To Follow or to Lead

Conformity and racism seem to be things of the past, yet they are still prevalent in American society. Before coming to college I thought I would meet many accepting people, but I have met many people who are racist and don’t believe in equality. I have also met people who pretend to be someone they’re not in order to fit into groups. However, I am increasingly aware that both conformity and racism limit individuality and acceptance. Being an individual is what I believe encompasses true American culture, as it is commonly referred to as a “melting pot.” In the film *Babe*, characters either accept their identity within a “tribe” or “herd,” or protest it to be unique. The director suggests, therefore, that David Berreby’s idea of “tribalism,” and Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of “herd” are prevalent in *Babe*, although tribes may not have as strict boundaries as Berreby believes, and it may not be as hard as Nietzsche thinks it is to stray from your herd’s habits.

The scene from *Babe* that I have chosen opens with Farmer Hoggett instructing Babe to herd the sheep. We see Babe question his ability to complete the task asked of him. Immediately thereafter, Fly tells Babe he has to “dominate them.” With this advice Babe runs into the sheep pen growling and barking as if he were a dog, while the sheep just stand there and laugh at him. Babe feels “ridiculous” and runs back to Fly. She tells Babe to stop treating the sheep as equals because “they’re inferior.” If they laugh, she instructs Babe to “bite them” and “be ruthless” in order to get them to listen. With Fly’s encouragement, Babe runs back into the pen barking and growling, yet again. When the sheep laugh, he runs up to one and bites its ankle. Maa tells Babe to “stop this nonsense” and Babe apologizes, explaining to the sheep that he was “just trying to be a sheepdog.” Maa tells Babe there are “enough wolves in the world already,” and with
kindness, Babe gets the sheep to listen to him. This scene ends with Fly explaining to Babe that sheepdogs don’t ask sheep what to do, they tell them what to do.

The key element I have chosen to analyze is the behavior and dialogue of Fly. Fly’s character is complex; she exhibits both aggressive and nurturing characteristics. When Farmer Hoggett instructs Babe to herd the sheep for the first time, he questions his ability to perform the task asked of him. However, Fly immediately offers Babe advice and encourages him to dominate. Fly’s willingness to share her advice demonstrates that she thinks of Babe as one of her own children. Fly’s interest in teaching Babe to herd the sheep shows her nurturing side and desire for him to succeed.

At the same time Fly’s behavior is nurturing and maternal, she also exhibits aggression and violence. After Babe’s first attempt at herding the sheep, he runs back to Fly, telling her that he feels ridiculous. Fly assures Babe that the sheep are inferior and encourages him to treat them that way. Fly establishes her violent character by telling Babe to bite the sheep and “be ruthless” in order to “bend them to your will.” This demonstrates her aggression towards animals she doesn’t consider to be one of her own, as she excludes them from her care.

Fly continues to show both nurturing and aggressive characteristics at the same time. When Babe follows Fly’s violent advice to exert aggression over the “inferior” sheep, his second attempt is unsuccessful and Farmer Hoggett walks away. Fly influences Babe to bite one of the sheep, showing her aggressive character, which compels Maa to step in and say, there are “enough wolves in the world already.” Thereafter, Babe takes his own advice, using kindness and politeness to successfully herd the sheep. Fly realizes Babe’s success and quickly alerts Farmer Hoggett, demonstrating her proudness and maternity. Subsequently, the farmer drives back towards his house with Babe and Fly in the back. While Fly shows that she is proud of Babe, she also reveals her aggressive character by telling Babe that he shouldn’t have asked the sheep to move, he should have told them to move.
David Berreby’s concepts of “tribalism” and “us versus them” serve as a lens through which to interpret this scene (9). For Berreby, tribalism is the process through which individuals desire to belong to a group and conform to its rules and behaviors. In turn, Berreby writes that a “sense of ‘us’ brings with it a sense of ‘them.’” By emphasizing the words “us” and “them,” Berreby draws attention to rivalries among tribes. Tribalism is an uncontrollable aspect of life; human beings contribute a lot to their tribes and one’s desire to belong cannot be stopped. Because strong feelings towards those labeled as “them” cannot be prevented, tribalism is just an aspect of human nature. Berreby applies the language of subconscious tribal beliefs to describe the process of tribalism: “identity between self and group can form rapidly, often following a psychological route that is relatively subconscious” (10). For Berreby, tribalism sheds light on subconscious formation of tribes within society: it’s inevitable and individuals are placed arbitrarily. Joining a tribe and viewing “them” as the enemy is subconscious; it’s natural and a part of human nature.

