*Sling Blade*

[*Sling Blade*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117666/); Miramax Films, 1996; Directed by Billy Bob Thorton; Starring Billy Bob Thorton, Dwight Yoakam, J.T. Walsh, and Lucas Black; Rated R; [Watch the trailer](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8CF0izAyrE).

Summary:

*Sling Blade* is a 1996 sleeper hit that was written, directed by and stars Billy Bob Thorton. The film is based on a 1993 short film, *Some Folks Call it a Sling Blade*, that Thorton also wrote. The main character, Karl Childers, is a middle-aged man with an intellectual disability who has spent the past 25 years in what he calls a “nervous hospital” for killing his mother and her teenaged lover with a sling blade. Once released, Karl returns to his hometown in Arkansas and meets 12-year-old Frank, and the two become friends. Frank’s mother Linda invites Karl to live in their shed, and Karl settles into job as a mechanic. The film explores the moral ambiguity of terms such as right and wrong, good and evil. If Flannery O’Connor and William Faulkner co-wrote a screenplay, it would be very much like *Sling Blade*, which won Thorton the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Morality. While Karl Childers’ thoughts and mannerisms might in their simplicity seem child-like, the word is even in his name, Karl’s sense of morality could be said to “grow up” over the course of the film.
* Hero. In an age where many film and television stars are anti-heroes, Karl is more of an unlikely hero.
* Parallels and cycles. Karl is 12 years old, the same age as Frank, when he kills his mother and her lover. To Frank, whose father committed suicide, Karl is a father figure; to Karl, whose brother died as a baby, Frank is a little brother. Karl’s dilemma upon learning of Doyle’s abuse overlaps with the situation he experienced at age 12.
* Religion. Karl carries a Bible with him and even recalls Bible lessons from his mother. However, he tells his father, who as an old man is surrounded by Christian artifacts, “Them stories you and Mama told me ain’t in [the Bible].”

Discussion Questions:

1. Is there a difference between killing and murder? How does this apply to the film?
2. How does Karl reconcile Vaughn’s homosexuality with what Karl has read in the Bible?
3. How does the death of Karl’s baby brother impact him?
4. Should Linda have taken on more responsibility for protecting Frank from Doyle? Was she trapped? Passive?
5. Dissect Karl’s baptism. Why does he get baptized? Are there biblical allusions to Jesus? Is it significant that on the day of the final murder it rains?
6. Karl’s reaction to the stream-of-consciousness stories from the child molester in the hospital at the beginning compared to the end of the film is different. What has changed?
7. Is the film’s ending predictable? Inevitable? How does this affect your opinion of the film?
8. Does the film grant redemption for Karl? If so, in what way(s)?