



## Challenging Human-Centric Narratives: A Critique of Anthropocentrism in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

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### Abstract

Anthropocentrism refers to the belief that humans are at the centre of the universe and, this notion is deeply rooted in modern human culture, behaviour, and living patterns. The term originates from the Greek words 'anthropos' meaning 'human being' and 'kentron' meaning 'center'. Thus, etymologically, anthropocentrism denotes human-centeredness. It can also be addressed as humanocentrism. Today anthropocentrism is often identified as the (theoretical) root cause of present-day eco-crisis, human overpopulation, and the extinctions of many non-human species. *Animal Farm* by George Orwell published first in 1945 has widely been recognized as the best-known animal story ever written. However, the theme of anthropocentrism is significantly present in this novella which primarily surfaces as a political allegory and a satire on the contemporary situations of the era. This study proposes to look at how *Animal Farm* addresses the question of animal equality. It will explore to what extent the story can be viewed as a commentary on relations between species using the traditional approach of anthropocentrism as a theoretical point of view.

**Keywords:** Anthropocentrism, Humanocentrism, Eco-crisis, Environmental Philosophy, Animal Equality.

The present paper aims to argue various approaches through which George Orwell's *Animal Farm* critiques the anthropocentric approach raising very subtle issues of animal equality, the human/animal opposition, and the question of power. By tracing the trajectory of historical discourse, the gravity of mankind in anthropocentric terms can be underpinned. One enduring source of support for this view is the

Great Chain of Being that can be traced from Plato and Aristotle through Plotinus to Aquinas, who asked for different beings in their degree of order from God to animals and then trees and plants below them. Regarding ethical considerations, less perfect beings may be subordinated to more perfect ones. As already hinted, religious sources underpinned this anthropocentric idea. In particular, the Judaic-

Christian doctrine of creation has fostered the belief that humans were made in the image of God that they share in God's transcendence of nature, and that the whole natural order was created for their sake. An ancient Greek philosopher, Protagoras declared: 'Man is the measure of all things'. Later Sophocles also opined that there are many wonders on earth, and the greatest of these is man. Man is the lord of all things living; birds of the air, beasts of the field, all creatures of sea and land. Many modern thinkers, including philosophers, upheld the same anthropocentric position. Immanuel Kant also suggested that man is the ultimate purpose of creation on earth and Marx proposed that the whole of world history is nothing but the creation of man by human labour.

*Animal Farm* by Orwell is a story of Manor Farm where animals decide not to stand for their constant mistreatment by the farmer, Mr. Jones, and take over the estate by expelling the humans. The animals rename the farm *Animal Farm*, establish a new ideology called "Animalism" and agree on a set of rules by which their new community should live to create a utopia where all animals are equal and in control of their own lives. However, the pigs, being the most intelligent animals on the farm, are quickly allowed some self-assigned special privileges. As the rules are secretly altered by the pigs to better suit their preferences, the animals soon find themselves collaborating with their greatest enemy, the humans.

Beyond an explicit, literal level, there are three symbolic levels on which *Animal Farm* operates. In the first place, it is a historical satire of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Soviet dictatorship, in which the precision of Orwell's allegory covers exact historical correspondences between the events of *Animal Farm* and Soviet history up to 1943. Secondly, *Animal Farm* as a political treatise suggests larger notions about power, tyranny, and revolution in general. At this level, Orwell's book conveys a broader historical and political

message, extending beyond mere criticism of the Soviet Union. Third, *Animal Farm* is a fable, or a 'fairy tale,' as Orwell termed it. It carries a universal moral about the 'animality' of human nature. For instance, by the conclusion of *Animal Farm*, some of the pigs are walking upright and wearing human clothes: they are a little different from corrupt human beings. *Animal Farm* mirrors our human world, which is sometimes referred to as 'the human circus' because the various types of human personality can be compared to the character types of animals. Some humans are like pigs, others resemble sheep, still, others can be compared to dogs, and so forth. On this level, Orwell's 'fable' about human nature transcends both history and particular political events. We observe that the fundamental nature of the animals remains unchanged. Whether driven by noble or selfish motives, they behave consistently throughout the story's transformation- from Mr. Jones's feudal, aristocratic, conservative farm to Napoleon's modern, progressive, radical 'Animal Farm.'

