The Lion King's Mythic Narrative

Disney as Moral Educator

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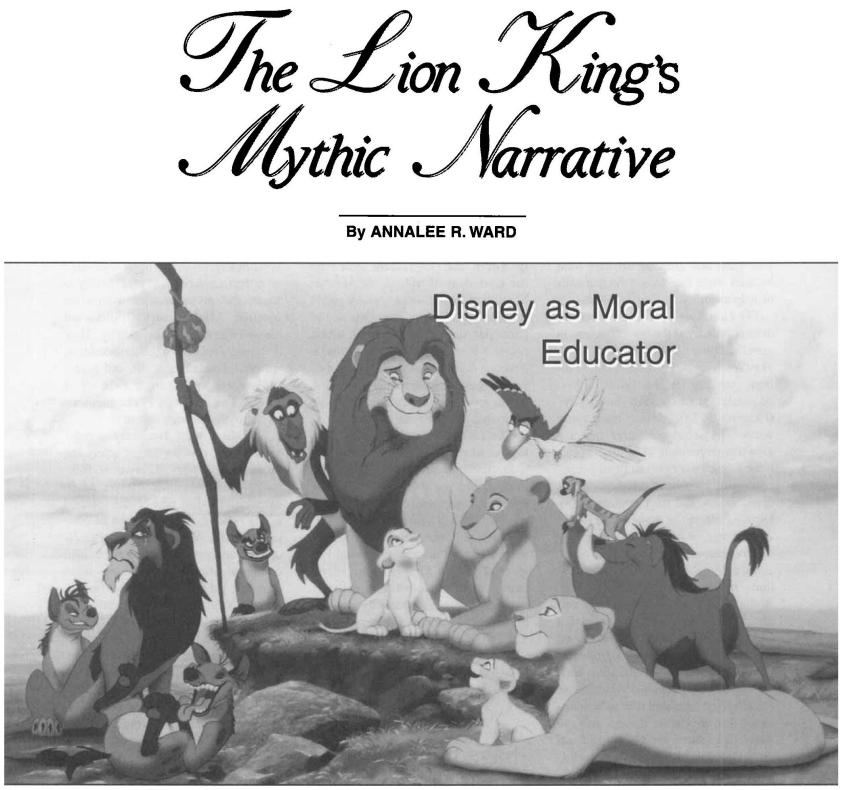

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"How do we restore [the] value of personal responsibility?" asks a recent newspaper headline (Montgomery E6). The article suggests that there is growing concern about the need for traditional values such as responsibility. The concern is reflected in the number of recent popular books that call for a more virtuous character in the people of American society. For example, in *Habits of the Heart,* Robert Bellah and his colleagues extensively interviewed more than 200 Americans to discover "how to preserve or create a morally coherent life." But they note that "the kind of life we want depends on the kind of people we are—on our character" (vi). Other examples include William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues*, which is meant to encourage such, and Charles Sykes's *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character.*

In this context, Walt Disney Pictures has produced *The Lion King* (dir. Rob Minkoff and Roger Allers, 1994), an animated film, that features a cast of animals that represents a society in harmony, then in a struggle for survival, and finally in a climactic battle resulting in renewed peace for the lion kingdom. More specifically, the story focuses on the life of lion cub Simba, son of Mufasa, the king; his struggle with guilt and growing up; and what he does when faced with the demands of responsibility.

The Lion King has achieved tremendous popularity at the box office and in merchandising. As of 28 March 1995, *The Lion King* had grossed $312.8 million, making it the fifth-highest "domestic grossing film in history" (Honeycutt 13). Sallie Hofmeister states, "[A]nalysts estimate that the *Lion King* represents $1 billion in profit for Disney over two to three years," producing revenue from box office, home videos, and merchandising (37). Disney expects the home video to sell 27 million copies. That would make it the "biggest-selling video of all time" and would generate "nearly $450 million in revenue" (Hettrick 92). Although not unlike other Disney animated films that use catchy songs, rich animation, and a diverse cast of voices, *The Lion King* has grossed significantly more than earlier popular films such as *The Little Mermaid, Aladdin,* or even the first animated film to be nominated for an Oscar, *Beauty and the Beast.*[1] It captured two Oscars and two Grammys for its music (Jolson-Colbum 5; Honeycutt 13).

