

SLING BLADE

Characters

- Karl Childers (Main)
- Frank (Boy)
- Linda (Mother)
- Doyle (BF)
- Charles Bushman (Asylum Man)
- Bill Cox (Employer)
- Vaughan Cunningham (Manager)
- Melinda Brady (GF)

Notes

- 1996 - Rural Arkansas
- Quiet prison home – lonely and used (abusive woman talk)
- “In a few minutes we’ll be in a room with a **killer**.”
- Questioning – they view him as an outsider
 - Is he safe?
- “You’ll see all kinds of people”
- Rules for interview
- What if he does it again? Signs?
- First time he speaks: immediately cast as outsider, mystery
- Children were cruel to him, made fun of him – sat in the shed and tinkered (outcast from the beginning)
- Jesse Dixon – cruel to him, took advantage of little girls
- Killed Jesse + Mother
- **Abuse of women** – his nemesis
- “Get used to looking at pretty people, and people looking at me” – Politics of Staring
- Nowhere to go – staring
- Children see innocence?
- What is he seen as? How is he seen? – Outsider, dangerous, suspicious – innocent, friendly
 - Don’t want all this! Come back to safety. (I don’t know)
- **Pity**, awkwardness (staying at Jerry’s) – taught manners
- **Find a niche**
- Talking about him in front of face
- Locked in again -> **pity**
- The joke – repeats
- Doesn’t know how to **live**, how to **interact**
- Unwieldy duo

- Suspicion, concern
- “Mentally retarded” – “Just got out of state hospital”
 - “Aw no he’s just retarded”
- **SEEN AS A FATHER FIGURE – Vaughan isn’t a “guy guy” (straight)**
- Sacred place – GF
- Poverty – something common
- **FLIPPED POWER RELATIONS**
 - “You don’t need to hear things like that; you’re just a boy”
 - Wish both there – invincible
 - Father suicided – couldn’t take care like he wanted – boy disagreed, blames himself?
 - Looking for a replacement
 - “Too many good people die”
- Construction – good money – cruel
 - She’s lonely since father died, and threatened if left
- “Not funny haha; funny queer”
 - St. Louis – people who are queer get together in a big town (is this an effect of big cities?)
 - Can’t take care of her, not strong enough (norms, prejudice)
- **Another HUGE Power Flip – Doyle**
 - Frank treated cruelly, Doyle insulting all
 - Mother uncomfortable
 - Drools, rubs shit in his hair – “I can’t eat around that **thing**.”
 - **I ain’t saying it’s right – it’s just the truth** – subjectivity
 - “Sweet”, “Faggot”, “Talking back, eh?”
 - Doyle super comfortable in his “own” house
 - Dictator in the house – Karl is again the **subject**
 - Frank tries to be defender – struck down
 - Heavy insults
 - “Ought not talk that way” – sees situation from “outside” perspective
- Repetitive: I’m not scared
- “I like the way you talk”
- **Vaughan** represented in contrast to all others as a nice/weak man
 - Wasted energy on hating -> don’t care
 - “The hand we’re dealt in life”
 - “We’re different; People see us as different”
 - Whispers as to not alert others of the danger of difference – protects himself from the subject position
 - Hard in a small town – but can’t leave because of connections
 - “Mine’s not as easy to see; I’m gay” – almost just as blatant when others search for it
 - Differences are easily found
 - Karl doesn’t see what his point is – doesn’t know what “not different” is
 - Not going to be easy – monster, lethal danger
 - **“A gentle, simple man”** – would never hurt them?
 - Offense sensitive

