

Illiteracy and Propaganda: Mechanisms of Manipulation and Indoctrination in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

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2
3 **Abstract:**
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5 This article explores the parallelism between George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the historical events that occurred
6 when it was written, by using a New Historicist approach. A literary production is a pure product of its time and era,
7 and *Animal Farm* is a clear allegory of the Russian Revolution, which began in 1917. In his dystopian novel, the
8 revolution happened on a farm and was led by animals that wanted to break free from the tyranny of their owner. At
9 the end of the day, the leaders of that revolution ended up copying the same behavior as their former oppressor. This
10 paper studies the different mechanisms used by those revolutionaries to establish the same dictatorship they once
11 fought against.

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13 **Key words:-**

14 *Animal Farm*, George Orwell, illiteracy, education, propaganda, indoctrination, revolution
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16
17 **Introduction:-**

18 *Education is the most powerful tool which you can use to change the world.* This quote,
19 attributed to Nelson Mandela in *Long Walk to Freedom* speaks volumes about the pivotal role of
20 education in our societies. Throughout History, leaders, mainly dictators, used it as a weapon to
21 instill their ideologies in the hearts and minds of their people. In Nazi Germany, for instance,
22 children were indoctrinated through education as Nazism was taught in schools, and students
23 grew up with those ideologies. (Lewis, 2000) described this concept as *Nazification of the young*
24 since the enrollment and involvement of children in Nazism would start as early as six years old.
25 But the recruitment was selective as children had to pass the racial "Aryan" test.

26 This way of perverting education, using it to brainwash people, has been denounced by
27 writers like George Orwell, who heavily criticized and condemned this spiteful and malicious
28 approach. *Animal Farm*, one of his best-known novels, was published in 1945, when the world
29 witnessed the rise and reign of Nazism in Germany, fascism in Italy, and the Russian Revolution,
30 which began in 1917. (Fitzpatrick, 1979) argued that when the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917,
31 education was a tool mainly attributed to the privileged classes. The peasantry was kept
32 uneducated so that the "Bourgeoisie" could maintain the same social ascendancy and dominance.
33 After the Revolution, Lenin and Trotsky adopted the policy of mass education, especially for the

34 working class. But during the reign of Joseph Stalin, education became a weapon he used to
35 brainwash citizens and to reinforce loyalty to his own beliefs.

36 When we read *Animal Farm* and consider its historical context, we can quickly identify
37 the parallels between George Orwell's fiction and the Russian Revolution and the Rise of Joseph
38 Stalin. This observation pushes us to ask these questions: how did Orwell describe the process of
39 indoctrination in *Animal Farm*? What were the mechanisms used to manipulate and brainwash
40 the other animals?

41 This article argues that illiteracy and propaganda were the main tools used by the
42 educated pigs to indoctrinate and manipulate the whole farm. We use a New Historicist approach
43 to explore the similarities between the fiction and its context, to describe the theoretical
44 framework and to discuss the strategies used to establish dictatorship on the farm and how they
45 mirrored their historical background.

46 I. Literature Review

47
48 (Moran, 2001) asserted that readers and critics analyzed *Animal Farm* from different
49 perspectives. But considering the period it was published, the plot of that satire was explicitly
50 hinting at the evolution of the Russian Revolution. (Fitzpatrick, 1979) depicted how that uprising
51 put an end to the reign of Tsar Nicholas II. When the Bolsheviks were in charge, education was
52 no longer exclusive to the upper class. They made sure the working classes, mainly the children,
53 could go to school and get a proper education. This vision was inspired by Karl Marx and
54 Engels, who spread the concept of a polytechnical education, allowing the lower classes to learn
55 various skill sets. (Marx & Engels, 1932) believed that:

56 In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but
57 each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the
58 general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and
59 another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the
60 evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter,
61 fisherman, shepherd or critic (Marx & Engels, 1932).

62 Furthermore, (Reed, 1919) shares the same perspective as he insisted on the value of education.
63 In *Ten Days that Shook the World*, he insisted that the workers who had taken the power should
64 always bear in mind that education would become the greatest asset in their fight for a brighter
65 future and spiritual growth (277). Added to that, he perceived that a large budget dedicated to
66 education is indeed the pride of a nation that will see an educated generation emerge and close
67 the existing gap between the rich and the poor.

