

Sling Blade Film Summary

Sling Blade by Billy Bob Thornton

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Context

Sling Blade is the story of Karl Childers, a mentally-retarded man, who was institutionalized as a child for killing his mother and her lover. Karl felt that he was protecting his mother from harm, but when he realized that she was wanting sex, he killed her, too. As the film begins, he is getting out of the institution and going back to the real world.

Karl moves back to his old town where the head of the hospital helps him find a job. Karl becomes friends with a young boy named Frank and his mother, Linda. Linda's boyfriend, Doyle, is cruel, and Linda cannot stand up to him. Karl cares for them and when Doyle decides to move in permanently, Karl realizes he must take action. Karl murders Doyle in order to protect Frank and Linda. In the final scene, we see Karl sitting in the institution once again.

Billy Bob Thornton directed and wrote this film, as well as giving an excellent performance as Karl Childers. After acting in numerous movies, Thornton starred in a *One False Move* a film he co-wrote with friend, Tom Epperson. *Sling Blade* brought Billy Bob back to his Arkansas roots. When he was nominated for Best Actor for his role of Karl, he said, "Getting the nomination is 'like gravy.' Winning would be 'like whatever is better than gravy.'"

Dwight Yoakam is possibly one of the best villains ever. He plays Doyle Hargrave as one of the most evil, cruel men imaginable. Yoakam first got his start as a country music star. He first began acting in *Red Rock West* (1992), a Nicholas Cage/ Dennis Hopper film. However, he really garnered wild praise for his role as Doyle.

Sling Blade was one of Linda Canerday's first performances, and she has only had a few since. Although her performance is decent, she is outshone by Thornton and Yoakam. Lucas Black, who plays Frank Wheatley, had one of his first performances in this film. He has gone on to star in several movies.

John Ritter gives an excellent performance as Vaughan, Linda's gay friend. Ritter first gained great popularity on the show, "Three's Company" in the 1980s. Later, he became well-known for his performances in the *Problem Child* films. Robert Duvall also makes a short appearance as Karl's father, Frank Childers. Duvall first became famous for roles as Boo Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Godfather II*.

Billy Bob Thornton was nominated for an Oscar for his performance as Karl Childers, and he won an Oscar for Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium.



Summary and Analysis

As the film begins, we see many people sitting in a room full of windows in an asylum. One man pulls a chair to the window and begins to talk to Karl Childers. The man tells Karl about the women he took from people who did not deserve them. The man killed many women in his life. A group of journalism students arrive at the hospital to meet with a murderer. They meet with the head of the hospital who tells them that pictures are not allowed because Karl is sensitive about having his picture made. Finally, he agrees to talk to Karl and see if they can take pictures.

Karl goes down to the classroom to meet with the people from the newspaper who want to ask about his release. The head of the hospital encourages him to meet some people before he goes to the outside. Karl finally agrees to talk to one woman, but she can't ask any questions. She asks him why Karl is being set free if he is still so troubled. The man says he's served his time, been acclimated, and doesn't show homicidal signs anymore. The hospital head also tells them that the photographer has to leave the room, and he changes the light for Karl by turning on only one small lamp.

The room is silent until Karl starts to speak. He tells her that he was in there because he killed someone. He begins to explain why he killed someone. Karl lived out back in a shed his parents built for him because they didn't want him with the rest of the family. He mostly sat around alone. He had a hole to sleep in with a couple of quilts. Karl explains that he mostly stayed alone to avoid the taunts of other children. His father worked hard for Old Man Dixon, who treated them badly and whose son, Jesse, was even more cruel than his father. Jesse took advantage of girls in the neighborhood and always said his mother was pretty. One evening, Karl was at his shed waiting for his Bible lesson when he heard a commotion in the house. When he looked in the window, he saw his mother naked and saw Jesse on top of her having his way with her. Karl says he just saw red, picked up a sling blade, and hit Jesse in the head and neck almost cutting off his head. Karl's mother jumped up screaming, "Why'd you kill Jesse for?" He discovered that his mother didn't mind what Jesse was doing, and Karl got even angrier. Karl hit his mother in the head with the sling blade and killed her, too. He says if he had it to do over again, he'd do it again. He tells the interviewer that he's been there a long time and has learned to read some. She asks if he'll ever kill anyone again, and he says he has no reason to kill anyone. After the interview, the hospital director says that Karl will go anywhere he wants and will be supervised as much as anyone else.

