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# APPROACHING *Animal Farm*

Above all, *Animal Farm* is relevant—relevant to the political and social events of the world today, and relevant to the developing values and critical senses of adolescents. George Orwell’s biting attack on totalitarianism and the governmental abuse of power is a perfect trigger for adolescent sensitivity to authority, injustice, inequality, and the need to rebel. These triggers can motivate students to read the book, to watch the 1990s real-world versions of the same struggle on the evening news, and to come to class discussion with questions, opinions, even passion.

Orwell’s masterpiece is the perfect vehicle to teach fable, allegory, political satire, and the anti-utopian novel, for it is all of these. The study of *Animal Farm* charges students’ interest in history—the Russian and Bolshevik Revolutions and resulting Soviet Communism—and in the people caught in the totalitarian means to the Marxist/Leninist dream of a classless society. Utopian and anti-utopian philosophy blend well with classroom discussion and debate of totalitarianism, communism, socialism, and capitalism. Over and over, students confront their own feelings and values regarding the ideal of equality versus the fact of unequal and often selfish human nature. This confrontation generates constant tension throughout the study of *Animal Farm*. The impassioned speech that begins the novel immediately establishes the utopian dream of a perfect world, a classless society in which all are equal, and simultaneously the anti-utopian fact that the dream is flawed because it is based upon the simplistic assumption that all are equal in motives and goals, if not ability.

This book focuses on several important aspects of *Animal Farm*. There are far more possibilities than any one class would be able to (or would want to) explore, so that teaching the book can be a different experience each year.

The list below touches briefly on possible angles of approach to *Animal Farm*, many of them overlapping. Specific activities related to each approach can be found in *Setting the Stage: Prereading*.

- **Structure: Fable, Satire, Allegory.** Orwell uses farm animals as characters to create humor that turns on human weaknesses. Orwell satirizes twentieth-century Soviet totalitarianism to show that, contrary to the nineteenth-century belief in the perfectibility of humanity, utopia is impossible.
- **Social and Historical: Bolshevik Russia.** *Animal Farm* is based on the Russian Revolution of March 1917 (which established the only truly democratic regime in Russian history), followed by the November 1917 Bolshevik Revolution (which established Soviet Communism), and the years since. Such noted political scientists as George Kennan have characterized the early-twentieth-century Soviet totalitarian state as caught in the harsh means to a utopian end-dream—a dream of a classless society. Russia was rife with police-inspired terror and systematic extermination of the individual thought and speech that threaten revolution. The characters and events of *Animal Farm* symbolize in a nearly perfect one-to-one relationship people and events like those in the Soviet Union from just prior to 1917 through the mid-1940s, when the book was published. In fact, history has proven Orwell’s hypothesis about utopianism: many of the people and events that appear in the novel foreshadow elements of Soviet affairs up until the extraordinary “opening” and “restructuring” of the 1980s. (See sidebars that relate passages from the text to ideas, people, and events in the Soviet Union.)

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## APPROACHING *Animal Farm*

- **Theme: Anti-Utopianism.** With origins as ancient as the story of the Garden of Eden and Plato's *Republic*, people have struggled with the possibility of a perfect world. Sir Thomas More gave a name to fiction based upon this idea of human nature as perfectible with his *Utopia* in 1516. In the twentieth century totalitarianism repeatedly threatened the world: leaders like Franco, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin demonstrated that people could be manipulated for purposes other than "perfecting their natures." In *Animal Farm*, George Orwell warns of humanity perverted rather than humanity perfected. He uses the Soviet Union as an example of the danger arising from simplistic views that fail to consider the complex nature of humanity. All animals—all humans—are not equal in their goals or their abilities. As in *Animal Farm*, inequality ignored makes dystopia all too likely.
- **Plot.** On the surface, the conflict is between the animals and the humans; the allegorical nature of the novel reveals that it is also about the conflict between humanity and society (government). Even more, in a quite profound way *Animal Farm* explores the real conflict between people and their own natures as manifested and reflected in society. An excellent novel to use in teaching standard plot development, *Animal Farm* combines exposition and complicating incident in old Major's initial speech to the animals, and even offers three distinct climaxes for classroom debate: Snowball's expulsion, the slaughter in the barn, and Boxer's betrayal.
- **Key Words.** Certain words accumulate new and different meanings as the novel progresses. Words from the text include *tyranny*, *comrade*, *vice*, *apathy*, *unalterable*, and *maxim*; literary terms include *irony*, *totalitarianism*, and *utopia*. There are others; your own choices as well as those of your students can expand the list.
- **Comparison of Art Forms.** What decisions do filmmakers face when they make a movie from a book? A play? An animated film version of *Animal Farm* is available as a second form; while true to the plot in many ways, the film ends very differently from the book. A play is also available.

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## BACKGROUND

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### Author

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George Orwell was born Eric Blair in Bengal, India; he grew up in England. Orwell described his family as “lower upper-middle-class,” by which he meant people in the English upper classes who were not rich, but who felt they should live as if they were. When Orwell was eight, he was sent off to boarding school. This was the first of two experiences he was to have of being the poorest boy in school (the second was at Eton). “In a world where the prime necessities were money, titled relatives, athleticism, tailor-made clothes . . . I was no good,” he wrote in the essay, “Such, Such Were the Joys.”

Orwell went to Eton in 1917, again on scholarship, where he encountered for the first time popular liberal and socialist ideas. When he graduated in 1921 near the bottom of his class, he had no hope of a scholarship to Oxford, so he followed his father’s example and entered the civil service. From 1922 to 1927 Orwell served in Burma as a sergeant of police. He was the embodiment of British imperialism, an uncomfortable role-reversal in contrast to his school days.

In 1927, Orwell resigned and returned to Europe, choosing to live among working-class people in Paris while writing novels and short stories that were never published. He returned to live among the indigent in England, eventually working at a variety of menial jobs as well as teacher and tutor. In 1933 he published *Down and Out in Paris and London*, an autobiographical work based on these experiences. It was at this time that he chose a pseudonym, to save his family from embarrassment.

During the mid-1930s, Orwell published several novels, including *Burma Days*, *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Aware of Orwell’s developing socialist views, his publisher sent him to research and write about the English coal miners and out-of-work industrial workers in northern England. The result was a powerful piece about what he found, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, published in 1937.

Orwell joined the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War to fight the fascist right-wing generals led by Francisco Franco. At first he felt he was seeing the success of socialism in action in the exhilarating atmosphere of people treating each other as equals, as “comrades.” However, most of his fellow fighters were jailed and shot by Communists in the very Republican government they were fighting for. Orwell returned to England in 1938.

Orwell resigned from the BBC in 1943 to begin writing *Animal Farm*, in an attempt to expose the truth of Soviet communism. The Soviet Union was Britain’s ally against Nazi Germany and the embodiment of Marx’s dream of a classless society. Orwell felt that as long as people could equate socialism with the Soviet Union’s political lying and Stalinist opportunism, no one could really appreciate socialism. Ironically, when the Western Allies sat down with Stalin at the Teheran Conference in December 1943, Orwell was hard at work on *Animal Farm* in an effort to save socialism from communism. He couldn’t have known of the agreements being made at Teheran which enabled Stalin to pull much of