

Baby in the Underworld:
Myth and Tragic Vision in *Dirty Dancing*

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One of the most popular movies of 1987 was a mass-market story of young love called Dirty Dancing. It's late summer, 1963. The movie's main character, whom everyone calls Baby, is headed with her family for a three-week vacation at a Catskills resort. Upon arriving, Baby's sister Lisa complains that she should have brought her coral colored shoes (along with her other ten pairs). Baby's father corrects her, speaking his first lines of the film. “This is not a tragedy”, he says. “A tragedy is three men trapped in a mine, or a police dog used in Birmingham.”

It's a little surprising to find talk of tragedy at the beginning of a movie that critic Leonard Maltin dismisses as a “superficial but audience-pleasing tale of [a] spoiled teenage girl” (Maltin, 1995). Tragedies are supposed to be filled with pain and suffering, and stereotypically end in death. But in fact, not all sad stories are tragic, and not all tragedies end sadly. What is required is a tragic vision. The idea of the tragic vision is expressed by the chorus in the Oresteia of Aeschylus: “From suffering comes knowledge” (pathei mathos). But this ancient tragedy does not end sadly; it culminates in a grand celebration of the institution of law in human affairs. Such an outcome, Aristotle explains in his Poetics, produces a ‘double’ or complex plot that is more pleasing to the audience than the direct tragedy of a work like the Iliad. That is why he regards Homer's Odyssey as tragic even though it ends happily. he says (Poetics 1453a30-35).

Do I mean to say that Dirty Dancing a tragedy, even of a mixed sort? It certainly was audience-pleasing—and continues to be. Directed by Emile Ardolino, it was the tenth highest grossing movie of 1987, earning over \$170,000,000 worldwide after having been produced by independent studio Vestron Pictures for just \$6,000,000 (IMDb, 2004). And it has remained a steady seller on VHS and now DVD over the years (the Ultimate Edition, released in December of 2003, was #623 on Amazon's list of DVD sales near the end of 2004). Critics have generally been less pleased, treating the film with attitudes ranging from Maltin's condescension to the outright hostility of Roger Ebert, who branded it as a "tired and relentlessly predictable story of love between kids from different backgrounds" (Ebert, 1987).

But is the movie a tragedy? No, of course not. Nor am I going to try to label it as some mixed form like tragi-comedy. But beneath its pop culture surface of uncomprehending parents and youthful rebellion, the movie expresses, not a tragic outcome, but in its own way a tragic vision: its happy conclusion is made possible only by a knowledge acquired through painful experience over the course of the story. Though the conventions of its genre keep it from being profound (just as they have kept critics from looking beneath its surface), something in it has made it perennially popular. I think what that is isn't just nostalgia or a great soundtrack. It is a remarkably intelligent screenplay that takes what many have seen as nothing more than a hackneyed coming-of-age story, and turns it deftly, lightly, but unmistakably into a myth of the wisdom gained through suffering.

And that's the other piece of preparation I need to explain the movie. The broad notion of a tragic vision must be joined to another useful concept, that of myth, and specifically the mythic journey. Here one can do no better than to quote the description of the hero's journey by Joseph Campbell:

The mythological hero, setting forth from his common day hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a

shadow presence that guards the passage. There he may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle, offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinization (apotheosis), or again—if the powers have remained unfriendly to him—his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft); intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of the return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir). (Campbell, 1949: 245-46)

A story employing elements of the mythic journey relevant to our purposes is the homecoming of Odysseus. The mythic dimensions of Homer's epic have long been recognized, and won't be reviewed here.¹ But some interesting echoes with Dirty Dancing will be noted. Most obviously, Odysseus' prolonged struggle to return home to Ithaca and his loyal wife Penelope shares with Dirty Dancing the central episode of a journey to the underworld; but we shall notice other, more incidental but still clear reminders and allusions to Homer's mixed tragic tale.

As we shall see, Dirty Dancing provides its own version of the myth of the heroic journey. Though made particular to a specific place and time and told from a young woman's perspective rather than from that of Campbell's assumed male hero, the movie tells a universal story of the painful passage into adulthood. It shows the courage that is necessary to live in the adult world,

¹ A useful analysis of the sort I mean is found in Dimock, 1956. My own treatment of mythic elements in the Odyssey can be found in Wians, 1996.

and the wisdom that comes with the passing from innocence to experience. Dirty Dancing is a myth of coming-of-age, as seen through the lens of a tragic vision.

