

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

## STEALING BEAUTY 1996

Bernardo Bertolucci

### OVERVIEW

*Stealing Beauty* is not one of the auteur's masterpieces, but it is still a hauntingly beautiful film about a girl searching for sex, love and family, and finding lessons about aging and art along the way. It is a gentle film, with humour and a wispy atmosphere. Some idea of the inspiration for the film came from Bertolucci himself when he said this: 'The people who make up this cosmopolitan community...had been very politically engaged twenty or thirty years previously; but, out of despair, they decided to abandon their political dreams and seek refuge far from the vulgar crowd, at the top of a hill, overlooking a unique landscape whose incredible beauty inspired the Tuscan painters of the 14th and 15th centuries.' This may explain why so much of the film concerns memory and disillusionment.

### PEOPLE

Lucy	Lucy, an American, is Sara Harmon's daughter.
Ian	Ian, Lucy's unknown father, is a sculptor living in Tuscany.
Diana	Diana is Ian's wife.
Alex	Alex is an English writer who is dying.
Miranda	Miranda is Lucy's step-sister.
Richard	Richard is Miranda's boyfriend.
Niccolo	Niccolo was Lucy's boyfriend during her first visit.
Oswaldo	Oswaldo is Niccolo's brother.

### SYNOPSIS

Lucy Harmon comes to a Tuscan villa at age 19, looking for her real father after her mother's suicide and hoping to find her boyfriend from her first visit four years earlier. Her mother had been living there when she was conceived, and now she stays there with many of her mother's old friends. During her stay, she has various experiences, sexual, romantic and otherwise. She is sculpted by the villa's owner, Ian, who also sculpted her mother. but Lucy establishes a closer rapport with Alex, a dying writer. In the end, after disappointments in love, she discovers that Ian is her father and has sexual intercourse for the first time with her old boyfriends' brother.

### SCENES

*Lucy arrives* 19-year-old Lucy arrives at the Tuscan villa of her mother's old friends, Ian and Diana. Lucy knew them when, four years earlier, she had visited her mother in the same village. Now, following her mother's suicide, she has come to spend a summer vacation. She will write poetry, and Ian will make an image of her. Also staying at the villa are Alex, an English writer, Miranda, Lucy's step-sister, and Richard, Miranda's boyfriend. Lucy is disappointed not to find Niccolo, an Italian boy, who was her first love during her first visit.

*Miranda and Richard* Lucy meets topless Miranda by the pool and learns that Niccolo is away with Christopher, Miranda's brother. Miranda introduces her to Richard, her lover. 'Ah, this is, you know, ah, Mommy's friend's daughter.' Richard says he admired Lucy's mother, as a great poet and then strips off and jumps naked into the pool with Lucy.

*Secrets* Lucy hears that Christopher and Niccolo are not coming back soon and that they have 'gone beyond naughty.' Diana talks to Lucy about her mother's admirable recklessness. Late that night, Lucy smokes marijuana with Alex, who reveals that he is dying. In turn, she reveals that she is a virgin. It also turns out that Lucy has come to the villa to find out which of the men from her mother's past is her father. At the same time, everyone is speculating about who would be a good boyfriend for her.

*Revelation* Passing their room at night, Lucy watches the athletic love-making of Richard and Miranda. The next day, Alex accompanies Lucy to the pool, where everyone is naked and cavorting about. 'I can't bear it,' says Alex. 'It's too unnatural.' Lucy is merely amused until she overhears Diana mention that Lucy is a virgin. Furious with Alex for revealing her secret, she decides to leave but Niccolo and Christopher return just in time to make her stay.

*Rejection* Lucy has kept her love for Niccolo alive in her memory and is crushed when he isn't interested in her. When Niccolo and his brother Osvaldo come to the villa for dinner, the young people smoke a joint and share stories about how they lost their virginity. Lucy speaks about love, but Niccolo, whom she cuddles up to, says that love isn't important. The following day, Lucy bicycles to Niccolo's family villa and finds him in a garden kissing a girl. She leaves without saying a word but looks daggers at him when Niccolo and his girlfriend join everyone at a restaurant.

*Aroused* Next day, as Lucy is posing for Ian, she exposes a breast, which catches Richard's attention. Arriving in a car, Niccolo is aroused, while Osvaldo shows disapproval of her shamelessness. Niccolo follows Lucy into an olive grove and begins to make love to her. She responds but suddenly pushes him away and runs off.

