

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Jacob Guion Wade Soule, PhD

DOWNHILL (1927)

Alfred Hitchcock

OVERVIEW

Downhill is a 1927 silent film directed by the celebrated auteur Alfred Hitchcock (1898-1980). An early film of Hitchcock's, it followed the success of his previous film, *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog*, also released in 1927. Both films feature Ivor Novello, a distinguished stage and film actor of the period, in the lead role. Although both films represented successful collaborations between director and actor, they would not work together again following *Downhill*. The film was based on a play co-written by Novello and the actress and dramatist Constance Collier. While Collier, unlike Novello, did not appear in the film version of her play, Hitchcock would go on to cast her in his 1948 film, *Rope*.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

Downhill continued to establish Hitchcock as a director in Britain. In contrast to *The Lodger*, which, in response to studio demands, was edited to remove the majority of its intertitles, *Downhill* relies almost exclusively on visual storytelling and can therefore be seen as a key film in the development of Hitchcock's distinctive visual style. Nevertheless, Hitchcock would, in a later interview with the French filmmaker François Truffaut, make several critical remarks regarding *Downhill*. While some of the criticism was reserved for the play on which it was based—Hitchcock described it as a “rather poor play” with “pretty dreadful” dialogue—he also remarked upon his own youthful and often-clumsy use of visual metaphor, most notably a scene in which the “downhill” journey of the protagonist's life is symbolized by an excessively long scene of Ivor Novello's character descending an escalator at a London Underground station. Although the scene would come to be regretted by its director, its filming on location attracted large crowds and required great technical ambition to film, with Hitchcock himself holding the camera at an awkward angle to get the shot.

The film made other leaps in the visual language of Hitchcock's style. A dream sequence in the film's final act is represented more as a waking hallucination than a straightforwardly separate mental world to which the character has been transported. Hitchcock explained to Truffaut that his decision to refrain from using a dissolve to signify the dream-state of the character departed from narrative conventions at the time. Such an innovation establishes a constant throughout Hitchcock's career, which one of the director's biographers, Peter Ackroyd, describes as the sense that his characters are living through a waking dream in which borders between the rational and irrational are constantly blurred. This is something Hitchcock himself alluded to in his conversations with Truffaut, remarking that the hallucination sequence in *Downhill* is designed to convey “the dream in the reality.”

MAIN CHARACTERS

Roddy Berwick A successful student at an elite public school whose life is turned upside down
Tim Wakeley Roddy's best friend, who has received a scholarship to attend the University of Oxford.
Mabel The love interest of Tim Wakeley, who falsely accuses Roddy of impregnating her
Sir Thomas Berwick Roddy's father
Julia Fotheringale A London actress and eventual wife of Roddy
Archie Lover and fellow cast member of Julia's

SYNOPSIS

Roddy Berwick is a top student at an English public school. From a wealthy London family, he has a bright and promising future that is put in jeopardy when a shop girl, Mabel, makes an accusation to the headmaster of the school that Roddy has got her pregnant. In reality, Roddy's best friend, Tim Wakeley, is the father, but Roddy agrees to lie to protect his friend. Roddy is expelled from school and banished from home by his father.

Forced to make a living in London, Roddy joins the theater as a member of the chorus. There he meets actress Julia Fotheringale after receiving a large inheritance from his godmother. However, Julia is

only using him for financial gain in a plot she has devised with her lover and fellow actor Archie. Julia has spent Roddy's fortune before he learns the truth, at which point he is ruined. Roddy travels to France where he is enlisted as a taxi dancer in a nightclub before finding his way to Marseille where he falls ill with a fever. A group of sailors take him in and decide to return him to London in the hope of receiving a financial reward. Once home, his father reveals that he has learned the truth of Roddy's expulsion from school. Roddy's reputation is restored and he returns to his former glory.

