

Case studies in English

1.8. Argumentative discourse

Case study N° 1.8
George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, 1945,
Chapter 1 (excerpt)

At Manor Farm, owned by Mr. Jones, live hens, geese, ducks, pigs, cats, dogs, horses, goats, donkeys, sheep, and cows. Jones spends more time drinking than looking after his animals. One evening, Old Major, a twelve-year-old boar highly respected by all the animals on the farm, calls them together and gives the following speech:

"Comrades, you have heard already about the strange dream that I had last night. But I will come to the dream later. I have something else to say first. I do not think, comrades, that I shall be with you for many months longer, and before I die, I feel it my duty to pass on to you such wisdom as I have acquired. I 5 have had a long life, I have had much time for thought as I lay alone in my stall, and I think I may say that I understand the nature of life on this earth as well as any animal now living. It is about this that I wish to speak to you.

"Now, comrades, what is the nature of this life of ours? Let us face it: our 10 lives are miserable, laborious, and short. We are born, we are given just so much food as will keep the breath in our bodies, and those of us who are capable of it are forced to work to the last atom of our strength; and the very instant that our usefulness has come to an end we are slaughtered with hideous cruelty. 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 15 is the plain truth.

"But is this simply part of the order of nature? Is it because this land of ours is so poor that it cannot afford a decent life to those who dwell upon it? No, comrades, a thousand times no! The soil of England is fertile, its climate is good, it is capable of affording food in abundance to an enormously greater number of 20 animals than now inhabit it. This single farm of ours would support a dozen horses, twenty cows, hundreds of sheep and all of them living in a comfort and a dignity that are now almost beyond our imagining. Why then do we continue in this miserable condition? Because nearly the whole of the produce of our labour 25 is stolen from us by human beings. There, comrades, is the answer to all our problems. It is summed up in a single word-Man. Man is the only real enemy we have. Remove Man from the scene, and the root cause of hunger and overwork is abolished for ever.

"Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not 30 give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals. He sets them to work, he gives back to them the bare minimum that will prevent them from starving, and the rest he keeps for himself. Our labour tills the soil, our dung fertilises it, and yet there is not one of us that owns more than his bare skin. You 35 cows that I see before me, how many thousands of gallons of milk have you given during this last year? And what has happened to that milk which should have been breeding up sturdy calves? Every drop of it has gone down the throats of our enemies. And you hens, how many eggs have you laid in this last year, and how many of those eggs ever hatched into chickens? The rest have all gone to market to bring in money for Jones and his men. And you, Clover, where are those four 40 foals you bore, who should have been the support and pleasure of your old age? Each was sold at a year old—you will never see one of them again. In return for

your four confinements and all your labour in the fields, what have you ever had except your bare rations and a stall?

"And even the miserable lives we lead are not allowed to reach their natural span. For myself I do not grumble, for I am one of the lucky ones. I am twelve years old and have had over four hundred children. Such is the natural life of a pig. But no animal escapes the cruel knife in the end. You young porkers who are sitting in front of me, every one of you will scream your lives out at the block within a year. To that horror we all must come-cows, pigs, hens, sheep, everyone.

Even the horses and the dogs have no better fate. You, Boxer, the very day that those great muscles of yours lose their power, Jones will sell you to the knacker, who will cut your throat and boil you down for the foxhounds. As for the dogs, when they grow old and toothless, Jones ties a brick round their necks and drowns them in the nearest pond.

"Is it not crystal clear, then, comrades, that all the evils of this life of ours spring from the tyranny of human beings? Only get rid of Man, and the produce of our labour would be our own. Almost overnight we could become rich and free. What then must we do? Why, work night and day, body and soul, for the overthrow of the human race! That is my message to you, comrades: Rebellion! I do not know when that Rebellion will come, it might be in a week or in a hundred years, but I know, as surely as I see this straw beneath my feet, that sooner or later justice will be done. Fix your eyes on that, comrades, throughout the short remainder of your lives! And above all, pass on this message of mine to those who come after you, so that future generations shall carry on the struggle until it is victorious.

"And remember, comrades, your resolution must never falter. No argument must lead you astray. Never listen when they tell you that Man and the animals have a common interest, that the prosperity of the one is the prosperity of the others. It is all lies. Man serves the interests of no creature except himself.

And among us animals let there be perfect unity, perfect comradeship in the struggle. All men are enemies. All animals are comrades."