Details from the film *Babe* confirm Berreby’s version of “tribalism.” Berreby believes that tribalism is a subconscious aspect of human nature, and the director of *Babe* demonstrates this. For instance, Babe was not a part of a tribe on the farm and Fly took him in and treated him as if he was one of her own. Despite the fact that Babe and Fly are different types of animals, Babe desired a sense of belonging on the farm and eventually joined Fly’s tribe of sheepdogs. Babe’s desire to belong becomes evident when he tries to herd the sheep for the first time. With Fly’s advice, Babe attempts to herd the sheep. He growls and barks at them, demonstrating that enemies of Fly’s tribe have also become Babe’s enemies and that he has conformed to sheepdog culture.

But *Babe* does not entirely match Berreby’s version of tribalism, which is demonstrated through the film’s mise-en-scène. For Berreby, tribalism comes with aggression against other tribes as individuals conform to their tribes rules and behaviors and desire a sense of belonging.
But in *Babe*, tribalism is portrayed differently. When Babe goes against Fly’s violent advice and treats the sheep with kindness, the music changes from apprehensive to forgiving; the lighting shifts from dark to pleasant, and the camera angles move from staccato to fluid, close-up shots. These cinematic elements disrupt the appearance of violence among tribes and emphasize that Babe doesn’t view the sheep as “them,” like Fly and her tribe do. This demonstrates fluidity among tribes and differs from Berreby’s views of tribalism. These cinematographic choices present a version of tribalism characterized by Babe’s ease of acceptance among the sheep, but also by strict separation between dog and sheep culture. The director of *Babe* suggests, therefore, that in tribalism, tribes may not have as strict boundaries as Berreby believes.

While David Berreby argues that people have an uncontrollable desire to join tribes, Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of “herd” also serves as a lens through which to interpret this scene (366). Nietzsche describes the concept of “herd” as being common and equal, lacking individuality and following the group’s instincts. Nietzsche writes that “society imposes [duty] in order to exist.” The word “duty,” describes the manner in which ordinary people live. Further, by not fulfilling your “duty” to society, one is courageous and strong. According to Nietzsche, living with “habits which are centuries’ old,” is like following the norm. Being a follower is weak an effortless, but breaking old habit and being an outlier is strong.

Details from the film *Babe* confirm Nietzsche’s concept of “herd.” Nietzsche believes that following the herd does not take effort to perform, and the director of *Babe* demonstrates this. For instance, when Fly gives Babe advice on how to herd the sheep, he immediately follows it by trying to “dominate them.” The film shows Babe and Fly in the same camera frames, showing that they are their own “herd.” Seconds later, Babe attempts to herd the sheep, abandoning his usual kind behavior, while mimicking Fly’s violent behavior. This beginning of this scene demonstrates Babe’s weakness of following Fly and the behavior of her herd.
But *Babe* does not entirely match Nietzsche’s version of “herd.” For Nietzsche, following the herd and lacking individuality occurs often as it is a habit of most people in society. But in *Babe*, the norm of following the herd is violently disrupted. Later in the scene, when Babe attempts to herd the sheep for the third time, Maa tells Babe “to stop this nonsense.” At this point, Babe courageously abandons the behavior of Fly’s herd and treats the sheep with kindness to achieve his goal. While Babe stops acting as a follower and turns into an outlier, the music changes from apprehensive to forgiving. This cinematographic choice presents Babe being forgiven by the sheep. When Babe successfully herds the sheep, he is respected and becomes a strong individual who goes against the behavior norms of his herd. The director of *Babe* suggests, therefore, that going against your herd’s habits is strong and courageous.

If Berreby and Nietzsche were to watch the scene, they might notice typical farm life where animals live with their own kind. But I also think they would notice the more complex ideas at play in the scene: boundaries between tribes and herds are less strict for Babe. The scene shows that when Babe acts like the tribe of sheepdogs, he isn’t well-liked. But when he strips the boundaries between tribes and acts like himself, he is not only accepted, but he is also respected. While Fly demonstrated the concept of “herd” through sheepdog behavior norms, Babe went against this concept by acting as an individual. Perhaps our culture has much to gain by valuing individuality rather than being a follower.

**Works Cited**
