

5.1: RACE, HIERARCHY, AND HYENAPHOBIA IN *THE LION KING*

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The author argues that Disney’s *The Lion King* reinforces the concept of a hierarchical society in which it seems only natural that one social group (in this case the hyenas, whose portrayal echoes stereotypes of African Americans) is outcast and doesn’t receive adequate resources.

If you’re like many of my students, you might be puzzled by the title of this reading, Race and hierarchy in *The Lion King*? Why would anyone think about a children’s movie in such a manner? After all, if you’re like my students, you love *The Lion King*. In my public speaking classes, I ask my students to give an introductory speech about three objects that represent their past, present, and future. One semester, three different students brought in a copy of *The Lion King* as the object to represent their past. People love this film. *The Lion King* is a hugely popular, Academy Award-winning film. It spawned a landmark, Tony Award-winning stage show. So why take such a lovable, popular film and think about what it has to say about race?

Many people are reticent to analyze Disney films critically, as Bells, Haas, and Sells found:

Even our own students, occupying a halfway house between film critic and mass audience, are extremely resistant to the critique of Disney film. . . [O]ur students commonly complained, “You’re reading too much into this film!” and “You can’t say that about Walt Disney!” These students consistently cite four easy pardons for their pleasurable participation in Disney films and its apolitical agendas: it’s only for children, it’s only fantasy, it’s only a cartoon, and it’s just good business. These four naturalizations create a Disney text exempt from material, historical, and political influences. . . Our students’ attitudes suggest that Disney successfully invites mass audiences to set aside critical faculties.

(Bells, Haas, & Sells, 1995, p. 4)

You may feel the same way, or perhaps you’ve never given much thought to what the “messages” of a Disney film might be. I invite you to put your skepticism on hold for a few pages and think critically with me about *The Lion King*. Here, I argue that *The Lion King* makes the concept of societal hierarchies seem natural and desirable, especially in relationship to race.

Hierarchy and *The Lion King*

A hierarchy is a system in which some members of a culture have more privilege, economic resources, status, or other form of power than other members do. Your classroom is a hierarchy. The instructor has more power than the students. He or she decides what you will do in class every day and has the power to assign you a grade. You are expected to sit in your desk and do as the instructor asks. Hierarchies usually are shaped like triangles. In a hierarchical system, usually only a few people have power, and many people have little power. Students outnumber instructors, yet instructors have all the power. There are even fewer deans and administrators, who have even more power than the instructors.

Most important, hierarchies are naturalized. That is, they seem normal and typical to many or most members of the hierarchy, even to the people without the power. You have spent many years of your life in a classroom, and it seems normal and typical to you that the instructor has more power. You’ve probably never seriously questioned this. Because hierarchies often remain unchallenged, the powerful people stay in power.

There are many hierarchies within societies. In US culture, for example, we have a gender hierarchy. Although there are many individual exceptions to this statement, in general men have more power than women. Similarly, although there are many individual exceptions, we also have a racial hierarchy in the United States. As Lipsitz (1998) argued, minorities in the United States disproportionately live in toxically polluted environments, are more likely to receive longer prison terms than Whites for the same crimes, and receive inferior health care. Unlike many minorities in the United States, most Whites have never been pulled over unfairly by police officers, followed around a store, or otherwise experienced racial profiling. Unlike minorities, Whites can turn on a television set and see many people who look like them.

*The Lion King* is about a lion cub named Simba who is heir to the throne of the Pridelands, a fictitious animal jungle society. Scar, the brother of King Mufasa, longs to become king himself. He enlists the help of the hyenas, a group of outcast animals who live outside the Pridelands, to help him kill the king and usurp the throne. After murdering Mufasa, Scar persuades Simba that he’s to blame for his father’s death. Simba goes into exile, and Scar assumes the throne, telling the other lions that Simba is dead. In exile, Simba is befriended by a warthog and meerkat who teach him to live the carefree life of *hakuna matata*. Meanwhile, the Pridelands fall apart under Scar’s rule, largely because the hyenas have been allowed to move in and have depleted all the resources. Simba’s childhood friend Nala finds Simba, now grown, and urges him to dispense with his hakuna matata lifestyle and claim the throne. After seeing an image of his father from the heavens, Simba goes home, defeats Scar, and becomes the rightful king. Order and beauty is restored to the Pridelands.

