The Allegory in Animal Farm

Old Major's Dream and Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*

Animal Farm opens with the news that old Major, "the prize Middle White boar" (1), has called a meeting to share a dream that he's had. As he explains his dream to the other animals, he points out to them that "Man is the only creature that consumes without producing," and he encourages them to "work night and day, body and soul, for the overthrow of the human race" (1). In short, he explains that men have been taking advantage of them for years, and that it is time for the tyranny of man to end. His message, boiled down to a word: "Rebellion" (1).

What Orwell actually gives us through old Major's speech is a simplified version of the basic tenets of communism, which were put down by **Karl Marx** and **Frederick Engels** in *The Communist Manifesto*, published in **1848**. The basic idea of the *Manifesto* was that the capitalist economic system was seriously flawed. (**Capitalism** is when the businesses are privately owned, and most of the money that is made in businesses goes to the owners.) The workers never saw the products of their labor because the capitalists – the people who owned the *means of production* (factories, land, etc.) – claimed the profit for themselves. Marx suggested that if common workers could overthrow the capitalists and claim the means of production for themselves, then all the workers of the world could live in peace with one another.

The *Manifesto* famously ends "The proletarians [common workers] have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workers of the world, Unite!" Old Major essentially ends his speech the same way with his final call to "Rebellion!" Yet both Marx and Old Major are better at criticizing the existing system than at proposing a new one. As we'll see very soon, after the Rebellion, the big question becomes: now what?

The *Manifesto* was written during a time of widespread revolutions across Europe, though it would not take hold in Russia until roughly sixty years after its publication. Yet even as it was written, Russia was, in many ways, primed for Marx's message. Its serfs were not emancipated until 1861 so the country had an enormous peasant class, and it was ruled over by tsars, who were often known for being out of touch with the Russian people.

In other words, the barn animals are itching to overthrow Mr. Jones.

The Fall of Mister Jones and the Russian Revolution of 1917

Though the animals begin preparing for rebellion as soon as Old Major dies, they don't know when exactly it is going to come. Yet we soon learn that "the Rebellion was achieved much earlier and more easily than anyone had expected" (2). What happens is that Mr. Jones goes out to get drunk and forgets to feed the animals. The cows are fed up and kick in the barn door, and all of a sudden all the animals are eating from the bins.

When Mr. Jones and his men come in to whip the animals into obedience, full-scale rebellion erupts, and the animals chase Mr. Jones and his men off the farm. Soon after, Napoleon and Snowball step into the lead and begin organizing the animals around a new system based on the Seven Commandments, the most important of which is that "All animals are equal" (2).

In this scenario, Mr. Jones is an allusion (reference to) to the last tsar (**tsar** is a ruler) of Russia, **Nicholas II**. The tsars had been known for being **out of touch** with the Russian people for a long time, but Nicholas was a particularly bad case. In 1914, he got Russia entangled in **World War I**, and then mismanaged it. As a result of various blockages (shortages of food, supplies, etc.) as a result of the war, a famine was beginning to creep across Russia (think of the farm animals not being fed). Nicholas, meanwhile, was not a strong enough leader to inspire the people's confidence (they didn't trust him).

Just like in *Animal Farm*, the February Revolution was relatively unorganized, and seemed to spring up out of nowhere. It began with several strikes and demonstrations in St. Petersburg, Russia, which gradually grew in number. Nicholas eventually sent in the military, but by then the workers were out of control; many of the military members began to sympathize with the strikers and switched sides.

After the Revolution, **Vladimir Lenin** suddenly returned from **exile** (he had been revolting against the government in the past) and put up his April Theses (the 'Seven Commandments'). A simple provisional government had been set up, but it was too weak to deal with the demands placed upon it. In October, the second phase of the Russian Revolution occurred when the Bolsheviks (the majority group of the different Russian **communist** parties) overthrew the provisional government.

Animal Farm aims to simplify these events so we don't exactly get two rebellions, but we do get the pigs (the Bolsheviks) sweeping in to take control over the revolution that already happened. The one event that is notably glossed in the novel is when we hear that the animals "raced back to the farm buildings to wipe out the last traces of Jones's hated reign" (1). In the novel, Jones and his family escape. However, after the October Revolution, Nicholas II and his family were executed and buried in a mass grave.

