George Orwell’s
ANIMAL FARM

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Introduction

We'd like to start off by thanking you for bringing our production of *Animal Farm* into your school! We believe that putting classic texts on stage enables them to be explored, interpreted, and understood in countless new ways. We hope this study guide will allow you to get the most out of your experience, and we look forward to discussing your thoughts and questions during our post-show discussion!

Biography of George Orwell

**EARLY LIFE**

The English novelist George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on June 25, 1903 in Motihari, India. His father was a minor British official in the Indian civil service. About a year after his birth, Orwell’s mother, Ida Blair, moved him and his older sister, Marjorie, to Hanley-on-Thames, a town west of London. Orwell’s father was absent for much of his childhood, rarely visiting the family from India where he was posted.

At the young age of 8, Orwell was sent to St. Cyprian’s, an expensive boarding school in the coastal town of Eastbourne, about two hours south of London. St. Cyprian’s was known for preparing students to go on to highly regarded colleges. Orwell’s family could not afford the high tuition, but he was able to attend on a scholarship. He quickly noticed that he was treated differently than his peers. Those who came from wealthy families received special treatment and it created a visible divide. This isolated Orwell and made his time at St. Cyprian’s very lonely. In addition, Orwell was often sick, battling recurrent conditions like the flu and bronchitis. This separated him even further from his peers. However, in this isolation, Orwell discovered his vivid imagination. He found comfort in reading and writing. In his autobiographical essay, *Such, Such Were the Joys*, written in 1953, Orwell reflected on his time at St. Cyprian’s:

> All the very rich boys were more or less undisguisedly favoured. The school still had a faint suggestion of the Victorian ‘private academy’ with its ‘parlour boarders’... The rich boys had milk and biscuits in the middle of the morning, they were given riding lessons once or twice a week, Flip mothered them and called them by their Christian names, and above all they were never caned.

It quickly became clear that Orwell was extremely intelligent. His writing caught the attention of his peers and teachers. He won scholarships to two of England’s leading colleges and in 1917 decided to attend Eton. After completing his studies, Orwell joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma (a country now known as Myanmar), which was then a British colony.
ORWELL’S DEVELOPING VOICE: BURMA AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

When Orwell first arrived in Burma, he appeared to fit in well as an imperial servant. He was accomplished, trustworthy and disciplined. However, he quickly realized how the Burmese were inhumanely treated by the British and felt increasingly ashamed of his role as a colonial police officer. He noticed that his peers felt superiority over the colonists and that he lacked this feeling. Secretly, Orwell began supporting the Burmese and disconnecting from the British. He learned Burmese and related to the local people. During this time, Orwell developed a strong disdain for colonialism. For the first time, he saw the ugly side of a process he thought he knew so well. He later reflected on this experience in his first novel, Burmese Days, and essays, “Shooting an Elephant” and “A Hanging.” These pieces revealed the dark side of British rule in Burma.

As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear. In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been Bogged with bamboos—all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt. - “Shooting an Elephant”

In 1928, Orwell resigned from the Indian Imperial Police and moved to Paris, where he immersed himself in the daily life of the poor. For several years he traveled throughout Europe, residing in slums and working menial jobs such as a dishwasher and hop picker. These experiences informed Orwell’s writing. He focused on themes such as the oppressions of imperialism and the struggles of the individual.

In late 1936, after marrying his first wife Eileen O’Shaughnessy, Orwell travelled to Spain where the Spanish Civil War had broken out. General Francisco Franco attempted a military coup and the working classes rebelled, starting a brutal battle between democracy and fascism. Originally, Orwell was interested in writing newspaper articles about the events, but soon after arriving decided the right thing to do was to join the militia. He became a fighter with the Republicans against General Franco and Nationalists. Orwell fought on the front lines and rose to the rank of second lieutenant. He was astonished by the socialist society that the Republicans created, where class divisions almost ceased to exist and people united in the belief of equality and freedom. However, Orwell was badly injured in battle, getting shot in his throat and arm. This left him bedridden and unable to speak for weeks. As he recovered, the Republicans were losing the war. Their ideal socialist society would not be a reality for long. The Nationalists, backed by both the Soviet Union and Hitler, were victorious and Franco took control of the country. Orwell realized the discouraging realities of an equitable society and that in order to save his life he had to flee Spain. He disguised himself as a wealthy British businessman and he and his wife boarded a train for France.
PUBLICATION OF "ANIMAL FARM"