*Father candidates* When Lucy is comforted by Alex, she shows him her mother's notebook of old poems. One poem seems to contain clues to her father, and they consider various candidates. Lucy questions Ian about where he was when she was born and he says he was doing her mother's portrait. They agree that he is probably her father, and she agrees not to tell Diana about his unfaithfulness to her.

*No sex* That night, Lucy goes to a special party at a big villa wearing her mother's dress. Niccolo is with yet another girl, while Osvaldo is playing in the open-air band. Amid the drinking and merry-making, Lucy meets an English man and takes him back to the villa, but they don't have sex.

*Virginity lost* Osvaldo comes looking for Lucy, who gets stung by bees. He takes her to a stream and covers the stings with mud plaster. As they talk, Lucy discovers that he wrote the letter that she thought Niccolo had written, a letter she loves so much that she memorised every line. They make love under a tree. It is his first time, too.

## THEMES

### 1. Love

*search for love* The story is centred on Lucy's search for love (and sex), which takes her through various relationships. During the course of her pursuit, the film touches on eternal topics, such as love versus sex, and how we can show love. In addition, the story includes examples of platonic love, paternal love and marital love. While the sexual scenes are eye-catching, the mood of the film is captured more completely in the scenes that discuss and display love.

*virginity* One of the pivotal scenes occurs early when Lucy tells Alex that she's a virgin. The older man is surprised and asks if she is moralistic and disapproves of sex. 'It's not as if I never wanted to sleep with anyone,' she says and describes her early infatuation with Niccolo, who was her first boyfriend. Alex suggests that her mother's death put an end to that relationship, which makes her angry. 'Lucy, Lucy,' he says, 'You're in need of a ravisher.' When she says she's 'ready,' we realise that she has no moral barriers to sex.

*Niccolo: old flame* One step on Lucy's path to full sexual experience is taken with Niccolo, the boy with whom she thought she was in love, from the kiss four years ago. At first Niccolo shows no interest but then sees her with her breast exposed while posing for Ian. 'Not bad,' he says to his brother, who shows disapproval at her seeming impropriety. When Lucy leaves Ian and walks into an olive grove, Niccolo stalks her. Catching up, he says she is beautiful and slips off a strap of her dress. Soon, they are on the ground, kissing passionately, but we see that while Lucy is responding, she is also appraising the situation. When he slips his hand between her legs, she says, 'Wait.' As he moves closer to intercourse, she cries, 'Not here. I can't.' When Niccolo doesn't stop, she screams, 'I can't! No!' Pushing hard, she shoves him aside and runs off. Crying in her room, she brushes the dirt from her shoulders, as if to remove all trace of an unwanted sexual encounter.

**Richard: womanizer** Other men consider Lucy a new piece of flesh, particularly after it becomes known that she is a virgin. There's Richard who is otherwise engaged but tries to seduce her anyway with an "acting exercise" that will help her relax (it involves getting down on all fours and licking a mirror). It's characteristic of the warmth of the film that Richard, who is the closest thing to a villain in it, should seem endearing when he's trying to get something he really wants. He tries to seduce young Lucy, but his attempt is more humorous than sinister.

**Richard and Miranda: voyeurism** Walking past the main house one night, Lucy hears animalistic grunts. She peers into a window and sees Richard and Miranda going at it with wild abandon. 'I love fucking you,' Richard cries. 'I fucking love fucking you. Tell me you like it, baby.' Her screams of 'Yes! Yes!' soon turn to 'No! No!' But Lucy's eyes are wide open with a combination of interest and fear. Richard and Miranda are not married, and they are the only couple who show this kind of unbridled sexual desire. Although it's difficult to gauge the effect of this voyeuristic experience on Lucy, she is neither repelled nor aroused. It's part of the learning curve.

**Oswaldo: romance** Lucy's search for love culminates in a scene in which she loses her virginity to Oswaldo, a boy she thinks she loves. The key point is that Lucy finally finds out that he (and not his brother) wrote the love letter that brought her back to Tuscany in the first place. Their love-making is slow, sweet and consensual. That last quality is made absolutely clear when Oswaldo says, 'Could you help me' just as he is about to enter her. Throughout this scene, Lucy smiles as if in seventh heaven. There is no grunting, no screaming, only brief cries of pleasure. When it is over, Lucy's face is radiant. It is a fitting ending to a mellow film.

