Armande Voizin: From Despair to Self-Actualization

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for Psychology 370

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November 22, 2005
Abstract

The character of Armande Voizin from Miramax Film’s *Chocolat* is studied from the perspective of two personality theories. Erik Erikson’s theory of the final stage of psychosocial development, which includes the idea of ego integrity vs. despair, and Carl Rogers’s theory of self-actualization tendency with respect to the defensive process of denial, are compared.
Armande Voizin: From Despair to Self-Actualization

The character of Armande Voizin from the film Chocolat (Brown, Golden, Holleran & Hallstrom, 2000) can be viewed from the perspective of Erikson’s psychosocial theory of development and from Rogers’s theory of self-actualization. Both theories help explain the internal struggle of this character and actually work in tandem throughout the development of her personality in the film. Armande is struggling with feelings of despair and sees no real purpose in her life as it nears its end. At the same time, she hampers her ability to self-actualize as she literally feeds a habit that could lead to her death. As Armande’s personality develops and changes, she finds worth and integrity as she moves towards a more healthy way of living.

Chocolat, a film by Miramax Films released in 2000, is about a small town in France and the changes it goes through during Lent one year. The town, Lansquenet, has been under the rule of the mayor, Comte de Reynaud, for some time and both he and his predecessor have dictated both the laws and morality by which the citizens must obey and live. One afternoon, two travelers, Vianne and Anouk, come into town and rent the defunct patisserie from Armande Voizin, an elderly woman who has long ago abandoned trying to conform to the rest of the town. The mayor is quite upset by the idea of an unmarried, non-Christian woman opening a chocolaterie during Lent, a time when everyone should be giving up his or her earthly pleasures and looking toward God for salvation. Comte de Reynaud spreads rumors around the small town about the “atheist” who dares to tempt well-meaning, God-fearing people with chocolates in the hopes that his parish will be spared the hellish consequences of such delicacies. Instead, one person
at a time, the people of the small town dare to cross the threshold of the *chocolaterie* and experience the ecstasy of the delicious treats.

During this time, Armande Voizin decides to see how her new tenant is doing. She enters in her usual gruff manner and seems to disdain the décor and the business in general. Vianne offers her a cup of hot chocolate spiced with chili pepper, which has its desired effect. Soon, Armande is giggling like a young girl and recounting the transgressions of her youth with enthusiasm. As Armande spends more time at the *chocolaterie* and with Vianne, as like many of the other townspeople, she becomes happier and sees more in life than what seemed to be there before.

Vianne helps Armande get in contact with her grandson, Luc, whom she hasn’t been allowed to see for several years. Vianne also holds a birthday party for Armande, at her request, and invites many of the townspeople that have come to enjoy the *chocolaterie* despite the continued objections from Comte de Reynaud. Not long after Luc escorts his grandmother back home from the party, Armande dies while resting in her chair. Vianne feels partially responsible for Armande’s death because she knew Armande had diabetes but sold her sweets to eat every day anyway. However, the other townspeople that had become friends with Vianne and Armande do not feel this way and encourage Vianne to stay and keep the chocolaterie running despite the mayor.

Armande Voizin, played by Judi Dench, is a 69-year-old woman with diabetes who no longer seems to enjoy her life. She has come to feel old and useless and describes herself as a “cranky old woman too tired to play games” (Brown, et al., 2000). She masks her feelings of uselessness by acting as if she doesn’t care about the world around her. In fact, it seems to be deeply troubling Armande that the world she once was an active part
of no longer seems to need her. Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development explains this as the conflict between ego integrity and despair, which occurs during the last stage of human personality development and life. Often, this stage is marked by feelings of worthlessness and uselessness as the aging person sees the end of her life nearing and feels there is no purpose left. Armande no longer feels useful nor does she feel that she has the time or energy to change her state of despair. As Erikson writes “Such a despair is often hidden behind a show of disgust, a misanthropy, or a chronic contemptuous displeasure with particular institutions and particular people – a disgust and displeasure which… only signify the individual’s contempt of himself” (Erikson, 1980, p. 104). Armande expresses her feelings of “disgust and displeasure” from the very beginning as she first meets Vianne, played by Juliette Binoche. She seems put out by the “intruder” who has come to rent her building and admonishes Vianne to keep the place in good shape, even though the interior has clearly been neglected for quite some time. Her “chronic contemptuous displeasure” is seen throughout the film as she shoos the new young priest away from the *chocolaterie* and snubs her nose at the social rules being imposed by the mayor. Armande seems to care very little for what anyone thinks of her and has decided that she is too old to worry about such things, but is actually hiding her true feelings about growing old and useless.

Along with her contemptuous and gruff attitude, Armande Voizin seems to have given up. “This can aggravate a feeling that life is meaningless, that the end is near, a fear of – and even a wish for – death” (Hall & Lindzey, 1957, p. 100). Vianne sees that Armande’s aloof façade is just that, and manages to encourage her to open up and allow others in while delighting in the joys of spiced cocoa and chocolate cake.
When Vianne is successful in reuniting Armande with her grandson Luc, played by Aurelien Parent Koenig, Armande again has a reason to continue living. She gives him a book of lude poetry and encourages him to indulge in the cake his mother has forbidden him to eat during Lent, stating, “Don’t worry so much about ‘not supposed to’” (Brown, et al., 2000). Erikson writes that “many begin to see their grandchildren as extensions of themselves into the indefinite future” (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986, p.66), helping aging people move out of feelings of despair and into feelings of integrity. Through friendship, caring, and involvement with her grandson, Armande Voizin is able to move through her last stage of psychosocial development with integrity and dignity and without feelings of things left undone.

