

The Lion King

MORAL EDUCATOR THROUGH MYTH, ARCHETYPE, AND RITUAL

FILM BACKGROUND

We live, we die. The children live and die—all part of the great “circle of life,” as *The Lion King’s* theme song implies. A Disney animated film aimed at children, *The Lion King* features a cast of animals who represent 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. But it is also a story that relies heavily on myths, archetypes, and rituals as rhetorical means to communicate moral values.

In recent years, the Disney conglomeration has emerged as a significant storyteller of our cultural myths. At one time the sources for myth were diverse but almost always included religious institutions. Now that is less common, and people turn to popular culture to satisfy spiritual hungers. For increasingly harried parents, Disney serves brightly packaged, nutritious, “safe food” in convenient locations, including their own home (in the form of videos). *The Lion King* in particular, however, invokes transcendent elements as it entertains.

The Lion King has achieved tremendous popularity at the box office, in merchandising, and in home video sales. It grossed \$312.9 million domestically, making it seventh on the list of top-grossing films (“Worldwide”). According to Sallie Hofmeister, “analysts 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 release to sell 27 million copies before they put on a moratorium. That would make it the “biggest selling video of all time” and would generate “nearly \$450 million in revenue” (Hettrick 1). Capturing two Oscars and two Grammys for its music (Honeycutt 13; Jolson-Colburn 5), this movie works through catchy songs, rich animation, and a diverse cast of voices that add depth to the pathos in the animals’ eyes—not unlike other Disney animated films.¹ Yet this film 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 for Best Picture, *Beauty and the Beast*.²

At the same time, *The Lion King* managed to bring out the rage of many critics who assert that it is a racist, sexist, homophobic, stereotyping, and violent film. Those are strong charges, especially in the present environment of politically correct concern. This kind of criticism of Disney films is not new, however.³

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 that the answer lies in the movie’s use of mythic narrative, which employs archetypes and rituals and, by its nature, advocates a morality. Given the postmodern proclivity for the relativity of values, as Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, many might respond negatively to the advocacy of particular values. By the same token, because the film taps into cultural myths, it strikes a deeper chord than other narratives might, which in turn evokes strong responses.

In this chapter I will examine the natures of mythic narrative, archetypes, and rituals and the appearances of each in *The Lion King*; how they work as communicative tools; and how the film acts as moral educator. It is to the topic of mythic narrative that I now turn.

MYTHIC NARRATIVE

A Definition of Myth

The statement that *The Lion King* is mythic needs clarification. Because definitions of *myth* vary, I will summarize several of the more significant approaches to understanding myth. Examinations of myth are usually included in narrative criticism or even subsumed under psychoanalytic criticism. The difficulty of constructing a uniform definition of *myth* can be seen in some examples of differing approaches.

Michael Real defines mythic activity as “the collective reenactment of symbolic archetypes that express the shared emotions and ideals of a given culture” (*Mass-Mediated* 96). This definition comports well with psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s belief in the primacy of archetypes: “Archetypes create myths, religions and philosophies that influence and characterize whole nations and epochs of history” (Jung and von Franz 68). The psychoanalytic approach to criticism is common to literary criticism, film criticism, and rhetorical criticism, which is my focus.⁴ An example of rhetorical criticism can be seen in the work of Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas Frenz, as well as of Robert Davies, James Farrell, and Steven Matthews. According to Rushing and Frenz, “the historical text that unites singular public expressions into a narrative is called a ‘myth’” (“Frankenstein” 64). In “*The Wizard of Oz and Other Mythic Rites of Passage*,” J. Scott Cochrane uses psychoanalytic language in summarizing the depths to which myth resides in people: “Myths are not . . . in any superficial sense created, but rather bring to expression the deepest values present in the collective human psyche” (79).

A useful survey of theories of myths, *The Message of Television*, provided by Roger Silverstone, summarizes the commonalities of theorists Ernst Cassirer, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, and Mircea Eliade in these words: “[The theorists lay] their stress on the world view that myth generates and in which it participates. . . . [The mythic, the] world of mystery and imagination, of feeling, participation and transformation is involved in the creation of order and of a secure reality out of the darkness of the unknown” (57–58). Historically, myth has been associated with the sacred because of its ability to touch mystery in a timeless manner. Silverstone also examines Claude Lévi-Strauss’s view of myth as structural and concludes: “The myths are basically answers to questions, and the questions and to a degree the answers also, are the universal ones of human existence” (60). Concluding that myth has often been related to magic, to ritual, and to fairy tales, Silverstone summarizes by broadening the concept of myth to mythic, with the following definition:

The mythic dimension of culture contains traditional stories and actions whose source is the persistent need to deny chaos and create order. It contributes to the security of social and cultural existence. The mythic is a world apart, but it is also close at hand. It acts as a bridge between the everyday and the transcendent, the known and the unknown, the sacred and the profane. (70)

In building that bridge, Eliade observes, myths touch a mysterious reality: “Myth is bound up with ontology; it speaks only of *realities*, of what *really* happened, of what was fully manifested” (*Sacred* 9).