The story almost begins with a voiceover by Jennifer Grey's character, Baby. In fact, the first words we hear are the words of a song about pain: Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons singing "Big Girls Don't Cry" (all of the old songs on the soundtrack were chosen by the movie's screenwriter and co-producer, by Eleanor Bergstein, and were carefully matched to the scenes they accompany). Only then does the voiceover begin. As we watch the family car approach Kellerman's Mountain House resort, Baby speaks. "That was the summer of 1963, when everybody called me 'Baby,' and it didn't occur to me to mind. That was before President Kennedy was shot, before the Beatles came, when I couldn't wait to join the Peace Corps, and I thought I'd never find a guy as great as my Dad. That was the summer we went to Kellerman's."

Baby—and how can we not notice her name?—begins the film in a state of innocence. Not just sexual innocence (she is a virgin as story opens), but innocence of the world, of life: Kennedy is alive, Viet Nam seems far away, and her life is centered on her family. Those final weeks of the summer (in fact, both the vacation and the movie end on the Labor Day weekend) will be the final weeks of Baby's childhood, for she's heading to a place that is simultaneously perilous and promising, where everything will change.

We can figure out where she's headed by looking more closely at the name of her destination: Kellerman's. The many Yiddish speakers staying at this old-fashioned borscht-belt resort know exactly what the name means: Man of the Cellar. And not just any cellar man—it's run by Max Kellerman (played by Jack Warden). Baby is on a journey to the cellar, to the underworld, a place presided over by the region's most important guardian.

This may strike us as an odd spot for a family vacation, especially when we hear Max Kellerman say that it's all due to Baby's father. Her father, played by Jerry Orbach, is a doctor, a physician, named Jake Houseman. Dr. Houseman and his family are special guests at

Kellerman's resort, as we learn when Max Kellerman himself rushes out to greet them. "Well, Doc," he says, "after all these years I've finally got you up on my mountain." Dr. Houseman laughs, asking, "So how's that blood pressure?" Max turns to Lisa and Baby with a significant expression. "I want you girls to know, if not for this man, I'd be standing here dead." Kellerman is the guardian of an underworld, and Baby's father is why Kellerman is there.

Now here there might seem to be an inconsistency. I said Baby is traveling to the underworld. But Kellerman's resort is on a mountain. I don't think we should be bothered when a myth combines symbols in this way (Campbell?). Besides, in myths and fairy tales we know that on top of a mountain one often finds a castle. The name of the dancer (played by Patrick Swayze) who Baby falls in love with is Johnny Castle. Now in all such stories we also know that, though it's sometimes buried underground, sometimes hidden inside a castle, there lies a treasure. So what we can say is this. Baby has gone to the underworld in search of some treasure. But first she has to get past the cellar man (who was put there by the Man of the House) before she can get to the Castle.

Baby has to get past two other obstacles that I'll quickly mention: a waiter and Yale Medical School student named Robbie Gould (Rob the gold), and Max Kellerman's grandson Neil. If Kellerman is guardian of the Underworld, Neil is the nerd from Hell. Neil will inherit the resort, so he's studying hotel management—at Cornell University, which is of course in Ithaca.

A different sort of obstacle is represented by a female character. Vivian Pressman is a bored, horny housewife, whose husband Moe stays back in the city making money while Vivian seduces Kellerman's young male employees (including, we are clearly meant to believe, Johnny). Now although Baby is the true Odysseus of the story, Johnny must in effect choose

between what Baby will come to represent and the adulterous Circe that is Vivian.² Baby's ultimate triumph, though subtly shown, will nevertheless be unmistakable.

After their arrival, the family quickly settles in (Max has reserved his best cabin for the Housemans). Soon they are taking part in large dinners, dull dances, and silly entertainments. But Baby displays an interest in exploring, leaving the family cabin by herself. Attracted one night by the sound of rock and roll, she is drawn to a footbridge leading to the staff quarters. She spots one of the dancers, Billy, trying to carry three watermelons across the bridge and calls out to him. Billy challenges her. "How'd you get here?" "I was taking a walk." "Go back," he says, "No guests allowed. House rules." She doesn't leave, so Billy becomes insulting. "Why don't you back to the playhouse? I saw you dancing with the little boss man," he sneers, referring to Neil. Instead of leaving, she offers to carry one of the watermelons and Billy's behavior changes. "Can you keep a secret? Your parents would kill you. And Max would kill me." And they proceed to cross the bridge. Once there, she sees the dirty dancers for the first time, each pair writhing in highly sexual rhythms and motions. Where, she asks, did they learn to dance like that? "I don't know," says Billy. "Kids do it in the basement back home" (or in the cellar, Dr. Houseman or Max Kellerman might say). Despite her initial shock, Baby is soon swept up in the gyrations when Johnny Castle arrives and tries to give her a quick, awkward dance lesson.