68 This agenda went on until Joseph Stalin gradually took power, and we started to see how he
69 used education to spread ideologies that would reinforce his dominance as a dictator (Holmes,
70 1999). With Stalin, individualism started to fade away, and everything was designed to establish
71 tyranny and force people to blindly obey the state's policies. The same rules were applied in
72 Nazi Germany, as Hitler himself claimed that whoever controls the youth, controls the future
73 (Rauschnig, 1939). Hitler wanted a ruthless and fearless youth that would defend Nazism at the
74 cost of their lives. Still according to (Holmes, 1999):

75 Soviet power especially under Stalin proved adept at a thoroughgoing
76 politicization of both public and private. Its propaganda made the point over and
77 again, most notably with the show trials, where private thoughts became capital
78 crimes against the state, and with such propaganda pieces as the film, *The Radiant*
79 *Path*, shot in 1937 although released only in 1940. The heroine, Tanya Morozova,
80 who began life as a simple maid, advanced to become a Stakhanovite textile worker,
81 engineer, and deputy to the Supreme Soviet. At the film's close, her face merged with
82 one of the Kremlin's towers, suggesting the "unity of the individual with the state
83 (Holmes, 1999: p100)."

84 (Holmes, 1999) mentioned how propaganda was helping Stalin muzzle its population. The
85 movie scene depicted in the above passage described how the Russians had to behave towards
86 the government, merging their beliefs with the ideologies of their leader to become one single
87 entity. (Tan, 2004) described this process as indoctrination, which is the paralysis of one's
88 cognitive imagination. Moreover, (Wagner, 1981) claimed that indoctrination can cause a person
89 to hold a belief that they cannot rationally justify. (Tan, 2004) added that:

90 While this definition of indoctrination is uncontroversial, the problem arises in
91 the area of moral education. Given the fact that children have yet to possess moral
92 autonomy and acquire a moral point of view, a number of philosophers have argued
93 that indoctrination is inevitable in moral education. This conclusion poses a dilemma
94 for parents and teachers who desire to teach moral values to their children and
95 students without indoctrinating them (Tan, 2004: p1).

96 (Paglayan, 2025) asserted that indoctrination was the process of teaching people to adopt new
97 beliefs without questioning them. Its main purpose is to enhance the legitimacy of the
98 authoritarian regime in the eyes of the population. Besides, mass education, just like in Stalin's
99 regime, allows the rulers to brainwash people and monitor the citizens by controlling every
100 aspect of their lives.

101 Dictators knew how to use education to their advantage to spread their ideologies. When they
102 faced uneducated citizens, they would simply leave them with their ignorance and feed them lies
103 and false information. In case the population was educated and alert, dictators would use
104 propaganda and directly target the youth, rewriting stories and brainwashing at an early stage, to
105 shape their beliefs once they are grown. In *Animal Farm*, the Pigs were the dictators, led by
106 Napoleon, who took advantage of the illiteracy of other animals and used propaganda to
107 manipulate and indoctrinate them.

108 **II. Theoretical Framework**

109 Illiteracy has been the weakness of many societies that fell under the control of dictators.
110 Those authoritarian leaders know how to take advantage of that shortcoming and use it against
111 the people they rule. They use different mechanisms like propaganda, to manipulate the masses
112 and brainwash them. In that process, some people end up losing their identity. Some of those
113 mechanisms used by dictators are described by (Althusser, 1970) as Ideological State
114 Apparatuses (ISA), to explain how people living under dictatorships are controlled by tools that
115 seem harmless and beneficial to them at first glance.

116 Education, religion, mass media, and culture are pillars that shape human beings. They
117 influence the way we think and what we believe in. They consequently become tools used by
118 rulers to indoctrinate their illiterate population, given that they will always believe what they are
119 told. At the end, their capacity to question and resist is obliterated, and they cannot think
120 independently. They behave like automatons who are deprived of any free will as they are
121 dehumanized. (Freire, 1970) argued that dehumanization marked people whose humanity had
122 been taken away, but also people who took it. We can consider it the process that prevents an
123 individual from becoming fully human.

124 In *Animal Farm*, we observe the same pattern with the pigs, considered more intelligent than
125 other animals, naturally taking the lead and triggering the revolution that had overthrown the
126 authority of the farm owner, Mr. Jones. Yet, when the revolution occurred, and the pigs became
127 the leaders, they started to act like the same rulers they once fought against. This power dynamic
128 is also explained in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* when O'Brien was talking to Winston
129 about power:

130 We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it.
131 Power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to
132 safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the
133 dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture.
134 The object of power is power. Now do you begin to understand me?(Orwell, 1949:
135 p251)'

136 O'Brian clearly addressed one contradiction found in almost every revolution. All those
137 leaders claim to be selfless and just want to help the poor people. They appear like heroes,
138 unselfish, altruistic, and humble human beings who want to fight injustice and be there for the
139 oppressed. Before seizing power, they always pretend to be uninterested. What they are doing is
140 a sacrifice for the greater good, almost out of pure kindness. But once that power falls into their
141 hands, the script starts to change little by little, just like in the farm with the seven initial
142 commandments gradually changing to justify the behavior of the new owners. Illiteracy
143 represents the heart of the matter in this situation because other animals could not read and
144 understand what the pigs were plotting. Rather, propaganda and even intimidation were used to
145 repel and discourage any sort of uprising that could threaten their hegemony.

