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In Dreams I Walk With You: David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* as a site of Oedipal Trauma and Nostalgia

But would you kindly ponder this question: What would your good do if evil didn't exist, and what would the earth look like if all the shadows disappeared? After all, shadows are cast by things and people. Here is the shadow of my sword. But shadows also come from trees and living beings. [29:305]

Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, 1967

David Lynch has cited the 1986 *Blue Velvet* as one of his most personal films, inspired by his desire to sneak into a girl's room and inadvertently become involved in a detective story. ("Blue Velvet: An Interview With David Lynch") Appropriately then, the film's resolution, in which Jeffrey Beaumont, our protagonist, returns from his formative tenure within a seedy underworld to a blissful domestic paradise that borders on the eerie, comes directly from his dreams. Lynch states in an interview that, "this film allows a person to become a voyeur and to have an experience of a world that is hidden." (*David Lynch TV Interview 1986*) The most apparent hidden world within *Blue Velvet* is the criminal sphere that the protagonist, Jeffrey Beaumont, unearths within his bucolic home town; however, multiple layers operate within the film's larger framework, perhaps most directly the hidden dreams and desires of David Lynch himself. Though his method of drawing inspiration from his own dreams and intuition renders *Blue Velvet* a perfect candidate for psychoanalysis, Lynch himself resists all efforts, critical and otherwise, to interpret his work. Lynch privileges intuition as an artist's most valuable tool and likewise encourages audiences to enjoy his work intuitively rather than analytically. Lynch as a director strives to evoke feeling rather than prescribe meaning. ("Blue Velvet: An Interview With David Lynch"; Rodley 137) Nonetheless, audiences and critics turn primarily to psychoanalysis

as a means to interpret the sexual and violent excesses that pervade *Blue Velvet*. Many audiences, though, have found these excesses unnecessary and offensive.

Blue Velvet caused such a stir that protestors picketed outside of the theater when it opened in London. (Rodley 150) They found its portrayal of women and sexual violence misogynistic; not only casual audiences but also certain established film critics, such as Robert Ebert, found *Blue Velvet* appalling. The excessive nature of *Blue Velvet* announced itself from the moment Dennis Hopper was cast in a lead role. The actor's reputation as a drug-addled, unpredictable, violent figure preceded him and subsequently preceded *Blue Velvet* itself. Though Hopper represented the same monstrous qualities of the villainous character (Frank Booth) whom he plays in the film, in reality, the role represented a tempering of Hopper's previously wild persona. The actor had just given up drugs and alcohol and achieved his frenetic performance thanks to adrenaline and David Lynch's enthusiastic directing style, rather than with the aid of intoxicants (Olson). Just as this newfound sobriety imbued Dennis Hopper's performance with an intriguing nuance for contemporary audiences, the characters within the world of *Blue Velvet* also present audiences with deeply nuanced representations of gender, sexuality, and violence. It does this by exploring both its characters' psychological depths and the cultural codes of gender to which they either adhere or fail to adhere.

Sigmund Freud would find great interest in *Blue Velvet*, which was assembled from its creator's daydreams and miscellaneous fantasies. David Lynch doesn't even try to pretend the film isn't personal; he admits that he identifies with the young Kyle MacLachlan, an unsurprising connection even aesthetically, considering the Lynchian suit and tie the boy dons throughout the film. The film, in addition to being constructed in a dream-like fashion, is surreal in itself. Freudian imagery and symbolism pervade the landscape, and the Oedipal complex that

Freud outlines in *The Interpretation of Dreams* populates its narrative structure. This Oedipal structure is doubled, with our protagonist, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) at its center. The narrative follows Jeffrey on a journey from his 50s era, small-town home, through a subversive, violent underworld, and ultimately returns him safely to the world of paternal law and order. Jeffrey enacts his Oedipal drama in the underworld before returning to his home a fully realized man, who has internalized the trauma associated with growing up. In this way, the film is a bildungsroman; yet, *Blue Velvet* is not about growing up so much as it is about the tragedy of being unable to return to a harmonious and innocent time prior to adulthood.

Psychoanalytic theorists such as Lacan and Freud postulate that the experience of growing up inflicts considerable trauma upon a child's psyche, from the mirror stage which occurs as an infant to as late as the onset of puberty and the exploration of one's sexuality. This trauma is necessary to discover sexual difference and also to learn about gender roles and performance of gender. As *Blue Velvet*'s masculine protagonist and hero, Jeffrey Beaumont, enters adulthood, he participates in traditional patterns of homosocial behavior and receives traditionally gendered sexual rewards. This privileging of the male protagonist is due to his position as not only a male, but a male who harkens from the film's patriarchal sphere. *Blue Velvet* is populated by, on one hand, inhabitants of Jeffrey's all-American hometown, who repress their trauma and who successfully participate in their prescribed roles of adulthood; and on the other hand, inhabitants of the chaotic underworld, who fail to perform their cultural and gender roles due to an excess of trauma that they reflexively re-enact on a constant basis.

The unusual aspect of *Blue Velvet*'s Oedipal resemblances is the duality of two family structures. Jeffrey cannot enact his growing up ritual within the ordered world that he calls home because it involves activities and emotions which are taboo in this seemingly safe small town.

The underworld where he ventures is broken, yet only here can the boy participate in the Oedipal drama necessary in order for him to reach adulthood. *Blue Velvet* suggests that to successfully become an adult member of society, a person must both undergo a traumatic, Freudian sexual awakening and also learn to suppress that trauma and perform their culturally prescribed gender; in its distinction between worlds, it offers a critique of the repressed, patriarchal sphere to which Jeffrey belongs. This critique occurs most noticeably in the fluidity of gender roles present within the underworld. Though much of the film is encoded with traditional gender roles, David Lynch operates within these roles to challenge them, blurring the lines of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. Especially the film's subversive characters— Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper) and Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini)— challenge their prescribed gender roles. At times, they perform their gender to excess, and at other times, their guard falls and their performance becomes androgynous. The excessive violence, sexuality, and melodrama that characterizes their relationships causes them to break gender binaries and challenge cultural notions of patriarchy.