Analysis

George Orwell published this novel in 1945. By using the traditional form of the animal fable, the author shows how revolutionary ideals can be corrupted when put into practice. *Animal farm* is a biting satire of the transformation of the 1917 Communist Revolution into an authoritarian regime led by Joseph Stalin for several decades. The chosen excerpt is the speech given by Old Major, a highly respected pig who has summoned all the animals on the farm to address them solemnly and share the conclusions he has drawn after many years of observation and reflection. It is a strong example of the construction of an argumentative speech.

As is generally the case at the beginning of a public speech, Major's first words are meant to capture the attention, interest and goodwill of his listeners. That is why he uses the term "comrades," which was a word used by the Bolsheviks during the 1917 revolution. This term, originally used mainly in the military sphere, acquired a strong socialist connotation after the Russian Revolution. By calling his audience "comrades," Major emphasizes the equality of status and the sharing of ideals among those who are – or should be – fighting on the same side. The term is repeated ten times in Old Major's speech: nine times as a form of address and once, at the end, as an attribute defining the identity of all animals.

In order to arouse his audience's interest, Major alludes to the "strange dream" he had. He promises to recount it later, creating a sense of suspense. To gain his listeners' empathy and emphasize the importance of what he is about to say, the pig

appeals to pathos: he announces his imminent death and presents the passing on of a lifetime of experience as a duty ("I do not think, comrades, that I shall be with you for many months longer, and before I die, I feel it my duty to pass on to you such wisdom as I have acquired", lines 2-4). This gives the scene a solemn and dramatic tone and reinforces Major's authority through experience. It also creates a context that is conducive to presenting the theme of the speech: Major is going to speak about the lives of the farm animals. The pig uses accessible vocabulary and does not hesitate to pause and include transitions to ensure everything is clear. Thus, to underline the theme of his speech, Major concludes the first paragraph with the sentence: "It is about this that I wish to speak to you" (line 7). Similarly, to summarize the conclusion he has reached after many years of reflection, Major ends his second paragraph with the sentence: "The life of an animal is misery and slavery: that is the plain truth" (lines 14-15).

The pig states that the lives of animals are "miserable, laborious, and short" (line 9). His judgement is deeply pessimistic and without nuance: these are lives of hunger, suffering, and mistreatment, lives without happiness, leisure, or freedom. Major asserts that this condition is not the result of natural causes, but of the exploitation of animals by men:

"But is this simply part of the order of nature? Is it because this land of ours is so poor that it cannot afford a decent life to those who dwell upon it? No, comrades, a thousand times no! The soil of England is fertile, its climate is good, it is capable of affording food in abundance to an enormously greater number of animals than now inhabit it. This single farm of ours would support a dozen horses, twenty cows, hundreds of sheep—and all of them living in a comfort and a dignity that are now almost beyond our imagining." (lines 16-22)

The techniques used to build the argument include rhetorical questions, exclamatory sentences, and the identification of a contradiction (introduced by the adversative "but" at the beginning of the paragraph, line 16) between the advantages of the English climate and soil and the misery of the animal world. Major demonstrates in this way that the precariousness of animal life is not inevitable. In the following lines, this idea is reinforced by the accumulation of negatively charged stance markers used to describe humans, characterized by their "hideous cruelty" (line 12). The use of numbers ("dozen," "twenty," "hundreds", lines 20-21) is a strategy employed by Old Major to lend weight to his overall argument and to convince his audience by balancing the purely emotional aspect of denouncing injustice with supposedly objective evidence.

The following lines prepare the presentation of Major's thesis:

"Why then do we continue in this miserable condition? Because nearly the whole of the produce of our labour is stolen from us by human beings. There, comrades, is the answer to all our problems. It is summed up in a single word-Man. Man is the only real enemy we have. Remove Man from the scene, and the root cause of hunger and overwork is abolished for ever." (lines 22-27)