Karl gets his books, catches a bus, and heads toward his new home. Karl arrives at a small Frosty Kreme and says he wants some food, asking for a large order of french fries after the man reads through the menu. Karl sits outside the local laundromat to eat. A young boy is trying to carry a load of laundry. The boy tells him that his daddy's dead and his mom is at work, so he has to do the laundry. Karl helps the boy carry the laundry home. The boy introduces himself as Frank Wheatley. Karl tells the boy that he had killed some people, but he had to be turned loose since he was well. The boy



invites Karl to come play football sometime because he and his friends are no good either.

Karl finally arrives back at the hospital, but they won't let him back in. Karl says he doesn't know how to be a free man and doesn't have anyone to help him. The head of the hospital says he would let him stay, but he doesn't have a choice. The man tells him that he knows Karl is good at working on small engines, so he can put in a good word for him with a man he knows who owns a shop. Karl says he could just walk around until morning, but hospital director takes him home with him. The family sits around quietly staring at Karl.

The next morning, the director brings Karl to the shop. The owners hire him and allow him to stay out back. They tell him that they'll buy his lunch until he gets on his feet. Although Karl is quiet, he begins to fit in to his new life. His bosses finally give him a key and tell him to buy some toothpaste, some magazines, etc. Karl goes by to see Frank just as Frank is getting ready to visit his mom at the Dollar Store. Frank invites Karl to go, and Karl agrees so that he can do his shopping. Frank introduces Karl to his mom, Linda, and Vaughn, the manager, who Frank says is Linda's best friend.

Karl tells Vaughn that he just got out of the state hospital. Vaughn is concerned that Linda lets Frank around him, but she says Frank sees Karl as a father figure. After they leave the store, Frank shows Karl where he goes to be alone. He used to bring his girlfriend there, but they broke up because he doesn't have any money. Karl tells him that he was really poor and that his daddy is still around somewhere. He only knows his father never wanted him. When Frank asks about his mother's death, Karl says Frank shouldn't think about bad things. Frank also says that his mom is dating Doyle Hargrave, who isn't nice to her at all. He likes the nights he doesn't stay over there better. Apparently, Linda only stays with him for the good time, and because he threatened to kill her if she left him. Frank says Vaughn is really nice but can't fight well because he's gay. Frank tells Karl that the truth is that his father killed himself because he couldn't care for the family the way he wanted, even though Frank thought his father did a fine job. Karl says he killed two people because he thought they were bad, but he's since learned you shouldn't kill anyone. Frank, however, thinks if the killing was self-defense or they deserved it, that it's okay.

Karl's boss tells him that he can continue staying at the store, but Frank and Linda want him to live at their home. At Linda's house, Doyle talks to Linda, but when Frank pipes in, Doyle tells Frank to be quiet. Doyle is afraid he can't eat around Karl. They decide they should find out what Karl did. Doyle is jealous of Vaughn, who is going to spend time with Linda tonight. Karl stands outside the door until Vaughn walks up and knocks on the door. Vaughn decides Karl and he should have lunch the next day. Frank invites them both in, and Linda sends them out to fix Karl up a place in the garage. Doyle begins harassing Vaughn, but Vaughn and Linda leave.

Doyle invites Karl to have a chat and insults him as they talk. Doyle asks if Karl cut someone up with a hatchet, but Karl replies that he doesn't remember ever having used a hatchet. Doyle says that he doesn't care either way because he's not scared of



anyone. He also says that Frank's dad taught him to be a wus, but Frank stands up for his dad. Then, Doyle sends Karl and Frank out to the garage, but as they leave, Doyle tells Frank not to mention the exchange to his mom. In the garage, Frank says he wants to kill Doyle. Karl tells him he shouldn't feel that way as a boy, but Doyle shouldn't treat Frank so badly. Frank asks Karl to stay with them for a long time.

The next day, Vaughn and Karl have lunch. Vaughn explains that he cares for Linda and Frank because his own family didn't like him. He says he's a lot like Karl in that way. Vaughn explains that he likes men. Vaughn warns Karl that Doyle is a dangerous person; Vaughn has already warned Linda that one day Doyle may try to kill her and Frank. Vaughn asks Karl to promise that he would never harm Linda or Frank.

