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Babe: A Narrative Analysis of Social Roles, Expectations and Values

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Abstract

Universal Pictures' animated film, *Babe*, is analyzed using narrative criticism to examine its social roles, expectations and values on a barnyard society. Focusing on the narrative dimensions of setting, characters and events, the author argues that, through the characters Babe and Ferdinand the Duck, *Babe* teaches viewers that it is possible to bend the established limitations of a preordained society, but breaking them creates an unpredictable fate.

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No doubt most people are familiar with the saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” If this is the case, then films must certainly speak volumes! They do; animated films, in particular, are universally praised as wholesome family entertainment, sharing widespread popularity among children and support from parents. From Disney© and DreamWorks© to Pixar© and more animation studios, children and adults alike have been entertained by visual imagery and fun characters and educated on valuable life lessons by many animated masterpieces. Universal Pictures’ *Babe*, released August 4, 1995 in theaters nationwide, was an animated work of genius and praised immensely. “What’s impressive about *Babe* is the way that it topples our expectations of the lessons an animal allegory should teach,” Adina Hoffman of *The Jerusalem Post* said (1996). *Babe* is so impressive, that in 1996, it won the Oscar® for Best Visual Effects; six Academy Awards® nominations; The Golden Globe® for Best Motion Picture; The National Society of Film Critics Award for Best Film and numerous awards worldwide for its creative efforts (“Babe,” 1995).

Adapted from Dick King-Smith’s tale, “The Sheep-Pig” and proclaimed “the *Citizen Kane* of talking pig pictures” (Greydanus, n.d.), *Babe* is a charming fable of the pig with “an unprejudiced heart.” After the mother pig is sent to hog heaven, the runt of the litter is taken as a prize for a county fair. The little piglet has a chance meeting with Farmer Hoggett (James Cromwell) and both share some inkling of a common destiny. The Large White Yorkshire’s new home becomes Hoggett farm, where every animal knows its place: Cows are for milking, sheep are for wool, and ducks and pigs are for eating. Unaware of his destiny and escaping it on two different occasions, Babe (voice of

Christine Cavanaugh) just wants to fit in. He befriends many animals, from Ferdinand (voice of Danny Mann), the eccentric duck who knows his fate and tries to deny it by becoming a rooster, to Maa (voice of Miriam Flynn) and the other sheep, who are won over by his “heart of gold.” Taken in by Fly (voice of Miriam Margolyes), the female sheepdog he calls ‘Mom,’ the innocent Babe disregards the male sheepdog Rex’s (voice of Hugo Weaving) rule about staying in his “proper place” and proves himself a capable sheep herder. And while “pork is a nice sweet meat,” Mrs. Hoggett (Magda Szubanski) declares, Farmer Hoggett places full faith in Babe’s herding abilities and risks ridicule by entering him in the National Grand Challenge Sheepdog Trials. The results are unanticipated and nothing short of spectacular. *Babe* teaches good morals, like treating others with respect and consideration, overcoming prejudice, and more. *Babe*, nevertheless, addresses some issues that confuse the viewers’ concept of the farm’s established social hierarchy, set social roles and expectations that I will analyze using narrative criticism.

The Method

Narrative criticism is a method of rhetorical discourse based on Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm, which deduces that humans are essentially storytellers and “good reasons are the stuff of stories” (1984, p. 8). Fisher contends that we make sense of our world through the stories, or narratives, we communicate. Narratives let us interpret reality by reasoning what a certain experience “is about” and how its dimensions create some correlation (Foss, 2004). Our main concern for examining a narrative, Fisher asserts, is determining whether or not it offers a “reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world” (Stoner & Perkins, 2005, p. 188). We examine a

narrative to determine what its motivation is, what course of action it offers as advantageous. What makes some narratives better than others can formally be judged through narrative probability and narrative fidelity (Fisher, 1984; Stoner & Perkins, 2005). When determining narrative probability, a narrative is questioned for its coherence or truth qualities; revealing narrative fidelity requires a narrative to be examined for logic of good reasons and consistency (Fisher, 1984; Stoner & Perkins, 2005). An explanation of a narrative, uncovered through analysis, offers an argument to understand and see the world in a certain way (Foss, 2004).

