

Animal Farm: Old Major

Matthew Williams • English Literature • May 11, 2026

Old Major is a prize Middle White boar, twelve years old and highly respected on the farm. He appears in a single chapter, delivers the speech that sets the novel's events in motion, and dies three nights later. He never sees the Rebellion he inspires. He bears no responsibility for what the revolution becomes, because he is not alive to see it.

This is one of Orwell's most careful structural choices. Old Major is beyond blame precisely because he is dead. He provides the ideology and the inspiration; he cannot be held accountable for what those who inherit his ideas do with them. He represents the gap between vision and practice, between a genuinely held belief in equality and the systems that claim to act on that belief while doing the opposite.

Who He Is

Old Major is sincere. There is no indication in the text that he wants power for himself, and he dies before he can acquire any. His speech to the animals is described as wise and reasonable. His diagnosis of their situation, that their lives are miserable and short, that they work hard and receive barely enough to keep them alive, that the products of their labour are taken by Man, is accurate. The animals' suffering under Jones is real, and Old Major is not exaggerating it.

He is also described as having a wise and benevolent appearance, and he is universally respected. Orwell gives him all the marks of genuine moral authority. The point is not that Old Major is wrong, or that his vision is false. The point is that a right vision without the institutional means to protect it from corruption will be taken over and distorted by whoever has the appetite for power.

His Dream and Speech

Old Major's address is the novel's philosophical foundation. He begins by saying he is old and will soon die, but that he wishes to pass on what wisdom he has before he goes. Then he makes his case: the life of every animal on the farm is miserable and short; all they produce is taken from them; once they are no longer useful they are killed. Man is the cause of all this suffering. Remove Man, and animals would be fed, warm, and free.

He formulates the principles of Animalism: no animal should wear clothes, sleep in a bed, drink alcohol, engage in trade, or kill another animal. No animal should tyrannise over another.

Whatever goes on two legs is an enemy; whatever goes on four legs or has wings is a friend.
Above all: all animals are equal.

He also teaches the animals a song, "Beasts of England," which he says his mother taught him long ago. It describes a golden future when animals will be free from human tyranny. All the animals, the highly intelligent and the less intelligent alike, learn it quickly and sing it five times over. They stop only when Jones fires his gun into the side of the barn.

Key Quotes

Quote	Chapter	Significance
"Man is the only creature that consumes without producing."	1	His foundational political claim; directly parallels the argument of The Communist Manifesto
"All animals are equal."	1	The principle that becomes the novel's central irony when Squealer rewrites it
"Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy."	1	The binary that the pigs eventually violate by walking on two legs themselves
"Is it not crystal clear, then, comrades, that all the evils of this life of ours spring from the tyranny of human beings?"	1	His argument from cause; persuasive, largely accurate, and appropriated by Napoleon to justify every subsequent act of control

Narrative Techniques

The skull as political instrument: Old Major's skull is preserved after his death and placed at the foot of the flagstaff, where animals salute it on Sundays. This is Orwell's direct reference to Lenin's embalmed body displayed in the Mausoleum in Red Square. Napoleon later abolishes the ceremony when it no longer suits him. The image is quietly grotesque: the revolution's inspiration is reduced to a political prop, saluted as long as useful and then quietly removed.

"Beasts of England" as structural frame: Old Major's song functions as a measure of the revolution's progress throughout the novel. It is sung in celebration after the Rebellion, sung mournfully by Clover after the show trial executions, and then abolished by Napoleon on the grounds that the better future it describes has now been achieved. Its abolition is one of the clearest signs of what the revolution has become.

The dream as structural device: Old Major frames his speech around a dream he has had of a world without humans. The dream gives the revolution an almost mythical origin: it did not

arise from calculation or grievance alone but from a vision. By the final chapter, the pigs are walking on two legs and the dream is its exact opposite. Orwell sets up this frame in the first chapter so that the distance between promise and reality can be felt across the whole novel.

Death before corruption: Old Major's death before the Rebellion is narratively precise. He gives the ideal form and then is removed before the ideal can be compromised. This allows Orwell to separate the vision from the people who exploit it. Old Major is not a hypocrite; Napoleon is. The distinction matters because it prevents the novel from being read as a simple argument that all political idealism is fraudulent.

Thematic Significance

Old Major represents the gap between revolutionary ideals and political practice. His vision is genuine and his diagnosis is accurate. What he does not provide is any mechanism for preventing new exploiters from emerging after the old ones are removed. He gives the goal but not the safeguard. The result is Napoleon.

Orwell's implicit argument is that revolutions require more than good ideas. They require institutions, checks, education, and an independent population capable of holding leaders accountable. Old Major's Animalism provides the goal; it provides none of the structural protections. His sincerity is real, but sincerity cannot substitute for the institutional design that would make sincerity unnecessary.

Exam Tip

Old Major is most useful for questions about the origins and failure of the revolution, or about the relationship between idealism and practice. For revolution: he provides the ideology that is then corrupted; show how each of his principles is violated by the chapter in which it happens. For idealism: note that Orwell treats his vision with genuine respect; the problem is not that the vision is wrong but that the structures to protect it do not exist. Always connect to the allegorical meaning: Old Major = Marx and Lenin, and the fact that both died before seeing how their ideas were used.