

Alice Nguyen

Brendan Shapiro

Section 27715

23 May 2017

Its Own Worst Critic: Language's Self-Analysis in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

1. Introduction

George Orwell, a writer, left behind a legacy as an advocate for democratic socialism and an opponent of authoritarian rule. In his 1946 essay, "Why I Write," he explained that his serious works since 1936 has been "directly or indirectly against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism." He admitted, however, that he did not try "to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole" with full consciousness until he wrote *Animal Farm*, published in Great Britain during 1945. Writing between 1943 and 1944, during the height of British-Soviet relationships, Orwell sought to dispel in Great Britain "the belief that Russia [was] a Socialist country" (qtd. in Dickstein 139). The satirical allegory portrays major events beginning with Nicholas II's removal during the Revolution of 1917 to Stalin's leadership through a story about farm animals who rebel against their owner, representing the tsar. With their knowledge, the pigs emerge as the leaders and use their eloquence to exploit the animals. By the end, the animals' living conditions are worse than before because the pigs are even more oppressive than their previous human master.

Animal Farm, a British novella written by Orwell, uses simple diction and the animals' collective perspective to deconstruct totalitarian rhetoric, contrasting how the clever pigs

manipulate words for self-gain and how the other animals' basic grasp of language makes them vulnerable. The animals' varying mastery over language, determined by their intelligence, exposes that they have not actually achieved a classless society. In this cautionary tale, Orwell exercises language as the very instrument used to criticize and to redeem itself, morally restoring its purpose as an instrument of honest expression and independent thought.

2. Background and Context

After the Soviet Union joined the Allies in 1941, Great Britain highly regarded the country because it believed that Western Europe's security depended on the Soviet Union's military to protect Eastern Europe. Although the British people and intelligentsia respected Joseph Stalin, Orwell, as a democratic socialist, did not. In his essay, "What is Socialism?" (1946), he explained that the driving force for the Socialist movement is the belief that "human nature is fairly decent to start with and capable of infinite development," a principle that "prepared the way for the Russian Revolution" (qtd. in Walter 205). Although Orwell accepted the communist belief that "pure freedom will only exist in a classless society" (when people work toward creating one), he opposed the claim that the Communist Party itself sought to establish such a society and "[was] actually on the way to being realized" in the Soviet Union (Kirschner 764). In fact, he believed that Stalin, along with other active revolutionaries, betrayed the ideals of the Russian Revolution by "[conflating] equality with collectivism and party rule" and mixing up the "longing for a just society" with the motive of "secur[ing] power for themselves" (White 84). To examine this betrayal, Orwell allegorized the corruption of the intellectual elites who took advantage of the working class, the rivalry between Stalin (Napoleon) and Trotsky (Snowball), and Stalin's practice of show trials and purges (1936-1938).

Possessing a vastly illiterate population, Russia began promoting literacy during the Great Reforms (1861-1874) by providing funding, establishing primary education, and supervising schools. When Stalin took over the country in 1929, the Sixteenth Party Congress initiated a literacy campaign the following year that aimed to achieve full “adult literacy” and “universal primary enrollment” (Ekolf 138). During Stalin’s leadership, the reasons for improving literacy shifted from cultural to economic amid the country’s industrialization. Primary school enrollments and adult literacy significantly increased during the first two five-year plans (1929-1938). Questioning these figures, historian Sheila Fitzpatrick asserts that these numbers were “sheer wishful thinking” and that attendance did not guarantee “permanent or even temporary literacy” (qtd. in Ekolf 141). The attempt to reach high literacy rates in a short span of time caused Stalin to prioritize speed over quality at the “expense of true education” (Ekolf 139). Despite the political and economic gains of the literacy drives, literacy did not grant individual freedom in the Soviet Union because the state remained “the bearer of the written word,” a title suggesting the dangers of political language (Ekolf 145).

