

Egoyan's *Chloe* :

An Allegory of True Love and Divine Light

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“That daughter of Eve, weak like all her sisters, who had so often
bartered her own flesh, was yet something splendid and wondrous.”
– Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*.

Prefatory Note:

This is an allegorical interpretation of the film *Chloe* – the U. S. theatrical version – starring Julianne Moore as Catherine, Liam Neeson as David, and Amanda Seyfried as Chloe; directed by Atom Egoyan; screenplay by Erin Cressida Wilson, based on *Nathalie*, directed by Anne Fontaine, and written by Jacques Fieschi, François-Olivier Rousseau, and Anne Fontaine, from an original idea by Philippe Blasband. It is assumed that the reader is familiar with this film and won't object to the spoilers contained in the following pages.



Fig. I. Chloe (Amanda Seyfried) sitting in a hotel room after an “assignation” with David. She wears a white bathrobe, and the lamp behind her suggests a halo, one of many in the film.

To understand *Chloe*, we must keep two things in mind. The film contains an allegory – essentially a hidden message conveyed through symbolism and personifications. This allegory or extended metaphor runs parallel to the literal story, but is separate from it.¹ The film also contains instances of paradox² – things that seem illogical, but are true. Therefore, David doesn't cheat on Catherine with Chloe, but still he is associated with darkness,³ a negative symbol suggesting coldness, evil, or ignorance.

We'll start at Chloe's death. When Chloe falls out the window, she is momentarily posed cross-like. Before Chloe falls, Catherine, who has rejected her, kisses her. This is symbolic of the Judas Kiss. During the scuffle with Catherine, Chloe sustains a wound in the palm of her hand: this is analogous to Stigmata.⁴ It is important for correct symbolism that blood be drawn from Chloe for her death to be regarded as a proper sacrifice⁵ – she can't simply fall to her death.

Also her body is covered with a white sheet – she is not put into a

¹ “Allegory.” *Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia*. 1971 ed. (vol. 1, p. 422.)

<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/allegory>

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/allegory>

² <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/paradox>

<http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Paradox>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Light_and_darkness

<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/darkness>

⁴ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Judas+Kiss>

<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Stigmata>

⁵ <http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/sacrifice>

black body bag. These are obvious allusions that indicate Chloe is a Christ figure, and her character also resembles Terence Stamp's character from *Teorema*, one of Egoyan's favorite films.⁶ Stamp plays a "visitor" who sleeps with every member of the family in Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1968 film and then disappears. In Pasolini's films, Christian iconography often appears associated with marginalized people: the poor, thieves, peasants, workers, pimps, and prostitutes. His intention was to re-sacralize human existence.⁷ Stamp might be a hustler with the proverbial heart of gold, or he might be Christ, God, or the Devil. Pasolini said that Stamp's character was not Christ, but was a supernatural being who was sacred.⁸ Chloe is clearly equated with the sacred too.

Throughout the whole movie Chloe is associated with white: white wine – she drinks it with Catherine at the bar when Catherine engages her to test David's fidelity; sugar – she borrows it from David when they first "meet;" a white bathrobe – she wears it in the hotel room when Catherine drinks wine from Chloe's glass – the one with the lipstick; lilies – she brings them to Catherine's office; swans – her favorite group is Raised By Swans; and snow and ice – she meets Michael at a hockey game to give him a CD by the group. White

⁶ <http://therumpus.net/2010/04/the-rumpus-interview-with-atom-egoyan-chloe/>

⁷ <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/cteq/04/accattone.html>

⁸ <http://www.moviecrazed.com/outpast/pasolini.html>

stands for purity.⁹ But Chloe's "whiteness" is not literal – she is a prostitute. Symbolism is based on traditional and conventional meanings: white is not a color normally associated with a prostitute. The symbolism indicates that Chloe possesses a special spiritual status, and a spiritual union with Catherine. The name "Catherine" means "pure."¹⁰ Chloe and Catherine are, therefore, linked symbolically through this color symbolism. They are linked on an allegorical level that is separate from the literal action.

