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“Liberty is Worth than Ribbons”: The Strategies of Power and Corruption in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*

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ABSTRACT :

George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* offers a penetrating reflection on the corrupting influence of power and the fragility of revolutionary ideals when authority becomes centralised. The novella exposes how dreams of equality and liberation devolve into tyranny through manipulation, coercion, and ideological distortion. Through the rise of the pigs—particularly Napoleon, Snowball, and Squealer—Orwell demonstrates how propaganda and deceit transform the language of freedom into an instrument of control, turning comradeship into servitude. The animals’ journey from hope to subjugation becomes a chilling allegory of how the oppressed, blinded by faith and fear, can become complicit in their own domination. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the corrupting influence of power in the novella, showing how ambition and hierarchical authority erode ethical principles and collective ideals. Therefore, the study examines the role of propaganda and ideological manipulation as instruments of control, revealing how language, education, and historical revision shape perception and enforce obedience. Orwell’s narrative functions as a timeless political and moral commentary, illustrating that corruption is not merely structural but also psychological, rooted in human weakness, greed, and the desire for dominance. Read through the lens of political allegory and ideological critique, *Animal Farm* unravels the processes through which truth is rewritten, ideals are betrayed, and authority perpetuates itself through illusion. The novella ultimately serves as a mirror to human history, warning of the ethical and social devastation that ensues when liberty is exchanged for obedience and when the rhetoric of equality masks the machinery of control. Moreover, the paper explores the text as an allegorical and socio-political commentary on historical and universal forms of oppression, highlighting the ways in which revolutionary ideals are subverted and systemic inequality is perpetuated.

Keywords: Power, Corruption, Propaganda, Authority, Allegory

Introduction

George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, first published in 1945, is widely regarded as a potent allegorical critique of totalitarianism and the corrupting influence of unchecked power. On the surface, the novella depicts a seemingly simple rebellion of farm animals against their human oppressor, Mr. Jones, yet beneath this narrative lies a profound political commentary on the human propensity for exploitation, greed, and moral compromise. Orwell situates his narrative within the framework of allegory, paralleling the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalinism, using animals to demonstrate the mechanisms of political manipulation and the erosion of ideals. The novella opens with a vivid portrayal of Mr. Jones’ incompetence and negligence—“Mr. Jones, of the Manor Farm, had locked the hen-houses for the night, but was too drunk to remember to shut the pop-holes” (Orwell 1). This depiction not only establishes the context of oppression and exploitation but also creates the conditions for revolutionary fervour. From the outset, the animals’ suffering reflects the consequences of structural and systemic power imbalances, and Orwell’s careful exposition demonstrates that power, when concentrated and unchecked, inevitably leads to corruption and abuse—a theme that remains central throughout the novella.

The narrative of the story explores the initial ideals of Animalism, which advocate equality, freedom, and justice for all animals. The revolutionary vision is vividly captured in Old Major’s speech, which serves as a catalyst for the rebellion—“Rebellion! I do not know when that Rebellion will come... but I know, as surely as I see this straw beneath my feet, that sooner or later justice will be done” (Orwell 5). Through this articulation, Orwell foregrounds the tension between idealism and reality, a tension that becomes central to the exploration of power dynamics throughout the story. As Qamar observes, the novel “depicts a potent transition from initial optimism to ultimate disappointment, mirroring how real-life revolutions frequently progress from idealism to authoritarianism. The animals at the start of the story believe in freedom and equality” (23). This juxtaposition of aspiration and disillusionment underscores the fragility of revolutionary ideals in the face of concentrated authority and foreshadows the moral and political corruption that will permeate the farm, setting the stage for Orwell’s incisive critique of power, manipulation, and ideological betrayal.