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.

Myth as Narrative

Narrative is an extremely popular topic today—no longer the sole purview of literary theorists or folklorists. Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre advocates narrative as part of the solution to the contemporary problem of ethical relativity. Theologians Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones link narrative to both theology and ethics. Communication scholar Walter Fisher develops narrative as a paradigm for human communication, also linking it to morality. Taking the argument further, historian Hayden White holds that narrative by definition moralizes (“Value” 23). In a later critical response, White 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” (“Narrativization” 253). White continues, “Narrative has the power to teach what it means to be *moral beings* (rather than machines endowed with consciousness)” (253).

Mythic narrative is found in every culture, enabling people to organize the meaning of their lives. Joseph Campbell argues that not only do all people use myths, but also those individual myths are variations of universal myths: “[A]ll [communities] have been built from the one fund of mythological motifs—variously selected, organized, interpreted, and ritualized according to local need, but revered by every people on earth” (20). Some of the more common myths deal with creation, the origins of humankind, the nature of evil or suffering, heroes, and cataclysmic destruction.

When a narrative that moralizes builds on myth, the result is axiological advocacy; the story, although it may entertain by virtue of its being a narrative, promotes certain values over others. It does so by linking the common cultural ideals to the power of mystery that includes references to the sacred, spiritual, or transcendent, which in turn is supported by a truth value.

Myth as Sacred

The link between the sacred and myths is important to this study, for the primary myths from which *The Lion King* draws are religious, with roots in biblical stories. They include the stories of paradise, the fall, desert wandering, the reign of Satan, the need for a savior, and the cataclysmic destruction of the earth, followed by the return of the savior who restores peace and the beginning of his full reign as rightful king.

Even the creators at Disney admit that they were trying to do something deeper, something “allegorical” in this film. 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” (1). I believe there is more to it than this and that the creators’ desire to add depth to the film is reflected in the use of biblical myths, relying on archetypes and ritual to raise spiritual consciousness. In most instances this consciousness relates to traditional spirituality, but as Klass notes, New Age messages are also included. Director Rob Minkoff is quoted by Jamie Bernard about the film’s spirituality: “the movie attempts ‘a level of spirituality, something slightly metaphysical’” (G4).

That the director chose to add a spiritual dimension raises questions of intent. Davies et al. offer one possible explanation: “The heroes and gods, or god-like beings, of the mythic fantasies . . . may well be efforts to fill a psychic void created by the rational emphases of modernity” (342). Real observes that “myths reflect and make sacred the dominant tendencies of a culture, thereby sustaining social institutions and lifestyles” (*Mass-Mediated* 103). Most likely, following in the Disney tradition, the film aspires to offer a positive lesson for children about behavior that Disney values by associating itself with deeper myths; in a sense it is sacralizing Disney’s (some would say American) values.

Myths in *The Lion King*

The first myth to which *The Lion King* alludes is the biblical narrative of life in paradise before the fall into sin. The movie begins with a diverse group of animals that normally prey on one another, joyfully meeting together at Pride Rock to witness shaman Rafiki’s blessing of Simba, the new cub of lion king Mufasa and queen Sarabi.⁵ The king—Mufasa here, God in the Bible—rules the 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” (16).⁶ When Simba asks about the “shadowy place,” Mufasa replies, “You must never go there, my son” (16). The allusion continues when a tempter, in this case jealous Uncle Scar, suggests that “only the bravest of lions” go to the land of shadows (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’s recruitment of Adam. Both know it is wrong. Both proceed. And the consequences are that it is the beginning of the downfall of nature’s operating in harmony and the inauguration of the 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 is guilty of causing his father’s death and tells him he must leave Pride Land and never return; Simba is in essence banished from the beautiful Garden of Eden. Scar then takes over, allowing the hyenas to roam freely. The result is nature out of balance and 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.