PLOT

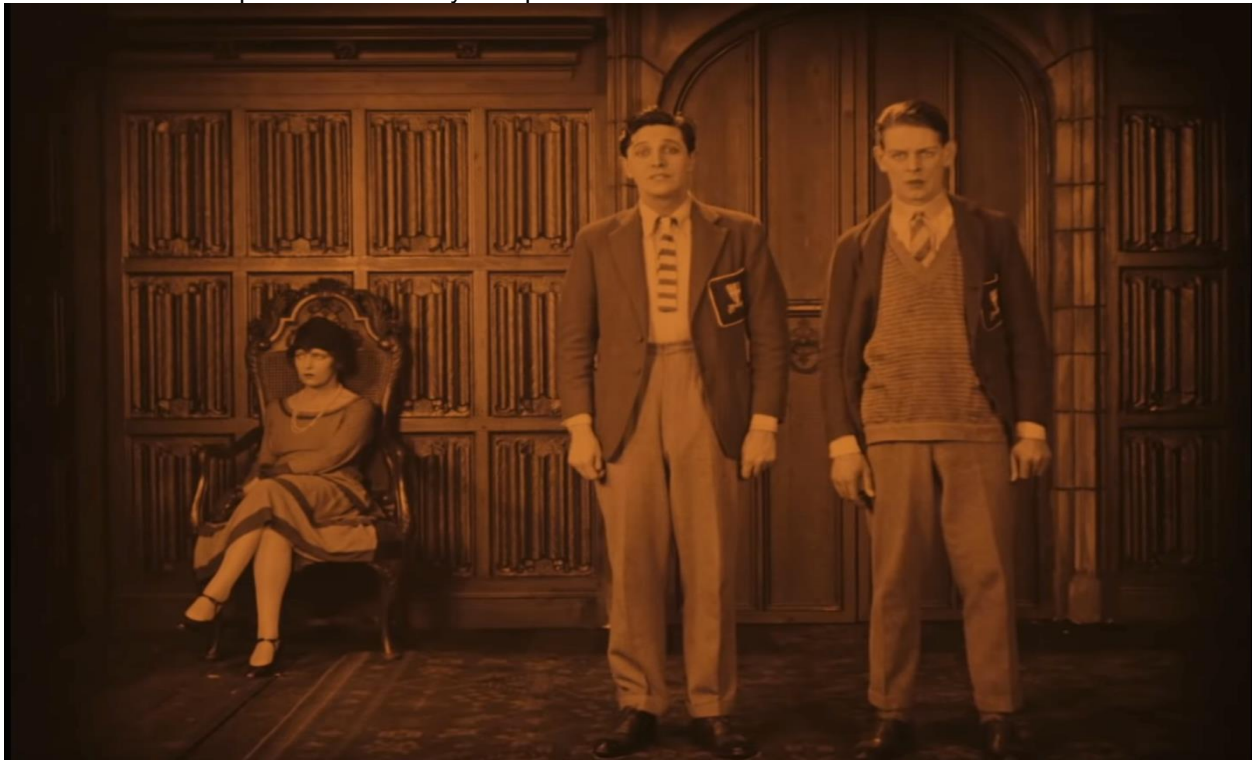
School life Roddy Berwick is a celebrated athlete at a prestigious English public school. He wins the "Old Boys" rugby match for his school and is held aloft by his fellow students. Following this triumph, he is made School Captain.



Love triangle Roddy and his friend Tim Wakeley meet a love interest of Tim's at a local shop where she works. Mabel, the love interest, is flirtatious with Roddy and the two dance enthusiastically. However, while Roddy tends the shop till, Tim and Mabel retire to a backroom to kiss.



