

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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BLUE VELVET 1986

David Lynch

OVERVIEW

Jeffrey Beaumont, a young college boy home for the summer, picks up a severed human ear and embarks on a personal investigation. It leads him to Dorothy, a nightclub singer, whose signature song is 'Blue Velvet' and whose husband and son are held hostage by a man named Frank who treats her as a sex slave. Jeffrey enlists the assistance of Sandy, his teenage sweetheart and daughter of the town's police chief, in order to rescue Dorothy and bring down Frank. His bold actions put him in life-threatening situations with drug dealers and psychotic thugs. The nightmare vanishes and normalcy is restored.

HISTORICAL NOTES

Director David Lynch said that the idea for this surreal and sexual crime thriller came from the image of the severed ear and the emotional quality of the song 'Blue Velvet' (the 1963 version by Bobby Vinton). The exterior scenes were shot on location in a town in North Carolina, where townspeople were so upset by the rape scene that the police ordered Lynch not to shoot in the town any more. Although the film divided critics on release, with some influential ones decrying its misogyny and violence, it won many awards. In more recent years, the film has grown in critical acclaim and regularly figures in lists of the best films of all times.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Jeffery	A college student home for the summer.
Sandy	Sandy Williams is a high school girl, who becomes his sweetheart.
Dorothy	Dorothy Valens is the singer who is abused by Frank.
Frank	Frank is a sadist and a criminal.
Williams	Mr Williams is a police detective and Sandy's father.
Yellow Man	One of Frank's associates and also a member of the local police force.

STORY

American dream Following the opening credits, we listen to 'Blue Velvet' (the teenage love song of 1963) as the camera records scenes of small-town America. Bright red roses bloom in front a white picket fence; schoolchildren are shepherded across the street by a 'lollipop' lady; and a man waters his front lawn. Inside a house, though, a small television screen shows a gun pointed at someone.

Menace Suddenly, everything turns to disaster. The watering hose used by the man comes off the spigot, the hose gets in a tangle and a bee stings his neck. He collapses in pain. The sense of menace is increased by a close-up shot of thick vegetation with a loud buzzing sound and a scaly insect crunching on the leaves. This is Lumerton, North Carolina, an ordinary town, with ordinary evil.

Severed ear Jeffrey Beaumont, home from college during the summer, goes to the hospital to see his father, who suffered a major stroke from the bee sting. Moved to tears by his father's speechless and motionless condition, Jeffrey leaves and crosses a field, where he notices a severed ear lying in the grass. Using a discarded paper bag, he takes the appendage to Detective Williams at the police station. The Coroner confirms that it is a human ear, says it looks like it was cut off with scissors and suggests that the 'owner' may still be alive.

Detective Williams At home that evening, Jeffrey tells his anxious mother that he's going out for a walk. 'Not to that place?' she says, referring the to the field where he found the ear. 'Oh, no. Just a walk in the neighbourhood,' Jeffrey says. He goes to Detective William's residence, where the policeman tells him not to mention the case to anyone and not to ask him about it again. 'I understand,' Jeffrey says. 'I'm just curious.'

Sandy When Jeffrey leaves the house, he runs into Williams' daughter, Sandy, who is a year

younger than he. She says she knows something about the ear case, as she calls it, and mentions that her father has been watching the apartment of a singer, named Dorothy Vallens. She shows Jeffrey the apartment, located on the seventh floor of a tall building.

Plan Jeffrey works in his father's hardware store, while the older man recuperates in the hospital. After his shift, Jeffrey cruises by the high school in his shiny car and picks up Sandy, who is reluctant because she has a steady boyfriend named Mike. At a local diner, Jeffrey explains his idea of getting into the singer's apartment in order to discover clues to the ear mystery. Sandy is aghast. 'Are you crazy? She might be involved in a murder,' she says. Undaunted, Jeffrey goes on to enlist her help in his plan.

False pretences Late that afternoon, Jeffrey gains entrance to the woman's apartment posing as a pest control man. While he is 'working,' he finds and pockets a key in her kitchen. Sandy was supposed to have knocked on the apartment door in order to distract the woman and allow Jeffrey to look around. But that plan is scuppered when a man in a yellow jacket arrives at the apartment.