The route by which Simba leaves is the desert. Aimlessly running until exhaustion and thirst take over, Simba would probably die if it were not for the care he receives from Pumbaa the warthog and Timon the meerkat. This part of the narrative resembles biblical stories of desert wanderings or journeys. Perhaps the most common is the story of Moses, who fled to the desert after killing an Egyptian and was there ministered to and taken in by the family of Jethro (Genesis 2). Another biblical desert wandering is the story of the nation of Israel. God and Israel covenanted together, each with responsibilities to fulfill, but Israel frequently disobeyed and did not live up to its obligations. In the same way, Simba, in taking up life with Timon and Pumbaa, fails to live up to his obligations to his father and to the Pride Land.

While Simba lives his carefree life in the jungle, things grow worse for the animals at home, and Nala finally runs away to the jungle, where she finds Simba. With the help of the ancestral spirit of Mufasa in the sky and the work of mystic Rafiki, Nala succeeds in convincing him that he

is the rightful king and must return to Pride Rock.⁷ Mufasa appears in the sky, calling to Simba to take his “place in the Circle of Life,” to “remember who you are” (Ingoglia 79). Compare this event to God’s speaking directly to Moses out of the burning bush. God reminds Moses of his ancestors and of his care for the oppressed people of Israel, and he sends Moses back to Egypt to lead Israel (Genesis 3).

When Simba returns to the Pride Lands, 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 also 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.

Compare this 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 will be famines and earthquakes in various places. . . . Immediately after the distress of those days “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” (Matthew 24:6–7, 29)

Once again the use of biblical myth is evident.

The final comparison is to the biblical 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, the victor of the battle with Scar, vindicated of responsibility for his father’s death. Jung observes, “. . . the 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 develop-

ment 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” (Jung and von Franz 101). In one possible stage of the heroic myth, the hero becomes the culture’s savior (104). Simba is the hero of Pride Land, for he has saved its inhabitants from chaos and possible extinction.

In the final scene, it is dawn, the Pride Lands have been restored to beauty, the animals once again have gathered in harmony to witness the blessing of a new cub—this time Simba and Nala’s—and the circle of life continues. As Eliade observes, “The myth of the end of the world is a universal occurrence; . . . This is the myth of the periodic destruction and re-creation of worlds, the cosmological formula of the myth of the eternal return” (*Myths* 243). This has obvious references to New Age philosophy in its beliefs in cyclical history, in the intimate relationship of nature and culture, and in ancestors’ life after death; all things are related in the “circle of life.” But the cyclical understanding of life is present in biblical myth as well. For example, the Christian understanding of salvation is based on understanding birth, life, death, and rebirth. Biblical descriptions of the end of time include a new heaven and new earth, with a tree of life in the new Jerusalem. Northrop Frye’s work on myths and archetypal criticism also confirms the presence of “cyclical movement” in myth (158 ff.). *The Lion King* speaks in sacred myth to communicate its message. In so doing, it relies on archetypes.

ARCHETYPE

A Definition of Archetype

Because myth depends on archetype, identification of the archetypes used in *The Lion King* illuminates the rhetorical force of the film as mythic. Examples of this kind of rhetorical criticism of film with a psychoanalytic emphasis are found in the research that Rushing and Frenz have done, which frequently relies on Carl Jung and archetypal analysis.⁸ They observe that Jung believed the cinema to be a significant expression of archetypes, for, as Jung put it, it “enables us to experience without danger to ourselves all the excitements, passions, and fantasies which have to be repressed in a humanistic age” (“Frankenstein” 64). Archetypes as part of the “collective unconscious,” states Jung, “manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic

images" (Jung and von Franz 58). Archetypal analysis is growing in popularity as a tool that cracks open the narrative structure, enabling deeper insights into the psychological power of film.⁹

Although archetypal criticism looks to Jung as its father, others have expanded the definition. Northrop Frye defines "archetype" as "a symbol which . . . helps to unify and integrate our literary experience"; it is a "typical or recurring image" that acts as a "mode of communication" (99). Chesebro, Bertelsen, and Gencarelli provide a detailed description of archetypal criticism, setting forth the following characteristics: they are "recurring," and they are based on principles of "human constructivism," "conventionality," "ambiguity," "epideictic understanding" (or being emotionally tied to the community), and "reduction" (260–261). These repeating images, they argue, are "indispensable to human beings" and help in "explaining human experiences" (271).

Although a more Platonic approach to archetypes might take issue with Chesebro et al. over the human constructivism and conventionality characteristics, all approaches agree that archetypes are universal symbols. For example, Eliade even compares Jung to Plato: "The world of the archetypes of Jung is like the Platonic world of Ideas, in that the archetypes are impersonal and do not participate in the historical Time of the individual life, but in the Time of the species—even of organic Life itself" (*Myths* 53). Archetypes act metonymically, as a kind of symbolic shorthand for universal experiences.

