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Chocolat

Abstract

This is a review of *Chocolat* (2000).

Chocolat is a bittersweet tale of temperance, or rather, a story of the struggle to achieve temperance when the Catholic Church meets a formidable adversary in a two thousand year old recipe for hot chocolate. While the church tries to repress carnal nature, cocoa is the aphrodisiac that unlocks primordial passions.

On a micro-level, the conflict is most obvious between Vianne Rocher (Juliette Binoche), the single mother of Anouk and recent arrival to the town of Lansquenet, and Comte de Reynaud (Alfred Molina), the mayor and self-appointed moral authority for the entire community. Yet, *Chocolat* is not a typical story of good versus evil. Vianne and the count, in spite of their personal and ideological differences, are both hostages to their respective heritages and traditions.

Vianne, who is half-Mayan, is descended from a nomadic people, destined to carry on the family tradition of "dispensing ancient remedies, never settling down." The count, on the other hand, is equally a prisoner of his lineage as he is descended from a long line of Counts and by example must exemplify unquestionable morality. Thus, even though his wife has left him, he persists in explaining her absence as an extended vacation in order to maintain appearances. Interestingly, the two icons that seem to give him the most comfort, and simultaneous torture, are the photographs of his wife and the crucifixes that he surrounds himself with.

An adult Anouk in fairy-tale fashion narrates the film as she reflects on her childhood arrival in a little French village in 1959 with her mother and invisible playmate, a kangaroo named Pantoufle. The threesome arrives in town astride a north wind of questionable human attributes. Vianne rents a dusty, old patisserie, located right across the street from the church, and proceeds to transform the shop into a chocolaterie. As if to add insult to injury, she opens for business at the onset of Lent. Father Henri (Hugh O'Connor), meanwhile, is busy delivering a homily in which he sets the tone for a season of "abstinence, reflection and sincere penitence."

Like the variety of confectioneries to be found in the shop, the villagers are an assorted bunch themselves. Josephine (Lena Olin), a battered wife and kleptomaniac, has fleeting moments of coherency and is driven to the brink of madness more by the pressure she feels to fit in and be a good wife than by the tragedy of her circumstances. Carolyn (Carrie-Ann Moss), a widow and daughter of Armand, is a repressive woman who smothers her son, Luc (Aurelien Parent Koenig). Young Luc is an introvert who expresses himself through drawing, often creating macabre self-portraits.

Vianne prides herself on being able to discern her customers' favorite truffles. With the exception of a river wanderer and love interest named Roux (Johnny Depp), she is usually right. However, Vianne's strength is not in her recipes, rather it is in her ability to give unconditional love and acceptance to others

in spite of their flaws and foibles. Her weakness is that she cannot break free from her own troubled and ancient past, as evidenced by another traveling companion, the ashes of her deceased mother with whom she confers, and of whom seems to hold some control over her even from the urn.

When the north wind returns and beckons Vianne to embark on yet another journey, she dutifully packs to go. But Anouk has had enough of the vagabond missionary life. They tussel and the urn is broken, the spell is weakened. But the north wind is not easily dissuaded and Vianne's transformation is only complete when she offers her mother's ashes to the wind. In doing so she reclaims herself from a lifetime of wandering and is free to choose her own destiny.

On the eve of Easter, the count experiences his own Gethesemane in a night of anguishing and searching prayer. The answer, he thinks, is to destroy the chocolaterie. After he breaks in and begins to destroy it, a spatter of chocolate lands on his lips. In a state of delirium, he succumbs to its potency and breaks his ascetical fast with a feast in the display case of the front window. When he recovers he realizes that he has been overly zealous in persecuting Vianne.

In the end, the moral message that emerges is that the "miracle of our Lord's divine transformation" is recalling the way he lived and in emulating that humanity. True freedom comes in accepting others as they are, and allowing them the freedom

to be all that God has created them to be. It is not who we exclude that counts, but who we include that makes all the difference.

Like many films, *Chocolat* is rife with religious themes and imagery, without being a religious film. Its release is both timely in this Lenten season and worth checking out.