

# Situation and Free Choice——An Interpretation of Animal Farm With the Perspective of Sartre's Existentialism

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## ABSTRACT

*Animal Farm*, a political allegorical novel written by George Orwell three years after his conception, was a huge sensation when published. Orwell from his unique perspective reveals the alienation of revolutionaries by power and presents the establishment process of totalitarian rule, showing that even socialism will have the risk of totalitarianism, which has great enlightenment to later generations. Attributing to the similar living background and life experience, Orwell's pursuit of free liberation embodies part of Sartre's existentialism, based on which some more objective interpretations different from the traditional of this animal farm, an epitome of a real society full of absurdity can be achieved. In light of Sartre's existentialism theory, this paper deems that the situation where animals live is not the culprit of their tragic fate but what they pursuit decides the farm's nature of oppression. And there is no good or bad of animals' different free choices, because all of which actually clearly reflect their being-for-itself.

**Keywords:** *Animal Farm, George Orwell, Existentialism, Situation, Free Choice*

## 1. ORWELL, SARTRE AND ANIMAL FARM

As a staunch anti-totalitarianism fighter, George Orwell always depicted the stifling rule, despicable means, greedy dictators and battered fools in works, all of which stemmed from his deep understanding of totalitarianism. Early boarding life at St. Sepurian School and experience of being discriminated at Eton which were like the totalitarian coterie gave Orwell an initial impression of the social unfairness and strict stratification, provoking him a rudimentary thought of this sick society. And witnessing the colonial people's suffering from imperialism while serving as an imperial policeman in Burma matures Orwell's political beliefs as well as profound thinking about capitalism. It wasn't until 1936 that Orwell began to have serious thoughts and discernment about politics. As his confession in *Why I Write* says: "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it"[1]. In his creative career, Orwell always held his conscience and sincerity. And among oeuvre, *Animal Farm* which came out in 1945, is one of the valuable spiritual heritage he left to future generations.

Showing a nightmarish and absurd world, *Animal Farm* describes the brewing, rise and eventual distortion of an "animalism" revolution, being a penetrating dystopian political fable. The polysemy of animals in *Animal Farm* is conspicuous: pigs represent the leadership; dogs the secret police, ranking second only to pigs; horses the working class; sheep the ignorant people, characterized by blind obedience. The old Major, the initiator of rebellion, refers to Marx and Engels. And obviously Napoleon is Stalin; Snowball Trotsky. The Soviet Patriotic War, when written in *Animal Farm*, is called the Battle of the Windmill, and the Battle of the Cowshed is the defense of Moscow. "Beast of England" is the Internationale. And the last scene of the story, according to Orwell himself, means the adoption of Tehran Declaration in 1943 by the three world giants: Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin[2]. With an extremely insightful and prescient vision, Orwell directly describes the catastrophe totalitarianism can incur. In such a farm inundated with totalitarianism set by the author, is the situation the culprit of animals' miseries? And what can explain their different destinies in the same environment? Answers to these actually can be found in the elucidation of situation and free choice in Sartre's existentialism.

The similarities between Sartre's and Orwell's experiences make their ideas and views of freedom

somewhat similar, both of which were deeply influenced by the era when they lived. Orwell in his life witnessed and experienced many historical events like the two World Wars, the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Civil War, which can be said a period of political darkness in western civilization. In the storm of revolution and war, people in different political camps were like beasts to denigrate and attack each other, and western civilization once faced collapse under the autocracy of like Mussolini and Hitler[3]. Orwell experienced the ruthlessness of these political movements, all like a brand engraved on him and also deeply on his literary creation. While the defeat of France during World War II and being under the colonial rule of fascist Germany were the dark periods of the whole French nation. And Sartre, like all the Frenches, lost the personality, dignity and freedom in this war, and even the right to survival could not be guaranteed. He was locked up in the concentration camp where people were tortured and killed every day and was profoundly aware of the fate of people being deprived of liberty. Thus he began a series of existential thoughts about freedom. Being one of the representative figures of existentialism which centers on human spiritual being and pays attention to human individuality and freedom, Sartre emphasized the value of man and the importance of freedom to the individual to realize his being, believing freedom is the primary requirement and important prerequisite of act by which the transformation and transcendence of world can be achieved. Both having similar life backgrounds, seeing the persecution of people and the violation of their freedom by war and dictatorship, sympathizing with oppressed people, and sharing the relentless pursuit and deep thinking of freedom, it is then possible to study Orwell's works with the aid of Sartre's theory. As mentioned above, *Animal Farm* alludes to human society, reflecting not only the idea of the author's anti-totalitarianism but the choices made by different individuals in a special situation. And no matter situation or free choice, these concepts are both elaborated in Sartre's existentialism. Therefore, it is reasonable and appropriate to interpret Orwell's work *Animal Farm* by using part of Sartre's existentialism theory.

