

Be My Baby: Class and Gender Struggles in *Dirty Dancing*

In 1987, Emile Ardolino's independent film *Dirty Dancing* took the world of American popular culture by storm. Starring Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey, this coming of age tale quickly became a cult classic with a strong following even twenty-five years later. While *Dirty Dancing* does not fit the typical bill of a movie musical, its emphasis on musicality and choreography and dance as a whole work to root the film in the musical genre. The use of these elements reinforces the central themes of the movie: class and gender.

Dirty Dancing straddles the line between a movie musical and a romantic drama that just happens to involve dance and music. Jane Feuer in her article "Is *Dirty Dancing* a Musical, and Why Should It Matter?" states, "A common sense definition of a musical film would be that it is a film that has a lot of music in it" (59). By this definition, *Dirty Dancing* certainly fits the musical film bill. However, Feuer goes on to explain that the most influential aspect of the movie musical deals with music related to the diegesis of the film: "Intuitively, we call a film a musical when it contains diegetic singing: songs or numbers that contribute to the telling of the film's narrative" (59). This is precisely what Ardolino's film lacks. *Dirty Dancing* contains two diegetic singing numbers, both of which border on painfully amateur. The rest of the film's soundtrack rests on the shoulders of prerecorded songs as the background for the dance numbers that carry the film's narrative. Thus, the emphasis on the music used in *Dirty Dancing* focuses not on diegetic singing but on diegetic dancing—an art form that, aside from Astaire films, had very little impact on the criteria for the Hollywood musical up until this point. By putting the emphasis on diegetic dancing, Ardolino makes up for the lack of diegetic singing, making it possible for scholars to classify *Dirty Dancing* as a movie musical.

In order for the plot to move forward with diegetic dancing, the film must—logically—include music. Ardolino, together with screenwriter Eleanor Bergstein, filled *Dirty Dancing* with music which not only matched the setting, the summer of 1963, but also matched the time period in which the film was made. All of this music plays an important role in the development of the plot as well as the characters and the themes which underscore the movie.

Ardolino uses music to accentuate the class struggle between the “entertainment staff” and just about everyone else in the film from the beginning of the movie. When Baby goes to an entertainment staff party at the beginning of the film, she hears soulful rock and roll music, specifically The Contours’ hit “Do You Love Me”, thus this form of music becomes instantaneously associated with the working-class group of the community. Oliver Gruner in his article ““There Are a Lot of Things About Me That Aren’t What You Thought’: The Politics of *Dirty Dancing*,” goes on to make the point that this soulful music, or “Johnny’s music” as he attributes it, brims over with “visceral kick and sexual aggression,” making it the perfect soundtrack for the working-class community—a group who seems to be associated with lack of manners and refinement by the upper-class staff and guests—as well as for Baby’s feminist and sexual awakenings (Gruner 158). Along with this use of period music, Ardolino incorporates music written in the 1980s specifically for *Dirty Dancing*, the most influential of these songs being Swayze’s “She’s Like the Wind.” This song, written and recorded by Patrick Swayze, talks about the class difference between the two protagonists, stating in the chorus, “She’s out of my league.” While this song plays non-diegetically, it still provides clarity into the class structure and struggles which Johnny and Baby must overcome.

Ardolino opens *Dirty Dancing* with a sepia-toned montage of couples, well, dirty dancing—that is dancing extremely close together, grinding, and letting the music take control of their movements. Pop hit “Be My Baby” by African-American girl group the Ronettes plays over this action. Gruner asserts that this song helps to articulate “female desires and anxieties,” and that girl groups like the Ronettes “helped teenage girls to come to terms with their own hopes, desires, and sexuality” (Gruner 158). While the song’s lyrics can be viewed as submissive to the male gaze, the song in tandem with this sequence rather foreshadows the events that unfold within the film: Baby learns to dance, falls in love and experiences a sexual awakening as a result of that love, and along the way learns to believe in herself and her convictions. Gruner quotes Susan Douglas’s claims that during this time period, “pop music became the one area of popular culture in which adolescent female voices could be clearly heard” (qtd. in Gruner 158). By including “Be My Baby”—a song about women acting on their romantic and sexual desires—in the opening sequence of *Dirty Dancing*, Ardolino plants the subconscious seed that this film deals with more than merely romance or lust.

