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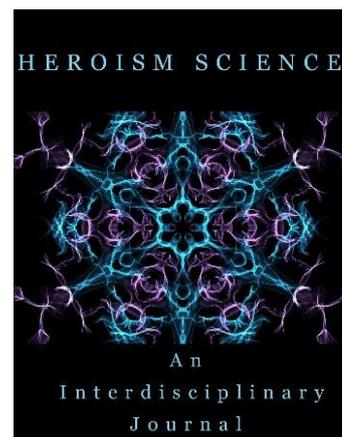
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“It’s My Metier”: The Failed Hero in Chinatown

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ABSTRACT: Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974) presents one of film’s most memorable failed heroes, Jake Giddes. Because of its grim ending, critics tend to conclude that it is an existential noir or a reflection on Polanski’s life and times, his escape from the Holocaust as a child, the death of his wife Sharon Tate, or political events such as Watergate and Vietnam. By examining the film through the genre of tragedy, Giddes becomes a tragic, not failed, hero, a character who can show us how to suffer nobly.

KEYWORDS: *Chinatown, tragedy, film, tragic hero, Roman Polanski*

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“IT’S MY METIER”: THE FAILED HERO IN CHINATOWN

Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974) offers a memorable failed hero in the character of detective Jake Giddes played by Jack Nicholson. From the opening of the movie to its final scene, Jake makes mistakes that most private investigators and even his assistants would never make. He even makes them repeatedly, as his former partner turned police lieutenant, Lou, reminds him, “you never learn.” To add insult to injury, Giddes must wear a ridiculous-looking bandage over his nose because of a cut he sustained during a fight with a man half his size. Mistakes, no dashing looks, what is the value of such a failed hero? His story might serve as a “bad example,” a cautionary tale. We might, for example, learn never to trust a “dame” or get involved. But Polanski’s *Chinatown* does not offer simple conclusions. It is not a “whodunit,” and his main character is not merely a failure. Instead, the film sets itself up as a tragedy, one of literature’s highest genres, with the flawed Jake Giddes as its tragic hero.

Defining tragedy is probably as difficult as stopping the water that is being dumped into the ocean by the antagonists in the film. There is a tsunami of critical work on the subject that often tends to limit the application of the term to the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, or the printed word, and limits heroes to the upper-class. Aristotle, who enjoyed defining and organizing genres, says that tragedy is a dramatic form that presents a hero, who is of noble birth or high social standing, who is neither saint nor sinner, but has some shortcomings that result in his “reversal of fortune,” the tragedy. For Aristotle, the best tragedies include a recognition at the moment the hero falls from grace, a moment that affects the audience, a catharsis (11-19). Through the hero’s realization, the audience reacts and perhaps reassesses their lives, choices, responses. Of course, this is a simplification, and critics have been arguing about Aristotle’s definition since it first appeared. Even during the high points of ancient Greek and Roman drama, there were exceptions to the Aristotelian rules, and Renaissance dramatists like Shakespeare revised the requirements regarding the tragic hero’s

status, as did Arthur Miller who cast a lowly salesman as his tragic hero in *Death of a Salesman*. While authors like George Steiner argue that tragedy may only exist in societies such as ancient Greece, Rome, and the Renaissance during which certain social, political, and religious assumptions were held, more and more work suggests that the tragic form is dynamic, evolving, and just as relevant today as it was in the past.²

What is important to note in most of the discussions about the tragic is that the hero fails, but he is not defeated. That is what makes it a tragedy. Rita Felski notes that as works “trend” toward tragedy, they offer heroes who overreach, who exhibit “miscalculated confidence and its consequences” (2). Their overconfidence leads to their “reversal of fortune,” and we are left to ponder their missteps. The result is not a simple moral of the story or conclusion, however. Tragedy is more complicated, and Felski suggests that films have avoided the tragic to avoid such complications and offer more melodramas, works that assign “individual characters an unambiguous role in the Manichean struggle of good versus evil, virtue versus vice” (7). And while having a dashing hero overcome evil is satisfying, Felski calls for a greater appreciation for the tragic in art and film because tragedy revels in ambiguity:

