

Animal Farm: Napoleon

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Napoleon is the novel's central villain, and Orwell's most important argument about how revolutions fail. He is a large Berkshire boar who shares leadership with Snowball in the early chapters, but his ambition is not for Animalism to succeed: it is for Napoleon to rule. He contributes nothing to the ideology of the rebellion, nothing to its planning, and almost nothing to its early governance. What he does, from the very beginning, is position himself to take what the rebellion produces.

He is named after Napoleon Bonaparte, the French Revolutionary general who became an emperor. The name is a warning built into the character: Orwell is showing, before Napoleon does anything, that the pattern of the revolutionary who becomes a tyrant has happened before.

Who He Is

Napoleon is not an ideologue. He does not believe in Animalism; he uses it. He is not a brilliant speaker like Snowball or a persuasive one like Squealer; he acts rather than argues. His intelligence is strategic and patient: he identifies what he needs, waits for the right moment, and moves decisively.

He is also, crucially, willing to do what other leaders will not. Snowball competes in public meetings and trusts in argument. Napoleon trains a private army in secret and produces it at the decisive moment. The contrast is between a leader who believes power should be won by persuasion and a leader who believes power should be seized by force. Snowball's method requires the other side to be equally honest. Napoleon's does not.

Orwell resists making Napoleon actively cruel in the way of a pantomime villain. He is calculating. He eats off Crown Derby dinner service, acquires a black cockerel to announce his arrivals, and issues ceremonial orders through Squealer. He has turned himself into a figure rather than a person.

His Arc

Before the Rebellion: Old Major's speech sets the revolution in motion. Napoleon inherits it. He and Snowball emerge as the two dominant pigs, but their disagreement on every point is immediate and total.

Taking the puppies: Napoleon takes the nine puppies from their mothers within days of the Rebellion, ostensibly to educate them. No one asks questions. He raises them in the loft above the harness room, in secret, for over a year. This is the novel's first and most important act of preparation: he is building his private army while the other animals are building the farm.

Expelling Snowball: At the decisive Sunday meeting, when Snowball has clearly won the windmill debate, Napoleon utters a strange high-pitched whimper. Nine enormous dogs burst through the door and chase Snowball from the farm. Napoleon then abolishes Sunday meetings, declares that all decisions will be made by a pig committee under his supervision, and installs himself as uncontested leader. From this moment, the novel's outcome is predetermined.

Consolidating power: Napoleon appropriates every symbol of the revolution. He rebukes Old Major's skull, takes Snowball's windmill idea as his own, has Squealer rewrite the history of the Battle of the Cowshed to diminish Snowball's role and exaggerate his. He creates a cult of personality: the titles "Our Leader, Comrade Napoleon" and "Father of All Animals," the gun fired on his birthday, the pig tasting his food for poison.

The show trials: Napoleon assembles the animals and calls forward four pigs who confess to conspiring with Snowball. The dogs tear them apart. More animals confess; each is executed immediately. This is the direct parallel to Stalin's Great Purge of the late 1930s. The executions shock even animals who have accepted everything else, but the shock does not produce resistance.

Selling Boxer: When Boxer collapses from overwork, Napoleon sells him to the knacker. The money buys whisky. He announces that Boxer died in hospital, full of praise for Napoleon. The lie is blatant. It goes unchallenged.

The final scene: Napoleon hosts the neighbouring human farmers for dinner. He announces the abolition of the name Animal Farm and the restoration of Manor Farm. He and Pilkington both play aces simultaneously. Both have been cheating.

Key Quotes

Quote	Chapter	Significance
"Napoleon is always right." (Boxer)	Throughout	The blind loyalty Napoleon cultivates in the working class
"If Comrade Napoleon says it, it must be right." (Boxer)	7	Boxer applying the motto to a specific case; the abdication of judgement
"Tactics, comrades, tactics!" (Squealer)	5	Napoleon's method explained after Snowball's expulsion; the absence of principle
"No one believes more firmly than Comrade Napoleon that all animals are equal." (Squealer)	5	The most explicitly contradicted claim in the novel

Narrative Techniques

Absence from argument: Napoleon never makes a case for his positions in public. He simply opposes what Snowball proposes, acts, and lets Squealer justify the actions afterwards. This is Orwell's most precise observation about a particular kind of political intelligence: the operator who understands that winning arguments is less durable than controlling the ground on which arguments happen.

The signal: Napoleon's "peculiar sidelong look at Snowball" and the high-pitched whimper before the dogs appear is one of the novel's most chilling moments. It establishes that Snowball's expulsion was planned in advance, and that what looked like a political debate was always a performance to be ended by force.

Escalation as structure: Napoleon's abuses escalate in sequence, each one slightly larger than the last, each one explained by Squealer as a necessary measure or a misremembering. Orwell builds Napoleon's tyranny gradually so that at each stage there is no single catastrophic break from the previous situation, only a small step from the last accepted position. This is how real authoritarian regimes work.

Language controlled, not produced: Napoleon rarely speaks in the novel. He issues orders through Squealer or through Minimus (the poet pig). This distance from language is deliberate: it allows him to remain above the propaganda he controls. He does not have to defend what Squealer says; he merely benefits from it.

Thematic Significance

Napoleon embodies Orwell's central thesis: the corruption of a revolution is not accidental but structural. Given an uneducated population, a willing propagandist, a compliant majority, and access to private force, any leader can reproduce tyranny in the name of liberation. The name points backward to history; the pattern points forward to the future.

He also represents the particular danger of a leader who has separated himself from ideology. He does not believe in Animalism, which means he cannot be constrained by it. The commandments can be amended; the history can be rewritten; the song can be abolished. For Napoleon, these are instruments of control, not principles. That is what makes him so effective, and so inevitable.

Exam Tip

Napoleon answers almost any question about power, revolution, corruption, language, or leadership. For power: trace how he acquires it step by step, through force, propaganda, and the elimination of rivals. For corruption: show how each violation of Animalism is smaller than the last but adds up to total betrayal. For language: note that he rarely speaks himself, leaving Squealer to do the linguistic work while he provides the dogs. Always link to the allegorical meaning: Napoleon = Stalin, and the specific parallels (show trials, cult of personality, historical revisionism) will strengthen any answer.