## 2. SITUATION

### 2.1 Objectivity of the situation

In the previous studies of *Animal Farms*, it is easy to find that many of them focus on the environment in which animals live, arguing that their tragic fates stem from this totalitarian farm and the ruling class (Mr. Jones, Napoleon, etc.) which attribute to their sufferings. It is in this situation that animals are oppressed, exploited and their freedom seriously violated. In this story, the situation where animals are

specifically refers to not only the environment in which they live but also the sum of all the individuals and things around them, corroborated by Sartre's relevant illustration: "*I am an existent in the midst of other existents...My position in the midst of the world is defined by the relation between the instrumental utility or adversity in the realities which surround me and my own facticity; that is, the discovery of the dangers which I risk in the world, of the obstacles which I can encounter there, the aid which can be offered me...This is what we mean by the situation*"[4]. As the main representative of French atheistic existentialism, Sartre studies the specific survival situation of people, especially how people act in some special situations. What he studies happens to be fully reflected in *Animal Farm*. In this novel, Orwell sets up such a "special survival situation" full of absurdity, oppression and sufferings which exactly are the manifestations of totalitarianism: the individual overpowers the law, severe hierarchy, oppression of labor, violent subjugation and personality cult. First comes the dictatorship from Napoleon. Napoleon grabs all the power after all the animals overthrowing Mr. Jones' s control and driving away Snowball, puts his will and interests above the law (i.e. the Seven Commandments) and amends them three times arbitrarily: changing the fourth "No animal shall sleep in a bed"[5] to "No animal shall sleep in a bed with sheets"[5]; the fifth "No animal shall drink alcohol"[5] to "No animal shall drink alcohol to excess"[5] and the sixth "No animal shall kill any other animal"[5] to "No animal shall kill any other animal without cause"[5]. And finally, Napoleon becomes more unscrupulous to cancel all but only leaves "ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS"[5]. Moreover, pigs can enjoy a range of quality living resources, such as milk, apples, comfortable living environment, while for other animals "*life was hard...and food was even shorter. Once again all rations were reduced except those of the pigs and the dogs*"[5]. These differences in resource holdings clearly reflect the huge class division in this coterie and the oppression of labor and the masses, completely deviating from the original intention of building this animal farm. In order to purge dissidents and put an end to backlash, the violent suppression and personality cult carried out later by Napoleon further put the absurdity and totalitarianism of the farm to its acme, not only reflecting Orwell's abhorrence and accusation of totalitarianism, but also his severe criticism of Stalin's "Great Purge" and personality cult, as well as deep sympathy for the masses in such circumstances. For situation Sartre ever mentioned that: "*Far from being able to modify our situation at our whim, we seem to be unable to change ourselves*"[4]. He thinks that we are unable to escape the class to which we belong, the nation in which we are and the family where we grow. The man who appears "to make himself" actually seems "to be made" by the climate,