At the same time, *The Lion King* managed to enrage many critics who claim it is a racist, sexist, homophobic, stereotyping, violent film. Those are strong charges, especially in the present environment of political correctness. That kind of criticism of Disney films is not new, however. Recent examples include Roberta Trites's article criticizing the sexism in *The Little Mermaid* and a similar feminist criticism by Susan White. Richard Schickel in *The Disney Version* criticizes the racism in many early Disney films, and Alex Wainer examines the stereotypes in *Dumbo* and *The Jungle Book.* When *Bambi* was released, numerous critics opposed its "G" rating because of the violent death of Bambi's mother.

[1] Hofmeister states that "*Aladdin* is Disney's second-biggest [next to *The Lion King]* grossing film," with $217 million in box-office sales.

Nevertheless, the question emerges: Why did *The Lion King* receive such intense response, both positive, in light of the box-office receipts, and negative? I believe the answer lies in the movie's use of mythic narrative that, by its nature, advocates a morality. Given the postmodern proclivity for relativism of values, as Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, many might respond negatively to the advocacy of particular values. By the same token, because it taps into cultural myths, it strikes a deeper cord than other narratives might, evoking strong responses. In this article I will examine the nature of mythic narrative and discuss its use in *The Lion King* as well as its axiological advocacy as moral educator.

Disney films have tremendous reach in American popular culture and have emerged as an important moral educator. That Disney animated films generally are retold fairy tales that not only tell a story but also have a moral is a given. *The Lion King* is a particularly telling example of obvious moralizing, but it also teaches other values, some positive and some that might be categorized as negative. It does so through words, pictures, and music in such a way that children are caught up in the narrative and not the preaching—a narrative that relies heavily on myth.

What Is Mythic Narrative?

That *The Lion King* is mythic needs clarification. The mythic, observes cultural critic Roger Silverstone, involves the "world of mystery and imagination, of feeling, participation and transformation ... in the creation of order and of a secure reality out of darkness of the unknown" (57–58). Historically, myth has been associated with the sacred because of its ability to touch the mysterious in a timeless manner. Myths carry truths—not always literally, but essentially. They are closely related to the transcendent, spiritual dimension of life and necessarily entail an axiology, a theory of values. That axiology is communicated by myths through narrative.

Narrative is an extremely popular topic today; it is no longer solely the purview of literary theorists or folklorists. Philosopher MacIntyre advocates narrative as part of the solution to the contemporary problem of ethical relativity. Walter R. Fisher develops narrative as a paradigm for human communication, also linking it to morality. Taking the argument further, Hayden White holds that narrative, by definition, moralizes. He asks, "Could we ever narrativize *without* moralizing?" (23). In a later critical response, he observes, "Story forms not only permit us to judge the moral significance of human projects, they also provide the means by which to judge them..." (253). He continues, "Narrative has the power to teach what it means to be *moral* beings (rather than machines endowed with consciousness)..." (253).

When a narrative, which moralizes, builds on myth, the result is axiological advocacy; the story, while it may entertain by virtue of being a narrative, promotes certain values over and against others. It does so supported by the power of the mysterious, common cultural ideals, and references to the sacred, spiritual, or transcendent.

It is this link to the sacred myths in particular that I wish to explore. For many of the myths that *The Lion King* draws from are religious, taken from biblical stories. They include the stories of Paradise, the Fall, the reign of Satan, the need for a savior, the cataclysmic destruction of the earth, and the return of the savior who restores peace and begins his reign as rightful king.

Even the creators at Disney admit that they were trying to do something "allegorical" in this film, and many critics see that. For example, Cochran states that Disney's story was "virtually mythological. A King and a King's Son. An Evil Uncle. Death and Rebirth. Plus the all-too relevant undercurrents of the decay of civilization" (36). Critic Perri Klass observes that *The Lion King* "is an interesting mix of *Hamlet, Bambi,* and *The Jungle Book,* all shot through with some contemporary sensibility about men who can't grow up." I believe, however, that the creators' desire to add depth to the film is reflected in their use of biblical myths, which contribute to its ability to act as a moral teacher by raising spiritual consciousness. In most instances this consciousness relates to traditional Christian spirituality, but as Klass notes, "New Age" messages also are included. Director Rob Minkoff is quoted by Jamie Bernard regarding its spirituality: "the movie attempts 'a level of spirituality, something slightly metaphysical'" (G5).