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148 III. Discussion

149
150 George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is still relevant as we observe how the practices he describes
151 in his novel are prevailing in some countries. He showed the crucial need to seek knowledge as
152 it can set a whole nation free. If the pigs became the leaders, it was because they had the
153 advantage of being educated. Other animals could have done better if they were asked to lead the
154 revolution. Their only fault was their inability to read and understand what was actually going on
155 in the farm.

156 This allegory clearly depicts how revolutions can be corrupted as leaders who used to be
157 motivated by the fight against injustice and oppression end up being the oppressors. We saw a
158 similar story happening during the Russian Revolution. When the regime of Tsar Nicholas II
159 ended, the Bolsheviks established new rules that would change the setting and foster social
160 mobility. The lower classes would have easier access to education, which was almost an
161 exclusivity of the higher classes, and added to that, the new leaders heavily invested in the
162 industrialization of the country (Fitzpatrick, 1979). The same picture was depicted in George
163 Orwell's allegory. He explained that the uprising that overthrew Mr. Jones was organized by the
164 pigs. They are generally considered smarter than other animals. Snowball, a natural leader,
165 started organizing the farm by assigning animals different tasks that would make the farm work
166 and most importantly, wanted to teach them how to read. Another similarity was the project to
167 build a windmill to boost the animals' productivity and improve their living conditions on the
168 farm, and that is when the revolution took another turn.

169 The windmill can be assimilated to the process of industrialization carried out by the
170 Russian leaders after the revolution. Indeed, the windmill was supposed to generate electricity
171 that would have powered the whole farm. Snowball's end goal was to set animals free from
172 labor, as the electricity could operate and manage the whole farm and keep the animals warm
173 during the winter season.

174 Napoleon nurtured the idea of leading the farm, but with that ambitious project carried by his
175 rival Snowball, life in the Manor farm would have been a utopia, and all animals would have
176 undoubtedly followed him. The day Snowball was supposed to deliver the speech that would
177 convince other animals to build the windmill was the moment chosen by Napoleon to chase

178 away his enemy by unleashing nine dogs he had been secretly breeding. Those fierce animals
179 hunted down Snowball, who had no other choice but to run for his life.

180 Napoleon used brute force and intimidation to get rid of his rival Snowball and take the lead
181 of the Manor farm. But to maintain himself at the top, he used another weapon, more effective
182 and vicious, which is propaganda. He sent Squealer to communicate about new rules and the
183 first step was to rewrite history and twist the narratives by questioning and undermining the hard
184 work done by Snowball, and calling him a criminal. Squealer was so good at his craft that other
185 animals started to doubt themselves:

186 Once again this argument was unanswerable; [...] if the holding of debates on
187 Sunday mornings was liable to bring him back, then the debates must stop. Boxer,
188 who had now had time to think things over, voiced the general feeling by saying: “If
189 Comrade Napoleon says it, it must be right.” And from then on he adopted the
190 maxim, “Napoleon is always right,” in addition to his private motto of “I will work
191 harder” (Orwell, 1945: p46).

192 A massive campaign of propaganda started on the farm, and its only goal was to degrade and
193 tarnish the image of Snowball. By doing so, they rewrote history and made Snowball go from a
194 hero to a pariah, responsible for all the evil things happening on the Manor farm. This approach
195 has always been used by dictators, who always need to have an enemy, a scapegoat, somebody
196 they can always blame, even if they need to create that opponent. In George Orwell’s *Nineteen*
197 *Eighty-four*, we can see the same scenario orchestrated by the Inner Party, led by Big Brother,
198 whose sole nemesis is a character called Goldstein, accused of being the root of all evil things
199 happening in Oceania. The strategy was to blame Emmanuel Goldstein for trying to overthrow
200 the Inner Party, so he and all of his accomplices had to be chased and arrested:

201 A day never passed when spies and saboteurs acting under his directions were not
202 unmasked by the Thought Police. He was the commander of a vast shadowy army, an
203 underground network of conspirators dedicated to the overthrow of the State. The
204 Brotherhood, its name was supposed to be. There were also whispered stories of a
205 terrible book, a compendium of all the heresies, of which Goldstein was the author
206 and which circulated clandestinely here and there. It was a book without a title.

