

# Animal Farm: Chapter 1 - Old Major's Speech

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## Summary

Mr. Jones locks his henhouses for the night but is too drunk to shut the pop-holes. As soon as the farmhouse lights go out, the animals stir and make their way to the big barn, where Old Major, the prize Middle White boar, has called a meeting to share a dream and some words of wisdom before he dies.

The animals arrange themselves in a characteristic order: the three dogs and the pigs settle in front of the raised platform; the hens and pigeons take the windowsills and rafters; the sheep and cows settle behind the pigs. Boxer and Clover come in together, moving slowly and carefully to avoid stepping on smaller animals. Clover settles a brood of orphaned ducklings in the crook of her foreleg. Mollie comes in late, eating sugar and flirting her ribboned mane. The cat finds the warmest spot between Boxer and Clover. Benjamin, the old donkey, joins them. The tame raven Moses is the only animal not present.

Old Major speaks. He tells the animals that their lives are miserable and short: they work hard, receive barely enough to stay alive, and are killed when they are no longer useful. Man is the cause. Man consumes without producing. Remove Man through Rebellion, and animals would be fed, warm, and free. He formulates the principles of Animalism: whatever goes on two legs is an enemy; whatever goes on four legs or has wings is a friend. No animal should wear clothes, sleep in a bed, drink alcohol, or kill another animal. All animals are equal.

He also warns them: once the Rebellion succeeds, they must not come to resemble Man. They must not live in houses, wear clothes, use money, or tyrannise over each other. The moment any animal adopts human habits, it has become the enemy.

He then teaches them a song he half-remembers from his youth: "Beasts of England." It describes a golden future when animals will be free from the yoke of Man. All the animals, intelligent and less intelligent alike, learn it in minutes and sing it five times through, growing louder with each repetition. They stop only when Mr. Jones fires his gun into the side of the barn from an upstairs window.

## Analysis

The chapter establishes the novel's political framework in miniature. Old Major's speech is a precise parallel to *The Communist Manifesto*: the diagnosis of exploitation, the identification of an enemy class, the call for collective action, the formulation of guiding principles. Orwell does not present this as ridiculous; the conditions Old Major describes are real, and the suffering he outlines is confirmed by everything the reader observes. The revolution is comprehensible and, on its own terms, just.

But Orwell also builds the seeds of failure into this opening chapter. The arrangement of animals in the barn is not random: the pigs and dogs position themselves at the front, closest to authority, before any hierarchy has been established. The pigs are already the leaders before the revolution begins. The cat votes on both sides of the motion about wild animals; she is already calculating personal advantage from the first moment. Mollie is already preoccupied with sugar and ribbons. Moses, the raven who will later represent religion and Sugarcandy Mountain, is absent from the meeting altogether.

Old Major's warning, that the animals must not come to resemble Man after the Rebellion, is the most important line in the chapter structurally: it identifies exactly what will happen. He states the danger; the novel then demonstrates it. His warning goes unheeded not because the animals forget it but because the pigs who inherit the revolution are not interested in keeping it.

"Beasts of England" is the chapter's emotional climax, and Orwell describes its effect carefully. Every animal, regardless of intelligence, can learn it. It gives the revolution a collective voice before there is a revolution. It is also, as the novel will show, a standard against which everything that follows can be measured: what the song promises is the exact opposite of what the farm will deliver.

## Themes

- **Revolution and its origins:** Old Major's speech provides the genuine grievance that makes the Rebellion comprehensible. Orwell does not undermine it: the animals' suffering under Jones is real. The question the novel will ask is what happens after a justified revolution, not whether the revolution was justified.
- **Class and hierarchy:** The animals' arrangement in the barn -- pigs and dogs at the front, working animals at the back -- anticipates the class structure that will develop on the farm. Class is not created by the Rebellion; it is already present in embryo in the first chapter.
- **Language as power:** "Beasts of England" demonstrates what Orwell will explore throughout: language as a unifying force that can outlast the conditions it describes, a standard that can be measured against the reality it was meant to produce.

- **Idealism and its limits:** Old Major's warning about coming to resemble Man is the novel's central irony stated in advance. He identifies the danger; the novel shows it happening; and his having identified it does not prevent it.

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