A final characteristic of archetypes, argues Rushing, is that they are "changing over time, co-varying with the development of human consciousness" ("Evolution" 2). This last aspect is helpful in clarifying how some of the mythic stories have changed in recent years yet retain their communicative power.

Archetypes in *The Lion King*

A number of archetypes have already been alluded to in the description of the myths, but there are more. The film begins with the song "Circle of Life." The song is clarified by the visuals of all different animals coming together in a loose circle around Pride Rock, where we see a new life, Simba. Historically, records Aniela Jaffe, circles represent "ultimate wholeness" and "the cosmos in its relation to divine powers" (266, 267). They are some of the strongest sacred archetypes and frequently appear as mandalas throughout history.

Next, Rafiki represents the medicine man or shaman or priest. His job is to somehow "baptize" the new cub with his blessing and to watch over him. Simba's birth is an important event in Pride Land, for he represents the birth of a new king, ultimately a savior. The significance is highlighted by the film's archetypal use of dark and light at the moment Rafiki finishes the blessing and holds Simba high:¹⁰ ". . . the clouds parted, and a shaft of sunlight broke through, shining down on the future king. The animals fell silent and bowed" (8).

As was mentioned above, Simba and Nala represent Adam and Eve, who were tempted by the snake, in this case, Scar. Here the forbidden fruit is an elephant's graveyard, the shadow lands—an archetype for death. Once again, light and dark are used significantly. Scar's mane is black, whereas Mufasa's and Simba's are golden. The forbidden land is dark and shadowy. The hyenas are dark gray and black.¹¹ The only other animals in the land to have any black coloring are the wildebeests with black manes who inadvertently kill Mufasa.

Another important archetype is that of the family. It is in this context that feminine and masculine are usually defined. Although in a number of places *The Lion King* makes concessions to a newer definition of femininity, it is here that what have been considered traditional archetypal feminine roles are reinforced to the extent that many critics have objected to the film's stereotyping.

As a child, Nala, chosen to be Simba's wife when they mature, is portrayed as being quicker and stronger than Simba and his best friend. But as an adult her role is to get Simba to be her king. She succeeds and bears his child. Her role is strictly that of helpmate. The feminine archetype has regressed to stereotype.

Likewise, the role of the mother, for example, is of one who submits to her husband; otherwise her role is almost nonexistent. Other than Narabi's token presence at the ritual, in "bed" in the cave, gossiping with her friend, or serving Scar, she has little significance to the plot. Klass observes, "Most Disney cartoon features have not included mothers at all; the title character in *The Little Mermaid* has only a father, as do Princess Jasmine in *Aladdin* and Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*" (1).

By the same consideration, the father's role in each of these movies is very important. Mufasa's father role is that of the archetypal "90's-style . . . involved dad," says Klass, unlike Bambi's "archetypal distant father of the 1940's" (1). Here the relevance of seeing the archetype as an evolving symbol is apparent, for the father's role has changed over time.

Nevertheless, the father figure is significant. Not only is Mufasa father of his immediate family, but he, as king of the Pride Lands, is responsible for the circle of life on his land; he is a father figure to the Pride Lands. W. Lloyd Warner cites the example of the African Bantu people, who see their king as father of their people; interestingly, the Bantu also “worship their ancestors” (31–32). That we see an emphasis in *The Lion King* on the important guidance provided by the ancestors in the sky demonstrates the centrality of the family archetype to the film. Warner states strongly the significance of family: “all symbol systems, in different ways, are related to the family structure” (41).

The family is a significant archetype, and the familial relationships are an important part of this film. Gerhardus Oosthuizen summarizes the centrality of family to African religions.

Humanity in Africa is basically family, basically community, with a strong emphasis on the traditional religion and its symbiotic union with ancestors and spiritual entities in the metaphysical world. In the traditional religious context, all the acts from birth to death and thereafter bind the person as a communal being to everyone around themselves. . . . The person is the center of existence—not as an individual, but as family, as community. (41)

The Lion King also emphasizes the importance of family, but in community, and the appearance of Mufasa in the sky demonstrates the “symbiotic union” of Simba with his father.