I will unpack the Freudian, mainly Oedipal traces within *Blue Velvet's* plot by analyzing Jeffrey's relationship with each of the main characters of *Blue Velvet*. These relationships reveal the psychological undercurrents of Jeffrey's sexual and individual maturation, a maturation that results in trauma that he must learn to suppress in order to return to his patriarchal home. Laura Mulvey's analysis of cinema and of *Blue Velvet* specifically will offer insight at certain points to reveal how certain characters either fulfill their culturally prescribed gender roles or challenge them, and Linda Williams' theory of excess in cinema will also help unpack how *Blue Velvet* challenges gender roles through its varied use of genre convention. Finally, an inspection of key images and songs that recur throughout the film will reinforce the themes of nostalgia,

destruction, and rebirth. These motifs emphasize the idea that trauma is both transformative and in certain cases, productive.

Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" outlines a feminist psychoanalytical system by which to analyze the production and reception of film. Mulvey argues that conventional cinematography privileges identification with a male gendered protagonist and casts female characters as objects whose value consists only in being gazed upon. Mulvey terms this male gaze as scopophilia, which is the pleasure in looking at an object that the viewer wishes to possess sexually. The inverse of scopophilia is exhibitionism, which is pleasure in being looked at; this manifests in Mulvey's theory through narcissistic scopophilia, or the audience member's identification with the masculine protagonist who both drives the film's narrative and who will be rewarded with possession of the female object at the end of the film. The cinematically privileged male results from a phallogocentric system, which in Lacan's terms relegates women to exist only as representations of male castration anxiety. The mother bears meaning only as lack and as the vehicle by which men mature into the symbolic order of language and law: nothing more. Mulvey points to the formal elements of cinema to illustrate the presence of the active or male and passive or female dichotomy. First, the audience assumes a voyeuristic point of view which allows them to enjoy looking at the female object through the male protagonist's point-of-view while remaining separate from the action of the film. Second, the male gaze manifests in gendered shots that often portray the protagonist in the foreground of the shot, on the edge of the screen, while he looks at the female who is placed in the shot's center. Additionally, the seductively slow and fragmented way in which female objects of desire are often filmed from the feet upwards is a frequent cinematic technique.

It is relevant to note that in her 1996 book *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Laura Mulvey discusses *Blue Velvet* as a site of the Oedipal myth. She explains how Lynch takes advantage of the cinematic form and psychoanalytical imagery to imbue *Blue Velvet* with an implicit Freudian subtext and also explores the ways in which these elements contribute to the creation of a surreal cinematic world. This world allows for what she terms a “narrative topological structure,” or a manifestation of the film’s themes in its physical settings. Specifically, the opposing small town community of Lumberton and the criminal underworld respectively represent the social order and rationality and its underlying, repressed subconscious irrationality. Mulvey pays special attention to patriarchal structures and depictions of motherhood at work within the film. She also includes a general analysis of the Oedipal myth, in which she argues that Oedipus’ clever defeat of the Sphinx signals a symbolic end of the “fatherhood era.” Once Oedipus’ individual reasoning trumps the ancient tradition of the Sphinx’s riddle, he becomes an Enlightenment figure who stands on the threshold of superstition and rationality— just as Jeffrey moves across the thresholds of various mother and father figures throughout *Blue Velvet*.

Linda Williams, in her 1991 essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” takes up the issue of gendered spectatorship in cinema that Laura Mulvey and Teresa de Lauretis both address. Rather than wishing to deconstruct this dynamic, Williams finds it useful to study the cinematic apparatus as a site of gender construction and representation. She claims that by looking at perversion as depicted in cinema, it is possible to determine a culture’s prominent sexual and gender identity issues; sometimes, these problems even provide their own solutions through fantastical narratives. She turns to perversion as a means of cultural analysis rather than a necessarily alienating trait, citing Freud in her claim that all people are in some way perverse. For her analysis, Williams looks at body genres, which are defined as genres that elicit a physical

reaction from the viewer: namely, pornography, horror, and melodrama. These genres are often dismissed as problematic and/or inconsequential art forms, yet she finds them useful for the very same reasons for which scholars usually dismiss them; they are often considered excessive in both their manipulation of the audience and in their gendered coding which often reinforces, rather than challenges, gender stereotypes.

Within her overview of pornography, horror, and melodrama as film genres, Williams discusses the traditional gendered coding of each. Traditionally, pornography is produced for heterosexual male audiences and depicts sadistic acts; horror is produced for an adolescent, or androgynous audience and depicts sadomasochistic action; and melodrama is produced for female audiences and depicts masochistic narratives (in that they dwell upon personal loss). Williams notes that as film evolves, gender fluidity becomes greater among these genres. This gender fluidity has progressed in leaps and bounds since she wrote this essay in 1991, but at the time that *Blue Velvet* was released in 1986, audiences may have just begun to notice more flexibility in film's traditional gender narratives— particularly body genres.

Blue Velvet is not any one body genre, but it certainly represents aspects of all three genres that Williams' outlines in her essay. David Lynch imbues the film with qualities of pornography, horror, and melodrama, yet never allows his narrative to completely fall in any one of these three categories. The three body genres mingle, confusing not only the genre of the film, but also the gender roles of the characters within, and the spectatorship of, *Blue Velvet*. This confusion indicates that the world of this film is inherently unstable. This instability indicates an attempt to challenge the status quo. Many of Lynch's characters adhere to gendered cinematic tropes and Freudian dynamics in a way that many feminists might find problematic. Yet, Lynch's blurring of genre and gender implies a world of possibility for his characters as individuals. *Blue*

Velvet's inclusion of cinematic tropes and gender stereotypes offers a superstructure within which the film challenges existing notions of gender and sexuality.

Blue Velvet opens with the collapse of Jeffrey's father, Mr. Beaumont. He is absent from the rest of the film, save for Jeffrey's sudden coming-of-age that we suspect may result from the trauma of his father's ill health. On his way home from visiting his father in the hospital, Jeffrey discovers a severed human ear in a field. The camera zooms to give the viewer the illusion of entering the ear; at the conclusion of the film, we will zoom back out of Jeffrey's ear, to signal the end of our journey through his psyche. Upon finding the insect-covered body part, Jeffrey presents it to Detective Williams, who will become one of his two surrogate fathers throughout the film and his source of his homosocial bonding. Jeffrey forms a relationship with Detective Williams' daughter, Sandy, who helps Jeffrey gain access to the strange world surrounding the severed ear and who accompanies him throughout the film. Jeffrey also forms a relationship with Dorothy Vallens, the woman whose apartment he invades in order to seek clues pertaining to the ear. Dorothy arrives home while he is present, so he hides in a closet and observes her while she undresses and speaks on the telephone. She discovers him in the closet and, excited by what she perceives as voyeurism, seduces him. A knock at the door signals Jeffrey's return to the closet where Dorothy hides him before engaging in sadomasochistic sex with her visitor, Frank, who will become Jeffrey's second surrogate father and represent competition between father and son. During one of the most notable scenes in *Blue Velvet*, the closeted Jeffrey witnesses Frank's use of nitrous oxide, which aids him in a regression to infancy as he rapes Dorothy. After Frank leaves, Dorothy once again seduces Jeffrey, but he leaves once she begs him to hit her. Jeffrey proceeds to spend much of the film developing his relationships with both Sandy and Dorothy while spying on Frank and his cronies, who include the Well-Dressed Man and the Yellow Man.

