Animal Farm Reassembled: Actor-Network Theory and the Construction of Power in Orwell's Novella

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Abstract

This paper reinterprets George Orwell's *Animal Farm* through the lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), moving beyond traditional allegorical readings that reduce the novella to a closed system of historical correspondences. While conventional criticism has mapped characters onto figures from the Russian Revolution, such approaches privilege human intention and symbolic representation while neglecting the role of non-human actants. Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, this analysis reconceptualises the farm as a dynamic network in which power emerges from the alignment and translation of heterogeneous entities—animals, texts, tools, and environmental forces. The rebellion is examined as a moment of network reassembly; the windmill as a material actant that reorganises labour; the Seven Commandments as an immutable mobile that sustains ideological control; and Squealer as a translation mechanism that stabilises authority. The paper argues that the pigs' dominance is not simply a matter of individual ambition or ideological betrayal but

the outcome of their capacity to enrol and align diverse actants. By foregrounding materiality and relationality, this study offers a genuinely novel mode of interpretation that expands the critical possibilities of Orwell's text and contributes to post-anthropocentric methodologies in literary studies.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, allegory, Animal Farm, Bruno Latour, George Orwell, materiality, non-human agency

Introduction

Since its publication in 1945, *Animal Farm* has been predominantly read as a political allegory of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. Critical discourse has long mapped Orwell's characters and events onto identifiable historical counterparts, producing a stable interpretive framework in which Napoleon stands for Stalin, Snowball for Trotsky, and the windmill for Soviet industrialisation (Woodcock 85–87; Williams 70–73). While this allegorical paradigm has yielded valuable insights, it has also constrained the novella within a closed system of representation, where meaning is derived primarily from external historical referents rather than from the internal dynamics of the text itself.

More recent scholarship has sought to complicate this model by foregrounding questions of language, ideology, and power. Critics such as Christopher Hitchens emphasise Orwell's critique of political language and moral corruption, particularly in relation to propaganda and ideological manipulation (Hitchens 54–58). Similarly, linguistic approaches, including those of Roger Fowler, analyse how discourse functions as a mechanism of control, drawing attention to slogans, commandments, and rhetorical strategies (Fowler 102–05). These interventions extend interpretation beyond strict allegory, yet they remain largely centred on human agency and symbolic meaning.

This paper argues that such frameworks, while influential, are insufficient for capturing the full complexity of *Animal Farm*. To move beyond these limitations, it proposes the

application of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a methodological approach developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, which reconceptualises social phenomena as networks of heterogeneous actants. ANT rejects the privileging of human actors and insists on the analytical symmetry of all entities—human, animal, and material—that participate in the production of effects. By 'following the actants', this approach enables a shift from interpretive models based on representation to those grounded in interaction, mediation, and relationality (Latour, *Reassembling* 12–15; Law 379).

Applying ANT to *Animal Farm* allows for a fundamental rethinking of the novella's political logic. Rather than treating the text as a static allegory, this study reads it as a dynamic system in which power emerges from the alignment and translation of diverse actants. The pigs' authority, in this view, is not simply a function of ideological manipulation or individual ambition but the outcome of their capacity to organise and stabilise a network that includes not only animals but also objects such as the windmill, the Seven Commandments, and the physical infrastructure of the farm. These non-human elements are not passive backdrops but active participants that shape the distribution of labour, the circulation of meaning, and the consolidation of control (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 72).

The argument proceeds through a series of focused analyses: the rebellion as network reassembly; the windmill as non-human actant; the Seven Commandments as immutable mobile; Squealer as translation mechanism; and the final scene as the successful black-boxing of the network. By repositioning *Animal Farm* within the framework of ANT, this paper offers a new mode of interpretation that foregrounds materiality, mediation, and non-human agency in the construction of power.

Literature Review

Critical engagement with *Animal Farm* has been historically dominated by allegorical and political readings that situate the novella within the context of the Russian Revolution.

Early influential interpretations, such as those by George Woodcock, emphasise the text as direct political satire, mapping characters onto identifiable historical figures (Woodcock 85–87). Such readings, while pedagogically useful, tend to reduce the novella to a closed system of one-to-one correspondences.

Subsequent scholarship has complicated this reductive framework. Raymond Williams situates Orwell within a broader tradition of democratic socialism, arguing that *Animal Farm* reflects anxieties about the corruption of revolutionary ideals more generally (Williams 70–73). Similarly, Christopher Hitchens foregrounds Orwell's moral clarity and critique of totalitarian language (Hitchens 54–58). These approaches shift attention from strict historical allegory to questions of ethics, language, and power.