Tragedy is prized for its refusal to offer clear-cut solutions and absolute judgements; according to Hegel’s influential thesis, it stages a conflict between competing rights rather than between right and wrong. Such a conflict, moreover, is often enacted in the divided desires and psyche of a single protagonist rather than being parceled out among a dramatic cast of allegorical types. (Felski 7)

Melodrama may make us feel good. Tragedy makes us think. It also offers an experience of tragedy through the actions of and tensions within the main character.

² For a concise and readable overview of the theories regarding tragedy, see Rita Felski, Jennifer Wallace. Eagleton defends the everyday use of the term tragedy and deems it worthy of scholarly discussion.

Examining *Chinatown* as a tragedy, not a melodrama or “whodunit,” makes the failed hero, Giddes, a tragic hero who is not just overcome by the impossible forces facing him, but he also remains strong through his strength of character, a combination of stubbornness and grit that may teach us all how to respond to failure and loss.

Before moving to the film itself, it is important to note that director Roman Polanski had experience with the tragic literary form through his work directing *Macbeth* (1971). Polanski created a darker *Macbeth*, if that is possible, one without the “positive figures in the play,” such as MacDuff and Malcolm (Deats 92). And as we shall see later, he darkened the script of *Chinatown*, as well.

Many point to Polanski’s personal experiences with loss to explain the almost nihilistic conclusions to both *Macbeth* and *Chinatown*: his narrow escape from Holocaust Europe as a child, the murder of his wife Sharon Tate in 1969, as well as the national tragedies of Vietnam and Watergate in the United States at the time.³ While all these may have influenced his personal and artistic perspectives, he self-self-consciously sought to create a tragedy in the generic sense of the term through this film. Robert Towne created the first script, and Polanski tightened it and adjusted the ending because he wanted the film to be an “unmitigated tragedy,” but he never referenced his losses ((Wasson 120). Instead, Polanski explained his desire to film a tragedy by referring to another film that he saw when he was young, the classic *Of Mice and Men* (1939). At the end of that film, a character, Lenny, is murdered, and Polanski described that as tragedy, and “what made him remember, years later, the film, was tragedy” (Wasson 120). Polanski chose the tragic form, not the tragedies

³ Many critics struggle with the film because of its bleakness and characterize it as a new genre. Garrett Stewart concludes that it is a “metaphysical ‘private eye’ film” (32). R. Barton Palmer and Mary-Kay Gamel liken Jake Giddes to Oedipus but conclude that the film is a product of the seventies milieu, not a “transhistorical” art form, and point to the influence of the social issues of the day to explain the film. Tom Pollard compares Giddes to mythic heroes such as Osiris, Perseus, Theseus, Odysseus and others, concluding that Giddes is not among them; instead, he is a “postmodern hero.” McGinnis concludes similarly. Novak summarizes it well—the consensus is that the film is despairing, if not defeatist, perhaps nihilistic” (255).

of his life and era, because the form itself has a powerful effect on the audience, partly because the hero does not succeed.

The tragic elements in *Chinatown* are clear. The noir style creates a world filled with shadows, subterfuge, and ambiguity.⁴ Drought-ridden Los Angeles “resembles the plague-ridden city of Thebes” (Belton 940) and Chinatown “stands for a sort of fatedness” (Novak 255), clearly a difficult situation with limited options. And our hero is definitely flawed. Even his detective practice, his “metier,” adultery cases, marks him as different from the usual heroic noir investigators who take on homicides and always get their man (Cawelti 283). He appears greedy, only interested in “trying to make a living,” an impression highlighted when his adversary, Noah Cross, mispronounces his name as “Gits,” implying he is someone who is only concerned about what he “gets.”

