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The Deconstruction of the Femme Fatale in Chinatown

Kristina Garvin
Denison University

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Kristina Garvin '01

The *femme fatale*, a constant fixture in the *film noir* genre, underwent a serious revision in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) that signaled a new, perhaps more pessimistic world view emerging from this particular genre. In addition, the gritty realism of this emerging shift in *film noir* shaped the view of women by portraying female characters more truthfully on the screen. Rather than being the cunning, carelessly cruel *femme fatale* that became so familiar in an earlier time, thanks to *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Faye Dunaway's Evelyn Mulwray is a victim—motivated in her 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 *films noir*. The *femme fatale* in early *noir* was symbolic of the threat to masculinity; in portraying these women as evil and without restraint, filmmakers were attempting to instill distrust of women's changing roles in American society. In previous movies like *Double Indemnity* and *The Maltese Falcon*, the *femmes fatales* were portrayed as ruthless and with classic, unexplained motives like lust or greed. These women were beyond rationale; 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 women are assailed on all sides. 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 masculinity—instead a patriarchal society was a threat to them. In *Chinatown*, Polanski deconstructs the idea of a *femme fatale* in order to portray the world as it truly is: hostile, unjust, and without an enduring regard for women.

Absent from *Chinatown* along with the *femme fatale* is the traditional role of the "good girl." Instead of a clear dichotomy between good and bad, we have only Evelyn Mulwray who is a mixture of good and bad, innocence and knowledge, integrity and hypocrisy. In an early scene, a different woman appears, very much

in the tradition of Brigid O'Shaughnessy from *The Maltese Falcon*, and attempts to steal Evelyn's identity in order to ruin the reputation of Hollis Mulwray, an engineer at the water plant. As the fake Mrs. Mulwray is exposed, the initial image of the *femme fatale* is nullified. From some of the first scenes in the movie, we know that this is not going to be a typical *noir*—and therefore the *femme fatale* will be anything but predictable, and definitely should not conform to the established character type in the genre.

In addition, J. J. Gittes, the private detective, has his first encounter with the true Evelyn Mulwray as she inadvertently hears him sharing a crass joke with his operatives. "You're screwing just like a Chinaman!" he shouts, just as he becomes aware that he is being watched by the true Mrs. Mulwray. Seconds later he discovers that he has committed a serious professional blunder by publicizing Hollis Mulwray's case of infidelity. In her first scene, Mrs. Mulwray is tactful, empowered, and self-assured. "I don't get tough with anyone, Mr. Gittes" she states, "my lawyer does." Jake, who should typically be a master of these situations like Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, is presented as a tactless fool, and Evelyn is collected and in control—unlike Brigid O'Shaughnessy whose early moment in the film shows her awkwardly giving Spade an inadequate amount of money.

However, in the following scenes we see Evelyn backing down from her firm position. At first it may seem as if she has something to hide like the usual suspicious *femme fatale*, but in reality, she is at the mercy of a controlling patriarchal hierarchy. For Evelyn, her husband's involvement in some kind of intrigue is "personal, it's very personal." At one point, she retorts, "Mr. Gittes, don't tell me how I feel." According to Lyons, "Mary Astor's Brigid merely pretended to fragility; Dunaway's Evelyn is a speaking wound, a shivering fork, every word brought reluctant and broken out of the realm of the unutterable (even when she is discussing iced tea), every gesture sketching at a remembered blow" (52). Evelyn brings to mind Brigid in these scenes—but her pain and suffering are real, despite the viewer's initial beliefs. Polanski refuses to fall into the clichés etched into memory by Mary Astor—and therefore creates an even more memorable character.

Evelyn is the victim of a long-standing patriarchal system that dominates not only Los Angeles but also her personal life. The patriarchy that operates in the movie is far greater than that of Gittes' private investigator authority, or the authority of the police. It may include the police—but this patriarchy that con-

trols everything is linked with a corrupt public utility system, namely the system that controls water flow. As we later discover, the person that is on the top of this organized system of corruption is Noah Cross, Evelyn's father. She is, of course, as Jake asserts, "hiding something"—but regretfully. After Jake blatantly asserts this fact, Evelyn expresses a wish to come clean on the details, but he drives away noisily and stifles her voice. It is an interesting moment in the movie—one that aptly demonstrates Evelyn's ambivalence and uncharacteristic wish to make things right. But Evelyn is only one person, and more importantly she is female, so she faces an insurmountable feat in trying to repair the damage that her father has done. Lindberg states,

When Polanski first read the script of *Chinatown* he thought it was "a potentially first-rate thriller showing how the history and boundaries of L.A. had been fashioned by human greed." He made it into something a bit more radical than that. In the end, the movie's various plot strands, involving local politics in the Los Angeles of the 30's, incest, and murder, do not actually come together, but the point of it all is clear enough, echoing yet another theme of the period—the powerlessness of the individual against economic and political evil. (63)

Both Evelyn and Jake are individuals—in some cases working against one another. Jake prods Evelyn for information that she refuses to divulge—perhaps because it is too painful—and when he pries it from her in the end it is too late to affect the outcome.