race, acquired habits, the circumstance of his childhood and the great and small things of his life. It is known that Sartre emphasizes people's freedom, but here he holds that our situation can not be evaded or remoulded according to our will. So does it contradict Sartre's view of freedom? Not really. It is precisely because of the freedom set forth by Sartre that it belongs to the category of philosophy. This freedom mainly represents the free choice of man and is the one of the field of consciousness, an independent consciousness that will not be disturbed by outside world. While the situation is given and objective, being not a obstacle on freedom (because people can still choose freely in the situation) but a realistic restriction on the result of free choice. After all, Sartre's freedom is categorized as subjective consciousness, while the situation is the objective reality. The situation has its objectivity and is the setting that wrapping individuals. People are always in certain situations and influenced by many aspects of themselves, others and society. So human freedom is the freedom in the situation. In the story, it is not the situation that determines animals' s acts and fates, but contrarily their purposes "illuminates their situations". Whether this farm is in the hands of Mr.Jones or later Napoleon or anyone, and no matter what system or means are put in place, such a situation is only an objective existence, which will affect animals, but not the root of their sufferings. The situation itself is neutral, neither pleasant nor agonizing. Just after regarding freedom as their purpose, then the coefficient of adversity of the situation arises. As Sartre mentions that *"In particular the coefficient of adversity in things can not be an argument against our freedom, for it is by us-i.e., by the preliminary positing of an end-that this coefficient of adversity arises"*[4]. Sartre takes a rock as an example. If we want to move it, then the rock will show a deep resistance at this time, but if we want to stand on the rock and look out for the scenery, then the rock is a valuable aid to us. For the situation itself, it is neutral, and needs to be illuminated by a purpose to show as an assistant or an opponent. While *"My place, before freedom has circumscribed my placing as a lack of a certain kind, 'is' not, strictly speaking, anything at all since the very extension in terms of which all place is understood does not exist"*[4]. It means that the situation itself in which animals live cannot be regarded as absurd, sinful or the culprit of suffering. If animals are willing to be governed and controlled, this situation is not unbearable but comfortable. In contrast, when animals refuse to be ruled and demand equality, then this situation shows them a coefficient of adversity, making them miserable and the environment unbearable. As Sartre believes that *"Thus our freedom itself creates the obstacles from which we suffer. It is freedom itself which by positing its end and by choosing this end as inaccessible or accessible with difficulty, causes our placing to appear to our projects*

*as an insurmountable resistance or a resistance to be surmounted with difficulty*[4].

## **2.2 Specificity of the situation**

Meanwhile, not only the situation has objectivity and its nature will vary according to the purpose, but under the same purpose's illumination, the coefficient of adversity of the situation will also vary according to individuals differences. This can be called the specificity of situation. In the story, pursuing the equality and freedom and improving living standards are the common purposes of animals. Under the illumination of this common goal, the coefficient of adversity of the situation for different individuals is various. When being oppressed, the hens think that it is unbearable and decide to act and rebel against it, while Boxer stays silent, grins and bears it, imputes it to his work deficiencies and works harder than before. Sheep, however, are more blind and submissive and it seems to be little painful for them under such control. For the hens, the situation illuminated by the same purpose shows a greater coefficient of adversity than the latter two and reaches an intolerable level. Sartre sets an example that with the same desire to climb (with the same coefficient of adversity) , it is easy for some climbers to climb rocks, but for novices or some poorly trained and physically weak climbing will be quite difficult. Thus it can be seen that the coefficient of adversity of the situation illuminated by the same purpose in front of different individuals is different. And so each individual's feeling towards the same situation is also different. As Sartre holds that *"of course it (the situation) contains and sustains abstract and universal structures, but it must be understood as the single countenance which the world turns toward us as our unique and personal chance"*[4]. Kafka ever mentioned a parable that a businessman came to the castle to complain but was kept out of the gate by a ferocious guard. He did not dare to go over there, so he waited and died waiting. Before he died, he asked the guard "Why should I be the only one waiting?" The guard replied: "This door is specially made for you." Actually after this sentence we can add that everyone has a door made for himself, which exactly highlights the specificity of the situation. This is a door not restricted by those "abstract and universal structures". And from the different performances given by animals being on the same farm with the same goal, this nature of situation are also fully reflected.

## **2.3 Necessity of the situation**

In addition, while the situation illuminated by animals' purpose shows a large or small coefficient of adversity to them that makes them uncomfortable or painful, setting such a situation is necessary. Situation has its necessity both in reality and in literary works. It

in terms of time consists of the present and the past, in which the past accounted for the vast majority of its composition. Because the present is just the moment, and the rest is all made up of the past. For animals, the past of their situations are that where they were born, what they saw and felt, how they were treated on the farm, and so on. Not only does the author show his own view of freedom and critical condemnation of totalitarianism through setting such a situation, but also such setting accords with the exposition of the meaning of situation in Sartre's view of situation. As he mentions that *"Now the meaning of the past is strictly dependent on my present project...it means that the fundamental project which I am decides absolutely the meaning which the past which I have to be can have for me and for others...by projecting myself toward my ends, I preserve the past with me, and by action I decide its meaning"*[4]. For example, for the burglar is his life in prison useful or sad? It depends on whether he is reformed after his release from prison or continues to steal. The past and the situation can not be changed, but its meaning can be reflected by the present or future behavior. At the same time, the past and the situation also provide the foundation for the present and the future, making all activities of the present and the future possible. As Sartre says *"I can not conceive of myself without a past...I am the being through whom the past comes to myself and to the world...We see how the past as "that which is to be changed" is indispensable to the choice of the future and how consequently no free surpassing can be effected except in terms of a past* [4]. In the story, setting up such a farm full of totalitarianism and starting with the animal uprising not only pave the way for a series of subsequent actions, but gives significance to the animals' efforts for freedom (though failed), which is that totalitarianism is powerful, but due to people's past sufferings it is imperative to be overthrown.