Karl does not eat dinner with the family. During dinner, Doyle decides he wants to throw a party that night using Karl as entertainment. Linda tells him she doesn't want people to come over, but Doyle calls his friends anyway. Later that night, Doyle gets angry at his friends and kicks them out of the house. He even tries to kick out Vaughn and Karl, but Linda tells him to leave and go get sober. Linda tells Doyle never to show this side of himself to her son again. She tells him that she might leave him, but he says if she tries, he'll kill her. Linda pushes Doyle, but when he pushes her back, Frank starts throwing stuff at Doyle. Doyle gets ready to leave but tells Linda he loves her and apologizes before threatening Frank. Karl sits still on the couch throughout the entire scene.

Later, Karl talks to Linda and tries to tell a joke to make her laugh. He asks for some biscuits sometime, and she makes him some right then. Linda tells Karl that she knows a girl who is a little slow he might like to meet. Karl tells Linda the truth about why he was in the state hospital. She remembers the story, and he tells her that he's well now. Karl reassures her that he would never hurt her or Frank, and she tells him that she knows he wouldn't. The hospital director stops and checks in on Frank, and he finds out that things are going really well.

Vaughn throws a little dinner and invites Linda, Frank, his lover, Albert, Melinda, and Karl. Vaughn and Linda try to get Melinda and Karl together. Vaughn asks Melinda not to tell the other employees at the store about Albert being at dinner, but she tells him everyone knows and talks bad about them. Linda suggests that Karl and Melinda go for a walk, so that Vaughn doesn't have to hear the whole story.

One afternoon, Melinda shows up with a bouquet for Karl. The talk for a few minutes, and then Melinda returns to the store. Karl and Frank hang out that night. Karl tells Frank that he had a brother for a little while, but he didn't get very old. The baby died because his parents made it come out early somehow. His dad gave him a towel with something in it to throw away, but the towel was moving. Inside, was a bloody little baby boy no bigger than a squirrel, who was still alive. Karl said throwing it in the trash barrel didn't seem right, so he got a shoe box and buried him in the yard. Karl said he heard the baby crying through the box, and Frank says he should have taken care of it. Karl said he was only six or eight and didn't know what to do. Karl's parents taught him to do just what they said, and he says giving the baby back to God right away was probably best. Karl says bad things shouldn't happen to children, only to adults. Frank then asks



if Karl ever considered suicide, but he says that the Bible says not to, or you'll go to Hades. Frank points out that the Bible says the same thing about killing others, too. Karl agrees that it does.

When they return to the house, Doyle is back. He and Linda have decided that things would be better if he were over more often. He has apologized and tells them he cares for them. Doyle admits that he's jealous, and he doesn't like the way she lives her life. He explains that he builds things and that is a lot of pressure. Suddenly, Doyle tells him that he wants to more like a family, and he plans to propose. They all sit in silence after he leaves. Linda admits that he's trying, but she doesn't know for how long. Frank tells her that Doyle will never change. She says that they're going to bide their time, and she warns Frank to stay away from Doyle. She says that she hopes one day Frank will have all he deserves and wants.

Karl plays football with Frank and his friends. Karl throws the football over to Frank so he can score a touchdown and feel good. Karl tells Frank that he's proud of him, and Frank has the first big smile he's had in the entire film so far. One afternoon, Karl walks out to his old home. He goes into his old shed and explores his old house. Karl finds his father sitting alone and talking to himself. He introduces himself, but his father denies having a son. Karl tells his father about his life now and offers to cut the yard for him. His father tells him to leave, but Karl keeps talking. He tells his father that he read the Bible, and he tells his father that the story his parents told him wasn't true. Karl said he thought about killing his father, but he said it's not worth it if he's just going to sit in the chair. Karl's father will be dead soon enough and the world would be through with him. Karl says they shouldn't have killed his little brother. Outside, Karl visits the spot where he buried his brother and talks to him.