*The Lion King* contains a society in which power is in the hands of a few, and in which this hierarchy is naturalized and deemed desirable to all. In the Pridelands, the lions are the most powerful members of society, with all other animals hierarchically inferior. This is demonstrated visibly at the beginning of the film, when the newborn cub Simba is presented to the Pridelands as the future king. All of the kingdom’s animals gather around Pride Rock, the lions’ den which, physically, is high above them, to watch Simba’s presentation.

As Rafiki, a monkey and spiritual figure, presents the cub to the Pridelands, a beam of light illuminates the cub, a Christian allusion suggesting divine sanction of the cub’s predestination to power. As Simba is presented, the other animals in the kingdom bow and applaud wildly.

In an early scene, King Mufasa justifies the hierarchical society to young Simba, referring to the hierarchy as the “circle of life,” which he claims must not be violated for fear of chaos. However, the circle of life operates in the interests of the lions, who thrive at the top of the hierarchy as the dominant elite. Mufasa justifies the inequality by arguing that it’s beneficial to all. None of the other animals in the Pridelands question their inferior status, despite the fact that sometimes the lions eat them. No revolutionary antelope group is shown plotting to demand more equitable conditions. Even Zazu, a dodo who is the king’s servant, doesn’t question the hierarchy, although he is humiliated repeatedly by Simba and by Mufasa. The only resident of the Pridelands who questions the societal hierarchy is Scar, the film’s villain. Thus, the hierarchy is naturalized; it’s made to look normal, desirable, and necessary for the good of all.

Race and Hyenaphobia in *The Lion King*

*The Lion King* contains a number of hierarchies. For example, *The Lion King* naturalizes a gender hierarchy. The lions clearly have more power than the lionesses. Although Nala is shown to be physically stronger than Simba, it is Simba who is predestined to be the leader. Power is passed in the kingdom from male to male, even though in the case of Scar, the kingdom falls apart under male leadership, and the Pridelands would have been better off with a female leader such as Nala. But here, I’ll focus specifically on the topic of race, and what I believe *The Lion King* says about race and hierarchy.

Historically, racial hierarchies often involve segregation of hierarchically “inferior” groups, who are separated from the rest of society and forced to live with inadequate resources and few opportunities. In Nazi-occupied Poland, for example, Jews were removed from society and forced to live in desolate ghettos, where they eventually were murdered. In South Africa, through the system of apartheid, the indigenous African population was segregated from the more affluent White population and forced into inadequate living conditions with inadequate schooling. Similarly, in the southern United States until the 1960s, Jim Crow laws legally separated African Americans from Whites and forced them into inadequate housing, schools, and economic situations. In the United States today, de facto segregation and White flight make segregation a continuing reality, the Trump administration has fueled angry public sentiment about immigration issues, and Native Americans for years have lived on reservations where they suffer some of the highest poverty rates in the country.

In *The Lion King*, the segregated group is the hyenas. The hyenas don’t necessarily represent any particular group (although as I argue below, their portrayal echoes derogatory stereotypes of African Americans) but rather might represent any hated group of outsiders throughout history—Native Americans, Mexican Americans, immigrants, and so forth. They represent the *concept* of the feared and hated outsider whom the mainstream culture fights to keep out. The order of the circle of life depends on the hyenas staying outside the lush Pridelands. When hyenas wander into the Pridelands, King Mufasa chases them out. When hyenas are integrated into the Pridelands, the Pridelands disintegrate.

