

Billy wilder's film double indemnity: using mise-en-scene

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Use of mise-en-scene in Double Indemnity

Billy Wilder's 1944 film *Double Indemnity* is a classic example of film noir.

The movie contains the dark themes pertinent to the genre, including crime, corruption, and the ever-present femme fatale. Wilder uses a number of various techniques throughout the film, but perhaps the most prominent of those is mise-en-scene. Each of the mise-en-scene elements, including costuming, settings, and lighting, add to the unsettling, mysterious, and dramatic tone of the film, and also lend themselves to the elements of film noir.

The element of costuming is used most effectively to portray Phyllis as the classic femme fatale. When she first appears on screen she is clothed in only a towel, which immediately captures the attention of not only Walter, but the viewers. Here, it is understood that Phyllis is alluring and sexual, and she also has a sort of troubling air about her. One of the next scenes is a close-up shot of Phyllis' ankle adorned by a gold bracelet. The anklet serves as a symbol of her overt sexuality, which is a definitive characteristic of a femme fatale. Walter immediately notices the anklet, and is obviously excited by it, and more so, by Phyllis herself. Of course, she realizes this and uses it to her advantage, not just in this scene, but throughout the entirety of the film. Phyllis is also typically costumed in clothing that might be considered a bit racy, and this too, serves as an obvious symbol of her sexuality. There are also other interesting costuming choices in the film. In a stark contrast to her step-mother, Lola is never clothed in anything revealing or sexy. This helps to maintain her innocence not just in relation to the crime, but also as a

young girl who is suffering through the actions of her step-mother. Another interesting costuming observation about Lola is that she wears mostly dark clothing throughout the film. This could be symbolic of her mourning the loss of her mother and father, which happened at the hands of Phyllis.

The settings in the film are one of the key mise-en-scene elements used by Wilder to create heightened dramatic moments. One such example is the scene after Walter and Phyllis dump her husband's dead body onto the train tracks. The getaway car will not start, and the feeling of dread washes over both the characters and the viewers. This moment is both dramatic and unsettling, and it serves as a reminder to the audience of the heinousness of the crime they've just committed. A very creative use of scenery is when Phyllis must hide from Keyes in Walter's apartment building; "the door to Walter's apartment unaccountably opens outward into the hall so that Phyllis can hide behind it as Keyes leaves" (Allyn 116). Normally, doors open inwards, but here, Wilder has used this simple reversal to create a dramatic moment. The scene where Walter and Phyllis first meet in the Dietrichson's home uses the setting to portray some heavy symbolism. Phyllis appears at the top of the stairs barely covered in a towel, and looks and speaks down at Walter, who is at the bottom of the stairs. In doing this, Walter is seen as vulnerable and Phyllis is seen as powerful, and in the film their relationship seems to play out at such. Interestingly and "appropriately, daytime scenes are few: Walter's first approach to Phyllis' house, his stop for beer at a drive-in, two establishing shots of the supermarket where Walter and Phyllis secretly meet, and Walter and Lola's drive along the beach where, ironically,

the view of the ocean is blocked by parked cars” (Allyn 117). There are few daytime scenes in the film because “night...give[s] the film the proper noir feel of melancholy and fatalism” (Allyn 117). Nighttime scenes also lend themselves to the mysterious and unsettling feeling of the film, and perpetuate the belief that bad things, such as crime and corruption, only happen at night.

The most noticeable mise-en-scene element in the film is lighting. Wilder uses a wide variety of lighting techniques to portray different feelings and moods. First, there is an abundant use of low-key lighting, which is central to the film noir genre. Through the use of low-key lighting “faces are striped by light through venetian blinds to create shadows like prison bars and many scenes are played out in near total darkness, with only back or side light defining the action” (Allyn 117). This use of chiaroscuro lighting serves to show the evil of the characters, particularly Phyllis and Walter. Interestingly, the shadows on Walter seem to increase during the progression of the film, perhaps showing his transition from innocent salesman to corrupt murderer. The shadows on Phyllis however, seem to be present from the beginning, showing that she is a villainous femme fatale with no regard for anyone but herself. The shadowing of the whole film also increases as it progresses, which is logical given that the action becomes more and more evil as the murder plot plays itself out. The lighting through the blinds, as mentioned above, is an interesting technique. Most interesting about it, perhaps, is the way it is used on Walter. For example, there are scenes that have both Walter and Keyes on screen, but only Walter is shadowed by the blinds. This

is symbolic of Walter being imprisoned by guilt for the crime he committed, while Keyes is completely innocent, therefore he is not shadowed. The blinds as prison bars are also foreshadowing that Walter is discovered and apprehended as the murderer.

In conclusion, the mise-en-scene elements in Double Indemnity are essential to the film; they help to create the atmosphere and mood needed that distinguishes it as film noir, along with the given features of crime and corruption. Each element, whether it is costume, setting, or lighting, serves a very necessary role in the film. All three components give deeper meaning and symbolism to the characters and plot, while the film on the whole gives deeper meaning to a time and generation faced with uncertainty in the wake of World War II.