Next steps Jeffrey tries to convince Sandy to return with him to the apartment that night, but she has a date with Mike. Sandy says she'll break the date but that Jeffrey should realise that she is in love with Mike. That evening, the pair go to a nightclub and hear Dorothy Vallens sing 'Blue Velvet.' Listening to the silky sexy singing, Jeffrey and Sandy are mesmerised. Shortly afterward, they leave and drive to the apartment building, where Sandy again voices fear about Jeffrey's plan. Using the key he took earlier, Jeffrey lets himself into her apartment, while Sandy waits outside in the car as a lookout.

Dorothy When Sandy sees a couple enter the building, she honks four times, which is their agreed signal, but Jeffrey doesn't hear it over the sound of a flushing toilet. Opening her door, Dorothy says goodbye to the man in the yellow coat, and Jeffrey hides himself in a closet. Having undressed, she answers the phone and has a cryptic conversation with Frank, whom she addresses as 'sir' and expresses anxiety about a little boy. Jeffrey watches her through the slats of the closet door.

Knifepoint Sensing that someone is in the apartment, Dorothy discovers Jeffrey in the closet and confronts him with a kitchen knife. She forces him to undress, so that she can see him as he has seen her. Still threatening him with the knife, she begins to fondle him and is about to make love, when there is a knock on the door and Jeffrey goes back into the closet.

Frank An older man named Frank enters and begins to abuse Dorothy, verbally and sexually. As Jeffrey watches, Frank engages in sexual role-play, in which he refers to Dorothy as 'mommy' and to himself as 'baby.' He turns violent, roaring like an animal, and the sex, using a plastic penis, becomes sadistic.

Confusion After Frank leaves, Jeffrey tries to comfort Dorothy, who makes sexual advances to him. Jeffrey is aroused, but when she cries, 'Hit me!', he snaps out of it and gets dressed. She asks him to stay and help her, but he leaves. On his way out, he sees a framed photograph of her husband and son. Jeffrey is confused and disturbed by the experience.

Danger and dreams The next evening, sitting in a car, Jeffrey tells Sandy what happened in the apartment. He thinks that Dorothy's husband and son have been kidnapped by Frank, who forces 'her to do things for him.' The severed ear, he believes, was cut off her husband as a warning of what they might do if Dorothy doesn't comply with Frank's wishes. Jeffrey expresses his fear and anger at such a terrible world, which prompts Sandy to tell him about a dream in which darkness is dispelled by 'the blinding light' of love.

Warehouse Jeffrey returns to Dorothy's apartment to check on her. She again asks him to stay and comfort her. Later, he again watches her sing 'Blue Velvet' at the nightclub and follows a car of tough-looking men to a warehouse with a name-plate that reads 'Frank Booth'. The next day, he returns to the warehouse, where he watches as the 'Yellow Man' (who had come to Dorothy's apartment) and Frank go inside. Yellow Man comes out, meets another man carrying a briefcase and the two of them go to a vantage point on a tall building from where they can see the scene of a murder. Jeffrey finds out that the dead man was a drug dealer.

First Kiss When Jeffrey tells Sandy about his discovery, she again urges caution and wants to know why he's doing all this detective work. 'I'm seeing something that is always hidden,' he says. They share their fears and end up kissing for the first time. Jeffrey returns to Dorothy and they make

passionate love, which turns sadomasochistic, when she tells him that he can do 'bad things.' She wants him to hurt her, but he says he wants to help her.

Frank's kiss Frank arrives and takes Jeffrey and Dorothy on 'a joy-ride' to the house where Dorothy's husband and son are held hostage. Dorothy is allowed to visit her family, while Jeffrey is taunted and forced to watch a man perform a popular love song (Roy Orbison's 'In Dreams'). Listening to the song, Frank becomes manic and screams. He drives Jeffrey and Dorothy, both held at knifepoint, to a deserted spot where he kisses Jeffrey and beats him violently, in a repeat performance of what he did to Dorothy.

The Yellow Man Deeply disturbed by his experiences, Jeffrey goes to the police. At the station, he recognises a detective named Gordon as the Yellow Man, who is one of Frank's associates. He tells Sandy's father, Detective Williams, about Frank's involvement in drug dealing and murder. When he shows him photos of Frank with the Yellow Man, who is William's associate in the police force, Williams doesn't reply. Jeffrey tries to get Williams to protect Dorothy, but Williams orders Jeffrey to stop his investigation and keep his daughter out of it. When Jeffrey goes to pick up Sandy for a date, he sees the Yellow Man come to the house and greet Williams. Nothing is said between Jeffrey and Williams, but looks are exchanged.