Along the way, however, we begin to see him differently. Whether he changes as a result of the obstacles or whether the obstacles reveal his true and noble character beneath his rough exterior, it is clear that by the end of the film, he is not just a selfish narcissist. He struggles to save a woman and her child, as well as the entire city of Los Angeles. He becomes “a man of honor and integrity who cannot be made to give up his quest for true justice” (Cawelti 280).

The film begins by encouraging the audience not only to sympathize with Giddes but to identify with him and assume that tragic self-confidence that will later cause problems for both Giddes and the viewers. *Chinatown* begins self-consciously, drawing our attention to the fact that it is a film and it has power. We do not begin with the plague, as *Oedipus* does. Instead, we see black-and-white photos of a couple having sex in the woods. A hand flips through the photos, a man groans. While the allusion may suggest pornography, it also

⁴ If defining tragedy has created a cottage industry for critics, so, too, has defining noir. James Naremore, one of the experts on the style, concludes “it has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term” (9).

references the early attempts at filmmaking when still photos were stacked and flipped to give the illusion of movement. Polanski seems to be reminding us that we have come a long way in terms of film art, perhaps suggesting that he is about to take the art form further. If nothing else, the opening flexes film's muscles; it is powerful enough to take on the tragic form.

The opening may also serve as a warning. What we see, may not be what we get. And the film repeatedly questions our ability to see and interpret images. There are numerous references to sight, blindness, glass, water, all suggesting how distorted our world can be at times. Giddes is a "private eye" who uses cameras, binoculars, and peeping-Tom or surveillance strategies. The Chinese gardener who mispronounces "grass" as "glass" underscores the water's distorting properties. Spectacles are found in the pond, attributed to one character, and then found to belong to someone else. Evelyn Mulwray has a "flaw in her iris" and is shot through that eye at the end of the film. In *Chinatown*, the "eyes" do not have it, so we must take care as we watch this film.

As the film challenges us to watch carefully, it sets us up to believe what we see. First, the photos lure us in, presenting us with a question or mystery. We want to know what is going on. Who is the couple in the photographs? Why are they here? The film offers us an answer immediately. Curly's wife is having an affair. Jake Giddes, our hero, has offered him the kind of "oracular" proof Shakespeare's Othello demanded to prove Desdemona untrue. Curly finds out his wife is cheating; gets upset; takes a shot of whiskey; goes home; and, as we learn later, does not divorce her because he is Catholic, but instead roughs her up a bit, puts her in her place, and reestablishes family harmony in an oddly nostalgic but completely sexist way. Case closed. This is our "metier" now. We "eye-identify" with Giddes and his profession because we have experienced a successful resolution to a mystery and because Polanski directs most of the movie from Giddes's perspective.

The next case appears to offer a repeat performance. Another distraught spouse, this time a woman, Mrs. Mulwray, hires Giddes to find out if her husband, Hollis, Chief Engineer of Water and Power in Los Angeles, is having an affair. The scene is nearly a shot-for-shot imitation of the noir classic *The Maltese Falcon* (1939), directed by John Huston who stars as Noah Cross in this film. The allusion to the older film also hints at a positive outcome for this case. And while Sam Spade would never care about fashion or Venetian blinds in the way that Giddes does, Giddes fulfills our expectations of a noir hero—rough around the edges, playing fast and loose with the law, but an independent man of integrity who solves his cases and triumphs over evil. And that’s exactly what appears to happen during this second case. Giddes solves the problem in a matter of minutes. When his partner, Walsh, for example, takes pictures of two men, not an adulterous couple, Giddes takes over as the more experienced detective. And the film appears to reward his actions. He captures the adulterous couple on film, He is our hero, and he knows his surveillance. This is, after all, his “metier.”