The Battle of the Cowshed and the Russian Civil War

In *Animal Farm*, the animals have time to begin organizing a large harvest before Mr. Jones and some men return. The different animals begin to take on clearer roles, and we learn that **Napoleon** is a double for **Stalin** and **Snowball** will be a stand-in for **Leon Trotsky**. **Boxer** the horse comes to resemble the **proletariat** (working class) with his personal motto "I will work harder" (3). Committees are set up, and the pigs work to spread literacy throughout the populace. These are all allusions to the earliest Bolshevik efforts at organization after the October Revolution.

Yet in reality, the Bolsheviks hardly had time to get going before the country erupted into Civil War. There was resistance to Bolshevik rule from the start, but what sparked the resistance groups was that the Bolsheviks withdrew from World War I by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918). **Trotsky (Snowball)**, who had emerged as the Russian military leader, had not wanted to end the Russian war effort. He and many others felt that without seeing the war through, there could be no real peace. But as Germans advanced into Russian territory, the Bolsheviks had no choice. The resistance, for their part, tried to seize on Trotsky's withdrawal as a sign of weakness.

In *Animal Farm*, Mr. Jones slinks off to the local bar to complain of his misfortune. Yet he can't get anyone to listen to him because the two neighboring farmers – Mr. Pilkington and Mr. Frederick – are on bad terms. Here, we get an early glimpse into the relations between the United States and the United Kingdom, Germany, and Russia.

Mr. Frederick, as it will be increasingly clear, is a stand in for the **Germans**, and later for Hitler in particular. During the Bolshevik Revolution, the Germans were entangled in war with both the U.S. and the U.K., and after the Revolution, they essentially shouldered Russia out of the War. **Mr. Pilkington** represents the **United States** and the **United Kingdom**, who at this time were nervous about Russia's withdrawal from the war, feared a Russian alliance with Germany, and were worried about Bolshevik ideas spreading to the West. As Winston Churchill famously put it, communism ought to be "strangled in its cradle."

To put all of this simply, the Bolsheviks were able to fight their civil war because the rest of the world was still caught up in World War I (at least until 1919).

In *Animal Farm*, the **Russian Civil War** gets depicted as the **Battle of Cowshed**. It's worth noting that the Bolsheviks weren't actually fighting the Russian tsar (who was already dead), but a patchwork army composed, in part, of landowners, middle-class citizens, monarchists, and old army

generals. What united these different groups was mainly the fact that they were all *anti-Bolshevik*, and they went under the loose name the **White Army**, contrasting themselves with the **Trotsky-led Red Army**.

There are a few things to notice about the Battle of Cowshed. First, Snowball (Trotsky) emerges as a military hero. Second, **Mollie** the horse, who represents the **Russian bourgeoisie** (upper-middle-class) runs off and plays little role in the battle. Third, **Boxer**, or the double for the **proletariat (working class)**, reveals himself as a powerful military force. As the narrator tells us, "the most terrifying spectacle of all was Boxer, rearing up on his hind legs and striking out with his great iron-shod hoofs like a stallion" (4).

The actual Russian Civil War ended in 1922 with the defeat of the White Army and the founding of the Soviet state. Similarly, after the Battle of Cowshed, Animal Farm is firmly established on the English farm scene.

To Grow or Not to Grow? The Windmill and the Trotsky-Stalin Conflict

As Lenin grew sick in the early 1920s, serious tension started to mount between Joseph Stalin (Napoleon) and Leon Trotsky (Snowball). Trotsky had already been critical of Stalin's war record, but what really set them apart was that Trotsky wanted to continue to spread the Revolution abroad, whereas Stalin wanted to focus on building communism in the territories Russia had already acquired.

Stalin used his position as General Secretary of the Communist Party (an appointment Lenin later regretted) to build a coalition against Trotsky, and essentially make him a mute political force. Following Lenin's death, Trotsky was forced into exile, leaving Stalin in complete control by about 1928.

In *Animal Farm*, the divide between Stalin and Trotsky (Napoleon and Snowball) is represented by the argument over the **windmill**. We learn that Napoleon despises the idea – at one point he "urinated over the plans and walked out without a word" – and, in general, "the whole farm was deeply divided on the subject of the windmill" (5). The windmill is, in many ways, the perfect symbol for the decision **about whether or not to expand communism**. It represents a fantastic and probably unachievable dream. In this case, the dream is worldwide communist revolution.

As soon as Snowball is off the farm, Napoleon begins to consolidate power for himself, as Stalin did in Russia after he exiled Trotsky. We find that he has reared the nine pups (dogs) and made them his **guard-dogs** (equivalent to **Stalin's secret police**, the NKVD), and that he has made Squealer his right-hand man. The animals are vaguely troubled by all of this, and "several of them would have protested if they could have found the right arguments" (5), but they do nothing.