I analyze *Babe* using narrative analysis to examine social roles, expectations and values in the film and to determine the narrative strategies used to raise these issues in this essay. I use narrative criticism as my means of investigation. Narrative criticism entails a complete examination of the dimensions of a narrative, including audience, causal relations, characters, events, narrator, setting, temporal relations and theme (Foss, 2004). While all elements of any narrative are valuable to some degree or another, setting, characters and events are the dimensions of the narrative that convey the issues I have addressed, and thus the focus of my analysis. I will argue that, through *Babe* and *Ferdinand the Duck*, this animated film teaches viewers that it is possible to bend the established limitations of a preordained society, but breaking them creates an unpredictable fate.

The Setting

The Hoggett Farm is a picturesque, rich setting where each species has its own place with its own outlook - almost a resident culture - like that of other animals, but never quite the same, and always makes sense given the animal's role on the farm

(Greydanus, n.d.). Every major event in *Babe*, except for the closing scene, takes place on Hoggett Farm. Despite the warmth of the farmhouse and beauty of the rolling countryside, the Hoggett Farm animals live in a biased world with a “rigid hierarchy” and set expectations for each and every animal (Addiego, 1995). Each animal has a job to do, tries to do it well, and knows its place. It is the cat’s role to catch mice, though Duchess feels her job is to be “beautiful and affectionate” for Mrs. Hoggett. Cows produce milk; Fly and Rex, the Sheepdogs, herd sheep; sheep give up their wool; roosters crow and mate with the hens; and hens make eggs. What is left? The role of ducks and pigs: to be eaten. The expectations for ducks and pigs on a farm setting creates pressure for Babe and Ferdinand the Duck to avoid being eaten, and thus pressure to attempt to defy destiny, rejecting that “the way things are is the way things are” if the way things are is not desirable.

The Characters

The main characters of the narrative are Babe, Farmer Hoggett, Mrs. Hoggett, Fly, Rex, Ferdinand, Duchess and Maa the Ewe. For my argument’s purpose, I will discuss only the two rebels, Babe and Ferdinand. Both characters act outside their predetermined social roles and expectations, but in different ways. Babe is a naïve piglet with “an unprejudiced heart,” challenging the mutual prejudices of his barnyard world. Innocent Babe does not know his fate as a pig. He only understands that it is his job as a pig is to eat. The lone pig on the farm, Fly decides to mothers him, so naturally he takes an interest in what she does: sheep herding. Through a chance incident, Farmer Hoggett sees potential in Babe to herd sheep and Babe is given the opportunity to be a “sheep-pig.” Later, after Babe has proven his sheep-herding abilities, he learns his fate from the

cat and tries to run away, only to be found, returned to the farm and lovingly nurtured back to health. Babe sees that he has a special relationship with Farmer Hoggett and is valuable as a sheep-pig, so his worries of becoming dinner are diminished.

Ferdinand is a different character, vehemently rejecting the status quo: “The way things are stinks!” He chiefly serves as a comic relief in this narrative (Hoffman, 1996). He lives in paranoia and is obsessed with making himself useful because he knows his fate: to be eaten. He purposely tries to take on the role of a rooster to avoid his fate. He stays too thin so he never becomes *duck à l’orange* for Christmas dinner, like his duck friend Rosanna: “Dinner means death; Death means carnage; Christmas means carnage!” He tries crowing like a rooster in the morning so he will be seen as indispensable, but he is seen only as an annoyance: “We’ve got to do something about that duck,” Mrs. Hoggett wakes up to say one morning. Ferdinand attempts to make eggs with the hens, but that also does not work out. Ferdinand stirs trouble, asks gullible Babe to help him in his scheme, and disappears for a while. He leaves the farm to avoid death, but returns near the end of the narrative to watch Babe win at the Sheepdog trials. Whether or not he ultimately accepts his fate is not determined.

