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Fmst 212/3

30 3 94

3000 Words¹

Sweetie and the Unspoken

Like an intricate puzzle, *Sweetie* is a particularly problematical film whose solution is far from self-evident. At first glance it seems composed of multiple perplexing motifs--cognate only by virtue of their respective explorations of relationships: reality and fantasy, sanity and mentality, spirituality and materiality, past and present, natural and unnatural, as well as less abstract family based relationships. As the characters struggle with these relationships, we are left wondering not only what they mean severally, but how they form a unified whole. *Sweetie*, in actual fact, is about none of these things; and yet *Sweetie* is about all of them, for they are each *symptomatic* of the central theme: incest. It is the relationship between film form and film content which makes its theme so difficult to discover, for just as incest, both universally and particularly, is a condition habitually hidden, spoken of more in silence than in sound, made barely visible not by its doing but by its consequent effect, so too it manifests itself in the film by its desire to remain concealed, is spoken of only by insinuation, is seen by its effects: symptoms of dysfunctionality. Quite simply, incest as the central theme upon

¹Sorry it's so many.

which the sense and meaning of the minor themes are dependent, is exposed with reluctance and subtlety using the more suggestive language of film rather than overt dialogue, and so producing a harmonious and wholly appropriate relationship between form and content.

After a careful analysis of the incest theme, in which we shall identify the specific film language diction used in its clandestine portrayal, we shall investigate the several secondary themes, particularly those of nature and spirituality, and discover the meaning they inherit from the incest relationship.

Incest then is never clearly stated, and its first strong expression does not come until almost one hour into the film. This revelation begins with Sweetie re-enacting a childhood custom: having recently been robbed of Bob, her partner and producer--most appropriately by her father's hand--she seeks to impress a surrogate, Louis, by methods not only typical of her childhood, but used specifically to impress her father. Thus we see her hopping about, flipping chairs and so associating what she considers a bona-fide male partner both with her father and particularly the past. This scene might very well be analysed as father and daughter's mutual inability to escape the charming days of Sweetie's childhood, an exploration of the past and present theme. And yet, was Sweetie's childhood really so sweet? Her first words to Gordon when he arrives at Kay's house: "I'm not coming back." Her last words to Gordon, as she sits in the tree house, are all abuse: " . . . break your neck you bloody

bastard." Indeed, we might notice here that all her outrage, all her half heard cries are directed entirely at her father. Not only that, but her painted nudity is like a non-verbal insult. There is certainly something unstated about their relationship, something that does not accord with a charming childhood. Something that shouts in the face of the idea that Gordon's obsessive love for young Sweetie was all above board and questions the nature of the pedestal upon which she was placed. It is by the powers of associational editing, however, that the true implication of the re-enactment scene is really manifest: we cut immediately to the temporally discontinuous bathroom scene. Importantly, it is Kay we first see, and we watch the bathroom therefore through a subjective camera, from Kay's point of view: we are to learn something not only of Sweetie and her father, but Kay also. Sweetie's eroticism is manifest in perfectly appropriate play, pretending to drop the soap, singing innocently, and linking again sex with childhood. We must recall also that this episode is successive to Gordon's displacement of Sweetie's legitimate partner. The sexual link between father and daughter is here made most obvious. The link to childhood and so to incest, however, is still tenuous. There is the associational connection between this scene and the previous one, but there we saw only the re-enactment of childhood. Perhaps then the bathroom scene is an expression more of Sweetie's mental instability. Its significance for Kay, and thus the key to the whole film, is established again by associative editing: the next scene is Kay in bed. There we see her deliberately pulling

the covers over her entire body, as if seeking protection in this childlike act. A slow and equally deliberate pan leads us to the cherished childhood souvenirs: Kay's collection of plaster horses. We would almost expect the now familiar music box melody, Sweetie's childhood theme, but the revelation is so serious only silence will do. The connections then are clearly made: the sexual display in the bathroom is something which Kay relates to their childhood.

The next and only other clear indication of incest turns the focus upon the relationship between Kay and her father. The scene takes place during the drive west. In what would normally be an innocuous action, it is again using cinematic diction that the real idea is expressed: First we see Gordon in profile, eyes straight forward, almost staring, almost paying too much attention to the road ahead. In a reverse shot the camera now takes on a subjective point of view. Key opens her legs slightly and then moves her hand between them. The action is isolated. We are supposed to see it as something important. There is a very obvious sexual connotation, though the camera angles and framing leave it ambiguous. Is the action deliberately sexual? Is Kay's resentment of Sweetie's *special* relationship based upon blame or envy? There are certainly instances elsewhere that suggest Kay blame's Sweetie for the incest with their father. Beside the crocodile infested river, for example, she says, "She's so damn clever. I really think she's evil." To which her mother replies, "She's not evil, she's just frightened." Indeed, blaming the victim is something that would seem entirely appropriate as well

as more likely. And yet there seems something so deliberate and provocative in Kay's movement, as if at some level she seeks to win her father's appreciation using Sweetie's tried and tested technique. And does Gordon watch, as the camera angle implies, or is that intense study of the road ahead, presented in the previous shot, maintained?

