

BABE [1995]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

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A pig won at a carnival becomes a member of the animal compliment of a sheep farm. On this farm, when the humans are looking the other way, the animals speak to each other. Babe, the orphaned pig, is adopted by Fly, the female sheep dog. Her significant other, Rex, is the head of the animal world, as his name implies. Babe has difficulty in finding her role in sheep farm life. At first, the Farmer sees Babe only as a prospective Christmas Dinner. Babe becomes fascinated with herding sheep. At first, the sheep are obstinate, usually responding out of fear to verbal and physical threats by the dogs. However, Babe asks them politely to cooperate, and they do. Farmer Hoggitt notices Babe's abilities and enters the pig in a sheep dog contest under the name "Pig." At first barred from competing because no animal other than a dog had ever entered, Babe competes and wins because the sheep respond to his approach of using kindness instead of threat. (Rated G).

At first glance, *Babe* is the perfect children's film. There are even title cards to break up the action into small segments – ideal for a youngster's attention span. It is a wonderful fairy tale. In addition to featuring talking animals, *Babe* proves its fairy tale nature in many ways. For instance, a farmer dances his sick pig to health.

But there is much more to this film. In addition to the sheer enjoyment of a contemporary fairy tell well told, *Babe* offers a spectacle of modern cinematic technology. Live animals are combined with animatronics. And even the live animals (over 500 were used) are often computer enhanced to make them look like they are talking. The lip movements are amazingly in synch with the sound track. Even if the story doesn't captivate (which isn't likely), the technology will.

As with many films, were we to concentrate on the symbolism, the first moments of the film would clearly define the events that follow. For instance, a few minutes into the film, the pig and the farmer first meet in a carnival. Carnivals and circuses have long been filmic (and in other areas) symbols of confusion, chaos, and the conjunction of the normally disjointed. We need only to think of a few films that use carnivals: in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1919] it is where the living, the dead, and the in between interact; in *Strangers on a Train* [1951], it is where good and evil (in all their complexity), lust, greed, jealousy, and insanity reciprocate. We soon see that the country fair in *Babe* is little different . . . as soon as we realize that the farmer's task is to judge the weight of the pig. He meets the Sphinx – and the riddle she poses always changes lives dramatically. It is through this augury that the farmer and the pig will be thrown together and work out their interconnected fates.

During their first meeting, the whole eclipse between pig and dog is laid out for us – the pig urinates on the farmer's boot! It is the dog that typically stakes out his territory by producing scent markers through urination, not (to my knowledge) the pig!

But, even if we can't read these symbolic representations clearly enough to know consciously what is about to transpire, they still effect our unconscious and thereby make the film function at a deeper level within our psyches. And certainly *Babe* does that.

Babe functions at multiple symbolic levels. The most obvious is a fairy tale variation of the story of *The Ugly Duckling*, a tale of finding one's way in a confusing and often brutal world. The fairy tale aspects of *Babe* are reinforced by the opening – the title is written in thick, gold lettering on the cover of an antique book. Under the titles that follow, images of pigs come to life relating to the various people mentioned: the writer, the set decorator, etc. As the film continues, we see a fairy tale parable of personal growth and satisfaction. Babe searches the farm, speaks to each of the animals to find out their role. As it is for many children looking for their role in the world of adults, this is a difficult search.

Many adults today find themselves in the same situation – searching for a role in a changing society or for an appropriate role for a changing self. In this sense, *Babe* is a variation of the story of *The Ugly Duckling* without the cop-out of the sudden transformation into superiority. In *Babe*, learning and transformation are hard fought and hard won, a message that will not be lost on children or adults.

Babe also works as a very pro-vegetarian movie. At one point, Babe discovers her “traditional” purpose at the farm – to be eaten. The horror of this is clearly projected to the audience, who, by this point in the film, fully identify with the little pig. Perhaps this is more than just a warning of the responsibilities involved in eating meat. Is this a comment on how society ‘consumes’ its members? Babe's impending doom (which doesn't come about, of course) is portrayed quite brutally, in stark contrast to the way this same issue is skirted in other films. For instance, Walt Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) preaches a “circle of life,” where the lions die to become the soil that nourishes the plants that feed the zebras who, in turn, are eaten by the lions. This is easy to believe . . . if you are a lion and at the top of the food chain. However, *Babe* tells it like it is from the point of view of those who are eaten.

However, watching *Babe*, we get the feeling that there is more going on in this film than a commentary about the benefits of vegetarianism or the aspects of the maturation process involved in finding one's role in life. These deeper levels are revealed by a simple dialectical trick. Why is it that a pig wants to become a dog? Why not a hummingbird or a mouse? A hint that we should be asking these questions is contained in the film itself: a duck has usurped the role of the rooster and crows every morning at sunrise.