Similar to other segregated groups throughout history, the hyenas live in a poverty-stricken land. Unlike the lush Pridelands, the hyenas’ land is barren. They don’t have enough food. Unlike beautiful Pride Rock, where the lions live, the hyenas live in caves and among elephant skeletons that are the *Lion King* housing equivalent of dilapidated projects in the inner cities. Although they’re wealthy, the lions feel no obligation to help the hyenas overcome their poverty. In fact, when the hungry hyenas venture into the Pridelands in search of food, Mufasa chases them out.

At no time in *The Lion King* do we learn that segregation is not a good thing and that lions ought to learn to overcome their “hyenaphobia” and create a more multicultural society. Quite the opposite is true. Hyenaphobia is never proven irrational. When King Scar invites the hyenas to move into the Pridelands, all of the lions’ worst fears are realized. Eventually the Pridelands are as barren as the hyena lands, and the food supply runs out. In response to the decay of the Pridelands, the lionesses encourage Scar to desert the Pridelands and move on. It is the story of White America’s flight to the suburbs. As the old unspoken fear goes, if minorities are integrated into mainstream culture, everything will fall apart. *The Lion King* creates a situation where these fears are justified and naturalized. Some creatures, *The Lion King* tells us, really do deserve to live in poverty and be segregated.

*The Lion King* does contain some positive nods to African Americans. Two well-known African Americans provide the voices of prominent characters: James Earl Jones as Mufasa and Whoopi Goldberg as one of the hyenas. Many African Americans and Africans were involved in the production of the film, and the film contains a good deal of African music (both of these are even more pronounced in the theatrical version of *The Lion King*). However, although these inclusions shouldn’t be dismissed, they don’t mask the negative stereotypes of African Americans that surface.

The hyenas signify the stereotypical caricature of the African American welfare recipient. Popularized by President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, the legendary welfare queen, who poached the taxpayers’ money by having babies out of wedlock, became the scapegoat for the nation’s economic problems. Like the welfare queen, the hyenas are the villains in this individualistic tale because they are scavengers taking resources they haven’t earned. They aren’t self-sufficient; they sneak into the Pridelands and poach food. No explanation is ever given as to why the hyenas aren’t entitled to share the resources of the Pridelands, just as no clear explanation is given as to why the Pridelands disintegrate when the hyenas are integrated. The needy hyenas simply are assumed to be unworthy scavengers.

Physically, the hyenas resemble the post-slavery Black Sambo stereotype that was prevalent in US popular culture for many years, including in the popular radio and television series *Amos ‘n’ Andy*. This stereotype emerged from the traditional minstrel show, in which African American or White men would mock African Americans by covering their faces with unnaturally dark blackface, exaggerating common African American physical features, and acting comically inarticulate and insipid. The hyenas resemble this stereotype. They have bulging eyes, protruding lips, and as Scar describes them, “vacant expressions.” They laugh hysterically and loudly all the time. Two of the main character hyenas show some intelligence, but the hyena Ed is the ultimate Sambo. He never speaks; he just laughs and laughs, and wags his protruding tongue like a rabid dog.

The hyenas represent an odd, contradictory mix of racial phobias. They are violent, and the lions’ stereotypes of the violent hyenas are justified throughout the hyenas’ actions. At the same time, they are helplessly buffoon-like—especially Ed. They are at the bottom of the food chain and scarcely can find enough food to stay alive. When Scar instructs the hyenas to kill young Simba, they fail miserably, falling into a pile of thorns as they run after the cub. In accordance with their dishonest nature, they lie to Scar and claim they have killed Simba. This is similar to stereotypes of minorities throughout history, including African Americans, who contradictorily are considered by many to be ignorant, yet somehow frighteningly violent. In addition, the hyenas roam together like gang members, representing stereotypical fears of minority gangs.