Orwell’s political fable, *Animal Farm*, was written in 1944. At this time, Orwell was working as a journalist and literary editor at the Tribune, a liberal magazine in London. Initially, the novella was rejected by many publishers because they considered it an attack on the Soviet regime, which was a major British ally in World War II. Publishers in England were reluctant to back a story that was so controversial. Many worried that Soviet audiences would be offended by the choice of pigs as the protagonists of the story. After no luck with British publishing companies, Orwell turned to American publishers. The distinguished American poet, T.S. Eliot, was approached and responded that although he supported Orwell’s position in the matter, he too refused to publish. T.S. Eliot commented that the story would create unnecessary upset in the wartime climate.

World War II ended on August 15, 1945. News of Japan’s surrender spread and celebrations filled the streets. After a year of unsuccessful attempts, *Animal Farm* was published by Secker & Warburg, a British publishing company known for its anti-communist political stance. Frederic Warburg and Orwell had become close friends after the company published Orwell’s book, *Homage to Catalonia*, 3 years before about his experiences during the Spanish Civil War. The company was known for introducing other controversial writers such as Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann and Robert Musil to British audiences. Interestingly, the company was also the first publisher of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in 1925.

*Animal Farm* was an immediate success and revenue came pouring in — so much so that Orwell had to quickly learn how to protect his income. To prevent paying high British taxes, he incorporated his name. For the first time, Orwell had gained worldwide recognition for his writing.

1984 AND ORWELL’S FINAL DAYS

In 1949, only four years after the publication of *Animal Farm*, Orwell published his other best-selling work, the novel *1984*. The story takes place in a fictional future, 35 years after its publication, where the world consists of three warring states. The protagonist, Winston Smith, struggles for freedom against the oppressive regime around him. Orwell critiqued totalitarianism with vivid language and style.

Orwell’s first wife, Eileen, had passed away in 1945 and Orwell was eager to remarry. In October of that same year, Orwell married Sonia Brownell. Shortly thereafter, on January 1, 1950, Orwell died in London of tuberculosis. He was only 46 years old. He had battled with the disease for years, originally diagnosed in 1938. His widow, Sonia, became the sole manager of his estate.

*Animal Farm* and *1984* turned Orwell into one of the most respected and visionary writers of the twentieth century. A bronze statue of Orwell was built in November of 2017 and stands outside the BBC in London, where he worked for two years during the second world war. The inscription includes a quote from the original preface to *Animal Farm*: “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”
QUESTIONS

1. Now that you have a basic understanding of Orwell’s background, can you see how Animal Farm was influenced by these experiences? What events or experiences in your life have shaped you as a writer?

2. What does the inscription on the BBC statue of Orwell mean to you? Why do you think this quote was chosen for the inscription? How does it relate to the political, economic and social climate of today?

Historical Context

There is no doubt that Orwell’s personal experiences throughout his life shaped Animal Farm. To dig even deeper it is important to also look at the major cultural, political, and economic events that occurred in and around Europe in the 1900s. These events were the background to Orwell’s life and we can see them reflected in his writing.

ENGLAND IN THE 1940S

The late 1930s and early 1940s were a tumultuous time in Europe. Hitler reigned over Nazi Germany and was seeking full domination of the continent. The UK was left with no remaining allies except the Soviet Union. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had previously attempted to initiate peace negotiations with Hitler, but was unsuccessful. By 1940, Winston Churchill replaced Chamberlain as Prime Minister and was ready to secure the UK’s safety using whatever measures necessary. When Hitler attacked France, violating agreed-upon contracts, Churchill declared war.

Suddenly, fear and destruction was a part of daily life. From 1940-41 the Battle of Britain and the Blitz seized English cities. London, Coventry, Manchester, Liverpool, and all other major cities in England were bombed during this time. A blackout was issued in London that required all windows and doors to be covered at night to hinder navigation of German planes. Over three million people were evacuated. Residents who stayed behind were forced to take shelter wherever they could find it. Many found refuge in underground railway stations that had been converted to makeshift public shelters. In London, over 20,000 citizens lost their lives and buildings were demolished. However, by 1945, with both the United States and the Soviet Union behind them, the UK was victorious, and Hitler was defeated. By the end of the war, the UK was a fractured, broken country.