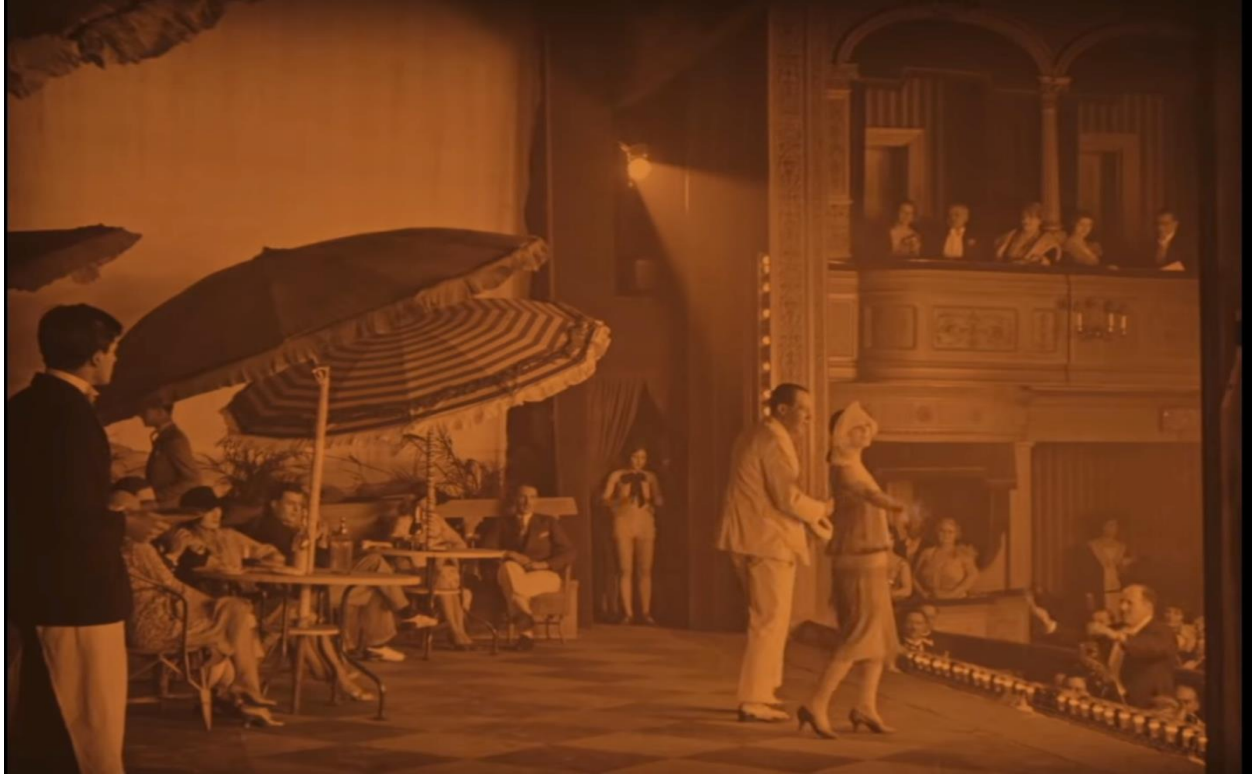
Accused At school, Roddy is called to the headmaster's office and finds Mabel there. The headmaster reveals that Mabel is pregnant and that she alleges that Roddy is the father. The real father is Tim, but Roddy promises to go along with Mabel's story in order to protect his friend who needs to retain his scholarship to Oxford. Roddy is expelled.



Father Roddy returns home and informs his father of his expulsion. His father refuses to believe his explanation and banishes him from the house.



London stage Roddy is shown performing as a waiter in a musical stage production. Backstage, he meets an actress to whom he is attracted. He leaves the theatre with the actress and one of her male co-stars in a taxi.



Inheritance At his flat, Roddy receives a letter informing him of his godmother's recent death. She has left him 30,000 pounds. Excited, Roddy rushes to tell his new friend, Julia, the news. They become romantically involved and subsequently marry.



Foiled Julia and her lover and fellow actor Archie have hatched a plot to gain Roddy's inheritance. Julia has spent the entirety of her new husband's money, a fact he realizes when he receives a letter from the bank informing him that he is overdrawn. He confronts Julia before realizing that Archie is hiding behind a dressing curtain in their flat. The two men fight and Julia kicks them out. Since the flat is in her name, Roddy is now homeless.



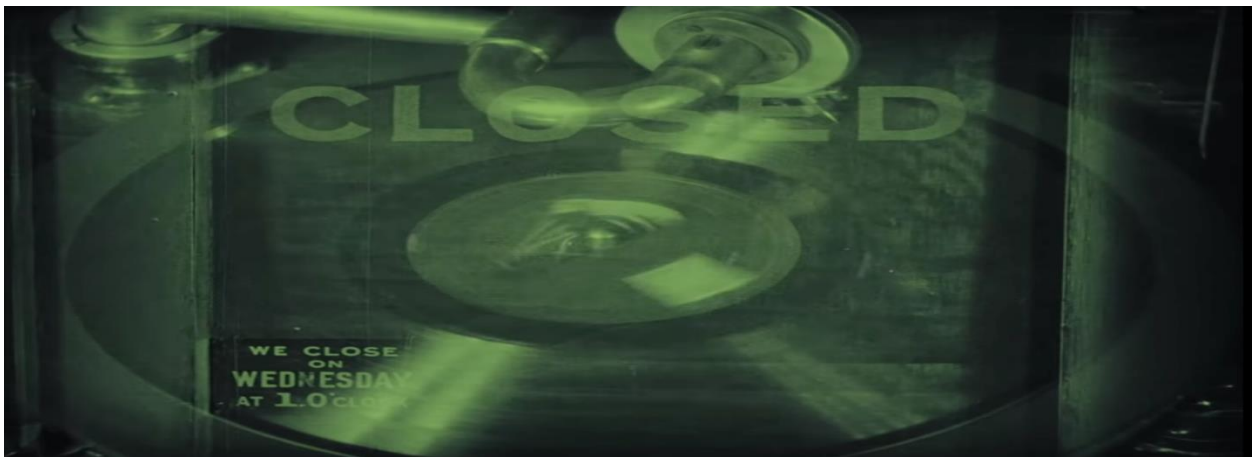
Taxi dancer Roddy travels to France, where he attends a dance at a sophisticated nightclub. However, in order to pay off his debts to the madame of the establishment he is made to dance with older women.