Eventually Frank discovers Jeffrey and takes him “for a ride,” in which Frank, Dorothy, Jeffrey, and some of Frank’s friends visit an apartment where Dorothy’s husband, Don, and son, Donnie, are held. On the way home, Jeffrey defends Dorothy from Frank’s abuse and in return, Frank assaults Jeffrey, kissing him violently, beating him, and leaving him on the side of the road. When Jeffrey relates his findings to Detective Williams, he is told to halt his amateur investigation for his own sake, yet it is too late for Jeffrey to withdraw from Dorothy and Frank’s bizarre world. Ever-faithful resident of Lumberton, U.S.A., he does find the time to attend a high school dance with Sandy. After the dance, they are pursued to her house by her jealous jock boyfriend; the altercation is cut short when Dorothy appears naked, abject, on Sandy’s front lawn and collapses into Jeffrey’s arms. The appearance of Dorothy in the Williams’ home spurs both police involvement and the resolution of the narrative. After Dorothy is taken to the hospital, Jeffrey rushes to her apartment, where he discovers the dead Don and the lobotomized Yellow Man. Jeffrey takes the Yellow Man’s gun and hides in the same closet from which he initially spied on Dorothy and Frank, and shoots Frank in the face after he enters, killing him. Detective Williams and Sandy rush into the room, Jeffrey greets them, and the film’s conflict is resolved. The final shots of *Blue Velvet*, after zooming out of Jeffrey’s ear, show Jeffrey at home with Sandy and their female relatives and then finally, Dorothy reunited with her son, Donnie.

Though a summary of *Blue Velvet*’s plot structure is helpful, it is impossible to explain the film in words alone. Due to its psychological, dream-like nature, the film is imbued with nonverbal or affective signals, such as music, which is one of the film’s most integral motifs. Two songs in particular appear throughout the film: Bobby Vinton’s “Blue Velvet,” from which the film takes its name, and Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams.” The opening credits display a blue velvet background as the song “Blue Velvet” plays. Without any prior knowledge of the film’s

plot, an audience member's first experience of *Blue Velvet* would grant them little surprise; both the song and the imagery echo the movie's title. The visualization of the rippling, glistening material on screen in conjunction with the slow, crooning song creates an auditory and tactile sensory experience that would serve to heighten audience members' anticipation to see the film, and more specifically, to see the woman who wears the blue velvet. To a contemporary audience, the ballad would be familiar, much like Dorothy's blue velvet robe is an item of comfort to Frank, or a womb is familiar to an infant. The audience is born into the strange world of *Blue Velvet* from this culturally resonant, identifiable psychic place. This familiarity even extends to the self-consciously cinematic trope present in this opening. Lynch has said that

... film is really voyeurism. You sit there in the safety of the theatre, and seeing is such a powerful thing. And we want to see secret things, we *really* wanna see them. New things. It drives you *nuts*, you know! And the more new and secret they are, the more we wanna see them. (Rodley 145)

Blue Velvet's opening pulls us into the narrative through an almost parodic use of the trope of cinematic spectatorship as voyeurism. Yet, spectatorship as voyeuristic is so inherent to traditional cinema that the opening does not feel contrived. Before the opening credits finish rolling, *Blue Velvet* has already undermined our experience of cinema; the dream-like, nostalgic voice of Bobby Vinton acts as a host to beckon the audience to enter the alluring and mysterious world which the shimmering velvet acts like a curtain to obscure.

The lyrics of "Blue Velvet" describe a male gaze. In them, Bobby Vinton grants us an impressionistic account of a woman's appearance and the way she feels in his arms, an account completely generic save for the color and material that identifies her: "She wore blue velvet/ Bluer than velvet was the night/ Softer than satin was the light/ From the stars." ("Blue Velvet")

The lyrics, illustrating the object of a male gaze, invite the viewer to share in the singer's memories. The conflation of these memories with Lynch's film suggest the existence of a community formed around these generic, heteronormative sentiments, granting Vinton access to participate in Lynch's narrative via homosocial understanding. It is this same homosocial access card that is offered to the audience of *Blue Velvet* in its opening credits; entrance to the film's world begins with the caveat that the audience share in viewing the woman in blue velvet and think about touching her. Finally, the lyrics provide a Freudian element to Vinton's meditations on the mysterious woman. The lines, "But in my heart there'll always be/ Precious and warm, a memory/ Through the years," suggests womb imagery and grants the song Oedipal traces. Consistent with the masculine access point granted to the audience from the film's opening credits, throughout the rest of *Blue Velvet*, music consistently signifies moments of extreme masculinity, aggression, or violence.

Already, gender constructs begin to blur. Though the song "Blue Velvet" has lyrics that invite the listener to join a masculine, heteronormative point of view, the song itself is effeminate. Not only is Bobby Vinton's voice somewhat androgynous and not only is the song's melodic, soft sound indicative of femininity, but its lyrics fall neatly into the category of melodrama, as Linda Williams defines it: the expression of sorrow after losing something or someone irreplaceable. Not only its nostalgic lyrics, but the music itself expresses a longing for the past in its 50s-era, crooning, pre-80s rock innocence. Though spectators enter the world of *Blue Velvet* through a heterosexual, male point of view, they do so through a feminine access point.