In the Battle of the Cowshed and the Battle of the Windmill in Animal Farm Orwell vividly paints the picture of war. The realism of the battles reflects the savagery and violence of Orwell’s time. Orwell’s illustration of the Battle of the Windmill was perhaps not unlike that of the frontlines of World War II:
It was a savage, bitter battle. The men fired again and again, and, when the animals got to close quarters, lashed out with their sticks and their heavy boots. A cow, three sheep, and two geese were killed, and nearly everyone was wounded. Even Napoleon, who was directing operations from the rear, had the tip of his tail chipped by a pellet. But the men did not go unscathed either. Three of them had their heads broken by blows from Boxer’s hoofs; another was gored in the belly by a cow’s horn; another had his trousers nearly torn off by Jessie and Bluebell.

ANIMAL FARM AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION
The rebellion on the Manor farm has a lot of similarities to the historical Russian Revolution which is believed to be the inspiration for *Animal Farm*. Though the time period of the novella is unclear, there are many similarities between the events on the farm and the revolution against Czar Nicholas II in Russia. In order to make your own comparisons, it is important to understand the events of this time in Russian history. Though many of his British peers idealized the socialist ideas growing in Russia, Orwell passionately disagreed with how the Communists were going about the rebellion.

THE RISE OF COMMUNISM
In the early 1800s, Europe was a Capitalist system. A country’s trade and industry were controlled by private owners and not the state. Businesses were thriving, but at the expense of overworked, underpaid laborers. At this time, there were no child labor laws and working conditions were unsafe. In the mid 1800s, Karl Marx, a German philosopher, created a plan in response to what he saw as the failures of capitalism. He called this plan “The Manifesto of the Communist Party.” Marx envisioned a system of total economic equality, where each person in a community would work according to their abilities and be paid according to their needs.

Those who followed Marx’s ideas were called Socialists. Socialists believed that an equitable society was possible with moderate changes to the current capitalist system. There also formed a more extremist group, the Communists, who believed that in order to create a just system, capitalism must be overthrown.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION
In the early 1900s, Russia was under the rule of Czar Nicholas II. At this time, labor laws were being passed in Western Europe making conditions better for workers. However, in Russia, this was not the case and the labourers suffered enormously. The Communists formed a political party called the Bolshevik Party, led by Vladimir Lenin. By 1917, food disparity sparked riots and strikes. In response, Lenin led a revolution against the existing government. Czar Nicholas II was forced out of power and his family was executed. The Bolshevik Party, under Lenin, took control of the government. This new ruling party changed the name of the country from Russia to the Soviet Union and promoted the spread of communism.

LEON TROTSKY AND JOSEPH STALIN
Vladimir Lenin struggled to retain power while other nearby countries feared the effects of communism and fought back against its spread. At this time, Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin took leading roles in continuing the fight for communism. Both emerged as potential candidates to replace Lenin. Following Lenin’s death in 1924,
Stalin became the uncontested dictator of the Soviet Union. Stalin created an alliance against Trotsky and exiled him from the country. Trotsky escaped to Mexico and was ultimately assassinated under Stalin's orders.

In Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the pigs Snowball and Napoleon mirror Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin, respectively, who struggle for control after Lenin's death. After the passing of Old Major, Snowball and Napoleon assume leadership roles. They inspire the other animals, saying that Old Major’s idea of a rebellion is realistic and can be done. At first Snowball and Napoleon appear to be partners, working together for the rebellion and the rise of Animal Farm. However, their rivalry becomes vicious as Napoleon realizes that he cannot assume complete power with Snowball by his side. Napoleon exiles Snowball and turns the community against him.

Snowball and Napoleon also mirror Trotsky and Stalin's social personalities. Trotsky was known by the public to be a popular and charismatic leader, famous for his engaging speeches. In contrast, Stalin was more reserved and retreated from public media. During the debate regarding the building of the windmill, it is mentioned that “Snowball often won over the majority by his brilliant speeches, but Napoleon was better at canvassing support for himself in between times.” Both Stalin and Napoleon eventually abandon their founding principles and become oppressive leaders, doing whatever it takes to achieve total domination.

