Animal Farm Themes

1. Satire

Satire is loosely defined as art that ridicules a specific topic in order to provoke readers into changing their opinion of it. By attacking what they see as human folly, satirists usually imply their own opinions on how the thing being attacked can be remedied. Perhaps the most famous work of British satire is Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), where the inhabitants of the different lands Gulliver visits embody what Swift saw as the prominent vices and corruptions of his time. As a child, Orwell discovered and devoured Swift's novel, which became one of his favorite books. Like *Gulliver's Travels*, *Animal Farm* is a satirical novel in which Orwell, like Swift, attacks what he saw as some of the prominent follies of *his* time. These various satirical targets comprise the major themes of Orwell's novel.

2. Tyrants

Broadly speaking, *Animal Farm* satirizes politicians, specifically their rhetoric, ability to manipulate others, and insatiable lust for power. Despite his seemingly altruistic motives, Napoleon is presented as the epitome of a power-hungry individual who masks all of his actions with the excuse that they are done for the betterment of the farm. His stealing the milk and apples, for example, is explained by the lie that these foods have nutrients essential to pigs, who need these nutrients to carry on their managerial work. His running Snowball off the farm is explained by the lie that Snowball was actually a traitor, working for Jones — and that the farm will fare better without him. Each time that Napoleon and the other pigs wish to break one of the Seven Commandments, they legitimize their transgressions by changing the Commandment's original language. Whenever the farm suffers a setback, Napoleon blames Snowball's treachery — which the reader, of course, knows is untrue. Napoleon's walking on two legs, wearing a derby hat, and toasting Pilkington reflect the degree to which he (and the other pigs) completely disregard the plights of the other animals in favor of satisfying their own cravings for power. Thus, the dominant theme of *Animal Farm* is the tendency for those who espouse the most virtuous ideas to become the worst enemies of the people whose lives they are claiming to improve.

3. The Soviet Union under Stalinism

Animal Farm is a satire of totalitarian governments in their many guises. But Orwell composed the book for a more specific purpose: to serve as a cautionary tale about Stalinism. It was for this reason that he faced such difficulty in getting the book published; by the time *Animal Farm* was ready to meet its readers, the Allies were cooperating with the Soviet Union. The allegorical characters of the novel represent specific historical figures and different factions of Imperial Russian and Soviet society. These include Karl Marx (Major), Vladimir Lenin (Major), Leon

Trotsky (Snowball), Joseph Stalin (Napoleon), Adolf Hitler (Frederick), the Allies (Pilkington), the peasants (Boxer), the elite (Mollie), and the church (Moses).
The resemblance of some of the novel's events to events in Soviet history is indubitable. For example, Snowball's and Napoleon's power struggle is a direct allegory of Trotsky's and Stalin's. Frederick's trade agreement with Napoleon, and his subsequent breaking of the agreement, represents the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact that preceded World War II. The following Battle of the Windmill represents World War II itself.

Despite his fairy-tale clarity in satirizing some historical events, Orwell is less specific about others. For example, the executions in Chapter VII conflate the Red Terror with the Great Purge. The executions themselves bear resemblance to both events, although their details connect them more to the Moscow Trials than to the Red Terror. Squealer's subsequent announcement that the executions have ended the Rebellion connects them to the period of the Red Terror, however. Orwell leaves some ambiguity in the identities of the Rebellion and the Battle of the Cowshed. These ambiguities help the reader focus on the overall satire of Stalinism and the broader warning about the evils of totalitarian government.

4. Intelligence and Education as Tools of Oppression

From the very beginning of the novel, we become aware of education's role in stratifying Animal Farm's population. Following Major's death, the pigs are the ones that take on the task of organizing and mobilizing the other animals because they are "generally recognized as being the cleverest of the animals" (35). At first, the pigs are loyal to their fellow animals and to the revolutionary cause. They translate Major's vision of the future faithfully into the Seven Commandments of Animalism. However, it is not long before the pigs' intelligence and education turn from tools of enlightenment to implements of oppression. The moment the pigs are faced with something material that they want—the fresh milk—they abandon their morals and use their superior intellect and knowledge to deceive the other animals.

The pigs also limit the other animals' opportunities to gain intelligence and education early on. They teach themselves to read and write from a children's book but destroy it before the other animals can have the same chance. Indeed, most of the animals never learn more than a few letters of the alphabet. Once the pigs cement their status as the educated elite, they use their mental advantage to manipulate the other animals. For example, knowing that the other animals cannot read the Seven Commandments, they revise them whenever they like. The pigs also use their literacy to learn trades from manuals, giving them an opportunity for economic specialization and advancement. Content in the role of the intelligentsia, the pigs forgo manual labor in favor of bookkeeping and organizing. This shows that the pigs have not only the advantage of opportunity, but also the opportunity to reject whatever opportunities they like. The pigs' intelligence and education allow them to bring the other animals into submission through the use of propaganda and revisionism. At the book's end, we witness Napoleon's preparations to educate a new generation of pigs and indoctrinate them into the code of oppression.