Unlike most of the *femmes fatales* in early *films noir*, we discover a tremendous amount of information about Evelyn's private life and therefore are able to understand her problems. Sexual dysfunction is a part of Evelyn's life and early up-bringing. When Jake grills her on the details of her father's relationship with Hollis Mulwray, Evelyn manifests obvious signs of discomfort, lighting a second cigarette when she already has one going. Evelyn, as it turns out, had married her father's business partner who was considerably older than she was. One gets the feeling that the marriage was arranged, or determined by forces outside of Evelyn's control. Discussions about her other extramarital affairs leave Evelyn especially uneasy. She tells Jake, "I don't see anyone for very long." When we later discover that Evelyn, as a young teenager, had an incestuous relationship with her father and produced a child, it doesn't come as a surprise. Noah Cross is dominant, manipulative, and controlling of his daughter's sexuality. At one point he asks Jake blatantly if Jake is sleeping with his daughter. He tells Jake, "You're dealing with a disturbed woman who just lost her husband. . . . You may think you know what you're dealing with, but believe me you don't." Noah Cross is the movie's evil center; his name even hints at "water and patriarchy and incest" (Lyons 52). Throughout the course of the film and the characterization of Noah Cross, Evelyn goes from being frustratingly vague in the amount of

information she will divulge to being viewed as an unwilling victim. At several points in the movie she appears to be a guilty *femme fatale*—she withholds information from Jake, has suspicious motives for dropping her lawsuit against Jake, and appears at one point to be imprisoning Hollis Mulwray's girlfriend. We later learn that the girlfriend is both her daughter and her sister, thus once again discrediting our impulse to make Evelyn the *femme fatale*.

The amoral nature of this world seems to be embodied in the idea of Chinatown, and later in the movie we see the driving force behind the amorality that causes the destruction of Evelyn, as well as Jake's quest for justice. The movie isn't set in Chinatown except for 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, "bothers 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" (Lyons 53). In the midst of this madness is an ineffectual police force, deprived of any power and controlled by the same patriarchal system that controls the water utilities. Throughout the movie, we see the police making consistent mistakes regarding the Hollis Mulwray case. For the first part of the movie, they automatically declare his murder an accident, and later in the movie they become a force which Jack must evade in order to discover the truth. Jake is simultaneously working against the all-powerful Noah Cross, the untruthful Evelyn, and the dishonest police force. "Jake's good will goes unrewarded," says Victor Gischler. "He cannot overcome the corrupt society he fights against, the society referred to metaphorically as Chinatown. The cops' pursuit of law and order is not the same as Jake's pursuit of justice."

The police, as having a firm foothold in the patriarchal system that only seeks to destroy justice, also play into the victimization of Evelyn Mulwray. They fail to protect her in the end, and instead restrain Jake from helping her and her daughter/sister escape from Noah Cross, who "owns the police," according to Evelyn. Rather than upholding their duty to serve and protect the people, they destroy any semblance of justice and truth, making it impossible for Jake to solve the case and bring relief to Evelyn and her family. A member of the police force accidentally shoots Evelyn while she driving to her escape. According to Lyons,

It all climaxes, or bottoms out, in Chinatown, where Jake, handcuffed to a hotheaded cop, is powerless

to stop Evelyn from winging her father or the hot-headed cop from shooting Evelyn in the head or Noah Cross from repossessing his daughter/granddaughter, with who knows what intentions. "O h Lord, Lord," wails Cross as he solicitously but vainly tries to cover Katharine's eyes from looking at her blooded mother. (53)

Near the end of the movie, we see Jake going against the inanity of the law to protect Evelyn and Katharine from their father. Jake, by this time, knows that Evelyn is a victim worth saving just as we do, and it takes precedence over solving the case of Hollis' death or exposing the fraud of the water company.

The last scene ensues with pure chaos, resulting in several shots fired—one by Evelyn that hits Noah, and one by the police officer that accidentally hits Evelyn. Katharine screams uncontrollably, blood ripples down Evelyn's face and clothing, and Jake is banished from the crime scene. "As little as possible," Jake mumbles to the police, meaning perhaps that this awful fate was decided before anyone could have done anything to affect the outcome. "Forget it Jake, it's Chinatown," his partner tells him at the very end of the movie. Determinism hangs heavily in the air as the credits roll up on the screen, and most disturbing of all is the fact that Noah Cross has taken his daughter/granddaughter away, suggesting that this victimization 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 subjective 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 himself 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* itself is associated with debauchery and loss of innocence, 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 somewhat sympathetic person suffering from a mental illness, 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 innocence. *Chinatown* may be how the world appeared from Polanski's point of view—a world where brutal murder 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 character is extremely important to the credibility of the motion picture. However, the world in which this realistic 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 others who have a need to restore equilibrium in their society.

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