At this point, the film demonstrates and simultaneously critiques the appeal of melodramatic and traditional detectives and narratives. While flawed, Giddes knows his job. He has exposed the affair and solved the mystery of the affair. In the next several scenes, Giddes’s work is exposed as flawed. Not only does Walsh’s photo of the two men arguing hold clues about the true mystery that surrounds Giddes, but Giddes is attacked by a banker who criticizes Giddes’s line of work. Giddes, of course, responds violently and impulsively, but the scene suggests that this kind of work and this kind of storytelling is “easy and sleazy.”

The scene also highlights Giddes’s unsavory qualities. First, the surprise appearance of the case in the papers hints that Giddes is not as in control as we or he thinks he is. Second, Giddes who “just trying to make a living” after he leaves the police force, appears self-involved, *nouveau riche*, just another participant in the capitalist overconsumption that is fueling the growth of Los Angeles. Third, Giddes relinquishes his battle with the banker to

hear a good dirty joke, making him appear superficial, a “hot head vulgarian” (Naremore 206).

The next scene confirms as much. Giddes returns to his office, ready to share his joke. His colleagues give him numerous cues to remain silent, but Giddes ignores them, tells the joke, and discovers that two clients are there. Giddes may be humiliated, but we are rewarded. We saw the truth, the situation, and the problem before he did. Our powers of observation appear better than his. We did not need him to see the clues his colleagues were indicating. But at the moment we engage in our own spectacular *hubris*, the film reveals that the Mrs. Mulwray in the office is the real Mrs. Mulwray and the previous visitor was a fake. We have been duped, and while we are not served with a lawsuit, as Giddes is, the revelation is just as humiliating for us as viewers as for our hero Giddes.

With the audience back on Giddes’s side or at least returned to watching the film from his point of view, Giddes becomes more sympathetic. He is concerned with his reputation as a private investigator, but he is just as concerned over Hollis Mulwray. The people who framed Giddes also framed Hollis. He says, once again emphasizing his status as a “private eye,” “If I can see him, I can help him.”

His decision to help sends him to his former world, the Los Angeles criminal justice system. Here the film forces us to compare Giddes’s character with those of the police officers, the supposed keepers of law and order. What we see is that there is not much difference between the two, and some of the officers are louts. They ridicule Giddes and his work, but his former partner, now lieutenant, Lou, treats him respectfully and offers him access to the case. From Lou he learns that Hollis is dead, and from his coroner friend, he learns that a drunk drowned in a river, a river Giddes knows is bone dry. In this way, while the rank and file police officers do not respect Giddes and dismiss him as foolish, the more

admirable members of the Los Angeles criminal justice system afford him respect and information.

Like other heroes, Giddes takes risks. He suspects that freshwater from the Los Angeles area is being dumped into the ocean to create the drought that will lead to the passage of an ordinance to build a new dam, all orchestrated by Noah Cross who is using the dam and the new water supply to create an empire. On a stakeout, he is nearly killed as the water is released. As he escapes, however, his efforts are rewarded by an attack by one of Cross's thugs and a dwarf, played by director Roman Polanski, who cuts his nose because he is "nosy." Giddes risks his life, loses one of his precious Florsheim shoes, and faces humiliation and ridicule after the attack. He must wear a bandage on his nose through much of the film and takes a lot of ribbing as a result. But the gauze may also remind us of the film's earlier suggestion, that things are not what they seem, and this may be true of Giddes as well. Giddes may be flawed, but he, like Oedipus, seeks the truth.

On his quest, he encounters the enigmatic Mrs. Mulwray. Giddes relentlessly questions her about her marriage, father, and the mystery surrounding Los Angeles's water problems and land development. Just as relentlessly, she obfuscates the truth by lying, evading, and omitting details. She embodies the way the glass, cameras, and water distort even the most recognizable objects.

