PAPER MILL PLAYHOUSE



Disney and CAMERON MACKINTOSH'S

MARY POPPINS

THE BROADWAY MUSICAL

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STUDY GUIDE

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

EDWARDIAN SOCIETY

Mary Poppins takes place in 1910 during the Edwardian era in London, England, spanning from 1901 to 1910 under King Edward VII. This time period is often described as a transition period in England between the Victorian age (1837–1901) and the onset of World War I in 1914. Before the twentieth century, English society remained largely shaped by Victorian restraint, yet King Edward's reign brought a gradual relaxing of that rigid outlook.

CLASS STATUS

Class status is a person's position in society and it changes the way they see the world and how others see them. During the Edwardian period, these broad groups were divided as follows:

- **Upper class**: Royalty, the nobility, and the very rich.
- **Upper middle class**: The wealthy, bankers, lawyers, doctors, merchants, and manufacturers.
- **Lower middle class**: A growing class in early 20th-century Britain consisting of shopkeepers, managers, civil servants, and small manufacturers.
- **Working class**: Chimney sweeps, farmers, factory workers, shop employees, house servants, and clerks.
- **Lower class**: The homeless and destitute, which were a grave and growing concern during the Edwardian era.

THE RISE OF THE NANNY

During the 19th and 20th centuries, middle- and upper-class British families employed special caregivers called "nannies" to look after the children. Like Mr. and Mrs. Banks in the show, fathers were responsible for working and financially supporting the family while mothers led the household staff and entertained guests. Having a nanny was a status symbol for these households and many middle-class families still hired nannies even if they couldn't afford them.

The Industrial Revolution in Great Britain (ca. 1760–1840) sparked a major change in economic growth and an increase in population. During the 19th century, the average middle-class English family had six or seven children (and wealthy families had even more than that). With larger families and greater income, there was a greater need for help around the house and to watch the children. In his book *The Rise and Fall of the British Nanny*, author Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy writes, "If the rich had anything that needed looking after – whether it was a coat or a child – then there was a servant for it." Children would see their parents for only a short amount of time each day, leaving the nanny to oversee everything from the children's clothing, books, food, medicine, and discipline.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In a wealthy English household in 1910, some of the other domestic staff may include:

- **The Butler**: Often the oldest person on staff, the Butler was in charge of the family silver, china, and glassware, as well as answering the front door. He would also assist in all the family meals and stand behind the chair of the master of the house, awaiting his next command. His high position also meant he had the highest salary of the household staff.
- **The Housekeeper**: Working closely with the butler, the housekeeper was in charge of maintaining order and cleanliness around the house. All of the female servants of the house reported to the housekeeper.
- **The Valet**: Second in command to the butler, the valet assisted the master of the house with his clothing and would handle all travel arrangements.
- **The Footman**: Reporting to the butler, the footman was responsible for cleaning and refilling the oil lamps, cleaning cutlery, polishing silverware, and setting the dining room table.
- **The Housemaid**: Handled many tasks that kept the household running, including sweeping the rooms, cleaning the fireplace, polishing the brass, washing dishes, and mending clothes.
- **The Cook**: In addition to cooking the food for each meal, the Cook also oversaw the entire kitchen area, making sure there was enough food in stock and that the space was well kept.
- **Scullery Maid**: The scullery maid's job included washing dishes, preparing fires, and lighting the stove in the mornings. She was often the youngest person on the staff.

CHIMNEY SWEEPS

Although not a part of the permanent household staff, chimney sweeps were regularly hired by these households. During the Industrial Revolution, urban growth increased the need for cleaning services among expanding families. Young boys were chosen for this task since they were small enough to fit inside the chimney. The job was dangerous and posed serious risks such as respiratory issues, falls, and death.

