

MARY POPPINS

Dramaturgical Study Guide

Created by Andrew Koenig, Student Dramaturge



Introduction

For almost 100 years now, *Mary Poppins* has enchanted generations of readers, viewers, and theatre goers around the world. In the next few pages we will briefly explore how this magical nanny was written into existence and eventually brought to life on the silver screen and on stage. Along the way, I hope you discover some of the enduring lessons Mary taught that remain true in our lives today.



A Brief History of Mary Poppins

P.L. Travers was the pen name of Helen Lyndon Goff, the writer who created *Mary Poppins*. She was born in Australia in 1899 and moved to England in her early 20s. While there, she became a travel writer and eventually published a little blue book titled “Mary Poppins” in 1934. The book became an international phenomenon and eventually found its way into the hands of Walt Disney’s daughter.



Disney himself was delighted by the book and became determined to make it into a movie. This did not prove to be an easy task. After nearly 20 years of persuasion, Travers finally agreed to sign over the rights to the books, and Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke became the Mary Poppins and Bert that so many fell in love with.



A Brief History of Mary Poppins (cont'd)

The movie became a sensation all its own; it was nominated for 13 academy awards and won 5. The movie cemented Mary's place in the imaginations of countless children and adults. However, P.L. Travers felt that Disney had not stayed true to her books, and walked out of the film premiere in tears.



Having been so upset by the film adaptation, Travers was very hesitant when Cameron Mackintosh approached her about turning her books into a musical. Ultimately, she was again convinced after Mackintosh agreed that no one involved in the creation of the movie would be involved in the making of the stage show. The *Mary Poppins* musical opened in England in 2004.



Novels vs. Movie vs. Musical

There are many differences between the three major versions of Mary Poppins. I've focused on the most central characters here.

	Novels	Movie	Musical
Creator	P.L. Travers	Screenplay by Bill Walsh & Don DaGradi Composition by the Sherman Brothers Directed by Robert Stevenson	Script by Julian Fellowes Music by The Sherman Brothers and George Stiles Directed by Richard Eyre
Mary	Mary is very vain and strict. She frequently stops to stare at her reflection in shop windows.	Mary Poppins is firm but kind, she disciplines the children but always maintains a certain warmth in her character.	Mary is a quirky blend of fun, aloof and mysterious. She is on a mission to bring the Banks family together.
Bert	Bert is a minor character, appearing in only a few chapters as a chalk artist and a Matchman (match salesman) but not a sweep.	Bert is Mary Poppins long time friend and something of a sidekick. He is an artist and a chimney sweep	Bert helps to open the eyes of the children to a social class outside their own and "sweeps" them up in Mary's adventures
Mr. Banks	Mr. Banks rarely makes an appearance. He shows up every now and then, frustrated by the children or terrified of Miss Andrew.	Mr. Banks cares for his family but is distant from them, focusing instead on his job	Mr. Banks is distant from his family because of the distance he felt from his own parents and the discipline he suffered under Miss Andrew.
Mrs. Banks	Mrs. Banks is concerned with the duties of being a housewife in the early 1900's, hosting parties and generally aiding Mr. Banks.	Mrs. Banks is a suffragette fighting for women's rights while still gently loving her husband and caring very much for her family.	Mrs. Banks is an aspiring, yet unsuccessful actress who is struggling to discover what it means to be a good wife for her husband and mother for her children.
The Banks Children	There are five Banks children, Jane is the oldest, followed by Michael and then their twin siblings, John and Barbara, and finally the youngest, Annabel.	Jane and Michael are the only two Banks children. They are troublemakers, but the behavior stems from a desire to connect to their father	Jane and Michael are the Banks children. They have many preconceived ideas about how the world works that are not necessarily true.
Miss Andrew	Miss Andrew is Mr. Banks old nanny who is hired after Mary Poppins leaves. Mary Poppins returns and locks her in a bird cage.	Miss Andrew does not make an appearance in the film	Miss Andrew is the anti-Mary Poppins. She is a dictator who is partially responsible for the emotionally distant man that Mr. Banks has become.

