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Kinsey

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Kinsey

Abstract

This is a review of *Kinsey* (2004).

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In his masterful new film entitled *Kinsey*, writer and director Bill Condon (*Gods and Monsters*) continues to explore his interest in alternative sexuality, in this case through a graphic biopic of the infamous sex expert, Alfred Kinsey. Kinsey is widely credited as a chief architect of the sexual revolution, and this movie explores Kinsey's wide-ranging interests in any number of alternative sexual behaviors. However, the sensational nature of Kinsey's personal life and sexual interests are portrayed against the backdrop of the movie's most prevalent theme, namely the conflict between religion and science. What pushes the movie from merely good to great is the way the conflict between religion and science takes shape so early, bringing a kind of logic to each scene, and in the end finding a subtle if slightly unsatisfying resolution in the film's final moments.

The movie opens with Dr. Kinsey (Liam Neeson) training his research assistants to interview candidates for their "sexual histories" in an impartial and nonjudgmental way. Pretending to be interviewees, Kinsey and his wife (Laura Linney) give answers to the illicit interview questions that are both adventurous and shockingly explicit. The interview questions also advance the story of the film by providing the opportunity for several flashbacks into Kinsey's childhood.

In response to a question about his relationship to his father, we flashback to a Methodist church of Kinsey's childhood where his father, a minister, is delivering an impassioned sermon on the evils of modern technology. Here we

learn that, among other things, the gas engine is evil because it has enabled the "joyride" to the brothel, that the evil of electricity has made possible the pornographic "picture show," and that the invention of the zipper has made possible the "speedy access to moral oblivion." Clearly, this kind of naïve moralism is hardly a portrayal of religion at its best, but the sermon provides the backdrop against which Kinsey's intellectual development occurred. Faced with the witness of impossible and ridiculous religious demands from his father, Kinsey chooses the intellectual "highroad" offered by science. Much to his father's disappointment, Kinsey leaves home to become a dreaded scientist, a biologist.

Initially, Kinsey's research interests center on collecting and cataloguing gall wasps. Seeing that no two galls are alike, Kinsey lectures his biology students on the irreducible diversity to be found in nature. It is during one of his biology classes that he first meets his future wife and falls in love with Clara ("Mac") McMillen.

Circumstances conspire so that eventually, Kinsey begins to seek out the opportunity to teach a university course on the biology of human sexuality. Realizing the terrible state of the field and the enormous gaps of knowledge at the time, Kinsey begins to give out anonymous surveys to his students which ask about their sexual history. He is both astonished and exhilarated by his findings, leading him to perfect the "sex survey" and sexual "interview" as means

of acquiring information. It is during these interviews that he realizes the depth of the biological instincts for sex, including surprisingly pervasive premarital and homosexual experiences amongst his interviewees, despite the moral and religious prohibitions against them. More and more, Kinsey comes to see sexuality through the lens of biology, and unrestricted by religious prohibition, Kinsey and his followers freely explore any number of taboo sexual expressions including open relationships, multiple partners, partner swapping, same sex experiences, filming of sexual acts, and other adventures in the name of "science."

Having scientifically proven the enormous variety of sexualities, Kinsey proclaims that "Everybody's sin is nobody's sin," a statement which seems to his detractors like an attempt to justify his brand of sexual relativism. In the effort to solidify his beliefs in the sheerly biological nature of sexuality, Kinsey becomes virtually obsessed with acquiring more and more sexual histories. Ironically, he becomes a kind of "preacher" of science, ever extolling the virtues of the empirical method and the diversity of nature's manifestations. His scientific moralism comes into increasing conflict with his detractors, and the culture clash becomes so great that he is denounced by his university colleagues and routinely vilified in the press. Kinsey eventually loses his research funding and is even investigated by Congress as a possible enemy of American democracy. Finally, Kinsey collapses

during a lecture and it is revealed during the hospitalization that he is addicted to barbiturates.

The movie is honest about the fact that Kinsey's scientific moralism had its own cost. The pain inflicted on Clara by Kinsey's initial infidelity with same-sex research assistant, Clyde Martin (Peter Sarsgaard), is masterfully portrayed. Moreover, Martin nearly loses his own wife when she falls in love with another man, a colleague in the project with whom she has been consensually involved. Finally, the dogmatism of Kinsey's scientism comes across as occasionally heartless, not at all unlike his own father's religious dogmatism. The movie's final scene portrays Kinsey and Clara stopping in the woods on the side of the road to take in the beauty of nature. The rejuvenated Kinsey becomes poetic about being outdoors, likening the immobility of a giant nearby tree to the sense of rootedness provided by his relationship with Clara. In the end, it seems there is something mysterious, almost religious about nature after all, and the immobility and rooted-ness of a tree has replaced the biological diversity metaphor which seemed to say, "anything goes." While it certainly seems that the rhetoric of science lent itself to Kinsey's sexual revolution, it cannot be said unambiguously that either science or spirit completely wins the conflict as it is portrayed in this film. It turns out that "nature" and Kinsey's love for Clara are the understated symbols of spirit which keep the movie somewhat more balanced than it might at first seem. This

film is certainly a welcome celebration of the decline of naïve religious moralism, but the greater message may well be that science on its own can be profoundly heartless. Whatever the message, the conflict of science and spirit comes off slightly unresolved, but this lack of resolution may well be the quality which keeps the audience thinking about this movie long after the lights have come up.