Animal Farm: Overview and Allegory

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George Orwell's Animal Farm (1945) is a short novel about a group of farm animals who overthrow their human owner and attempt to run the farm themselves. Within a generation, their revolution is taken over by the pigs, freedom is replaced with dictatorship, and the principles of the original rebellion are systematically dismantled. The novel ends with the animals watching through a window, unable to tell the pigs from the humans.

This is an allegory: a story in which every element stands for something outside the story itself. The farm is the Soviet Union; the animals' rebellion is the Russian Revolution of 1917; the pigs' takeover is Stalin's consolidation of power; the final dinner is the Tehran Conference of 1943. Orwell is not writing a history but a warning: his argument is that the pattern he describes is not specific to the Soviet Union but structural, a consequence of what happens when any revolution concentrates power without building the institutions necessary to hold that power accountable.

The Allegorical Framework

Character or Event	Allegorical Meaning
Old Major	Karl Marx / Vladimir Lenin: the theorist and inspiration of the revolution
Napoleon	Joseph Stalin: the dictator who takes over and consolidates power
Snowball	Leon Trotsky: the idealistic rival, expelled and scapegoated
Squealer	State propaganda: Pravda, Soviet media
The Dogs	The NKVD (secret police): Stalin's instrument of terror
Boxer	The Soviet working class: exploited and ultimately discarded
Mr. Jones	Tsar Nicholas II: the overthrown ruler
Mr. Frederick	Adolf Hitler / Nazi Germany
Mr. Pilkington	The Western capitalist powers
The Rebellion	The Russian Revolution of 1917
The Battle of the Cowshed	The Russian Civil War (1917--22)

Snowball's expulsion	Trotsky's exile (1929)
The show trials	Stalin's Great Purge (1936--38)
Napoleon selling timber to Frederick	The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (1939)
Frederick's forgeries and attack	Germany's invasion of the USSR (1941)
The final dinner	The Tehran Conference (1943)

Orwell himself said the novel was his "first conscious attempt to fuse political purpose and artistic form." He wanted to expose what he saw as the betrayal of socialist ideals by the Soviet state, but he also intended the critique to be broader: any revolution that produces a new ruling class with unchecked power will reproduce the oppression it claimed to abolish.

Key Themes

Power and corruption. The pigs do not start out corrupt. Old Major is sincere; Snowball is genuinely committed to improving the animals' lives; even Napoleon, in the early chapters, is simply a rival politician. The question Orwell asks is structural: given access to power, information, and force, what prevents a leader from using them for personal advantage? The novel's answer is: nothing, without institutional safeguards, an educated population, and independent sources of information. The animals have none of these, and so Napoleon's takeover is complete.

Language as power. Squealer is the novel's most precise argument about how language functions in authoritarian politics. The Seven Commandments are not abolished; they are amended, one qualifier at a time, until they mean their opposite. "All animals are equal" becomes "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." The sheep's slogan "Four legs good, two legs bad" becomes "Four legs good, two legs better." The mechanism is always the same: language is adjusted to describe the world that power has created, rather than the world that the revolution promised.

Ignorance and the conditions for oppression. The animals are not stupid, but most of them cannot read. They cannot check Squealer's statistics. They cannot remember exactly what the commandments said. They work too hard and too long to think about what is happening to them. Orwell's argument through Boxer is that ignorance is not a personal failing but a political condition, one that regimes actively maintain because an educated population is harder to manage.

The betrayal of ideals. Every principle of Animalism is violated, one by one, and each violation is explained as either a necessity or a misremembering. Sleeping in beds becomes acceptable because the commandment said "with sheets." Killing animals becomes acceptable because the commandment said "without cause." Trading with humans was always going to happen.

The farmhouse was always going to be the pigs' headquarters. The logic is consistent: the only purpose of the commandments is to define what is not permitted; if the pigs' behaviour is permitted, the commandments must be adjusted.

Orwell's Method: The Beast Fable

Orwell chose the form of the beast fable, a tradition going back to Aesop, for specific reasons. Animals are simpler than humans: their characters can be more purely representative, their circumstances more easily controlled, their betrayals more visible. The simplicity of the form makes the argument's structure clear.