Once the opening credits end and Jeffrey appears on screen, the audience is meant to latch onto him as a consciousness through which to satiate the scopophilic hunger that has been

piqued by Bobby Vinton. Though “Blue Velvet” constructs the film’s symbolic framework, it is mainly associated with Dorothy’s character throughout the film; she exhibits her femininity when she sings it in what appears to be a self-reflective narrative tool. Roy Orbison’s “In Dreams,” on the other hand, accompanies Jeffrey during more intimate moments throughout the film. Lynch did not initially plan on including the song, but upon hearing it immediately determined to use it, claiming that “‘In Dreams’ explained to me so much of what the film was all about.” (Rodley 137) The cheery music juxtaposed over lyrics that echo the masculine scopophilic and Freudian elements we noticed in “Blue Velvet” put us inside Jeffrey’s head: “In dreams I walk with you/ In dreams I talk to you/ In dreams you’re mine all the time/ We’re together in dreams, in dreams.” (“In Dreams”) The desire to not only accompany, but possess, a woman who remains unnamed in both songs, suggests the female as the object or unattainable reward.

In the Freudian landscape of *Blue Velvet*, dreams are more reliable indicators of meaning than actual events. Likewise, the spectator will identify with Jeffrey most intimately in moments where he or she is granted omniscient access to his inner memories, daydreams and visualizations. Like “Blue Velvet,” “In Dreams” is also a nostalgic, melodramatic, and definitively non-masculine. By imbuing the protagonist’s consciousness with such effeminate motifs, Lynch grants his audience emotional intimacy with the male hero, completely upending the stereotype of the masculine hero who either conceals his sentimentality altogether, or only reveals a hint of sentimentality near the climax of the narrative. The audience of *Blue Velvet* is granted a fuller experience of Jeffrey’s consciousness which challenges the cultural construct of masculinity. Often throughout the film, “In Dreams” is heard in communion with Jeffrey’s inner thoughts, daydreams, or desires, strengthening the bond that the audience feels with Jeffrey.

Jeffrey's daydreams often occur when he is walking alone at night along the sidewalks of his neighborhood, the familiar darkness of which symbolizes the boy's unconscious, where the majority of the film takes place. Though the camera brings the audience into the severed ear that Jeffrey discovers, this vital framing scene takes place in Jeffrey's imagination rather than his physical surroundings, bringing us into the ear as it is seen in his imagination. Because the film implies that the narrative takes place in Jeffrey's unconscious, moments that grant access to his inner thoughts bring the spectator closer to a narrative core than the actual action of the film. It is in these intimate, imaginary moments that we witness Jeffrey's internalization of the darkness that he must process in order to reach adulthood, a theme present in *Blue Velvet* thanks to the influence of film noir. (Mulvey "Netherworlds and the Unconscious") Examples of Jeffrey's meditative maturation include his visualization of the primal scene he witnesses between Frank and Dorothy and also the vulnerable moment when we witness his sobs as he recalls hitting Dorothy. We exit the ear only once the surreal, dark action of the film has concluded; appropriately, the ear we exit is Jeffrey's actual ear, signifying that he has assumed the adult identity that previously he could only imagine.

Before he initially breaks into Dorothy's apartment, Jeffrey says to Sandy, "there are opportunities in life for gaining knowledge and experience. Sometimes, it's necessary to take a risk... I bet someone could learn a lot by getting into that woman's apartment. Sneak in, hide, and observe." (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Jeffrey's motivation for engaging in his bizarre adventure is curiosity and a desire to mature. Detective Williams initiates Jeffrey into this adventure when they first speak about detective work and Williams tells him, "[Curiosity is] what got me into this business, too." (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) This moment of homosocial bonding creates a kinship bond between Williams and Jeffrey, as the detective reminisces about his own adolescence and

ushers Jeffrey into contemplations of adulthood. Jeffrey, who for practical purposes has lost his father, has no choice but to grow up; it is the sudden void where his father once stood that leaves him with the choice of paternal figures. His immediate reaction upon finding the severed ear is to bring it to Detective Williams, a figure of law who acts as a surrogate father to Jeffrey throughout the film. Yet, Jeffrey ultimately navigates his way from childhood to adulthood without heeding the detective's fatherly advice that would have him cease involvement with Dorothy and Frank. Though Jeffrey ends up with Detective Williams' daughter at the end of the film, it is Frank whom he destroys in an Oedipal fashion.

Like Oedipus, who defeats the Sphinx with only his own wit rather than the help of tradition, Jeffrey Beaumont operates without a father, jumping between rational and irrational worlds and surrogate fathers. Frank also claims kinship bonds to Jeffrey, though unlike Detective Williams, Frank's relationship with Jeffrey embodies Freudian competition. When they are in the car, Frank glances in the rear view mirror, catches Jeffrey's eye and asks, "What are you looking at?" When Jeffrey responds, "Nothing," Frank cryptically says, "You're like me." (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) For Frank, unlike Detective Williams, Jeffrey's presence is a threat, a literal Oedipal nightmare. Jeffrey is not similar to Frank in any way except that they both need Dorothy as a source of maternal protection and sexual release. While Detective Williams holds the masculine power of law, language, and the symbolic order, Frank's masculinity exists only superficially within the irrational criminal underworld he inhabits.

Frank's masculinity is manifested in purely physical ways throughout *Blue Velvet*, mainly through violence that he inflicts upon Dorothy and Jeffrey. When Frank, Jeffrey, Dorothy, and their group are ready to depart from "Pussy Heaven," as Frank calls it, the apartment where Dorothy's husband and son are held, Frank shouts "Let's go!" At that moment

the group disappears from the room as if by magic. It's a shot that a viewer could easily miss, because a moment later the film cuts to the next scene; however, for a split second, the actors have vanished from the set. This subtle taste of the dreamlike reminds us that Frank's world is one of irrationality. His brute strength and violence is useless in a surreal landscape where the laws of physical matter don't necessarily exist. Like this world is a fantastic dream-state created for the sake of the film, Frank's brutish aggression is a constructed representation of masculinity—the idea of gender as tied to sexuality taken to excess, as expressed in his exclamation that "I'll fuck anything that moves!" (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*)

One aspect of the dark underworld which Frank and his cronies inhabit and from which Jeffrey and Dorothy escape is a conflation of sex and love with violence. This conflation is not only implicit within the film's themes, but Frank makes it an explicit rule in his aggressive speech to Jeffrey. Before leaving the boy unconscious and beaten by the side of a dark road, he snarls, "You know what a love letter is? It's a bullet from a fucking gun, fucker! You receive a love letter from me, you're fucked forever! You understand, fuck? I'll send you straight to hell, fucker!" (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) The dialogue here takes liberal use of the colloquial double meaning of the word "fuck"— it can imply rape or nonsexual assault, and fitting with the homoerotic nature of Frank's assault upon Jeffrey, we cannot decipher which meaning he intends. Consistent with his excessive, hyper-sexualized, hyper-violent world, we can assume both meanings.

