

# Double indemnity essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In the film ' Double Indemnity'-1944- Billy Wilder, lighting and mise-en-scene are very important in creating atmosphere and also affecting the audience.

At the start of the extract under analysis we see Walter driving in his car on a bright, sunny day, he gets out of the car and rings the doorbell of the Dietrichson house. We immediately see frames in the door that suggest he is walking into a trap before he has even entered the house. As he enters the house we are struck by the change in lighting, as inside the house is low-key lit with lines, shades, and shadows, the exterior high key lighting has gone and it is now dark. This also tells the audience that the atmosphere of the house is dark.

We then see Phyllis Dietrichson from Walter's point of view. At the top of the stairs she stands holding sunglasses and wearing nothing but a towel. From Phyllis' costume the audience can see obviously that Phyllis is the femme fatal as together with the towel, heavy lipstick and bleach blond hair this is portrayed clearly. We notice a stairwell between Walter and Phyllis that suggest Walter will never be able to reach her. Walter enters the living room and waits for Phyllis. The room is filled with film noir motifs, there are various shadows and frames, and the Venetian blinds create lines and shadows everywhere: on the walls, the floor and across Walter as he walks through the room.

This implies that Walter is walking in to some sort of trap. These shadows give the audience a sense that something is not right, we feel it is a dangerous situation and that the darkness is overpowering Walter as if he has no power or control. Not only this, the shadows across Walter also suggest hidden dark side to his personality. This is used in this way in most

film noirs and neo-noirs. Walter looks at the pictures of Mr Dietrichson and Lola his daughter. The pictures are framed ironically suggesting they are also in the trap that Phyllis has set and Mr Dietrichson's photograph is in the foreground, this may suggest he is the first person Phyllis wants to dispose off.

Walter moves over and looks at the fish bowl. Arguably this in itself represents Walter because they (and later Walter) can't escape their world they can see out but cannot get out, which is the situation Walter is getting into. The mise-en-scene shows the situation Walter is in, the effect this has on the audience is to give an idea of what Walter is getting himself into and how he will feel. Phyllis walks down the stairs and the camera focuses on her ankle and legs, particularly the gold anklet and heart. She wears high heel shoes with straps.

This shot fetishes her proving even more to the audience that she is marked out as sexual therefore a femme fatal. It also shows her to have some sort of power as high heels usually represent strong women. Her costume puts forward this idea even more. She wears white but this is a trick because white usually symbolises virginal and purity but Phyllis is the opposite of this, she is a brutal woman, who will do what ever she can to get what she wants, even murder.

Phyllis enters the living room and heads straight for the mirror. Through this use of mise-en-scene we learn more about the character of Phyllis; her reflection suggests to the audience that she is dichotomous, at the same time we see Walter's reflection behind her this may suggest to the audience

that he is also dichotomous behind her. She at once redoes her lipstick that is already heavily applied and fixes her bleach blond hair, which extends the idea of her being a femme fatale. At this point Walter has followed Phyllis to the mirror and has stared at her every move. Clearly this shows to the audience that Phyllis is in control of the situation as she has drawn Walter into her trap with her sexuality. Phyllis then sits down and like a puppy dog Walter follows.

She leans back and crosses her legs, drawing Walter and our attention to them. This again shows that Phyllis uses her sexuality in a very devious and conniving way to seduce Walter. The fact that Phyllis is in control is made more obvious for the audience in the way she sits back whereas Walter leans forward towards her. Phyllis also plays with her wedding ring throughout her conversation with Walter, which hints to the audience that her marriage is loose, unstable and she is wants to be rid of it. Another visual motif of film noir is seen when Phyllis stands and begins to pace up and down, this is her huge and distorted shadow behind her. This suggests to the audience that Phyllis has two different people in her meaning that she has a split personality.

When watching the film I initially understand what a character is by viewing the mise-en-scene and lighting. For example Phyllis immediately is recognised as a femme fatale because the way we see her dressed when we first see her, her heavy make-up and jewellery. I also feel the audience see her as quite a sexual person by the way she shows her legs and the ankle bracelet when she walks down the stairs. The lighting of the interior of the

Dietrichson house shows the audience that this is a very dangerous place that Walter is entering.

There are many objects in the living room that create tension and form an atmosphere, which suggest claustrophobia. The room is also filled with lines that are caused by the light stands and Venetian blinds. I think that this gives the audience a suggestion that it is a trap for Walter and thus emphasises the idea of claustrophobia. Lighting and mise-en-scene are very important they affect the audience's response to a certain character or situation and also help create tension and atmosphere.

In 'Double Indemnity' film noir visual aspects are used and this helps create a certain atmosphere. These motifs also help us identify character types in this case it was Phyllis, the femme fatale. On the whole atmospheric lighting and mise-en-scene in 'Double Indemnity' affected the audience in such a way that they could sense the powerful tension in the film.