207 People referred to it, if at all, simply as THE BOOK. But one knew of such things
208 only through vague rumours(Orwell, 1949: p14).

209 The problem here is not Goldstein but the Oceanians who are with him. He will never be
210 arrested because he needs to exist. Dictators need enemies so they can put their state under
211 constant surveillance and justify their need to monitor people. So even if they do not have
212 enemies, they will create one for the sole purpose of getting rid of people who would try to fight
213 their regime. Napoleon did the same thing with Snowball, as any animal suspected of siding with
214 him would be called a traitor and would face brutal repression. Animals were constantly
215 frightened. Snowball was accused of doing all the bad things happening on the farm, as
216 suggested in this passage:

217 “Comrades!” cried Squealer, making little nervous skips, “a most terrible thing
218 has been discovered. Snowball has sold himself to Frederick of Pinchfield Farm, who
219 is even now plotting to attack us and take our farm away from us! Snowball is to act
220 as his guide when the attack begins. But there is worse than that. We had thought that
221 Snowball’s rebellion was caused simply by his vanity and ambition. But we were
222 wrong, comrades. Do you know what the real reason was? Snowball was in league
223 with Jones from the very start! He was Jones’s secret agent all the time. It has all
224 been proved by documents which he left behind him and which we have only just
225 discovered (Orwell, 1945: p64).

226 The truth was completely rewritten thanks to propaganda, and the worst part was that animals
227 who had witnessed everything, right from the start, denied what they had seen and preferred
228 believing in these lies. Snowball, who organized the farm after the revolution, used his military
229 skills with the help of other animals to save the farm from foreign invasion, had then become a
230 long time Jone’s secret agent.

231 (Figes, 1996) explained how the same story happened during Stalin’s reign in the Soviet
232 Union and how people could be arrested for “anti-Soviet thinking”, criticism of the regime, or
233 even suspected disloyalty, as he argued:

234 They arrested statisticians and agronomists as 'revolutionaries' and prevented
235 them from travelling into the countryside. They raided the zemstvo institutions —

236 including hospitals and lunatic asylums — in search of 'political suspects'. They even
237 arrested local noblewomen for teaching peasant children how to read and write in
238 their spare time (Figes, 1996: p67).

239 Dictators need to spread terror and fear so they can accuse those people they suspect of being
240 traitors who plot against them. George Orwell stressed this approach in both *Animal Farm* and
241 *Nineteen Eighty-four*, when Napoleon was persecuting other animals he believed were working
242 with Snowball and in Oceania, everyone was wired, and the “Thought police” as he coined it
243 could plug in any citizen’s wire at any moment. Privacy was non-existent, and as he said, the
244 habit became an instinct that Oceanians had to live with.

245 Many autocrats are known for their mental instability. Joseph Stalin, for instance, was always
246 demanding absolute conformity in thought as well as actions, as stated by (Service, 2004). Under
247 his regime, nobody was safe from suspicion, and his regime required not only complete
248 obedience but also absolute belief:

249 He trusted none of his politicians and commanders. Even Zhukov, his favourite
250 military leader, was the object of his disquiet: Stalin instructed Bogdan Kobulov in
251 the NKVD to put a listening device in his home. Seemingly the same was done to
252 Stalin’s old comrades Voroshilov and Budenny. His suspicions were boundless.
253 Having ordered Dmitri Pavlov’s execution in the early days of the war, Stalin was
254 little more satisfied with Ivan Konev, Pavlov’s successor on the Western Front
255 (Service, 2004: p491).

256 It was even worse during Nazi Germany, with a major part of the youth going through a
257 whole process of Nazification (Lewis, 2000). Hitler wanted obedience not only from adults, but
258 also from the younger generation.

259 The indoctrination started at a very early stage, as young boys were taught the ideologies and
260 beliefs of Nazism and had to undergo military training. Hitler had his plans, and he knew his
261 most loyal allies could be his youth, innocent kids with malleable minds, and he took advantage
262 of that:

263 The Hitler Youth itself was by no means lily- white, despite the dazzling image
264 created by Nazi propaganda and the dramatic shows of youth solidarity displayed at
265 the Nuremberg and other rallies. Within both the Jungvolk and the Hitler Youth, all
266 manner of crimes were committed. Rules were broken, discipline defied, moral
267 imperatives [...] were ignored and the movement acquired a reputation, never
268 officially admitted, for brutality, decadence and evil influence (Lewis, 2000: p9).