Another significant archetype is that of the journey that nearly leads to Simba’s death. (I will expand on the discussion of journey below as part of the section on ritual.) Simba tries to cross a vast desert frontier. Images of past archetypal frontiers such as the sea and the American frontier are elicited.¹² Befriended by Pumbaa and Timon, Simba recovers and matures during this time, as well as cements the bonds of friendship. These friends advise him to live for the moment and to forget worries and responsibilities. That is not quite possible, however, when Nala appears and reminds him he is king. The film returns to archetypal imagery when he struggles over what to do—at night. Osborn describes the suggestive power of light and dark as one of the strongest archetypes: “Light . . . relates to the fundamental struggle for survival and development. Light is a condition for sight. . . . In utter contrast is darkness (and

the night), bringing fear of the unknown, discouraging sight. . . . One is reduced to a helpless state” (“Archetypal Metaphor” 117). Simba agonizes over who he is and what he should do, during a sleepless night. Rafiki appears, however, encouraging him to look at himself. Ultimately, Simba sees his father in the light of the stars and is encouraged to take up his rightful role.

He returns to Pride Rock to fight Scar to the death. The fact that Simba must ascend to the highest point on the land to do battle and ultimately achieve his goal is also symbolic. Frye suggests that the “mountaintop” experience, the highest point between heaven and hell, also acts as archetype (203). During the fight, the grasslands catch on fire. The scene is one of deathly darkness interrupted by the destructiveness of fire, an archetypal fire of “a purifying force,” as Osborn describes it (123). It is an apocalyptic vision of a struggle with the powers of darkness. When it seems that Simba is about to lose to Scar, Scar brags about how he killed Mufasa in a similar manner. That confession exonerates Simba from his guilt, renewing his strength and enabling him to overcome Scar. Scar falls to his death, serving as food for the hyenas. As Simba and Nala rejoice, the fire is quenched by rain—rain that ends the famine and stands as an archetypal image of renewal and rebirth.¹³ The image is completed in the next scene—a colorful, lively picture of the revived Pride Lands. The king has returned, nature is restored, and life is in rightful balance. *The Lion King* concludes with the dawn of a new day, literally and figuratively. The animals gather again to witness the blessing of a new cub. The circle closes.

RITUAL

A Definition of Ritual

In intimate relationship to myth and archetype is ritual, for myths are built on archetypes and ritual. Defining *ritual* is a difficult task. As professor of performance studies, Richard Schechner observes, “The writings about ritual are voluminous” (264), and the term “has been so variously defined—as concept, praxis, process, ideology, yearning, experience, function—that it means very little because it means too much” (228). As I use the term, I understand it to be repetitive action identified with the sacred or as symbolic experience. Either usage relates it to myth and archetype and is an important dimension in understanding myth.

Rituals in *The Lion King*

BAPTISM In *The Lion King* two rituals in particular play primary roles in furthering the mythic power of the narrative. The first is the ritual of baptism performed at the beginning and the end of the film. Much is made of the ceremonial nature of the occasion and its importance to the lion family but also to the broader culture. Rafiki, the representative of the spiritual, gathers the cub in his arms, shakes a gourd over his head, then cracks it open to loose the sticky substance (perhaps symbolizing life) inside. Next he smears the gourd's contents on Simba's forehead and sprinkles dust (perhaps symbolizing death) over Simba's back. It is a careful orchestration of a performance that has been given before, Rafiki notes, when Mufasa was born, and will be given again to Simba's cub. The ceremony concludes with Rafiki holding Simba high in presentation to the cheering kingdom and to heaven. Heaven responds positively with a shaft of light falling on Simba. The "people" respond solemnly in silence and worship as they bow to Simba. It is a sacred ritual, part of the structure of the community.

This scene alludes to both the Christian ritual of baptism and the West African ritual of the naming ceremony. Baptism is a ritual that signifies the washing away of sins and the new life in Christ. The purifying symbol of water is placed on the head of the person (or in some traditions, people are immersed), much the same way as Rafiki put the contents of the gourd on Simba.

Although many different rituals are exercised by various African people (Mbiti 119), some tribes practice a naming ceremony that has many similar features to the one in the film. The West African Wolof people include in their ceremony red and white kola nuts: "The red kola nuts symbolize long life, and the white ones symbolize good luck. An elderly person rubs hands over the child's head, prays and spits in its ears to implant the name in the baby's head. After that the name is then announced loudly to the crowd . . ." (Mbiti 119). The West African Nupe religion follows a brief private ceremony with a large public ceremony. Nadel observes that "this is done before a gathering of guests as large as the host can make it"; then, traditionally, the grandfather had the important role of stating the name (116–117). *The Lion King* begins with a huge gathering of all the animals. Then, someone who appears to be one of the oldest members of the community, Rafiki, takes over the ceremony.

PILGRIMAGE The second important ritual in the film is that of Simba's journey, or pilgrimage, although he does not recognize it as such. This journey can be considered ritual in two regards: it is a rite of passage, and it is a pilgrimage.

Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep researched rituals extensively and, in particular, rites of passage. He concludes: "Life itself means to separate and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: . . . thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity, and old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife . . ." (189–190).

He could be describing the plot of *The Lion King*, for it is a story about birth, death, separation, maturity, and even the afterlife. The rite of passage involves an archetype of initiation that forces the individual "to experience a symbolic death." It is a "'rite of passage' from one stage of life to the next . . .," ending in the realization of self-actualization through symbols of transcendence (123).

Simba experiences a separation, a crossing of the threshold, which in his case is a literal crossing of the desert. In addition, he experiences both a symbolic death, in having to leave all that he knew and loved, and a near physical death. When he recrosses that threshold to reenter society, he has arrived at self-knowledge, with the help of transcendent symbols such as the appearance of his father in his face in the pond and then his father's appearance and voice in the sky. The film concludes with reference to Simba's maturity—another ritual ceremony for Simba and Nala's new cub. Appropriately, the song "Circle of Life" is heard once more.

Victor Turner, drawing on the work of Van Gennep's three distinct phases of rites of passage—separation, transition, and incorporation—focuses especially on the transitional state, also called the liminal. He defines *liminal*, which has its roots in the Latin word *threshold*, as "that time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another. It is when the initiand is neither what he has been nor is what he will be" (113). This in-between state is characterized by a "blurring and merging of distinctions," which leads to a "leveling" process. Individual identities become meaningless, and people "are pushed as far toward uniformity, structural invisibility, and anonymity as possible" (25).

Yet this anonymity brings a certain freedom with it. In tribal ritual, initiands are beyond the "normative social structure"; participants are "dead to the social world but alive to the asocial world" (26). Turner calls this a kind of "anti-structure." The antistructural tendency of the limi-

nal is, for Turner, a positive function that allows for the development of creative seeds for societal change. Those seeds are germinated in the unique relationships of fellow pilgrims, relationships called “communitas.” In this state, argues Turner, “we place a high value on personal honesty, openness, and lack of pretensions or pretentiousness” (48). Hence, the liminal, though a state of limbo, can actually be a time of refreshment, a time to let go of the old and envision the new.

In the film, Simba experiences the liminal state when he joins with Timon and Pumbaa, certainly unpretentious characters, to live the life they advocate through the song “Hakuna Matata.” In the words of the song, “It means no worries for the rest of your days. It’s our problem-free philosophy, Hakuna Matata.” Simba spends his teen years, it implies, living the care-free life, accountable to no one, responsible for nothing. It is an antistructural life lived in a unique community where there are no social distinctions between a lion (normally king of the jungle), a meerkat, and a warhog; it is the life of the liminal, transitional stage for Simba. It is a simple, communal life, and ultimately, with the help of Nala and Rafiki, leads to his self-discovery.

In addition to the view of his journey as a ritualistic rite of passage, it can be understood as a ritual of pilgrimage.¹⁴ Anthropologist Alan Morinis describes the pilgrimage as “a paradigmatic and paradoxical human quest, both outward and inward” (ix), that functions as “a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal” (4). Morinis adds, “The allegorical pilgrimage seeks out a place not located in the geographical sphere. Some sacred journeys are wanderings that have no fixed goal; the pilgrimage here is the search for an unknown or hidden goal” (4).

Simba journeyed both physically and metaphorically. Although he did not recognize his goal, he was on a journey of self-discovery that began with birth and continued until he took his rightful place as king of the Pride Lands. In addition, Morinis notes that “pilgrims tend to be people for whom the sacred journey is a limited break from the routines and familiar context of an ordinary, settled social life” (19). Or in Turner’s language, it can be a liminal experience.

Having done extensive research on pilgrimage, Victor and Edith Turner identify a number of characteristics that can be seen in Simba’s journey. They suggest that pilgrimages have the following attributes: a sense of leaving one’s sins behind, voluntariness, penance, ordeal, leveling of statuses, simplicity, community, and self-discovery of one’s center

(1–39). All of these factors occurred in Simba’s experience, with the self-discovery coming when Simba returns to his rightful place. Morinis observes that the return to society is the test of the success of the pilgrimage. He cites Karen Sinclair as having said, “Salvation and grace depend only partially upon transcendence. Ultimately moral redemption lies in the creation, by whatever symbolic sacred means, of a positive place within the mundane social order” (27). That this kind of message resides in the subtext of a film that uses ritual as a communicative strategy is a positive moral lesson. Whether or not the audience perceives that will be taken up later.

Nevertheless, that the film is aware of itself as a story of pilgrimage is alluded to in the opening and closing song, “Circle of Life,” which tells of the movement through cycles of hope and despair. The song suggests that we are all on a journey, seeking to “find our place” in the world.

