The Deconstruction of the Femme Fatale in Chinatown

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by portraying female characters more truthfully on the screen, Polanski is motivated in his actions and able to elicit sympathy from viewers. However, instead of restoring some semblance of order in seeing Evelyn Mulwray succeed, Polanski does not allow any type of justice to prevail in his movie—no matter how small or insignificant. As we walk away from Chinatown, we realize that justice has no place in a world where patriarchy is insurmountable at best—and hideously corrupt at worst.

An attempt to restore order in post World War II America led to the inception of femmes fatales in film noir. The femme fatale in early noir was symbolic of the traditional repressive image of the female character in America's society. In previous movies like Double Indemnity and The Maltese Falcon, the femme fatales were portrayed as ruthless and with classic, unexplained motives like lust or greed. These women were beyond rational; they had "no explanation for their relentless pain or greed" (Rich 6). Chinatown, therefore, is what one critic calls, "an excellent benchmark whereby we can measure the evolution of the genre" (Gischler). In this film, Polanski was able to bring his unique perspective to the movie in order to create a more realistic story involving widespread corruption where the outcome sees no justice at all, and the audience is left with no answers. Having lost his wife Sharon Tate at the hands of the Manson Family, and having later been incarcerated on counts of statutory rape, Polanski knew that women were not a threat to the chauvinistic patriarchal society in which he was born. He felt that the women of Chinatown, and later in the movie, were a threat to masculinity—instead of a patriarchal society that dominates not only Los Angeles but the entire country, the femme fatale deconstructs the idea of Chinatown, and later in the movie, has suspicious motives for attempting to corrupt everyone in the area of random, meaningless, and omnipotent malevolence. The idea that things in Chinatown were out of Jake’s control, where the worst that can conceivably occur will be imprisoning Hollis Mulwray’s girlfriend, and appearing at one point to be impossibly Holli Mulwray’s girlfriend. We later learn that the femme fatale is both her daughter and her sister thus, that our impulse to make Evelyn the femme fatale.

The nature of this movie seems to be embodied in the idea of Chinatown, and later in the movie, we see the destruction that the movie causes the destruction of Evelyn, as well as Jake’s quest for justice. The movie isn’t set in Chinatown except its last scene, but it makes references to this place quite often. Chinatown was the district Jake worked in while in the police force, and though we do not know much about his job, we get the feeling that Chinatown was a chaotic place lacking order and morality. Chinatown, according to Jake, "borders everybody that works there. For me it was just bad luck." There is the idea that things in Chinatown were out of Jake’s control, and he pursued his career as a private investigator to claim some authority. Unfortunately, the L.A. that Jake struggles to investigate is just as deadly, “an area of random, meaningless, and omnipotent malevolence where the worst that can conceivably occur will be imprisoning Hollis Mulwray’s girlfriend, and appearing at one point to be impossibly Holli Mulwray’s girlfriend. We later learn that the femme fatale is both her daughter and her sister thus, that our impulse to make Evelyn the femme fatale.

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Katharine from their father. Jake, by this time, knows against the inanity of the law to protect Evelyn and it takes precedence over solving the case of Hollis' death that Evelyn is a victim worth saving just as we do, and banished from the crime scene. "As little as possible," Jake mumbles to the police, meaning perhaps that this or exposing the fraud of the water company. Evelyn. Katharine screams uncontrollably, blood in several shots fired—one by Evelyn that hits Noah, ripples down Evelyn's face and clothing, and Jake is and one by the police officer that accidentally hits Chinatown," his partner tells him at the very end of anything to affect the outcome. "Forget it Jake, it's of all is the fact that Noah Cross has taken his daugh-
ter/granddaughter away, suggesting that this victim-
ization of a teenage girl could happen all over again. "Chinatown finally belongs to Cross, its Harry Lime," writes Lyons. "Gittes' wit has been silenced; Evelyn is dead" (53). Indeed, the alleged femme fatale who turned out differently from our expectations is gone, no longer able to tell her own story or make things right. Lyons writes, "it is the power of Chinatown, the silkiest of noirs on the surface but blackest at heart, to lure us to the brink of this nihilism" (53). And in discrediting the notion of Evelyn as strict femme fatale, the film exposes the underlying notion that the cruel world of L.A. does nothing but destroy people, and women in particular.

How much does Chinatown reflect Polanski's world view? The nihilism and pessimism, in part, can certainly be credited to the loss of his wife to the Manson family. Polanski gives the sense of being a helpless watcher in his movies, as what Lindberg calls, "a peeper at life through keyholes" (61). In addition, "the amorality of his movies combines with the sub-
jective viewpoint of the camera, in this reading, to put the audience as well in the position of a peeper" (61). The fact that the corruption of teenage girls is central to Chinatown is interesting, seeing as how Polanski him-
self was caught in a scandal involving a teenage girl and was rumored to have been involved with several others. It is contradictory, in a way, that Chinatown it-
self is associated with debauchery and loss of inno-
cence, when Polanski himself lived these damaging ideas. Of the teenage girls that he had known, Polanski said, "like so many girls of their age, they had untapped reserves of intelligence and imagination. They weren't using their bodies to further their careers [... ] they didn't want to hear about distribution rights or film finance—not even about the Manson murders. And they were more beautiful [...] than they would ever be again" (qtd. in Lindberg, 64). Now considered a some-
what sympathetic person suffering from a mental ill-
ness, Polanski's intimate knowledge of the dark secrets of degeneration was probably an asset in directing Chinatown. While Polanski's life is certainly nothing to admire, it contains plain authority when speaking about nihilism, corruption and the gravity of lost inno-
cence. Chinatown may be how the world appeared from Polanski's point of view—a world where brutal mur-
der can happen in one's home, a world where sexual predators are as familiar as one's own self. The clear notion of a traditional femme fatale is absent from Chinatown because Polanski knew that the femme fatale was a false construction. And because Chinatown is extremely realistic and with no favorable outcome, having a multifaceted leading female char-
acter is extremely important to the credibility of the motion picture. However, the world in which this re-
alistic woman exists is cruel and without justice or an emerging truth. Though the portrayal of women seems more favorable in this film, the portrayal of the world in general is increasingly pessimistic, deterministic and hopeless. This encroaching form of despair claims not only women, but also men like J.J. Gittes, and all oth-
ers who have a need to restore equilibrium in their so-
ciety.