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Symbolism in Animal Farm

When George Orwell wrote his famous novel Animal Farm, the world had just undergone major change. It was 1945 and the world had just seen the end of the Second World War. Hitler had been defeated, Churchill had been voted out of office, Mussolini and President Roosevelt had just died. Stalin was the last of the great world leaders that had contributed to the end of the war, causing much of the world to view Russia and Stalin in a favorable light. However, Orwell saw a darker side to this reality, one in which Stalin was not the humanitarian he presented to the outside world. Within his novel, Animal Farm, he attempted to present this alternate view of reality through the characters and events that took place on a fictional farm. Everything associated with this farm is a symbol of something else. In The Literary Symbol by William York Tindall, symbol is defined as “the outward sign of an inward state” where ‘sign’ indicates a material object and ‘inward state’ refers to feelings, thoughts or a combination of the two (1955). However, as Orwell used it, symbol refers to any substitution of character or construction that is intended to imply through strong connections characters and events occurring in the broader political world of the writer. This application of the use of symbol to represent real-life people can be seen in the characters of Napoleon, Old

Major, Snowball, Squealer and the pigs, Boxer and the other animals that are killed and Farmer Jones and the other humans.

A side by side comparison between Orwell's character Napoleon and the real-life person of Joseph Stalin illustrates an almost mirror image, fully portraying Orwell's negative impression of Stalinist Russia. George Lamont (1995) points out that Napoleon and Stalin share a similar weakness for public speaking that turns out to be a strength in their primary opposition – Snowball for Napoleon and Trotsky for Stalin. They each demonstrated a willingness to do anything for power, proving themselves cruel, brutal and willing to kill to reach their goals. Where Napoleon had dogs, Moses and Squealer to help him control the animals, Stalin had the KGB, the sanctioned state church and his own propaganda machine. While Napoleon sets out to honor the teachings of Old Major, he deviates drastically from the true path to the destruction of the dream. This is similar to the way in which Stalin set out to follow the teachings of Karl Marx regarding socialism, but allowed his own desire for power destroy the Russian dream. In addition, Napoleon is able to take control of the farm immediately following the revolution rather than waiting for the brief and tragic reign of Lenin to end.

Like Napoleon's relationship to Stalin, Old Major's relationship with Karl Marx is unmistakable. There are several similarities between the founding principles of Animalism and Marxism. Old Major told the animals about his theory that the animals should be the only ones to profit from their own labors, keeping the fruits of that labor for their own survival. Marx proposed the workers of the world should unite to demand better conditions in return for their labors. In both instances, these characters incited those they spoke with to unite and revolt against those in higher positions who controlled

the distribution of wealth. Also in both situations, the speaker dies before the revolution begins, having little opportunity to point out where leaders might be deviating dangerously from the original concepts that would lead to the brave new world socialism was promising (Lamont, 1995). “To the extent that Animal Farm alludes to events of the Russian Revolution, the skull of Old Major ... parallels the actual preservation of Lenin’s corpse in Red Square first in a simple vault and later, as though hiding the man’s mortal humanity behind a myth of omnipotence or saintliness, in a vast mausoleum” (Smyer, 1988, p. 85).

Trotskyian tendencies abound in the character of Snowball throughout the novel. Like Trotsky, Snowball is young, smart and idealistic with a good sense for public speaking. True to the ideals of Animalism, Snowball, like Trotsky, truly held to his belief that life could be made better for all of the animals on the farm and worked diligently to bring that dream about. When he was chased from the farm by Napoleon’s dogs, in much the same way that Trotsky was chased from Russia by Lenin’s KGB, he worked to spread the ideas of Animalism as much as he could in the outer world beyond the gates of the Animal Farm (Lamont, 1995) until he disappears from the story altogether, except as a threat and continued scapegoat for conspiracies against the farm. Even without his presence on the farm, Snowball is seen to be the power behind the show trial of four pigs who claimed to have been meeting with Snowball since his expulsion, resulting in their throats being torn out by the dogs as punishment for working against Napoleon. “In a terrible voice, Napoleon demanded whether any other animal had anything to confess. The three hens who had been the ringleaders in the attempted rebellion over the eggs now came forward and stated that Snowball had appeared to them in a dream and incited them

to disobey Napoleon's orders." They were also killed as a result of their connection to the Snowball/Trotsky movement just as any supporters of Trotsky under Stalin's rule were hunted down and murdered rather than allow them to incite any kind of rebellion.

As has been mentioned, both Stalin and Napoleon were lacking in speaking skills, which they each made up for with the development of their own personal propaganda machines. For Napoleon, this machine existed in the form of the pig Squealer. Squealer's real-life counterpart is the Russian newspaper Pravda, which was used by Stalin to broadcast his message throughout Russia. "It was through Pravda that the people of Russia were made to believe that Stalin's gaining more wealth and power was absolutely necessary for all. All of Stalin's success was based on how well Pravda could distort the truth" ("Pravda vs. Squealer", 2001). The Pravda was able to convince the people of Russia that they were better off under Stalin in all the important parts of life by using simplified language to limit the terms of the discussion and by using overly complicated language to confuse the issues, skillfully blending the two for maximum confusion effect. Comparing Squealer to the Pravda, Lamont says Squealer has a big mouth and enjoys using it. He uses this skill to convince animals to believe in his words and to follow Napoleon's lead. He also uses this skill to subtly change the commandments in such a way that they are familiar to what the animals remember, but manage to convey completely different meanings from what was originally intended. The propaganda machine of the Lenin/Stalin government also worked diligently to use language that supported the image of their chosen leader and were willing to use any lie necessary to convince the people to follow him. Also like Squealer, the Pravda was able to capitalize on the relative illiterate nature of the general population (Lamont, 1995).

Through these various characters and the traits he builds in them, Orwell is able to create Russia in miniature, exploring the ways in which Stalin was able to gain and then keep power despite growing evidence that the experiment was not succeeding. Rather than blame socialism, Orwell was struggling to demonstrate how the abuse of power and position, coupled with greed and ruthlessness, forced the destruction and resulting devastation that was experienced. Although only the very general characteristics have been discussed here, there are several other ways in which each of these characters demonstrates positive and negative aspects of each of their real-life counterparts, including how they worked to help or hinder the socialist movement. In addition to the characters, the actions, events, buildings and auxiliary characters provide further insights as to Orwell's viewpoint regarding the Russian Revolution as it has been outlined within the interplay of these principle characters.

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