Viewed as a rite of passage and/or a pilgrimage, Simba’s journey has ritualistic implications related to the sacred, to the mythic.

COMMUNICATION TOOLS

The Lion King’s communication tools are used to tell a narrative that moves its audience and with which they can identify, despite its lack of human role models. The film transcends the context symbolically to speak to human concerns and experiences.

Myth, Archetype, and Ritual: Rhetorical Tools

Roderick Hart argues that “all rhetoric depends on myth” (318), which he defines as “master stories describing exceptional people doing exceptional things that serve as moral guides to proper action” (315). *The Lion King* draws its rhetorical strength from the use of biblical myths, archetypes, and rituals.

That “proper” actions are easily identifiable has long been a characteristic of Disney. For example, in an analysis of Disney as a morality play (particularly Disneyland), Real interviewed 192 Disneyland visitors and discovered a unanimity about perceptions of what Disney considered virtues and vices (“Disney Universe”). Smoodin observes that even today the Disney “company works diligently to control the manner in which . . . films can be interpreted by modern audiences” (*Animating* 189). Because Disney’s audience is primarily children, the company uses these

didactic means to clarify and reinforce its lessons. Disney envisions a moral society that embraces traditional myths. Philip Lee comments on the need for the familiar as a tool to communicate the film's message:

Film makers have to make use of stories that can be generally recognized. Don Cupitt, among others, has identified the themes of these universal narratives. They move from pilgrimage to goal, desire to satisfaction, struggle to success, opposition to mediation, conflict to resolution, confinement to freedom, loss to recovery, problem to solution. They confirm our identity; locate us in time and space; and reassure us about life and death. (23)

The universality of the company's myths and the metonymic nature of archetypes contribute to Disney's communicative strength in *The Lion King*. By using these tools, Disney increases the power of its rhetoric, for it speaks not only to the conscious but also to the unconscious.

Myth, Archetype, and Ritual: Psychological Tools

Malcolm Sillars makes two important points about the human psyche: "Human thought and behavior are products of the interaction of the conscious and unconscious" and "the conscious and the unconscious are the products of childhood" (173–174). In childhood, the individual's core identity is formed. According to David Payne, Walter Ong provides insight into the function of contemporary media as helping in the process of identity formation, necessary because of the "absence of straightforward puberty rites" (37). Payne exemplifies the quest for identity in an analysis of *The Wizard of Oz*, writing, "Just as fairy tales foreshadow and prepare children with lessons for later life experiences, Oz might encapsulate or reflect a particular interest in and experience of identity search, one that can be aroused and fulfilled by viewing the text" (37). The same could be suggested of *The Lion King*. It acts as a sort of fairy-tale, adolescent-identity quest that teaches children the lesson that growing up means accepting responsibility.

Bruno Bettelheim's psychoanalytic approach to fairy tales echoes Ong's voice regarding the role of media in identity formation. Payne summarizes Bettelheim's view of the benefit of fairy tales, a type of myth:

Fairy tales often picture a child's powerlessness in the adult world, and the narrative creates a world where the child does have power

and is involved directly in choices, actions, and sometimes conquest of adults. Bettelheim thus sees fairy tales providing "equipment for living" in the form of advice or moral lessons about ethical choices and character, about what one encounters in the world, and about childhood foibles such as running away from home. Finally, fairy tales help to bolster the child's sense of importance and self reliance, by providing stories told especially for children where children are central characters and heroes. (29)

The Lion King gives advice for living, by encouraging the "right" choice of accepting responsibility. By confronting children with the reality of parents' mortality and the emotional pain of death, it teaches lessons of life yet frames the lessons in a positive narrative. Children are encouraged to see that friends help, that love continues and life goes on. Through the communicative power of myths, archetypes, and rituals, *The Lion King* provides children with spiritual and psychological "equipment for living."

THE LION KING AS MORAL EDUCATOR

Although Disney's role as moral educator is strong, recognition of that role is limited. For example, in the comprehensive *Walt Disney: A Bio-Bibliography*, Kathy Merlock Jackson 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 (162–163). Nevertheless, she does suggest just 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 in culture but also 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" ("Disney Universe" 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." Real continues, "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" ("Disney Universe" 77). Critics are well aware of that media potential and are paying more at-

tention to even 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 and identifying its axiology.

Critical Response

While receiving many positive reviews, *The Lion King* also heard much criticism. This criticism found problems of racism, sexism, the stereotyping of gays and Jews, and violence. 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 a Harvard psychologist's beliefs about the film: "The good-for-nothing hyenas are urban blacks; the arch-villain's gestures are effeminate, and he speaks in supposed gay clichés" (3).