Chloe has a halo¹¹ in at least eleven shots: (1) in the beginning when she delivers her monologue, (2) in the ladies' room with Catherine, (3) when she meets Catherine at the bar, (4) when she makes her first report to Catherine – the halo is a sun, nimbus, or star in a mural on the building across the street, (5) when she follows Michael to Catherine's copy machine, (6) in the hotel room when she's wearing the white robe (See Fig. I.), (7) when she and Catherine are leaving the hotel room and Catherine breaks down – right before Chloe kisses Catherine, (8) in the love-making scene with Catherine, (9) in the cab after pulling away from Catherine's house (See Fig. II.), (10) when she is leaving Catherine's office after being rejected, and (11) when Catherine calls her after hearing Michael playing *Raised By*

⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White>

<http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/white>

¹⁰ *Dictionary of First Names* by Alfred J. Kolatch, Perigee, 1980.

¹¹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/halo>

Swans. Halos appear around the heads of saints, martyrs, and of course, Jesus.

Chloe is also associated with light. She always meets Catherine during the day to “report” on David, and the meetings in the diner are in front of big windows; and the light is a washy, pure light. When Catherine “sees” David and Chloe in the Allen Gardens greenhouse, the light is this washy, pure type. Some of the halos are during the day, but some are at night, especially in the cab after Chloe and Catherine make love. Even in the dark when Chloe doesn't have a halo, a light or lights are frequently near her. Chloe's light leads us back to Christ, just as the figurative allusions in her death scene. Chloe's light shines even at night. Here is where we reach the core of the allegory. In the Gospel of John, it says of Jesus, “In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light Shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”¹² Chloe never shares her “light” with David. That's why he is associated with the dark. David is like a vampire –most of his interactions with Catherine are at night. Except for the fantasy scenes with Chloe, David is shown only once during the day. This is the morning after he misses his flight and his surprise birthday party; Catherine wakes to find him shaving, but it is significant that David is not before the mirror when he talks to Catherine. It is significant that David –

¹² John 1:4-5.

unlike Chloe and Catherine – is never shown in a mirror; for mirrors are symbols of truth.¹³ Again he lies to Catherine when he claims that he tries to ignore his birthday – he announced it to the lecture hall.

Darkness is David's motif; but why? He never meets Chloe. He is the only one in the Stewart family not to sleep with Chloe. This association with darkness is a paradoxical element. David doesn't cheat on Catherine with Chloe, but his love for Catherine has died. Light and dark are a contrasted pair like day and night, white and black, good and bad. It is clear in the film that Chloe loves Catherine, thus David is the opposite – he does not love Catherine.

David lectures on the opera *Don Giovanni* by Mozart.¹⁴ This opera is about a notorious lothario who, in the end, is dragged down to hell. When Catherine confesses to her encounter with Chloe, David insists that he has been faithful; but in his heart, does David long to be a seducer of many young women?

Chloe's "light" is love. When Catherine asks her how she can turn tricks, Chloe says that she finds something to love in everyone. She is in daylight before a large window. Prostitution is not about love.

¹³ http://www.houseofnames.com/xq/asp/keyword.mirror.qx/symbolism_details.htm

<http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/m/mirror.html>

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Giovanni

Her reply has an allegorical meaning. Christ was all about selfless love. "God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him."¹⁵ Chloe loves Catherine instantly and completely, even when Catherine is cold and controlling, even when Catherine doesn't deserve love. Chloe offers undeserved and selfless love as Christ did.

In the beginning of the film when David calls Catherine to tell her that he has missed his flight by a "minute," he lies – he is not even at the airport. He is on the street about to get into a taxi. Miranda, a young student, appears over his left shoulder – the sinister side.¹⁶ It's very much like David is in hell – it's dark, cold, and steam from car exhaust swirls around. There's an ominous red light in the background. Eventually, David admits to having drinks with Miranda; but, like the great casanova that he longs to be, David never admits to having sex with her.