Karl comes into Doyle and Linda's room because he wants to be baptized. Linda tells him that they'll get him baptized the next day. Doyle asks why Karl is holding a hammer, but Karl says he doesn't know. The next day, Karl is baptized in the nearby river. Vaughn, Frank, and Linda witness the baptizing while Doyle stays home. Doyle sends Linda out for chicken while the guys watch the game. After she leaves, Doyle tells Karl and Frank to sit down and explains that they need to talk. He tells Frank that he is the only problem between him and Linda. He tells Frank that the first rule is that he only speaks when he is spoken to, and he has to start acting like other kids. Doyle also says that Karl can't stay any longer. Frank tells Doyle that his mom said Karl could stay. Doyle grabs Frank, but Karl tells him not to lay a hand on the boy. Doyle demands that Karl go get his stuff and leave as Frank runs upstairs. When Linda gets back, Karl is leaving the house. Karl tells her that both he and Frank have gone off somewhere else. He tells her that she's a good mom and is good to him as well. He also lets her know that he fixed the washing machine, and then he leaves.

Karl finds Frank at his favorite spot, and Frank tells Karl that he (Frank) will never be happy again. Frank says sometimes he thinks it would be better if he had not been born, and he tells Karl that he can't leave Karl alone. Karl explains that Doyle's so mean, he could even beat up Karl. Karl explains that he still cares for Frank very much, even though Karl is leaving, and they will always be friends no matter where they are.



Karl gives all his books to Frank. Frank says that today he has a different feeling. Karl asks Frank not to go back to Doyle tonight. He tells him to go to Vaughn's house, and he makes Frank promise. Frank promises and asks if everything will be okay. Karl reassures him that everything will be fine. Karl puts his arm around Frank and tells Frank he loves him; Frank reciprocates, and Karl leaves. Inside one of the books, Karl left a bookmark for Frank that says, "You will be happy." Frank says, "Karl...."

Karl goes to Vaughn's house and asks him to let Linda and Frank stay with Vaughn tonight. He explains that Doyle is in a bad way again, and Karl is afraid that Doyle will hurt them. Karl also gives Vaughn money to give to Linda, and he also tells Vaughn that even though God doesn't want men to sleep together, he doesn't believe God would send Vaughn to Hades. He says he doesn't believe you have to be with a woman to be a good dad, and he tells Vaughn to take care of Frank. Vaughn says, "Karl...."

Karl sharpens a lawnmower blade to prepare for the night. He goes to the house and finds Doyle drunk. Doyle asks where everyone is, but Karl doesn't answer. Karl instead asks how to call the police, and Doyle tells him to use the phone. Doyle asks about the blade, and Karl says that he plans to kill him with it. Doyle tells him to dial 911, and bring an ambulance or a hearse. Karl then kills Doyle, calls 911, and tells them the whole story. Karl tells them that the second hit almost cut Doyle's head in two pieces. Karl says he'll be waiting on them, and that Doyle said they should also send an ambulance or a hearse. While he's waiting, Karl eats a biscuit with some peanut butter - his favorite.

Back at the institution, we see the same man talking to Karl again that we saw in the beginning. The man continues to tell about his escapades, and then he asks Karl about his time outside of the institution. Karl tells him that he made friends with a boy, but that the world was too big. The man asks Karl who he killed and asks if it was the boy. Karl tells him not to say anything about the boy, and he tells the man not to talk to him anymore. The man leaves and Karl stands by the window alone. We see just a touch of a smile on Karl's face as he looks out the window.



Characters

Karl Childers, played by Billy Bob Thornton

Description

Karl Childers is a mentally-handicapped man, who murdered his mother and her lover as a child. He has spent many years in a mental institution, and when the film starts, he is finally being released. Karl has been happy there and has no desire to leave; however, his life begins to change when he gets a job in his hometown and meets Frank and Linda.

Karl becomes friends with Frank and his mother, Linda and eventually moves into their garage. He sees what an evil man Doyle is and tries to warn Linda about Doyle. When Doyle begins to ruin their lives, Karl takes matters into his own hands and murders Doyle.

Analysis

Karl is a good, kind man who tries to stand up for right and wrong, although he doesn't always go about it the right way. Karl believes that when he kills his mother's lover, he is actually protecting her, but when he discovers that he was wrong, he kills her as well. Karl is a confused little boy who had a very troubled life. He even had to bury his baby brother, who was still alive at that point.

