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## “Read Between the Lines, Bitch” The Feminist Message of *Chasing Amy*”

BY KATHLEEN MISH

Kevin Smith's film *Chasing Amy* centers around Holden and Banky, two best friends who create comic books for a living. Their heterosexist world is changed forever by the introduction of Alyssa, a female comic book artist. She seems to be the ideal woman for Holden, but his hopes for romance are shattered when he learns she is a lesbian. She does eventually commit to a romantic relationship with Holden, but he cannot accept her sexually promiscuous past. Fellow comic book creator, Hooper, a black gay male, and the shady Jay and Silent Bob, on which Holden and Banky's comics are based, provide advice along the way about constructions of female sexuality, a topic with which Holden struggles.

*Chasing Amy* promotes a clear feminist message: a woman should have the freedom to define and control her sexuality, despite societal norms or demands which serve to constrain her. Throughout the film, Holden, Banky, and Alyssa's lesbian friends attempt to control Alyssa's sexuality. Even Alyssa herself tries to conform her own sexuality to the standards of society, for she is not open with Holden about her past sexual encounters. Eventually, Holden's inability to reject the common view of a normal couple leads to the end of his love affair with Alyssa. Only over time, and with the help of Jay's surprisingly insightful comments and Silent Bob's poignant story of lost love, can Holden accept Alyssa as an individual who is not defined by her sexual activity.

Holden's first attempts at defining Alyssa's sexuality occur early in their relationship. While just getting to know one another, they have a conversation on the swings which is very telling of Holden's opinions about sex. Most importantly, his thoughts on virginity differ greatly from Alyssa's definition of the act. His views on virginity coincide with the rigid views held in the past, in which the rupture of the hymen was considered a physical sign of the loss of virginal status, as described in Brumberg's "Disappearance of Virginity." Brumberg claims that a male definition of virginity led to a loss of individuality for young girls, as their bodies as well as their hymens were "in effect 'jointly owned' by her family and her bridegroom as much as by the girl herself" (145). Alyssa refuses to have her body defined through physical rather than her own personal means, and refutes Holden's statement by mentioning the rupture

of her hymen at a young age due to an accident with a fencepost. He must quickly attempt to redefine his thoughts: "Virginity is lost through penetration." By penetration, Holden means vaginal penetration by the penis, or "serious deep dicking." When Alyssa suggests that she has been penetrated by women through fisting, Holden can barely understand the concept and is rendered speechless. Holden is somewhat progressive, in accordance with the modern society of the 1990s, as he has come to believe that "virginity was simply a social category and not a moral state" (156). However, he cannot extricate himself from the rigid and standard definitions of virginity. By attempting to define Alyssa's sexuality to fit into his own preconceived standards, Holden is trying to exercise control over her sexuality. Alyssa obviously has her own views as to when she lost her virginity, which cannot be changed by Holden's arguments.

In his own unique way, Banky tries to place Alyssa and her sexuality into strictly defined categories. These sexual categories are extraordinarily rigid so that he may understand her sexuality easily, and does not have to face the possibility that human sexuality, including his own, can cross lines that have been constructed by society. At first, Banky cannot even understand the concept of lesbianism and is fascinated when Alyssa makes out with another woman at a bar. As Holden is forced to explain, "It's new to him." Banky soon overcomes his staring and the two begin to trade stories about sexual encounters involving women. Although Banky can accept Alyssa as a lesbian, he can not see her an individual with a distinct sexuality. According to him, she must fit into the only category of lesbians that exists: as a lesbian, she must be a "man hating dyke." Once her promiscuous sexual past with men has been revealed to him, Banky feels compelled to define her as a whore. He almost never refers to her by her true name, but by the high school nickname given to her: "Finger Cuffs." This moniker is truly demeaning, and Banky's decision to constantly refer to Alyssa by this name, even to her face, shows that he cannot think of her as an individual, but only as a participant in a group sex act. By defining her in this way, he attempts to exercise control over her and force her away from Holden.