This scene, when Frank pulls over to the side of the road and assaults Jeffrey, is a performative moment during which Frank exhibits hyper-masculine behavior while also betraying effeminate characteristics and homosexual tension. His display of aggression contrasts with the unusual behavior of one of the unnamed women from Pussy Heaven, who dances on the

roof of Frank's car for the duration of this scene. She is ignored by the other characters who are occupied by the scene unfolding between Frank and Jeffrey. Her carefree yet stiff dance, which persists throughout the scene, represents a rote feminine performance that is inscribed into her behavior. Her dance imbues the scene with an eerie quality produced by more than just the fact that she dances while a boy is beaten; the song to which she dances is, presumably, not actually playing in the world of the movie. Why dance on the roof of a car without an audience and without a song? She is already a generic, expendable character. This bizarre behavior causes us to write her off as something broken—a female so stuck in her performative female-ness that she mechanically reproduces gendered behavior even without a proper cue or a purpose.

In contrast to the rooftop dance that occurs in the background of the scene, Frank himself signifies a more complicated relationship between gender, sex, and violence. Frank's assault is necessitated when Jeffrey challenges his dominance in the car and is the first Oedipally charged altercation between the two characters. Frank inhales his nitrous oxide and begins to whine and fondle Dorothy. Jeffrey punches Frank and yells, "Leave her alone!" (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Maybe watching this sadistic sexual behavior has finally reached critical mass with Jeffrey—or maybe he feels the need to intervene this time, as opposed to last time when he watched from the closet, because he is surrounded by onlookers who he wants to impress. Jeffrey's chivalric defense of Dorothy occurs due to the presence of an audience. The urge to protect may be genuine, yet the act of protection can only occur in the public, when it takes on a performative nature. Similarly, Frank must respond violently in order to uphold his position as the dominant male within his group.

A closer look at the Oedipal traces within this scene suggest alternative interpretations of its significance. First, consider the fact that this is a story told from Jeffrey's point of view; the

narrative not only privileges him as the protagonist and hero, but it is suggested that most of the film takes place inside his imagination. Though Frank and Dorothy's sexual interactions appear sado-masochistic, it is possible that this violence is a narrative tool utilized to illustrate the traumatic experience of a child witnessing his parents copulating. The source of Oedipal conflict within the male child results not only from jealousy of the father, but also from the desire to protect the mother from what appears to be a violent assault. Just like the woman dances on the car's rooftop to music that only we (the audience) can hear, perhaps Dorothy and Frank engage in perfectly average sex that only we (through Jeffrey's point of view) witness as brutal. To extend this hypothesis for the duration of the film would be to destabilize most of its thematic and narrative content, but from a Freudian analytical point of view, it is a significant possibility to consider.

Second, though it is possible that Jeffrey intervenes in the car and does not intervene in Dorothy's apartment due to the public versus private nature of each scene, or it is possible that he intervenes now simply because the violence has become too much for him to bear, a third possibility arises and seems the most likely of the three— that he can only participate in an Oedipal conflict with Frank once Frank has accepted him as a (symbolic) son. This conflict occurs just a moment after Frank glares at Jeffrey in the rear-view mirror and growls "You're like me," a provisional acceptance from the father figure Jeffrey requires for the sole purpose of enacting his Oedipal drama. In this way, although Frank beats Jeffrey, insults him, humiliates him, and leaves him unconscious on the side of the road, the interaction is also a bizarre initiation rite. Monstrous Frank hits the boy, tells him "Don't be a good neighbor to her [Dorothy]" (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*), but is really saying, "Welcome to the family, son. Buckle up." The intimacy between these two characters is symbolized by the red lipstick which Frank rubs on

his lips before kissing Jeffrey all over the face; though the gesture is intended to intimidate Jeffrey, it leaves them both marked with an uncanny, homoerotic signifier of violence. Frank then rubs the blue velvet material on Jeffrey's face, symbolizing their shared desire for the same woman and more generally, their shared Oedipal mother issues. Frank aggressively delivers significations of love, sex, and violence in this interaction, all of which are conflated and blurred together.

Echoes of Frank's speech to Jeffrey ("You know what a love letter is? It's a bullet from a fucking gun, fucker! You receive a love letter from me, you're fucked forever! You understand, fuck? I'll send you straight to hell, fucker!") follow us to the end of the film, when Jeffrey enters Dorothy's apartment for the final time to discover the lobotomized man in the yellow suit and Dorothy's dead, ear-less husband. This, the most bloody, violent, and disturbing scene in the film, is accompanied by a tender love ballad. Unlike Jeffrey's thematic songs, "Blue Velvet" and "In Dreams," the musical theme that echoes Frank does not grant us access to his sentimentality, but rather reminds us of his earlier violence. The horrific scene is juxtaposed with a nostalgic hit song from 1962, Ketty Lester's "Love Letters." The singer's crooning lyrics savor the lyrics: "Love letters straight from your heart— keep us so near while apart." The incongruity in tone is dramatic in effect, and ominous: we hear the song in Frank's absence, while observing the consequences of his hyper-masculine, monstrous violence. Rather than inviting us to access his inner life, the song shadows his physical presence. Frank and Ketty Lester both declare their undying love— Frank's love, though, is inseparable from brutal violence.

Through Frank's uber-masculine, outrageous personality is cartoonish, he is a complex, psychologically believable character. Though the audience is not granted explicit access to his thoughts or feelings, Frank participates in the gender-blurring present throughout the film in

different ways. At some point, Frank participates in each of the three gendered body genres that Linda Williams outlines. Frank primarily appears to be a sadist. He embodies the masculine perpetrator of pornography and the unredeemable monster of horror in his senseless brutalization of Dorothy and Jeffrey. Yet, Frank not only inflicts pain and punishment, but at certain points becomes the unwilling, passive site of sensation himself. The most obvious examples of this are his dependence upon nitrous oxide to engage in sexual activity and also the infantile behavior he exhibits during these times. Also, though, at a few subtly placed moments throughout the film, Frank displays some gender fluidity, and becomes a subject in the body genre we would least expect: the melodrama. These moments are always prompted by music. Like the savage beast, Frank only begins to approach a sympathetic character when music plays: he sits inside The Slow Club, watches Dorothy sing, fondles a piece of her blue velvet dressing gown, and cries to himself. At this moment, the audience can (almost) imagine he has a heart— or at least, that he has lost something of utmost value. Frank Booth may be a sociopath, but he very well may be a product of a traumatic past, himself. Frank is, by no means, a forgivable character. He is, though, a believable person in that he has vulnerabilities. Through its complex portrayal of a cruel masculine character, *Blue Velvet* pushes against gender stereotypes and also portrays trauma as self-perpetuating.