In his essay, “Politics and the English Language” (1946), Orwell discussed the inaccuracies made with language and their effects. He criticized the tendency of modern prose to turn the concrete to the abstract. This transformation occurs from bad writing habits, such as using pretentious diction and meaningless words. At its worst, modern writing consists of “ready-made phrases” strung together that “partially conceal your meaning from even yourself.” This trend is especially common in political discourse, which also relies on “euphemism[s], question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness” to defend the indefensible. Language suffers from politics because the latter is “a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred, and schizophrenia.” Given the political climate of his time, Orwell hypothesized that the Russian, German, and

Italian languages deteriorated because of dictatorship. In the conclusion, Orwell calls the reader to rethink language as "an instrument for expressing thought," not for concealing nor preventing it. By simplifying their words, people can "free [themselves] from the worst follies of orthodoxy," and reclaim the ability to think for themselves, "a necessary first step toward political regeneration."

3. Scholarly Conversation/Literature Review

In the ending, *Animal Farm* completes the collapse of the animals' society when their original commandment, "All animals are equal," adds the phrase "but some are more equal than others." The ambiguous use of equality prompts scholars to define or to address the complications of the word themselves. Literary scholars, such as David Dwan, claim that the ambiguous meaning of equality is a critique of the concept itself. In his essay, "Equality on *Animal Farm*," Dwan explains that the animals' assertion of their equality "seems to imply that they are not at present equal" (665). The animals' difficulty to differentiate man from animal makes "the scope of equality" even more unclear, and so they rely on a friend-enemy distinction (665). Although the animals' Seven Commandments implicitly guarantees them equality on moral grounds, their "unequal grasp of the law" exposes its inadequacy (670). Only the pigs devise the law, thus allowing them to change the rules for their own benefit. Although Dwan "restor[es] perplexity" to the concept of equality as he intended, he fails to support the "obvious" claim that "there is a human perspective animals cannot possess" (666). He cautions readers to not interpret the tale of animal equality too literally because our kindness or concern for them does not "necessarily stem from our being equal to them" (667). However, he does not elaborate on the human perspective that distinguishes us from animals, a shortcoming emphasized when he followingly admits that Orwell abstractly used variations of the word "human," e.g. humanism.

Examining the novella's literary language, scholars typically do so to analyze its construction of history or to interpret its political commentary. There are scholars, nonetheless, that analyze the language itself without as much emphasis on political or historical context as their peers do. One such scholar is Roger Fowler who "write[s] a history of Orwell's stylistic development" in his book, *The Language of George Orwell*. In his chapter on *Animal Farm*, Fowler discusses its "impersonal" and "simple" narrative style (165). Orwell constructs his syntax and diction with short words, single adjectives, and active clauses. To produce an impersonal voice, Orwell omits the presence of "a dominating narrator," abstaining from the use of first-person pronouns, singular and plural (168). When Fowler examines the animals' own language, he observes that the "amount of speech assigned to the different animals" is disproportionately allocated, with most of the dialogue given to the pigs (174). This chapter demonstrates how linguistic actions symbolize the "relationship of language and power" and how the immoral use of language can support "a distorted, untruthful, version of reality" (177). Fowler provides passages of the pigs enforcing their authority to support his claim, and thus limits his analysis of how the other animals are affected by and exercise language. His work leaves questions about the relationship between language and those without power unanswered.

4. Engagement with Scholarship

As previously mentioned, Orwell attempted to "fuse political purpose and artistic purpose" when he wrote *Animal Farm*, yet the former often overshadows the latter in academic debate. Scholars minimize literary analysis to character description and plot summary when they review abstract concepts in *Animal Farm*. When scholars do look at the novella's language, they do so to criticize how its literary form weakens its political purpose. By making such arguments, these scholars reduce the artistic significance of the novella and understate the profound and

coexisting relationships language has with ideological concepts, with those who use it, and with itself.