QUESTIONS

1. Do you think Orwell’s intention was to reflect and criticize only Soviet Russia or human society as a whole? Or both? Why?
2. Name other current or historical movements or rebellions with similarities to what happens in *Animal Farm*.
3. What are characteristics that you believe a good leader must possess?
4. Do you believe that a free and just society is truly possible? Support your argument with concrete examples from *Animal Farm* and your own experiences.

The Impact of Propaganda

Propaganda was a huge part of Communism’s rise in Russia. Posters featuring misinformation about the government were used to promote Communist ideas and leaders. In *Animal Farm*, Napoleon uses propaganda through his attendant, Squealer. As Napoleon makes more and more outrageous decisions, Squealer must convince the public that Napoleon's choices are not only valid, but for the benefit of everyone. Squealer is sharp and articulate, and the animals are easily brainwashed by him. For example, when Napoleon decides to hoard the milk and apples only for the pigs, the rest of the animals are disturbed and confused. Squealer calms them...
by saying that the milk and apples are necessary for a pigs diet and
because the pigs are the “brainworkers” they must be on top of
their game. He manipulates the truth by saying, “It is for your sake
that we drink that milk and eat those apples”. Because very few of
the common animals are educated, it is easy for them to fall under
Squealer’s spell. This was a tactic of Lenin’s propaganda as well;
pro-communist posters used slogans and deformed pictures to
elevate the appeal of the party. Lenin kept the workers uneducated
so they were unable to intelligently make their own decisions and
conclusions.

COMMANDMENTS
Whether through laws created to govern cities, or through
commandments guided religious beliefs, communities create a
contract with each other in order to build mutual understanding.
These agreements are intended to support the community
and set the groundwork for it to thrive. However, often these
laws are not carried out as they were intended, or they become twisted to benefit some and deprive others.
(For example, the idea behind Communism is that capital is shared equitably, and many would say that Stalin
disobeyed that basic principle by living a life of luxury.)

In Animal Farm, the animals create a list of seven commandments following the rebellion against the humans.
As Napoleon becomes more and more powerful, he breaks their contract. The pigs begin mirroring behaviors of
their former ruler, the farmer Mr. Jones. Napoleon begins wearing clothes he found in the farmhouse, standing
upright and walking on two hooves instead of four. In order to cover up his violation of the commandments,
Napoleon has the written statements changed when no one is looking. When Clover, the cart-horse, hears
that the pigs have started sleeping in the beds in the farmhouse, she is appalled. Doesn’t this violate the 4th
commandment, which states “No animal shall sleep in a bed?” She returns to the barn to refer to the rule, and
Muriel reads it aloud for her, “No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets.” Clover is tricked into thinking that
she has been forgetful and in fact the pigs are still behaving according to the rules. Here we see language as a
powerful tool used to coerce the common animals into submission.

In the world today, we see many governments where laws are being bent or broken to fit the agendas of
particular parties. Our political culture in The United States today is torn, many seeing a need for change but not
agreeing on how to go about it. Often, one group feels they are “right” and the others are “wrong.” This divide
creates even more problems and continues the cycle of oppression and inequality. Orwell leaves us with the
realistic truth, “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (Animal Farm).

RALLYING SYMBOLS
In Animal Farm, the song, “Beasts of England” becomes an anthem for the animals and unites them in their fight
for change. This simple song reminds them of their goal and keeps their spirits up. Music (in the form of chants,
anthems, or hymns) is used in cultures all over the world to bring people together. The civil rights movement in
the United States in the 1960s utilized this tool, giving freedom fighters a soundtrack to motivate and inspire.
Songs like “We Shall Overcome” and “Eyes on the Prize” were sung all over the country to unify the fight for
equal rights. Napoleon understands this power of music and uses the anthem “Beasts of England” to benefit his
agenda. He changes the title to “Comrade Napoleon” and reworks the lyrics to praise his own leadership, rather than represent freedom for all.

Throughout history, societies have also used flags to unify people. Symbols often represent the founding of the community and represent shared values. Mirroring human behavior, the animals on Animal Farm create their own flag. This flag is green with images of a hoof and horn. It is mentioned that the green represents the fields of England and the hoof and horn represent the animals. The Animalism flag mirrors the Soviet flag, which is red with a star and hammer and a sickle in the upper left corner. Red banners were well known at that time to represent socialist movements and protests. The hammer and sickle symbolize the workers who are seeking freedom. Similar to his treatment of “Beasts of England” Napoleon uses the flag to proclaim his power, removing the hoof and horn. He takes these symbols of unity, which are intended to bring the animals together for a common cause, and spins them to elevate his power.