Dorothy plays a maternal role to both Frank and Jeffrey. In the famous scene when Jeffrey witnesses her rape from the closet, she unintentionally protects infantile Jeffrey from witnessing the primal scene for a moment. As Frank descends into infancy and irrationality, the camera pans behind Dorothy's head, for a second darkening the shot and obscuring Frank while he breathes from his mask. The scene portrays Dorothy as at her most vulnerable yet still capable of maternal protection; she is the ultimate Oedipal mother, subordinate yet endlessly capable of

mothering. Dorothy's femininity embodies Mulvey's description of the female role in patriarchal society: "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the female other, bound by symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning." ("Visual Pleasure" 2084-5) Dorothy Vallen's femininity is the axis around which the criminal underworld of *Blue Velvet* revolves. Though Frank's violence renders him brutally dangerous, he is dependent upon her maternal strength. Frank, who "... stands in polarized opposition to the Law, culture, the Symbolic order and, to all intents and purposes, verbal language" (Mulvey "Netherworlds" 143) exists in a world that like him, is opposed to rationality. This surreal, chaotic, and villainous world is also ultimately ruled by the feminine maternal. It stands in direct opposition to the rational, good, and masculine-coded small-town world over which Detective Williams presides.

In his demise, though, Frank himself is emasculated by Jeffrey. Like the archaic Sphinx who is defeated by Oedipus' ability to think for himself, Frank falls prey to a clever trick. Jeffrey hides a police radio in Dorothy's bedroom and conceals himself in the same closet from which he initially spied on Frank. When Frank rushes into the apartment and hears noise from the bedroom, he berates like an abusive father: "You shit for brains, man, you forgot I have a police radio. Here I come, ready or not." (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Already fantasizing about defeating Jeffrey in the innermost Oedipal sanctum, Frank does not consider that Jeffrey has outsmarted him. He also does not consider that Jeffrey might, in reality, have no interest in completing the Oedipal battle in this inner sanctum, the bedroom where the son would consummate with the mother; rather, Jeffrey waits to defeat Frank at the threshold of Dorothy's womb-like apartment,

where he can put Frank in his rightful place, destroy him, and then return victorious to the masculine, ordered world from whence he came.

Why would Jeffrey engage in such an intense Oedipal dynamic with Frank and Dorothy when he ultimately has no intention of possessing Dorothy or of assuming his earned patriarchal role in their world? Perhaps it is only in this subversive, chaotic space that Jeffrey can act upon his forbidden desires that are necessary to his maturation. Dorothy initiates Jeffrey to the dark truths of adulthood and her subsequent disappearance from his life fulfills her two functions as woman as per Mulvey:

The function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolizes the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby reassess her child into the symbolic. Once this has been achieved, her meaning in the process is at an end. It does not last into the world of law and language except as memory of lack.

(“Visual Pleasure” 2084)

Though Jeffrey murders Frank to save Dorothy, he also assumes Donnie’s (Dorothy’s son’s) role in the young boy’s own Oedipal drama through his actions that lead to the subsequent death of Don, Donnie’s father and Dorothy’s husband. Jeffrey completes Donnie’s Oedipal dirty work for him, strengthening another homosocial bond that exists even without Jeffrey and Donnie ever having to meet. Like Oedipus, who does not recognize the significance of killing Laius until it is too late, Jeffrey also does not understand the full significance of finding Don’s severed ear until after the fact. Unlike Oedipus, however, Jeffrey is not doomed because he exercises his repressed desires in a fantasy environment. Jeffrey travels through this Freudian-coded, surreal underworld to become an adult. Memories are all that he takes with him once he escapes: memories like the ones Roy Orbison remembers in “In Dreams.”

Blue Velvet's resolution occurs soon after the moment when Jeffrey's two worlds—his two women— accidentally collide. When Dorothy invades Sandy's front lawn, she is naked, hurt, and vulnerable. Barely conscious, she asks, "Is that you, Jeffrey?" (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) and collapses into his arms. Throughout most of the film, Dorothy is sexually charged; yet, here she appears bearing bruises from her brutalization. Dorothy Vallens achieves a feat rare in cinema: the portrayal of a nude female body as representative not of sex, but abjection: the transformative power of abuse. Dorothy can never revert to the glamorous singer she once was or could have been. Her bruised body and her disoriented demeanor in this scene signify that she will forever be haunted by violence— much like Frank's evilness very well may be the result of his own internalized trauma. Yet, doll-like, Dorothy still dons her wig, refusing to submit to complete vulnerability or a complete deconstruction of her femininity.

In this scene, the female form takes on significance as a site of horrific violence— violence that transcends gender. In a scene that could be described as the intersection of all three body genres: pornography (nude), horror (bruises, monstrous appearance), and melodrama (she collapses into Jeffrey's arms), suddenly the film ceases to elicit any bodily reaction whatsoever. Genre itself is excessive at this moment; due to an overwhelming influx of signification, Dorothy's body ceases to act as a bearer of meaning, and instead becomes a maker of meaning. We cannot categorize that meaning into any established cinematic trope. Neither can the other characters within the film; this confusion causes Sandy's jock boyfriend and his cronies to run away, Sandy herself to cry, and Jeffrey to stand, awkward, as Dorothy embraces him. Naked Dorothy stumbling across the lawn is a signifier lost in the wrong symbolic system, a bug from beneath a rock. For Jeffrey, that bug is his secret sexual partner, or as Dorothy calls him, "My secret love." (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Her unbidden appearance and intrusion into his world

necessitates the end of this bizarre double life that Jeffrey has been leading. Like Frank's reflexive assault on Jeffrey that occurs once Jeffrey steps out of line in the car, Jeffrey himself must put an end to his involvement with this subversive world— nay, an end to the subversive world itself— once it interferes with his “real” life. In this sense, Jeffrey is not very different from Frank; he ultimately is the one to send Frank a “love letter” in the form of a bullet through the head.

