

Meet George Orwell



Liberty is telling people what they do not want to hear.

—George Orwell

In the years since the publication of *Animal Farm* and *1984*, both of which conjure visions of modern government's dangerous power, critics have studied and analyzed George Orwell's personal life. Orwell was a man who had a reputation for standing apart and even making a virtue of his detachment. This "outsider" position often led him to oppose the crowd.

Orwell began life as Eric Arthur Blair (George Orwell was a pen name he adopted later for its "manly, English, country-sounding ring.") He spent his early years in India as a lonely boy who liked to make up stories and talk with imaginary companions. He began to "write" before he even knew how, dictating poems to his mother, and perhaps saw this outlet as an alternative to the human relationships he found so difficult. Refuge in words and ideas became increasingly important when Orwell's parents sent him, at age eight, to boarding school in England.

Later, instead of going on to university, he decided to take a job in Burma with the Indian Imperial Police. Orwell wrote about this experience in *Burmese Days* (1934) and in the essay "Shooting an Elephant." At odds with British

colonial rule, Orwell said he "theoretically—and secretly, of course . . . was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British."

Returning to England to recover from a bout of the chronic lung illness that plagued him all his life, Orwell began his writing career in earnest. Over the next two decades, he wrote newspaper columns, novels, essays, and radio broadcasts, most of which grew out of his own personal experience.

Orwell's beliefs about politics were affected by his experiences fighting in the Spanish Civil War. He viewed socialists, communists, and fascists as repressive and self-serving. Orwell patriotically supported England during World War II, but remained skeptical of governments and their willingness to forsake ideals in favor of power.

With each book or essay, Orwell solidified his role as the outsider willing to question any group's ideology. Orwell spoke his mind with *Animal Farm*, in which he criticized the Soviet Union despite its role as a World War II ally of Great Britain. At first, no one would publish the novel, but when *Animal Farm* finally appeared in 1945 it was a success. It was later adapted both as an animated film and as a play.

In explaining how he came to write *Animal Farm*, Orwell says he once saw a little boy whipping a horse:

It struck me that if only such animals became aware of their strength we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the [worker].

Orwell said it was the first book in which he consciously tried to blend artistic and political goals. Orwell's final novel, *1984*, continued that effort with a grim portrayal of a world totally under government control.

Orwell pursued his writing career faithfully, although it was not always easy. In his final days he made the statement, "Writing . . . is a horrible, exhausting struggle . . . One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven . . ."

Introducing the Novel

Animal Farm is written on many levels. It is already a children's story in its own right. . . . [It] is also a lament for the fate of revolutions and the hopes contained in them. It is a moving comment on man's constant compromise with the truth.

—John Atkins, *George Orwell*

On the publication of *Animal Farm* in 1945, George Orwell discovered with horror that booksellers were placing his novel on children's shelves. According to his housekeeper, he began traveling from bookstore to bookstore requesting that the book be shelved with adult works. This dual identity—as children's story and adult satire—has stayed with Orwell's novel for more than fifty years.

Animal Farm tells the story of Farmer Jones's animals who rise up in rebellion and take over the farm. Tired of being exploited solely for human gain, the animals—who have human characteristics such as the power of speech—vow to create a new and more just society.

Though the novel reads like a fairy story, and Orwell subtitles it as just that, it is also a satire containing a message about world politics and especially the former Soviet Union in particular. Since the Bolshevik revolutions of the early 1900s, the former Soviet Union had captured the attention of the world with its socialist experiment. Stalin's form of government had some supporters in Britain and the United States, but Orwell was against this system.

In a **satire**, the writer attacks a serious issue by presenting it in a ridiculous light or otherwise poking fun at it. Orwell uses satire to expose what he saw as the myth of Soviet socialism. Thus, the novel tells a story that people of all ages can understand, but it also tells us a second story—that of the real-life Revolution. Many critics have matched in great detail the story's characters to historical persons—for example, linking the power struggle between Napoleon and Snowball to the historical feuding between Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky for control of the Soviet Union. Critics

also believe that Old Major represents Karl Marx, who dies before realizing his dream. Other comparisons include Moses as the Russian Orthodox church, Boxer and Clover as workers, the sheep as the general public, Squealer as Stalin's government news agency, the dogs as Stalin's military police, and Farmer Jones as Czar Nicholas II. The farm's neighbors, Pilkington and Frederick, are said to represent Great Britain and Germany, while Mollie suggests the old Russian aristocracy, which resists change.