## 2. Friendship

**Alex** Something approaching love develops between Lucy and Alex, the ailing writer. Starting with sharing marijuana and personal secrets, these two disparate figures establish an emotional rapport, which culminates in a scene when they sit on his bed reading her mother's poem that describes the sexual act that conceived Lucy. The intimacy of the poem is matched by their own deep feelings for each other, he with his arm around her, she with her head resting on his chest. It is one of the most tender moments in the film, this mutual affection between the dying man and the sexually budding girl. His age and condition make him 'safe' for her, while her joyful youth gives him hope.

## 3. Parent

**Ian** Lucy is looking for her father and seems to have found a surrogate father in Alex, but he is still more a friend than a blood relative. It is only toward the end of the film that Lucy finds paternal love when she and Ian realise that she is his daughter. The scene is skilfully directed. Little by little, they piece together the details that confirm Lucy's belief that Ian is the man described in her mother's poem about her conception. She comes to his studio with a bouquet of wild flowers, which she gives to him when their mutual understanding of their true relationship is clear. Slowly they approach each other and then both giggle. She wants to see her sculpted image, and he says he will show it to her before it is finished, but only if she keeps it a secret. Putting his arm around her, he says, 'How did you become such a lovely girl?' They look at the sculpture and then at each other, Lucy leans her head on his shoulder and they embrace. This is the consummation of her search. She has found her father, a man who loves her.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Lucy** Lucy is a young American woman on the cusp of womanhood. She is attractive, even sexy, but also childlike and physically awkward at the same time. She is candid yet shy, afraid of who she might be. She's also curious, seeking not only her father but also her identity. And she is sensitive, captivated by a four-year-old love letter, and responsive to beauty in poetry, art and the landscape.

**Candid** Lucy has the candour of a young American of the 1990s. Although sexually inexperienced, she is not afraid to talk about it, as is illustrated in the first scene with Alex, the writer. As they exchange ideas, while sharing a joint, she says that she's never had sex. It comes out almost accidentally, and she speaks quite casually, as if she were saying that she's never been to some famous city or country. This attitude toward sex is central to understanding her character. She does not regard her virginity in any religious or moral light. She is looking forward to losing it, hopefully with Niccolo, the person she has selected for herself. It doesn't quite turn out that way, but her openness concerning sex means that losing her virginity is not traumatic.

**Wild teenager** Lucy is sometimes contemplative, but sometimes wildly energetic. This aspect of her character is revealed in a brief scene, when Alex wonders if Lucy is still angry at him for revealing her secret about her virginity, Diana assures him 'that she's not giving it much thought' and points through a window. Inside, Lucy is throwing herself about with abandon as she listens to loud rock music (grunge) on her headphones. She sings along with the lyrics, flinging her arms in the air and nearly falling over. It is an unguarded moment, when we realise that pensive Lucy is still just a teenager, full of energy and searching for an outlet.

**Searching** Lucy's search for her father, which drives the narrative forward, is dramatised in several scenes, but nowhere more poignantly than when she and Alex read one of her mother's poem. They are lying side by side on his bed, his arm around her as he reads the tender words that describe the moment when her mother conceived her. When he reads the last line, she is in tears. 'It's my real father,' she says through her strangled sobs. He agrees, and after a moment's silence, she looks up at him, 'It's not you, is it?' He dismisses that idea with a laugh, and she mentions another man but adds that she's 'not sure anymore.' Suddenly, she sits up and says, 'Let's forget about it. I already have a father [step-father] I love.' The vehemence with which she speaks only reveals the strength of her desire to find her real father.

**Alex** Alex is a frail man, whose pale face displays his slow decline to death. Despite that condition, he is a proud person who does not want to be fussed over. And he is deeply sympathetic, especially toward Lucy, whose youth infuses him with a burst of life. In this relationship with her, he displays empathy, vulnerability and the capacity for love.