To see what all this means, we have to return to Joseph Campbell for a moment. In the passage quoted above, the hero starts the mythic journey by leaving his dwelling and proceeding to the threshold of adventure. There a shadowy presence stands guard. This power must be conciliated, after which the hero journeys to an unfamiliar world of strangely intimate forces.

² A similar choice must be made by George Bailey (James Stewart) in Frank Capra's It's a Wonderful Life. George, the Odysseus who stays home (his brother goes off to become a war hero), must choose between Donna Reed's Mary and Gloria Grahame's Violet (a thoroughly earth-bound Circe) before he can find his treasure.

Two symbols not mentioned in the Campbell passage should also be noted. To enter the movie's underworld, Baby crosses the threshold of the bridge. Bridges are an obvious and well-known symbol for the transition from adolescence to adulthood.³ Second, we should recall that Baby crosses the bridge carrying a watermelon. That's a reminder of the old euphemism, "She swallowed a watermelon seed." Baby, it seems, is pregnant. With what we don't know; but on a vacation ending on Labor Day, Baby is about to give birth to something.

Again according to Campbell, once across the threshold, the hero meets a series of tests. The first of these comes quickly. The next day it is learned that Johnny Castle's dance partner (but not romantic partner) Penny is pregnant ('Penny'—that's a nickname for Penelope, isn't it?). Baby goes to her father and without telling him the truth asks for the \$250 it will cost for Penny to obtain an abortion. She then agrees to train with Johnny so that she can step in for Penny at a well-paying outside dancing gig that the two hard-working kids from the wrong side of the tracks really need. And so Johnny teaches Baby to dance, and quickly they start to fall in love.

OK, maybe the story can be predictable at times. But even at these times it is graced with intelligent touches. Along with her lessons with Johnny, Baby practices on her own. She does so—perhaps implausibly but certainly appropriately—on the symbolic threshold to adulthood, the bridge leading to and from the staff quarters (the music in the background is "Wipe Out"). Baby is an apt pupil (which is fortunate in a movie that lasts 97 minutes), but there's one move she can't master: the lift. Johnny says the best place to learn lifts is in the water, so one day he takes her away from Kellerman's Mountain House to a lake of quiet natural beauty. There they practice, with Baby undergoing ritual immersion and emergence, death and rebirth, until she learns to trust Johnny to support her.

³ See Kiepenheuer, 1991. A bridge can, of course, be a symbol for any decisive transition.

The most severe test comes after she and Johnny perform successfully but not brilliantly at the outside gig. Upon returning to Kellerman's, Billy rushes up to tell them that Penny is in serious trouble. The abortionist was a back-alley hack and Penny needs immediate medical attention. Baby does the only right thing. She runs back across the bridge to her father, Dr. Houseman, who rushes to Penny and saves her. Of course he is furious with Baby as he realizes the extent of her lies and secret life. As they leave Penny and the others, they go back across the bridge. Midway her father says, "You're not the person I thought you were, Baby. I'm not sure who you are." Baby's childhood identity is gone, wiped out. Her new identity is yet to emerge. All we have now is pain, hers and her father's.

Jake Houseman goes back to his cabin, to sleep, her tells her. But Baby goes across the water to Johnny. She knocks on his cabin door. "Can I come in?" She looks around at the mess. He shuffles. "I, uh, guess its not a great room. I, uh, you probably got a great room." "Oh no," Baby says quickly, "it's a great room!" And she's right. She has left the tidy cabin of her childhood and is seeing the great room of the world, in all its disorder. She has reached the core, the center.

Johnny moves some clothes off a chair so Baby can sit. He goes to turn off the record player. "No. Leave it on" she says (for we must have music—art— for the great moments of life, not so much as we live them, but to make sense of them afterwards).

She has come to apologize for the way her father treated Johnny, who he believes got Penny pregnant. But Johnny won't let her. "I mean the reason people treat me like I'm nothing is cuz I am nothing." "That's not true! You—you're everything." But Johnny cuts her off. He tries to make her see what the adult world is like. "You don't understand the way it is", he tells her, "for somebody like me." Almost imperceptibly, the conversation moves to the question of courage. Johnny continues. "I never met anybody like you before. You're not scared of anything." "Me? I'm scared of everything. I'm scared of what I saw, and what I did, and who I am. Most of all

I'm scared of walking out of this room and never feeling again for the rest of my life the way I feel when I'm with you."