What animals experience is inextricably linked to the situation they are in, but is not determined by it. The objectivity of the situation determines that its attributes are decided by the purpose of the individual. It is because animals pursue the freedom that the situation shows a negative side to them. And the degree of this negative side is reflected by the specificity of the situation. This situation can not only help the author to express his views and thoughts, but also closely relates to the individual's present and future activities. Therefore, such a situation should not be recognized as the root cause of animal suffering, and its existence is very necessary.

### **3. FREE CHOICE AND BEING-FOR-ITSELF**

#### ***3.1 Different free choices***

From the above-mentioned, it can be known that the nature of the situation in which the animals live is

determined by their purposes. This "purpose", from the perspective of Sartre's existentialism, is produced by free choice, which is also the philosophical essence of Sartre's existentialism. The core of existentialism is freedom. Human freedom is primary and absolute, and human self is the priority of choice, which means that human essence is the result of choice. When people face a choice, they have the right to choose freely without interference from others. For human's freedom, what kind of road to go and what kind of action to take are both arbitrary. Here we know that animals freely choose the purpose that determines the nature of their situation, namely equality and freedom. But because the coefficient of adversity of situation caused by the specificity of situation differs in front of individuals, facing different coefficient of adversity of situation the animals' free choice will also be various.

As one of the earliest leaders in this story, in order to achieve a better life on the farm, Snowball takes the initiative to various works like actively carrying out education, developing and improving infrastructure construction. It can be said that in order to achieve the common goal of animals set at the beginning of the construction of animal farms, Snowball chooses to be an active reformer (in Orwell's writings represents Trotsky and the revolutionaries). At the beginning of the farm, he actively organizes a series of reading and writing classes and other groups, and achieves a great success. Almost until later all animals can more or less recognize some words. Being able to recognize words is essential to the realization of individual freedom, lying as the foundation on which individuals are free to read, write and think. In addition, in order to improve the quality of animals' life, Snowball advocates the construction of windmills to provide electricity. Not only can the animals enjoy the light and the heating in winter by using electricity, but they can also operate a circular saw, a lawn mower, a beet slicer and an electric milking machine. In this way, with the machine they can be liberated, thus then the quality of life will naturally be improved. And there are many more, such as when Mr. Jones tries to retake the farm, Snowball fights bravely and is even wounded. It can be seen that in such a situation, Snowball has always been the image of a positive reformer. Such an image is the embodiment of his free choice. While the Boxer who symbolizes the broad masses of proletarian soldiers and masses makes his free choice which is quite different from Snowball's. He is always the hardest-working of all animals, getting up half an hour earlier than others. No matter how difficult his living condition is, and how serious the totalitarian regime is, he never resists or tries to change but only thinks that it is because he has not yet worked hard enough and then chooses to work harder than ever. To him, two slogans are always on the lips: "I want to work harder"[5] and "Napoleon is always right"[5] seem to sufficiently answer all questions. And it seems as if he has never taken anything but hard work to heart. Here, the choice of silent

obedience and working hard is Boxer's free choice. He believes that as long as hard work will one day achieve the goal of freedom and equality. In fact, not only them, every animal in the farm has made their own free choices: some choose to challenge and resist; some choose to be silent, or even choose to follow blindly. There is no good or bad of the nature of these choices. They are the choices made when in a situation illuminated by individual purpose and facing different coefficient of adversity. And in these choices, their being-for-itself are also reflected.