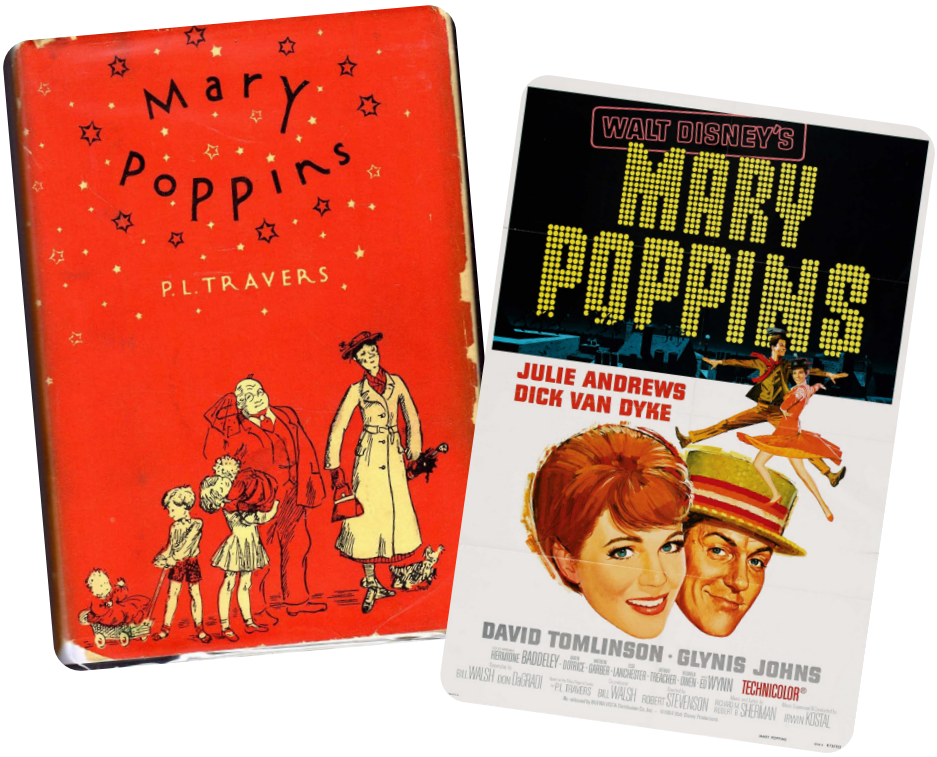
ADAPTATION

FROM THE PAGE TO THE SCREEN

From 1934 to 1988, P.L. Travers published eight *Mary Poppins* books. Born Helen Lyndon Goff in Australia in 1899, Travers was an avid reader of myths and fairytales including the work of the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Beatrix Potter. These stories inspired her to write her own series of magical tales. After moving to Ireland and then England, she adopted the pen name Pamela Lyndon Travers and began to study Eastern mysticism, Celtic folklore, and Theosophy that also influenced her writing.

Walt Disney became interested in adapting the *Mary Poppins* stories once he saw how much his daughters enjoyed reading them. After reading the books himself, he visited Travers and tried to obtain the film rights as early as 1938. However, Travers initially rejected the proposal, not enthusiastic about her beloved characters being paired with cartoons. Walt Disney made multiple attempts over more than 20 years before Travers finally agreed to the adaptation in 1959.

Despite a very turbulent creative process between Disney, the *Mary Poppins* creative team, and P.L. Travers, who had script approval over the project, *Mary Poppins* premiered August 27, 1964, to universal acclaim. It became the highest-grossing film of 1964 and earned thirteen Academy Award nominations, winning five, including Best Score, Best Actress for Julie Andrews, and Best Original Song for “Chim Chim Cher-ee.”



ADAPTATION

FROM THE SCREEN TO THE STAGE

The film captivated theater producer Cameron Mackintosh, who attempted to secure the stage rights from P.L. Travers during the early 1970s but was unsuccessful. The author's disappointment with the Disney film greatly affected her decision-making regarding any future adaptations of her work. Mackintosh visited Travers once more in 1993 to express interest, now with the production credits of massive hits such as *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, and *Phantom of the Opera* to his name. Along with his deep understanding of the original stories, he eventually received the author's blessing.

By 2001, Cameron Mackintosh and Disney Theatrical Productions agreed on the direction of the new project, and work began adapting the 1964 film for the stage. The creative team, which included the music team of George Stiles and Anthony Drewe, writer Julian Fellowes, and director Richard Eyre, went back to Travers's original source material to include additional characters, plot points, and to further deepen the themes of the story. *Mary Poppins* premiered in 2004 at the Bristol Hippodrome in England and moved to the West End later that year where it won two Laurence Olivier Awards. Following its success in the West End, *Mary Poppins* premiered on Broadway in 2006 at the New Amsterdam Theatre. The Broadway production received seven Tony Award nominations, including Best Musical, and won for Best Scenic Design. The original production closed in March 2013, becoming one of the longest-running Broadway shows after 2,619 performances.







Mary Poppins at Paper Mill Playhouse (2017)

SUGGESTED READING

***Mary Poppins* series by P.L. Travers:**

- *Mary Poppins* (1934)
- *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935)
- *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943)
- *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1952)
- *Mary Poppins From A to Z* (1962)
- *Mary Poppins in the Kitchen* (1975)
- *Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane* (1982)
- *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door* (1988)

Anything Can Happen If You Let It: The Story Behind the Journey from Books to Broadway
by Brian Sibley and Michael Lassell

Mary Poppins, She Wrote: The Life of P.L. Travers by Valerie Lawson

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Mary Poppins - Disney Educational Video Series