Horror Jeffrey and Sandy go to a party, where they confess their love for each other and kiss passionately. Driving her home, Jeffrey's car is followed and a wild chase ensues. Jeffrey fears it is Frank, who might kill them, but it turns out to be Mike, Sandy's boyfriend, who hits Jeffrey in front of his house. Dorothy is standing on the porch, stark naked. She falls into Jeffrey's arms and calls him 'my love.' Sandy is horrified, but they drive Dorothy to Sandy's house, where her mother calls for an ambulance. Sandy is disgusted by the sight of the naked Dorothy hugging Jeffrey and slaps him in anger.

Walkie-talkie Later on the telephone, Jeffrey tells Sandy to send her father to Dorothy's apartment. Jeffrey goes there alone and finds Dorothy's husband dead and the Yellow Man seriously wounded. Deciding to let the police find the bodies, he is about to leave when he sees one of Frank's gang members approaching the apartment building. Racing back inside, Jeffrey grabs the Yellow Man's walkie-talkie to communicate with Williams. Then he remembers that Frank has a walkie-talkie in his car and will intercept his message, so he misleads Frank by saying he is hiding in the back room of the apartment. Instead, he hides in the closet and watches as one of Frank's gang members shoots into the back room trying to kill him. When that frustrated hitman leaves, Jeffrey emerges and takes the Yellow Man's gun. Frank walks in and Jeffrey shoots him.

Normality Jeffrey and Sandy are at a family barbecue. His father has recovered and they see a robin, from Sandy's dream, eating an insect. Someone says it shouldn't do that—eat a bug—and Sandy smiles to Jeffrey and says, 'It's a strange world.' A healthy and happy Dorothy is reunited her son.

THEMES

Sexuality The theme of dangerous and hidden sex runs throughout this psychologically complex film. The message seems to be that sex is erotic when it is hidden, and when it is secretive it can be dangerous. Both Jeffrey and Sandy are innocents but only he is seduced by the eroticism of hidden sex. His voyeurism is explicit in two key scenes, first, when he watches Dorothy undress through the slats of a closet door behind which he is hiding. Never has the phrase 'in the closet' been more literal, as we sense Jeffrey's emerging sexual desire. He has the same vantage point when watching the movements of one of Frank's gang members, who is hunting for him. The concealment augments his arousal in the first instance and it increases his fear in the second. Over and over, Jeffrey is asked what he wants and why he is pursuing the case of the severed ear (a classic example of Hitchcock's MacGuffin). He doesn't know why he's fascinated but he can't stop because the mystery is as thrilling as the unveiling of a woman's body. Sex is also violent, almost lethal, when it is hidden from the eyes of the perpetrator male. When sex-maniac Frank abuses Dorothy, he screams, 'Don't fucking look at me,' and she herself tells Jeffrey not to look at her when she entices him. In one sense, this not-seeing is the opposite of voyeurism, but it is similar in that it allows Frank to be at one remove from the sexual act, as if he were a voyeur of his own actions. By contrast, the burgeoning love between Jeffrey and Sandy is carried out with open eyes, face to face, in the 'blinding light', as Sandy describes her dream of love. Perhaps Jeffrey offers the most complete explanation of this theme when he explains to Sandy that he is continuing to investigate despite the obvious dangers. 'I'm

seeing something that was always hidden,' he says as his eyes light up. 'I'm involved in a mystery. And it's all secret. You're a mystery. And I like you.'

Surrealism This being a David Lynch, as opposed to a David Cronenberg, film, a layer of surrealism is laid on the surface of the neo-noir sex thriller. Again, Jeffrey is handed the key line of dialogue, when, in the beginning of the story, he says to Sandy that 'it's a strange world' and goes on to describe Frank's criminal and depraved actions. Sandy repeats the phrase, word for word, in the final scenes, when they watch a robin eating an insect (instead of a worm). More subtle surreal elements are introduced at various points in the unfolding story, for example, the severed ear found in a field and the roar of insects munching on leaves. That roar is later heard in the animal sounds emitted by a crazed Frank when he attacks Dorothy and then Jeffrey. Nightmarish images similarly convey the deep disturbance of Jeffrey's mind as the terror builds up. There is also the surreal of the hyper-real, especially the bright colours of the red and yellow flowers, the red fire-engine and the white picket fence that are shown in the opening scene. A man is watering his lawn, he is stung by a bee and he suffers a major stroke. That is the film in a nutshell: the familiar is made strange, and horror erupts into a placid suburban world.