**WRITING PROMPTS:**

1. Reflect on the seven commandments the animals originally wrote to govern Animal Farm. Create your own list of commandments that you believe would be necessary to regulate an equal, just society. Do you see any ways that these rules could be twisted to benefit some and suppress others?
2. Design your own flag for the United States based on what you think the country represents. What symbols would you use? Explain your choices.

**“A Fairy Story”**

Fables have been an important part of children's literature for centuries. Orwell, like many children throughout the world, was introduced to fables early in his life. At the age of 8, Orwell received a copy of *Gulliver's Travels*, a novel about faraway adventures, for his birthday. Before he was even officially gifted the present, he secretly read it in its entirety.

We see the structure and style of the fable used today in television programming for children, such as in Disney or Sesame Street. Fictional stories often include animals, mythical creatures, or other inanimate objects as protagonists. These characters are anthropomorphized or given human qualities. In addition, fables leave readers with a clear moral or lesson to be learned.

In *Animal Farm*, Orwell's characters have distinct personalities, such as Benjamin, the cynical old donkey and Boxer, the slow-witted but dedicated and loyal cart-horse. These stock characters parallel those in well known tales such as “Hansel and Gretel” and “Snow White.” In these stories there is a clear distinction between good and evil. From the first few pages of *Animal Farm*, readers conclude that the animals are oppressed by the tyrannous farmer Jones. Readers quickly sympathize
with the animals and root for their success. Similar to the writing style of most fables, Orwell decides to focus on the action of the story instead of the thoughts of the animals. The plot moves quickly and there is little time to ponder what the characters are thinking. This mirrors the comprehensive and accessible style of the fairy tale, available for all audiences, old and young.

While the novella mirrors the structure of the fable in many ways, it also fits in its own unique category. Many literary critics refer to *Animal Farm* as political satire, where humor is used to comment on politics. Orwell uses simplistic techniques to tell a complex, controversial story. Though it is often compared to the Russian Revolution, the story could also be seen as a reflection on general human nature and the inevitability of stratification and corruption. Differing from many fables for young children, the themes in *Animal Farm* are obviously mature and intended for an adult audience.

*Animal Farm* also fits in it’s own category when reflecting on the moral lesson at the end. In contrast to most fables, *Animal Farm* leaves readers unsure of what to walk away with. The common animals peer through the farmhouse window and are unable to tell the difference between pig and human. “The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which” (*Animal Farm*). What did Orwell want his audiences to take from this play? C.M. Woodhouse, in his 1954 introduction to the novella, reflects on the use of the fairy tale:

> “It is a transcription of a view of life into terms of highly simplified symbols; and when it succeeds in its literary purpose, it leaves us with a deep indefinable feeling of truth...it leaves us also with a feeling of rebelliousness against the truth revealed.”

Perhaps Orwell simply intended to give his harsh opinion of human behavior and what we take away from it is up to us.

**QUESTIONS:**
1. What are some fables or fairy tales you grew up with? What are the morals you took away from the stories after reading them?
2. Why do you think Orwell chose to use the fairy tale structure to tell his story?
3. Is there a moral lesson to be learned from *Animal Farm*? If yes, what do you think it is?

**Classic Repertory Company’s Production**

As with any adaptation, our production of *Animal Farm* will not be a word-for-word recreation of the novel. Our company of actors, designers and director worked together to create a 75 minute interpretation for the stage that distills the essence of the story. We have a cast of eight actors, which means you’ll see many actors playing
multiple characters. Be aware of how the actors use props, costumes and their bodies to become someone new. We take our shows on the road to venues of all sizes, which means our set needs to be light and mobile. We have lots of musicians in our cast, so we like to use live music. Our actors are recent college graduates, which means some of them will play characters much older than themselves, and some of them will play characters half their age. All of these things make our production unique, in the hopes of offering you a new way to experience the story. We look forward to talking with you after the show, and hearing about your experience!

**QUESTIONS**

1. How do you think seeing the story performed live in front of you will be different from reading it?
2. What character are you most excited to see brought to life?

We look forward to talking with you after the show and hearing about your experience!

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


