mindlessly, the chickens will always run round in circles clucking senselessly, the horses (principally Boxer) will always work brainlessly, the dogs will always savage their fellow animals ruthlessly. Only the pigs have higher mentality and a capacity to change? Into what? So many Joneses. So it was, so it will be. Forever.

### War and Stalinism

The core elements of what was published as Animal Farm in 1945 had taken shape embryonically in Orwell’s mind during his service in the Republican forces in the [Spanish Civil War](http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/authors-take-sides-on-the-spanish-war) in 1936–37 and, more specifically, the Stalinist purges in Barcelona in which he and his wife almost lost their lives. He was, conflictedly, always thereafter ‘a man of the left’, but one who loathed Soviet Stalinism. The conflict was heightened by the fact that during the Second World War, as Orwell was writing Animal Farm (with his wife’s assistance, biographers have plausibly suggested), the Soviet Union was the Allies’ closest ally in the fight against Hitler.

A draft of what Orwell called his ‘Fairy Story’ was finished in summer 1944 and submitted to his publisher Victor Gollancz. Gollancz was an old-time communist and rejected the book by return of post. Other publishers were reluctant, post-Stalingrad, to launch something so virulently anti-Soviet. The British, at this period, loved ‘Uncle Joe’; he was, as Churchill put it, tearing the guts out of the Nazi Empire while the allies were preparing, relatively bloodlessly, their second front. Soviet losses in the Second World War (which Russians called the ‘Great Patriotic War’) were massive – tens of millions more than the Allies’ casualties.

[T S Eliot](https://www.bl.uk/people/t-s-eliot), at Faber, to whom Orwell next submitted Animal Farm, praised the clear prose but felt, in his usual way, that since the pigs were the most intelligent beasts they should indeed run things. What the farm needed was more benign piggery. Five American publishers were uninterested. It was too English. And too anti-Soviet.

Animal Farm had to await the end of the hot war and the onset of the cold war (a term Orwell invented). It was finally published in August 1945, as the bells were ringing for VJ day and the Iron Curtain was about to fall across Europe. Once the book was out, the money flooded in. So much so that within a few months Orwell had to incorporate himself, to protect his income from the then punitive rates of British tax. George Orwell was now a limited company. That, too, was a fable.

Animal Farm was not, in its life to come, merely a fable: it was destined to become a pre-emptive weapon in the cold war: something Orwell never intended. J Edgar Hoover himself was solicited for an endorsement. He liked the book, but the FBI did not give out endorsements. Over the following years Animal Farm was disseminated behind the Iron Curtain as black propaganda.

In her study of the CIA’s cold war culture-war Frances Stonor Saunders describes how the CIA covertly acquired the subsidiary rights to Animal Farm from Orwell’s second wife and widow Sonia.[[2]](https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-animal-farm#footnote2) The film was produced in England and released in 1954, the ending radically changed to predict the eventual overthrow of swine-human totalitarianism by the unquenchable forces of Western democracy. It was a wholly non-Orwellian happy ending.

The cold war is over, but Animal Farm continues to sell. Posterity has passed its verdict. This is a book which contains perennially valid truths.

### Footnotes

[1] Quoted in John Haffenden, William Empson, Volume 2: Against the Christians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 48.

[2] Frances Stonor Saunders, Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War (London: Granta, 1999).

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Ref : https://www.gale.com/open-access/animal-farm

In his short novel Animal Farm (1945), English author George Orwell (1903–50) allegorizes the Russian Revolution of 1917, when the tsarist autocracy was pushed out and the Bolsheviks came into power, and the revolution's incremental betrayal of its supporters under dictator Joseph Stalin (1879–1953). Drawing on fable conventions, Orwell tells a farmyard story, casting revolutionary leaders Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924), Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), and Stalin as pigs, which—along with other common farm animals such as horses and hens—rebel against the tyranny of tsar-like farmer Mr. Jones. Set on a small English farm, the novel follows a collective of working animals that, as the pigs exploit them anew, toil pathetically day after day in the belief that they are remaking the farm as a republic.