**Gentle** As they smoke marijuana in their first scene, the dying man and the young woman strike up an immediate rapport. When it comes out that she is still a virgin at 19, he is surprised and asks why. She explains, but he isn't satisfied. 'You're scared.,' he says. 'What is it you're scared of?' When she doesn't answer, he says, 'There's something else isn't there? I can see.' When she leaves to return to her room, he kisses her hand and says, 'Sweet dreams.' Throughout this character-establishing scene, Alex's voice is gentle and warm, neither condemning nor invasive, but only calmly probing, genuinely interested in her situation and her fears.

**Loving** Another moving scene takes place between Alex and Lucy after she has come back from the villa, where she has seen Niccolo with another girl. Angry and confused, she speeds away on her bicycle, falls over and scratches her knee. Returning to the villa, Alex notices her injury, and when she dismisses it as a scratch, he won't hear of it. 'It's terrible. Wait, I'll do something about it.' He disconnects his IV drip and tends to her cut by cleaning it with alcohol. 'Blow on it, please,' she says like a little girl. Alex smiles and lowers his head to cool her scratch with his breath. When he's finished, he says, 'You don't know how much good your being here has done me. Better than all the drugs. You're my own personal walking IV.' He beams at her with a smile that stretches all across his face. He is rarely happy, but he is always loving toward Lucy.

**Ian** Ian has a chiselled face, much like one of his wood images, which makes him look older than he is. Often, he stares with cold concentration at his model or his sculpture. But he is also a warm and affectionate man, with no apparent agenda, sexual or otherwise, except for his work. And he works long and hard in his studio, never allowing his model to see the image until it is finished.

**Dedicated** Ian has been asked by Lucy's step-father in the US to sculpt her and he doesn't waste time getting down to work. A day after she arrives, Ian calls her into his studio, where he sits her down and begins to make charcoal sketches. He doesn't talk much, only responding to her comments, and tells her to concentrate on an object behind him 'to help you keep still.' His only unprovoked comment is to remark that Lucy is different from her mother (whom he also sculpted) because of the joy in her eyes. What he wants to achieve is not a superficial likeness but the essence of the person. His dedication to his art is total.

**Vulnerable** The softness beneath Ian's hard exterior appears in one memorable scene. Near the beginning, Ian is sitting up in bed with a book, chatting to his wife, Diana, who is preparing for bed. When Diana says that Lucy is stranded with 'us old fogies,' Ian says, 'Speak for yourself,' implying that his passions are not all spent. Diana then comments wistfully on how Lucy could be having romantic adventures elsewhere. Ian looks at her hopefully, but she says she's not coming to bed yet and starts to turn off the light. 'Come here,' he says. 'Give me a goodnight kiss.' She plants her lips on his forehead. 'Another one,' he sighs. She complies and he tries to draw her down, but she pulls away, leaving Ian forlorn. Like everyone else, Ian needs love and proofs of love,

**Miranda** Miranda is the one character whom it is easy to dislike. Shallow, catty and stuck-up, she thinks she is a wonderful jewellery designer, who has bestowed her presence on the others at the villa. Bringing her hunky boyfriend with her, she enjoys nude sunbathing and heavy-duty sex. When Lucy arrives, she is jealous and loses her sangfroid.

**Blasé** Miranda's loathsome character is captured brilliantly in a brief moment when she meets Lucy by the pool. She is completely naked except for sunglasses and a towel that doesn't quite cover her pubic hair. When Lucy, in a modest swim suit, comes up for air, she says, 'I thought you were drowning. I was wondering if I'd have to haul you out or not.' Her voice is devoid of any emotion, except annoyance at the thought of having to help another person. 'I don't really live here,' she says, airily. 'But we come, every year. On Mommy's birthday. To console her.' That final phrase is uttered with a sneer, again displaying her contempt even for her own mother. Miranda's weary indifference is in sharp contrast to Lucy's perky curiosity.

**Jealous** After young Lucy arrives, Miranda sizes up her half-sister with cunning and anxiety. She's definitely a threat to her, especially with Richard. That fear bursts out into the open during a scene when Lucy, Richard and little Daisy are playing together on the lawn in front of the villa. They run around, one of them carrying a scarf, which the other two attempt to grab. Richard and Lucy end up falling down together, with her short dress flying up, exposing her underwear. As they squirm and squeal with innocent delight, the others watch from the patio and smile at the innocent antics. But Miranda's smile turns in a flash into a scowl and she smashes her coffee cup on the flagstone. 'Are you coming swimming or not, Richard!' she cries. She does not like what she has seen.