Historical Context

Mary Poppins takes place in England in the early 1900s, a time very different from our own. This period of time was known as the Edwardian era. During the Edwardian era parenting was more of a formal experience as opposed to a relationship. Families that were moderately well off would most often hire a nanny and other staff that would assume responsibility for raising the children. This meant that the children would either be visited frequently, or seen almost never at all, depending on the parents.

Terminology

Brimstone and Treacle: medicine commonly used in Victorian times. Brimstone is another name for sulphur; treacle is a medicinal mixture used as an antidote to poisons, including snakebites.

Neleus: a character from Greek Mythology; the son of Poseidon (God of the sea) and Tyro (a greek princess.) Neleus and his twin brother, Pelias, were abandoned by their parents.

Screever: someone who draws pictures on sidewalks for money

Spit-spot: an expression like “chop-chop;” basically hurry up

Tommy rot: nonsense; ridiculousness

Rococococious: a play on the word “Rococo,” an eighteenth century artistic period characterized by its elegance and, as Mary Poppins suggests, its flourishes.

Halitotious: a play on the word “halitosis,” a symptom in which a noticeably unpleasant odor is present on the exhaled breath



Themes

The themes behind the mysterious and wonderful tales of *Mary Poppins* are the reason her story has endured for so long. Beneath the magic and adventures are lessons and love that warm hearts and help us to begin to truly believe that, “Anything Can Happen”, as Mary sings at the end of the musical. These next few themes are some of the most prominent that have shaped our production and understanding of this timeless story.

Truth vs. Fiction

After many of their adventures with Mary, the Banks children will ask, “Did that really happen?”. Mary frequently berates them for such silly talk, leaving the children stumped. While this may seem strange and even rude at first, Mary is simply trying to prepare the children for the future. As adults no one will tell Jane and Michael what is true and what is not; they will have to make those decisions for themselves. Will they be able to believe in magic when they are older? Perhaps this is Mary’s way of trying to keep that belief alive in the face of the “real world”.

Family

Mary does not descend into the lives of the Banks family in order to be a replacement parent or to make their problems disappear. She says herself that she will stay, “until the wind changes”. Instead, she comes to bring the Banks family closer together. Husband, wife, and children- all three parties are distant from one another for different reasons. Mary reminds them of what should be most important to each of them- their relationship to each other.

Looking Beyond Appearances

The Banks children say their parents wouldn’t approve of Bert because he is “dirty” and Jane calls the Bird-woman a “bundle of rags”. Mary asks, “When will you learn to look beyond what you see?”. Mary constantly challenges the children not to judge situations or people based on how they appear, showing them that magic is often hiding where you least expect it.

Discussion

Status is a person's position in society, and it changes the way he or she sees the world, and how others see him or her. In Edwardian England, status was pretty much set in stone – your position when you were born was the same throughout your life. What Americans would consider “individualism” did not really exist. There was very little thought about moving up to a higher station in life – it was just not done – and so, people comported themselves according to their position in the hierarchy. But your status can be different depending on whom you relate to. For example, Mary Poppins's status is high compared to the children (she is their mentor and caregiver), but Mr. Banks can fire her (she is his employee).

Think about your own status within the community of your school and how that can change depending on whom you relate to (fellow students, teachers, administrators, parents).

Activities

Jolly Holiday

The Banks children consider the park a boring, unexciting place until Bert paints a vivid picture of it that comes to life in “Jolly Holiday.” What is a boring venue in your own life that could use some imagination? Pick a place and create a chalk drawing or painting that adds excitement. After you've created it, think about what you could do to bring your own imagination to life! Remember, “anything can happen if you let it.”

The Talking Shop

Have you ever been thinking of something you just can't find the right word for? (e.g. *netflixing*, or maybe *hangry*?) Time to visit the Talking Shop. Write out the letters of the alphabet and double the vowels. Cut out the letters and mix them up, and then choose 10 and create a word that says “precisely what you mean.” If you're feeling brave, double the letters and create a word using at least 20! (Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious is 34 letters long!)