269 Propaganda represented a lethal tool used by dictators to justify all their crimes. Most of the
270 time, they were dealing with illiterate people who could not grasp the subtle techniques their so-
271 called leaders were using to make them submissive and obedient. In *Animal Farm*, George
272 Orwell showed how illiteracy caused the indoctrination of other animals who could not realize
273 that the revolution and ideologies they fought for were being betrayed. Step by step, the seven
274 commandments were altered until the betrayal reached its peak when the last but most important
275 commandment went from “All animals are equal” to “All animals are equal, but some are more
276 equal than others.”

277 Orwell demonstrates the power of education and language in his dystopian novels. Illiteracy
278 is a weakness, and he shows how people can easily be brainwashed and indoctrinated because of
279 their low level of education. In *Nineteen Eighty-four*, he introduced two major concepts that are
280 bending reality and linguistic standards, which are Newspeak and Doublethink.

281 Newspeak, as he clarified it, was the official language used in Oceania. It was designed by
282 the Inner Party to serve their own purpose: confusing the masses. It was crafted to diminish and
283 reduce the range of thought by carefully taking off some words and expressions that do not meet
284 the needs of the established regime. Using that language allowed Oceanian leaders to tell lies and
285 deliver irrelevant speeches but still make sense and appeal to the masses.

286 The other mind controlling method we have mentioned was doublethink, which is a more
287 efficient approach to twist reality, confuse the masses, and rewrite history. Orwell explained that:

288 DOUBLETHINK means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s
289 mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them. The Party intellectual knows in
290 which direction his memories must be altered; he therefore knows that he is playing
291 tricks with reality; but by the exercise of DOUBLETHINK he also satisfies himself

292 that reality is not violated. The process has to be conscious, or it would not be carried
 293 out with sufficient precision, but it also has to be unconscious, or it would bring with
 294 it a feeling of falsity and hence of guilt (Orwell, 1949: p270).

295 Doublethink was a common practice in the Manor Farm. They reached a point where one
 296 thing could be right today and become wrong tomorrow. This practice was institutionalized by
 297 the pigs to normalize what they were up to. When they had entirely changed the commandments,
 298 life on the farm was not the same anymore, as the new owners strangely looked like the ones
 299 who had left. They were supervising the activities of the farm with a whip, installing a telephone
 300 in the Manor, and reading newspapers, wearing the same clothes Mr. and Mrs. Jones had left in
 301 their wardrobe.

302 This plot parallels the story of the Russian Revolution, given that we notice striking
 303 similarities between *Animal Farm*'s characters, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and the main leaders
 304 during the Soviet Union, as exemplified in Table 1.

305 Table 1 : Similarities between *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-four* and historical figures.

<i>Animal Farm</i> 's characters	Historical References	<i>Nineteen Eighty-four</i>
Napoleon	Joseph Stalin	Big Brother
Snowball	Leon Trotsky	Goldstein
The pigs	Communist Party (the ruling elite)	The Inner Party
Other animals	The working class (exploited)	The outer party and the proles
The Manor farm	Soviet Union	Oceania

306
 307 Even though Emmanuel Goldstein in *Nineteen Eighty-four* did not play the same role as
 308 Trotsky and Snowball, we see how they ended up becoming the scapegoats of the states they
 309 were part of. He was rather a fictional entity created by the Inner Party to attract and decoy those
 310 who were still seeking the true version of history and not the narratives they were fed by their
 311 oppressor.

312 Conclusion

313 This article examines how propaganda, mixed with illiteracy, can be used as a way to
314 indoctrinate and manipulate people. In *Animal Farm*, If other animals had known how to read
315 and decipher messages, they would have never let Napoleon reach his final goal: taking total
316 control of the Manor farm and behaving the same way as Mr. Jones did. He gradually altered the
317 initial commandments so they could serve his own purpose and give him more power. In
318 *Nineteen Eighty-four*, O'Brian clarified the truth behind many revolutions that occurred
319 throughout history.

320 They justify their desire to seize power by claiming that they are fighting against
321 injustice, they are willing to sacrifice themselves to establish fairness and give the power back to
322 the people, but at the end of the day, once they are in charge, we see other ideologies and new
323 ways of thinking that are the total opposite of what they used to stand for. Orwell's allegory
324 teaches us the paramount importance of education and critical thinking in our societies so we can
325 avoid the predicted picture of the future, where boots are stamping on our faces.

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