It also allows Orwell to write something that looks, at first glance, like a children's story. The gap between the gentle register of the narrator and the horrors being described is itself part of the effect. When Boxer is loaded into the knacker's van, the prose remains calm and matter-of-fact. The effect is more disturbing than an explicitly emotional account would be.

Narrative Techniques

Rhetoric: Old Major's speech in Chapter 1 is the novel's most concentrated example of rhetoric. It uses anaphora ("No animal in England knows the meaning of happiness... No animal in England is free"), rhetorical questions ("Is it not crystal clear, then, comrades, that all the evils of this life of ours spring from the tyranny of human beings?"), and direct address to named animals — Boxer, the cows, the hens, Clover — to make each listener feel personally implicated. Squealer inherits and degrades this technique. He uses the same rhetorical questions but in service of lies: "Surely, comrades, you do not want Jones back?" The question closes down thinking by making the alternative unthinkable. Orwell's argument about rhetoric is structural: the same linguistic tools that build solidarity can be repurposed to enforce silence.

Allegory: The novel is a sustained political allegory: every major character and event has a real-world equivalent, and Orwell designed the correspondence to be recognisable. Old Major = Marx/Lenin; Napoleon = Stalin; Snowball = Trotsky; the Dogs = the NKVD (secret police); Boxer = the Soviet working class; the show trials in Chapter 7 = Stalin's Great Purge; the final dinner = the Tehran Conference. The allegorical framework means every scene operates on two levels simultaneously: the literal animal fable and the political history it encodes. An answer that works only on one level will miss Orwell's central argument.

Juxtaposition: Orwell places the Seven Commandments directly alongside their amended versions to make the loss visible at each step. "No animal shall sleep in a bed" becomes "No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets." "No animal shall kill any other animal" becomes "No animal shall kill any other animal without cause." "All animals are equal" becomes "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." The reader holds both versions at

once; the juxtaposition is the argument. On a larger scale, the opening chapter — animals inspired, united, singing — is juxtaposed with the closing chapter, in which the same animals watch through a window, unable to tell the pigs from the men.

Foil: Napoleon and Snowball are foils: Napoleon is quiet, political, and willing to use force; Snowball is eloquent, idealistic, and committed to collective education. Their rivalry shows two possible paths for the revolution, and the narrative makes clear that Snowball's path was foreclosed the moment Napoleon had the dogs. Boxer and Benjamin are foils in their response to oppression: Boxer gives total, unthinking loyalty ("Napoleon is always right"); Benjamin gives total, undeluded cynicism ("Donkeys live a long time"). Neither response is adequate. Boxer's loyalty destroys him; Benjamin's cynicism saves him from nothing.

Situational irony: The animals overthrow Mr. Jones to be free and equal, and they create a regime more exploitative and more violent than the one they replaced. The commandment "No animal shall kill any other animal" is effectively abolished in the chapter in which Napoleon publicly executes animals. The farm renamed "Animal Farm" to mark liberation is renamed back to "Manor Farm" at the close. The animals who gathered in Chapter 1 to hear Major's vision of equality find themselves in the final chapter watching through a window as the pigs negotiate with the humans they were supposed to have replaced — and can no longer tell the two apart.

Approaching Animal Farm in Paper 02

Paper 02 questions on prose fiction will typically ask about character, theme, or Orwell's narrative methods. The most important thing to demonstrate is that you can read the novel on two levels simultaneously: what happens on the surface of the story (the animals and their lives) and what that surface represents (the political allegory). An answer that only discusses animals without connecting to the allegorical significance will score in the mid-range at best.

Strong answers will also be specific about Orwell's narrative methods: how his choice of an animal fable shapes the reader's response, how the narrator's detached tone creates irony, how the amendment of the commandments is shown rather than simply stated.

> 📝 **Exam Tip**
> Animal Farm is a layered text. Whatever the question asks, demonstrate that you can read on both levels: the literal story of the farm and what it represents. If the question is about character, connect each character to their allegorical meaning. If the question is about theme, connect Orwell's theme to the historical argument he is making. Specific references to Orwell's narrative methods, the beast fable form, the ironic narrator, the amendment of the commandments, always strengthen an answer.