

# Tolerance and intolerance in chocolat



Chocolat is not just a quirky romance set in a quaint French village centered on a magical chocolate shop. It is so much more than that. It is a story of the juxtaposition of humanity and the ying and yang of life. It leaves the reader with more than a craving for chocolate. It leaves them reflecting on their own morals, values and prejudices and maybe a little better equipped to consider those of others. Joanne Harris uses two opposed narrators and several literary techniques to present a study in moral relativism. Moral relativism is the premise that any view based on a moral judgement is neither intrinsically right nor wrong; that moral judgement only comes from the lens through which it is viewed and those views are shaped by a myriad of factors such as life experiences, culture, beliefs and family values. Tolerance and intolerance are not moral absolutes, but rather are relative to those beliefs and social norms.

Joanne Harris uses the characters point of view to create a picture. Vianne views herself as tolerant. She is free spirited and strong willed, willing to stand up to perceived prejudices. She has strong empathy, particularly with the misunderstood members of the village. With the thought that “ It isn’t up to [her] –or anybody–to decide how these people should live their lives.” Vianne views placing rules or restrictions on people as intolerant. In contrast, she conveys the point of view that Reynaud’s position is one of intolerance. He is inflexible and rigid in his faith. Her perception of his religious beliefs allows the author to present a foreshadowing of how religion may negatively manifest in society and how hypocrisy born of blind faith in religion can cloud judgement. Whilst Reynaud views himself as faithful and an upholder of moral values, he is at the same time portrayed as heartless and intolerant

when seen through Vianne's eyes. The author has used this paradox to further challenge the concept of moral absolutes.

From Reynaud's perspective tolerance is compliance with agreed norms of the society in which he lives. He sees behavior that is in opposition to those norms, such as Vianne's, as antisocial and therefore it does not require acceptance. The purpose of acceptance is to provide a sense of belonging and therefore when Vianne shows disregard for these rules of acceptance he feels justified in promoting her exclusion by the townspeople.

Joanne Harris employs a number of literary techniques to increase engagement with the reader. By using parallelism of the two narrators, Vianne and Reynaud, each committed to an opposing point of view, Harris encourages the reader to develop a deeper understanding of the core issues. Harris "see's Vianne and Reynaud as two sides of a single coin; closer in terms of their background, their fears and their struggle for dominance than anyone else in the story." By presenting both sides equally Harris is able to encourage the reader to reflect on the concept of tolerance and intolerance. When questioned on the story Harris refers to it as " a plea for tolerance of others but also of ourselves, a reminder that to be fallible is both natural and allowed; that self-indulgence isn't always bad;"(Harris, 2000)

The use of a protagonist, an advocate or champion of a cause or idea, and an antagonist, a person who actively opposes someone or something, is a common literary technique in themes of major conflict. However, in *Chocolat* these roles are not clearly defined. Whilst a contemporary definition may see Vianne as the protagonist and Reynaud the antagonist, arguments could

equally be made for the opposite based on the reader's subjectivity and perspective. When questioned on which characters she perceives as fulfilling these roles, Joanne Harris stated " that's a very good question, I will leave it to you as the reader to decide"

By presenting the story from the two opposing perspectives of the main characters Vianne and Reynaud, Joanne Harris challenges the reader to come to their own conclusion of who is right or wrong. The deliberate absence of a third, neutrally narrated perspective reduces the potential for the reader to simply adopt the role of a bystander and instead draws them into the conflict and encourages them to reflect on the polarizing issues of the narrators. In doing so the reader will unconsciously form a subjective position, based on their own views and beliefs as to which character they most align with. This in turn encourages the reader to reflect on their own bias and explore where they find themselves on the tolerance/ intolerance continuum.