

# A comparison of chinatown: script and screenplay



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Whilst the world of Chinatown is a filthy pool of bitter desperation and questionable morality in both the script created by Robert Townes and the film made by Roman Polanski, the versions show noticeable differences due to the altering of mediums. Nicholson builds a significantly more detailed character than is seen on the page by applying a myriad of mannerisms and varying tones. It is through this that Gittes is transformed from a cynical, indifferent private eye to a more complex combination of seedy corruption, surface charm and a desire to uncover the shady underside of 1937 Los Angeles while simultaneously being successful and gaining credibility. Another way in which the character of Gittes is enhanced in the film is through the usage of costuming. The colouring of Gittes' suits and the accessories that accompany them emphasise certain traits including his constantly wavering morality and the cool collectiveness that he attempts to portray. The constantly differing but always muted colouring of Gittes' attire acts as a measurement of his varying levels of corruption and provides a visual representation of his fragmented personality. The shades of grey, white and black that dominate his costuming suggests the many facets of Gittes that exist but also indicate that they must exist within a world that is hopelessly grim despite the harsh, glaring light that penetrates the city. At the film's opening Gittes suit is a creamy white as opposed to the scripts directions for a "white linen suit". Through this subtle altering in colour Polanski suggests both Gittes and L. A. are on a superficial level pure and charming while implying from the films outset that corruption is seeping through to every to corner of the city, even to those who are fundamentally decent. He is wearing this same suit whilst meeting the fake Mrs. Mulray, demonstrating his relatively sound intentions at this point as he simply

attempts to make a living, but when meeting the real Mrs. Mulray his jacket has been removed foreshadowing that her presence in his life will cause him to become significantly more vulnerable and exposed. After several developments in the Mulray case Gittes meets Mrs. Mulray for dinner in an attempt to extract information about her family from her. His suit is near black in colouring and his tie a dark navy despite the script failing to mention what Gittes' costume should be composed of at this point. The director's choice of colouring allows it to be implied that between these two meetings Gittes has crossed the line from helpful to sordid, and that this is the point where he becomes swamped with the filth that has surrounded him from the beginning. In between these two points of the film Gittes suits are varying shades of grey. In the scene where he watches Mulray oppose the plan for the proposed dam, the script simply states that he is "impeccably dressed". In other scenes where his costuming is grey his outfit is sometimes not mentioned at all. By choosing grey as the central theme for costuming in this area of the text the battle between Gittes desire to assist in solving L. A.'s problems and his self interested desire to become wealthy and esteemed can be presented in an effective visual manner allowing the audience to see at what point the influences around him overwhelm his sense of decency. For example, in the court scene previously mentioned Gittes' suits shade is a lighter grey with a lighter still checkered pattern, suggesting at this point he is appreciative of Mr. Mulray's refusal to "make the same mistake twice" and that he is purely carrying out his job without the presence of a selfish motive. When at the coroner's office with Mrs. Mulray his suit is a far darker grey, perhaps indicating that his interest in her is swaying towards the inappropriate and his fascination with the case has gone farther than what

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his job requires and has become a bitter personal battle. Later on in the film, when he visits Noah Cross, his suit has significantly lightened in colour, consisting of a beige jacket and white pants. He is still wearing this outfit when he goes to investigate the orange groves and warn them of the proposed plan. The script's only costuming advice for this section is once again for Gittes to be "impeccably dressed". The suggestions for Noah Cross's costume are far more specific and detailed, indicating Townes did not see Gittes' costuming as an important aspect of the scene. By dressing Gittes in a meaningful manner as Polanski has done, it can be seen that his intentions are once more altruistic as he assists Mrs. Mulray in stopping her malicious father and attempts to stop the devious water owners from making money from the less fortunate. Interestingly, this is the first point in the film that his jacket and pants are differing in colour, perhaps suggesting that while Gittes has remembered his good intentions he is not entirely exempt from the poison penetrating L. A. It also foreshadows that the darkness will soon permeate both his outfit and life. Inevitably, it does, and when Gittes receives a call summoning him to the death of Ida Sessions he is dressed in deep red pajamas, a colour that can represent both danger and death, and as Gittes enters the crime scene of Mrs. Sessions in a dark grey suit he begins a flurry of encounters with both of the above. Now only his handkerchief is white showing how little of his purity remains and his tie is a bright red indicating that the perils of the next twenty four hours are only just beginning. The accessories worn by Gittes in the film play an important role, and despite the fact his ties fail to be mentioned in the script the large number worn, all adorned with indistinguishable circular patterns, are essential in reminding viewers of the blurred lines between what is

