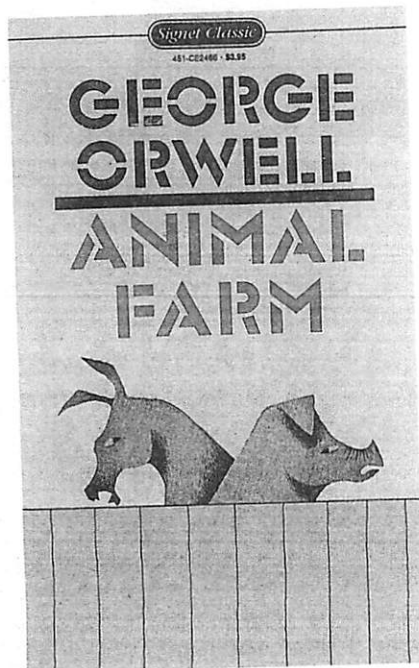

THE ELEMENTS OF A NOVEL

An introduction by John Leggett

In a narrative so plain that a child will enjoy it, yet with double meanings as cruel and comic as any great cartoon, George Orwell presents a parable that may rank as one of the great political satires of our anxious time. . . . the impact goes straight to the forehead of any kind of Goliath, any monstrous totalitarianism. It is a smooth stone indeed, sped by a skillful slinger.

—Christopher Morley



Ask your classmates to define the term **novel**, and see if you all mean the same thing by the word. For example, do you agree on how a novel differs from a short story? Is a novel simply longer than a short story? Surely it is that. Short stories, as a rule, get themselves told within fifteen or twenty book pages, often even less. If a short story is longer than that, some people suspect that the writer hasn't probed deeply enough to tell the story as a full novel, or that the writer hasn't wanted to make the cutting necessary to produce a short story.

Of course, there is a very legitimate mid-sized narrative of about fifty book pages called the **novella** ("little novel"), but for some reason novellas are very rare. Perhaps the length is an awkward one. A fifty-page story is too long for most magazines to use and too brief for a book publisher to bind and sell conveniently in hard cover.

What is a novel? It is a long fictional story, whose length is normally somewhere between a hundred and five hundred book pages, which uses all the elements of storytelling: **plot, character, setting, theme, and point of view**. The novel has been the most popular form of storytelling since its appearance in England in the eighteenth century.

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, a long fictional account of the adventures of a shipwrecked sailor, was published in 1719. It was followed by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in 1740, by Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* in 1749, and by the first true psychological novel, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, in 1760.

The Reach of a Novel

Though novels share all the elements of a short story (see page 3), they differ in their reach or scope. While the short story tends to confine itself to a single important **conflict**, to a few **characters**, to a single **theme**, and to a short span of **time**, the novel can, and usually does, embrace a great many conflicts, multiple themes, and several settings. While James Joyce's huge novel *Ulysses* takes place in a single day, John Galsworthy's novel *The Forsyte Saga* takes thirty-four years to unfold. A novel like Leo Tolstoy's great *War and Peace* introduces us to armies, soldiers, and officers by the barracksful, and to their families at home as well. Charles Dickens stretches another huge canvas for his masterful portrayal of the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

What Does a Novel "Do"?

Why do people read, let alone write, one of these long stories called a novel? People who read a great deal believe that a good novel does two things, and that it does them at the same time. It entertains us, and it tells us something about ourselves or about the world we live in.

If a novel succeeds with us, it so absorbs us in the lives of its characters that they seem like people we actually know, and we must read on to discover what happens to them. If at the same time we are also learning about some huge history-making event like a revolution, then our lives have been stretched with new knowledge and new pleasure. We know a little more than we did about how people behave in good times and in bad. We also know a little more about how to deal with our own lives.

Writing a novel takes an enormous amount of time: several years as a rule, and five or six years is not unusual. Writing a novel has to be done alone, too. As a prisoner in a workroom, the writer draws characters, scenes, and a story out of his or her own mind and heart. "Torture," some writers will tell you. Why do it?