Marseille Washed up in Marseille with a fever, Roddy is taken in by a group of sailors and an older woman. Recognizing that Roddy comes from wealth, the older woman hatches a plan to stow him away on the next ship to England in hope of receiving a financial reward for his return.



Fever dream Onboard the ship, Roddy has a series of fever-induced hallucinations. He sees his father in a police uniform. He also sees the various women who have exploited him gathered together and laughing. Finally, he dreams of the record player and shop sign from the fateful afternoon with Mabel.



Return home Having recuperated from his fever, Roddy returns to his family home. He is greeted with surprise by his father, who asks for his forgiveness having learned the truth about Mabel's accusation. Roddy returns to school and once again plays in the Old Boys rugby match.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

RODDY (*Naïve, Passive, Sexual object*)

Roddy is a young man with a bright future. He is handsome, gentle and unassuming but he is easily taken advantage of. His naivety leads to his inability to take control of the events that are causing his life to gradually fall apart. Similarly, his good looks but lack of adult experience causes him to be easily exploited by the women who seek to use him. As his situation worsens, Roddy's grasp of reality and his ability to cope deteriorates. His eventual return to his status as a star pupil with a bright future comes about not through his own personal will and determination but rather the guiding hands of chance and fate.

Naïve At the beginning of the film, Roddy lives a sheltered existence. From a wealthy background, he is afforded every advantage in life—most obviously his wealth, but also athletic talent and good looks. Coupled with these positive qualities, though, is a deep naivete that is most apparent in his interactions with women. From his early encounter with Mabel, whose flirtations he is blissfully unaware of, to his failed marriage to Julia and his exploitation at the hands of a French nightclub manager, Roddy is frequently at the mercy of women who see him as a man that they can exploit. His naivete appears in other situations, too. He is unfailingly loyal to his friend Tim without seeming to be aware of the chain of events that this loyalty will incur. He is also complacent in his trusting of male authority figures to believe the truth—most notably his father—and yet is disabused of this notion by his banishment from home.

Passive Despite his athletic prowess, Roddy is a character who struggles to impose himself on the world around him. Rather, environment and circumstance impose themselves on him. Despite his evident ability in school life, as a star athlete and school captain, the real world is too much for him. He is helpless to stop the chain of events that ensues from his decision to take the blame for his friend's misadventures. Following his expulsion from school, his every decision leads to a worsened situation. The world of adulthood, with its twin challenges of money and sex, overwhelms him. Whether it be his marriage to Julia (to whom he has signed over a flat in her name), his travelling to France, or his becoming indebted to the woman who is selling dances with him to women at a nightclub in lieu of payment for his lodging, he is never in control of his fate.

Sexual object This impotence carries with it obvious sexual overtones, since in all these instances he is exploited by women who are portrayed as devious and sexually aggressive. His boyish good looks, slim frame, and anxious demeanor all contribute to an effeminizing of his character. Various instances in the film exemplify this vulnerability, but it is in the scenes with sexual overtones that it is made most obvious: the early scene in which a female onlooker spies him half-naked in the changing room (a risqué scene for the time period) is an early instance, and it is made still more overt with the ogling that occurs in the French nightclub by the older ladies in attendance. Overall, Roddy is an object for other people, rather than a subject in his own right.

THEMES

SOCIETY (*Class, Gender, Patriarchy*)

Social class and social mobility The film's initial setting in an unnamed but clearly prestigious private school immediately establishes themes of social class and social mobility. Roddy is from a wealthy background. His friend Tim, on the other hand, is from less illustrious beginnings, as is indicated by his need to retain a scholarship to Oxford (the implication being that he would not be able to afford it independently).

Much of the film's drama emerges from Roddy's unfortunate interactions with those of a lower socioeconomic status. These interactions tend to drag Roddy down the social ladder with increasing intensity in each instance. Mabel, the instigator of Roddy's "downhill" journey, is a shopgirl, and it is her concern for her ability to support a child that leads her to accuse the wealthier Roddy of being the father, rather than admit the truth that the father is Tim.