The Dynamics of Power and Its Corruptive Influence

The novella presents a nuanced exploration of how power shapes both individual behaviour and social structures, revealing the psychological and moral consequences of authority. It vividly portrays the effects of power on those who wield it, particularly through Napoleon. Initially one among equals, he gradually evolves into a figure of absolute authority, employing fear, intimidation, and violence to maintain control. The dogs he raises and trains serve as instruments of coercion, enforcing his decrees and instilling terror among the other animals. This rise to dominance is starkly illustrated—“Nine enormous dogs wearing brass-studded collars came bounding into the barn. They dashed straight for Snowball” (Orwell 35). Orwell demonstrates that authority can exploit physical dominance to consolidate power, while simultaneously highlighting the moral compromises leaders make when self-interest outweighs collective welfare—a recurring tension between ambition and ethical responsibility. Power in the text also manifests through the manipulation of ideology and the incremental revision of moral codes. The Seven Commandments, initially codifying equality and fairness, are subtly altered to justify the pigs’ self-serving actions. This manipulation reflects the ease with which those in power can reinterpret laws to serve convenience while blurring the distinction between principle and expediency. Old Major’s speech lays the moral foundation for Animalism, inspiring the animals to recognise their oppression and rise against human tyranny—

Now, comrades, what is the nature of this life of ours? Let us face it: our lives are miserable, laborious, and short. We are born, we are given just so much food as will keep the breath in our bodies, and those of us who are capable of it are forced to work to the last atom of our strength, and the very instant that our usefulness has come to an end we are slaughtered with hideous cruelty. No animal in England knows the meaning of happiness or leisure after he is a year old. No animal in England is free. The life of an animal is misery and slavery: that is the plain truth. (Orwell 3)

This juxtaposition of revolutionary ideals against the realities of power exposes the structural vulnerability of societies where authority is concentrated and unchecked. Orwell suggests that legitimacy can be manufactured through controlled narratives, enabling those at the top to consolidate dominance while gradually eroding the foundational principles of the community. The accumulation of authority by the pigs does not occur in isolation; it relies on the compliance, ignorance, and manipulated beliefs of the other animals. Through this, Orwell emphasises that corruption is not merely a personal failing but a systemic phenomenon facilitated by social, educational, and ideological structures. He underscores the systemic and cyclical nature of corruption, culminating in the merging of oppressor and oppressed under totalitarian control. The transformation of the pigs into figures indistinguishable from the human oppressors they replaced illustrates the inevitability of moral decay when power is centralised: “The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig again; but already it was impossible to say which was which” (Orwell 95). It reinforces the novella’s critique of hierarchical consolidation, revealing how initial revolutionary fervour is undermined by self-interest and how oppressive systems tend to replicate themselves regardless of ideological origins. Through these layers of narrative, Orwell provides a comprehensive exploration of power’s corruptive influence, showing how revolutionary ideals can be eroded in the absence of ethical leadership, structural safeguards, and vigilant resistance.

Propaganda and Manipulation as Tools of Control

Orwell emphasises the central role of propaganda and ideological manipulation as instruments for maintaining power and control. Squealer, the pigs’ chief spokesperson, exemplifies this strategy, skilfully using language to justify actions that would otherwise appear exploitative or unjust. His rhetoric transforms self-serving policies into necessary measures for the ‘greater good,’ convincing the animals that their sacrifices are both essential and virtuous. For instance, when food rations are reduced, Squealer manipulates statistics and presents selective information to persuade the animals that they are actually better off than under Mr. Jones’ rule. Orwell thus demonstrates that language and communication are not neutral tools but powerful mechanisms for controlling perception, shaping beliefs, and sustaining hierarchical power structures. Propaganda in the novella extends beyond language to the manipulation of history and collective memory. Snowball, once celebrated as a hero of the rebellion, is gradually rewritten into a scapegoat for all failures on the farm. When the windmill collapses, the pigs declare, “It was Snowball who had been hiding in the trees all the time, sabotaging our efforts” (Orwell 72). By attributing failure to a fabricated enemy, the pigs create a common adversary, divert attention from their own mismanagement, and foster unity under authoritarian rule. This allegorical device reflects historical and contemporary totalitarian regimes, where rewriting history and demonising internal or external enemies legitimises the ruling elite’s control while neutralising dissent. The manipulation of collective memory thus becomes a crucial instrument in the consolidation of power.

