

# THE JUNGLE BOOK [1994]

by

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It is the responsibility of all adults to be aware of the myths told to our children. These form the core of their future lives, both conscious and unconscious. Today, a large portion of these “educational” myths come from the movies our kids watch. Make no mistake about it, most “children's films” deal with the problems of the real, adult world, for, after all, this is the world in which our children live – now and in the future.

*The Jungle Book* is a “good” film. I mean this in several ways. First, it is politically correct in just about every way imaginable. And second, like all good fairy tales, *The Jungle Book* taps into the collective unconscious, guiding young viewers through a symbolization of the various aspects of the psyche. It is no less important to have correct knowledge of the psyche than it is of social, sexual, racial and environmental relations. *The Jungle Book's* most surprising accomplishment is, as with many nursery rhymes and fairy tales, that these two aspects (the concrete and the symbolic) are not in conflict, but actually enhance and even reinforce one another.

The opening scene symbolically sets the political tone. The British Army is plowing (almost literally) through the Indian jungle – from left to right. In traditional (some would say old-fashioned) theater, the positive characters enter from the right and the villains enter from the left. We instantly know the film's opinion of the British and their army. This same scene sets the psychological tone: the party is walking through the jungle at the edge of a large river – a symbol of the unconscious. Thus, the party entering the jungle is poised on the cusp between the world of consciousness (the land, civilization, man's laws) and the unconscious (the river, the jungle, and nature's laws).

Since the British Army is bad, we can assume that everything that opposes it is good: the native civilization, Indian art and culture, the various animals and plants that occupy the jungle (which the British kill for sport), and the spirit of the jungle itself. There are exceptions among the British: the heroine, Kitty, her father and the doctor. But they are anomalous; in general, the British Army, and those Indians that have taken up their ways, are greedy, insensitive, brutal, and murderous. While placed in nineteenth century India, the film's message is easily transferred to contemporary cultures, anywhere around the globe that is dealing with issues of environmental relationships.

The villain's specific motivations takes these eco-politics a step further. Captain Boone is always clean, well dressed, and anally up tight. He is the very model of a model

nineteenth century yuppie. And what but evil can yuppies be doing in this natural paradise? Boone tortures Mowgli, kidnaps Kitty, kills several fellow soldiers in order to get to the treasure. Needless to say, he's not intending it to go to the British Museum. He is looking forward to a life of luxury and power, of creature comforts, of, I assume, an infinite supply of whatever the nineteenth century equivalents were of Cuisinarts and BMWs.

A film paradise often signals that we must be on the lookout for religious symbolism. Mowgli, in a fiery explosion, winds up floating down the river in a large, hollow tree branch. Moses! Again, the politics of *The Jungle Book* are clear even at this deeply hidden symbolic level. Just as Moses was rescued from his river journey by the royalty of Egypt, Mowgli is met at the riverbank by the jungle's royalty, its animals – specifically a wolf, a bear, and a panther. The jungle shows a tremendous innate intelligence. Not only can a tiger distinguish – and kill – a hunter among many other men, so the other animals immediately and unhesitatingly adopt the young Mowgli into their fold.

It is the jungle that initiates Mowgli into masculine adulthood. His discovery of the lost city leads to the discovery of his own adult masculinity. This maturing encounter is instigated by the theft of his bracelet – his only reminder of civilization – by a monkey. This theft actually turns into a far greater gift, that of his own maturation, the true treasure. In this case, the monkey acts in the traditional role of trickster, apparently doing harm, but actually doing good. Mowgli dispatches the large snake guarding the treasure and lurking in the water (notice again the density of the symbolism: snake = phallus, knowledge; water = unconscious). When he has passed the tests of strength set out for him, the monkey king takes off his crown to recognize Mowgli as the new ruler of the jungle and returns his bracelet. The treasure itself is a metaphor, because it is through this treasure, again, at first, seemingly an evil thing, that he will discover his mature love for Kitty – the other true treasure. Significantly, Mowgli takes with him, as a prize of his accomplishments, a very phallic, bejeweled dagger.

In addition to Mowgli, all the good people, especially Kitty and the Doctor, are in tune with the jungle. They have studied their environment. Kitty can easily name the various monkeys, while the Doctor takes a party of young ladies to paint the beauties of the jungle (of which they seem to be rather oblivious). The Doctor also describes a (symbolic) bridge as the separation between civilization and the black jungle where “you take your life in your hands.” While others may be threatened by the jungle, Kitty, because she is attuned with the external jungle and her internal unconscious, is perfectly safe there. She even says hello to the monkeys. In fact, this is where she meets and instantly falls in love with the now adult Mowgli. Their love seems to be based on a mutual respect and love for the natural environment at all its physical and symbolic levels. Boone, by comparison, sees the jungle as a place to kill animals for sport and a place to rape its hidden treasures.

The film ends with what is clearly and emphatically an inter-racial relationship. Unlike the convenience of the feral child being a white boy lost in the jungle, as with Tarzan, or the other even more unlikely situation of having a white woman so

conveniently living amongst the savages, as in *Dances with Wolves* [1990], *The Jungle Book* faces this issue squarely. At the end, Mowgli abandons the treasure, leaving it lost in the jungle, and makes an emotional commitment to Kitty. While it ignores the practicality of the situation, the film seems to exude a confidence, that, if an emotional bond is strongly cemented, all other factors (Will they live in the city or in the jungle? Will they get formally married or just live together jungle-style?) can be safely ignored. Clearly, *The Jungle Book* is one of Disney's most advanced films for children. It is a grand entertainment, exciting and wise.

*The Jungle Book*. Walt Disney Studios. 1994