Throughout the novel, **Squealer (appropriately named), goes around putting the right "spin" on everything that Napoleon is doing. In this way, Orwell uses him to represent the **Soviet press**, who were controlled by Stalin throughout his rule. Whenever the pigs violate the tenets of Animalism, Squealer persuades the other animals that the pigs are actually acting in everyone's best interest.

Napoleon's Initiative and Stalin's Five-Year-Plans

One of Stalin's first decisions as the leader of the Soviet Union was to initiate something known as the **Five-Year-Plans**, the first of which was accepted in 1928 for the years 1929-1933. The Plans continued in Russia up until the early 1990s, and their main goal was to rapidly industrialize (create machines, etc.) the nation so that it could catch up with the West.

Going hand in hand with the Five-Year-Plan was Stalin's decision to collectivize agriculture. He thought that he could increase the production of crops by moving to large-scale mechanized farms,

and by bringing the peasantry under direct control.**This means that the people were basically forced to work on huge government farms and live on government housing for very little money.

The plan meant a massive drop in quality of living for the peasants, and quickly revealed itself as a failure. There are historical debates about the degree to which Stalin's plans led directly to the widespread famine of 1931 and 1932, which killed millions of Russian peasants. What is clear, however, is that once the famines started, Stalin did little to help the people.

In *Animal Farm*, we find that Napoleon has the animals working harder than ever (alluding to the Five-Year-Plans). Even the neighboring humans "had developed a certain respect for the efficiency with which the animals were managing their own affairs" (6). Meanwhile, Napoleon's own hypocrisy is becoming increasingly apparent to anyone who is paying attention. The pigs have begun to sleep in the humans' beds, and Muriel the horse reads out the altered commandment "No animal shall sleep in a bed *with sheets*" (6).

Despite (or perhaps because of) Napoleon's initiative, there are widespread food shortages across Animal Farm (paralleling the famines in Russia). Napoleon quickly realizes that "it was vitally necessary to conceal this fact from the outside world" (7), and he sends the sheep out to talk about their increased rations. At the same time, Napoleon has all the empty food bins in the store-shed filled with sand in order to hide the lack of food. Napoleon, like Stalin, is struggling to make his policies look like they are working, and give the appearance of strength when the Farm is becoming increasingly weak.

The Hen Rebellion, Napoleon's Pile of Corpses, and Stalin's Great Purge

Not that *Animal Farm* is ever a particularly light tale, but the story takes a very dark turn about halfway through. First, the hens refuse to give their eggs up to the pigs, and Napoleon resolves to starve them until they change their minds. Several of the hens die, and the rest simply give up.

Soon after, Napoleon calls a general meeting, and the dogs drag out several pigs "squealing with pain and terror" (7). The pigs confess that they were working with Snowball and Mr. Frederick, and a moment later the dogs "tore their throats out" (7). After that, the same thing happens with the surviving hens from the rebellion, a goose, and several sheep. At the end, there is "a pile of corpses and Napoleon's feet and the air was heavy with the smell of blood, which had been unknown there since the expulsion of Jones" (7). Wasn't this supposed to be a fairy tale?

Not exactly, as we're learning. What we have here is a nightmarish allusion to the **Great Purge**,** which took place between 1936 and 1938. Working to eliminate every last trace of the opposition, Stalin had executed or sent to **Gulag labor camps**** many of those who could claim association with **Leon Trotsky** (Snowball), as well as military leaders and anyone that might possibly be labeled "anti-Soviet." The estimates of how many died in the purges ranges from about 500,000 up to 2 million.
**purge means to get rid of something **labor camps are similar to concentration camps

What made Stalin's purges particularly horrible was that he forced many to come forward and confess falsely to crimes that they never committed, often after severe psychological torment and outright torture. These became known as the "Moscow Show Trials."

What we see in *Animal Farm* is a very simple and direct illustration of how Stalin's purges worked. Squealer tells the other animals that Snowball, the scapegoat for everything, is not just working against them from outside the farm, but that he has been sneaking back inside: he's trying to destroy them from within. Snowball here becomes the figure of general Stalinist paranoia, and what we get is an old-fashioned witch-hunt, plain and simple.

So, no, we are not getting a fairy tale. But it's worth remembering that Karl Marx's vision was of a utopia (or perfect community), of precisely the opposite of what Stalin had to offer. A Russian in the

late 1930s might look back on what happened and think, like old Clover, "These scenes of terror and slaughter were not what they had looked forward to on that night when old Major first stirred them to rebellion" (7).