Orwell also highlights the psychological dimensions of propaganda, particularly how it enforces blind loyalty and suppresses critical thought. The depth of the animals’ indoctrination is vividly captured in the statement, “If Comrade Napoleon says it, it must be right” (Orwell 37), which reveals how fear, repetition, and ideological conditioning can compel unquestioning obedience. Education and knowledge, or the lack thereof, play a critical role in this process. The animals’ inability to read or think critically makes them especially susceptible to manipulation. Boxer’s repeated assertion, “I will work harder” (Orwell 18), illustrates how the internalisation of the pigs’ agenda transforms exploitation into a perceived moral duty. By linking cognitive limitation with authoritarian instruction, Orwell underscores the subtle yet profound ways in which ideology can be internalised, demonstrating that manipulation is not only structural but also psychological. He also employs symbolism to reveal the intersection of propaganda and material exploitation. The windmill, initially intended to improve the animals’ lives, ultimately becomes a tool for consolidating the pigs’ authority. While the animals toil under the belief that their labour will yield collective prosperity, the pigs reap disproportionate benefits, reinforcing social hierarchies. The windmill thus embodies both the seductive power of ideology and the instrumentalisation of labour to maintain dominance. Scholarly insights complement Orwell’s depiction, as Van Dijk (1999) suggests that manipulation “serves as a powerful means of shaping the consciousness of individuals and societies by distorting reality and internalising particular ideologies, beliefs, and values.” Furthermore, Van Dijk (2000) emphasises that language and discourse function as “critical social practices influenced by ideologies,” determining “how we acquire, learn or change ideologies” (9). Manipulation, in this sense, “is a communicative and interactional practice, in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests.... Language users call this discourse ‘manipulative discourse’” (Van Dijk, “Discourse and Manipulation” 360). Orwell’s narrative, combined

with these theoretical insights, illustrates how propaganda and manipulation operate across linguistic, psychological, and structural dimensions to perpetuate authority and suppress resistance.

Allegory and Socio-Political Commentary

Orwell's *Animal Farm* operates foremost as a rich allegory, capable of being "read, understood, and interpreted at two levels: a primary or surface meaning" (qtd. in Talabani 36). At the surface, it is "an allegorical novel that tells a story of animals living on a farm under hard conditions which make them revolt against a human farmer, the owner of the farm" (Abass et al. 22), yet it simultaneously functions as a scathing critique of historical and political realities. Scholars note that it represents "an allegory that was clearly an incident in the Soviet Union since the Russian Revolution of 1917 and it was especially about the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin" (Hasan et al. 66). Through this duality, Orwell embeds a critique of the corrupting potential of power within a seemingly simple narrative, demonstrating how the ideals of revolution can be co-opted and perverted by those who ascend to authority. The characters themselves embody historical and ideological figures, transforming the farm into a microcosm of political struggle. Old Major articulates the revolutionary ideals reminiscent of Karl Marx, establishing the moral and ideological foundation of Animalism. Snowball parallels Leon Trotsky, the intellectual revolutionary, while Napoleon embodies Joseph Stalin, consolidating power through authoritarian measures. Through these representations, Orwell examines the betrayal of revolutionary principles, revealing how movements originally designed to promote equality and justice can devolve into instruments of oppression and hierarchical control. In this context, Orwell captures the tension between idealistic revolutionary rhetoric and the practical realities of governance, illustrating how personal ambition, greed, and fear of dissent can erode ethical leadership.

Orwell further interrogates the moral consequences of systemic exploitation through characters such as Boxer, the loyal and diligent workhorse. Boxer's tragic fate—"Boxer was never seen again" (Orwell 92)—underscores the human cost of hierarchical systems that commodify labour while marginalising those who sustain societal productivity. Through his artistic use of an allegorical *Animal Farm* to stand for the world at large, George Orwell depicts "a true-to-life picture of how human beings behave towards their fellow human beings once they assume power" (Jabak 173). This portrayal emphasises the vulnerability of the working class under centralised authority and highlights the ethical and social costs of unchecked power, demonstrating that oppression is not only structural but also profoundly human. Beyond its historical specificity, the novella resonates as a timeless reflection on authority, ideology, and human behaviour. At the same time, it dramatises how leaders consolidate power, manipulate collective memory, and suppress dissent, inviting readers to critically examine contemporary political and social structures. Orwell illustrates the fragility of collective ideals when confronted with greed, fear, and ideological distortion, emphasising that the vision of an equitable society can be systematically eroded. He underscores the necessity of vigilance, ethical leadership, and active civic engagement to preserve liberty, illustrating that revolutionary ideals demand continual reinforcement. The conceptual metaphorical model of this dystopia implicitly specified in the title demonstrates Orwell's critical stance on Stalinist socialism in Russia, revealing his profoundly negative attitude toward totalitarianism (Haliti 99). Through this layered allegory, the novella functions both as a historical commentary and a universal warning about the ethical imperatives required to safeguard justice, equality, and freedom.

