

STUDENT NOTES

The first time you read the book, don't look for anything in particular. Just enjoy the story. Try and finish it in as few sessions as possible, then note your impressions. What did you like, or not like? Which sections stick in your mind? Try to be specific and give examples. Don't worry, this exercise is not an exam: there is no right or wrong. These thoughts are only for you.

Why not stop reading now and do this exercise. It will only take a moment.

Done? Good. Now, here are some ideas to help you as you study the book.

STORY STRUCTURE

Who is the **Protagonist**? Is it Napoleon? His actions drive the narrative more than any other character. But, crucial though he is, this is not his story. Indeed, no single character emerges as the hero around whom everything revolves. More likely, the protagonist is the group of animals as a whole or, more specifically, the initial ideal of those animals when they engage in revolution. We root for their hope of a better life and we watch this hope fight to survive. It's unusual for a protagonist not to be an individual, but the fabulous nature of the story – ie it's a fable – enables us to engage with this abstract ideal.

So is Napoleon the **Antagonist**? He certainly causes most of the problems. Or is it the farmer? Actually, they are both agents of the true antagonist which, like the protagonist, is something abstract – the inevitability of political corruption. Whoever runs the farm becomes corrupt, first the farmer then the pigs. Orwell's message is that it matters not who is in

charge. The real enemy is power itself.

The **Inciting Incident** for the story is the moment when the animals revolt and drive away Mr Jones the farmer. This event plunges them into a new world from which they cannot return unless they achieve their desire for a better life, or are defeated in the process. This is their **Quest**. It is a dangerous one and, after the inciting incident, they have no choice but to pursue it.

This quest plays out at various levels, each of which compel our attention. At an emotional level, it concerns the fate of characters whom we like, such as Snowball and Boxer. At an intellectual level, it charts whether a noble ideal can survive. Additionally, from a practical level, it explores whether animals might actually be able to work together and run a farm.

Our attention is maintained during the story by **Escalating Levels of Jeopardy**. At first, the threat appears to come from humans. This threat is allayed by the Battle of the Cowshed, but any relief is shortlived. When Napoleon unleashes his guard dogs to kill Snowball, we realise the real danger comes not from outside, but from among the animals themselves. Later, during the horrors of the show trials, when animals confess to crimes while knowing this will trigger their slaughter, the danger has now entered the psyche of innocent characters. Who can survive an enemy embedded in your own brain?

The plot is driven by well-crafted **Turning Points**. Each provides an initial shock, then the realisation that the antagonist is stronger and better prepared than you thought. The fear grows that evil will prevail. This ratchets up the jeopardy. The first turning point is small – the milk goes missing – but it introduces the notion that some animals do not mean well. Another disquieting incident occurs when

Napoleon urinates on Snowball's plans for the windmill. But the first really distressing turning point is when Napoleon sets his dogs on Snowball. Thereafter, each time the pigs take up another human behaviour that was previously proscribed – whether it be sleeping in human beds, selling eggs for money, negotiating with humans, drinking alcohol or killing other animals – it's another turning point. The series of **Commandments** is an excellent narrative device for charting the gradual betrayal of the rebellion.

The greatest turning point, and perhaps the most harrowing passage of the story, is the sending of Boxer to the knacker's yard. This is the final betrayal: the most palpably noble character in the story is cynically murdered to buy whisky for the pigs.

Stories need a **Climax** to resolve the quest. What potential resolutions are there for this story? The animals might succeed in running the farm, perhaps overthrowing Napoleon and allowing better characters to take charge. Or humans might succeed in recapturing the farm and returning the animals to bondage. However, this would not resolve the key question of the book – can political power be free of corruption? Orwell has a clear view on this matter (corruption always wins, so the protagonist loses) and he chooses a brilliant way to demonstrate it: the pigs get drunk with humans. It's a mundane event compared with the drama of earlier battles or murders, but it works perfectly. By showing that the pigs now behave like humans – indeed look like them – this climax crowns the trajectory of betrayal and shows the inevitability of corruption.

Orwell subtitles the book *A Fairy Story*. But is it? Such stories usually end happily – with a fairy-tale ending, no less – in which the protagonist succeeds, albeit after much struggle. In *Animal Farm*, however, the protagonist most definitely fails.

This is because the story is a **Tragedy**. The hero – the group of animals as a whole – starts with noble intent but, like all tragic heroes, has a major flaw: within the group are some ignoble elements, particularly Napoleon and Squealer, who take control and prove irresistible. Our satisfaction in witnessing this tragedy comes from its ability to elicit our sympathy. Hence the impact of the scene when Boxer is betrayed and taken away. That is truly tragic and pitiful.

But this does raise a question about Orwell's tragic intent with this story. Does he suggest that all revolutionary ideals are destined to fail? Certainly, we're left feeling pretty hopeless by the end (or at least most of us are, but not all: many recent leading politicians in the UK and US might feel quite at home with Napoleon's behaviour.) And perhaps that reflected the despair felt in the 1940s by many on the left at Stalin's betrayal of the Russian Revolution.

Or does Orwell rather seek to present a nuanced tableau: yes, there are inevitably bad actors among the revolutionaries, but they only succeed because the group allows this. If the community of animals could develop greater wisdom, scrutiny and justice, then maybe it could contain the more evil elements. Judge whether you feel this is plausible.

PARALLELS WITH SOVIET RUSSIA

When Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* during World War Two, most readers immediately recognised parallels with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1919 and its resulting corruption under Joseph Stalin. This hindered the book being published immediately, for Stalin was then an ally of the West. Only in August 1945, after Hitler was defeated and the Soviet alliance was starting to crumble, did Secker and Warburg publish the first edition.

The story closely matches characters and events in early twentieth century Russia. **Mr Jones'** mismanagement of the