Karl carries his baggage into his adult life and is terrified when he finds out he has to go back out into the real world. Karl wants to stay in the institution, but he finds that life outside isn't so bad. Karl enjoys spending time with Frank, Linda, and Melinda. When Doyle begins to mistreat Frank and Linda, Karl decides to murder Doyle, so that he can save Frank and Linda.

Doyle Hargraves, played by Dwight Yoakam

Description

Doyle Hargraves is a mean drunk, who is dating Linda. Doyle is jealous of the time Karl spends with the family and hates anyone who is different. Doyle decides to move in with Linda and starts abusing her and Frank, so Karl murders Doyle to save Linda and Frank from further pain.

Analysis

Doyle is a mean, prejudiced alcoholic. He has no goals in his life, but he feels that he is better than everyone else. In order to make himself feel better, Doyle begins to abuse



Linda and Frank. Although murder is wrong, viewers feel that Doyle got what he deserved.

Vaughan Cunningham, played by John Ritter

Description

Vaughan is the homosexual manager at the store where Linda works. They are good friends, but Doyle hates Vaughan because he is gay.

Analysis

Vaughan is a kind man who tries to protect Linda and Frank. He is very open about himself and does his best to stand up to Doyle's attacks. Vaughan is very protective of Linda, and he even has lunch with Karl just to make sure that he is safe.

Frank Wheatley, played by Lucas Black

Description

Frank is a young boy, who meets Karl at the laundromat. Karl helps Frank carry the laundry home, and they become friends. Frank introduces Karl to his mother, Linda, and convinces Linda to let Karl live in their garage.

Analysis

Frank is a very trusting young man, who is a better judge of character than his mother. He is scared of Doyle, but he still stands up for his mother when he can. Karl gives up his freedom, so that Frank can have a happier life than he would with Doyle as a step-father.

Linda Wheatley, played by Natalie Canerday

Description

Linda is Frank's mother. She agrees to take Karl in after Frank becomes attached to him. She is dating Doyle and is so desperate for a relationship that she cannot see what a terrible man he is. She simply continues to give him the benefit of the doubt long after he no longer deserves it.



Analysis

Linda is desperate to be loved and puts herself and Frank in danger trying to fulfill this need. Linda tries to provide well for her son, but Karl makes sure that she is safe by killing Doyle.

Dr. Jerry Woolridge, played by James Hampton

Description

Dr. Woolridge is the head of the mental institution. He tries to help Karl by getting him a job in his hometown.

Analysis

Dr. Woolridge is a kind man, who feels strongly for Karl. He hates that Karl has to leave the institution, but he does his best to make sure that Karl is safe.

Frank Childers, played by Robert Duvall

Description

Frank Childers is Karl's father.

Analysis

Karl visits Frank, who now hates Karl. Frank loved his wife, even though she was cheating on him and resents Karl for killing her.

Melinda, played by Christy Ward

Description

Melinda works with Linda and Vaughan. She is mentally handicapped, and they set her up on a date with Karl.

Analysis

Melinda doesn't talk a lot, but she and Karl get on well.



Charles Bushman, played by J.T. Walsh

Description

Charles Bushman is in the institution with Karl. Charles is always telling Karl stories of his past terrible escapades.

Analysis

Charles is overbearing, and, in the beginning, Karl just listens silently, but by the end of the film, Karl has a stronger sense of self and tells Charles to shut up.



Themes

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is an important theme in the film and in life. Sacrifices are made for many reasons, but the strongest is for love or the pursuit of love. Many sacrifices are made during the course of *Sling Blade*. Linda sacrifices herself to Doyle for the sake of having a relationship. Karl sacrifices himself for Frank and Linda to free them from the hateful Doyle.

Linda believes that her relationship with Doyle will eventually bring her love. However, Doyle's hateful attitude and mistreatment of Linda and Frank lets the viewer know that her hopes of love will never be met with Doyle. If anything, her life will turn out in a way she will despise. Doyle is a mean, abusive man and everyone, but Linda, seems to realize this. She continues to sacrifice everything in her life for a relationship with Doyle.

Eventually, Karl sacrifices himself for Linda and Frank. Karl sees the evil in Doyle and how terribly he treats these people he cares so much about. After realizing that things will only become worse for his friends when Doyle moves in and Karl moves out, Karl decides that only one thing can be done - Frank has to die. Karl sacrifices his freedom, so his friends can live peaceful, happy lives.