The Events

We are given clues to expect major events, or kernels, in the narrative through the use of strident mice reading chapter-like title cards, which also gives the narrative a storybook feeling. There are two events in the plot that show the bending, if not breaking, of established limitations of barnyard society: Ferdinand’s audacious crime with Babe as the gullible accomplice in “Crime and Punishment,” and Babe herding the sheep for the first time in “A Pig that thinks it’s a Dog.” In the first event, Ferdinand convinces Babe to

help him get rid of the Hoggetts' new alarm clock, since it impedes his new career as a rooster. To do so, however, would be to break the rule of no livestock allowed in the house. Babe also has to not wake the cat in the process. Ferdinand foresees a disaster and rushes inside to stop Babe, only to sneeze, wake up the cat, and cause a painted mess all over the house. Babe is brought into the barnyard with the rest of the animals, except Ferdinand who disappears for a while, and for breaking the house rule is told he cannot communicate with Ferdinand under any circumstances nor is he allowed to sleep with the dogs in the barn.

In the second event, Farmer Hoggett has a notion about Babe that he cannot explain and gives Babe a chance to show what skills he has to herd sheep. Babe joins the dogs in the sheep field and Hoggett calls to Babe to drive the sheep out of the yard. Fly pushes Babe, encouraging him to “make them feel inferior” and “be ruthless,” while Rex scolds her for doing so. Babe tries to get the sheep to do what he says but they just laugh at him – he bites one. Maa is ashamed, telling Babe not to resort to the ways of dogs, which they consider to be vicious wolves, but just ask them politely. Babe does and they do as asked in neat formation. Hoggett is dumbfounded. Fly cannot believe that Babe asked them nicely, since they do not ask sheep, they tell sheep what to do since they regard sheep as particularly stupid. Rex is angry, having “watched in shame” as all he and Fly stand for as sheepdogs is betrayed by Fly allowing a pig to replace them. Rex is upset because Fly deliberately encourages Babe to do the work of a sheepdog and Babe succeeds. Rex fears being replaced by a pig, which would be an unpredictable fate for a dog indeed!

There are several smaller events, or satellites, in the plot that show the same breakage of established limitations of barnyard society. One such event is when Rex does the impossible and speaks to the sheep kindly. He runs from the sheepdog trails to the Hoggett farm to talk to Hoggett's sheep for Babe, because the sheep at the sheepdog trials will not respond to Babe. Hoping Hoggett's sheep will offer him some advice for Babe so that Farmer Hoggett wins the sheepdog championship, Rex makes some promises to the sheep to treat them nicely from now on, never bite, and most importantly of all, never use what they tell him against any sheep, which is "the password." By breaking the limitations in this scenario, one can only assume that good will come of the dogs treating the sheep nicely and vice versa, but the outcome is unpredictable, nonetheless.

Conclusion

I analyzed the animated film, *Babe*, using narrative analysis to examine the social roles, expectations and values of a barnyard society, which are vast and dependent on the character's point-of-view. I determined that the Hoggett farm setting, the characters, specifically Babe and Ferdinand, and two major events, as well as a few minor ones, were the dimensions of the narrative to use to best examine these issues. Examining Babe's experiences, I would contend that Babe made decisions based on *innocence*. Babe was able to bend the limitations of a preordained society because he has a "heart of gold" and Farmer Hoggett warmed to him, giving him the freedom to choose a different destiny. Examining Ferdinand's experiences, I would contend that Ferdinand made decisions based on *fate*. In constant fear of "death by carnage," he did everything he could to avoid fulfilling his fate. While Babe and Ferdinand had different approaches, they both

managed to avoid their fate, but there is nothing in place to contend that they will remain free from their fate.

This analysis of *Babe* suggests ways in which animated films, with seemingly simple and light moral messages, use certain strategies to create a desirable perspective of social roles and expectations that is a little more complex, but communicated with ease. *Babe* teaches its viewers that it is OK to march to the tune of a different drummer. Change within a society is very hard to implement, but when forced into the public for their consideration, if it ends up being good, it ends up being accepted. If anything goes wrong, however, society immediately reverts back its traditional system of values, expectations and social roles.

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