That the directors chose to add a spiritual dimension to the movie raises questions of intent. Robert Davies, James M. Farrell, and Steven S. Matthews offer one possible explanation: "The heroes and gods, or godlike beings, of the mythic fantasies ... may well be efforts to fill a psychic void created by the rational emphases of modernity" (342). Michael Real suggests that "myths reflect and make sacred the dominant tendencies of a culture, thereby sustaining social institutions and life-styles" (103). Myth, therefore, by definition, can act as a prosocial force in promoting values. *The Lion King,* following in the Disney tradition, aspires to offer a positive lesson for children about behavior that Disney values by associating itself with deeper myths.

Myths in *The Lion King*

The first myth that *The Lion King* alludes to is the biblical narrative of life in Paradise before the fall into sin. The movie begins with a diverse group of animals, which normally prey on one another, joyfully meeting at Pride Rock to witness the mystic Rafiki's blessing of lions King Mufasa and Queen Sarabi's new cub, Simba.[2] The king—Mufasa here, God in the Bible—rules a beautiful land, and all appear to be happy and at peace.

A second reference to the Garden of Eden myth comes when Simba is a frisky lion cub. Just as Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat of the fruit of one tree, Mufasa places a limitation on Simba. He says, "Everything the light touches is our kingdom" (Ingoglia

[2] At first glance this scene may appear to be more a reference to baptism than Paradise. That too is obviously a part of the scene, but is generally considered more ritual than myth.

16).[3] When Simba asks about the "shadowy place," Mufasa replies, "You must never go there, my son" (Ingoglia 16). The allusion continues when a tempter, in this case jealous Uncle Scar, suggests to Simba that "only the bravest of lions" go to the land of shadows (Ingoglia 21).

In a 1990s feminist reversal, Simba, the male, is tempted and recruits his best friend, female Nala, to go with him—as opposed to Eve recruiting Adam. Both know it is wrong, but both proceed, and the consequences are that it is the beginning of the downfall of nature in harmony and the beginning of a reign of evil. For, unknown to Mufasa and Simba, Scar has hatched a plan with his evil cohorts, the hyenas, scavengers of the shadow land who periodically prey on Pride Land animals. They intend to kill both Mufasa and Simba, thus allowing Scar to ascend to the throne.

Their plot succeeds in that Mufasa is killed saving Simba from a wildebeest stampede. Scar manages to convince Simba that he caused his father's death and that he must leave Pride Land and never return. Scar then takes over, allowing the hyenas to roam freely. The result is nature out of balance and the destruction of the land. In the biblical narrative, that means that evil is in the world, and Satan is alive and at work, a reality in which Christians believe.

Meanwhile, Simba has been rescued by two unlikely friends—Pumbaa the warthog and Timon the meerkat—and taken to live and mature in the jungle. During this time things grow worse for the animals in Pride Land, and Nala finally runs away to the jungle where she finds Simba. Nala succeeds in persuading him, with the help of the ancestral spirit in the sky and the work of mystic Rafiki, that he is the rightful king and must return to Pride Rock.

When Simba returns, he encounters a bleak, desperate land. Ingoglia describes the sight:

> Everything had been touched by the drought. The trees were almost leafless. Starving giraffes, stretching as high as possible, had eaten the branches bare. The enormous ancient baobabs were stripped, their stringy bark devoured by desperate, hungry elephants.
>
> The dry wind picked up, and threatening clouds gathered overhead... A blinding lightning bolt scorched the earth, and the dry grasses caught fire. (83–84)

Not only has the land suffered, but Zazu, Mufasa's faithful servant, is confined to a cage; the hyenas, having exhausted the herds meant for the lions, are about to riot; and Scar is trying to stop a rebellion by the starving lionesses.

Contrast that description to the one in the book of Matthew telling of "the last days" before the return of Christ. Christ tells his disciples: "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars... Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There

[3] Specific references to dialogue will be cited from Ingoglia.

will be famines and earthquakes in various places" (Matt. 24: 6–7). Once again the use of biblical myth is evident.

The final biblical reference is to the description of the Savior's rescuing humanity through the conquering of Satan, and Christ's reign over a new heaven and a new earth as the rightful king. The story of *The Lion King* concludes with Simba as the victor of the battle with Scar, purged of guilt over his father's death. As Jung observed, "[T]he myth of the hero is the most common and the best known myth in the world... The essential function of the heroic myth is the development of the individual's ego-consciousness—his awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses—in a manner that will equip him for the arduous tasks with which life confronts him" (101). In one possible stage of the heroic myth, the hero becomes the culture's savior (Jung 104). Simba is the hero of Pride Land as he has saved the animals from chaos and possible extinction.