Those who perceived the film as racist frequently commented on the hyenas and Uncle Scar. An article by Spark on the criticism 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 although 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 a stereotypical gay.

Criticism about sexism was also strong. For example, Spark cites Ellen Goodman as having said, "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 *Little Mermaid* set'" (1).

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

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 fairy tales 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)

Perri 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 that literature enables children to learn powerful lessons that 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 that involves questions of value—it operates as a mythic narrative that necessarily advocates a morality. Some agree

with the dominant message, and others believe that the subtleties are dangerous teachers of a morality with which they do not agree.

The Lion King's Axiology

What values does this film teach? The primary message that *The Lion King* makes 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. Growing up means accepting responsibility. Certainly, few would disagree that Disney is proffering a "prosocial" message here, using Brown and Singhal's definition of *prosocial* 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. All are part of the "circle of life," posits the theme song. The song teaches the importance of those 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, these are lessons that mirror truth and to which few would object.

Numerous other values can be derived from the story and the use of archetypes 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. This can be seen in the film's use of biblical myths and, more specifically, in the instances of the mystic Rafiki's participation and of 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, and it has good and bad members. This is evident in the fact that Scar, though 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 dad'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, and they are often associated with light and darkness. Many visuals throughout the film suggest this, as well as the use of the only dark mane on Scar, the darkness for the elephant graveyard, the darkness of the hyenas, the darkness of the land ravaged by Scar's rule, 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—and suffers consequences—for disobedience.
9. Death comes to all—to those who are good as well as to those who are bad. We do not understand it, but it happens. Simba learns this lesson when his good father is violently killed by a stampede and later when Scar is killed in battle.
10. Life goes on even in the face of death. Simba wished he were dead, thinking he was responsible for Simba's death, yet Timon and Pumbaa showed 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 had to be shown that responsibility is greater than guilt (and later discovered his own guilt was unfounded).
12. Life is more than the pursuit of no worries and no responsibilities. Simba wanted to live the easy life but found he had to accept who he was and the responsibility that came with being the king's son. However, it is also possible, particularly for the children who own the video of the film, to get the opposite message by focusing only on the song "Hakuna Matata." One wonders whether or not the audience of children understands

that the liminal stage Simba goes through in the jungle is *only a stage*. Given the upbeat nature of the song, the wider media's attention to the song and its overall attractiveness, children tend to replay this part of the movie more than others. They hear the message over and over again—"no worries for the rest of your days . . . Hakuna Matata."

13. Honesty and openness help truth win out. By hiding his guilt from everyone, 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 these values are noncontroversial, prosocial concerns that provide important lessons about life and especially life lived in community. MacIntyre argues that we need to combat today's moral decline by returning to an emphasis on character, on moral virtue rooted 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.

Disney, by grounding its narrative in myth that employs archetypes and rituals and by infusing the story with moral purpose, has chosen to take on the role of a moral educator. In most instances, it raises ethical sensitivity and suggests a positive direction to follow. However, when racism or sexism becomes the norm that appears to represent reality, then Disney has lost its moral high ground.

Pocahontas

THE SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES OF MORAL ORDER

FILM BACKGROUND

High on the edge of a promontory, Pocahontas, her long, glossy hair blowing in the wind, studies the sea-blue horizon. With a body like a Barbie doll, the skin of a high-paid model, the sensitive eyes of an innocent child, and the sculpted features of an artist's dream, Pocahontas begins and ends her appearance in the 33rd Disney animated film in this statuelike pose, overlooking the audience, the present, and the past.

Disney's *Pocahontas* is set in 1607 when the English Virginia Company sent out a group of adventurers who hoped to "kill ourselves an injun or maybe two or three"—all for "glory, God, and gold and the Virginia Company." They were under the authority of Governor Ratcliffe but were inspired by the leadership of John Smith, who exercised great heroism in saving his friend Thomas from drowning in a storm. They traveled across the ocean on the flotilla of ships led by the *Susan Constant*. Meanwhile, Pocahontas, daughter of Chief Powhatan and also known as Little Mischief, has had a disturbing dream that leaves her unsettled and wanting to find her true path. Her father interprets it to mean she will marry the warrior Kocoum, but she finds that upsetting as he is "so . . . serious" (Ingoglia, *Disney's Pocahontas* 17). As she sings "Just Around the Riverbend," we hear of her restless search for something more than a steady husband. Her spiritual advisor—Grandmother Willow, a willow tree—encourages her to "listen with her heart" in order to understand