The film also aligns her with the inscrutability of Chinatown: "the female and the Oriental as Other are connected by Faye Dunaway's appearance: makeup and lighting maker her look as oriental as possible" (222). Novak adds, "when Evelyn is in frame, so too is one (or more) of her Chinese servants" (255). And while she is certainly not what she seems, her suggested Asian heritage could also be explained by the lack of references to her mother. While her father Cross looms over the film's action, no mother is ever mentioned. Given her father's drive to colonize all he sees, Eve's mother might have been one of any number of

Chinese servants in the Cross household over the years, a woman used and discarded like so many people in Cross's path. Phillip Novak complicates the association further arguing that linking Evelyn with Chinatown and representing both as inscrutable "others" make troubling statements about race and gender. Instead, Novak argues that we view Evelyn and Chinatown as linked not by what they are or symbolize but by how they are viewedIn other words, Evelyn and Chinatown are connected, but they are connected by function, by what they show us about Jake, not by meaning. Maybe Chinatown is just a place—like any other. Maybe it's not bad luck at all—except for those who fail to read carefully. (258)

What is clear is that Evelyn is not a typical noir *femme fatale*, but the film presents her as such initially. After Hollis's murder, the police assume she was responsible for her husband's murder. Her father, too, describes her as unstable, jealous, and impulsive. He hires Giddes to "find the girl," Hollis's lover, to save her from his hysterical daughter. As in many noir films, the *femme fatale* attracts the noir hero. And Giddes like many noir heroes before him, succumbs to Evelyn's charms and sleeps with the dangerous Mrs. Mulwray.

And while we may think that Giddes has been caught in the spider's web by this man-killer, the moment provides greater insight into Giddes's character. He recalls his time in Chinatown, and he confesses his mistake: "I was trying to keep someone from being hurt and I ended up making sure she was hurt." Giddes's vulnerability endears him to the audience. He has made a mistake, and he may be making one with Mrs. Mulwray, but he continues to work and pursue the truth.

If we have any desire to deify Giddes, however, the next scene brings him down to earth with a thud. After Giddes reveals his secret, Evelyn responds, *cherche la femme*. Giddes does not understand, so she explains, "Was there a woman involved?" Giddes may have learned the word "metier," but he does not know French. Despite his office, his fancy shoes,

his Venetian blinds, and his one French phrase, he is a regular guy, “just trying to make a living.”

Despite his encounter with Evelyn, however, he does not trust her. When she is called away, he follows her. Through a peeping-Tom shot, we see what he sees—Evelyn giving sedatives to Hollis’s young woman. Enraged, Giddes confronts her with the “truth” he has been told by her father. She has kidnapped the girl. Evelyn denies it and offers a partial truth. The girl is her sister. Giddes accepts the explanation, but he does not return to Evelyn’s bed. Instead, he continues his investigation.

Tired of her evasiveness, Giddes removes himself from the family momentarily and returns to his law enforcement friends who tell him that Eve is, in fact, their prime suspect. And water and distorted perceptions play an important role in their conclusion. The autopsy concluded that Hollis was killed in saltwater, not freshwater. Giddes returns to the Mulwray home to discover in the saltwater pond a pair of glasses. He concludes that the glasses are Hollis’s and the police are right. Determined to capture his *femme fatale*, Giddes, like Sam Spade before him, calls the police, but he wants to extract an explanation from his wayward lover. Like Spade, he pretends that he is only concerned about his reputation as a private investigator, but like Spade, he has strong feelings for a woman. As he reveals the glasses, the glasses that have helped him apparently “see” the truth, he confronts Evelyn with the fact that he knows she does not have a sister. Evelyn denies it. Frustrated, he slaps her violently. Whatever the secret she is hiding, it is buried deep. This is one of the film’s most violent scenes. At last, she confesses, “She’s my sister, she’s my daughter, she’s my sister, she’s my daughter.” Stunned, Giddes tries to fathom what he has just heard, stuttering, “He raped you.” From Evelyn’s response, this conclusion is not quite accurate either. Her father, Noah, and she had an incestuous relationship that led to the birth of Kathryn. Hollis cared for her and

rescued her from her father's clutches, but she knows that her father intends to do the same to Kathryn.