In the final scene, it is dawn, and Pride Land is restored to beauty. The animals once again are gathered in harmony to witness the blessing of Simba and Nala's new cub, and the circle of life continues. This has obvious references to the New Age philosophy of cyclical history, the intimate relationship of nature and culture, and the belief that ancestors are somehow living now; all things are related in the "circle of life." Consequently it diverges from the biblical account; nevertheless, the similarities between the two are still strong. *The Lion King* speaks in sacred myth to advocate morality.

Disney's *The Lion King* as Moral Educator

Although Disney's role as moral educator is strong, recognition of that role is limited. For example, in Kathy Merlock Jackson's comprehensive *Walt Disney: A Bio-Bibliography,* she cites a number of articles that discuss Disney's role as educator in connection with history or children's literature, but morality is not discussed (162–63). Nevertheless, Jackson does suggest how powerful an influence Disney has had on our culture: "The Disney vision has permeated our culture; it is recognizable, inescapable" (109).

Michael Real, however, not only believes Disney has influence on culture; he suggests that it acts as a moral educator. In analyzing 200 questionnaires administered to people who had just completed a day at Disneyland, Real concludes that "Disney instructs through morality plays that structure personal values and ideology" (48). Historically, morality plays served a "particular religion," but today the emphasis on multiculturalism and pluralism "prevent[s] the direct teaching of ethics, metaphysics, or theology in the public schools. This leaves a vacuum for students—one not always filled by familial religious-ethnic interpretations of behavior and values. Mass-mediated culture is available to fill the void" (77). Critics are well aware of that media potential and are paying more attention even to children's films. *The Lion King* raised an uproar

of both negative and positive response. Understanding the film's role as a promoter of morality, then, means examining the critical response, identifying its axiology, and discussing its responsibility to its unique audience.

Critical Response

Although *The Lion King* received many positive reviews, negative criticism focused on problems in the film with racism, sexism, the stereotyping of gays and Jews, and violence. David Foster observes, "Some ... see not family fun but shocking violence and offensive stereotypes: subservient lionesses, jive-talking hyenas, a swishy Uncle Scar, a father's murder" (3). Citing the *Boston Globe,* Foster observes that a Harvard psychologist believes, '"The good-for-nothing hyenas are urban blacks; the arch-villain's gestures are effeminate, and he speaks in supposed gay cliches'" (3).

Critics who perceived the film as racist frequently commented on the hyenas and Uncle Scar. An article by Ronald Spark cites a Detroit paper that said, " 'The animators have marked him [Scar] as sinister in a racially insensitive way. Scar's coat seems to have a permanent shadow over it. And while Simba's mane is gloriously red, Scar's is, of course, black' " (44). Obviously not all critics viewed Scar in the same way; some saw him as stereotypically gay.

Criticism about sexism was also strong. For example, Spark cites Ellen Goodman: "'The film is a paean to patriarchy. All is well in the world only when princes like Simba are willing to take their rightful place on the throne'" (44). Other criticism commented on the minor role of females in the film.

Concern over the violent death of Simba's father Mufasa was also voiced, and critics called for "more restrictive ratings" because of it ("Film Censors" 78). Klass compared it to *Bambi* in a positive way, but noted that *Variety* "pointed to 'scenes of truly terrifying animal-kingdom violence that should cause parents to think twice before bringing along the *The Little Mermaid* set'" (1).

Other criticism included concern that Timon was a stereotyped Jew because he used the expression, "oy." Spark also notes the objection that the film "is unfair to Africa" because it stereotypes the continent, and that it has a political agenda of "hierarchical, even monarchical propaganda" (44).

