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Film Noir Unit 4 Essay

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Cherchez La Femme: Analyzing Man Through Woman *Chinatown*

Hardboiled fiction inspired film noir not just in tone and character but in the recycling of the same tropes and themes in dozens of individual stories. Examples such as *Kiss Me Deadly* offer an excellent retelling of these themes while also giving a taste of the postmodernist outlook neo-noir films would be known for. A skilled artisan becomes interested not only in creating a worthwhile story, they become intrigued by what makes the stories inspiring their own resonate with audiences. This understanding of what came before allowed director Roman Polanski to take the *femme fatale* and disillusioned detective of film noir and put them in a story that goes beyond good and evil. *Chinatown* ditches black and white in its color scheme and in its subject matter by giving dimensions to its lead characters. In the process of solving the case at hand, Detective Gittes uncovers the motives explaining why a person does what they do instead of stopping short at discovering what they do. *Chinatown* continues the tried and true theme of helplessness but also offers up the idea that it is not only the corrupt that keeps man down but the patterns inside him causing him to end up where he began.

Before delving into what will be referred to as the love scene in *Chinatown*, a reference will be made to another film noir effort. In the film *Double Indemnity*, the *femme fatale* stands on a towering balcony looking down onto the lead male character. Towers in literature and in reality represent power over what looks like the ants down below. Walter, the male lead character, fell under the spell of Phyllis, the *femme fatale*, once he looked up. From then on, one character held power over the other. Then there was a struggle over who held that power that ended in destruction for both sides. Gittes, as a detective and sleuth, thinks he has a monopoly on power in investigative situations since he knows how to ascertain the truth. He thinks highly of himself in that way, and yet he walks around with a reminder on his face of how he’s not invulnerable. The extent of his vulnerability is masked until he takes the bandage off for Evelyn to clean his wound. Evelyn is stunned by the garishness of his wound. While Evelyn purifies Jake’s imperfection, Jake notices a defect in Evelyn’s eye. Mood setting music kicks in here. The score seems to believe a romance is blossoming in this moment. A man telling a woman he has been staring into her eyes can be met with delight or disgust depending on how she views the situation. Evelyn describes it as a flaw. He questions her word choice and leans in to kiss her. This flaw serves as a reminder of the irreparable damage her father did to her. The sins of the father have such an effect that they have manifested physically in her eye. The eye is where a view of the world is taken in, and this defect represents how one trauma can skew a person’s viewpoint forever. Peroxide purifies wounds through chemical reactions, leaving a burning sensation. A common misconception is that this burning sensation means the peroxide is doing its job. As it turns out, hydrogen peroxide is actually killing bacteria cells because of its incredibly reactive nature. Unfortunately, the killing does not stop there. Along with the invader bacteria cells, the peroxide also “destroys healthy skin cells” (Melina). What is meant to heal has the potential to hurt and further delay the healing process.

Upon notice of the flaw, Jake and Evelyn end up in the bedroom. Jake’s chosen method of soothing Evelyn’s injury is performed in the same way the cause of the injury was originally carried out. In a way, Jake’s nose was harmed in the same way. A knife did the obvious harm, and then peroxide, disguised as a medicine, furthered the damage. Obviously a father raping his daughter is vehemently bad. An argument can be made that Jake sleeping with a woman who has never properly dealt with the evil done to her is only making the trauma worse. What is meant to be a remedy to a problem only further elongates the problem. However, human beings tend to identify with one another through their weaknesses, and that is where the power struggle comes back into play. For the first time, if only for a brief moment, the male and female protagonists in a film noir stand on even ground. Both have bared their wounds for the other to see and with it comes a moment of intimacy.

Despite their apparent intimacy with each other, Jake takes up more screen real estate than Evelyn. This is meant to imply he believes he has control in the situation and also remind the viewer he is the character in the character study. He looks up in the triumph with Evelyn looking in his direction. The jazzy score kicks in. The sound is peaceful with a little intrigue and mystery laced in. The smoke of Jake’s cigarette is comforting but also obscures. (Cigarettes are very similar to the peroxide and sex in this situation. They provide relief but in the long run are harmful.) The brief time of pure intimacy represented by the white sheets they lay upon is interrupted by questions from Evelyn that Gittes does not want to answer. Along with her questions, her gaze is directed at Jake, and he looks away to avoid answering with facial expressions. Once the questioning is reversed, Evelyn takes a puff from her own cigarette, and Jake turns his head Evelyn’s way.

A parity exists between the two, but the parity is not of openness. It is a secret both are hiding that drives them to do all they do. Earlier it was mentioned how Evelyn’s rape and the repercussions from it inform all she does in the present. The trauma of Chinatown acts the same way in Gittes life. Gittes role as an investigator demands he interrogate those related to the case he investigates. In all the film noir movies where the main character is an investigator, characters try to figure out what makes the detective tick. They dodge their questions just as Gittes does, but Gittes does it while also alluding to something taking place in Chinatown. Evelyn whispers “cherchez la femme” which roughly translates to “it’s always a woman” (*Chinatown*). Jake does not understand the meaning of the question in French. What he does understand is that it is the loss of a woman that drives his obsession with Chinatown. He admits as much however so casually. His admittance and that he has a backstory at all separates him from his past counterparts. What does not separate him is that it is his irresponsible ambition and infatuation with women that bring him his woes. Evelyn predicts her own fate when she asks whether the woman is dead. The foreboding piano signals the phone ringing but also foreshadows another woman under Detective Gittes protection meeting with an untimely demise.

In *Chinatown*, not only does the audience learn of why Evelyn allowed her husband “to have an affair” with her daughter and sister. The audience gets to meet the perpetrator of the travesty and see him rip the only good to come out of his horrible sin from the person protecting that good. Gittes also gets to see his possible chance at happiness robbed from him in the place where he first lost his innocence. Noah Cross, Evelyn’s father, is the evil in her life. Chinatown is the evil in Gittes life, but it is Noah Cross that represents and continuously perpetrates the evil that makes Chinatown the place that it is.

Evelyn is not the traditional *femme fatale*. Her death at the end of the film is tragic in a way other film noir movies have been unable to portray. The reason for this is the audience understands her motivations. The exact details of Gittes past are never put forth in detail. However, Evelyn’s story is representative of the journey Gittes went on that led to unhealthy obsession with Chinatown. If it is always a woman, or cherchez la femme, then it is also a woman that allows the viewer to understand Gittes as a character. He is different from other detectives in the genre but not to the point where he finds himself able to escape his own predestined fate.

Works Cited

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