Animal Farm: Boxer

Matthew Williams • English Literature • May 11, 2026

Boxer is an enormous cart-horse, the strongest animal on the farm and its most tireless worker. He is not intelligent: he cannot memorise the alphabet beyond the letter D. But he is honest, loyal, and genuinely committed to the revolution he helped to make. He works harder than any other animal, believes in the cause with uncomplicated sincerity, and is sold to the knacker when he can no longer work. Orwell gives him the novel's most direct emotional arc: the animal whose virtues are most fully on display is the one most completely destroyed by the regime those virtues sustain.

Orwell uses Boxer to answer a specific question: what happens to the working class under the kind of regime Napoleon builds? The answer is that their labour is exploited to its limit, their loyalty is weaponised against them, and when they are no longer useful they are disposed of. The animals who might have protected him have no power. Those who have power sell him.

Who He Is

Boxer's two personal mottos define his character and his tragedy. The first, "I will work harder," is his response to every setback: not analysis, not question, but increased effort. It is admirable in the way that unthinking commitment is always admirable, and it is fatal in the same way. Harder work in a corrupt system does not improve the system; it enriches those at the top.

The second motto, "Napoleon is always right," is adopted in Chapter 5, after Napoleon abolishes the Sunday meetings. The animals are alarmed; Boxer thinks it over and concludes: "If Comrade Napoleon says it, it must be right." From that point he carries both mottos together. His intelligence is not sufficient to penetrate the manipulation he is facing, and his loyalty fills the gap. He knows something is wrong. He concludes it must be his own fault. He works harder.

These mottos are not signs of stupidity. They are the ideology of the model worker: the belief that loyalty expressed through labour is its own virtue, regardless of where the labour goes. Orwell is precise about this because he is not blaming Boxer for his fate. He is describing the political conditions that make someone like Boxer possible and then inevitable.

His Arc

The early farm: Boxer throws himself into every task. During the hay harvest, the first summer after the Rebellion, he rises half an hour before everyone else and works until nightfall. He and Clover form the farm's reliable core: the animals on whom every heavy job depends.

The Battle of the Cowshed: Boxer fights hard. He knocks down a stable boy with a blow of his hoof and believes he has killed him. He is genuinely distressed by this possibility: he does not enjoy violence and is troubled at the idea of having caused harm. The boy turns out to be merely stunned. The episode shows Boxer's gentleness alongside his power.

The windmill: Boxer's contribution to the windmill is the novel's most sustained image of human labour under authoritarian exploitation. He drags stone, hauls rubble, and works before dawn every day. When the first windmill is blown down in a storm and must be rebuilt, his response is "I will work harder." When the second is destroyed by Frederick's men and must be rebuilt again, the same. Each setback costs him something he does not get back.

Chapter 7: When Squealer revises the history of the Battle of the Cowshed, Boxer says clearly that he remembers Snowball fighting on the animals' side and being wounded. Squealer tells him he is wrong; Napoleon has documentary proof. Boxer's response is to invoke his existing motto: "If Comrade Napoleon says it, it must be right." Later, when the dogs execute four pigs in public and the animals slink away to the hillside, Boxer's response is different from Clover's grief or the sheep's passive compliance. He concludes: "It must be due to some fault in ourselves. The solution, as I see it, is to work harder." He cannot act on what he perceives as wrong, and his inability to do so is the novel's most direct image of the limits of loyalty without critical capacity.

The collapse: After years of overwork, Boxer collapses while dragging stone to the windmill. He tells Clover that his lung has gone but that he does not mind: the others will be able to finish without him. He is looking forward to retirement, to the small plot of pasture reserved for old animals, to perhaps learning the rest of the alphabet at last.

The betrayal: Instead, Napoleon sells him to the knacker. The van that comes for Boxer has Alfred Simmonds, Horse Slaughterer and Glue Boiler on its side. Benjamin reads this aloud, the only time in the novel he uses his literacy in service of another animal. By then the van is already moving. Three days later, Squealer describes Boxer's peaceful death in hospital, his final words praising Napoleon and Animal Farm. It is entirely invented.

Key Quotes

Quote	Chapter	Significance
"I will work harder."	Throughout	His first motto: the response to every problem; admirable and exploitable
"Napoleon is always right."	5 onwards	His second motto, adopted after Napoleon abolishes Sunday meetings; the abdication of critical judgement
"I do not understand it. I would not have believed that such things could happen on our farm."	7	His response to the executions: awareness without the capacity to act on it

Narrative Techniques

The two mottos as structural device: Both mottos serve Orwell's critique of passive loyalty. "I will work harder" is admirable in isolation but solves nothing when the system itself is corrupt; harder work only enriches those at the top. "Napoleon is always right" is the abdication that allows every abuse to continue. Together they describe how authoritarian regimes cultivate exactly the qualities in workers that make resistance impossible.

Benjamin's paralysis as counterpoint: Benjamin is the only animal who can read well, who sees clearly, and who does almost nothing. He reads the knacker's name on the van and raises the alarm too late. Orwell positions Boxer and Benjamin together to ask: which is worse, Boxer's blind faith or Benjamin's clear-eyed inaction?

The van that cannot be stopped: When the animals run after Boxer's van, it is the novel's most emotionally direct moment. It is also constructed to feel inevitable. Nothing the animals do will stop it. Power has already moved beyond any check they might apply. The scene is the clearest demonstration in the novel that the animals have no recourse.

The lying commemoration: Napoleon's speech honouring Boxer, the wreath ordered for his grave, the banquet announced in his memory, is the final humiliation. The system that exploited Boxer's loyalty commemorates him with further lies, and the animals accept the commemoration in place of the truth. This is the mechanism of propaganda: it replaces the real with the officially sanctioned memory, and in doing so makes dissent impossible because no one can say with certainty what happened.

Thematic Significance

Boxer is Orwell's concentrated argument about the relationship between loyalty and exploitation. His virtues are genuine: he is strong, honest, devoted, and tireless. The tragedy is that in the context Napoleon has created, these virtues become the mechanism of his destruction. A less loyal Boxer might have questioned; a weaker Boxer might have been retired earlier. His greatest qualities are what make him most useful, and therefore most expendable.

He also raises the question of education as a political condition. He cannot read. He cannot remember the commandments changing. He cannot verify the statistics Squealer presents. His ignorance is not simply a personal limitation; it is maintained by the structure of the society he lives in. An educated Boxer is a dangerous Boxer, which is why Napoleon educates the pigs' children in the farmhouse kitchen and leaves Boxer to the alphabet he can never get past D.

> 📝 **Exam Tip**
> Boxer is the most emotionally powerful character in the novel and works for almost any exam question about class, loyalty, exploitation, propaganda, or education. For class: he is the working class whose labour sustains the system that destroys him. For loyalty: trace how his two mottos develop and what each one allows Napoleon to do. For education: connect his inability to read to his inability to resist. Always note that Orwell treats him with genuine sympathy while making clear the structural causes of his fate.