considered acceptable and what is not in the deeply fractured L. A. This accessory was soon overtaken, however, when Gittes nose was cut and his face then dominated for a large portion of the film by a nose bandage. The script calls for “ a bandage spread eagled across Gittes nose”, which simply does not have as powerful effect as the bulky, misshapen lump taking up the majority of Nicholson's face. It is piercingly white in colour, made even more so by the glaring sunlight, acting as a constant reminder that Gittes possesses a higher level of integrity than many of his vapid counterparts. It begins off obscuring his entire nose but when he has drinks with Mrs. Mulray it has moved to the side, exposing its left side. This implies that he is slowly losing the decency he initially possessed and also that he is once again making himself more susceptible to danger by delving deeper into the complex Mulray case. It then becomes blood stained as he fights several men at the orange groves, indicating the rapidly increasing danger of the situation and the disintegrating state of Gittes morals. When he sleeps with Mrs. Mulray it has been removed altogether, indicating that he has most certainly relented to the increasingly insipid world of L. A.'s wealthy.

Nicholson does not ‘ shove’ the shot glass towards Curly in Scene One but rather places it down definitively, portraying Gittes over confidence in his ability as a private investigator and the lesser movement of the glass perhaps reflecting the characters narrow vision of what is going on around him later in the film. In the very first shot of Gittes he is sprawled casually across the seat, oozing both nonchalance and disinterest as Nicholson displays the aloof façade that Gittes attempts to present to those around him. His legs are also crossed at this point, immediately establishing Gittes’ reserved nature and desire to remain detached from his clients on a personal

level. He is clear and definitive in his movements but they are also fairly restricted and are never below mid range, perhaps indicating that while Gittes has penetrated the upper class he remains restricted by the compromised, decaying world that they reside in. After Gittes' line "...and you're right" the film cuts to when Curly is pleading with Gittes to ease off on the payment for his services. By cutting out Gittes' rant about wealthy Americans and the death penalty, the characters façade of disinterest can be maintained throughout the entire first scene and revealed in a more progressive way in the rest of the film. Then, as the script is picked up once again and Gittes says "forget it, Curly" he pats Curly on the shoulder and back as opposed to the directions in the script which suggest he "throws an arm around Curly" as he says "I don't want your last dime". A pat is far more definite than a thrown arm emphasising Gittes arrogance further and by changing the location of the touch Nicholson takes the focus away slightly from money, suggesting that his character has some care for others and is not to be affiliated completely with the corrupt upper class. His voice has a distinctive huskiness as he addresses Curly, its tainted purity resonating with the toxicity of the once noble ideal of the American dream, that anyone could make an honest living if they worked hard enough. Gittes traded his respectable career as a policeman for the more low-brow practice of exposing cheating lovers, foreshadowing that he is not distanced enough from the outside world to properly observe or change it. Despite this, there is no doubt he is eloquent and smooth in his interactions, as demonstrated by his clear dictation even when his mouth movements are restricted by a cigarette. His tone remains notably dry and emotionless throughout the course of the first scene and his register consistently low, demonstrating the

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world weary nature of Gittes and his cynicism in the ideals of love that are rapidly crumbling before Curly's eyes. Chinatown undergoes an array of notable transformations as it is moved from script form to the screen. Nicholson's acting accompanies costuming and a wide range of other filmic elements in creating a vivid, engaging screenplay unable to be entirely reflected in the script upon which it was based.