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Double Indemnity doubles down with double entendres

Description

Written and reviewed by Larry Gleeson during the annual TCM 31 Days of Oscar (2025)

Double Indemnity, possibly the definite film that firmly establishes the tenants of film noir with its dark visuals and dark narrative with an unflinching pitch-black worldview reminiscent of German Expressionism. Fred MacMurray (Walter Neff) a successful insurance salesman crosses path with femme fatale, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck). Neff isnâ??t a bad sort of a person. Unfortunately, he finds himself at the whims of Phyllis who wants her husband dead. Phyllis entices Neff with just a towel and a pair of gams. What unfolds is a blueprint for as close to a perfect film noir as there is.



Film noir typically uses a voice-over narration, flashbacks, low-key lighting, shadows that conceal emotion, rain-slicked pavements representing fragmented psyches all wrapped around a criminal act

with a woman who leads an unsuspecting man down the prim rose path. *Double Indemnity* has all of this and more. Boasting an excellent cast headlined by Stanwyck, MacMurray, and Edward G. Robinson, and one of the most talented and enigmatic comedic writer/directors in cinematic history, Billy Wilder. Art direction was headed by two German Weimar cinema artists, Hans Drier and Hal Pereira, steeped in German Expressionism. Pioneering low-key lighting cinematographer, John F. Seitz joined in to create visual and thematic motifs from the very beginning of the film.



Every detail of the coldly expressed, mise-en-scen reveals Walter, driving on a rain slicked road in the dark of night. As he makes his way into his insurance office, the illusory visuals of Walter as imprisoned inside a prison yard with prisoners. As Walter begins his flashback via a Dictaphone, a representational handgun, his imprisonment is unabashedly confirmed. Most of *Double Indemnity* comes through from Walterâ??s voice-over narrated flashback. His ironic tone and viewpoint enable him to comment on his actions from an informed point of view. As Phyllis puts on a fresh set of clothes after dazzling Walter with just a towel from her open-air, second floor. The use of overhead lighting added an alluring aura. Walterâ??s desire is undeniable as he voices, â??I wanted to see her again without that silly staircase between us.â?• As the double entendres fly, Walter has taken the bait, hook line and sinker.

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Most interesting, is Wilderâ??s use of doubles, or the doubling effect linking crime and narrative, used widely by Alfred Hitchcock. In a suspenseful moment following Walter and Phyllisâ??s murder of Phyllisâ??s husband, Walterâ??s boss, Mr. Keyes (Robinson) has dropped by Walterâ??s apartment unexpectedly to inform Walter of doubts of an accidental death for Mr., Dietrichson . Walter listens fully aware Phyllis is on her way over. Phyllis hears Keyes inside Walterâ??s apartment before he walks out, she hides behind the door. Walter holds open the door chatting as Keyes starts to leave. This is the pivotal moment of truth for Walter. Whose side will Walterâ??s soul choose? Does he even have a choice? His unconscious, animalistic attraction to Phyllis dictates Walterâ??s doom and demise. Being under the Production Code, Phyllis needs to be punished. What will Walter do? Tune in and find out! Nominated for seven Oscars, *Double Indemnity* is highly recommended.

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