Disney's response to the negative criticism was also strong. Foster quotes the spokesperson for Disney, Terry Press: '"These people need to get a life. It's a story. It's fiction'" (3). Spark observes, "They [the critics] are people for whom the very word 'black' has racist suggestion. They sniff out racism and sexism and this discrimination and that discrimination where no reasonable person would ever suspect they existed" (44). He points out that children need to be exposed to some of the realities of life to enhance their coping skills. He uses fairytales as an example of a positive force in children's growth. "We must not let our own crop of self-righteous crackpots spoil a film which our children will not only enjoy, but which will teach them a good deal

about life. Life as it is. Not as the political correctness brigade would like it to be" (44). Lipson echoes the strong criticism of the critics:

> People who think lovely thoughts and find so many nursery rhymes upsetting just won't like this straightforward message [get on with your life]... This message ... is a tough one for many self-pitying boomer parents raised in a peacetime, surrounded by consumer luxuries and endlessly in recovery from one perceived slight or remembered injury. They are continually mewling about past traumas that now excuse them from this responsibility or that challenge. It's the victim thing, and the movie sets Simba up for the part. (2)

Penri Klass, a pediatrician, is concerned about those critics who would sanitize life. "If children's entertainment is purged of the powerful, we risk homogenization, predictability and boredom, and we deprive children of any real understanding of the cathartic and emotional potentials of narrative" (1). She believes stories enable children to learn powerful lessons which may be dramatic, but are not harmful.

> Do we really want to protect our children from being saddened or scared or even upset by movies—or by books? Do we want to eliminate surprise, reversal, tragedy, and conflict? ... When we talk about children made sad by a movie, we are talking about children being moved by things that are not really happening to real people, and that is what art and drama and literature are all about ... that is a giant step toward empathy. (1)

I belabor the critical response to point out that *The Lion King* evokes deep responses on a moral level involving questions of value; it operates as a mythic narrative that necessarily advocates a morality. Some agree with the dominant message, and some believe the subtleties are dangerous teachers of a morality with which they do not agree..

The Lion King's Axiology

What values does *The Lion King* teach? Its primary message, central to the story, is that Simba, much as he enjoys life in the jungle with Pumbaa and Timon, must live up to his calling. He must accept the responsibility of who he is—a future king. Growing up means accepting responsibility. Certainly, few would disagree that Disney is proffering a "prosocial" message here, using Brown and Singhal's definition as "any communication that depicts cognitive, affective, and behavioral activities considered to be socially desirable or preferable by most members of a society" (90).

A second dominant value is that the survival of the lion kingdom—and by implication, our society—depends on the relatedness of the members. Everything is part of

the circle of life, posits the movie's theme song. The song teaches the importance of relationships as part of the food chain, as well as the reality that life and death are part of the same circle. Hence, the third significant message is entwined in the song: birth, death, and new birth are part of creation, and death is not something unnatural. At the same time, life is valuable and precious. The ritual of baptism adds significance to that fact. Again, those lessons mirror truth, to which few would object.

Numerous other values can be derived from the story and may or may not be observed by the children watching. They include the following:

1. There are mysteries in life that point to a transcendent, spiritual reality. The movie shows this through its use of biblical myths and, more specifically, in the instances of the mystic Rafiki's, participation, and Mufasa's appearance in the sky.

2. Cleanliness is an important part of life (even for animals). This is observed in the fact that Nala could not go with Simba until she had finished her daily bath.

3. Family is family, with good and bad members. Scar, while seemingly a good-for-nothing whiner, is not cast out or ignored, and Simba respects and listens to him.

4. Father is the head of the household; mother's role is to feed and clean the family while father's is to rule. This was the relationship of Simba's family.

5. Fathers should be involved in raising their children. Mufasa took time to teach Simba lessons and had a positive, loving relationship with him.

6. Friendship, surprisingly, is a good basis for marriage. The friendship between Nala and Simba is encouraged and valued. When Simba discovers, however, that they are pledged to be married when they are older his response is, "I can't marry Nala. She's my friend" (Ingoglia 28).

7. There is good and evil in the world, which are often associated with light and darkness. Many visuals throughout the film suggest this, including Scar's dark mane and the darkness of the elephant graveyard, the hyenas, and the land ravaged by Scar's rule. In contrast are the light of the heavens shining on Simba (and later his son) in a baptismal blessing and the light on the land under Mufasa's and then Simba's rule.

8. Obedience to one's parents is right. Simba is disciplined for disobedience, and he suffers consequences of his actions.

9. Death comes to all—both good and bad. We do not understand it, but it happens. Simba learns this lesson when his good father is violently killed by a stampede and Scar is killed in battle.

10. Life goes on even in the face of death. Thinking he was responsible for his father's death, Simba wishes he was dead; yet Timon and Pumbaa show him that life goes on.

11. Guilt can get in the way of who we ought to be and what we ought to do. Simba experienced this and learned that responsibility is even greater than guilt (and later discovered guilt was unfounded).