Innocence For that eruption to be frightening, of course, a context of security and safety must be established first. Lumberton is every town. Jeffrey and Sandy are its innocent teenagers, 'nice kids,' who are sexually inexperienced. Jeffrey is polite and addresses adult men as 'sir.' But the innocence of the film is personified more vividly by Sandy, the blond-haired, sweet-faced senior in high school. Her boyfriend is on the football team and her father is a policeman. What could possibly happen to her? As Jeffrey is drawn deeper and deeper into the dark secrets of Dorothy's world, Sandy is frightened. She bats her eyelashes and squirms with anxiety as she struggles to comprehend the things he tells her. She does, eventually, allow him to kiss her, but she is revolted by the sight of Dorothy naked and held in Jeffrey's arms. That is too much for the sheltered girl, who can only twist her face in horror and disgust. While the story focuses on Jeffrey's descent into a world of depravity, all its themes are highlighted by the contrast with Sandy's feminine purity.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

JEFFREY Jeffrey has an outgoing and engaging personality. Polite, nice-looking and confident, he is also inquisitive and takes bold actions. His experiences reveal the confusion and delight of a young man on the cusp of sexual experiences.

Adventurous Jeffrey is a forward-thinking person, who does not step backwards. A little too self-assured, but not arrogant, he seizes the opportunity when it presents itself. This bold attitude is revealed in the key scene that sets in train the series of events that propels the film to its conclusion. Having found the ear and heard that it might be connected with Dorothy Vallens, he invites Sandy to have lunch with him in a diner. When she asks why he has invited her, he folds his hands together, places his hands on the table and says portentously, 'There are opportunities in life, for gaining knowledge and experiences. Sometimes, you have to take a risk.' Sandy looks perplexed and he continues. 'I was thinking someone could learn a lot by sneaking into that woman's apartment. Sneak in, hide and observe.' Sandy shakes her head and says he's 'crazy.' Undaunted, Jeffrey smiles and lays out his plan, step by step. She doesn't want to hear it, but Jeffrey scolds her and tells her not 'to take that attitude.' He uses his winning smile and quiet confidence to sweep away her entirely reasonable caution. The scene reveals the excitement that underlies Jeffrey's sense of adventure, a boldness that leads him into danger.

Protective Jeffrey's 'nice-guy' character is illustrated after the horrific scene, in which Frank rapes and beats Dorothy. Having watched the savage attack from his hiding place in the closet, Jeffrey comes out after Frank leaves and crouches down beside the bruised Dorothy. He gently touches her and asks if she is all right. She is scared, and he helps her over to a couch and covers her with a light blanket. 'What do you want?' she asks in fright, and he answers, 'Nothing.' Again, he whispers, 'Are you all right' and starts to leave her. She calls him back and he holds her trembling body. At no point in this five-minute encounter does he show anything but genuine concern for another person's well-being. His protective instinct is immediate and total, a sharp contrast to the predatory instinct just displayed by Frank.

Sexuality Jeffrey is a virgin when the film opens, handsome but inexperienced. His first real sexual experience is voyeuristic, when he views Dorothy's sexual abuse from inside the closet. When he 'comes out of the closet,' he is seduced by the damaged Dorothy, which is a thrilling if confusing

experience. He is overwhelmed by the desire she evokes in him but is unsure of how to release it. That first sexual encounter colours his growing relationship with Sandy, nudging it from innocence toward passion. In this sense, the movie is Jeffrey's coming of sexual-age story.