Orwell wrote Animal Farm toward the end of World War II (1939–45), when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was being hailed by the Allied forces (including the British) for its decisive victories over Nazi Germany at Stalingrad (1942–43) and Kursk (1943). As such, he had difficulty finding a publisher prepared to offend Russian sensibilities. Gollancz and Faber and Faber, among other publishing houses, rejected the book outright. London publisher Jonathan Cape came close to printing it but was persuaded to reject the work by a Ministry of Information official later presumed to have been a Soviet spy. In spite of this reluctance, when it was finally released in England by Secker and Warburg in 1945, the novel was a runaway success, as it was the following year in the United States—no doubt helped by the dissolution of wartime alliances and the first rumblings of the Cold War. Regarded by many as Orwell's finest work, and certainly his first truly popular one, Animal Farm has long been ranked as among the best books of the twentieth century.

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##### **Historical and literary context**

Following the revolution, the Russian Communist Party recast the former empire as a federation of republics with governments informed by the socialist principles of German philosopher Karl Marx (1818–83). Initially under the leadership of Lenin, Soviet Russia then entered an era of reconstruction, during which it privatized all aspects of the economy and attempted to control any forms of dissent to its Marxist-Leninist goals. After Lenin's death, Stalin effected a coup from within the Communist Party, and, although making a dogma of Marxist-Leninism, he turned the party into a properly totalitarian apparatus. During what is referred to as the Great Purge, millions of enemies of the state were executed or sent to forced-labor camps. Meanwhile, hasty attempts to modernize the peasant agriculture brought on deathly famines. Animal Farm retells this history metaphorically—in the sly maneuverings of the boar, Napoleon, to oust his rivals and take control of the farm; in his forcing the animals to build an electricity-generating windmill, which leaves no time for food production; and in his purges of alleged traitors to the animals' revolution against Mr. Jones.

The novel begins with Lenin (some say Marx or a Lenin-Marx composite), Trotsky, and Stalin figured in the characters of Old Major, Snowball, and Napoleon, respectively—pigs on a farm where animals are bred to produce (like the hens), to labor (like the cart horses), and to be fattened for slaughter (like the pigs). Old Major rouses the animals to rebel against the “tyranny of man,” and the Russian Revolution is satirized as a scrap between Mr. Jones and his animals. The animals, victorious, take over, and with a newfound sense of dignity set about everyday tasks such as harvesting hay. However, the pigs have only just posted the “seven commandments of Animalism,” including the tenet that “all animals are equal,” when they opt out of the hard labor and appropriate exclusively for themselves the comforts of the farmhouse. Here, what culminates in Napoleon's dictatorship tragically inflects the lives of the common animals, who continue to toil in the belief that they are forging Old Major's republic.

Bunt (1924) by Polish novelist Wladyslaw Stanislaw Reymont (1867–1925) bears a remarkable resemblance to Animal Farm, although it is not clear whether Orwell knew of the work. The novel allegorizes the same revolution with a story of farmyard animals rebelling against their human masters in a struggle for equality that ends in terror and oppression. Orwell's next novel after Animal Farm, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), offers a comparably symbolic—if more realistic—vision of everyday life impoverished culturally and politically by a Stalinesque regime. The fearful preoccupation with Stalinism also informs Orwell's Homage to Catalonia (1938), a nonfiction account of his experience in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) fighting for a leftist militia.

In addition to pleasing popular audiences, Animal Farm appealed to political conservatives who recognized its value as a propaganda tool for discouraging socialist affiliations. Thus the Central Intelligence Agency clandestinely funded the 1954 animated film adaptation by John Halas (1912–95) and Joy Batchelor (1914–91), which was also the first feature-length animated film in English cinema history. Critics in the early twenty-first century have been just as attentive to Orwell's politics, yet there has been a greater tendency to acknowledge the novel as a work of politically informed art rather than of mere propaganda.

