

Animal Farm: Benjamin

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Benjamin is the oldest animal on the farm, a cantankerous donkey who seldom talks and, when he does, usually says something cynical. He is the only animal who can read as well as any pig. He is also the animal who sees most clearly what is happening to Animal Farm throughout the novel, and who does the least about it.

He is, in some ways, the most troubling character in the book. Napoleon is a tyrant; his cruelty is straightforward. Squealer is a propagandist; his dishonesty is his function. But Benjamin is clear-eyed and intelligent and capable of acting, and he does not act until it is too late, and possibly not even then. Orwell uses him to ask a question the novel does not comfortably answer: if you understand what is wrong but do not act, are you responsible for it?

Who He Is

Benjamin's philosophy is a thoroughgoing cynicism: life is hard, suffering is permanent, one set of rulers is much like another, nothing is ever meaningfully better or worse. He refuses hope because he has concluded that hope always ends in disappointment. He is always right in the sense that his predictions are accurate. He is never useful in the sense that accurate predictions change nothing.

He is described as the worst-tempered animal on the farm, though without openly admitting it he is devoted to Boxer. The two spend their Sundays in the paddock beyond the orchard, grazing side by side and never speaking. This friendship is the one relationship in his life that involves something other than detachment.

His refusal to read to the other animals is the most pointed aspect of his characterisation. He can read as well as any pig. When Muriel slowly reads out altered commandments or when the other animals stare at writing they cannot decode, Benjamin is there. He says nothing. The most literate non-pig on the farm keeps that literacy entirely private.

His Arc

Before the Rebellion: Benjamin does not share the general enthusiasm. When the Rebellion succeeds and the other animals celebrate, he remarks only that donkeys live a long time and that none of them has seen a dead donkey. He implies that he expects to survive whatever happens, and that whatever happens will not be as good as the animals hope.

During Animal Farm's operation: Benjamin works efficiently and without complaint. He does not read the commandments aloud when they are first painted. When the others try to get him to read, he says he does not believe in reading. He watches the pigs accumulate privileges, watches the commandments change, watches the windmill built and rebuilt, and says nothing. He is never deceived. He is never moved to speak.

Boxer's removal: When the van arrives to take Boxer away, Benjamin runs to alert the other animals -- his only moment of genuine intervention in the novel. He reads the name on the side: Alfred Simmonds, Horse Slaughterer and Glue Boiler. He raises the alarm. The van has already moved. Boxer's weak kicks from inside the van are the last the animals see of him.

Benjamin is more silent after this. He no longer makes his usual cynical remarks. The novel describes him as even more morose than before, but he does not change his fundamental position. His grief, which the text does not put into words, registers as the cost of a philosophy that observes everything and prevents nothing.

Key Quotes

Quote	Chapter	Significance
"Donkeys live a long time. None of you has ever seen a dead donkey."	2	His refusal of hope on the first morning of Animal Farm; the most compressed statement of his philosophy
"He would say that God had given him a tail to keep the flies off, but that he would sooner have had no tail and no flies."	1	Orwell's summary of his worldview: every benefit comes with a cost that cancels it out
His reading of the knacker's name on the van	9	The moment his literacy finally serves a purpose; also the moment it is too late to matter

Narrative Techniques

Reading as power withheld: Benjamin's literacy is consistently relevant and consistently unused. When the commandments are changed, when the statistics are announced, when the documents about Snowball are cited, Benjamin could speak. He chooses not to. Orwell places him next to every scene of linguistic manipulation to ask what it means to have the tools of resistance and decline to use them.

The donkey's lifespan: His observation that donkeys live a long time is more than a detail. It positions him as someone who has seen enough cycles of hope and disappointment to stop

investing in either. His long view is what makes him passive: he expects the revolution to fail because he has seen things fail before.

The one late action: Benjamin is given exactly one moment of intervention, and it fails. This is structurally precise: it suggests that disengagement does not insulate you from catastrophe, it only means your action, when it finally comes, arrives too late. His increased silence after Boxer's death is the novel's commentary on what intelligent inaction costs. He was right about everything; he was also useless.

Contrast with Clover: Clover perceives what is happening but lacks the language to act. Benjamin has the language and withholds it. Together they represent two different versions of political passivity: one constrained by the absence of tools, one constrained by the conviction that using tools changes nothing. Orwell does not let either off the hook.

Thematic Significance

Benjamin is Orwell's challenge to the temptation toward ironic detachment: the position that understanding a corrupt system is itself a kind of integrity, a refusal to be taken in. Orwell's response is that understanding without action is not integrity, it is paralysis. Knowing that all governments tend toward corruption does not excuse inaction when a specific corruption is in progress.

He also tests the novel's implicit argument about education. If the other animals' ignorance is what allows Napoleon to succeed, Benjamin is the counterexample: he is not ignorant, and Napoleon still succeeds. Intelligence and literacy are necessary conditions for resistance but not sufficient ones. They require will, and Benjamin's will is consumed by his conviction that will makes no difference.

Exam Tip

Benjamin is useful for questions about education, inaction, and the conditions for resistance. For education: he is the counterexample to the argument that knowledge alone produces resistance; note that he has the knowledge and uses none of it. For inaction: his one intervention, too late, is the novel's argument that cynical disengagement is not a neutral position. For contrast: compare him with Clover (who wants to act but cannot articulate) and Boxer (who acts without thinking). Always note that Orwell presents Benjamin's inaction as a failure, not as wisdom.