The composition of David and Catherine's reconciliation scene is very similar to the scene with Miranda. Catherine and David leave the café, it's at night, on the street, and David is about to catch a cab to go back to work. There is a red light in the background, even as he kisses Catherine. He lies to Catherine in this scene, just as he lied to her about missing his plane. And when he returns to work, he is still

¹⁵ 1 John 4:16.

¹⁶ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/sinister>

in the dark – a dark room. The meeting he's attending is chaired by a beautiful dark-haired young woman. David has a penchant for young dark-haired women. In this scene, David looks bored. He's not bored with the woman, he's bored with the meeting – it is not important. David has left Catherine again to be with another woman.

In the beginning of the film, Chloe says, “I guess I've always been pretty good with words.” This too has allegorical meaning. “In the beginning was the Word....”¹⁷ “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth.”¹⁸ “Grace” here means divine love or aid for regeneration or sanctification.¹⁹ Chloe's monologue is delivered before a mirror, a symbol of truth. It is Chloe's mission to redeem Catherine – to regenerate her loveless life. Although Chloe never meets David, her stories about their trysts seem to have the power of truth – Catherine believes them. Chloe's words are analogous to the parables of Jesus: they are not literally true, but they contain a spiritual truth²⁰ – David doesn't love his wife anymore; but Chloe brings light and love.

¹⁷ John 1:1.

¹⁸ John 1:14.

¹⁹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/grace>

“Grace.” *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, Springfield: Merriam, 1981.

²⁰ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/parable>

John 1:1 also says “the Word was God.” And “In him was life; and the life was light of men.”²¹ And it continues, “He [John the Baptist] was not the Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth everyman that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.”²² The Word and the Light are the same. The Word and the Light are Christ; and by associating Chloe with them, Egoyan makes her a Christ figure by which Catherine's life will be rejuvenated.

While delivering her monologue, Chloe has a halo and is surrounded by a diaphanous curtain or veil. This too has religious or spiritual meaning. The Tabernacle and the Temple were both divided by a veil. The Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept and where the *Shekinah* – the brilliance of God²³ – resided, was behind a veil. Curtains are also erected on the sides of altars in traditional churches.²⁴ Veils are also placed over the altar vessels – the chalice and paten – to show reverence for them.²⁵ In Hebrews 6:19, Heaven is described as being behind a veil. In Hebrews 10:20, the Incarnation of Jesus is symbolized by a veil: “By a new and living way, which he

²¹ John 1:4.

²² John 1:8–10.

²³ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=588&letter=S7search=shekinah>

²⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veil>

²⁵ Ibid.

hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh;" people may enter into the presence of God. Chloe's appearance behind a veil during her monologue symbolically sanctifies her. She is no ordinary girl – her halo and the veil tell us this. She is "otherworldly."²⁶

In her monologue, Chloe also says that she knows what a client desires, even if the client doesn't tell her. This is analogous to omniscience. Chloe knows the deepest secrets of her clients and makes their desires or fantasies real – she makes them flesh. She turns their words or thoughts into reality. She answers their prayers.

At first Chloe's words seem to connect Catherine to David. When Catherine is masturbating in the shower, she envisions David and Chloe in the Allan Gardens greenhouse; however, Catherine and David are never seen loving each other. At the reception, when David turns to flirt with yet another female student, Catherine flees into Chloe's arms. Ultimately, the words – the grace and truth – bring Catherine to Chloe, her true love. Without Chloe there is no love between Catherine and David. Before her fatal fall, Chloe even tells Catherine: without me, you wouldn't have your husband back. Just as with Michael who becomes a vicarious substitute for Catherine when Chloe seduces him, Chloe is a surrogate for David.

²⁶ To borrow a word from the screenplay.