In my close reading of *Animal Farm*, I will primarily employ literary analysis, with some historical and social context, as my focus to demonstrate the connection between language and inequality in the novella. The novella's simple and collective narrative style allows it to noticeably compare the pigs' scheming rhetoric and the other animals' limited speech, behaviors connected with their intelligence. As a result, the animals' vision for a classless society is defeated by a hierarchy determined by those who can and cannot master language in the forms of reading, writing, and talking. Language serves as a weapon for the pigs to exert their dominance, and therefore makes the other animals vulnerable because they lack the same understanding of language to challenge their oppressors. Orwell exposes totalitarian rhetoric in *Animal Farm*, yet this allows him to challenge its misuse through his opposing writing style, which demonstrates how direct, honest language fosters autonomy.

5. Close Reading

Following the revolution, the animals assert that they are all equal under Animalism's Seven Commandments, but their intellectual differences immediately establish a hierarchy which challenges this principle. After secretly learning how to read and to write for three months, the pigs proclaim their Seven Commandments to the other animals (15). Shortly afterward, the pigs seize exclusive control over the farm because their "superior knowledge" makes it "natural" for them to assume leadership (18). Ironically, inequality indirectly justifies the reasoning for the pigs' authority, but the animals do not question their supposed entitlement to their positions. With the pigs in power, the other animals serve as laborers under their supervision. Dwan argues that this authority comes from the law which the pigs use as an "instrument of arbitrary power"

(670). To broaden his claim, I contend that language is “the instrument of arbitrary power” because the law is a form of language, and the animals’ intelligence (or lack thereof) is associated with linguistic abilities. The rules are devised by the pigs because they are the most literate and are followed by the animals who are less so. In the essay, “The Dual Purpose of *Animal Farm*,” Paul Kirschner states this division reflects a “new class system” based upon “native intelligence” (768-769). Given Kirschner’s claim, intellectual inequality conflicts with the animals’ desire to achieve an egalitarian society, especially when the equality they speak of is so vaguely defined.

Rather than work out those tensions, the animals deceive themselves about their progress to affirm that they do live in a classless society. The pigs, mainly Snowball, create committees for the animals to join, which typically fail, except the reading and the writing programs. The reading seminars are described as a “great success,” but this praise paradoxically conflicts with the animals’ collective sentiment that “almost every animal on the farm was literate in some degree” (21). At first, the courses seem effective because the description “great success” gives the impression that nearly all the animals are sufficiently educated. However, only a few animals aside from the pigs can read proficiently. The horses know the alphabet to some extent and the rest cannot get past the letter “A.” Although the animals are not as literate as assumed, the range of their skills does not entirely negate the quoted statements. If the animals consider success as nearly every animal being literate, regardless of level, then by their definition, the classes are effective. Even so, their standard for “success” is questionable because the variability of literacy means that many of the animals essentially know little to nothing in comparison to the pigs. This inequality threatens their vision of a classless society because “success in language relates

directly to the amount of power enjoyed” by the animals (Fowler 174), a correlation that parallels with literacy in Russia.

Table 1

Rate of literacy in the Soviet Union among people age 9 to 49 by sex, age, and area, 1897, 1926, 1939

Literacy in the Russian Empire and in the Soviet Union, 1897–1939
(Population Aged 9–49)*

	1897		1926	1939
		Urban		
Men	66.1		88.0	97.1
Women	45.7		73.9	90.7
All	57.0		80.9	93.8
		Rural		
Men	35.5		67.3	91.6
Women	12.5		35.4	76.8
All	23.8		50.6	84.0
		Total		
Men	40.3		71.5	93.5
Women	16.6		42.7	81.6
All	28.4		56.6	87.4

*Figures are percentages.