Initiation Although Jeffrey is bold, he is a young man teetering on the brink of manhood. His sexuality, like Sandy's, is unformed and emerges in the course of the film through his encounters with Dorothy, Frank and Sandy. We sense his nervousness from the very beginning, even when he picks up the strange ear, which is the rabbit-hole down which this masculine Alice descends. His emerging sexuality is vividly dramatised in the scene in which he views Dorothy from inside the closet. Through the slats in the door, we see his eyes glow as he watches Dorothy undress to her underwear. The camera switches back and forth between his eyes and what they see. Soon, Dorothy goes into the bathroom, still visible to Jeffrey, where she strips off her bra and panties. His eyes are riveted on her, unblinking. Suddenly, she senses his presence and confronts him with a knife. 'I just wanted to see you,' he says, cowering on his knees. When she asks what he saw, he describes his watching her undress, which prompts her to make him undress for her. 'What do you want?' she asks, and he says, 'I don't know.' She kisses his thighs, and he trembles and pants with pleasure. 'Do you like that?' she asks, and he says 'yes' in a barely audible sigh. Then she leads him to the couch, where they are about to have intercourse before they are interrupted by Frank's entry. When they resume (after Frank's abuse of Dorothy), she invites him to explore her body. Jeffrey is passive and hesitant, uncertain of what is happening. 'Do you like the feel of me?' she asks, and Jeffrey does not answer immediately. A long pause ensues before he says yes, but his affirmation is tentative, as if he is speaking in a foreign language. And, in a sense, he is.

This long scene (separated into two parts by Frank's entry) illustrates a young man's sexual initiation rite. He begins as a voyeur, peering through the closet door enjoying Dorothy's body from a distance. Then, when he is discovered, she excites him by kissing and fondling him close to his penis. His arousal is cut short but soon resumed on the couch, with the woman teaching him how to please her sexually. Jeffrey responds tentatively, confused about what to do next. It is a brilliant illustration of a young man's first sexual encounter.

In another sexual scene, which follows only 24 hours after the first described above, the passive Jeffrey takes the initiative. He lets himself into Dorothy's apartment and asks if she is all right. Dorothy wants to know why he has come but admits that she likes him. 'It's crazy,' she says, 'I don't even know who you are. What do you want?' Jeffrey starts to speak but instead takes a step toward her. Then he says, 'It's not crazy I like you, too.' When she says that she liked being with him the night before, he moves closer and says, 'Same here.' Now, very close, Jeffrey leans in. She responds and they kiss. The choreography of this brief and only mildly erotic scene is significant. Previously, in the first sexual scene, Jeffrey had stood motionless and was led to the couch. In this scene, he moves toward her, matching her step for step, as they come close. He does not take the lead, but he is no longer reactive. They embrace and kiss passionately, and even his speech is more confident. He is coming of age, sexually.

SANDY Sandy is the 'girl next door'. Pretty, sensible and loyal, she is the perfect sidekick for Jeffrey's reckless adventures. As a sexually and emotionally naïve teenager, she is shocked by what he finds, but she has an inner layer of strength that pulls her through the horrors of the story.

Cautious Sensible Sandy is the polar opposite of bold Jeffrey. When the young man lays out his audacious plan of getting into Dorothy's apartment, she reacts with disbelief. 'Sneak into her apartment?' she asks. Jeffrey says yes, and she replies, 'Are you crazy? She might be involved in a murder.' Jeffrey tries to reassure her with his plan, but the more he explains, the more she 'gets the creeps.' No matter what he says, no matter how reassuring his smile, she is firm that she wants nothing to do with his 'crazy plan.' This scene is important in establishing Sandy as the voice of common sense, the normal person, in what soon becomes a world of chaos and terror. As a result, Sandy's caution only increases the sense of danger that lies ahead.

Inexperienced Blonde-haired, blue-eyed Sandy is also the personification of innocence. This trait is illustrated in a wonderful scene that occurs just after Jeffrey has told her about the horrors he has discovered: Frank's crimes and violent abuse. He relates this in a matter-of-fact way while sitting with Sandy in a car at night. As he describes the sex slavery of Dorothy, Sandy's mouth widens with fright and disgust. Jeffrey is also disturbed and cries out, 'Why are there people like Frank in this world? So much trouble?' Sandy ponders this for a moment before describing a dream she had. 'Our world was dark,' she begins. 'Because there weren't any robins...for a long time there was just

darkness...all of a sudden, thousands of robins were set free... and brought this blinding light of love.' Her own eyes are lit as she describes her vision of pure love, the antidote to the degraded sex that Jeffrey has witnessed. Her innocence seems to shield Jeffrey as he continues his descent into hell.

Confused For most of the film, Sandy is kept away from the ugly aspects of Dorothy's life. She hears about them from Jeffrey, but she does not witness them until a dramatic scene toward the end. She and Jeffrey drive to his house, where Dorothy is standing on the porch, without any clothes. The strange, naked woman runs into Jeffrey's arms and speaks to him of their love. Sandy can only watch speechless with horror and disgust. As Jeffrey holds Dorothy and tries to comfort her, Sandy is caught between a sense of disbelief, of betrayal by Jeffrey, and of compassion for Dorothy. When Dorothy is taken away in an ambulance, Jeffrey tries to explain, but Sandy slaps him hard across the face. 'I love you,' she tells him later. 'I just couldn't watch. Is she ok?' Then, she breaks down in tears and mumbles, 'Where is my dream?' Her coming-of-age story is painful because it is confusing.