The rhetorical question that opens the lines just quoted serves to engage the audience and give the scene a dramatic tone. It is linked to the first part of the reasoning by "then" (a coordinating conjunction expressing consequence, line 22). The question of why animals are submissive is presented as a natural consequence of becoming aware of the injustice they suffer. The use of the first-person plural ("we continue," "our labour", lines 22-23) emphasizes the bonds of comradeship between the speaker and his audience. The explicit statement of the thesis that closes the paragraph is prepared

by a reference to Marxist theory (perceptible in “the produce of our labour is stolen from us by human beings”, lines 23-24) and by the formulation of a brief summary of the assessment Old Major has just made (“It is summed up in a single word-Man. Man is the only real enemy we have.”, lines 25-26). The narrator thus shows that the old pig has summoned the animals not only to share a personal view of their living conditions, but above all to incite them to revolt. This is the thesis Major seeks to prove. In the following paragraphs, he will present arguments to demonstrate the relevance and validity of this thesis, as well as concrete examples to illustrate or support these arguments — but the essential point is already summed up at the end of the third paragraph.

The beginning of the fourth paragraph draws a comparison between humans and animals :

“Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals. He sets them to work, he gives back to them the bare minimum that will prevent them from starving, and the rest he keeps for himself.” (lines 28-32)

Major makes no reference to the intellectual capacities of men, as his goal is to demonstrate the inferiority of the human species in comparison to all other animal species. The shift to the first-person plural in the lines that follow and the use of antithesis (“Our labour tills the soil, our dung fertilises it, and yet there is not one of us that owns more than his bare skin.”, lines 32-33) emphasize the unity between the speaker and his audience. The development of this part of the argument leads to the observation of the animals’ extreme poverty in contrast with human opulence.

The emphasis on the animals’ poverty is, in fact, what can give strength to the rebellion. Old Major knows that his ability to persuade and convince can be increased if he provides concrete examples from the life at Manor Farm. This is why the speaker highlights past sacrifices. To illustrate his point, he begins by questioning the cows and hens, explaining that all the milk and the eggs they produced served only to enrich Jones and his men – meaning that, had it not been for the harmful interference of humans, the present would be filled with calves and chicks. In the case of the horses, Major goes even further, directly addressing Clover, the farm’s mare, by name (he will do the same with Boxer, the strong horse, in the following paragraph). In a clearly anthropomorphic projection, the old pig turns the sale of the mare’s four foals into a traumatic episode, through which what could have brought her “support and pleasure of [her] old age” was taken from her (line 40). These examples are the basis of Old Major’s strategy to move his audience. Rhetorical questions abound in this part of the speech. By imagining aloud all that the animals could have done if men had not taken what was rightfully theirs, Major shows that he is not content with merely stating the general condition of animals, but that his goal is to stir them to revolt.

The following paragraph raises an even more painful issue, as it details how humans kill animals who have grown too old to work. The pathos is evident when Major mentions the “cruel knife” (line 47), the howling at the block, the figure of the knacker, slashed throats, and animal flesh turned into dog food. Another painful memory is the image of Jones putting down the old dogs by drowning them in a pond with a brick tied around their necks.

The thesis is repeated and summarized in the word “Rebellion” and in the prophetic tone adopted by the old pig toward the end of his speech. The use of future tense and assertive statements is telling:

That is my message to you, comrades: Rebellion! I do not know when that Rebellion will come, it might be in a week or in a hundred years, but I know, as surely as I see this straw beneath my feet, that sooner or later justice will be done. (lines 59-62)

Then the exhortations accumulate with verbs in the imperative (“Fix your eyes on that”, “pass on this message of mine” “remember, comrades,” “Never listen when they tell you that...”, lines 62, 63, 66, 67). The appeal to camaraderie and the call to struggle against mankind are repeated. The parallelism between “All men are enemies” and “All animals are comrades” at the end of the speech (line 71) clearly defines the opposing sides, in a perspective that rejects nuance. When Major denies that man and animal could have common interests and that the prosperity of one could benefit the other, he asserts a rigid, Manichaean worldview without any cracks.

The statement that “Man serves the interests of no creature except himself” (line 69) sums up the identification of the adversary that characterizes all militant discourse. In this case, the adversary is an “enemy,” and the authoritarian and unjust way in which he treats the animals fully justifies the necessity of rebellion. The rest of the novel shows that good reasons alone are not enough to build a just society: the pigs, claiming to be the forerunners of the revolution, eventually become its political leaders. They then begin to grant themselves privileges and ultimately become as corrupt as humans.

Although this novel was written to evoke the transformation of the Soviet communist regime into a corrupt and totalitarian system between 1917 and 1945, the effectiveness of its construction means it is still read today as a contribution to reflection on contemporary contexts.