Scar’s use of the hyenas to usurp the throne reflects the fear that minorities might be mobilized to overthrow the powers that be, reminiscent of *Birth of a Nation* (Griffin, 1915), the epic Ku Klux Klan propaganda film in which Northern outsiders mobilize evil, stereotypical former slaves to wreak havoc upon the South. In addition, “Be Prepared,” the musical sequence in which Scar invites the hyenas to support his coup, alludes visually to Hitler’s propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (Riefenstahl, 1935). The hyenas march in perfect procession, their forms emphasized by tall, looming shadows, a scene that echoes the high-stepping, redundant marching scenes from *Triumph of the Will*. Scar, through this analogy, is like Hitler. “Stick with me and you’ll never go hungry again!” he roars throughout the canyon, a promise similar to Hitler’s promise in the skeletal remains of post-World War I Germany. The analogy between the hyenas and the Nazis is evidence of the film’s justification of the race hierarchy. The Nazis, after all, are widely understood as racial oppressors, not as victims of an unjust racial hierarchy; and by comparing the hyenas to Nazis, the film shows no sympathy for the hyenas’ plight.

The hyenas, as it turns out, fight miserably in the final race battle between the lions and hyenas. The race hierarchy is restored at the conclusion of *The Lion King*. The surviving hyenas presumably are sent back to the shadowy place, and the Pridelands are once again idyllic. The circle of life is restored—and part of that circle of life includes the exclusion of the outsider hyenas.

Reconsidering the Circle of Life

We live in an unjust, hierarchical world. A relatively small number of people have access to wealth, privilege, and opportunity, while millions and even billions of others live in poverty and have little access to resources. In the United States, we live in a nation where equality and justice are valued highly, and yet our nation is filled with economic, gender, and racial hierarchies.

One might say that this is just the way the world works. Some people will always have more money, status, freedom, and resources than other people. However, the fact that hierarchies *do* seem like “the way the world works” is evidence that they have become naturalized. It seems natural, normal, and perhaps even desirable that some people are more powerful than others.

But it’s just a children’s film, you might say. How can a children’s film have such impact? It is precisely because *The Lion King* is seen as just entertainment and just a children’s film that it does have impact. Viewers don’t take it seriously. People assume that as a popular, lovable Disney film, its message must be positive. The film’s larger ideological implications remain unchallenged.

*The Lion King* is by no means the only example of media content that teaches us about concepts such as race, segregation, and hierarchy. As you read this book, you’ll find other discussions of media texts that reinforce similar lessons. As I noted earlier, an assumption of textual media analysis is that through the media, members of a culture learn implicitly what the rules, norms, and power structure of their culture ought to be—the *ideology* of their culture. Certainly *The Lion King* does not turn children into racists. However, when members of a culture view many messages such as *The Lion King*, the ways in which we as a culture view ideological concepts such as race, segregation, and hierarchy are shaped.

IT’S YOUR TURN: WHAT DO YOU THINK? WHAT WILL YOU FIND?

1. Think about other Disney films that you’ve seen. What do you think are the ideological lessons of these Disney films? Are there other Disney films that you feel have an ideological message about race, hierarchy, or segregation?

2. I’ve found that many people don’t think Disney films ought to be analyzed critically. Do you agree that many people feel that way? Why or why not? If people don’t think that Disney films ought to be analyzed critically, what (if any) might be some negative consequences of this?

3. Sometimes, the ideological nature of a media text can be made more visible if viewers try to understand the text from a different point of view. To do this, conduct a mock *Lion King* debate on this topic: “Should the hyenas be integrated into the Pridelands?”

Divide the classroom into four groups: Hyenas; Lions; the Circle of Life Party (a political party of Pridelands animals who firmly believe every animal should behave in accordance with their place in the circle of life, and that the lions are benevolent rulers); and the Progressive Jungle Democratic Alliance (a political party consisting of Pridelands animals who want to create a more democratic system where all animals govern the Pridelands equally). Each group should create a statement and debate each other on the topic. Afterward, discuss the exercise and the film. Has your perspective on *The Lion King* changed after this activity? Do you agree with me that *The Lion King* promotes segregation?

4. Imagine you wanted to create a film like *The Lion King* but one that didn’t promote segregation. Could you tell the same story in a different (more inclusive) way? How? Using the same characters, what other stories could you tell that would be compelling but not exclusionary?