Linguistic and discourse-oriented studies have further deepened the field. Roger Fowler analyses Orwell's prose as a vehicle for ideological control, particularly through the manipulation of slogans and commandments. Squealer's rhetoric becomes a case study in political language, echoing Orwell's concerns in 'Politics and the English Language' (Fowler 102–05). This line of inquiry emphasises how language constructs and maintains systems of domination.

More recent theoretical interventions have drawn upon frameworks such as biopolitics and posthumanism. Influenced by Michel Foucault, some critics interpret the farm as a site of biopolitical regulation, where animal bodies are disciplined and exploited for productive labour. Parallel to this, posthumanist readings have begun to question the anthropocentric assumptions underlying earlier interpretations.

Despite these developments, the majority of scholarship remains fundamentally anthropocentric. Even when animals are foregrounded, they are typically treated as symbolic stand-ins for human actors rather than as entities with material agency. Objects such as the windmill, the farmhouse, and the Seven Commandments are almost invariably interpreted as

symbols rather than as participants in the unfolding of political power. This symbolic reduction limits the analytical scope of the text.

A small but significant body of literary criticism has begun to engage with materiality and networks, particularly under the influence of science and technology studies. However, these approaches have not been systematically applied to *Animal Farm*. While Rita Felski advocates for a 'post-critical' methodology that attends to the agency of objects (Felski 9–12), her work has not been directly mobilised in Orwell studies. Similarly, the methodological insights of Bruno Latour, especially his insistence on recognising the agency of non-human actants, remain conspicuously absent from mainstream interpretations.

This absence is striking given the thematic compatibility between *Animal Farm* and ANT. Orwell's narrative is replete with entities such as animals, tools, texts, environmental forces that interact in complex ways to produce political outcomes. Yet existing criticism has largely failed to conceptualise these interactions as networks of heterogeneous actants. The present study therefore identifies a critical gap: the lack of a network-oriented, materially grounded analysis that accounts for the agency of both human and non-human elements in the text.

Theoretical Framework

Actor-Network Theory, primarily developed by Bruno Latour along with Michel Callon and John Law, offers a radically non-anthropocentric method for analysing social and material relations. Emerging from science and technology studies, ANT challenges conventional sociological models that privilege human agency, instead proposing that both human and non-human entities participate equally in the construction of social reality. Rather than treating objects as passive instruments or symbols, ANT conceptualises them as active participants, ‘actants’, that shape, mediate, and transform networks of relations (Latour, *Reassembling* 10–15).

At the core of ANT lies the principle of generalised symmetry, which refuses to impose *a priori* distinctions between human and non-human actors. Animals, machines, texts, and environmental forces are all granted analytical parity with human subjects. For literary analysis, this move is particularly significant, as objects have traditionally been subordinated to symbolic or allegorical interpretation. ANT insists that critics 'follow the actors' by tracing the associations through which agency is distributed across a network (Latour, *Reassembling* 12). Meaning does not reside in isolated entities but emerges from interactions among heterogeneous actants.

The concept of the actant is central: any entity that modifies a state of affairs by making a difference within a network. An actant may be a person, an animal, a tool, a text, or a natural force. Agency is distributed across a constellation of elements that collectively produce outcomes. Closely related is the process of translation: power is not an inherent attribute but an effect of successful translation—the capacity of one actant to enrol others and redefine their interests in ways that stabilise a network. Translation involves negotiation, alignment, and displacement: an actant speaks on behalf of others, often transforming their original intentions (Callon 196–98). This concept shifts attention from individual intention to the relational processes through which power is assembled.

Another key concept is the black box which is a network of relations that has become stabilised and taken for granted. Its internal complexity is no longer visible. Once a network is black-boxed, it appears as a single, coherent entity whose internal controversies are obscured (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 131). From an ANT perspective, the critical task is to 'open' these black boxes and examine the heterogeneous elements that sustain them.

The notion of the immutable mobile further refines ANT's attention to materiality. An immutable mobile is an object that can circulate across contexts while maintaining a stable form, thereby enabling the extension of power over distance (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 223).

Maps, diagrams, and written texts are classic examples. Their apparent stability allows them to function as reliable carriers of meaning, even as they are mobilised within different networks.

In applying ANT to *Animal Farm*, this study adopts a methodological commitment to tracing interactions among human, animal, and material actors without reducing them to symbolic functions. Rather than asking what the elements of the narrative represent, the analysis examines what they *do*: how they assemble networks, redistribute agency, and stabilise or destabilise systems of power.

Reassembling the Farm

Conventional readings interpret the rebellion primarily as a political overthrow, framed as an allegorical representation of the Russian Revolution. However, from an ANT perspective, the rebellion is better understood as the reconfiguration of a heterogeneous network of actants.