The Scheming Frederick and how Hitler Broke the Non-Aggression Pact

There's an odd little episode after Napoleon's executions that has to do with the need to **sell a pile of timber** to either Mr. Frederick or Mr. Pilkington. Mr. Frederick stands in for Hitler or Nazi Germany at large, and Mr. Pilkington stands in for the United Kingdom (or perhaps the Western alliance of the UK and the USA).

Now as Napoleon is first trying to decide to whom he will sell the timber, he notices that Frederick is "the more anxious to get hold of it, but he would not offer a reasonable price" (8). At the time, Napoleon's relations with Pilkington were "almost friendly" (8). As the animals become aware of what a threat Frederick might present, Napoleon teaches them to chant "Death to Frederick" (8.8).

Then suddenly, to everyone's surprise, Napoleon swaps sides and sells the timber to Frederick. The other pigs claim that Napoleon only buddied up with Pilkington so that Frederick would raise his price. But Napoleon has a surprise coming. He soon learns that Frederick has given him forged money, and has gotten the timber for nothing!

What's going on here? Well, Hitler and Stalin had long been mortal enemies. Anti-communism was a central concern of Nazi Party ideology from the very beginning, and Stalin spent much of the 1930s casting himself as a true enemy of the Nazis. Stalin nearly signed an anti-German political alliance with France and Britain (represented by Mr. Pilkington) in the late 1930s. Yet when that fell through, Stalin stunned the world by signing a **non-aggression (no fighting) pact with Hitler** instead, in August 1939. Aside from maintaining peace between Germany and the Soviet Union, the pact divided up a number of Eastern countries into German and Soviet realms of influence. Poland, for example, was slated for dismemberment, with both totalitarian regimes angling to take over half the country. *(Basically, there was a lot of land that Germany and Russia was going to split and be in charge of, including Poland, in addition to promising not to fight each other in WWII.)*

In early 1941, Stalin began to get word from his spies that Hitler was planning to break the pact, but he simply couldn't believe that the Germans would invade Russia before first defeating Britain. Yet in June 1941, Hitler did indeed launch Operation Barbarossa, with millions of German troops pouring suddenly into Soviet territory, starting the war on the Eastern Front. This lead to Russia getting involved in World War II. Actually, the bloody fighting that unfolded on the Eastern Front eventually destroyed a huge part of Hitler's military, leading to Germany's defeat in 1945. If Hitler had not broken the non-aggression pact, the entire landscape of our modern world might be entirely different. In short, the forces of Hitler might have won World War II.

But it didn't. Hitler betrayed Stalin, and, as we learn in *Animal Farm*, "The very next morning the attack came..." (8.16).

Battle of the Windmill and World War II

Russia suffered *enormous* casualties in World War II. It is estimated that the Soviet Union lost roughly 11 *million* soldiers in the war, along with perhaps even more civilian casualties.

In December of 1942, the German army had pushed within twenty miles of Moscow. It was only through a massive counter-offensive that the Soviets managed to push the Germans some forty to fifty miles back. Hitler then shifted his strategy and began aiming at oil fields in the southern Soviet Union. The Soviets were able to thwart the plan, but only with many more losses.

By the time Orwell was wrapping up *Animal Farm*, the war was not yet over, but, at least for the

Soviets, the worst had passed. From 1943 on, the Soviets remained on the offensive until the end of the war in April 1945.

Animal Farm has its own miniature version of **World War II** in the **Battle of the Windmill**. Things begin rapidly as Frederick's men advance, take a pasture and blow up the Windmill. As the enemy rushes onto the farm, "even Napoleon seemed at a loss" (8). A message arrives from Pilkington telling Napoleon, "Serves you right" (8).

For the fable genre, the fighting in *Animal Farm* is extremely violent. A number of animals are killed, and Boxer uses his hoofs to smash in the heads of the men. Though the animals end up winning, they find that they are "weary and bleeding" (8). Almost immediately, Squealer begins proclaiming the war as a proud victory for Napoleon.

Boxer the horse, like so many that survived the war, no longer understands the word victory. When Squealer points out that they have regained the farm, all Boxer can say is, "Then we have won back what we had before" (8). No matter how good your ministry of propaganda, it's hard to *spin* a war in which millions of lives are lost. Even the loyal Boxer understands that.

