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Eating Otherness: The Unifying Qualities of Chocolate in Lasse Hallström's *Chocolat*

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Paige Lockard is originally from Kansas City and attended Lee's Summit North High School. Now, she is majoring in both English literature and psychology, as well as studying French and business for minor degrees. Next year, she will be working on Honors Capstones in both of her major areas of study. She will graduate in May of 2016, after which she hopes to explore a few different areas of employment, or continue her education in postgraduate studies. She chose to write about Lasse Hallström's *Chocolat* because it has been a favorite of hers since childhood. Dr. Roth taught her how to analyze the film in much greater depth than she had ever considered before, and she now understands *Chocolat* to be of truly great quality as well as truly great entertainment.

Many films that directly involve food as a plot point or major theme choose to use it as either a means of utopia or dystopia, positive or negative. Because different foods are conducive to different moods within a film, oftentimes the decision to use foods positively or negatively directly relates to the tone the filmmakers wish to establish throughout the entirety of the piece. Because these foods often represent a dichotomous relationship between characters or plots within a film, Lasse Hallström's use of food in *Chocolat* (2000) is especially intriguing. Here, chocolate is used as *both* a positive and negative symbol in the town, creating *both* unity and conflict. The chocolate itself does not change within the film, only the way it is interpreted by other characters. Hallström uses chocolate as a means for establishing otherness in Vianne's character, as well as working as a unifier amongst the

townspeople. He masters this feat without altering anything but the external notions surrounding the confection, and the way in which it affects the characters' lives.

Chocolat is a film about a woman who moves to the conservative French village of Lansquenet in the 1950's, disrupting the town's otherwise quiet lifestyle by opening a Mayan chocolaterie. The heroine of the film, Vianne (Juliette Binoche), moves to Lansquenet with little intention to stay for any extended amount of time, due to her nomadic nature and Mayan heritage. Upon arriving, she is immediately met with disdain from the townspeople, namely Le Comte Reynaud, played by Alfred Molina. Le Comte is the acting mayor of the town, as well as being a critical player in the Catholic Church and direct influence on the town's new priest. Because his pious reputation is on the line, Le Comte works endlessly to thwart Vianne's attempts to gather business for her chocolaterie, which she opens on Ash Wednesday. Vianne's closest friend and ally throughout the film, Josephine (Lena Olin), is first introduced as a battered wife and resident black sheep of Lansquenet, and only happens upon Vianne's shop in an attempt to steal some chocolate. Another important influence on Vianne's success is Armande (Judi Dench), who is a grumpy old woman who rents the shop to Vianne upon her arrival, and eventually helps to endear her to the townspeople. In the midst of her struggle to win over the town, Vianne meets Roux (Johnny Depp), a riverboat dweller with whom she has a brief romance, further distancing her from the conservative piety of the townspeople.

However, a way in which Vianne attempts to further her place in the community is by helping Armande reconnect with her grandson, Luc, and estranged daughter Caroline, who works for Le Comte and disapproves of Armande much in the same way she disapproves of Vianne. Throughout the film, it becomes obvious that in many ways, Vianne and chocolate become synonymous with the "other;" something to be feared, disliked, or disapproved of by the town of Lansquenet. One reason for this disapproval is the enormous influence the conservative Catholic Church has on the town, and in the time of Lent, there is even more pressure for the townspeople to show their piety by denying themselves physical pleasure, which includes the consumption of chocolate. For Vianne, this creates a clear animosity between herself and the other townspeople.

At the onset of the film, Vianne's shop and chocolates only work to divide her from the rest of the townspeople, who are attempting to recognize Catholic Lenten. Vianne's otherness is apparent in many ways, almost all of which are catalyzed through her chocolate confections. One major way Vianne contrasts the other women in the town is her obvious embrace of her sexuality, which is shown through her dress and relationship with Roux. For example, the first scene in which we are introduced to Vianne, she and her daughter, Anouk, are wearing striking red capes as they walk through an otherwise brown and dusty, deserted town. Continuing from there, Vianne is always shown wearing tight fitting, cleavage bearing dresses in rich and saturated colors, symbolically showing her affinity for indulgence.

There is even a scene later in the film in which Anouk finds fault in her mother's dress, pointing out that she wished her mother could just wear black shoes like all the other mothers. This sexuality is easily translated to Vianne's chocolates, further tying together indulgence of taste and sexuality as being one in the same when it comes to physical pleasure. In one scene specifically, Josephine has left her abusive husband to find refuge in the Chocolaterie Maya. Vianne begins to teach Josephine how to

make nipples of Venus, a dark chocolate mound whose tip is then dipped into white chocolate, creating a striking resemblance to the female breast. Here, the chocolate creates a canvas on which Vianne enables Josephine to embrace her own sexuality and power, showing that the conservative values of the town, which pressured Josephine to stay with her husband, are no longer relevant. This scene is also obviously indicative of Vianne's comfort with her own sexuality, as she is comfortable making and selling chocolates that look like the female body form.