Justice

Justice is also a major theme in *Sling Blade*. There are many acts of justice in an unjust world. Karl seeks to bring justice to the world through his actions although he is sent to the mental institution for his efforts.

Karl first seeks to bring justice to the world when he finds his mother with another man. He thought that the man was raping her, so he tried to protect her by attacking the man. However, he discovered that she was actually having an affair. He was so outraged by her actions that he ended up bringing justice to her to by killing her.

After Karl sees the way Doyle treats Frank and Linda, he decides that they deserve justice as well. Thus, Karl decides to murder Doyle and free the two from Doyle's hateful and abusive ways. Karl is sent back to the institution for the murder, but he feels that he has delivered justice and helped his only friends.

Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in *Sling Blade*. Karl has lived a lonely, desolate life. From his youngest years, he was despised and ignored by those around him. His parents thought him odd, and he could not go to school because he would be



mistreated. Then, he was stuck in an institution for many years talking only to the other residents and his doctor.

When he leaves the institution, Karl has to go back into the world and mix with other people. Karl's first new friend is a young boy named Frank Wheatley. Frank has few friends because he's not really good at sports, but he enjoys being around Karl. Karl eventually becomes friends with Linda, Vaughn, and Melinda as well.

Karl realizes that Doyle may destroy all his friends. Since he is moving in, Doyle will probably try to keep Karl, Vaughan and Melinda away from the house. Doyle mistreats Linda and Frank, and when everyone else is forbidden to visit, Linda and Frank will have no one to help them. Karl realizes all this, and, since he loves his friends, especially Frank, he decides to kill Doyle because Linda will never throw Doyle out. Karl sacrifices his freedom for the only friends he has ever had.



Style and Cinematography

Sling Blade strikes the emotional chords of the soul. Although the title makes it almost sound like an action movie, *Sling Blade* is actually a powerfully-kind, compassionate film. We see Karl as a kindhearted, mentally handicapped man, who has killed and kills again, but only at times when the individuals could be said to deserve death.

Billy Bob Thornton's depiction of Karl is impressive, as is Dwight Yokam's role as Doyle. Rather than presenting Karl as stupid or mean, Thornton brings real humanity to the role. Karl ends up being a character we love rather than hate. We understand his motives, and in the end, most viewers believe that Karl did the right thing. Yokam, on the other hand, brings one of the meanest and most hateful villains of film to life. In this film, Yokam shows that he is definitely not just a country music singer; he is an excellent actor. Doyle's surly personality makes him one of the most hated characters of film. He mistreats everyone, and no one can say that he doesn't deserve what he gets.

The cinematography in *Sling Blade* is also excellent. The scenes are shot with warm light that helps to enhance the colors. However, the scenes with Doyle are generally shot a little darker, which helps the viewer to recognize the impact of evil in the room. The techniques used help to create a warm, positive film even when things are at their worst. In addition, the viewer can see the changes in mood and environment by the changes in the light.

Motifs

Mental Retardation

Karl is mentally retarded. Karl is slow and does not always process the things around him the way other people do. Thus, Karl retains a sort of innocence. Although he knows that murdering people is wrong, he has a feeling that he has no choice when it is to protect those he loves.

Using Karl's disability as a storytelling function helps viewers to understand the themes in the film. If Karl was what we might call "normal," he might seem cruel and inhumane when he kills his mother, her lover, and later, Doyle. But, since he is mentally retarded, his actions somehow seem justified, and the viewer relates to Karl.

We are also able to see other people's motives for what they are. For example, we see Doyle's prejudices even more powerfully because of the way he treats Karl. Doyle hates anyone who is different, even when those differences make them kinder, better people than most. We see prejudices and feelings clearly as we see the world through Karl's life.

Abusive Relationship

Abuse is a major problem in many relationships. Generally, men are abusing women, and the women find it extremely difficult to get out of the situation. No matter how bad the abuse gets, many women refuse to leave their abusive spouses or boyfriends, and the situation in *Sling Blade* is no different.

