

# Billy Wilder's Film Noir

NICOLE FRANK / MAY 18, 2003

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## Billy Wilder America's Legendary Film Director: His Genius and His Legacy

\*Emphasis on Double Indemnity and the Holocaust\*

### *Class*

Studies in Film, a senior high elective

### *Subject Matter*

Movies directed by Billy Wilder -Double Indemnity (1944) required -Sunset Boulevard (1950) optional - Some Like It Hot (1959) optional

### *Grade Level*

High School 11-12

### *Interdisciplinary Subject Areas*

- Language Arts: viewing film, reading criticism, writing a literary analysis
- Social Studies: historical context of post WWI America
- Multimedia Technology: Internet use, online research, and media literacy
- Visual Arts: film aesthetics and the art of filmmaking -Cultural Studies: American film

### *Length of the Unit*

Ten days (two weeks)

### *Alignment with the Standards*

Write and Speak: Literary Critical Analysis

Students will apply a variety of skills dealing with critical thinking by reading text through a visual medium, researching Double Indemnity online, comprehending the moral and social commentary in the film, interpreting the film, evaluating the success of the film, examining the film in a cultural and historical context ex: Double Indemnity and the Holocaust + the cultural climate of post WWII America.

### *Materials*

- 1- The famous example of film noir directed by Wilder Double Indemnity and the two optional selections, Sunset Boulevard and Some Like It Hot
- 2- Access to a VHS or DVD player
- 3- Access to computers and the Internet for online research
- 4- Three days in media center to access books, and periodicals

## *Objectives*

- 1- Students will be able to critically examine the visual medium of film as an art form
- 2- Students will recognize the deconstruction of film as a type of literacy and an academic discipline
- 3- Students will know and understand vocabulary and concepts pertaining to film
- 4- Students will be comfortable participating in an academic dialogue on film
- 5- Students will be able to formulate a thesis on some aspect of Wilder's Double Indemnity
- 6- Students will write a critical analysis of Wilder's Double Indemnity
- 7- Students will explore the historical contexts of the 1930's and 1940's influencing Wilder's films especially Double Indemnity, Sunset Boulevard, and Some Like It Hot
- 8- Research the social climate of post WWII America
- 9- Students will become familiar with the traditions of film noir and its characteristics that distinguish it from other genres
- 10- Students will be familiar with the strong original screenplay of Wilder's Double Indemnity
- 11- Students will be familiar with the characters in Wilder's Double Indemnity
- 12- Students will be able to offer various interpretations of Wilder's Double Indemnity
- 13- Students will identify social and moral messages in the film Double Indemnity
- 14- Students will consider the archetypes represented in film noir and consider how it relates to the historical context of the period directly following WWII
- 15- Students will explore how archetypes mirror qualities in the common man/woman
- 16- Students will become familiar with the culture of Hollywood in comparison to European filmmakers during the 1930's and '40's.
- 17- Students study, research, and critically examine one of the optional Wilder films, Sunset Boulevard or Some Like It Hot.

## *Major Assessments*

Students will write a three to four page critical essay on Wilder's Double Indemnity and an additional three to four page critical essay on one of the two optional Wilder films: Sunset Boulevard or Some Like It Hot. Each critical essay should include a bibliography with at least three sources that the student consulted regarding the film. The bibliography should contain at least two different kinds of sources ex: a periodical and an online sit. I will record the average of the two paper scores to account for 25% of the final course grade. In addition to writing the two critical essays, students will participate in many daily discussions, exercises, and group activities that will contribute to their understanding of Wilder's work. Students will introduce their peers to their different approaches to the film by sharing the thesis and a

summary of their arguments from one of their two critical essays to the class in a short presentation to last five minutes.

### *Process*

**Step One** – Familiarization with Wilder, and Film Noir Students receive packets on Wilder and film noir. In small groups of two to three, they fill out the definitions for film vocabulary and concepts.

**Step Two** – Viewing the Film Student begin watching Wilder's film Double Indemnity

**Step Three** – Finishing the Film + Large Group Discussion Student finish watching Double Indemnity class begin large group discussion

**Step Four** – Online Research Students reference a variety of web sites on Double Indemnity gathering information on reviews, interpretations, critiques of the film, etc.

**Step Five** – Research in the Media Center Students reference a variety of sources available such as periodicals, books, statistics on ticket sales, movies critics etc. on Double Indemnity to be included as sources in their bibliographies.

**Step Six** – Thesis Due, Begin Writing Students bring in a thesis to workshop in class. They have the rest of the time to begin writing their rough draft.

**Step Seven** – Rough Draft Due – Peer Editing Students bring in their rough drafts and spend the hour reading their peer's work and offering editing suggestions

**Step Eight** – Final Draft Due Students submit their final drafts of the Double Indemnity paper. They divide into two groups depending on whether they choose to write a paper on Sunset Boulevard or Some Like It Hot. Students view optional film in class and repeat research steps toward writing the second essay.