There has already been plenty of research on *Animal Farm*. It seems that animal fiction is seldom interpreted simply as stories about animals. Because animals cannot speak for themselves, it is tempting for humans to write and read animal characters in a way that makes sense from a human point of view, and not necessarily from the point of view of the animals. In this regard Brian Boyd states that because animals are mute, we can project ourselves onto them, and read our purposes in them. We can humanize them or moralize them, as in the fable and bestiary traditions the industrious ant, the idle grasshopper. (228)

Literary criticism tends, almost without exception, to treat animals appearing in literary texts as a symbol for some human issue, such as ethnicity, gender, or social class (Wolfe, *Animal Rites* 124). Timothy Clark elaborates on the problem:

In most canonical literary texts, the place of non-human life is both pervasive but unseen. It is simply so uncontroversial as to make alternative readings centered on animals seem almost like a change of discipline. Any study of a text on the non-human always becomes a study of humanity in some sense... At the same time, once the issue of animal exploitation is raised about a text, it immediately becomes obvious in ways that may leave little more to say. (187)

This applies to *Animal Farm* as well. That is why the argument addresses not only the treatment of animals physically but also the treatment of animals as a part of a literary narrative – that is, not simply the way the animals in the story are treated by other characters but also how the narrative itself presents the animals. Though *Animal Farm* is often interpreted as focusing on human suffering and its theme is closely tied to the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, Orwell still manages to address animal issues – whether intentionally or inadvertently.

*Animal Farm* has various lines that openly point out to the humans' neglect of the well-being of animals. The novel begins by describing how "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" (AF 1) and it is later explained that lately Jones had taken to drinking more than was good for him and failed to take care of his duties. His men were idle and dishonest, the fields were full of weeds, the buildings wanted roofing, the hedges were neglected, and the animals were underfed. On the day of the Rebellion i.e. Midsummer's Day, the workers of Jones had milked the cows in the early morning and then had gone out rabbiting, without realizing the need to feed the animals. Jones himself slept all day after a long night of drinking so that when evening came the animals were still unfed. Even when the hungry and outraged animals break into the storage shed to have something to eat,

Jones and his men would go in to stop them with whips in their hands following this as their usual practice. Hence, the novella depicts how humans violently attack the animals and least care for their needs. As these actions of men power are portrayed clearly unjust by describing the animals' hunger and violent reaction, the text can be interpreted as a document which raises a voice for animal equality. In this context, Jones being the most common surnames in Britain, is representing literally every man, mankind in general.

As the novella opens, the first chapter depicts a respected board called Major who delivers a speech that serves as the moral basis for Animalism and encourages the animals to rebel against the humans and assert their voice: "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" (AF 3). Even the lyrics of the anthem of Animalism "Beasts of England" -- also underline how the animals feel about the means of control that the humans generally use: "Rings shall vanish from our noses / And the harness from our back / Bit and spur shall rust forever / Cruel whips no more shall crack" (AF 7). This is a strong instance that showcases how the text criticizes use of physical violence and restraints to control animals and later when the animals take over the farm, they free themselves from all the instruments of restrain and cruelty.

Human versus animal binary is constantly present in Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Major declares very early in his speech that "in fighting against Man, we must not come to resemble him" (AF 6). Keeping in mind the beliefs of environmental philosophy, one is bound to figure out the message of *Animal Farm* as the wellbeing of animals and the human-animal relationship, something that is so apparent to be ignored. In this way, the approach of Orwell is considerably difficult to understand but the animal point of view is a significant way of reading a canonical novel, the

animal characters of which have been dismissed in literary criticism for decades. In this regard, the view of Calarco is highly relevant when he argues that one of the reasons why the “increased violence toward animals has” because “the almost exclusive focus on the human in the interpretations of [*Animal Farm*] draws attention to our habitual allegorizing of stories we take to be only ‘ostensibly’ about animals; our blindness to their actual presences as co-beings on the planet; and our determined conversions of their presences into absence” (256). Here, we find how we are rooted in thinking in anthropocentric terms.

One way to look at the text is Barthesian perspective if we go deeper in critiquing the anthropocentric model in the text. Roland Barthes in his seminal essay “The Death of the Author” suggests that the meaning of the text is not something definite that is set by the author and his or her background but something that the reader is free to create based on a whole variety of meanings in the text. He writes that “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not . . . the author” (148). Hence, it is justified and even pertinent to study *Animal Farm*, a novel categorised as a political satire, from a fresh point of view – that of the farm animals – since it may give a deeper perspective of the culturally derived mindset that causes the negligence for the well-being of most nonhuman animals.