In a film review in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Elizabeth Wallace writes that, "Josephine begins her new life with Vianne and Anouk by learning to make chocolate—a sensual, healing ritual of melting, stirring, and pouring. Vianne first teaches Josephine the art of making 'nipples of Venus'" ("Film Review: Mother Love and *Chocolat*"). Here, Wallace asserts that the entire art of making chocolate gives light to sensual activity, not just the nipples of Venus. This furthers the argument that Vianne, who is already learned in the art, influences Josephine's sexuality and confidence by involving her in the process of taking a rich, wet, and indulgent liquid, and molding it into whatever creation the two women desire. In accordance with this, Antoine Prost writes in an article from *Population and Development Review* that, "the French Catholic Church had a longstanding tradition of teaching...an explicit sexual morality that rested on three premises" ("Catholic Conservatives, Population, and the Family").

In very blunt terms, Prost stipulates that the first of these premises is that sexuality is evil. Chastity was of the utmost importance to conservative French Catholics, and absolute restraint from sex was ideal even inside the sanctity of marriage. Vianne's sexuality is apparent in her dress, her relationship with Roux, which is sexual but without commitment (let alone marriage), and her close ties with chocolate, which represents physical indulgence and pleasure in another arena. Prost's research also leads the reader to conclude that Josephine, who is in all accounts a righteous woman who obeys her husband, is breaking the societal norms established in the town by taking part in the chocolate making, which is chalked full of sexual symbolism and outside of her marriage bounds. Prost also informs his readers that, "the clergy ceaselessly railed against situations—such as dancing—that might lead to [sex]" ("Catholic Conservatives, Population, and the Family"). This directly relates to Josephine's sexual evolution as well. Later in the film, after Armande's birthday dinner, Josephine dances with several men on Roux's boat, lifting her skirt and twirling around in great delight as her husband looks on from a distance. Where this show of dancing may exhibit the resolution of Josephine's sexual awakening, her lesson on making nipples of Venus surely represents the beginning. In this, it is obvious that chocolate creates otherness in Vianne's sexuality and its representation of such, but as well as its contrast to the townspeople's intentions to deny themselves physical pleasure, especially during Lent.

Another way in which Vianne is an "other" to the townspeople is her apparent Atheism. Vianne opens her chocolate shop at the onset of Lent, a time when the town practices abstinence from pleasurable activities. Early in the film when Vianne is still preparing her shop for its opening, Le Comte visits and chastises her for opening a chocolaterie during Lent. Le Comte presents himself as mayor, as well as a representative of the Church, and invites Vianne to come to mass. In turn, Vianne refuses his invitation and explains that she and her daughter "do not attend." In this, the chocolaterie itself, as an extension of Vianne's character, stands in contrast with the Catholic Church. This is symbolic in that chocolates

represent the very thing that the townspeople are abstaining from, as well as literal in that the Chocolaterie Maya sits directly across from the church in Lansquenet square.

Margaret McFadden addresses this contrast between the church and the chocolaterie in terms of Christ-figures, noting that Jesus Christ belongs to the Church in the same way that Vianne, acting as a Christ-like figure, belongs to the chocolaterie. She goes on to detail Vianne's similarities to the role of Christ because "she heals people and brings them together across generational and class lines" (Bower 125). She draws another connection to Vianne and Christ when "Vianne offers a healing glass to the chocolate-sodden mayor, just as Christ offered his hand to heal Jairus's daughter, the blind man, and the leper" (Bower 126). These similarities offer complexity to the film, where for the most part Vianne's Christ-like actions cause much unrest in the town when she first arrives. Because the town already engages Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church, Vianne's role disrupted their routine because she offered benevolence by means of chocolates and friendliness, as opposed to redemption and blessings. These are the same similarities to Christ that do eventually endear Vianne to the townspeople, however, when they begin to understand that pleasure and benevolence exist on a physical, as well as a spiritual plain.

As the film goes on, the audience finds that as much as the chocolaterie made Vianne an outsider to the town, the confections also brought the community together through a mutual appreciation of the chocolate, and greater understanding (and appreciation) of earthly and physical pleasures. One of the first times we see the community come together, if not literally then in spirit, is in the consecutive shots of the townspeople sitting in confession, talking about the pleasure that Vianne's chocolates have given them. One after another, the audience glimpses what the townspeople tell the priest during confession, which lends a voyeuristic quality to this otherwise pure practice; the same way Vianne's chocolate shop just slightly taints the purity and piety of Lansquenet. Furthermore, the confessional setting of these scenes shows that although the village is admitting to taking great pleasure from the taste of chocolate, they are still living under the shadowed guise of the Church. In this way, it is apparent that they still consider their appreciation of the chocolate as something shameful, and only feel comfortable admitting their joy to the priest, the highest religious figure in the film. It is as if the townspeople are looking to be absolved or forgiven for their pleasure, which directly connects the chocolate to sin. However, because all of the townspeople are partaking in the chocolate during lent, and they all feel they need to confess this "sin," they are clearly connected not only to each other, but also to Vianne. The Chocolaterie Maya has created a division between the church and the chocolate-eaters, but more so it has created a unity in Lansquenet because, for that very reason, the chocolate-eaters and the churchgoers have become one in the same people.

