

The Sun Always Rises in *Blue Velvet* (Essay), Bee Wertheimer

David Lynch's 1986 *Blue Velvet* is a dreamlike coming-of-age film following Jeffrey Beaumont, a college student returning home to Lumbertown after his father is hospitalized due to a medical episode. After discovering a severed human ear on his way home from the hospital, Jeffrey finds himself caught between two worlds, represented by two women: the sunny suburban Lumbertown, manifested as high school senior Sandy; and the dark world of crime burrowed underneath—like insects writhing beneath pristine grass—represented by night club singer Dorothy.

Sandy Williams is the daughter of Detective Williams, whom Jeffrey brings the severed ear to (and whose partner is involved in the crime world Jeffrey seeks out, though the film never explicitly implicates Williams). Despite her and Jeffrey's flirting, Sandy has a boyfriend—a fact which Jeffrey uses as justification to sexually pursue Dorothy.

Dorothy Vallens is the victim of druglord Frank Booth, who has kidnapped Dorothy's husband and son to force her into sexual slavery. After witnessing Frank rape Dorothy, Jeffrey accepts her sexual advances toward him. Dorothy is a victim of sexual abuse, yet she initiates sex with Jeffrey, and begs him to hit her. This comes across like a "gotcha"—we're all perverts, just like Frank. Even his victim.

Perhaps I am not enough of a pervert to understand this film. Dorothy's suffering reads to me as exclusively for Jeffrey's sake—this is the real world. Power is wielded by pathetic men and there's nothing you can do about it (until suddenly there is?). You act like, maybe even believe, that you don't want part in this darkness—you think you're better than Frank—but you still fuck Dorothy, you still hit her. But don't worry, it's

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actually okay, and you don't have to reckon what you've done—Sandy forgives you for sleeping with Dorothy, you defeat the real bad guy and everyone gets a happy ending. Frank pays for his crimes, but you're in the clear, kid. You just got caught up in something bigger than you could understand. The pain you caused was nothing.

When the ending played out, I was overcome with a sense of wrongness. *No, this isn't right, this can't be it.* We just spent two hours discovering the horrors lurking in the corners of the adult world, only for all of these horrors to neatly erase themselves. *The sunny suburb and dark crime world are inextricably intertwined, beauty inseparable from grotesque,* the film insisted. But now the robin devours the insect, the goodness prevails over the evil. This feels too easy, undeserved by the narrative, a hand waving in the air to dismiss the last two hours. What was the point of all of that, then? Why are we getting all moralistic, all Catholic about this whole affair? Why not allow the audience to sit with our unease, look at the world around us with suspicion, grieve what happened to Dorothy; rather than absolve us of responsibility for what we've witnessed, what we've enjoyed?

Unless that feeling is the point. Unless we're supposed to understand that this cannot possibly be how it ends. That, actually, we're meant to sit with this nagging insistence, *isn't this too good to be true?* Perhaps we're supposed to feel guilty for not wanting this ending, for the characters to linger in their own suffering, seemingly able to move on in a way that I most certainly am not.