##### **Themes and style**

The grand theme of Animal Farm has to do with the capacity for ordinary individuals to continue to believe in a revolution that has been utterly betrayed. Orwell attempts to reveal how those in power—Napoleon and his fellow pigs—pervert the democratic promise of the revolution. The emotional force of the novel comes from the author's depictions of those ordinary animals who unthinkingly give themselves in good faith to working for the very system by which they are ruthlessly exploited. A case in point is Boxer, one of two cart horses among the pigs' “most faithful disciples.” The horses “had great difficulty in thinking anything out for themselves, but having once accepted the pigs as their teachers, they absorbed everything that they were told, and passed it on to the other animals.” Whether harvesting hay or fetching stones from the quarry, Boxer works harder than any other animal, yet still he adopts the motto “I will work harder.” So selfless is he in his service, in fact, that he works himself close to death. At this point Napoleon, while purporting to send him to the hospital, sells him to the slaughterhouse, then spends the money from his corpse on whiskey for the pigs.

The novel develops according to a recognizable dramatic pattern that underscores the tragedy of what it means to never lose faith in a betrayed revolution. For example, when the animals participate in the so-called Battle of the Cowshed, they witness Snowball decorated as “Animal Hero, First Class” for distinguishing himself in battle against Jones. Napoleon later revises the history with contradictory details—announcing that Snowball actually fought alongside Jones against the animals. When the animals resist the new story, the pig Squealer (a master deceiver) convinces them that their memories are faulty. This pattern of firsthand experience superseded by revisionist propaganda underscores the tragedy, as Orwell sees it, of ordinary individuals who forego their better judgment in letting a totalitarian regime dictate a false reality.

Orwell chose a difficult genre—the fable, often equated with children's literature—to offer a complex critique of one of the most problematic regimes in modern history. He succeeds by capturing both realistically and amusingly the characteristics of many of the animals and by convincing the reader that these characteristics lend themselves, at least metaphorically, to understanding human life in the totalitarian context. Rather than simply mocking his subjects, Orwell suggests that there is indeed something beastly about them: that there is something sheep-like about those who learn dogma by rote (who bleat “two legs bad, four legs good!” or “four legs good, two legs better!” interchangeably), something dog-like about secret police trained to attack on command, and something horse-like about those who unthinkingly give themselves body and soul to the bankrupt cause.

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##### **Critical discussion**

Animal Farm was released to critical acclaim. Writing for the New York Times, historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. hailed it as “a simple story perhaps, but a story of deadly simplicity … [a] superbly controlled and brilliantly sustained satire.” Not everyone agreed with Schlesinger, however. Writer and critic W. J. Turner, for instance, thought the novel was marred by “pessimism” and accused Orwell of being “grossly unfair to Stalin in his account of him as ‘Napoleon.’” Still, the fact that the novel has been a staple in classrooms for generations suggests that critics like Turner did not have the last say.

Writing in 1989, activist-scholar John Molyneux (1948–) summed up Animal Farm as “probably the most popular and influential piece of literary propaganda produced in English, perhaps in any language, this century.” Molyneux claimed it was “likely that far more people have learned what they know of the fate of the Russian Revolution from here than from any other source.” In his introduction to a 2003 edition of the novel (with Nineteen Eighty-Four), essayist and critic Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011) confirmed Animal Farm's distinction as “the twentieth century's most successful satire.” As Hitchens and Molyneux both make clear, although the novel has long appealed to younger readers with scant knowledge of Soviet history, the book's legacy rests on its political force.

Indeed, Orwell scholars continue to read the novel for its political insights. Discussing The Rule of the Pigs, Oleg Minich's 2005 cartoon adaptation of Animal Farm, Olena Nikolayenko insisted in her 2007 essay in PS: Political Science and Politics that the book speaks profoundly to contemporary crises in and for democracy—in Minich's case, in the former Soviet Republic of Belarus. Other twenty-first-century scholars similarly return to Animal Farm to think through enduring political issues. David Dwan, for instance, in an ELH (English Literary History) article, considered Orwell's treatment of equality as a means of probing contemporary practices under Western democracy that do not always live up to prevailing ideals. Meanwhile, scholars such as Paul Kirschner have tried to reclaim the text as not only a political but also a literary work, reminding readers of Orwell's own declared intention “to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole.”

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