A tremendous success when published, *Animal Farm* has since become part of school curriculums and popular literary culture. Readers and critics alike have enjoyed its imaginative premise and the engaging charm of its animal characters. Orwell's straightforward language draws readers into the farm's world, while the witty underlying satire invites serious analysis. In *George Orwell: A Personal Memoir*, T. R. Fyvel writes:

[Orwell] turned the domestic animals on the farm into immediately recognizable and memorable and sometimes lovable characters.

Animal Farm is more than a fairy story. It is a commentary on the the relevance of independent thought, truth, and justice.

THE TIME AND PLACE

An **allegory** is a narrative that can be read on more than one level. Critics often consider *Animal Farm* to be an allegory of the Russian Revolution. In the early 1900s, Russia's Czar Nicholas II faced an increasingly discontented populace. Freed from feudal serfdom in 1861, many Russian peasants were struggling to survive under an oppressive government. By 1917, amidst the tremendous suffering of World War I, a revolution began. In two major battles, the Czar's government was overthrown and replaced by the Bolshevik leadership of Vladimir Lenin. When Lenin died in 1924, his former colleagues Leon Trotsky, hero of the early Revolution, and Joseph Stalin, head of the Communist Party, struggled for power. Stalin won the battle, and he deported Trotsky into permanent exile.

Once in power, Stalin began, with despotic urgency and exalted nationalism, to move the Soviet Union into the modern industrial age. His government seized land in order to create collective farms. Stalin's Five Year Plan was an attempt to modernize Soviet industry. To counter resistance

(many peasants refused to give up their land), Stalin used vicious military tactics. Rigged trials led to executions of an estimated 20 million government officials and ordinary citizens. The government controlled the flow and content of information to the people, and all but outlawed churches.

Did You Know?

Orwell initially struggled to find a publisher for *Animal Farm*. Many liberal intellectuals in Europe admired the Soviet experiment with socialism. They believed socialism would produce a society in which everyone—workers and employers—was equal, and in which there were no upper, middle, or lower classes. In Orwell's words "they want[ed] to believe that, somewhere, a really Socialist country does actually exist." Also, British publishers were hesitant to publicly criticize their Soviet allies as World War II came to a close. The book was published in 1945, after Germany surrendered.

Orwell believed that the basis for society was human decency and common sense, which conflicted with the ideals for society that were prevalent at the time: socialism, capitalism, communism, and fascism, to name a few. As an individualist who believed that his own experiences should guide his philosophy, he was often at odds with these popular ideas. He believed that governments were encroaching on the individual's freedom of choice, love of family, and tolerance for others. He emphasized honesty, individuality, and the welfare of society throughout his writings.

Before You Read

Animal Farm Chapters 1–4

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Why do you think revolutions occur? What circumstances would lead people to overthrow the daily political and economical structure of their lives?

List It

With a partner, identify two or three revolutions that occurred more than ten years ago. What circumstances, if any, do these revolutions have in common? What sorts of goals were the revolutionaries seeking to accomplish? In retrospect were the revolutions successful?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out about farm animals who decide that revolution is the necessary course.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Many of the ideals behind the Soviet revolution were based on the writings and teachings of Karl Marx. A German intellectual who lived in the mid-1800s, Marx believed that societies are divided into two segments, a working class and an owner class. The working class creates all the products, while the owner class enjoys all the benefits of these products. This class division leads to inequality and oppression of the working class. Marx's objective was to create a classless society in which the work is shared by all for the benefit of all, and he believed revolution was the way to achieve this goal.

In leading workers toward revolution, Marx used slogans like "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." He also urged people to give up their religion, which he believed gave them false hope for a better life in heaven. The character of Old Major in *Animal Farm* is sometimes interpreted as a representation of Karl Marx. Major's speech in the novel's opening chapter reflects many Marxist ideas, from the opening "Comrades," a typical form of address in the former Soviet Union, to the revolutionary song he teaches the other animals.

