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Themes of the Animal Farm

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## Main Themes:

### 1. The Corruption of Socialist Ideals in the Soviet Union

*Animal Farm* is most famous in the West as a stinging critique of the history and rhetoric of the Russian Revolution. Retelling the story of the emergence and development of Soviet communism in the form of an animal fable, *Animal Farm* allegorizes the rise to power of the dictator Joseph Stalin. In the novella, the overthrow of the human oppressor Mr. Jones by a democratic coalition of animals quickly gives way to the consolidation of power among the pigs. Much like the Soviet intelligentsia, the pigs establish themselves as the ruling class in the new society.

The struggle for pre-eminence between Leon Trotsky and Stalin emerges in the rivalry between the pig Snowball and Napoleon. In both the historical and fictional cases, the idealistic but politically less powerful figure (Trotsky and Snowball) is expelled from the revolutionary state by the malicious and violent usurper of power (Stalin and Napoleon). The purges and show trials with which Stalin eliminated his enemies and solidified his political base find expression in *Animal Farm* as the false confessions and executions of animals whom Napoleon distrusts following the collapse of the windmill. Stalin's tyrannical rule and eventual abandonment of the founding principles of the Russian Revolution are represented by the pigs' turn to violent government and the adoption of human traits and behaviors, the trappings of their original oppressors.

Although Orwell believed strongly in socialist ideals, he felt that the Soviet Union realized these ideals in a perverse form. His novella creates its most powerful ironies in the moments in which Orwell depicts the corruption of Animalist ideals by those in power.

*Animal Farm* serves not so much to condemn tyranny or despotism as to indict the horrifying hypocrisy of tyrannies that base themselves on and owe their initial power to, ideologies of liberation and equality. The gradual disintegration and perversion of the Seven Commandments illustrate this hypocrisy with vivid force, as do Squealer's elaborate

philosophical justifications for the pigs' blatantly unprincipled actions. Thus, the novella critiques the violence of the Stalinist regime against the human beings it ruled and also points to Soviet communism's violence against human logic, language, and ideals.

## 2. The Societal Tendency Toward Class Stratification

Animal Farm offers commentary on the development of class tyranny and the human tendency to maintain and reestablish class structures even in societies that allegedly stand for total equality. The novella illustrates how classes that are initially unified in the face of a common enemy, as the animals are against the humans, may become internally divided when that enemy is eliminated. The expulsion of Mr. Jones creates a power vacuum, and it is only so long before the next oppressor assumes totalitarian control.

The natural division between intellectual and physical labor quickly comes to express itself as a new set of class divisions, with the "brain workers" (as the pigs claim to be) using their superior intelligence to manipulate society to their benefit. Orwell never clarifies in Animal Farm whether this negative state of affairs constitutes an inherent aspect of society or merely an outcome contingent on the integrity of a society's intelligentsia. In either case, the novella points to the force of this tendency toward class stratification in many communities and the threat that it poses to democracy and freedom.

## 3. The Danger of a Naïve Working Class

One of the novella's most impressive accomplishments is its portrayal not just of the figures in power but also of the oppressed people themselves. Animal Farm is not told from the perspective of any particular character, though occasionally it does slip into Clover's consciousness. Rather, the story is told from the perspective of the common animals as a whole. Gullible, loyal, and hardworking, these animals give Orwell a chance to sketch how situations of oppression arise not only from the motives and tactics of the oppressors but also from the naïveté of the oppressed, who are not necessarily in a position to be better educated or informed.

When presented with a dilemma, Boxer prefers not to puzzle out the implications of various possible actions but instead to repeat to himself,

“Napoleon is always right.” *Animal Farm* demonstrates how the inability or unwillingness to question authority condemns the working class to suffer the full extent of the ruling class’s oppression.

#### 4. The Abuse of Language as Instrumental to the Abuse of Power

One of Orwell’s central concerns, both in *Animal Farm* and in *1984*, is how language can be manipulated as an instrument of control. In *Animal Farm*, the pigs gradually twist and distort the rhetoric of the socialist revolution to justify their behavior and to keep the other animals in the dark. The animals heartily embrace Major’s visionary ideal of socialism, but after Major dies, the pigs gradually twist the meaning of his words. As a result, the other animals seem unable to oppose the pigs without also opposing the ideals of the Rebellion.

By the end of the novella, after Squealer’s repeated reconfigurations of the Seven Commandments to decriminalize the pigs’ treacheries, the main principle of the farm can be openly stated as “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” This outrageous abuse of the word “equal” and the ideal of equality in general typifies the pigs’ method, which becomes increasingly audacious as the novel progresses. Orwell’s sophisticated exposure of this abuse of language remains one of the most compelling and enduring features of *Animal Farm*, worthy of close study even after we have decoded its allegorical characters and events.

#### 5. Corruption

*Animal Farm* demonstrates the idea that power always corrupts. The novella’s heavy use of foreshadowing, especially in the opening chapter creates the sense that the events of the story are unavoidable.

Not only is Napoleon’s rise to power inevitable, but the novella strongly suggests that any other possible ruler would have been just as bad as Napoleon. Although Napoleon is more power-hungry than Snowball, plenty of evidence exists to suggest that Snowball would have been just as corrupt a ruler. Before his expulsion, Snowball goes along with the pigs’ theft of milk and apples, and the disastrous windmill is his idea. Even Old Major is not incorruptible. Despite his belief that “all animals are equal,” (Chapter 1) he lectures the other animals from a raised

platform, suggesting he may view himself as above the other animals on the farm. In the novel's final image, the pigs become indistinguishable from human farmers, which hammers home the idea that power inevitably has the same effect on anyone who wields it.

## 6. The Failure of Intellect

Animal Farm is deeply skeptical about the value of intellectual activity. The pigs are identified as the most intelligent animals, but their intelligence rarely produces anything of value. Instead, the pigs use their intelligence to manipulate and abuse the other animals. The novella identifies several other ways in which intelligence fails to be useful or good. Benjamin is literate, but he refuses to read, suggesting that intelligence is worthless without the moral sense to engage in politics and the courage to act. The dogs are nearly as literate as the pigs, but they are “not interested in reading anything except the Seven Commandments” (Chapter 3). The dogs' use of their intelligence suggests that intellect is useless—even harmful—when it is combined with a personality that prefers to obey orders rather than question them.