Alyssa's lesbian friends, though at first appearing to be on the outskirts of society themselves, also have their own defined set of sexual standards. In fact, their entire homosexual culture has become somewhat mainstream. As Hooper comments on these so-called "lipstick lesbians:" "It's so acceptable nowadays, people think it's cute." These women have their own view of what constitutes a lesbian. When she is involved romantically with women, Alyssa is accepted and supported by other friends. When she reveals that she has fallen in love with a man, the shocked looks and silence reveal even more about what they think of her than the biting comment, "Another one bites the dust." Like Holden, these women cannot accept Alyssa as an individual with the capacity to make decisions about her own sexuality. Though they had claimed to support Alyssa and her work in the comic book business before they knew about her relationship with Holden, they abandon her afterwards, despite the fact that she as a person or her work has not changed at all. Their failed attempt to control her sexuality according to their social norms results in her rejection from the group.

Many of Alyssa's experiences correlate directly with the experiences of the girls interviewed in Deborah Tolmann's "Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls' Struggles for/with Sexuality." In Alyssa's struggle with her own sexuality during high school, she rejected the "cultural standards that stand between women and their empowerment" (375). She performed various deviant sex acts throughout her youth as a means of seeking pleasure: "The minority of girls who spoke of sexual pleasure voiced more sexual agency than girls whose experiences were devoid of pleasure" (376). As Alyssa explains to Holden, her exploits were performed on her own terms: "I used them." Despite her view on her participation or even coordination of her past sexual acts, members of society, including Holden, cannot accept what she has done to be natural. One of the young girls interviewed states that "girls who lose control over their desire can be called 'sluts' and ostracized" (379). Holden's inability to accept the capacity of Alyssa's desire is destructive to their relationship, for he feels that he has lost control over her sexuality. She is no longer his conquest, and he no longer feels like "Marco Fucking Polo when it comes to sex," as Hooper so aptly describes heterosexual males.

Despite the rejection of cultural norms imposed upon her in high school, Alyssa does nothing more than find another set of sexual standards to adhere to when she becomes a part of the lesbian culture. She has lost her sense of individuality, and even begins to define herself through her sexuality: "I am fucking gay, that's who I am." Holden's confession of his love for Alyssa is met by a fit of rage. She claims that she is angry with him for asking her to do something she can't, while she is really angry at herself for not allowing herself to give into her desire for a male. In response to his arguments, she responds, "Oh, it's that simple?" Falling in love with Holden should be that simple, for the chemistry between them is quite obvious. Yet a complete redefinition of Alyssa's sexuality does not come easy to her. She becomes a victim of her own attempts to define and control her sexuality. Yet later she comes through a transformation, in which she realizes that her sexuality cannot be controlled. She embraces her love for Holden, and is proud of her autonomy. "I came to this on my own terms. I didn't heed what I was taught." In her self acceptance of her own sexuality, Alyssa is able to be with Holden, "that one person to complement me so completely."

Conflict arises when Holden is unable to accept Alyssa and the sexual experiences she has had. Jay and Silent Bob serve to give him the best advice about the situation. Holden cannot come to terms with Alyssa's true feelings for him, which Jay so eloquently is able to convey: "Bitch tasted life, yo, now she's settlin' for your boring, funny-book-makin' ass." Holden tries to deal with his feelings of inadequacy by yet again attempting to control Alyssa's sexuality. By proposing a threesome with Banky, he is yet again placing her into a sexual category which he can understand: he believes her to basically be a slut, and wants her to act like one. Alyssa, in her state of sexual enlightenment, of course does not agree to the proposal. She will not allow her sexuality to be manipulated by Holden, who does not understand the person she has become, and finally leaves him.

In *Chasing Amy*, Hooper demands, “Read between the lines, bitch” which is actually sound advice for the audience as well as Holden. The movie is not merely another Kevin Smith flick about sex. The film actually carries a serious feminist message. Holden and Alyssa can only find peace, though not together, when they have each come to the realization that a woman’s sexuality cannot be defined or controlled by others or by society at large.

### Works Cited

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