Character Types

A **fable** is a narration intended to enforce a useful truth. Fables have two important characteristics. First, they teach a moral or lesson. In *Animal Farm*, the moral involves Orwell's views about Soviet politics. Second, the characters are most frequently animals. These animal characters often function as a satiric device to point out the follies of humankind. Though Old Major, Snowball, and Napoleon may represent Karl Marx, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin, many of the story characters are much more general. Some animals are grouped together as a single character—"the sheep," "the hens," and "the dogs." Orwell also capitalizes on the traits generally associated with particular animals, such as sheep as followers and dogs as loyal.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

cannibalism [kan'ə bə liz'əm] *n.* practice of eating one's own kind

cryptic [krip'tik] *adj.* intended to be mysterious or obscure

gambol [gam'bəl] *v.* to skip about in play

ignominious [ig'nə min'ē əs] *adj.* shameful; dishonorable

indefatigable [in'di fat'ə gə bəl] *adj.* untiring

parasitical [par'ə sit'i kəl] *adj.* like a parasite; gaining benefits from a host it injures

Before You Read

Animal Farm Chapters 5–7

FOCUS ACTIVITY

How would you feel if the rules for correct behavior kept changing?

Discuss

In a small group, discuss some methods people have for persuading others to follow particular rules of behavior. Consider ways in which this persuasion relies on bias and manipulation of information.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how Napoleon persuades the other animals to follow his rules.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

One of Orwell's concerns about the Soviet state was that it used language to distort historical events. After Stalin bullied Leon Trotsky out of the country, he systematically removed any trace of Trotsky from Soviet history—took him out of photographs, censored his papers, and so on. He also used *Pravda*, his news agency, to control the information people received. In Chapters 5 through 7, Orwell repeatedly calls readers' attention to both Napoleon's manipulation of information and the animals' willingness to believe him.

Power Struggle

In Chapters 5 through 7, the battle for power between Snowball and Napoleon comes to its climax. In Soviet history, a similar battle raged between two very different men, Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin. Stalin exercised power through regulations and rules. As its leader, he controlled the Communist Party bureaucracy. Trotsky had proven himself a masterful military strategist and inspirational leader during the Russian Civil War. He wanted to limit government power. The two also disagreed about how to industrialize and whether to focus on Soviet or worldwide socialism. Stalin took control in 1925—control he kept largely through tactics of terror.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

canvas [kan'vəs] *v.* to request support

coccidiosis [kok si'dē ō'səs] *n.* parasitic disease

dynamo [dī'nə mō] *n.* electric generator

embolden [em bōld'ən] *v.* to instill with courage

malignity [mə lig'nə tē] *n.* an example of evil behavior

manoeuvre [mə nōō'vər] (U.S.: maneuver) *n.* strategy to gain a particular aim

perpendicularity [pur'pən dik yə lar'ə tē] *n.* the state of being perpendicular, or at right angles, to a specified plane

superintendence [sōō'prin ten'dəns] *n.* the act of directing

Before You Read

Animal Farm Chapters 8–10

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Do you think revolution is worth the upheaval and damage it inevitably causes? Can it bring about real and lasting change? Why or why not?

Debate It

With a partner, identify and discuss factors that a government can modify (such as policies) and those that it cannot (such as climate conditions). Consider also whether there are elements to the human condition so basic that no revolution can change them.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out the ultimate consequences of the animals' revolution.

BACKGROUND

Did You Know?

Orwell pokes fun at the animals' revolution throughout the novel by revealing to readers information that the characters do not know or acknowledge. This is called using **irony**. Though *Animal Farm* is narrated from the point of view of the lower animals, who appear to grasp very little of the power struggles and political jostling, readers can clearly sense Orwell's commentary on the events. In the final chapters, Orwell's heightened use of irony brings the story to a dramatic and unsettling conclusion that clearly spells out the author's concerns about Soviet socialism.

Allies and Enemies

Napoleon wants the farm to have greater contact with the outside world. Joseph Stalin had similar visions for the Soviet Union. During the 1930s, he was torn between allying himself with Western capitalist nations or with Adolf Hitler's fascist German government. The Soviet propaganda machine defiled each "enemy" in turn as Stalin shifted allegiances. In 1939 Stalin pledged himself to Hitler by signing a "non-aggression pact." Hitler broke his promise and invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. The Soviets then became allies with the West. At first, Hitler had great success against Stalin's less modern armies. Ultimately, the Soviet army turned the tide with the Battle of Stalingrad, though the city was nearly destroyed and thousands of Soviets killed.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

beatifically [bē'ə tif'ə kəl lē] *adv.* in a manner suggesting bliss

demeanor [di mē'nər] *n.* outward manner

deputation [dep'yə tā'shən] *n.* a group appointed to represent others

devotees [dev'ə tēz'] *n.* ardent followers

inebriates [i nē'brē its] *n.* those who are habitually drunk

interment [in tur'mənt] *n.* the act of burial

machinations [mak'ə nā'shəns] *n.* scheming actions

taciturn [tas'ə turn'] *adj.* not inclined to talking