Occurring within five minutes of the previous example, both revelations are placed in almost the exact middle of the film, suggesting again that these are the key moments upon which everything else turns.

There are numerous other examples of more subtle declarations of the incest theme. The family's inability to demonstrate affection, particularly when that affection is manifest by physical contact, is delicately drawn in the scene where Flo and Gordon are finally reconciled. Sitting at opposite sides of the table, they hold hands until Kay appears, when their bond is hurriedly relinquished. Although this scene in no way speaks of incest, it does show a context of physical suppression and guilty expression of physicality fundamental to incest inflicted families. In another example, Gordon's guilt is deftly suggested when he breaks down in the car during the return journey home. "I just want everyone to be together," he sobs. Is this simply an example of Gordon's inability to relinquish the good old days? As we have seen, the good old days were really the bad old days. Having the family united would allow Gordon to believe that his secret affair was somehow left behind, that it no longer mattered, that his behaviour in the past has been

vindicated by the family unity of the present. We also should note that as Gordon sobs about togetherness, he is actually left entirely alone in the car. His isolation then is poignant. The inherent dangers of a close association between Gordon and Sweetie is underlined by the dialogue which takes place outside the car. "One thing we've decided," Flo explains, "is that she's [Sweetie] not gonna live with us." Kay responds with heartfelt overstatement: "That's great, that's really great." This is an expression of Kay's resentment of Sweetie's preferred relationship with their father, but also the exclusion of the impecunious Sweetie can only be seen as "great" when we understand it in the context of incest. The idea of incest is also hinted at, naturally enough, when we first meet Flo. Preparing to leave Jordan, her last image is one framed in an oval mirror. This seems, at first, to be merely for purposes of aesthetics until, after a brief excursion to Gordon in the kitchen, we cut to Sweetie, who is framed identically in a smaller oval mirror. Thus a clear connection is made between mother and daughter, showing them as in some way similar. The connection is, we gradually discover, not in their relationship as mother and daughter, but as wife and daughter; and it is for this reason that the two similar framings were separated by a look at Gordon. The roles of wife and daughter are similar, and that similarity is related to Gordon. We later learn then that Sweetie left her father in much the same way as Flo, and the connection between mother and daughter, treating Gordon in like fashion, is strengthened.

We have already seen how the unidirectional abuse of the climactic tree house scene undermines the credibility of the implied sweet days of childhood; but the episode as a whole does much more. Firstly, Gordon reveals the incest mindframe by insisting that problems within the family remain within the family, that outsiders should not be acquainted of the details. More importantly, one carefully framed shot suggests the entire ill-fated stream of cause and effect: with a scene of disaster in the background, with Sweetie fallen from the destroyed tree house, with Sweetie gasping her final breath, peculiar composition draws particular attention to a hose-pipe in the foreground. The hose-pipe dangles, penis-like. Its metaphorical implication is strengthened by the feeble urine-like spurt of water. There is a penis and there is destruction. The connection between sex and disaster is clearly and finally made. The present disaster is connected with childhood when Kay calls, "Sweetie breath," and we see, instead of Sweetie, Clayton, the small boy, gasping away. The implication is clearly that it was childhood suffocation that is really the cause of Sweetie's death.

Now that we understand an incestuous relationship existed between Sweetie and Gordon, that Kay was at the very least privy to this relationship, we begin to understand the underlying dynamics at work in the family based relationships. But it is with this unveiling that other relationships: nature, spirituality, past, illusion, insanity and their respective antitheses--themes with which the film at first seemed

principally concerned--not only begin to make sense, but are relegated to their secondary status.

Deliberate and telling composition is one of the first means of cinematic expression we encounter, and it is the nature motif it pronounces. In the opening scene, we see a large expanse of flowery and leafy carpet--and consequently discover the entire house to be similarly festooned: wall paper, bed covers, table cloths and hanging pictures. As we initially observe the carpet, the still life begins to move: there is a flickering of leafy shadows over the woven flowers. Simultaneously, Kay, in a soliloquy, pays reference to some sinister quality of trees, of roots and their hidden powers, which are in some shadowy and hidden way tied in to Sweetie and her "palace" in the branches. When we first see Kay at work, one shot is deliberately framed to show the flower pattern on her tea cup. Nature, the most consistently used motif, only begins to make sense with the discovery of the incest theme. The single most important aspect of this motif is the tree. It is an appropriate symbol in the context of *Sweetie*, not only because it suggests the family tree, but because it is associated specifically with Sweetie and her tree house; and particularly since it is the roots that most disturb Kay. Incest is not only the root of Kay's problems, namely her inability of form normal relationships, but also incest is, exactly like the roots of Sweetie's tree--and all other trees--something which is hidden from view, something which cannot breach the surface. Kay recognises the power of sexuality, but it seems to her as an unnatural thing, since all

of its associations are incest related. It is for this reason the entire natural realm is given ominous power by Kay: tea leaves predict the future; she asks her clairvoyant friend if herbs can bring back Louis; a sickly tree is seen as being a potentially evil omen. Afraid of this power, she surrounds herself with man-made and impotent representations of nature. It is also in this way that the natural and spiritual realms are connected.