We are in the stuff of myth and the world of tragedy at this point. A character called Noah controls the water. He is played by John Huston who played Noah in his *The Bible: In the Beginning* (1966). A larger than life force embodied in one man, Noah explains his reasons for all he does, power and legacy. He tells Giddes, "most people never have to face the fact that they are capable of anything." He wants to control the water of Los Angeles to build his empire, and he wants to take Kathryn for himself so that he can reproduce himself. Noah is not just a character; he is a force of nature working to populate himself with himself.

Undaunted, Giddes continues his efforts to save the women. He is clearly out of his league, but there is something ennobling in his struggle. He strategizes. Captured by Cross's men, he is taken to a meeting place where he hopes the police will meet him and arrest Cross. As Giddes desperately tries to explain what Cross has done, not only to his daughter but to the city of Los Angeles, Cross catches sight of his daughters. He is determined to get Kathryn for himself. He pleads with Evelyn in such a reprehensible way that there is little doubt what he has in store for the innocent girl. Desperate to save Kathryn and escape, Evelyn shoots her father in the shoulder. As Lou attempts to take a non-lethal shot, Giddes reaches up, only to cause the discharge of another policeman's gun that hits Evelyn in the eye, the eye with the "flaw in the iris." It appears that our "eyes" do not have it. Giddes fails, evil wins.

As Giddes looks at Evelyn's corpse and as Cross takes Kathryn away, he comments, "as little as possible," a phrase that has been repeated throughout the film. It is the advice that the district attorney gave to Giddes when he was working in Chinatown. Lou, too, reminds Giddes, "Forget it, Jake, it's just Chinatown." At this point, it is easy to conclude that the film is nihilistic, a product of the disillusioned seventies, or a postmodern noir. But by looking at the film from Jake's perspective, seeing what he sees, and interpreting things the way he

does, we experience the tragedy and may have our own moment of recognition. Giddes has suffered a reversal of fortune, and it appears that his recognition is the advice given to him while in Chinatown. But what we have seen of his character throughout the film is not one that lives by the adage, “as little as possible.” Instead, Jake has done everything he could to find the truth and help rescue the women from a terrible fate. And despite his failure, his quest and his commitment to heroic action reveals him as a flawed but noble character who did uncover the truth.

The film does not end here, however. In the only crane shot in the film, we see Giddes and Chinatown recede. Mary-Kay Gamel calls it “the ‘Olympian’ position of distance and superiority to Giddes,” a superior position we have not experienced since the early moments in the film when we were solving mysteries and situations more successfully than Giddes. Gamel, who resists ascribing any universal conclusions regarding the film in favor of more historical conclusions, positions the film in the milieu of the seventies. But having experienced Giddes’s quest through both the narrative and the cinematic techniques, it is difficult to ignore some transhistorical and universal meanings from the film. Giddes experienced tragedy before the action of the film. In Chinatown, he made an error and lost, but he does not give up. Despite his attempts to “just make a living,” Giddes gets involved again. Like Noah, he repeats certain behaviors, but unlike Noah who repeats his actions to imprison, Giddes repeats in the hopes of offering freedom. As Scott Allison and George R. Goethals remind us, heroes struggle because it is an “inescapable part of the human experience. Heroes separate themselves from the rest because they don’t allow the struggle to stop them from achieving great things” (111). Giddes continues to struggle, despite his failures. Like *Oedipus*, he may lose, but he does not acquiesce; therefore, he is a tragic hero and the film a tragedy.

Screenwriter Robert Towne wanted to conclude the film happily, with Giddes and the women going to Mexico and escaping Cross's clutches. Polanski and he fought bitterly over the conclusion, and the ending was not filmed until very late in the production process. Polanski wanted to end the film his way because his ending demonstrates that "a nobler detective is waiting to emerge" (qtd. in Wasson 139). Giddes's failure is our challenge. For Jake Giddes, he returned to his "metier," not adultery cases, but tragedy. And the film challenges us to ponder Giddes's choice.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.