Teaching George Orwell's

Animal Farm

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Eva Richardson

PH

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Animal Farm*

*A*NIMAL *FARM* IS AN ALLEGORICAL NOVEL that uses elements of the **fable** and the **satire**. All novels rely on certain conventional elements, including: **plot** (Mr. Jones is the inefficient and lazy owner of Manor Farm. Inspired by the pig Major, who tells the animals about the possibility of a better future, the animals on Mr. Jones' farm prepare for a rebellion. Once they have taken over the farm and rename it Animal Farm, they rejoice in being able to control their own work and food supply. The animals on Animal Farm work under the leadership of the pigs, particularly Napoleon and Snowball, but Napoleon and Snowball disagree about handling farm business. Eventually, Napoleon manipulates the other animals into supporting his ideas and expels Snowball from the farm. Napoleon now rules with an iron fist over the other animals and implements an authoritarian system of government. The other animals suffer under his oppressive regime. Napoleon constantly changes the rules of Animal Farm to his advantage and eventually begins trading and interacting with human beings.)

Character is another crucial element of the novel (The main characters in *Animal Farm* are the pigs, Napoleon and Snowball; the horses, Boxer, Clover, and Mollie; Mr. Jones; the neighbors, Mr. Pilkington and Mr. Frederick, as well as a host of other minor animal characters.) Another significant element of the novel is **setting**, or time and place (The plot of *Animal Farm* does not take place during a specified time frame. The allegorical significance of *Animal Farm* places the concept in the early twentieth century. The novel takes place in rural England, Orwell's home country.)

Point of view from which a novel is told determines the **style** and **tone** of the text (*Animal Farm* is told from the perspective of a third-person narrator. This third-person narrator conveys the plot from the naïve perspective of a common farm animal—any animal except for a pigs—or a disinterested, but observant, human.)

The **style** and **tone** of a novel are further established through word choice and sentence structure (The sentence structure and word choice in *Animal Farm* are simple and straightforward, echoing the naïve perspective of the farm animals. The book is, therefore, sometimes looked at as a children's novel.)

Novels often convey one or more **themes** (Some of the significant themes in *Animal Farm* are the establishment of an authoritarian regime, the manipulation of language, the importance of education, the flaws inherent in human nature, the role of individual citizens in society, the corruption of ideologies, etc.).

Animal Farm can be considered an **allegorical novel**. In an **allegory**, certain characters, events, objects, or ideas in the text serve to illustrate meanings that go beyond the literal, beneath the surface of the text. The allegorical representations often serve to reveal a particular insight or **truth about human behavior or human faults**. (In *Animal Farm*, most of the characters and events are designed to refer to specific figures and events from the time of the Russian Revolution and shortly afterwards.)

Marxist Approach Applied to *Animal Farm*

Notes on the Marxist Approach

T HE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories "owned" the culture. This idea was called "dialectical materialism," and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of society) would be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated production, not in the hands those few who owned it. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theories by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, ideologies

Activity One

Examining Early Sections of the Text for Signs of A Corrupt Capitalistic System

1. Have students (independently, in pairs, or in small groups) review a section of Old Major's speech in Chapter I (pages 27-31).

    • Students should pay particular attention to references to the following key terms:

        • Slavery

        • Labor/laborious

        • Free/freedom

        • Order of nature

        • Land/soil

        • Usefulness

        • Abundance

        • Produce of labor/production

        • Root cause of hunger

        • Consume/consumption

        • Tyranny

2. Use the following questions to generate a classroom discussion about Manor Farm under the leadership of Mr. Jones as an example of a corrupt capitalistic system:

    • What is the quality of life experienced by the animals on the farm?

    • Is there any corruption inherent in the management of Manor Farm?

Psychoanalytic/Freudian Criticism Applied to *Animal Farm*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS "PSYCHOLOGICAL," OR "PSYCHOANALYTICAL," or "Freudian Theory" seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses solely on the text itself with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining the conflicts, characters, dream sequences and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is very similar to the Formalist approach to literature. One will further understand that a character's outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son's desire for his mother, the father's envy of the son and rivalry for the mother's attention, the daughter's desire for her father, the mother's envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father's attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level, to avoid breaking a serious social more.

- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory posits that dreams are the means by which a person's subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and done in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.

Activity One

Examining Characters' Actions and Motivations

1. Have students review chapter V.

2. Copy and distribute *Psychoanalytic Reading, Activity One: Character Chart*

3.   Divide class into pairs or small groups and assign one of the following characters to each pair or group. Students should take detailed notes on their assigned character's actions and speculate on the character's motivations for his or her actions.

    • Mollie
    • Snowball
    • Napoleon
    • Benjamin
    • Squealer

4. Ask students to fill in the two-column chart on their activity sheets for their assigned character. The chart should include specific information and/or quotations relating to the character's speech and actions in one column and information and quotes relating to the character's motivations (conscious or unconscious) in the other column.

5. Have students introduce their charts to the other groups; generate a classroom discussion about each character using the following questions:

    • How do readers learn about each character's motivations: Through the character's speech? Through comments made by other characters? Through the character's actions?

    • Is there any discrepancy between the way Napoleon thinks about himself and the way other characters understand him?

    • How does Benjamin deal with his superior knowledge? Does he experience an inner conflict? Does he neglect his responsibility as an older, more experienced animal? If so, why?

    • Are characters motivated by greed, selfishness, foolishness, loyalty, anger, jealousy, loneliness, fear, wisdom, etc.? If so, which characters and why?

New Historicism Approach Applied to *Animal Farm*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as that culture really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the "truth" of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the "truth" is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the "losers" of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another culture is often lost to history because it is the powerful that have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict "traditional" (i.e., the winner's) history, there is no way to really know the ironclad truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it "reflects." To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the south during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of and change certain elements of that culture.

Activity One

Examining the Allegorical Significance of the Text for Clues to the Proliferation of Socialism and Communism in Europe in the Early Twentieth Century

1. Copy and distribute "*Animal Farm* New Historicism Activity One Factsheet: The Russian Revolution."

2. Copy and distribute "*Animal Farm* New Historicism Activity One: Chart."

3. Review the significance of *Animal Farm* as an allegory that relates to this specific time period in European history.

4. Ask students to draw connections between the events in *Animal Farm* and the events taking place during the Russian Revolution by completing the chart on their activity sheet: one column should contain information from *Animal Farm;* the other column should list related historical events that occurred during the Russian Revolution.

5. Then have students use their charts to answer the following questions in a classroom discussion:

    • To what extent do the characters in *Animal Farm* function as more or less accurate portrayals of Stalin, Lenin, Trotsky, etc.?

    • Which aspects of *Animal Farm* illustrate positive events that occurred during the Russian Revolution?

    • Which aspects of *Animal Farm* illustrate negative aspects of the Russian Revolution?

    • What general concerns about human behavior does George Orwell express in *Animal Farm*?

    • Can the text of *Animal Farm* be considered to be an accurate history lesson? A warning? A prophecy? An exaggeration? A fear-based argument? Why or why not?

    • Why did Orwell set his novel in England?

    • Why does he not include a clear reference to a particular time period?

    • In order to reach his intended audience or achieve his intended goal, what changes might Orwell have had to make with regard to the characters and events in *Animal Farm*?