As the film progresses, Roddy's distance from his illustrious upbringing extends, until he is "thrown to the rats of the Marseille dockside" in the film's final act. The company that Roddy keeps has until this point been declining in social status, from the seemingly sophisticated, but in reality criminal, actors whom he meets in London, to the patrons of the nightclub in which he works off his debts in France. In Marseille, though, it is notable that social class and social mobility become racialized as the film deploys racist stereotypes in its depiction of the sailors who take Roddy in. The older woman of the group appears in blackface. The Black actor who depicts one of the male sailors is, as Bret Reid has observed, uncredited in the role while the white actor who plays the other sailor is credited. It is significant that the nadir of Roddy's social fall is represented not just in terms of class, but of race. Indeed, Marseille, as a southern port, represents a geographic slide "downhill" that reinforces the white supremacy and colonial attitudes that ultimately inform the film's vision of the social order. While *Downhill* is concerned with social class, it is important to note that it also replicates dynamics of social inequity through its depiction of this theme.

Gender Roddy's social descent is, at every turn, accelerated by women who want to use him for their own gain, whether financial, sexual, or both. Mabel's accusation against him is motivated by Roddy's wealth as this makes him a potential provider, but there is also a note of sexual and romantic desire on Mabel's part that is unrequited, leading to the possibility of her acting not just out of greed but out of bitterness at Roddy's apparent indifference towards her. Julia, however, whom Roddy goes on to marry, presents herself as a sexual or romantic interest but is in fact concealing a financial motive in her relations with Roddy. The notion of women as being both sources of sexual and financial threat to Roddy's existence is made thematically complete by his exploitation in France as a taxi dancer (and, possibly, a gigolo). Finally, the older woman in Marseille hatches a plan for the younger men to take him on board their ship and to England in the hope of financial remuneration. One of the few female characters who does not exploit Roddy is his mother, but she is powerless to help him and plays no significant role in the film's narrative.

In the context of Hitchcock's career such a misogynistic worldview is not surprising, since he would continuously be drawn to narratives in which men are manipulated and controlled by threatening women. *Downhill*, though, is more explicit than most in its relentless foregrounding of this theme.

Patriarchy: Male authority If Roddy is an impotent character, this is in stark contrast to the older, male figures in the film. As a schoolboy, the summoning to the headmaster's office early in the film is portrayed as an ominous and oppressive event. Mabel's accusation is so devastating to Roddy because it is made directly to the headmaster, whose power over Roddy's future is far-reaching.

The supreme male authority figure of the film, however, is Roddy's father. Portrayed by Norman McKinnel with great intensity, Sir Berwick oscillates between a warm, gentle source of masculine authority to an enraged tyrant upon the revelation of Roddy's supposed misdemeanor. Roddy is unable to convince his father of his innocence, indicating yet again his inability to impose himself on the world around him. The combined accusatory force of father and headmaster is too much for him and he leaves his childhood home with barely a whimper.

In the film's concluding scenes the centrality of the theme of male authority is made more explicit still. In the visually inventive hallucinatory sequence aboard the ship, Roddy envisions his father in the outfit of a policeman. It is as if Roddy has internalized the accusations made against him and he now perceives himself to be morally corrupted, despite his fundamental innocence. This literal collapsing of patriarchy and the law speaks to a famous anecdote from Hitchcock's childhood that has often been seen as a revealing insight into the logic of the anxieties evident in the filmmaker's oeuvre. When he was six years old, Hitchcock would recall, his father punished him for a minor infraction by sending him to the local police station. The young Hitchcock was to give the officer on duty a note requesting that he (the young boy) be put in a cell for a few minutes to scare him straight. The officer told Hitchcock: "This is what we do to naughty boys." Hitchcock retold this anecdote in one of his final public appearances—his acceptance speech when receiving the American Film Institute's Lifetime Achievement Award in 1979.

APPEARANCE vs REALITY (Reality and illusion)

Reality and illusion In many ways, *Downhill* is a coming-of-age drama, even though, because he never overcomes any challenges of his own volition, Roddy's development into adulthood is questionable. Nevertheless, the film does concern a young man's journey from the protected bubble of youth into the "real" world of adult concerns. A key aspect of this distinction between the idealized world of the public school and the corrupted worlds into which Roddy will be forced to venture is the contrast between what is real and what is illusion. Indeed, Roddy's adventures begin as a result of his attempt to protect his friend, which requires him to indulge the falsehood of being the father of Mabel's child. From this moment on, all subsequent events in the film involve some confusion of reality and illusion. Indeed, when Roddy leaves home and moves into the city by himself, an intertitle informs the audience that the subsequent scenes will come under the banner of "The World of Illusion." We then see Roddy working as a waiter, only for the camera to gradually reveal that he is in fact performing a role in a theatrical production. Hitchcock's camera underlines its own ability to deceive and to create "illusions", reinforcing this theme on a formal level.