The whole treatment of Kay's search for spirituality is treated with a certain ambivalence. We know it is the inappropriate and unfortunate rejection of the physical--read sexual--self which is behind this search, but this does not seem to justify the humorous approach which characterises the film's portrayal. We notice that spirituality is often misunderstood, by Kay, to mean new age religion, folklore clairvoyance and superstition, and that this, in itself, might be conducive to humour. The absurdity of Kay and Louis spiritual quest is made evident when Kay narrates: "He'd worked out that there were seven spiritual planes, and the kind we had was somewhere near the top." A problem arises though when the world we initially encounter is one in which supernatural happenings *are* possible. How then do we reconcile the ridiculous portrayal two spirits-- Kay and Louis--by their own shirts, which hang by the window in semi-transparency, blowing in the wind and illuminated by heavenly sunlight, with the car park scene, where the sexual passion of the hidden couple is *mysteriously* transferred to Louis' ex-fiancée, who says, "You know, I feel . . . sexy."

"Yeah," her friend agrees. How then do we reconcile the mocking of the viewer, who participates in Kay's superstitions by noting the number thirteen in the garage, with Kay's mole which *mysteriously* moves from the left side of her neck to the right after she meets Louis. The film then presents an actual world which can be influenced by the supernatural, and yet at the same time makes great efforts to ridicule that unphysical realm. Indeed, in a film which deals with such a serious theme with such perfect form, the entire province of humour is somewhat problematical.

If we recognise Kay's flirting with spirituality as being part and parcel of her rejection of the physical side of her relationship with Louis, we must wonder why their initial declaration of love showed no reluctance towards passion. Even the "seven spiritual planes" narrative took place with the couple in bed. The solution comes from the precise moment when Kay rejects the physical side of her relationship. This occurs during the night following the uprooting of the man-made clothes tree which was replaced by the "ominous" natural variety. The couple have been together for thirteen months. Kay lies on her back, Louis has his hand upon her breast. We are to assume that until then their sex life has been normal. But it is the subject of the tree in the garden which they discuss. As they talk we are offered a shot of ominous leafy shadows upon the ceiling. And then Louis, trying to comfort Kay's fears, ironically achieves the opposite effect. "The roots grow to be really strong. They can split concrete." Suddenly Kay turns and Louis'

hand falls away. The light is switched off. It is from this moment that their sexual relationship ceases to exist. Louis reference to concrete splitting ability of tree roots reminds Kay of her irrational fear, narrated in the films very beginning. That fear of roots comes from the association of tree with Sweetie with unnatural sex. The beginning of the dream sequence, which follows, casts aside any doubt that might remain. It begins with the introduction of Sweetie's music box theme. It is the first time we hear it. Sweetie then is associated not only with trees, but with Kay's rejection of sexual relations in this, the earliest foreshadowing of the incest theme that will later be revealed. Using sound and colour, the dream sequence begins by portraying nature from Kay's point of view, as a dangerously and potent force. More importantly though, it shows the planting of a small tree in line with telegraph poles, taking the place of a telegraph pole, and thus showing it destroying normal lines of communication. This is entirely appropriate, for the tree represents both the unspoken sex of her childhood, as well as the unspoken connotation of sex which now takes control in her own relationship.

In a film that takes great care in the naming of its four principal characters--Gordon and Flo suggesting garden and flower and being indicative of the nature theme; Sweetie suggesting something desirable particularly in the context of childhood--it should come as no surprise then that Kay is the key to the puzzle of the film, that makes a unified picture of

so many separate and different motifs. In the nomenclature we see the tremendous attention to detail that makes *Sweetie* such a thoughtful and subtle film.

We have seen with what delicacy and awareness of structure the incest theme was finally broached, and how, with this exposé, the themes of nature and spirituality become expressions of the effects of that incest, particularly upon Kay. It is entirely appropriate that Kay, who is indeed the key to the film, seems not to have been a participant in that incest, but, like us, a witness. In a film of such complexity and subtlety, however, we have really only provided a framework for further understanding; and it is within this framework that the particular dynamics of family relationships can be understood. These are, in themselves, vast topics of discussion, and it is for this reason that they have only be lightly touched upon.

Although perhaps something of an audacious thesis, this quality comes not from its lack of rapport with *Sweetie*, but from the delicate manner in which *Sweetie* is exposed. Not only is the incest theme laid open through cinematic language, creating a perfect accord between form and content, but also the secondary themes are similarly developed. *Sweetie* then is not so much a literary story portrayed through film, but a story whose very essence and expression is *film*.