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Chinatown Review

Is director Roman Polanski teasing us with the structure? Is he luring us into somewhere we wouldn't normally go? Write me a 500 word or less review of this movie that incorporates structure, story, and our main characters.

– *What did you do in Chinatown?*

– *As little as possible.*

— Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway) and J. J. Gittes (Jack Nicholson)
Chinatown (1974)

Chinatown's protagonist, Jake Gittes, remembers the sting of helping too much and doing more harm than good. Its writer, Robert Towne, and director, Roman Polanski, subscribe to this philosophy themselves, carefully withholding information from the viewer for the sake of the mystery. Each scene is carefully constructed to satisfy some of the viewers' pangs of curiosity while introducing one or two more.

The story leads us into what seems like any old murder mystery. A gumshoe observes a handful of suspects. Thugs emerge from the shadows to rough him up. There are dames and plot twists. What's unique is the way we meet our hero. The typical fictional P.I. is seen investigating murder or barely surviving a shooting. Most real private detectives, on the other hand, spend their time spying on unfaithful spouses or silently partaking in boring stakeouts, and this is how we see Jake. In the beginning of his story, his life is "somewhere we wouldn't normally go," but it's not long before Jake's vigilance gets him into trouble; the story that follows is enjoyable thanks to its protagonist's realistic depiction.

In fact, at times, either by editing or by acting, Gittes seems to realize or understand something just a moment later than I expect him to, as when a gardener tells him an important

clue and he doesn't react immediately. This has the effect of making the audience feel smarter than the protagonist, but it also makes him more believable overall. He represents the audience, always wanting what's right, but shamefully willing to be a bit dirty if necessary, and driven by curiosity about the story that surrounds him and that dame he can't stay away from.

That dame is Evelyn Mulwray, a widow with a shady past. She supports Jake, reluctantly at first, and even plays along with some of his tricks, as when they visit a nursing home and pretend to be married to lend credence to their cover story. She's hiding things, though, and ends up being another mystery for Jake to crack.

The bandage on Jake's nose is a reminder of the painful consequences of sticking it where it doesn't belong. Noah Cross represents the flawed system in which Jake operates. When Evelyn removes that reminder, and Jake strays from his philosophy of non-involvement to oppose Noah, it is inevitable that Evelyn is hurt.

The film's structure isn't too special. Act One introduces the characters and ends with the discovery of a stiff. Act Two deepens the relationship between the hero and the dame and ends with them in bed. Act Three reveals the dame's secrets and ends with denouement and tragedy. All of this seems unoriginal when put simply, but the film remains fresh, soaked as it is in foreshadowing (Curly comes back), symbolism (Noah survives the flood) and historical context (the St. Francis Dam disaster), not to mention clever editing and photography, and convincing acting. *Chinatown* breaks little new ground, but shines with quality in the ground it treads.