- “Deep in thought” -> “French Fries”
- Doyle controls the others – always seems to be drunk or drinking
- “Sorry for the poor thing”
- **“You’re just a kid”**
 - No bills to pay
 - No job
 - No business
 - No lady
 - What do you have to be worried about?
- Doyle’s “friends”
- Show off Karl
- Plays cards with chief of Poh-Lease – Power
- Drunk, wrecks
- Wheelchair disabled – left behind
 - Role – Lyrics, Tunesmith – do no cross
- **ATTEMPTED REVERSAL OF POWER STRUGGLE**
 - Acts like he owns it all, rejects everything
 - She stands up to him, Frank (and Vaughan a little) back her up – complete role reversal, rejection
 - Context changed, not his house – “I’m going to kill you” (Witness)
 - LEAVE -> Violence, kid angry
 - Reverse of everything – Doyle is to be pitied, drunk and confused, “I hate you-no I don’t”
 - Sorry, please re-accept me (he was rejected! – unfamiliar – afraid of that subject position)
 - Karl still an innocent bystander – tries a joke
 - Set up a woman for him!
 - Makes Frank feel calm, safe, comfortable
 - Lays hand on Bible – wouldn’t hurt them
 - That boy, he’s my friend
 - My fav part – “It ain’t got no gas” – “Simplest things first”
- Everyone already knows, Vaughan
- Melinda + Karl: Awkward couple - similarly subjected people find safety in each other?
- Karl seeks companionship/camaraderie – always accepts invitations to go somewhere
 - “Nothing bad ought to happen to children – bad things should be saved for those grown up”
 - “I shouldn’t have told you that” – protective
 - “Have you thought of killing yourself like daddy” – searches for a fatherly figure
- Apologizing, regret, caring – How abusive relationships work
- Football – different context (grown mentally retarded man playing with kids)
 - “I ain’t like you – I’m too old and give out”
 - “I’m proud of you” – father
 - Decided to turn power relation against his father
 - “no kin to me”

- Like Vaughan, spares father
- Baptized – his transformation
- Doyle establishes power relations – plague stricken town (sets up rules – don't speak until spoken to, Karl gone)
- **No one objects when he walks off, gives everything away – “Karl?”**
- Insists on calling police on himself – “Karl?”
- Karl rejects Charles – it's his turn to show contempt towards the one who abuses women
 - “The world was **too big**”

Questions

Social and Cultural Norms (Context)

- Norm in insane asylum: unfriendly, abusive?
- Norm throughout: abuse of women – Karl and Vaughan were taught differently
 - Karl was subjected to this throughout his life, however he had also been taught the wrongs of it; read the Bible
 - Vaughan grew up in a large city (more liberal/Progressive, homosexual)
 - Norm was also that men were dominant – Vaughan was not, therefore solidifying his place as an outsider
- Social norm: not disabled/poor/gay
- Normal interaction with people (Karl's joke)

How Norms Affect Subjects (Context)

- Outcasts banded together
 - “I care about every single one of you”
- Vaughan is made fun of (with him naïvely thinking no one notices)
- Karl is looked at with suspicion/contempt
 - “I am not afraid”
- Frank and Linda have little say because they have little economic power
- Melinda “is also... mentally ret... well she's like you”

Subject's Sense of Place (Context)

- Those that are rejected, or at least shunned, in society tend to find solace in each other, because they know that there, in that context, they cannot be made fun of, and thus fit in.
 - They solidify, as such, their subjective place to the rest of the world as “outsiders”
- Karl at first thinks he belongs back at the asylum, then starts to accommodate him at his workplace, and then finds haven with Frank, since they both need each other
- Vaughan belongs back at the big city (but away from his parents) – but he cannot leave out of concern for those precious to him (the other outcasts)

Understanding of Culture -> Construction of Identity

- Karl at first sees himself as needing protection, as his identity has only formed in the context of the asylum's culture

- Karl then understands cultural norms more, and recalls the events with the abuse of women, and finds himself as the unseen protector
- Karl was called “retarded”, “dangerous”, “suspicious”, but by Frank his identity evolved... he was treated as “father”
- Karl may not have understood where he stands on the hierarchy, but he was already firmly placed in his spot -> his sense of identity formed around the cultural view of people who are different, and specifically people who are mentally deficient

Understanding of Subjectivity -> Agency/Action

- Karl came back to the asylum, seeking asylum, because he was subject to uncomfortable staring, contempt and suspicion
- Vaughan represented as weak and vulnerable, and so he acts weak and vulnerable (encounter with Doyle, cannot defend himself or Linda as he wanted to)
- Frank and Linda’s power was heavily constrained by Doyle’s greater power (more money, friends with chief of police, threats of killing – sexual domination, though Vaughan disproves that), they could not speak back to him, and Doyle acted as if he owned the house several times.