Source: Eklof, Ben. “Russian Literacy Campaigns: 1861-1939.” *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives, edited by Robert F. Arnove and Harvey J. Graff, Plenum Press, New York, 1987, pp. 142

The doubtful reputation of the reading and writing programs mirrors the skeptical achievements of the national literacy campaigns in Russia, respectively disguising how the animals and people are disempowered. Analyzing Soviet reports that literacy improved from 1897 to 1939, historian Ben Ekolf addresses that the data does not reflect the poor quality of education (see table 1). Both Russian adult and children received “crude elementary education,” a detail reflected in *Animal Farm*, which ensured that “literacy would not come to be

synonymous with the independence of mind” (143). Although the working class did learn how to read and to write under Stalin’s rule, they did not “learn from reading,” a limitation shared with the animals (144). In other words, the Russian people lacked the proper education to actively think for themselves and consequently failed to recognize the power-hungry nature of the elites. In the story, the animals’ general assembly reflect these shortcomings because the animals vote on the pigs’ resolution, unable to come up with their own. (20). Their votes establish the sense that their opinions matter, but their inability to debate and to propose allows the pigs to take political control. The paradoxical statement about the animals’ reading and writing courses and Russia’s statistics of its literacy rates function similarly to conceal the division between the intellectual elites and the working class.

The story also unravels the animals’ illusion of a classless society by differentiating the other animals’ linguistic mannerisms from the pigs’, indicating their low hierarchical positions. Boxer the horse, the representative of the working class, bears the burden of the workload when the labor intensifies during the construction of the windmill. To endure the toil, Boxer repeats the slogan: “I will work harder” (35). His language is direct because he does not have ulterior motives. The maxim’s precision and message reflect his moral decency, depicting his “honest sincerity,” and “vitality”— “positive qualities” of “working-class speech” depicted in literary tradition (Fowler 21). Boxer’s second slogan, “Napoleon is always right,” however, reveals the negative qualities associated with working-class speech that Fowler does not address. Boxer’s simple-mindedness is admirable because it captures his idealistic perspective, but this quality can also produce an unconscious submission to authority which sustains the “maximum leader’s cult and dictatorial power” (Kirschner 143). Boxer does not explain nor question why Napoleon is always right, particularly because he does not have a reason nor feels like he should. Just like

Boxer, the rest of the animals lack the ability to think critically, and thus perpetuate the decay of language.

Since the animals possess a basic comprehension of language, the pigs disguise the truth with ease to consolidate their authority. During one of their meetings, Napoleon announced that Animal Farm would now “engage in trade” with neighboring farms to “obtain certain material” (39). Addressing the concern about interacting with humans, Napoleon assures them that they will not trade for “commercial purposes.” Since the animals possess a limited range of vocabulary, they do not recognize that Napoleon’s distinction between “trade” and “commercial” is illogical because the words are synonymous. By associating trade as simply “obtain[ing] certain material,” Napoleon distances the word from its economic denotation to downplay the truth that he will conduct business with humans, their declared enemies. He adds that he will trade with them since contact between animals and humans “would clearly be most undesirable,” so he will endure “the whole burden” (40). By elevating his character, Napoleon pretends to act in the farm’s interests, masking his intentions to trade for economic gain and to develop diplomatic relationships with the farmers. If simple working-class speech positively embodies honest sincerity, then inversely, “the great enemy of clear language” is the “insincerity” of intellectual elites (“Politics and English”). In the context of *Animal Farm*, insincerity builds a gap between Napoleon’s “real” and “declared aims,” which are covered by “a mass of lies” (“Politics and English”). The essay connects political chaos with the decay of language, but the novella extends this argument by illustrating how the animals suffer from mindlessly believing the pigs.