Linda has been dating Doyle for quite some time. No one likes Doyle. He's lazy and mean. He treats both Frank and Linda terribly, but Linda refuses to let him go forever. Every time he comes in with an apology or excuse, she takes him back. He'll even bring her a gift sometimes, and that will be enough.

Karl kills Doyle in part because Linda doesn't have the strength to get out of the relationship on her own. Karl wants to protect her and Frank the only way he knows how. He realizes that once Doyle moves in for good, the chances of Linda leaving him are even slimmer. The abusive relationship helps us see Karl's sacrifice even more clearly.

Small Town Life

Sling Blade is set in a small town in Arkansas. As anyone who grew up in a small town knows, life there is much different than it is anywhere else in the world. Everyone knows everyone's business, stories stay in circulation for years, and people are expected not to

change. In many small towns people have known you for your whole life and don't expect you to be any different than what they've always known.

Although everyone in town knows about Doyle, no one wants to tell Linda to move away. They are nosy and inquiring, but they will not take steps to help her. Until Karl came along, Vaughan was her only real friend, and he was despised by the town for being homosexual.

We see small town life in a different way in this film, and the themes and story would not be the same if it were set anywhere else. The small town life helps to highlight the themes of sacrifice and friendship. In a city, Frank and Karl would probably never have met, but in this small town, they can become friends.

Symbols

The Bible

Karl's Bible is symbolic of his desire to turn his life around. Karl killed when he was young out of ignorance. He believed his mother was being hurt so he killed a man. Then, when he discovered that she was cheating on his father, he killed her, too, as punishment for her infidelity.

We learn that while in the institution, Karl has been reading the Bible, and although he doesn't understand everything in it, he is trying to follow it as best he can. Karl even tells Frank a little about what he's learned. Karl says that he doesn't kill anymore because he knows now that it is wrong.

However, despite all Karl's efforts to be the good man that he should be and follow the Bible, he ends up killing Doyle to save Frank and Linda. Audiences can interpret this two ways - either Karl was a bad man for killing someone, or he was a good man for sacrificing his freedom to save others. Either way, we realize as he gives his Bible to Frank that he is leaving for good, but before he goes, he wants to pass something good to Frank.

Sling Blade

Karl's sling blade is symbolic of his ability to kill. Karl uses the sling blade the first time when he kills his mother and her lover. Although he doesn't know any better, Karl ends up being sent to an institution anyway because of his capacity to murder. Eventually, however, he is forced to leave the institution and live a normal life.

Karl finds that he will need to kill again, though. Linda and Frank are unable to help themselves, so Karl realizes that he is their only hope. He sharpens a lawnmower blade this time and prepares to kill again. Unlike his first murder of passion, Karl's second murder is well thought out, down to the point that he makes sure everyone else is out of the house with an alibi.

As Karl kills again, the sling blade and the lawnmower blade symbolize his ability to kill. They also show his humanity since both times he killed to protect someone else. Although he didn't go about things the right way, Karl does what he knows he can to protect the people he loves.

Windows

In the first and last scenes of *Sling Blade*, we see Karl sitting by the large glass windows staring out over the grounds. The windows are symbolic of freedom. The first time Karl



seems unconcerned with freedom, and he even asks to be allowed to stay at the institution.

Karl is forced to accept his freedom, however, and he returns to his hometown and begins working. During Karl's time of freedom from behind the glass windows, he makes friends and begins to love people who care for him for the first time in his lonely life. Karl's freedom is jeopardized, though, when he decides to kill Doyle in order to protect Frank and Linda. Karl sacrifices his freedom that he has begun to enjoy for his friends.

In the final scene, Karl is once again behind the glass windows staring at the outside where freedom lies. Karl seems to have no regrets about his situation. Having experienced the outside world and made friends, he is happy to return to his imprisonment when that meant saving the lives of his friends. Karl's return is without remorse, and he now has happy memories to enjoy during his time in the institution.



Essay Questions

Why was Karl in the mental hospital?

What are Karl's plans after he gets out?

Describe the relationship between Karl and Frank.

What is Doyle's reason for hating Vaughn? Is this hatred justified?

Who is Melinda?

Why does Linda stay with Doyle?

How does Karl's life change after he meets Frank and Linda?

What happened to Karl's little brother?

How does Karl prepare for his actions against Doyle?

Is Karl justified in killing Doyle?