Sandy, the real girl, watches in confusion as Dorothy enters Jeffrey's embrace and is placed in his car's passenger seat that she herself occupied just a moment ago. Reacting to the situation appropriately, as daughter of the law, Sandy tells Jeffrey, “Take her to my house, my father can get an ambulance faster than anyone.” (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Once inside the Williams' house, Dorothy cries, “My secret love!” (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) and clings to Jeffrey, revealing their relationship to the horrified Sandy. Sandy slaps Jeffrey, a clichéd feminine display of anger, yet immediately after this scene she tells him on the phone, “You lied to me... I forgive you Jeffrey. I love you. I love you. I couldn't watch that. Is she ok?” (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Dorothy never asks Jeffrey for a fuller explanation and he does not offer one. The transgression, which by usual standards would be considered huge, is forgiven instantly and completely. After Jeffrey kills Frank, he and Sandy embrace in the hallway. The hero, Jeffrey, gets his reward, the angelic girl.

Sandy first appears in *Blue Velvet* as if by magic. Almost like an apparition, she emerges slowly from the darkness outside her father's house, accompanied by slow music and a whooshing sound. In an uncanny, erotic, and almost unnerving arrival into Jeffrey's and the audience's consciousness, she approaches aggressively. Despite the fact that she is a woman, and a naïve girl at that, thanks to her father Sandy has the privilege of knowledge that gives her an

initial, albeit brief, upper-hand in her relationship with Jeffrey. Initially, Sandy doesn't even intend to become Jeffrey's girlfriend, but instead coyly spends time with him while maintaining her relationship with a football player. True to cinematic trope, though, Sandy and Jeffrey fall in love. This romance is necessitated not only by their location in the cinema, but also by their location within a patriarchal, heteronormative sphere. Each character sticks to their prescribed gender script in the relationship: Sandy wears more feminine dress, reveals more collar bone, and shyly glances at Jeffrey more each time they meet, while nonplussed Jeffrey plays it cool and dutifully keeps his double life hidden from his sidekick girlfriend. Although Sandy enters the relationship with a slight upper hand, Jeffrey quickly seizes power from her as he matures into adulthood and the well of her knowledge runs dry. Sandy merely leads him to Dorothy, who literally and figuratively makes him the man he must be before he can take possession of the innocent and more suitable girl.

Just as Jeffrey is not required to offer an explanation of his questionable extracurricular activities to Sandy, he also never offers explanations to the other women in his life. His aunt and mother are portrayed as concerned maternal figures, yet also idle homebodies. Though they are always seen together, they are never portrayed in conversation or within close proximity of one another. They exist on opposite ends of a couch, or on opposite sides of a table, doomed to eternally watch Jeffrey's comings-and-goings with no efficacy to protect or teach him. In one scene, their television shows a shot of a man's legs walking up stairs while Jeffrey himself walks up the stairs in front of them. The fragmentation they view on television is not erotic fragmentation of the sort Mulvey describes, but rather, exclusionary fragmentation that illustrates the displaced and incomplete glimpses they are granted of Jeffrey's activities. In another scene, Jeffrey sees them at the breakfast table after he has been beat up by Frank. Before either of them

can say anything, he responds to their concerned gaze by saying, “I don’t want to talk about it.” When they gently continue to express concern, he softly threatens them with violence veiled through humor: “Aunt Barbara, I love you, but you’re gonna get it.” (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Obviously, Jeffrey doesn’t mean that he will literally assault his aunt, but the joke carries more weight when the marks of physical confrontation are evident on his body. He is marked with the violence that he has been in the process of internalizing throughout the movie up to this point, and also he betrays marks of inherited violence. Jeffrey is no longer under the jurisdiction of the home, the law, or his original maternal figures. Jeffrey has travelled to a dark, parallel universe where sex and violence have switched places. He cannot admit to the people in the daylight realm that the marks of violence upon his body are the result of a sexual conquest, especially when the literal violence that left marks upon his body was enacted in such a homoerotic fashion. Just as he wouldn’t tell them if he were raped by Frank (which Lynch originally intended to include), he also can’t tell them the circumstances surrounding his black eye.

When Jeffrey returns to the home at the conclusion of *Blue Velvet*, it is by choice as an autonomous adult. What could be construed as *Blue Velvet’s* epilogue occurs after the camera zooms out of Jeffrey’s ear and slowly pans over his face, lingering on his closed eyes which finally can rest in the safety of the Williams’ backyard. He enters the house once summoned by Sandy who shouts, “Jeffrey, lunch is ready.” (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Inside the house, he is surrounded by a group of maternal women: his mother, his aunt, Sandy’s mother, and Sandy. Detective Williams and Jeffrey’s father are both suspiciously absent. It seems as if Jeffrey is now the patriarch of this idyllic and peaceful world, full of women who interact only with him and not with one another.

The final shot of the film shows Dorothy embracing her son in a park, while he wears a hat that Jeffrey tinkered with earlier in the movie. The spectator's last impression of the surreal *Blue Velvet* conflates Jeffrey with Donnie, emphasizing his role as the Oedipal hero and also his earned dominion as patriarch of the masculine-ruled, ordered, peaceful domestic world. While the final shot reinforces the Oedipal identification that Jeffrey shares with Donnie, it reminds the viewer that Dorothy herself is not a member of the subversive underworld in the same manner as Frank. She was forcibly made a temporary member of this community, in a way not terribly dissimilar to Jeffrey, who as a male actively entered that world of his own accord. Her final appearance in *Blue Velvet* reminds us that though she signifies the maternal, Freudian, irrational figurehead of Jeffrey's Oedipal drama throughout most of the film, this role is nothing more than just that: a role. Dorothy Vallens is restored to the land of law and order at the end of *Blue Velvet* once she fulfills her primary duty, which is to make Jeffrey a man.

Blue Velvet is a bildungsroman which traces its protagonist's journey from childhood into adulthood through his role as the hero of a detective story that represents an Oedipal drama. We have established these Freudian relationships among the characters; we can see that they adhere to a traditional Oedipal structure, transmuted in certain ways, but consistent with Freud's theory, nonetheless. Part of Jeffrey's maturation into adulthood involves learning how to be a man. The film suggests that these gender roles are just that—learned and inherited.

