



# The Influence of Defamiliarization on Literary Works — A Case Study of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*

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**Abstract:** George Orwell is a master of the application of defamiliarization techniques. His work 1984 is regarded as a model of the application of defamiliarization technique. The author takes his another work, *Animal Farm*, as an example to explore the realization and effects of defamiliarization on literary works. This article according to the concept of defamiliarization put forward by Viktor Shklovsky, classifies the use of defamiliarization in *Animal Farm*. Combined with examples from *Animal Farm* to analyze the effect and influence of using defamiliarization, the essay aims at showing defamiliarization can be applied to the subject, narrative perspective, characters, language and almost every aspect of the work to provide creative aesthetic art for people.

**Keywords:** *Animal Farm*, George Orwell, defamiliarization

## 1. Introduction

Defamiliarization is an artistic technique, which refers to the deviation from common sense and always results in a feeling of unfamiliarity. In the field of literature, defamiliarization means presenting common literary elements to readers in an unfamiliar way so we can gain fresh perspectives and see works differently.

The concept of “defamiliarization” was first proposed by Viktor Shklovsky, founder of the Russian formalism theory system. According to him, “defamiliarization” is used to avoid “algebraization”, the over-automatization in the process of recognizing things (Shklovsky 1).

What did he mean? In fact, he told us a common phenomenon in daily life — if we are very familiar with something, we tend to describe it by using expressions given by our predecessors automatically. In this way, there’s no need for us to think and we can make others understand things more easily. But at the same time, we cannot express our own feelings and thoughts. Shklovsky wrote in his book *Art as Technique*: “If, however, no one was looking, or looking on unconsciously, if the whole complex lives of many people go on unconsciously, then such lives are as if they had never been (Shklovsky 2)”.

Defamiliarization can solve the problem. According to Shklovsky, since the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself, we should increase the difficulty and length of perception and make form more difficult (Shklovsky 2). By using defamiliarization, the text can be obscure and the process of understanding can be hard, thus enabling readers to awaken fresh perspectives and new feelings about familiar and once neglected things in their life.

George Orwell is a master of the application of defamiliarization techniques. His work 1984 is regarded as a model of the application of defamiliarization technique. Today, I’d like to take his another work, *Animal Farm*, as an example to explore the realization and effects of defamiliarization on literary works.

## 2. The use of defamiliarization in *Animal Farm*

### 2.1 Defamiliarization of subject and narrative perspective

The unique fable subject and animals’ perspective of *Animal Farm* are aspects of defamiliarization that are most easily perceived by readers. *Animal Farm* was Orwell's response to the historical background at that time: the rigidity of Russia's political system, lies of political equality, and the extreme personality cult of Stalin. Instead of heavy tones and sharp languages of other political satire works, Orwell adopts fable as the subject of *Animal Farm* and used animal perspective to write the tale. He has wrapped his satire of dark politics in the cloak of fairy tales so that readers could get interest and curiosity rather than dull historical knowledge from the work.

For example, Napoleon's exclusion, suppression, and later slander of Snowball have obviously symbolized Stalin's political persecution of Trotsky in the 1920s. Orwell uses the form of fairy tales and perspective of animals to make the story unfamiliar to readers, which can not only lighten the weight of historical events but also give readers room to think. And he also uses the fable to hint at his own political standpoint — from author’s satire of Napoleon’s individualism and praise of Snowball's intelligence, we can see Orwell’s dissatisfaction with Stalinism and pity for the failure of Trotskyism.

## 2.2 Defamiliarization of characters

Most readers' impression of farm animals is tame, gentle, and simple-minded. But in *Animal Farm*, farm animals have their own thoughts and even carry out a campaign to overthrow humans, which overturns traditional animal images in readers' minds. Different kinds of animals symbolize people of different characters. The vivid description of their thoughts and deeds makes readers feel novel.

For example, the image of pigs is quite different from our impression. Whether from a western historical perspective or Russian ideology at the time, pigs were a symbol of stupidity, ignorance, vulgarness, stubborn and greed. Let me prove this with some English slang and Russian sayings: pig-ignorant (very stupid or badly educated), pig-headed (unwilling to change your opinion about sth), действительная свинья (as stupid as pigs), свинья грязь всегда найдёт (dirty pigs), разбираться как свинья в апельсинах (utterly ignorant).

But in this story, pigs' images are very unique and unfamiliar to readers---they are very smart and naturally become the leader of animals, from which readers can get interested and learn the author's bitter satire towards the Stalinist regime. There are even classes and factions emerging within these pigs, which is a reflection of the so-called democratic Soviet Union politics. Such defamiliarization of characters can not only show Orwell's implicit political criticism, but also set obstructions in the reading process, which can make readers maintain interest and keep thinking.

## 2.3 Defamiliarization of language

In *Animal Farm*, we can find Orwell's language is concise and simple, but he tends to use more euphemism to set obstructions for readers --- he never points out the main idea directly, but always uses satirical description to let readers catch his idea gradually, which can lengthen the process of perception of readers and bring us endless aftertaste.

Here's an example from paragraph 8 of *Animal Farm*:

Napoleon himself was not seen in public... When he did appear, he was attended not only by his retinue of dogs but by a black cockerel who marched in front of him and acted as a kind of trumpeter... Napoleon inhabited separate apartments from the others. He took his meals alone, with two dogs to wait upon him, and always ate from the Crown Derby dinner service... Napoleon was now never spoken of simply as "Napoleon". He was always referred to in formal style as "our Leader, Comrade Napoleon".(63; ch. 8)

In this part, instead of saying "Napoleon held an absolute leadership position at the farm and lived in luxury" directly, the author expresses his main idea in defamiliarization language. Orwell describes details of Napoleon's privileged life and his name with noble titles called by other animals, showing Napoleon's personality cult and mental control among other animals. In the process of reading, readers can get the author's meaning in exploration rather than jump to conclusion. Beyond the language obstacles, they will get enjoyment from the perception of literature.

## 3. Discussion

There are also other kinds of defamiliarization in the work, such as defamiliarization of pronunciation: the raven Moses has the same pronunciation as Moses in western Christianity. Since Moses's faith of Sugarcandy Mountain which corresponds to the Christian heaven, we can also get profound meaning from it.

## 4. Conclusion

The creation of literary works should not be cold formulaic writing, but the crystallization of author's profound thoughts, innovative form and guide to reader's comprehension. Through the interpretation of defamiliarization technique used in *Animal Farm*, we find that defamiliarization can be applied to the subject, narrative perspective, characters, language and almost every aspect of works. It can not only help authors express their attitude and thoughts in a creative way, but also arouse readers' interest in reading and prolong their aesthetic perception process. All in all, defamiliarization is an important technique in western literature, which provides creative aesthetic art for people.

## References

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