After Chloe dies, the camera takes us back to the hotel room and Allan Gardens, and they are empty. There is no love without Chloe's "light."

In the scene where Catherine calls Chloe after receiving the text message from her saying, "I just left him," Catherine scolds Chloe, "I told you not to call my husband," Catherine says. And Chloe responds by saying that David called her. It wasn't sexual, Chloe tells Catherine, it was emotional. When David touches Catherine, he feels like he's cheating on Chloe. What a cruel lie! Chloe should be associated with darkness – with evil – but this scene is the opposite of David's phone call scene: the sky above Chloe as the scene begins is white, is bright – the setting sun gives her a halo. Once again, Chloe is associated with white and light. This isn't incongruous with the allegorical symbolism. Her "lie" contains a higher truth – this is another paradox. David doesn't love Catherine.

In the restaurant powder room, both women stand before the mirror; and it is here that Chloe first attempts to give Catherine her hairpin. Later, Catherine rejects Chloe, and the devastated girl attempts to find solace with Michael, only to fall out the window of the master bedroom when Catherine pushes her away during a scuffle. However, Chloe's love does revive Michael and Catherine, but not David. Chloe is the victim or scapegoat for Catherine – this is what

the allusions to Christ – the Stigmata, Judas Kiss, and cross-pose – indicate. Chloe suffers because Catherine insists upon interfering in Michael's life. And by Chloe's death, Catherine realizes that she could lose Michael if she were to continue attempting to control his life as she attempted to control Chloe through a business transaction. Chloe also pays the price for Catherine's other sins – the machinations to catch David in infidelity and Catherine's own unfaithfulness. Chloe is a martyr for love. She willfully suffers because of her selfless love for Catherine; just as Christ, for the love of humanity, suffered to relieve the sins of humanity. Egoyan is telling us that Chloe is a personal saviour for Catherine. Chloe's expression as she falls seems transcendent. Her mission to bring light and love to Catherine accomplished, Chloe disappears forever. When Catherine wears Chloe's hairpin, she symbolically accepts this love, albeit too late. Catherine “comprehends” Chloe's light.



Fig. II. Chloe (Amanda Seyfried) leaves in a taxi after making love with Catherine. Our heroine shines even at night. An exceptionally large and bright halo.

At the end of the film, one expects the family to be together at Michael's graduation party; however, the final scene shows Catherine, David, and Michael standing in separate parts of the room. Michael symbolically has the distance from Catherine that is normal for a young man to have from his mother. Catherine will no longer smother him as she did earlier in the film. At the same time, David is symbolically doomed – like Don Giovanni. David has not received the light from Chloe. The distance between him and Catherine is symbolically negative – it is not the body language of a couple whose marriage is revitalized. The distance between David and Catherine in this scene is reminiscent of the famous shots from *Citizen Kane*: as Kane's marriage degenerates, the distance between him and his wife at the table increases. Catherine even turns her back on David. He is not the person that Catherine loves. She had earlier put her hair down in the restaurant to be more attractive to him; but now, she has her hair back up and pinned with the hairpin, decorated with a stylized peacock, given to her by Chloe. The peacock, like the butterfly, represents regeneration or resurrection:²⁷ this pin then is a symbolic sign of Catherine's “salvation” – her happiness is no longer dependent upon a husband who does not comprehend the light.

²⁷ <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/symbols/butterfly.htm>
<http://www.whats-your-sign.com/peacock-symbolism.html>
<http://www.catholic-saints.info/catholic-symbols/peacock-christian-symbol.htm>
(The pin might be a rose, a symbol of martyrdom.)

Ironically, it is Chloe, although she is dead, who is symbolically closest to Catherine in the final scene: Catherine is wearing Chloe's pin while David is on the other side of the room. Catherine wears the pin given to her by her true love, a wounded little girl searching for her mother; and she wears an allegorical symbol of the "divine light" that Chloe shared with her.

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