Prior to the rebellion, the farm operates through a relatively stabilised network in which Mr Jones functions as a central node—what ANT terms an obligatory passage point through which all relations must pass (Callon 203). All flows of resources, labour, and authority are mediated by Jones: 'the animals were underfed, they were overworked, and the profits were all taken by Mr Jones and his men' (Orwell 3). Instruments such as whips reinforce this configuration, materialising authority in physical form. This network is not sustained by human will alone; it depends equally on non-human actants—feeding systems, farm architecture, and the animals' bodily exhaustion.

The destabilisation begins with Old Major's speech. ANT demands that we situate the speech within a broader assemblage. Old Major's articulation of Animalism translates the animals' diffuse suffering into a shared framework: 'Man is the only real enemy we have' (Orwell 6). Yet this translation succeeds only because it resonates with material conditions—hunger, fatigue, and spatial proximity in the barn—that enable its circulation. As Latour argues, ideas gain force only through the networks that sustain them (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 128).

The immediate trigger for the rebellion further illustrates distributed agency. When Jones fails to feed the animals, their hunger precipitates an unplanned rupture: 'the animals broke into the store-shed and began to help themselves' (Orwell 11). This moment is not the execution of a premeditated plan but the result of material necessity. The breaking of the store-shed door, the spilling of grain, and the animals' collective movement all function as actants that destabilise the existing order. Jones's attempt to reassert control through violence fails because the network that once supported his authority has collapsed.

From an ANT perspective, the success of the rebellion lies in the temporary realignment of actants. The animals' bodies, the availability of food, the absence of effective human resistance, and the residual influence of Old Major's teachings converge to produce a new configuration of power. Power is not an inherent property but an effect of successful translation—the capacity to enrol and align diverse actors within a network (Callon 203). The rebellion is not the triumph of a unified collective will but the outcome of a contingent and fragile network effect.

In the aftermath, the pigs begin to reposition themselves within this newly formed network. Their literacy enables them to assume control over key mediating structures: 'the pigs had set aside the harness-room as a headquarters for themselves' and took responsibility for organising the others (Orwell 16). Through acts such as renaming the farm and formulating the Seven Commandments, they establish themselves as the new obligatory passage point. These moves are material interventions that restructure the network, redistributing authority and access.

The Windmill as Actant

Within conventional interpretations, the windmill is typically understood as a symbol—either of Soviet industrialisation or of the pigs' manipulative propaganda. An ANT approach

resists this reduction by treating the windmill as an actant: a non-human entity that actively participates in the reconfiguration of the farm's social and political order.

The windmill first emerges as a point of contention between Snowball and Napoleon. Snowball presents it as a technological innovation that will reduce labour: 'with the windmill the animals could have electric light in their stalls and hot and cold water' (Orwell 34). The windmill functions as a site of competing translations. Snowball translates the animals' desire for comfort into support for the project, enrolling them into a network oriented towards technological progress. Napoleon initially resists this translation, only later appropriating the windmill after expelling Snowball. This exemplifies the strategic redefinition of interests within a network: the windmill's meaning is not fixed but continually rearticulated (Callon 203).

Once construction begins, the windmill becomes a material force that reorganises labour. The animals are compelled to work under increasingly harsh conditions: 'the animals worked like slaves' (Orwell 38). The physical demands of quarrying stone, hauling materials, and erecting the structure reshape daily rhythms. The windmill operates as an actant by imposing new constraints and possibilities upon the network. It redistributes energy, time, and bodily effort, binding the animals into a more intensive labour regime. As Latour argues, objects are not passive intermediaries but mediators that transform the relations they carry (Latour, *Reassembling* 39).

The windmill also functions as a focal point for the consolidation of political authority. Napoleon's endorsement is accompanied by a retranslation of its purpose: it is no longer a means of easing labour but a necessity for survival. Squealer reinforces this shift, persuading the animals that increased work is essential: 'Surely, comrades, you do not want Jones back?' (Orwell 40). The windmill becomes entangled with the rhetoric of fear and loyalty, providing a concrete object around which ideological control can be organised.

The destruction of the first windmill marks a critical moment of instability. A violent storm topples the structure: 'in the morning the animals found the windmill lying in ruins' (Orwell 46). From an ANT perspective, the storm must be recognised as an actant that intervenes decisively in the network. Napoleon's response—attributing the destruction to Snowball—constitutes a strategic act of translation. By reassigning causality, he re-stabilises the network, transforming a natural event into evidence of sabotage: 'Snowball has done this thing!' (Orwell 47). The ruins themselves become part of the network, serving as 'evidence' that supports Napoleon's claim. In Latourian terms, the event is black-boxed: its complex material causes are obscured (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 131).