One of the most important scenes in the film is Armande's birthday celebration, which in contrast with the confessional scenes, represents the first time the townspeople come together to openly rejoice and partake in food pleasures. It is important to note that Vianne is the host and chef of the party, putting her at the center of the town's celebration. Previously, Vianne acted as an outsider to the town's traditions, including mass, lent, and confession. Part of this is religious, as Vianne is an atheist, which contrasts every other person who practices devout Catholicism in the film, and part of it is regional. The town is made up of one homogenous group, where everyone behaves and thinks similarly. Vianne is a nomadic, single woman with Mayan heritage and knowledge of divination. She contrasts the town in almost every way. However, during Armande's birthday dinner, Vianne is the center of the town's

festivities, and acts as a catalyst for their pleasure. Here, the food acts as a mediator between Vianne and the town, bringing them together in a mutual celebration and appreciation of food. She does not only join in the town's community, she enables it.

Jennifer Schulz speaks to the effectiveness of food as a mediator in *Chocolat*, focusing on its role in relation to the strong female lead found in the film. She argues that mediation and cooking are both historically feminine roles, creating an immediate divide between the male (Le Comte) and female (Vianne) characters. She goes on to argue that Vianne's main role in the film is not as a cook at all, but solely as a mediator, and the chocolaterie simply acts as a disguise for her within the plot. Vianne's use of chocolate throughout the film, as well as cook for Armande's birthday shows how she "extol[s] the virtues of women maintaining their ambitions and [uses] them to fundamentally change the relations of dominance and subordination around [her]" ("The Cook, the Mediator, the Feminist, and the Hero"). Considering Schulz's assertion that Vianne's role in the film is as mediator, in many ways her work in the chocolaterie does change the "relations of dominance and subordination" around her. Using chocolate, she mediates Josephine's development into an independent female, shifting the balance of power in her relationship to Serge.

Vianne also mediates a shift in power in Armande's relationship with her daughter, moving both Armande and Caroline into an equally dominating respect. Another instance in which Vianne acts as mediator occurs most apparently in the scene depicting Armande's birthday party. Through cooking, the catalyst that Schulz cites as means of mediation in the film, Vianne prepares a meal so incredible that camaraderie amongst the guests is inevitable. Where the townspeople were previously reluctant to fraternize with the riverboat gypsies, now they eat, dance, and celebrate in harmony with one another. Again, Vianne's character is inherently tied to the food she produces, where she is mediator and chocolate is her tool for mediation. Therefore, the chocolaterie metaphorically replaces the church as the main gathering place in which the town relates to one another and fosters their community. Given this, Armande's birthday party represents the first time this newfound community is shown, as well as the penultimate shift for Vianne from "other" to insider in the context of Lansquenet.

The final scene in the film wherein chocolate acts as a community unifier portrays the chocolate festival after mass, on Easter Sunday. This scene synthesizes the two strongest opponents in the film (Vianne and the chocolaterie on one side, Le Comte and the church on the other), and is paramount in showing that Vianne has successfully become a welcomed part of the town. She is neither rejected by the people of Lansquenet, nor has she overridden their previous beliefs with her influence. Where the chocolaterie previously stood in opposition to the church, in the final scene the community is seen gathering in the square, the space between the two buildings. This shows how the people have embraced both the Chocolaterie Maya as well as the Catholic Church, where both places can cohabitate the same way Vianne and Le Comte have learned to cohabitate. Just prior to the chocolate festival, Le Comte breaks into the chocolaterie in an attempt to destroy it, but ends up gorging himself on the delicious confections and falling asleep in Vianne's window display. It is here that Le Comte concedes to the value of the chocolaterie and the pleasures of chocolate. Given this, it is important to notice his participation in the chocolate festival, gathering with all the other townspeople for the celebration. Vianne's last and major antagonist falls, and the many contrasting influences displayed throughout the film are neutralized, resulting in one diversely balanced and content community.

In many ways, Lasse Hallström embraces the typical uses of food in film, showing it at the center of conflict between characters. However, he uses the same food in the same way to also unify those same characters, resolving the very conflicts the chocolate created in the first place. By doing this, it becomes clear that chocolate is as much of a catalyst for the other characters as it is a catalyst in itself. As an extension of Vianne's character, the chocolate creates barriers involving the church, the townspeople, and the basic norms that the town values at the onset of the film. But through the evolution of the characters and their appreciation of the chocolate and of Vianne's presence, those barriers soon become common ground amongst the people of Lansquenet, allowing for a new understanding of Catholicism, mediation, and pleasure as it relates to themselves and their beliefs.

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