Resistance, Compliance, and the Fragility of Ideals

The text not only examines the corrupting influence of power and the mechanisms of manipulation but also explores the tension between resistance and compliance among the oppressed. While the animals initially unite under the revolutionary ideals of equality and liberty, their capacity for critical resistance remains limited. Characters such as Clover and Benjamin, though perceptive, exhibit varying degrees of passive compliance, underscoring the psychological and social constraints that inhibit effective opposition. Benjamin, the donkey, embodies skeptical awareness: "Don't imagine, comrades, that leadership is a matter of magic. There is no magic in it, but it is up to us to see things as they are" (Orwell 62). Yet even his insight fails to catalyse meaningful action, demonstrating that awareness without agency cannot counter systemic domination. The novella further illustrates how social conditioning and ideological control suppress resistance. The animals' memories are manipulated, and their historical consciousness is eroded through propaganda. Squealer's constant reinterpretation of the Seven Commandments and selective retelling of past events obscure truth, limiting the animals' ability to contest authority. For instance, when the pigs claim that Snowball's sabotage caused the windmill's collapse, the animals accept the narrative despite harbouring private doubts. Orwell thereby demonstrates that compliance is maintained not only through coercion but through the strategic control of perception, memory, and belief, rendering resistance psychologically and socially challenging.

The gradual erosion of collective ideals highlights the fragility of revolutionary movements when ethics and accountability are subordinated to power. The animals' initial fervour for liberty, expressed in slogans such as "All animals are equal" (Orwell 90), slowly deteriorates under the pigs' manipulative governance. Their willingness to accept inequities, rationalise suffering, and reinterpret principles underscores how external pressures and internalised beliefs weaken resistance. Orwell emphasises that oppressive regimes rely on the interplay between coercion and voluntary compliance, revealing the complex social dynamics that allow tyranny to endure. The narrative also resonates with Gramsci's notion of hegemony—"the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (qtd. in Sari et al. 60). In *Animal Farm*, this dual form of power is evident as the pigs employ language, education, and propaganda to shape perceptions and sustain authority without relying solely on force. The famous maxim, "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell 90), exemplifies Gramsci's concept of hegemonic consent, whereby the subjugated internalise and reproduce the ideology of their oppressors. Through this lens, Orwell underscores that liberty, justice, and equality require active engagement, critical awareness, and collective vigilance, illustrating that ideals, once compromised, are extraordinarily difficult to reclaim.

Conclusion

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* remains a seminal critique of power, exposing how authority can be manipulated to serve self-interest rather than collective welfare. Through the allegorical depiction of a farm society, Orwell demonstrates that even revolutionary ideals, when entrusted to a select few, are

vulnerable to corruption and exploitation. The narrative emphasises that power, if left unchecked, inevitably fosters inequality and moral decay, illustrating the fragility of human ethics under hierarchical structures. Elliott (1960) defines satire as “a corrective of human vice and folly through ridicule” (qtd. in Sari et al. 59). Orwell skilfully harnesses satire to expose the distortion of socialist ideals and to unveil the manipulative tactics that sustain totalitarian power. Characters such as Napoleon and Squealer exemplify how rhetoric, propaganda, and selective information can shape ideology, control perceptions, and suppress dissent, demonstrating that domination operates not only structurally but also psychologically, influencing thought, behaviour, and collective consciousness.

The trajectories of key characters further illustrate the ethical compromises accompanying power. Napoleon’s authoritarian rule and the pigs’ gradual adoption of human traits symbolise the betrayal of revolutionary principles, revealing how ambition and greed can undermine collective ideals. Snowball’s scapegoating and Squealer’s manipulation highlight the systemic strategies through which the ruling elite maintains dominance over the marginalised. *Animal Farm*, “a powerful political allegory that critiques the dangers of authoritarianism and the betrayal of revolutionary ideals” (Sari 57), functions as a timeless warning about the perils of concentrated authority. Orwell’s novella underscores the moral and social responsibilities inherent in leadership and the necessity of safeguarding equality, justice, and liberty. By presenting a society that mirrors historical totalitarian regimes while retaining universal applicability, the text encourages readers to critically examine political structures, remain vigilant against manipulation, and actively uphold ethical governance to prevent the repetition of tyranny.

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