### **3.2 The relationship between free choice and being-for-itself**

In fact, "free choice" is not merely an action but a kind of consciousness. In the individual's free choice, actually what Sartre calls "being-for-itself" is also manifested. The basic concepts in the study of Sartre's existentialism philosophy are the "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself". "Being-in-itself" does not depend on any other thing or consciousness. It itself exists and does not take the human consciousness as the transfer, whose birth or death also cannot be controlled by human consciousness. "Being-for-itself" as another type of existence corresponding to "being-in-itself" refers to a consciousness that people realize their own existence. As a kind of consciousness that can reveal the external objective world, "being-for-itself" is people's subjective consciousness with intentionality, being external to and beyond the object and in this process highlighting the meaning and value of the object and making it distinguish from itself. It is salient that the free choices made by animals belong to the subjective consciousness with intentionality and embody their different individual values, so their free choices embody their different for-itself, which is also ever stated in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*: "Therefore the freedom of the for-itself appears as its being. But since this freedom is neither a given nor a property, it can be only by choosing itself... freedom is simply the fact that this choice is always unconditioned"[4]. It can be seen that the being-for-itself of the individual is reflected in its free choice. In previous studies of *Animal Farm*, some people have their own understandings about different animals. Taking Boxer as an example, in previous reviews he has always been interpreted as an image with "fool loyalty" who does not know resistance but only buries in the work, letting many readers sigh for his tragic fate. But actually from the perspective of Sartre's existentialism, this is precisely the embodiment of the Boxer's for-itself, and is the way he realizes his self value, which is not a kind of torture to him but contrarily will bring him a sense of achievement. For this is not the act of being forced by others but the free choice guided by his own being-for-itself. There is also similar illustration described by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. He

assumes "fatigue" as a situation and thinks that his companions are almost as tired as he is when they receive the similar training and in the same health condition. So why do his companions put up with their fatigue in a way different from him? If he asks them certainly they will say that they are fatigued, "*but that he loves his fatigue; he gives himself up to it as to a bath; it appears to him in some way as the privileged instrument for discovering the world which surrounds him, for adapting himself to the rocky roughness of the paths, for discovering the "mountainous" quality of the slopes...Finally the feeling of effort is for him that of fatigue overcome*[4]. For his companions their fatigue is nothing but a passion, and their effort "*is given as a way of appropriating the mountain, of suffering it to the end and being victor over it*[4]. For Boxer, he can also be said as "loves his fatigue", and like this "feeling of fatigue overcome". He sees his choice as a way to achieve value. Similarly, other animals' choices are the same. From this we can see that the being-for-itself of the individual is clearly reflected in his free choice. And that is why we don't need to feel over regretful for a character, because he makes the choice embodying his being-for-itself. In this process he does what he wants to do and realizes what he thinks is valuable. In other words, to some extent, he is free.

Actually not only Boxer, but Snowball, such a vigorous reformer, also manifests his being-for-itself in free choices. As mentioned in the story, Snowball always argues with Napoleon over political differences but still insists on his own views, is indefatigable at and busies himself with organizing various committees, classes and movements for other animals, are willing to spend quite a long time and great effort on the design drawing of windmill, and at huge risk fights with human courageously. All of these difficulties he confronts can be regarded as his "fatigue", but it is conspicuous that he also "loves his fatigue" and deems such "fatigue" as a tool to discover and transform the world around him. All these free choices he makes by which his value can be achieved exactly highlight his being-for-itself: a persistent, valiant and active reformer.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

It is undeniable that through the research review of *Animal Farm*, previous researches on Orwell and this novel have achieved valuable outcomes. Based on which, this paper tries to make further interpretations of its content with the combination of Sartre's existentialism and also intends to explore some doubts in this process, in order to obtain more in-depth understandings of Orwell and his work *Animal Farm*. Orwell's works are mostly to reveal the truth, trying to arouse the clear realization of political reality of people in a semi-paralysis state. With the keen insight and sharp writing he examined and recorded the era in

which he lived, and expressed his anger at totalitarianism and his worries about the way of future social development with the height of the prophet and the compassion of the sage. As a classic work of 20th century literature, *Animal Farm* not only fully embodies these political ideas of Orwell, but from the aspect of existentialism also accords with the characteristics of Sartre existentialism and demonstrate some of Sartre's views. In the novel, setting a situation is essential, which attributes are illuminated by individual purposes, and the coefficient of adversity varies from person to person. At the same time in the situation, the individual's being-for-itself is also reflected in his free choice. With the aid of these, this thesis does not take the criticism of totalitarianism on which many previous studies focus as the foothold, but more objectively analyzes the cause of its situation and the reason of individual choice. When we look at this work, apart from reading the literature itself, seeing Orwell's eternal pursuit of freedom and the expectation that the masses uncover the dust of their hearts and dare to challenge totalitarianism, we should also hold a critical and objective attitude to correctly think about the environment and characters as well as the existentialism thought embodied in it.

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