Sexuality Sandy has a boyfriend and has probably kissed him, but she is a virgin. As she hears about Jeffrey's adventures, though, she is introduced to raw sexual desire, which both frightens and disgusts her. Still, she is drawn to Jeffrey's confidence and participates in his dangerous games. That intimacy leads to kissing and then to love.

The first indication we have of Sandy's sexual inexperience comes when she and Jeffrey have gone to the nightclub to watch Dorothy perform. They order beer and settle down to listen. Dorothy's performance oozes with sensuality, which makes Sandy uncomfortable. She looks over at Jeffrey, who is enraptured by the singing of 'Blue Velvet' with its suggestive sensuality. She looks down and then gives him a nervous smile, as if to say, 'It's a bit strange, but I'm all right.' A second later, when she looks up at the stage, her face tightens into a near-frown and she rubs her forearm to comfort herself. Sandy is out of her depth. Dorothy's overt sexuality unsettles her, especially since Jeffrey seems to be enjoying it. This scene, which lasts barely more than a minute, reveals Sandy's lack of sexual experience and her instinctive fear of it.

Sandy's first kiss (at least with Jeffrey) comes in a scene at a dance party. She wears a modestly low-cut dress, and her blond hair hangs down her shoulders. When Jeffrey says she looks 'beautiful,' she hangs her head and mutters thanks. She asks if he wants something to drink, but he would rather dance. She smiles, and they hold each other close as they move slowly on the dance floor. It is the first time they have touched, and Sandy caresses his back with her hand. They pull back their faces and then, very slowly, move in to kiss each other. She responds, caresses his neck and continues to kiss him. Again, they draw apart for a moment and she whispers, 'I love you.' Sandy is young and somewhat frightened of sex, but this scene illustrates her budding sexual desire. It is all very chaste, very consistent with Sandy's overall character, but it is nonetheless sensual, especially the slow movement of their bodies and her breathless declaration of love.

DORPETHY Dorothy is a sensual woman, who is also traumatised by fear. Her husband and son are held captive by a man who abuses her sexually. She is badly damaged by the ordeal and appears to have lost all self-respect, but she does recover by the end of the film. Perhaps that recovery is not surprising when we consider the final lines of her nightclub performance when she sings, 'I can still see blue velvet though my tears.' Dorothy is really a split-personality, a deeply tortured soul inside an enchanting exterior. But to regard her simply as a victim is to ignore her agency.

Fearful Even before we witness Dorothy engaged in any sexual scene, we become aware of her fear. She comes into her apartment after performing at the club, undresses and then the phone rings. 'Yes, Frank. Yes, sir,' she says obediently. 'Let me talk to him. Please. Sir.' She is allowed to speak to her husband for a moment, during which we hear the anxiety in her voice. When the call ends, her heightened sense of vulnerability registers another danger: someone is in her flat, hiding in the closet. She grabs a kitchen knife and flings open the closet door. Fortunately, it is only polite young Jeffrey, and not some thief or killer. Still, the scene establishes the deep current of fear that runs through Dorothy.

Mentally disturbed The depth of Dorothy's mental damage is revealed in one of the film's most unsettling scenes. As Mike, Dorothy and Jeffrey argue in front of Sandy's house, Dorothy slowly comes into view, in the background, near his front porch, standing naked and confused. She doesn't speak and her facial expression is an empty stare. She eventually falls into Jeffrey's arms, and clings to him like a child to its mother. She appears to be delusional, with no awareness of her nudity and

the reaction of the onlookers. Dorothy is beyond the reckoning of ordinary social mores; she exists in a world of her own.

Sensual Dorothy's performance of 'Blue Velvet' is a scene that firmly establishes her erotic presence in the film. She comes on to the stage in a slinky, low-cut black dress and bright red lipstick. When she turns to face the band, we see that her dress has no back. Still facing the band, away from the audience, she wraps her arms around herself and stands motionless for a moment. Slowly, she turns and begins to sing: 'She...wore...blue...velvet.' Pausing after each word, her haunting, breathy voice is mesmerising. She sways slightly, runs her hands down her hips and turns up her face with an expression of sated pleasure. Jeffrey and Sandy, in the audience, are both excited and unsettled. Dorothy is the archetypal temptress, whose sensuality is powerful, hypnotic and probably dangerous.