The trauma that Jeffrey experiences through his interactions with Frank (and transitively, Dorothy) represent the inherent trauma associated with becoming an adult: both an adult in the psycho-sexual sense of the world, and in the more general sense that he has experienced his first exposure to excessive trauma, violence, and sexuality. After he first witnesses Frank and Dorothy from the closet, before delving any deeper into their world, the naïve Jeffrey asks Sandy

in the car: “Why are there people like Frank? Why is there so much trouble in this world?”

(Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Jeffrey associates “people like Frank” with darkness itself, when in reality Frank and “people like Frank” are derivative of excessive trauma, which self-propagates. Frank is a bearer, not a maker, of this violence, trauma, and hyper-masculinity; it is a never-ending drama in which he has no choice but to participate. His addiction to the nitrous oxide, his strange Oedipal fetish, his impulsive violence, and the fact that he appears to be deeply attached to Dorothy despite his cruel treatment of her all point to addictions and id impulses which not only drive Frank, but control him entirely.

Despite the unpleasant effects of traumatic experiences, *Blue Velvet* suggests that they are necessary to development. This darkness must be internalized and processed in order to function in regular society, lest one become a monstrous Frank or a hapless Dorothy. In the world of *Blue Velvet*, the only way to production is through destruction— even in the seemingly peaceful small-town sphere of patriarchy. The town, aptly named Lumberton, presumably thrives from its lumber industry. Often when the camera pans through the town, a flatbed truck piled high with logs will pass by. The image occurs even in private, domestic spaces; as Jeffrey sits on his bed, contemplating the violence he has witnessed during his adventure, the viewer might notice a kitschy sign hanging on the wall above his bed. It is a fake log emblazoned with the town name “Lumberton” (it even appears to have a wire, so maybe the sign lights up). The process of logging implicates miles of forests that must be razed before the trees can be made to lumber and sold. The decimating yet productive violence enacted upon passive bodies (the trees) mirrors the violence inherent in human development; their transmutation into a new substance, lumber, mirrors the imposition of cultural and societal codes of behavior upon a maturing person. Yet lumber does not remain lumber. This stage is only temporary, until it becomes a house, or until it

is burnt for warmth, just as the process of individual growth and transformation does not end with the initial trauma but continues indefinitely.

Lumberton is also populated with images of fire trucks. These images are often accompanied by a friendly wave from the fire fighter, like something out of a Richard Scarry cartoon. The town manufactures objects that can produce fire— logs— but it also provides expansive infrastructure to extinguish any flames that may arise. Jeffrey, in his adulthood-training, is learning to be a metaphoric fire fighter: to protect the community by keeping passion and elemental flames in check. In short, he is learning not only the voice of his own superego, but he is learning to become a superego within his community. This is the inherited patriarchal responsibility. We see glimpses of fire throughout the film— always silent, always separate from the action of the movie, they follow moments of extreme violence or passion. Usually these glimpses are of a flickering candle, but when Jeffrey and Dorothy copulate, a wall of flames appears briefly on screen. This fire represents the elemental passions that manifest in violence and sex. These drives are alluring but must be kept in check, which is why the safe world of Lumberton has all of these friendly fire fighters who drive around, keeping an eye out for trouble.

The end of the film suggests that the members of Lumberton remain separate from the elemental or the primal while continuing to express admiration and respect for it. When we see Jeffrey at the end of the film in his domestic paradise, he, Sandy, and his aunt gather around the kitchen window, where an (animatronic) robin sits on the windowsill and crunches on a giant, wriggling insect. Robins are symbolic of love for Jeffrey and Sandy— not an intimate love that they share, but a more universal harmony. Sandy says to Jeffrey, “Maybe the robins are here.” (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) For Sandy, who has witnessed comparatively little violence, the appearance

of a robin represents a new era of stability and peace. Jeffrey's aunt, who remains separate from darkness entirely throughout the film says "I don't see how they do it. I could never eat a bug," (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Only Jeffrey, who has fully internalized darkness and become the patriarchal protector of the house, sees the robin and recognizes its relative meaninglessness as a signifier of harmony. He says, "It's a strange world, isn't it?" (Lynch, *Blue Velvet*) Jeffrey is aware that chaos broils right beneath the surface of his peaceful world; as a patriarch, he assumes the role of superego in keeping that chaos in check. The world of Lumberton is a constructed universe of safety and order— a safety and order that would give way to something dangerous and wild in an instant if one of its patriarchal protectors were to falter even for one moment.

The only place that is truly safe from violent and sexual urges is not a physical space, but a psychic space— childhood. Yet, this is a place to which no person can return after becoming scarred by the process of learning to be an adult. Throughout *Blue Velvet*, a nostalgia for the past persists. When the film was released in 1986, 50s-era Lumberton would evoke, for older viewers, warm memories of a more secure cultural era, and for younger viewers, it would evoke imagined, romanticized scenery of parents' earlier lives. Throughout the film, thematic music harkens from an earlier age: namely, Bobby Vinton's "Blue Velvet" and Roy Orbison's "In Dreams," serving to boost the viewer's affective nostalgia. These songs both indicate the loss of a woman, one who a listener would assume to be a lover, but who in the Oedipal context of *Blue Velvet*, we can deduce represents the mother. Like ashes which can never return to being a tree, or Dorothy Vallens, who can never return to a time before her brutalization at the hands of Frank, no man can ever return to the security of his mother's womb.

Just like individuals cannot return to an innocent state prior to growing up, culture cannot return from the trauma of oppressive or flawed ideology. Jeffrey Beaumont experiences and

internalizes the trauma inherent to reaching adulthood in his interactions with the inhabitants of *Blue Velvet*'s underworld, who live in an unregulated state of constant, impulsive violence.

David Lynch pushes against the oppressive traumas that are both inherent to biological life and also culturally encoded within systems of gender by blurring the lines of each, creating spaces in which characters enact both monstrosity and a perverted sense of liberation. This monstrosity represents the trauma that an individual must confront, overcome, and suppress in order to reach adulthood. Frank Booth represents a man controlled not by his superego but by the irrational impulses of his id. Jeffrey's journey to Lumberton's seedy underbelly is representative of a trip to Hell and back; his need to travel to a dark underworld in order to experience growth necessary to adulthood is both a critique of the dominant patriarchal culture which Lumberton represents and a gesture towards darkness itself as not only necessary, but good.

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