Some say the novelist does it for money; that is how he or she earns a living. But the motive for writing a novel involves more than that. A novel is written out of the writer's belief in a private vision, in a gift of knowledge about what is going on between people here on earth. The writer has some insight into "the purpose of it all" that he or she wants to share. Every once in a while, the insight is worth the sharing, and we have a great novel. But, of course, visions are very personal matters, and we have to make up our own minds about whose vision is worth sharing.

Most novelists start a new book with an idea that interests them or with a character who interests them. From that moment, progress can be like a long journey taken into a wilderness. The writer takes chances and often follows paths that turn out to be the wrong ones.

Writing a novel is generally hard labor. Some writers feel that, day after day, they seem to be dragging a dead weight up a steep

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Animal Farm

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hill. If they are extremely lucky, one day the weight stirs, it begins to come to life, and it does do some of the work on its own. When this happens, that lucky writer has broken into the lode of inner experience where it is possible to discover the deepest of feelings. From that moment, the writer may feel that the novel is writing itself.

Of course, there are all kinds of novels. They may be good or bad, serious or funny, profound or superficial. They may have to do with **ideas** (as in George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm*) or they may have to do chiefly with **character** (as in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*). Most great novels are equally concerned with both character and ideas (as in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*). Novels can also be simply entertainment—as a mystery or spy or science-fiction novel usually is.

For most of us, the worthwhile novels must either inform us of something we're the better for knowing—how it is to work in a coal mine or to be the general of a losing army—or else they must move us in some way, toward tears or laughter. The great novels give us a strong emotional experience—and that is a test of what is worthy in art of every kind.

Where Did the Story Come From?

George Orwell got the idea for *Animal Farm* from seeing a small boy driving a horse and whipping it whenever it tried to turn. “It struck me,” said Orwell, “that if only such animals became aware of their strength, we should have no power over them, and that men exploit animals in much the same way as the rich exploit the proletariat [the working class].”

When he began writing *Animal Farm*, Orwell was forty-two years old and a relatively unknown writer. The books he had produced up to then revealed definite political convictions. Orwell disapproved of Britain's privileged class and believed instead in the traditions and virtues of the working class.

These beliefs had been fostered by a visit Orwell made to Spain about ten years earlier. He had gone to Spain in order to write about the Civil War there, and even to fight in it. In fact, he was so badly wounded in battle by a sniper's bullet in his neck that his voice was permanently altered. But the war experience had also given him a horrifying glimpse of political reality. In Spain he saw how liberal, revolutionary causes can be corrupted and evolve into another form of totalitarianism, which he saw as the future's big threat to human freedom. (Totalitarianism is a kind of dictatorship where one political party has total control and all opposition is ruthlessly suppressed.)

Later in Russia, he saw a powerful leader—Joseph Stalin—come up through the revolutionary ranks and end up oppressing the people as badly as they had been oppressed before, under the czars.

To show how a whole nation could be enslaved, Orwell created his fable about the animals of Manor Farm. Orwell said that the



Night Pigs by Jamie Wyeth (1979). Oil on board.

© 1979 by James Wyeth. Courtesy of the Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

book was the first "in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose in one whole."

When *Animal Farm* was published in 1945, its success surprised even Orwell. The first edition sold out in a month, and by spring of 1946 it was being translated into nine languages. It sold over half a million copies and ended Orwell's financial worries.

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Along with Orwell's next novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Animal Farm* made its author into the outstanding political satirist of his time. When he died of a neglected lung disease in 1950, at the age of forty-six, he was recognized as the conscience of his generation.

The Life of Orwell (1903–1950)



George Orwell as the proprietor of *Animal Farm*. Drawing by David Levine.

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“**D**on’t
let it happen.
It depends on you.”