Another theory of personality that describes the character of Armande Voizin is Carl Rogers’s theory of self-actualization. This theory states that everyone strives to maintain and enhance his or her selves throughout their lifetime (DeCarvalho, 1991, p. 88). What can impede this process is a conflict between seeing oneself differently from whom one really is, a conflict between the ideal self and the actual self that makes it difficult for a person to self-actualize.

A defensive process that a person may use to deny the disparity between the ideal and actual self is denial. “Denial prevents awareness of the existence of experiences that are incongruent with our self-concepts” (Liebert & Liebert, 1998, p.411) and thus allows the person to believe that the “experience does not exist” (Liebert & Liebert, 1998, p.411). Armande refuses to see herself as unhealthy and incapable of caring for herself. She denies the fact that she has advanced diabetes and takes part in activities that could lead to increased illness and even death. She does not speak about her condition and
conceals it from Vianne and others. Armande can’t fully self-actualize as long as she continues to deny her physical condition.

Actualizing tendency doesn’t involve developing in ways that are harmful or potentially harmful (DeCarvalho, 1991, p. 88) and Armande’s insistence that she is healthy and needs no assistance doesn’t allow her to fully actualize herself. Also, as she represses her feelings about being ill and being cut off from her grandson, she works against her potential to self-actualize (Gale, 2003 [On-line]). Armande needs to come to terms with her illness and learn how to cope with it in a healthy manner rather than denying its existence in order for her self to develop further.

Caroline Clairmont, played by Carrie Anne Moss, is Armande’s estranged daughter and Luc’s mother. They have differing opinions on many topics, one of them being Armande’s need for regular care. As she’s retrieving Luc from his secret rendezvous, Caroline reveals to a shop full of people that Armande has diabetes and should not be eating chocolates every day. Armande is angry and bitter and exclaims “Don’t you dare pity me” (Brown, et al., 2000). Caroline tries to persuade her mother to go to “le mortoir”, the nursing home, but Armande refuses. Caroline remains angry with Armande for not taking better care of herself, and Armande remains angry with Caroline for not minding her own business. Clearly, Caroline cares greatly for her mother and her diabetic condition, but Armande still adamantly refuses to accept her physical state.

Later, Armande tells Vianne that she wants a special birthday bash to celebrate her 70th birthday. Vianne agrees to arrange everything if Armande will agree to check into the nursing home. Armande finally agrees and allows Vianne to help her.
At her party, Armande is vibrant and carefree. In allowing her self to accept her physical limitations and the help she needs to cope with them, she progresses in her process of self-actualization. She also progresses from feeling worthless and old to having a sense of integrity and fulfillment. By realizing both her limitations and her worth she has moved in a positive direction through her stages of psychological development.

Erikson’s psychosocial theory of ego integrity and despair is the more applicable of the two theories to Armande’s state, but is clearly not the only one. Armande goes through this last stage of development and manages to fight through her despair to come out stronger and more integrated with her life and those around her. However, Armande’s unwillingness to accept her physical state and to defiantly challenge it continuously, against the advice of others and her own best interests, is definitely within the construct of Carl Rogers’s theory of self-actualization. In the character of Armande Voizin, both Erikson and Rogers’s theories work simultaneously, and in order for her to achieve the goal of one she must achieve the goal of the other. If Armande had not been willing to accept her diabetes and the help she needed, and thus move through more of her self-actualization process, she would not have been able to leave her despair behind and move through the last stage of psychosocial development, and the reverse is true as well. Armande would not have had the impetus to stop harming herself if she had not begun to realize that she had worth to her family and friends.

The main difference between the two theories is that while Erikson’s is applicable to a particular time of life, Rogers’s is applicable throughout the lifespan. Self-actualization is an ongoing process, one which is achieved while doing, without any real
ending point. Erikson’s stages of development occur at specific points within a lifetime, and although stages can be returned to, the main concept is that a person moves from one stage to the next, developing the personality with respect to each stage and its constructs.

Armande Voizin is the character of the quintessential older woman who seems to no longer care about anyone or anything, herself included. As she nears the end of her life she has decided that she has nothing left to do but to wait to die and that there is no longer any use for her. She sees her daughter’s attempts to get her into a nursing home where she can be cared for as a way of sending her off to her death prematurely. Because Armande is not actually ready to die, she denies her need for medical care, simultaneously denying her need of help from her loved one. As Armande realizes she is still needed by others, most importantly by her grandson Luc, she allows herself to slowly accept her own need for assistance and stops denying her diabetic condition.

The process of self-actualization and the development of ego integrity in this character work together to allow Armande Voizin to grow and respond positively within her environment, to those around her and within her self. In the film she transforms from a gruff, surly, bitter old woman, closed off from those around her, to one who can see that she has had a full life and still has the potential to offer more to her family and friends.
References


NOTE (from Dr. Grant): Student lost points for failing to include a minimum of 3 journal articles (and to use them throughout her character analysis)