Goodbye Boxer and the Betrayal of the Proletariat (Working Class)

Throughout *Animal Farm*, we've seen the pigs betray the principles of the Rebellion over and over again. Yet no betrayal is quite so poignant as what happens after Boxer's lung collapses. Squealer tells everyone that Boxer is going to be taken to a veterinary hospital in Willingdon for surgery.

When the animals go to see Boxer off, Benjamin the donkey appears and starts crying that they are all idiots. He reads the side of the van to them: "Horse Slaughterer and Glue Boiler" (9). All of the animals shout to Boxer that he must kick his way out, and he tries, but old and weak as he is, he cannot.

A few days later, Squealer comes back and explains the "misunderstanding." He says the surgeon purchased the van from the horse slaughterer, but that he has not yet changed the name. Squealer claims that they did everything they could to save Boxer. Napoleon holds the horse a memorial service, and ends it by reminding everyone of Boxer's two favorite maxims: "I will work harder" and "Comrade Napoleon is always right" (9).

Boxer, in many ways, is an example of the perfect proletarian (worker). He never complains; he is extremely loyal; and he literally works himself to death. Yet his reward is that he is sold off, slaughtered, and turned into glue. Meanwhile, the pigs are living lavish lifestyles in the farmhouse and getting drunk off cartons of whiskey.

Though the betrayal of Boxer is not a link to any specific episode in Russian history, it might be seen as a brief 'allegory within an allegory' for Stalinism as a whole. And, in a way, Orwell's imagery is all too literal. As the van rapidly moves down the road with Boxer trapped inside, one can't help but think of so many victims of the Stalinist regime that were made to disappear or were sent to Gulag concentration camps.

Napoleon's Last Laugh and The Tehran Conference

The book ends with a meeting between the pigs and the neighboring humans. The animals watch on through a farmhouse window as the pigs explain that there must have been some misunderstanding. They want to make it clear to the humans that they never meant to incite rebellion; their entire goal has been "to live at peace and in *normal business relations*" (10, our italics). *In short, the pigs have hung the other animals out to dry - the Rebellion is dead—they don't care about the other animals.*

The meeting between the pigs and the humans is an allusion to the Tehran Conference, which

took place in November of 1943, and which was intended to map out a strategy to end World War II. It was a meeting of the leaders of the **Big Three allied powers**, jointly leading the fight against Hitler: Franklin Roosevelt of the United States; Winston Churchill of the United Kingdom; and Joseph Stalin of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.).

At the Tehran Conference, the Big Three hammered out agreements on several matters of great significance to World War II and, later, the Cold War. Stalin, whose soldiers on the Eastern Front (in Russia) were bearing the brunt of the war against Germany, got Churchill and Roosevelt to promise to open up a Western Front in France by the spring of 1944 by finally launching Operation Overlord (now known as D-Day). (Stalin had been begging since 1941 for the British and Americans to open a Western front to take the pressure off his forces.) Churchill and Roosevelt also agreed, reluctantly, to allow Stalin to permanently change the borders of Poland, incorporating much of what had been eastern Poland into the Soviet Union. Many in the West (the Polish government-in-exile in London foremost among them) saw this as a craven sellout of democratic principles… which it may have been. But it was a sellout that Churchill and Roosevelt saw as necessary to win the war.

But it was also a sellout that drew the anger of George Orwell. *What people often emphasize when they read the end of Animal Farm is that the pigs have become exactly like the humans*. The final line goes, "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" (10).

In the Preface to the Ukrainian edition, Orwell emphasizes this note of conflict at the end of the novel. Though the creatures cannot tell pig from man, as they observe them, the pigs and the men are caught in ferocious argument. The reason is that they're both cheating one another: "Napoleon and Mr. Pilkington had each played an ace of spades simultaneously" (10).

The end of *Animal Farm*, the moment when that **ace of spades hits the table**, might be taken as the allegorical beginning of the **Cold War**. At the time the West decided to play cards with the Soviet Union; they'd do anything to defeat the Germans. But the wartime alliance of Roosevelt and Churchill and Stalin was a temporary marriage of convenience; as soon as the war ended, it fell apart in a mess of mutual distrust, leading directly to fifty years of stalemate, to fifty years of such incredible tension between Russia and the West that schoolchildren in both countries were drilled on what to do if a nuclear bomb landed nearby. Orwell, it seems, saw it coming a mile away.

**The sheep, who blindly follow and believe whatever they are told, represent the citizens of the Soviet Union.

**Clover represents the female side of the working class, the female counterpart to Boxer.