While the song choices for *Dirty Dancing* carry much of the political weight explored in the film, the dancing proves to be of equal—if not more—importance. When sheltered, middle-class Baby first walks into the entertainment staff party, she looks around bewildered that people’s bodies can move so fluidly with such primal vitality. Later in the scene, Johnny takes her into the middle of the dance floor and tries to teach her the basics of this style of dance, which some would define as crude. Baby’s stiff movements and initial inability to grasp the concept of moving fully with the music clearly represent the rigid background from which she

hails. She does not understand the concept of dancing like this because the environment in which she was raised represses feminine sexuality, and this style of dance is rooted in sex.

In line with this idea of sexual repression, Hilary Radner in her article “*Dirty Dancing: Feminism, Postfeminism, and Neo-feminism,*” emphasizes the implications dancing has on the feminist undertones of the film: “Dancing and sexual experience are at the heart of the film’s appeal and, within its narrative, intimately connected” (Radner 139). As previously mentioned, Baby’s first experience dancing appears stiff and rigid, and though she begins formal training in order to take Penny’s spot in a performance, Radner points out that these beginning dance scenes “[testify] to a particular modality of experiencing the body and signifying her status as ‘girlish’”—as opposed to mature like Penny, the older, trained, and therefore more experienced, dancer (Radner 139). The evolution of Baby’s dancing within the film—whether informal “dirty dancing” or a technical mambo—represents her transformation from almost-collegiate girl to worldly woman, bringing about both her feminist and sexual awakenings.

Upon its release, *Dirty Dancing* sparked much debate within the feminist community, begging the question, is it feminist or not? Most critics of the film on the con side of this debate point to the fact that for more than half of the movie the female protagonist is only referred to as “Baby”. As Radner points out, “No modern, feminist, forward-thinking woman wants to be called ‘baby’ now do they?” (132). While this is a very good point, Siân Lincoln in her article “*Dirty Dancing* as Teenage Rite-of-Passage Film,” reminds us that Frances Houseman herself states in the film’s opening monologue, “Everybody called me ‘Baby,’ and it didn’t occur to me to mind” (172). However, this nickname means more than it seems; by the end of the film,

Frances sheds her identity as “Baby,” as Johnny calls her Frances in the final scene. The name “Baby” functions as a representative of Frances’s journey to independence.

These same feminists also tend to point to the film’s famous final scene where Johnny declares to Dr. Houseman, “Nobody puts Baby in a corner,” and pulls Baby on stage with him for their final dance. Their argument here revolves around Johnny “saving” Baby from the corner. However, looking at this scene in this light does the film an injustice by leaving out the rest of the action between the couple. While Johnny leads the dances, Baby instigates the actual relationship that develops between them—a fact that Johnny does not seem to resent in the least. As Radner states, Johnny and Baby develop “a relationship between equals” (139). These critics still often view *Dirty Dancing* as a testament to women needing to find themselves through a man. Rather, Baby and Johnny both find themselves through their relationship. Johnny sees Baby as a courageous, kind, and selfless person, qualities that he does not often see or believe even exist, and he tells her as much when she first goes to his room after enlisting her father’s help in Penny’s botched abortion. Through Baby’s actions and character, Johnny gains the confidence and courage to stand up for himself and the people he loves; the same is true for Baby, as well. As much as Baby idealizes the world and what she can do to help it, her sheltered life has kept her separate from the people of the world who actually struggle. Through her relationship with Johnny, she not only gains a better understanding of what she has claimed to believe in for so long, she also gains the confidence and courage to stand up to her father—a tremendous feat for her. As Feuer puts it in her text *The Hollywood Musical*, “...the repressed of each returns as the surface of the other. Johnny becomes idealistic and assertive; Baby gets in touch with her sexuality” (Feuer 131). Thus when Johnny pulls Baby from the corner, he does not save her from

the oppression of her family, he rather repays her for the gift of confidence that she has given him.