“George Orwell” is a pen name. He was born Eric Blair in India, into a British family he described as “shabby-genteel.” (He took his pen name because he felt “Eric Blair” sounded like a snobbish, upper class name.) Back home in England, Eric was sent to “rich man’s schools” where he saw how wealth and privilege prevailed in every situation, and how the strong constantly triumphed over the weak. Instead of going on to the university, he took a post with the police department at Rangoon in Burma.

He did not enjoy this service: “In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters.” His health also suffered in the Burmese climate. He had always been an avid reader, and when he returned to England in 1927, in search of another career, he quite naturally chose writing.

He also began to lead a notably Bohemian life. He traveled to Paris, where he lived in filth and poverty, and he spent a year in England, traveling as a tramp. His first book, called *Down and Out in London and Paris*, was about these experiences.

His experience in the Spanish Civil War was critical. What he saw in Barcelona disillusioned him. He returned from Spain bitter toward Communist policy and totalitarianism in general. He then developed the idea for *Animal Farm*—“a nightmare world in which the leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but the past. If the leader says of such and such an event, ‘it never happened’—well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five—well, two and two are five.”

By 1948, within two years of his death, Orwell had finished his second masterwork, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This novel looks into the future (1984 was then 36 years away) where it finds humankind deprived of a past, of privacy, of freedom, and of individualism. Orwell said that he had not intended this novel as a prophecy but as a warning “that something like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could happen.” “The moral to be drawn from this dangerous, nightmare situation is a simple one,” said Orwell: “Don’t let it happen. It depends on you.”

The Form of *Animal Farm*

Animal Farm combines three different literary forms. First, it is a **fable**, or a beast tale. Fables are usually brief and humorous stories in which animals speak and act like humans. The purpose of a fable is to expose some human failing. The use of animals in a

beast fable helps the writer control the reader's feelings: people who are portrayed as pigs, or sheep, or worms do not usually seem very admirable, or dignified. Perhaps Orwell chose this fable form because he had always loved animals and observed them carefully. "Most of my good memories of my childhood, and up to the age of about twenty," he wrote, "are in some way connected with animals."

Animal Farm is also an **allegory**, a story that can be read on two different levels. Each character or event in an allegory stands for something else, and the writer uses these characters and events to convey some moral message. To people who are aware of Orwell's purpose, and of history, the animals' rebellion on Manor Farm is clearly an allegory for the Russian Revolution in 1917, and the pig Napoleon represents the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin. It is possible to "translate" most of the other events and characters in the novel to some real-life equivalents in Russian history.

Finally, *Animal Farm* is a **satire**, a form of literature that uses ridicule to make specific events and people look foolish or stupid. Satire always has a bite—it seeks out our weaknesses and wrongdoings and forces us to see our behavior with new eyes. Satire usually uses **dramatic irony**—in which we perceive a contrast between what is stated on the page and what is really meant. Satire also uses **situational irony**—in which we realize that there is a discrepancy between what we expect to happen and what actually does happen. *Animal Farm* probably has more irony per page than any other modern novel; watch for it as you read.

Yet, for all the political meanings people have seen in it, *Animal Farm* is not merely a political book. Basically, it is a good story, and that is why people have continued to read it for over forty years. The specific political satire is there for people who want to analyze it, but for most readers the first pleasure is in finding out "what happened" on Manor Farm after the animals took over. The second pleasure lies in recognizing how this barnyard menagerie could be a microcosm of our own society, and of any society—at any time in history, at any place on the planet. What Orwell said about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could also apply to *Animal Farm*:

"Don't let it happen. It depends on you."

The Themes of the Novel

Though *Animal Farm* is often humorous, it reveals several serious **themes**, or main ideas. Here are some of them:

1. The idea that freedom and individual dignity must be guarded very carefully.
2. The idea that language is a powerful tool; used improperly, it can enslave and confuse us.
3. The idea that weakness can be dominated by strength, fear, and trickery.
4. The idea that hope and vision must be kept alive, or we might live like the animals of Manor Farm.

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