**MLAN Final: Animals and Taboo**

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**Introduction**

Have you ever had a conversation when a taboo topic occurred and created an uncomfortable environment? Many people have, especially when talking about sensitive, social issues and painful history which elicits a deep emotional response. Some talented authors and social advocates realized how sensitive topics are taboo and utilized a means to communicate polarizing ideas: the use of animal characters in literature and in film. The use of animals can remove the seriousness of life-like social issues and have their audience instead view the sensitive issues as something that only affects the animal characters in media. Disney’s Zootopia, Art Spiegelman’s Maus, and George Orwell’s Animal farm all use animal characters to depict and explain the intricacies of complex social issues.

**Animal Farm**

George Orwell [Eric Arthur Blair] used animal characters to depict the rise of the Russian Revolution and how it evolved to what it was during WWII, when Animal Farm was published in 1945. Stalin ruled with a communist, tyrannical fist, causing social activists, like George Orwell, tactfully write about the faults communism and how it detrimentally affects its own people.

The book begins with the prize-winning pig Old Major inspiring the other animals to want better living conditions for themselves. Old major said all animals are equal, man only serves the interests of themselves, and how Jones overworks and staves the farm animals (p 8-9, 11-12). The animals on Manor Farm revolted against their farmer (Mr. Jones) once they were not given food and decided they would create better living conditions for themselves after the drove Jones off the farm (Orwell p21-23). The animals formed a democratic system and derived Seven Commandments which all animals had to follow (p27). Snowball and Napoleon (two pigs) became the leaders of the new Animal Farm and held democratic voting during meetings, yet their behavior changed overtime, becoming more tyrannical. The pigs gave their species more food rations and other luxuries as the novel progressed. The pigs become human-like by walking on two feet, drinking whisky, and holding a meeting with other farmers at the end of the book (p 153-155).

Taken at face value, the novel is a tale of unfair pigs who took control over a farm. With context of WWII and basic knowledge of how Communism is practiced, the story shines in a new light which exposes and criticizes Communism. The first instance is how the animals address each other as Comrade in direct reference to Stalin’s Communist Russia (Orwell p7). The animals complained how Mr. Jones overworks and starves the animals when he can’t do any farm work the animals do (Orwell p8-9). Old Major said, “Man only serves the interests of themselves.” (Orwell p11). “Man” is a metaphor for tyrannical government in this situation because the men on the farm neglect and overwork the animals. The animals were equal after Jones was run off the farm but over time, one group gradually took more and more control: the pigs.

Like dictators, Napoleon the pig ruled by fear and oppressed people who opposed his ideas with his attack dogs who acted as his armed guards (Orwell p60-61). Napoleon later used his attack dogs to kill any animal who opposed his ideas or admitted to having thoughts of betraying Napoleon (Orwell p94). Not killing other animals was one of the original Seven Commandments but after further inspection, the farm animals saw the rule was edited to say “no animals shall kill other animals….*without cause*.” (Orwell p100). Unannounced changes to the Seven Commandments were common with these changes often justifying the pigs’ recent actions (Orwell p76,100,120,148). Napoleon and his speaker, Squealer, used propaganda and gaslighted the farm animals into changing their memory of certain events and glorify Napoleon. The farm animals were gaslighted into thinking Snowball was conspiring with Jones and other human farmers and into thinking they had a better quality of life compared to when Jones owned the farm. The worst example was when Boxer was injured and Squealer and Napoleon told the farm animals he called a doctor, when he instead called someone to take Boxer and slaughter him to harvest his hide and bone marrow. This was revealed by some animals who were able to read the words on the Harvester’s wagon (Orwell p134). Squealer denounced the acquisition and instead condemned whoever spread the rumor and glanced among the farm animals to determine who spread the rumor, and more importantly: who can read. Later that day, a new box of whisky was delivered to the pigs as payment for selling Boxer (Orwell p139). The pigs sent an animal to die, lied about it, gaslighted the farm animals, and received whisky for it. Orwell used the pigs behavior to show a group (oligarchy or dictatorship) controlled information and harmed its people [farm animals] for self-gain. Another common action done my dictators, Napoleon awarded himself the two highest medals and appointed himself a unique title (Orwell p92,117).