Assertive At the same time, Dorothy can also be assertive. Not always the victim, she can force others to do her will. The most explicit example of this aspect of her character comes in another scene with Jeffrey, when she forces him at knifepoint to lay naked on a couch. She lays on top of him, still holding the knife, and begins to kiss him. Although he is not struggling, he is also not entirely happy with the situation and complies with her wishes because of the threat of the sharp blade a few inches from his neck. It is an important scene in the development of Dorothy's character, and the sexual themes of the film as a whole, because of the gender role-reversal. Unlike in most rape scenes in movies, here it is the woman who holds the knife and forces sex on a man. We can say that Dorothy's (potentially) violent sexual abuse of Jeffrey mirrors her abuse by Frank, and that the victim becomes the perpetrator. Nevertheless, the scene still displays a reservoir of strength in Dorothy.

Sexuality Dorothy's sexuality is complex. On the one hand, she is a victim of the abuse at the hands of the psychotic Frank. However, the blurred lines of sadomasochistic sex sometimes make it difficult to ignore her apparent pleasure in her suffering. In addition, and apart from that abuse, Dorothy possesses a smouldering sexual appeal as revealed in her singing performance in the nightclub. She sways back and forth, opens her mouth wide and sings in a languorous tone. She is paid to perform, but her performance is also an expression of her tremendous, almost accidental sexuality. Indeed, her ever-present desire is one of the most disturbing elements of this disturbing film.

Masochistic Although Dorothy is clearly a victim of abuse, she is so damaged that she sometimes she appears to enjoy her pain. That suggestion is visualised in three separate shots during the scene of Frank's violent and terrifying attack on her. Frank hits her hard as a punishment for violating his rule that she can't look at him. Then, for a few seconds, we see a close-up of her face, showing a chipped tooth but also a rapturous smile. A moment later, after Frank has inhaled more gas, we again see her parted mouth and serene smile, as if she is feeling pleasure. A third time, as Frank and she enact the role-play of mommy and baby, she lets her head loll back in ecstasy. This is the disturbing element of Dorothy's sexual nature. She is terrorised, beaten and humiliated, but she can still, for brief moments, find pleasure in the role she is forced to play.

Damaged Another aspect of Dorothy's sexuality is her inability to separate pleasure from pain. In other words, not only does she find pleasure in pain (masochism), but she also believes that she should feel pain while engaged in sex. This utter lack of self-respect is dramatized in the first scene in which she meets Jeffrey. After watching her abused by Frank, Jeffrey goes to help her as she lies in a heap on the floor. When Jeffrey helps her onto to a couch, she asks him to hold her because she's afraid. Then she invites him to touch her breasts and to feel her nipples. 'Feel me,' she says seductively. 'Touch them.' Suddenly, she cries, 'Hit me!' Jeffrey tries to stop her, but she continues to scream, 'Hit me! Hit me!' This scene dramatizes the depths of her self-hatred and mental instability. In her mind, the hand that comforts her is confused with the hand that strikes her.

FRANK Frank is a criminal drug dealer who eliminates anyone who opposes him. He has kidnapped the husband and son of Dorothy, holding them hostage while he abuses her sexually. He is violent, mentally unstable and subject to fits of frenzied madness.

Unstable Frank is delusional, swinging in and out of different realities throughout the film. One clear example is the scene, when he has taken Dorothy and Jeffrey to the house where her family is being held captive. Frank puts his arm around Dorothy and leads her into the house, where he orders beer and announces that it's to be a party. A friend asks how he is, and Frank says, 'Good. I'm real good.' A second later, he berates that same friend for not having the beer to hand. No matter what his

underlings do, he finds an excuse to revile them before changing back into the magnanimous host. He pockets some cash earned from drug sales and explains how he had to get rid of one dealer who cheated him. Next, comes the climax of the scene when one of the men in the house impersonates Roy Orbison and sings 'In Dreams.' The man sings of the 'sandman who tiptoes to my room every night, sprinkles stardust and whispers, "Go to sleep, everything is all right." I close my eyes and dream of you.' Frank inhales some gas, mouths these words and is transported by the song into a magic world of dreams and pleasure. His face screws up in something between pain and pleasure before he abruptly turns off the record and announces that he's taking Jeffrey on a joy ride. The scene reveals how susceptible Frank is to the power of dreams. He has a weak grip on reality at the best of times, and the gas and the song propel him into his fantasy world.