**Step Nine** – Final Draft Due of Essay # 2 Author's chair -students share the thesis and argument of one of their two essays. Refreshments available.

### **Vocabulary, Characters and Important Concepts:**

-Dialogue in film noir

-Filmography

-Cinematography

-Director

-Genre

-Femme Fatale

-Protagonist

-Use of the Vernacular

- Voice Over
- Flashback
- “Whodunit” Murder Mystery
- Sardonic Comedy
- Lighting Techniques
- Lighting Styles
- Strategies of light and dark to convey meaning esp. in film noir
- Camera Angles
- The ideal “perfect” crime
- Paranoia
- Double Indemnity Insurance Policy
- Symbolism

### *Links*

*Students will receive a list of these web sites to consult during their online research. They are also strongly encouraged to consult sites not listed.*

Billy Wilder as director of American film and reviews of his movies, and misc.

American Master PBS series, “Billy Wilder: The Human Comedy.” <http://www.csmonitor.com/durable/1998/01/30/feat/tv.1.html>

Review of Wilder’s Sunset Boulevard <http://filmsite.org/suns.html>

Review of Wilder’s Some Like It Hot <http://filmsite.org/some.html>

Wilder’s different film genres <http://www.german-way.com/cinema/bwilder.html>

Database of movies <http://us.imb.com/M/person-exact?Wilder%2+Billy>

A list of Wilder’s films with links to information about each of them <http://www.eonlin.com/Facts/People/0,12,37822,00.html>

Movie posters and other links to Wilder’s movies <http://www.reelclassics.com/Directors/Wilder/wilder.htm>

The Kennedy Center’s Tribute to Billy Wilder <http://www.kennedy-center.org/honors/years/wilder.html>

Specific sites on Double Indemnity – become familiar with the film

Information on Wilder’s Double Indemnity [http://filmunlimited.co.uk/Century\\_Of\\_Films/Story/0,4135,91758,00.html](http://filmunlimited.co.uk/Century_Of_Films/Story/0,4135,91758,00.html)

Analysis of Wilder’s Double Indemnity <http://www.filmsite.org/doub.html>

Includes information on Wilder’s work, Double Indemnity, and other fine links to essays on the author, the actors, and the writers. [http://filmunlimited.co.uk/Century\\_Of\\_Films/Story/0,4.4135,91758,00.html#top](http://filmunlimited.co.uk/Century_Of_Films/Story/0,4.4135,91758,00.html#top)

Roger Ebert of Siskel and Ebert’s Essay on Double Indemnity [http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/greatmovies/double\\_indemnity.html](http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/greatmovies/double_indemnity.html) Review of Double Indemnity <http://www.mysteryguide.com/bkCainIndemnity.html>

Audience reviews of Double Indemnity [http://www.epinions.com/mvie\\_mu-1006170](http://www.epinions.com/mvie_mu-1006170)

Specific sites on Film Noir

Film Noir, Pulp Fiction & Classic American films of Hollywood <http://www.filmsite.org/filmnoir.html>

Film Noir: a filmography courtesy of the University of North Carolina <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/mrc/noirbibhtml>

General information on Film Noir <http://classicfilm.about.com/movies/classicfilm/msub22.htm>

An archive of classic films <http://www.moderntimes.com/bab/di.htm>

AFI documents on Film Noir <http://www.afionline.org/nft/nft.frame.html>

### ***Rubric for Critical Essays***

Each essay is worth one hundred points. I will take the average of the two scores and that grade will be worth 25% of the final course grade. See attached sheet for Grading Criteria. Grading Criteria Critical Analysis of Wilder’s Double Indemnity

Good and well-developed thesis	5 4 3 2 1
The introduction contains background information	5 4 3 2 1
Paragraphs contain a good topic sentence	5 4 3 2 1
Body paragraphs are well supported	5 4 3 2 1
Good summary sentences at the end of paragraphs	5 4 3 2 1
Overall organization	5 4 3 2 1
Smooth transitions between paragraphs	5 4 3 2 1
Provides sufficient evidence from the film	5 4 3 2 1

Evidence is introduced and cited	5 4 3 2 1
Supporting evidence is relevant	5 4 3 2 1
Commentary follows the points of evidence	5 4 3 2 1
Addresses the goal of the thesis throughout	5 4 3 2 1
Demonstrates a solid understanding of the film	5 4 3 2 1
Considers the historical climate during the film	5 4 3 2 1
Consults three sources and contains a bibliography	5 4 3 2 1
Effectively applies information from the sources	5 4 3 2 1
Conclusion	5 4 3 2 1
Sentence variation	5 4 3 2 1
Word choice and style of expression	5 4 3 2 1
Grammar, verb tense, spelling and syntax	5 4 3 2 1
Total Score _____/100	