At just this moment, another 45 drops from the spindle: "Cry to Me," by Solomon Burke:

When your baby leaves you all alone
And nobody calls you on the phone
Ah, don't you feel like crying?
Don't you feel like crying?

We feel like crying. We feel like crying every time childhood ends, at every painful passing from innocence into experience, every time a young person takes the first brave steps into the adult world.

But Baby doesn't cry; big girls don't cry. Instead, she rises to her feet. "Dance with me," she says. "What, here?" "Yes, here." She moves toward Johnny, toward life in all its confusion, disorder, and vitality. She moves toward life and she embraces it.

This is the treasure; this is always the treasure: life must be embraced.⁴ This is the first lesson of adulthood; it is the lesson we must learn again and again, through art, through music, through stories: life cannot fully be lived unless it is embraced as it is. For the first time in the movie, Baby—whom everyone said would change the world—follows the lead of her teacher effortlessly.

Campbell writes that the hero's triumph may be represented sexual union, a sacred marriage with the fundamental regenerative powers of the world. So, Baby and Johnny make love, still with Solomon Burke singing in the background. Baby returns to Johnny the next day. Again they make love. Afterwards Johnny asks "What's your real name, Baby?" "Frances," she

⁴ This sentence and the idea in the next sentence are taken from Wians, 1996. I thank the Journal of Education for permission to reuse it.

answers, “for the first woman in the Cabinet.” “Frances,” he repeats. “That’s a real grown up name.” Baby’s parents, good liberals no doubt, named her after Frances Perkins, appointed by FDR, to be secretary of the Department of Labor. At last on this Labor Day weekend, Baby has given birth—to herself, to her mature identity. The child is mother of the woman.

Once the treasure is found, it can be shared with others. The hero returns with the boon to the waiting community, where its power revivifies and restores it. And so the movie ends in a exuberant song-and-dance (“The Time of My Life”) that carefully shows every part of the little community at Kellerman’s coming to life. It begins with Baby, Johnny, and the dirty dancers, reaches out to Baby’s parents and sister, grows to take in every member of the closing pageant’s audience, and even embraces Max and Neil. Only the adulterous Vivian is excluded. We now realize that her first name, rooted in viv-, signifies a parody of the life force, just as her surname Press-man, is a sign of her base physicality, of her ignorance of the higher function of eros in life. In the midst of the general celebration, the camera follows Vivian as she withdraws, angry and alone, from the joyous throng.⁵

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Let me move toward my conclusion with another quotation from Campbell:

There can be no question: the psychological dangers through which earlier generations were guided by the symbols and spiritual exercises of their mythological and religious inheritance, we today . . . must face alone, or at best, with only tentative, impromptu, and not often very effective guidance. This is our problem as modern, “enlightened” individuals, for whom all gods and devils have been rationalized out of existence. (Campbell, 1949, p. 104)

⁵ Similarly, Violet in *It’s a Wonderful Life* reacts with incomprehension at what is really a hope for rebirth behind George’s suggestion that they go barefoot through the fields, swim in a mountain pool, and walk ten miles to the top of Mt. Bedford to watch the sun rise—this despite a name that also suggests life. See the script by Capra and collaborators in Basinger, 1990, p. 181.

In one way, my analysis of Dirty Dancing might seem to suggest that Campbell's assessment is too pessimistic. We moderns, though left to wander in the desert of popular culture, can occasionally find an oasis of compassion and intelligent guidance. Told in symbols intelligible to its intended audience, we now see why a little film with few pretensions can establish surprisingly deep and enduring connections with viewers. But at the risk of overwhelming Bergstein and Ardolino's expert lightness with a too serious conclusion, I must observe that it is far too easy to bring to mind a much, much longer list of films, told to the same audience and with equally potent symbols, in which the universal mythic journey of coming-of-age is reduced to getting drunk and getting laid, where the threshold guardian controls access to nothing more valuable than Daddy's checkbook, charge cards, or the keys to his Ferrari. I fear it is worse than Campbell said: our predominant myths are little more than infantilizing fantasies, which promise vicarious satisfaction of both the child's consuming appetites and the adolescent's lust for sexual experience. Against such siren songs, we should rejoice when a movie like Dirty Dancing tells us that big girls don't cry, and shows us precisely what is at stake in becoming an adult. When such a film comes along, we should gratefully agree with Jake Houseman's final affirmation of Baby's progress in the last line of the movie: "You looked wonderful out there."

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