Murderous Frank's utter disregard for life is illustrated in one of the final scenes of the film. He enters Dorothy's apartment, where he has already killed Dorothy's husband and left the Yellow Man badly injured. Now, he returns, seeking to get rid of Jeffrey, who is hiding (as always) in the closet. Frank comes into the room, with a piece of blue velvet draped over the barrel of his gun. His first move is to shoot the Yellow Man and watch him collapse to the floor. Then he fires shots into the walls, alternating between swearing and laughing. 'Ready or not, here I come,' he says, in a mock imitation of 'hide-and-seek.' Frustrated at not being able to find Jeffrey, he begins to scream even louder. He has killed several people already, and if he finds Jeffrey, he will be just one more person on his CV.

Sexuality Frank is a sadist and a fantasist. He treats Dorothy as a sex slave, hitting her, raping her and terrorising her. His abuse, though, is psychically hidden under assumed identities (he is 'baby' and 'daddy,' while she is 'mommy.' He also inhales gas in order to change his identity and shield himself from any guilt for his behaviour. Moreover, his victim is not allowed to look at him while he is engaging in his role-plays and violent acts of sexual gratification.

Sadistic As soon as Frank walks into Dorothy's apartment, he screams, 'Shut up you shit-head! Where's my bourbon?' He makes her turn out the lights and sit on a small chair opposite him. 'Now it's dark,' he sighs and sits down in a leather chair with his drink. 'Spread your legs,' he orders her with a flat tone of voice, as if he is a PE instructor. 'Wider,' he says. 'Show it to me.' He gulps down his bourbon and says, 'Don't you fucking look at me.' He takes out a small ventilator and inhales some kind of gas. He begins to call out, 'Mommy! Mommy! Baby wants to fuck.' He gets on his hands and knees and crawls toward her, growling and screaming like a frenzied animal. He strikes her, saying again, 'Don't look at me.' He gags her and himself, rapes her viciously with a plastic penis and humps her, simulating intercourse, when there is no actual penetration. Finally, he punches her hard in the face for looking at him and, still grunting and growling, leaves her on the floor. Frank's behaviour is that of a sadist who isolates himself from the brutality of his actions. He inhales a gas that transforms him into a sort of animal, and he assumes two different identities while abusing his victim: that of 'daddy' and that of 'baby,' both of whom want to 'fuck mommy.' Another distancing technique is his repeated demand for Dorothy not to look at him. Frank's role-playing would be ripe for Freudian psychoanalytic theory as the *id* that disturbs the ordered politeness of Jeffrey's and Sandy's world. The daddy-baby-mother triangle of his savage sexual rage must symbolise some primal urge, but we have to remember that the film-maker is skilled at leading viewers up a conceptual garden path. It seems safer to conclude that Frank is a psychotic sadist.

Fantasist Another unforgettable scene of Frank's sick sexuality occurs much later. He has taken Jeffrey and Dorothy for a joy ride in a car with some of his criminal gang. Again, he inhales the gas that transforms him into a raving madman and abuses Dorothy. When Jeffrey tells him to stop and hits him, Frank goes apoplectic and orders him taken outside, where he is held by two men. Frank approaches him, his lips glistening with red lipstick. 'Pretty, pretty,' he gasps as he takes more gas and kisses him full on the lips two or three times. Next, he tells someone to play the song by Roy Orbison ('In Dreams'), which acts as another trigger for him to enter into a deranged sexual state. While the dreamy song plays in the background, Frank screams at the helpless Jeffrey, 'I'll send you a love letter. You know what a love letter is? It's a bullet from a gun!' He makes Jeffrey feel his penis and proceeds to punch him savagely until he drops to the ground. Here, again, Frank requires an identity shift in order to be able to launch his violent attack on his victim, this time on Jeffrey. The Roy Orbison song takes him into a world of dreams in which he can possess the objects of his desire and enjoy pleasure whenever he wants. Frank is a fantasist.



(Sandy and Jeffrey survey the scene)



(Dorothy sings 'Blue Velvet')



(Dorothy forces Jeffrey into sex)