There is specific information contained in the symbolism of the pig and the dog that informs the deeper levels of this film. So, let us look at what the pig and the dog represent, especially with regard to their opposition.

For modern Westerners, the pig is primarily a symbol of uncleanness, however, the pig (especially in the form of the sow) has been a symbol of fertility and the mother goddess in the cultures of antiquity. (It is interesting to note that female pigs were used throughout the film because, when photographed from the rear, male pigs display their genitals far too obviously for a G-Rated film.) In the Eleusinian mysteries of Greece, for instance, the pig was the sacred animal sacrificed to the goddess Demeter. The relation between the pig and the feminine is seen in ancient Egyptian, Roman, Teutonic, Buddhist, Celtic, and Welsh cultures. The great esteem in which the pig was held in pre-Christian cultures as the happy universal mother of the muddy realm, many-teated, heavy set, and surrounded by her brood, only changed with the coming of the modern age.

The dog, by contrast, has been associated with the male prerogatives throughout history. Dogs accompany man, the hunter. Sirius, the Dog Star, was identified by the Greeks with the great god Pan. In Christian times, the sheep dog, guarding and guiding the flocks, was seen as an allegory of the role of the priest. When the dog is used as a symbol of fidelity (from which we get the name “Fido”), it is often to exert male control of women. Women were painted with dogs in their laps to symbolize their fidelity to their husbands. Even widows were painted this way to advertise their posthumous allegiance.

The symbolic action of *Babe* is, thus, the pig, a symbol of the feminine, entering and becoming identified with the dog, a symbol of the masculine. There are several ways to see this action.

First, there are the ancient implications of the feminine being taken over by the masculine. According to some anthropologists, before our current male-dominated culture was established, the civilized world was matriarchal (there is some physical evidence for this at several sites in Anatolia, mostly Katal Hayuk). The thousands of years that follow the ascendance of the patriarchy over the matriarchy have been marked with the absorption of the female symbols into a male environment. Essentially, feminine functions were put to use serving male goals. Perhaps the most famous example is the irrepressible cults of the Virgin Mary. Originally a Mother Goddess, she became integrated into patriarchal Christianity as both the Mother of God and the intercessor between humans and God. But the ancient ways cannot be erased and cults of the Virgin Mary spring up through the ages and regularly threaten to take on a life of their own, independent from the “Father” church. In *Babe*, we can see this process symbolized through the action of the animals: The Pig, pulled out of its natural environment and symbolic of the feminine is thrust into a patriarchal world, ruled by Dogs. There the Pig learns to do the Dogs work; the matriarchal learns to be subsumed to the patriarchal.

What is fascinating about this film (and is true of any really potent symbols) is that it can be interpreted in exactly the opposite way, in this case as a parable of contemporary feminism. The feminine Pig enters the masculine Dog world and learns to

successfully function there. In fact, the Pig does better than the Dogs (winning the championship) because she has brought with her traditionally feminine characteristics – asking the sheep to cooperate – rather than using the typically male methods – threatening and biting them!

This interpretation of *Babe* is reinforced by the presence of the Cat. It is the old-fashioned, house-bound view of the woman that is here represented as Evil in the form of the Cat. She obviously spends hours fixing her hair and preening herself. She spends her life indoors before the hearth or lounging listlessly about the farmer's house. She is the one who “cattily” reveals to the Pig his purpose in life – to be eaten by the farmer. Yet, her real purpose is not so much to inform the Pig as it is to secure her position as the Queen of Domesticity. Similarly, in certain very vocal areas of contemporary feminism, the woman who opts to remain house bound is vilified. (Personally, I don't see this as a problem if her position comes from a conscious and free choice – unfortunately, it very often doesn't and the woman is simply “drawn” into this traditional role from social and peer pressures.) The Cat's self-professed role on the farm is “to be beautiful and to be affectionate to the Farmer.” Little mistake can be made on the role of evil on the Hoggitt Farm.

At still another level, *Babe* tells us about Farmer Hoggitt's success as a human being. His fate is inextricably intertwined with the symbolic feminine, Babe, who now becomes a guide to his internal journey of individuation. Being an introvert, most of his changes take place as ruminations, which his wife and neighbors fear as an onset of insanity. When the pig is sick and about to die, he allows his own undeveloped, extroverted aspects to emerge – he boldly and wildly dances in a transcendent transport. Of course, this instantly cures the pig. He is now in balance and can go on to follow his internal, feminine guide to win the championships. These have always been won by dogs – the symbolic masculine. But now Hoggitt, balanced in masculine and feminine, wins and becomes the man he was fated to be all along. At this level, *Babe* becomes a story of individuation.

Like many fairy tales, *Babe* functions at multiple – and independent – levels. They range from the child's adjustment to adult world to adults surviving a change in role orientation, from a reading that flows from the ancient to the contemporary, and from the social to the deeply personal.