Affect/Manipulate Culture

- Karl changed what was deemed as accepted in the context around him; he altered the view of sexual abuse and the morals (laws) people should live by

Construction of Race, Gender, Class, Ethnicity

- **Homosexual**
- Doyle: White, straight, male
- Femininity: used and abused, threats of murder

Physical Attributes -> Position

- **Mentally Disabled**
- The target of pity and belittling
- Can talk about him / insult him at his face
- Positioned lowly, in the “outcast” group of the community – where the undesirables live

Power Binaries Established, Shifted, Played Out (Context)

- **Mother/Slave**
- **Friend/Stranger/Unwanted/Simpleton/Savior**
- Charles firstly used him because of his state; he was higher power, in the abuse of women (turns around at the end)

Contexts

Asylum

- Karl: beneath the gaze of the authority, equal to those around him
- At first: the silent listener; later on, he shifts the power by rejecting that label

Streets

- Staring, treated with suspicion, pity, awkwardness
- Not quite sure of him, so regard him as unimportant

Karl and Frank

- Karl became more and more of a caring, friendly fatherly figure to Frank
- Replaced his previous father who did not think himself worthy

With Doyle

- Doyle represented absolute power
- Karl, Frank, Linda and Vaughan reduced to subjects, unable to act back and frightful of the invasion of power

Subjectivity

Karl is the creation not only of his parents and his genetics, but rather the creation of society itself. Karl would not be who he is, where he is, had not rules for where people like him were to stand in the system. For one, after murdering his mother and her lover, he wasn't sent to prison. Instead, he was sent to a mental state hospital, an insane asylum, because that is where **people like him** go. From then on, he was always a subject to the whims of those who treated him. The journalist treated him as a murderer, Doyle treated him as a pestering "it", Frank treated him as a "father" and many others simply treated him as a simpleton that should be shunned. Karl isn't any of these labels; rather, he is all of them. Karl is the culmination of the interactions and power relations established in each of these contexts throughout the movie, and that formation of his identity allowed him to understand his role in the world. The world, which he described, was "too big".

The Theory Toolbox

"There is no meaning or self that exists temporally before the law" – Karl's self was not created from his being, but from the interaction with stimuli around him. He was taught the Bible and a few mannerisms, but was never really strong at basic social expectancies. This is due to the parts of culture he was subjected to. In the asylum, he never really had to worry about interactions.

"There is no 'escape' to some place of perfect freedom where we are untouched by culture, no longer subject to our surroundings." – While Karl, Vaughan and especially Frank may want to run away to some place where they would not be judged under a label or convicted by a higher power, they are always going to be *someone*. In this community, they are outsiders, and as such they band together to form the group of outcasts, which becomes their label ("I care about each and every one of you").

Foucault

"The exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague do not bring with them the same political dream. The first is that of a pure community, the second is that of a disciplined society. Two ways of exercising power over men, of controlling their relations, of separating out their dangerous mixtures." – The community employed a strategy of the exile of the leper, in search of the pure community, free from freaks. Doyle, on the other hand, attempted to convert Linda's house into an autocratic system of the

arrest of the plague, dispersing the outcasts from his house and imposing strict control over his subjects.
Power Relations.

Outline

Solace

Niche

- The Different Contexts
 - Asylum
 - TT1
 - Street
 - Opposition to complete change of identity and role
 - Ways he is seen, wants to go back
 - Vaughan
 - Origins (Vaughan's and Karl's)
 - Abuse of women
 - Expectations, what others think of you and why that matters
 - Forms identity
 - In different contexts seen differently, fit in differently in the power scale
 - Karl : Asylum :: Vaughan : Big City
 - TT2
 - Frank
 - Fatherly
 - Shop
 - Use, niche
 - More of an equal, still lower
 - Foucault's binary
 - Transitions
 - Doyle
 - Absolute power
 - Power relations
 - Roles
 - Asylum
 - Transformation of self