Thoughtlessly submitting to the pigs’ perverted rhetoric, the animals surrender control over their own language and lose autonomy. The story portrays the Great Purge beginning with

Napoleon's suspicions that the exiled Snowball has spies. He calls upon four younger pigs to reveal their crimes and they immediately admit that they collaborated with Snowball to destroy the windmill, adding that he was Jones's secret agent for years. After the pigs list their crimes, the dogs "promptly [tear] their throats out," coincidentally where their vocal cords are located. Ripped apart at their throats, the younger pigs' deaths represent the complete loss of self-determined language. The physical execution and the verbal confession indicate the violent and moral dangers of debased language. The confessions, in addition, do not portray objective reality: the autumn winds destroyed the windmill and Snowball dedicated himself to the animals' movement (43, 32). The other animals take ironic initiative by confessing their own falsified crimes. Using language to rewrite history, the animals "alter ... the past" and deny the "existence of objective truth," (qtd. in Dickstein 142). The authority Napoleon amasses from the executions represent how Stalin, his human counterpart, "achieve[d] an unrestricted personal dictatorship with a totality of power" during the Great Purge (qtd. in Meyers 123). Now, Napoleon not only commands the animals, but he also decides language for them as they collectively participate in his organized lies at the expense of their own lives. Analyzing the animals' different relationship with language, Orwell exposes how in a totalitarian society, intellectual elites use language as a weapon to secure power and the working class, lacking the same tool, are left defenseless.

Adopting the characteristics of working-class speech, Orwell therefore undertakes the denunciation of political rhetoric for the animals who cannot defend themselves. To help the animals grasp the essential principle of Animalism, Snowball reduces the commandments to the maxim: "Four legs good, two legs bad" (21). The birds initially object to the simplified version, pointing out that they have two legs. In response, Snowball "clarifies" that a bird's wing is like a leg because it "is an organ of propulsion and not of manipulation," not man's hand "with which

he does all his mischief” (22). The narration places quotation marks around Snowball’s explanation, a feature that distinctively separates his rhetoric from the narration. Dialogue is often imagined, so the direct speech highlights Snowball’s long words among the surrounding short ones. Orwell cautions the use of long words in “Politics and the English Language,” advising one to use short words if possible to “get one’s meaning as clear as one can.” Snowball does the opposite, however, because his argument depends on appearing as sound logic and confusing the birds. Orwell’s advocacy for using understandable language is demonstrated in *Animal Farm’s* simple prose. This writing style allows the narrator to focalize the animals’ collective point of view because the narrator “knows as much as the animals know” (170). Nevertheless, the absence of an omniscient narrator does not undermine the story’s message, but instead compels readers to “learn from reading” so that they may recognize for themselves how the pigs take advantage of the animals. Clear language also allows Orwell to stress the tensions between illusion and reality, showing that the animals are not disempowered by their simple speech, but by their failure to think for themselves.

6. Conclusion

Animal Farm’s clear language underlines the pigs’ manipulative discourse against the other animals’ simple-minded speech to uncover the degradation of political rhetoric. The animals’ different control over language, associated with their intelligence, creates a hierarchy that undermines the animals’ illusion of their classless society because the pigs obtain power with disingenuous language and the other animals lack the linguistic ability resist tyranny. The animals’ collective perspective attempts to conceal and ignore this conflict, allowing the problem to gradually escalate as the pigs snatch more power. The pigs invade the animals’ own language to the extent that the animals do not question authority at the costs of their lives. Orwell

addresses the real dangers of language within a totalitarian society, but by using language himself, he redeems the purpose of language as an instrument of honest and independent thought.

In *Animal Farm*, Orwell's criticism of Russian intellectual elites is at odds with his own identity as an intellectual and political writer, nevertheless, it suggests why he chooses to write in simple prose to reconcile these tensions. He himself tries to resist the bad linguistic habits purposefully exercised by powerful figures who do so for selfish interests. In *Animal Farm*, he portrays the ugliness of language, but his own command over language exposes power relationships, compelling respect for both his skill and moral conscience. Through the novella, readers realize how language can disguise intention and prevent self-autonomy, calling them to recognize these flaws in the political setting of the real world and to use language more wisely than the animals. Humans impose conflict through language, and so language itself is not the problem. Although people cannot practice language with perfect precision and sincerity, what matters is the conscious effort to try, regardless.

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