Radner further explains the importance of the relationship between Baby and Johnny to the feminist agenda of the film: “Their relationship evolves around two significant experiences that they share: the first, Frances’s initiation as a dancer; the second, her sexual awakening” (139). The dance for which Baby stands in involves the iconic lift, which, even after many days of intensive training with Penny and Johnny, she fails to perform successfully. Radner states that this failure “was not a result of her lack of technique, but of her inability to ‘act.’” Subsequently, however, she does act on her desire for Johnny” (Radner 141). As predicted by the opening sequence, Baby realizes her desires and decides to actualize them, beginning the real transformation from “girlish” to mature (Radner 139). Radner goes on to say, “When she is able to assume responsibility for her desire, she then...moves toward the realization of her self as independent” (Radner 141). This point is central to the need for Baby’s relationship with Johnny in the film; without it, her sexual awakening never exists, leaving a huge chunk of necessary experience out of her transition into independence. While Baby’s journey to womanhood involves much more than sexual experience, it is clear that her revelation of independence could not happen without having had that sexual experience. That said, sex in *Dirty Dancing* represents more than lust or love; for Baby, her sexual awakening represents her newfound ability to act upon her desires and convictions.

Another important piece of Baby’s road to independence deals with her relationship with her father. At the beginning of the film, Baby seems to be the quintessential “daddy’s girl,” only to find herself practically ostracized from him after she reveals that his money paid for Penny’s

abortion. While Dr. Houseman has liberal beliefs about the goings-on in the world, his view of women remains entirely archaic, despite his constant encouragements that Baby will “change the world” (Gruner 159). Gruner claims Housman “had wanted to mold Baby in his own image; she was to change the world, but not herself” (Gruner 159). Even though the final scene reveals that Baby has been welcomed back into the family fold, Dr. Houseman still looks down his nose at Johnny until Robbie—a member of the waitstaff—confides that he is the father of Penny’s aborted child. So Johnny’s famous lines attempt just as much to free Baby from her corner as they do to demand respect from Dr. Houseman, both for Baby and himself.

Despite the initial responses of critics, this final scene represents so much for both the central gender and class themes. Baby’s confidence on the stage and her ability to successfully perform the lift finalizes her maturation from the beginning of the film to the end, while at the same time signifying her independence and ability to act fully on her desires (Radner 141). Thus it makes sense that Johnny addresses her as Frances rather than Baby at the very end of the movie, showing that he sees her as a grown woman, as he notes earlier in the film when she reveals her real name to him, “Frances?...That’s a real grown-up name” (Gruner 159). This final performance lets the audience know that Frances has broken free from the bonds of her pseudo-liberal family structure, giving them peace of mind that even after the film’s end she is capable of forging a path all her own.

More than this feminist angle, the finale signifies the closing of the gap within the class structure of *Dirty Dancing*. The scene begins with an amateur talent show consisting of many guests on stage singing along to the Kellerman’s anthem. The entertainment staff stands quietly at the back of the room, obviously separate from the rest of the community at Kellerman’s, better

not seen or heard. However, when Johnny and Baby take the stage, the entertainment staff makes themselves known, cheering and clapping and moving with the music of “(I’ve Had) The Time of My Life”. About halfway through the dance, Johnny jumps off the stage and enlists his community to dance with him down the aisle of the banquet hall. After the lift, everyone starts dancing to the music, guests, waitstaff, and entertainment staff alike. The consummation of Johnny and Frances as a couple creates a bridge between the different classes, giving them all the chance to, at the very least, dance without a care in the world.

While Emile Ardolino’s 1987 film *Dirty Dancing* strays from the typical Hollywood musical, it somehow remains a pinnacle in the scholarly study of movie musicals. Despite its distinct lack of diegetic singing, *Dirty Dancing* employs the use of diegetic dancing to make statements about both class and gender relations. This emphasis on choreography along with the musicality of the film not only give this film cult status in the movie musical canon, they also manage to make even the least analytical of viewers think about these issues in a different light.

Works Cited

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