

Subversion with a Spoonful of Sugar

By

Daniel E. White February 24 , 2025

Once upon a time, the sun never set on the British Empire. Then Britain lost America to the colonists, South Africa to the South Africans, India to the Indians. In our lifetimes, People of a Certain Age, Britannia has gone from ruling the waves to having trouble ruling the Midlands. The leadership has lost its power as the society has changed. They would like to Make Britain Great Again but to no avail.

The reason for their impotence is Mary Poppins.

At least two generations have loved this subversive film, made by an American, Walt Disney. All of the characters speak British English, but some of the wisest speak with accents that reveal them to be “uneducated.” Scene after scene in the movie undercuts the orderliness of a class system and proper daily life. And there was celebration of such ideas as “work can be fun!”

In case you have forgotten the story, a proper British banker has a dutiful, somewhat ditzy wife who advocates the vote for women, an orderly daily life measured by specific things happening at the same, prescribed time, and a cook and a maid who feud constantly. There are two children, a boy and a girl, whose behavior has driven away a number of nannies. The aptly named Mr. Banks decides that he must choose the next nanny. Through magic, and to his surprise, Mary Poppins arrives.

She transforms the lives of the Banks family and then, when the wind shifts, she flies away on her umbrella. Everybody is happy. The corrosive nature of the movie with regard to respect for Britain and its leadership should be obvious already.

How can everybody be happy?

Recognizing the seriousness of my accusation, I present the following examples of aspects of the movie that could not be understood as anything other than assaults on the “natural order of things.”

1. MaryPoppinsurgesthechildrentofindthefuninwork,specificallyincleaningup their rooms. Work is supposed to be arduous. Fun is intended to counter work with frivolity. They are clearly opposites. And who ever found the fun in cleaning up one’s room?
2. ThemilitaryismockedbyadottyoldAdmiralwhoinsistonfiringacannontwiceaday that unsettles everything and everyone in the neighborhood. From the dialogue, it is clear that he thinks he is still at sea in command of a ship. People in the neighborhood humor him.
3. Itissuggestedthatwomenhaverights,evensubservientwives,cooksandmaids. But with Mrs. Banks as a leader of the suVrassettes, this suggestion apparently should not be taken too seriously.
4. AboytakingbackhistwopencefromthebankPresidentcausesarunonthebank, threatening the existence of England. Everybody knows that if the Bank of England falls, Britain falls. How can one maintain confidence in the B of E if a boy’s desire to keep his own coins to feed the birds at St. Paul’s can pose such a threat?
5. Ifonelaughstoomuch,onemighthavetocontendwithfloatingabovethings.The only way to get down is to think bad thoughts. Therefore, it is best if one can avoid laughing too much and concentrate on staying grounded by thinking bad thoughts.
6. Chimneysweeps,specificallyBert,themanofmanyoccupations,aresmarterand wiser than bankers. This is an obvious assertion that laborers have brains enough to conduct their lives quite capably without the direction of their betters.
7. IntheBritishEmpireuponwhichthesunneverset,number6abovewouldnever have happened. Everyone was born into a station in life, a well-defined class system that discouraged upward mobility, where everyone knew his or her place.
8. Thereisnomentiofreligionoreducationinthemovie.MaryPoppinsimpliesthat the best way to learn is through experience. What the Church of England preached, or the halls of learning taught are not relevant to learning how to live one’s life.
9. “Gofflyakite”doesnotmeangetoutofmyhair.ItisoVeredasthewaytoloseallof one’s troubles and cares.
10. The whole premise of the movie—that a woman who has magical powers—will ensure that there is always a spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down undercuts the importance of hard work, discipline, order, etc.

The insidious nature of Mary Poppins makes the point, once again, that what children are taught will one day affect how they live their lives.

Does the example of England give America any pause for thought? Is there any aspect of popular culture here that is subversive or a threat to the way things are supposed to be? Do we have ideas about how things are supposed to be that parallel the certainty with which the British once regarded the natural order of things? Is there a natural order of things? Says who?

One more thing: a movie is the product of several forms of subversion often called art.

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