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Drop Dead Fred

By Stuart Fischhoff, Ph.D.

Directed by: Ata de Jong

Year of Release: 1991

Fred did not drop dead. He lives on -- in the minds of many women and in the notes of many therapists.

Drop Dead Fred is a movie. A great movie? No, no, no. Is it a new movie? No, three years old, in fact. Was it a major release with lots of hype and controversy? Nope, it came and went, small ads and dismissive reviews. Was it, at least, staggering under the load of humongous star salaries? Unh-unh, it starred Phoebe Cates and the ever-popular Mayall Rik as the eponymous "Drop Dead Fred."

So why are women renting the video and why are their therapists renting the video? Just what is *Drop Dead Fred* all about? Well, it is about Elizabeth, a young woman trying to make it in the workaday world who is having nothing but trouble with her job, with her mother and with her fiancée. If you are a Mary Tyler Moore Show fan, this is Mary Richards' worst nightmare. Unlike Mary, Elizabeth cannot make it on her own.

Elizabeth needs help and help she gets. Not from a gruffable, avuncular Lou Grant, but from the most ID-iotic white knight ever to rescue a damsel in distress. Returning to her mother's house after her life completely collapses, Elizabeth "inadvertently" (think Freudian here) releases her invisible,

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imaginary childhood friend, his name -- "Drop Dead Fred" -- to do battle with the "meanies" who bedevil her young adulthood.

That's right, Fred is not real. Well, he is and he isn't. Drop Dead Fred, hereafter fondly referred to as DDF, is the undernourished ego dominated by the never-socialized Id; the angry, vengeful child in the adult body. Thus, DDF is a crazy mix of Beetlejuice and Don Quixote, a monster-hero who deals more in improbable nightmares than in impossible dreams.

DDF reads Elizabeth's every wish and every annoyance and gives life to them. He encourages her to do whatever she wants -- abandon impulse control, seek revenge, be spiteful, etc. All this to get Elizabeth to stop wimping out and take charge of her life.

In the end, DDF brings Elizabeth up to speed. Their journey over, he must heed the voices, the needs of other children. Most amusing in this regard is the film's hilarious revelation that DDF is not alone as a guardian pest. There is a virtual labor union of such beasties who drive parents nuts, and whose futile exorcism has spawned a cottage industry of therapists.

Of course, therapists treating invisible forces is nothing new -- think of all the past-lives therapists shingled in Southern California. But the conceit of therapists trying to exorcise imaginary spirits who are quite real and quite spirited, is mocked deliciously.

But back to the point, Drop Dead Fred, the being, is the rebel to end all rebels. He thumbs his nose at authority, at convention and at "adult" reasoning and leaves Elizabeth, his corporeal host, to accept the blame which, of course, she doesn't. In her own mind she is a blamed but blameless bystander. This movie's curious appeal to young women, then, (refreshingly) has nothing to do with sex and romance. It is about having a guardian

"multiple," an alter-ego, or "other."

Training and experience teaches us that MPD does not have its origin in adulthood. It may first appear in adulthood but it originates in childhood, perhaps as an invisible friend, but always when the ego is developing, pliable, unfixed, when splitting into multiples is made possible by the plasticity of the underdeveloped ego. Uninitiated adults can only resort to the small potatoes of dissociative reactions, such as fugue states or amnesias. The ego's hold on reality is too strong, the sense of self too entrenched for the truly exotic and awesome dissociations. But children, ah, there's the fertile ground for splitting.

When impulses are repressed in childhood, unable to be part of a total personality, they do not mature with reality-tested experience but exist instead in a personality gulag. Should they take expression in the form of a multiple, the expression, like Stevenson's Mr. Hyde, can be truly monstrous. The intemperate, dominating, signature persona of such an overdriven personality trait becomes Eve Black, Mr. Hyde or, yes, the less malevolent Drop Dead Fred.

It is no mystery why certain films have appealed to patients over the years. *Birdy*, for example, appeals to patients who want to take flight and escape. *I Never Sang for my Father* and *The Great Santini*, cut to the quick of father-son relationships. *Ordinary People* captures the essence of ice-queen mothers who are quietly schizophrenogenic. *Looking For Mister Goodbar*, *Sybil*, *Mommy Dearest*, you know the DSM drill there. But *Drop Dead Fred* is a new cinematic therapy tool and should be better understood. It is tapping into something less than clear but very volatile.

Curiously, none of the young men I know who saw *Drop Dead Fred* understood the film's appeal to women beyond it being another rescue fantasy. Indeed, at

first blush it does seem as though Elizabeth is not so much empowered as a woman in the film as she is rescued by a man. But once Elizabeth decides to take control, she and DDF meld into each other, an integration not only of "multiples" but also of the Anima and Animus, the Yin and Yang.

Perhaps *Drop Dead Fred* appeals to young women so much because it promises them that embracing the shadow adds to the substance of their lives. Or perhaps it reassures them that somewhere inside all of them, a Mary Richards is alive and well and waiting to make the leap into prime time.

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