12. Life is more than avoiding worries and responsibilities. Simba wanted to believe he could—and live the easy life—but he found he had to accept who he was and his responsibility.

13. Honesty and openness help truth win out. By not confessing his guilt to anyone, Simba could not learn the truth that he did not cause Mufasa's death. When he confessed, the truth came out, and he was absolved.

The majority of values are noncontroversial, prosocial concerns that provide important lessons about life and community. MacIntyre argues that we need to combat today's moral decline by returning to an emphasis on character, on moral virtue, and grounding that in narrative, practice, and community. *The Lion King* exemplifies the drive toward this kind of morality with its emphasis on Simba's character: the need for him to practice his rule, his responsibility to his community, and the importance that his story and that of his people be told. *The Lion King* is a mythic, moral narrative.

A Unique Audience

Because Disney aims its films particularly at the family audience, its persuasive role involves other issues. Challenged by the possibility of manipulation, persuasive attempts must justify both the means and the ends—particularly with an audience of children who are still forming their moral vision. Robert Coles in *The Spiritual Life of Children* reflects, "How young we are when we start wondering about it all, the nature of the journey and of the final destination" (335). Children are concerned about moral issues.

Disney faces the issue that children "are more vulnerable, more persuadable, than adult audiences" (Schrag 221), and therefore require greater care. If, as Coles believes, movies help both adults and children "try to figure out the moral significance" of their lives, Disney has a great burden to present a responsible moral vision (Coles, *Moral Life* 90).

The fact that film has not only dialogue, but also visuals and music to add to its potential power, is an observation of which Disney is well aware. Cochran states: "He [Jeffrey Katzenberg] works entirely by instinct when it comes to the animated stuff—it's all about 'is this telling the story, is it holding together, is there an emotional core to this thing?' He's a great emotional foil. If it moves Jeffrey, it'll move other people" (34). Disney wants powerful emotions at work in its films. Cochran also comments on the visuals: "What intrigued Hans [the composer] was that animation, especially animation with animal characters, works its audience magic on a purely subconscious level." For, he observes, "what animation does is present emotional truth, not 'realistic' truth" (35). Not only do the words and the visuals combine to tell the story, the music is also consciously designed to follow "the emotional structure of the story itself' (36). Cochran gives the following example:

> Zimmer composed a theme for Mufasa which he believed should not be played after he died—except when he appears in the sky. "You hear this theme when Mufasa explains the kingdom and responsibility to Simba, but

> it basically dies with Mufasa, and doesn't return until Mufasa reappears as a ghost. But it isn't linked to Mufasa. It's linked to the whole idea of being King, and Simba has to earn the right to have that theme, because he has forgotten all about responsibility and his role in life." (37)

Film is a powerful storyteller; tapping in to myth enhances its power by touching the sacred and reminding audiences of the mystery of the spiritual.

Hence, the implication for Disney is that they need to take extra care in what they do because their tools are powerful, and they are working with a vulnerable audience. For as Robert Schrag concluded in a narrative analysis of Saturday morning television, "these first stories are not subjected, in the minds of those young children who view them, to the test of narrative fidelity. These children are in the process of constructing the criteria against which they will judge the narrative fidelity of other stories" (231). The stories that children are exposed to will form the standards for testing the truth of other stories later in life. Consequently, charges of racism, sexism, and so on, particularly in children's films, must be taken seriously. If children believe that what they see represents a true picture of life, then the potential for cultural change and growth is diminished.

There is another side to the image of film as moral educator, however. While acknowledging that it plays a role, Coles concludes that other factors are equally important in forming the moral life of children. The child "doesn't forget what he's learned in school, learned at home, from hearing people talk in his family and neighborhood" (80). In other words, it is possible for the negative messages of films to be overridden by the other influences in a child's life, as long as those other influences are both positive and strong. That negative messages are present in the first place, however, is still a problem.

Disney, by grounding The Lion King's narrative in myth and infusing its story with moral purpose, has chosen to take on the role of a moral educator. In most instances, The Lion King raises ethical sensitivity and suggests a positive direction to follow. However, if racism or sexism becomes the projected norm representing reality, then Disney has lost its moral high ground.

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Annalee R. Ward
The Lion King's Mythic Narrative
Disney as Moral Educator

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Ward examines the nature of mythic narrative and discusses its use in "The Lion King" as well as its axiological advocacy as moral educator. The film is an especially telling example of obvious moralizing, but it also teaches other values, some positive and some that might be called negative.
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