5. Violence and Terror as Means of Control

In *Animal Farm*, Orwell criticizes the ways that dictators use violence and terror to frighten their populaces into submission. Violence is one of the yokes from which the animals wish to free themselves when they prepare for the Rebellion. Not only does Jones overwork the animals and

steal the products of their labor, but he can whip or slaughter them at his discretion. Once the pigs gain control of the animals, they, like Jones, discover how useful violence and terror can be. They use this knowledge to their full advantage. The foremost example of violence and terror in the novel is the pattern of public executions. The executions can be said to represent both the Red Terror and the Great Purge, but they stand more broadly for the abuse of power. For example, they are also similar to the Taliban's public executions in Kabul's soccer stadium in modern Afghanistan.

Capital punishment for criminals is a hotly debated issue. Killing *suspected* criminals, as Napoleon does, is quite another issue. The executions perhaps best symbolize the Moscow Trials, which were show trials that Stalin arranged to instill fear in the Soviet people. To witnesses at the time, the accused traitors' confessions seemed to be given freely. In fact, they were coerced. Napoleon likely coerces confessions from many of the animals that he executes. Orwell's use of the allegory genre serves him well in the execution scene. Execution with weapons is a violent and horrifying act, but many people have become desensitized to it. Orwell's allegorical executioners, the dogs that kill cruelly, portray the bloody and inescapably animalistic side of execution.

Terror comes also in threats and propaganda. Each time the animals dare to question an aspect of Napoleon's regime, Squealer threatens them with Jones's return. This is doubly threatening to the animals because it would mean another battle that, if lost, would result in a return to their former lifestyle of submission. Jones's return is such a serious threat that it quashes the animals' curiosity without fail. The other major example of fear tactics in the novel is the threat of Snowball and his collaborators. Napoleon is able to vilify Snowball in the latter's absence and to make the animals believe that his return, like Jones's, is imminent. Snowball is a worse threat than Jones, because Jones is at least safely out of Animal Farm. Snowball is "proved" to be not only lurking along Animal Farm's borders but infiltrating the farm. Napoleon's public investigation of Snowball's whereabouts cements the animals' fear of Snowball's influence. In modern language, Snowball is pegged as the terrorist responsible for the infringements on the rights and liberties instigated by the pigs.

6. Exploitation and the Need for Human Rights

Exploitation is the issue around which the animals unite. Initially, the animals do not realize Jones is exploiting them. For this reason, Old Major's speech is a revelation of momentous proportions. Major explains to the animals that they are enslaved and exploited and that Man is to blame. He teaches them not only what exploitation means, but also the fact that it is not inevitable. Orwell suggests that exploitation is, in fact, bound to happen when one class of society has an advantage over another. The opposite of exploitation, according to Major, is the state of being "rich and free." Major's ideas about animal rights symbolize the importance—and scarcity—of human rights in an oppressive regime. Gaining freedom does not necessarily lead people also to become rich, but it is better to be poor and free than poor and exploited.

All the animals on Animal Farm are exploited under Napoleon's control, save the pigs. Even the dogs, which work closely with the pigs, are exploited. The dogs face perhaps even a worse form of exploitation than the other animals, because they are made into agents of intimidation and death. Whereas Napoleon exploits the other animals' physical strength and their ignorance, he exploits the dogs' viciousness and turns them into villains against their parents' wishes.

Boxer's life is a particularly sad example of exploitation because he exploits himself, believing wholeheartedly in Napoleon's goodness. In the end, Napoleon turns the tables and exploits Boxer, having him slaughtered for profit. By the end of the novel, we see clearly how the animals participate in their own exploitation. They are beginning to build a schoolhouse for the thirty-one young pigs Napoleon has fathered (perhaps an oblique reference to the "Thirty Tyrants" of ancient Greece). That schoolhouse will never benefit the animals that build it; rather, it will be used to educate the pigs and indoctrinate them into the cycle of exploiting others. Throughout the novel, Orwell shows us how the lack of human rights results in total helplessness. However, though it underscores the need for human rights, the novel does not suggest how to achieve them. After all, once the animals expel Jones and gain rights for themselves, the pigs take those rights away and the cycle of exploitation continues with new players.