Language is another powerful tool in Orwell’s text. It works both as a means of power and an indicator of intelligence. Language is utilized by the pigs to gain a privileged position in the farm community, much like humans have gained concerning other species. The less intelligent species continue to be exploited even after the humans are banished from the farm, as the pigs assume the position of the superior species. The novel also addresses essentialism

and the ideas of what is natural and what is human, which are very important for animal equality. In real life, humans base their morals on those very ideas to dominate other beings through speciesism.

The behavioural pattern of the pigs in *Animal Farm* continue to evolve throughout the novel to the final stage where it becomes impossible for the other animals to distinguish them from humans. It is evident through their mannerism that the behaviour of the pigs is, if not anthropomorphic, at least meant to remind the reader of human behaviour. It is important to remember that the range of non-human animals is so diverse and because their emotional and cognitive potential remain largely unknown, any narrative representation of non-humans is bound to be based on mainly fictitious or human conceit. Therefore, such human-centred assumptions are difficult to avoid.

The windmill is a powerful symbol in the *Animal Farm* which functions as a reminder that technology can be either a threat or a possibility, depending on who is in the position to use it. In the final chapter the windmill is finally ready but the animals, other than pigs of course, are unable to enjoy the technological advancement. The windmill, however, had not after all been used for generating electrical power. It was used for milling corn and brought in a handsome money profit. In the final chapter, the walk of the pigs resembles humans when they stand up right and start walking on their hind legs: ‘Four legs good, two legs better! Four legs good, two legs better! Four legs good, two legs better!’ (AF 89)

To avoid any protest from the other animals, the pigs have trained the sheep to chant this new maxim of the farm. This once more suggests that the pigs consider human attributes as a credit that puts them in a more privileged position than other animals. In doing this the novel again criticizes speciesism. The extract also exemplifies how the less developed species

is taken advantage of to reinforce the status of the more developed species. Critics of animal equality also tend to rely on the less developed mental attributes of some species – and even apply it to any animals in general – to prove their point of the human superiority.

As discussed above, none of the animals can use certain tools that require standing on their hind legs. However, when the pigs start walking upright, their front limbs are finally free to new kinds of functions. While the pigs have learned to walk upright, the Seven Commandments of *Animal Farm* have also been replaced with a single commandment: “All animals are equal / but some animals are more equal than others” (AF 90). This phrase sarcastically summarizes the whole issue of animal equality in the current spectrum. The problem is not just that humans have put themselves in a privileged position over other animals – although it is the most crucial issue, since it indirectly causes the other problems – but that humans also put certain animals with most human-like characteristics in that same privileged position while other animals, intelligent or not, are considered less important. The new commandment is used as justification for any further privilege that the pigs grant themselves. The following day, the pigs supervising the farm's work were all carrying whips in their trotters. It hardly seemed surprising when the pigs acquired a wireless set, made plans to install a telephone, and subscribed to *John Bull*, *Tit-Bits*, and the *Daily Mirror*. It also didn't seem odd when Napoleon was spotted strolling through the farmhouse garden with a pipe in his mouth. The pigs had taken Mr. Jones's clothes from the wardrobes and put them on, with Napoleon himself dressed in a black coat, ratcatcher breeches, and leather leggings, while his favorite sow wore the watered silk dress that Mrs. Jones used to reserve for Sundays.

By implying that certain abilities and attributes are inherently human, the novel consistently highlights the binary opposition

between human and animal. The pigs, who possess the most human attributes, place themselves in a higher position than the other animals because of those attributes. As the reader is ultimately left to sympathize with the animals on the outside – species other than pigs, dogs, and humans – the novel suggests that if the human/animal opposition is not deconstructed, the initial problem of inequality between species will remain the same.

There is a vast possibility of research on animal literature in general. The field of animal studies and post-humanist literary theory is still developing. The research will continue to merge literary studies with environmental science, focusing on how literature represents animals and their ecosystems. The critique of speciesism- the assumption of human superiority over other animals- will remain central. Future research will likely explore how literature can challenge speciesist postulates and promote more equitable interspecies relationships. Hopefully, this study encourages other researchers to address animal issues in their work, as well as challenge readers to keep the animal question in mind even when reading classic pieces of literature with generally accepted meanings. A change in the general mindset of humans is of course a goal that could have an impact on the way we treat nonhuman beings in our society and our daily lives. Unfortunately, as Timothy Clark points out, “a basic ‘speciesism’ is so fundamental and all-pervasive that it is still hard to imagine what society would be like without it” (190).

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