The subsequent rebuilding intensifies the animals' labour, demonstrating the object's enduring agency. The windmill thus exemplifies ANT's central claim: objects participate in the production of power by shaping the relations among actants.

The Seven Commandments as Immutable Mobile

Among the most frequently analysed elements are the Seven Commandments, typically read as a satirical representation of ideological corruption. An ANT approach shifts attention from content to operation, treating the commandments as an immutable mobile: a material object that appears stable and authoritative while enabling the flexible exercise of power (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 223).

The commandments are first established shortly after the rebellion, painted on the barn wall as a codified expression of Animalism: 'The Seven Commandments would now be inscribed on the wall' (Orwell 15). They function as a centralising device within the newly formed network, providing a visible and ostensibly permanent reference point for collective behaviour. Their authority derives not only from their ideological content but from their material form—a fixed inscription in a shared space. As Latour observes, immutable mobiles

gain power through their capacity to persist while maintaining a stable appearance (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 223).

However, this apparent stability enables manipulation. Over time, the pigs subtly alter the commandments to accommodate their changing practices. The original injunction 'No animal shall sleep in a bed' is later modified to 'No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets' (Orwell 45). Similarly, 'No animal shall drink alcohol' becomes 'No animal shall drink alcohol to excess' (Orwell 78). These changes are small enough to escape immediate detection yet significant enough to legitimise new behaviours. The wall remains intact; the visual authority of the text is preserved. This continuity allows the commandments to function as immutable mobiles despite their internal mutability.

From an ANT perspective, the power of the commandments lies in their role as mediators within the network. They regulate behaviour, justify decisions, and stabilise authority by providing a seemingly objective standard. The animals' limited literacy further reinforces this dynamic. Most are unable to read the commandments precisely, relying instead on memory or the pigs' interpretations. This creates a dependency that enhances the pigs' capacity for translation. By controlling access to and interpretation of the commandments, the pigs effectively speak on behalf of the text (Callon 203).

The commandments also function as a mechanism for black-boxing. Their presence simplifies complex political decisions into seemingly self-evident rules. When contradictions arise, the animals do not question the system itself but assume a failure of memory: 'the animals were certain that some rule had been broken' (Orwell 45). The network's internal inconsistencies are concealed, as the commandments absorb and neutralise dissent. The text becomes a black box—its authority accepted without scrutiny, its transformations rendered invisible (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 131).

The final transformation into a single maxim—'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others' (Orwell 90)—marks the culmination. The illusion of stability collapses into overt contradiction, yet the structure of authority remains intact. The immutable mobile has reached its limit, revealing that its power was never grounded in logical coherence but in material persistence and controlled interpretation.

Conclusion

This study has argued that *Animal Farm* is most productively understood not as a closed political allegory but as a dynamic network in which power emerges from the interactions of human, animal, and material actants. By applying ANT, the analysis has shifted attention away from representational equivalences and towards the processes through which authority is assembled, stabilised, and transformed. The pigs' dominance is not simply the result of individual ambition or ideological betrayal but of their capacity to control the translation and alignment of a heterogeneous network.

The final scene, in which the pigs become indistinguishable from humans, provides a decisive illustration: 'it was impossible to say which was which' (Orwell 95). From an ANT perspective, this represents the successful black-boxing of the network. The distinctions that once structured the farm—animal versus human, equality versus hierarchy—have been absorbed into a stabilised system whose internal contradictions are no longer visible. Black boxes function by concealing the complex negotiations and translations that produce them, presenting instead a unified and unquestioned reality (Latour, *Pandora's Hope* 131).

Throughout the narrative, this process has been incrementally constructed. The rebellion reassembled the network, redistributing agency. The windmill reorganised labour and anchored political authority in material form. The Seven Commandments operated as an immutable mobile, maintaining the illusion of continuity while enabling gradual transformation. By the novel's conclusion, the network has achieved relative closure. The

animals' inability to distinguish between pigs and humans signals not merely a loss of identity but the erasure of alternative perspectives within the network.

This reading has broader implications for literary criticism. It suggests that *Animal Farm* anticipates a mode of political analysis that foregrounds the role of materiality, mediation, and non-human agency in the production of power. By moving beyond anthropocentric and allegorical frameworks, ANT enables a more nuanced understanding of how authority is constructed—not only in fiction but in real-world systems where objects, technologies, and environments play an active role.

Ultimately, the significance of *Animal Farm* lies not solely in its critique of a particular historical regime but in its depiction of how networks of actants can be assembled to produce enduring structures of domination. The pigs' success is not merely a moral failure but a technical achievement: the creation of a system in which power is so thoroughly distributed and stabilised that it no longer appears as power at all.

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