Eventually the pigs became more like humans by wearing clothes, drinking alcohol, walking on two legs, and communicating with other farmers in the end of the novel (Orwell p151,154,155). When the pigs held a meeting for the other farmers and wore nice clothes, the farm animals watched from outside. They couldn’t tell the pigs apart from the humans (Orwell p155). The pigs being undistinguishable from the humans is a metaphor of how animals who were once equal to themselves, became tyrants instead. The pigs ruled over the other animals using fear, false information, aggression [attack dogs], and other means to control the other farm animals to work harder and eat less rations than what the animals experienced when Jones was in charge (Orwell p151). Orwell used these animals to depict how communism works and how a group elevates themselves above the rest, rules and overworks the other animals [their former peers], and enjoys all the benefits will disregarding the wellbeing of their subjects. Orwell turned an adult topic into something middle and high school students can understand by using animals to remove some of the horrors of communism.

**Maus**

The Holocaust is one of the worst events of all history, where over 6 million Jews were abused, starved, suffered psychological trauma, and worked to death. The inhumane treatment of a religious group of people still affects us today and is a taboo topic in conversation. There were few survivors and most of them don’t want to share their stories of the religious persecution they experienced. Art Spiegelman, the author of Maus, presents his father’s Holocaust stories in a unique, graphic novel format. The characters are all animals: mice, cats, dogs, and pigs.

The author chose to use animals to depict the relationship of how the different groups interacted with one another. Using animals instead of humans may be easier to comprehend and seem less horrible if animals are the ones who suffer the awful events of the Holocaust instead. Jewish people were depicted as mice who feared the Nazis who were drawn as cats (Spiegelman p5,35). Americans were depicted as dogs because they worked with the mice [Jews] and fought the cats [Nazis] (Spiegelman p258). Non-Jewish Polish people were drawn as pigs because they did not fit among the mouse, cat, and dog relationship, yet they still indirectly benefited from the removal of Jews from their localities (Spiegelman p84). Polish people were able to live in the vacated houses of evited Jewish people after a Nazi order (Spiegelman p84). Spiegelman thought of why the characters in the book should be a certain animal due to how the groups interacted and gave animal characteristics to each group.

**Disney’s Zootopia**

Disney’s Zootopia uses the main character Judy Hops, a ‘trier’, to combat typical stereotypes and encourage people to aim outside the box of their own self-imposed limits. The film addresses gender, weak vs. strong groups, and police stereotypes.

Judy Hops is a bunny from a small rural area called Bunnyburrow and faces some discrimination when she tries to become a police officer because of her small size and lack of natural weapons or armor, a characteristic of ‘vulnerable’ rabbits. Her parents, childhood bully, and her police chief looked down on Judy because she was a bunny. Gideon Grey, Judy’s childhood bully said she was a carrot-farming dumb bunny as a personal insult. Judy ignored these insults and overcame adversity by using the strengths she did have to succeed as a police officer. Nick Wild asked Judy “are all bunnies bad drivers?” either due to her small height or that she was a woman.

Many animals who identify as predators were targeted with strong animosity, especially foxes. Nick Wild, the fox who accompanied Judy Hops, admitted that he was bullied and suffered a traumatic experience for being a predator and specifically a fox. Wild told Hops that you cannot let others know that insults affect you and society will only see you a certain way. Judy also became suspicious of Nick when he entered an elephant ice cream parlor. The movie progressed to where predator animals were going ‘savage’, and this led to a social fight between the prey and predators. This caused groups to openly oppose predators and become hostile and cautious around them. Disney was trying to show how one link can be misinterpreted to condemn an entire group of animals [humans] and reinforce negative social concepts. Zootopia was meant for people to open their eyes and recognize how we have stereotypes, and how we need to act to avoid externalizing them.

**Conclusion**

Media such as Zootopia, Maus, and Animal Farm use animal characters to convey complex social issues. Maus uses animals to represent how different groups of people interact with one another during the Holocaust and how different populations of animals in Zootopia have stereotypes which relate to human society. Orwell’s Animal Farm’s animals demonstrated how a group of people can overthrow the government, how one group can gradually elevate themselves from the herd, and how that group eventually becomes tyrannical themselves and oppress their former peers. When taboo topics emerge, animal characters can be used to convey sensitive ideas and situations and the authors of these media have realized that and took advantage of it to convey their social agendas. When human emotions fail to recognize social issues, animal characters are used instead. Now we need to transfer what is learned in these animal stories and transfer it to our human society to improve ourselves, and each other.

**Source List**

* Disney’s *Zootopia.* 2016
* Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. New York. 1954
* Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*, Pantheon Books New York. 2011