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The Power of Language in *Double Indemnity*

Billy Wilder's 1944 film *Double Indemnity* has resonated throughout the decades as one of the greatest films noirs ever made. This is no doubt at least in part due to its temptingly sensational plotline, at the heart of which an insurance salesman named Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) recounts the murder of Dietrichson and subsequent insurance fraud that he committed with his cunning love interest (and the wife of the victim), Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), as a Dictaphone message to Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson), a brilliant claims manager that Neff clearly admires and loathes all at once. The events that Neff recounts are depicted in the film as a flashback, with Neff mediating the story as a voiceover. However, there is a wide gulf between the language Neff chooses to use over the Dictaphone in retrospect and the way that he interacts with others onscreen in the moment. The discrepancy between the fluid functionality of what Neff relates over the Dictaphone and the unstable conversations we see him have onscreen shows the immense amount of weight that Neff puts on language in this film as a tool to manipulate others and shows us that he is truly not "confessing" at all, as he demonstrates no remorse for his actions.

Though Neff states at the beginning of the film that he doesn't "like the word confession" (5:07) and seems to act full of false bravado as he begins his retelling by insulting Keyes, it is clear from the very outset that the purpose of this Dictaphone message is to wrest control of a situation that has gotten out of his hands. Neff's gut reaction is to manipulate the conversations that he has with others when he feels threatened, and this is no different. Because of this, it may seem like Neff's bravado is simply a mask, and that the confession behind it is real, with all the remorse that the word "confession" traditionally implies. However, the reality is that Neff is

simply smart enough to exploit this; at no point does he show true regret. He simply knows that it is more valuable for him to be the one who has control over how this story comes out (as he has lost control of the story itself and he knows that it will come out whether he wants it to or not), and for him to sound remorseful when it does. Though it may seem like Neff is doing the opposite of that in the voiceover when he states his true intentions early on, such as when he says that he couldn't stop thinking about the first tempting conversation he had had with Phyllis about the possible convenient death of her husband because "you get to thinking about how you could crook the house yourself" (28:18), what he is actually doing is offering Keyes and the rest of the audience a last-ditch opportunity to empathize with him and his situation. He begins the sinister claim above by saying, "…you know how it is, Keyes" (28:05). Neff is clearly desperate for Keyes' acceptance throughout this film, as can be seen when he recounts how much plotting went into the murder just to keep Keyes from digging it up and airing it out. And even in the final showdown between Neff and Phyllis, he says, "A friend of mine's got this funny theory" (1:32:17) and then proceeds to recount Keyes' speech about the trolley car ride (1:19:33). The fact that he refers to Keyes as a "friend" and then acts as though he has learned from Keyes' words clearly shows that Neff is tailoring this story to make it perfect for Keyes, in the hope that Keyes will accept the offering and empathize with him, so that Neff can stay in control in at least that way.

Neff's true nature shines through especially brightly when we take the function of the Dictaphone message in conjunction with the conversations we see him have onscreen with other characters. Though Neff is extremely verbose and willing to share his point of view through the Dictaphone, he frequently and characteristically avoids communicating his thoughts onscreen, as the plot unfolds. Communications that make Neff uncomfortable frequently cause him to shut

down and communicate ineffectively. A prime example of this is can be seen in the conversation he has with Lola Dietrichson (Jean Heather) about her mother's untimely end due to the poor care taken of her by her nurse, which was conveniently Phyllis' employment at the time. When Lola tells Neff her suspicion that Phyllis has now orphaned her, his first response is to ask her, "Aren't you just imagining these things?" (1:13:08), and then to cross-examine her, asking if she isn't simply stirring up trouble because she hates Phyllis. When Lola promises to tell everyone what she thinks has truly happened to her father, Neff completely stops speaking again for a moment, and stares at her horrified and dumbfounded (1:13:39). This group of awkward interactions stands in stark contrast with the smooth fluidity that Neff employs over the Dictaphone. And although it's obvious throughout the film and even immediately after these scenes that Neff can be a very smooth talker, as he is able to gain a lot of information from Lola and then keep a close eye on her by beginning a murky relationship with her, it's also easy to see that Neff doesn't have as much control in person in the moment as he does over the Dictaphone. The stark contrast between Neff's smoothness over the Dictaphone and the way he interacts with others in person serves to highlight that the function of the Dictaphone message is to manipulate those who would hear it; Neff has control over the way the story comes out with the Dictaphone and it is easy to see that he takes full advantage of that control when we take note of the fact that he is nowhere near as "good" in person.

This is pushed to its limit in an almost disorienting way at the end of the film, when Neff notices Keyes' presence and stops dead in his recitation and past and present finally converge. When Neff notices Keyes, he is in the middle of saying, "I want you to take care of [Lola] and that guy Zachetti" (1:38:53). It is easy to see that this is simply another attempt at pathetic manipulation on Neff's part. When he realizes that the situation is out of his control (he has been

shot at this point and it would be extremely difficult to cover up), he attempts to paint himself as a redeemable character by sending Zachetti off to call Lola, seemingly to give them a possibility at a happy ending. However, the relationship that Neff has developed by this point with Lola is a bizarre one. He says of Lola, "…it was only with her that I could relax and let go a little" (1:23:52). He seems to have almost paternal feelings towards her in a way, but he also seems more romantically interested in her by the end of the film than he does in Phyllis. Though not overtly sexual, Neff's feelings for Lola are thus extremely inappropriate, especially in light of the fact that he murdered her real father, and thus only serve to highlight the baseness of his character. This is made even worse by the fact that he tells Zachetti, who he knows to be at least verbally abusive towards Lola, to use a nickel and call her. Zachetti's exact response, summarizing his extremely unlikeable character perfectly, is, "She isn't worth any nickel" (1:37:50). And yet Neff still almost passes her on to Zachetti in the end, without a second thought for her welfare, and then asks Keyes to look out for them. What he actually wants is to look like a good man to Keyes in the end, to seem as though he has had a change of heart because of what he has done to Lola, to come out redeemed by his thoughtless appeal to Zachetti. When Neff is interrupted in the flow of his thoughts when he notices that Keyes is in the room, he falls silent and then almost jauntily changes the subject, saying, "Up pretty early, aren't you?" (1:39:16). Neff seems distinctly panicked; he has run out of time to perfect and manipulate what Keyes will hear of the situation. The fact that he changes the subject so briskly completely detracts from the authenticity of this moment that Neff means to redeem him; he doesn't seem noble, but instead seems even ashamed by the weight of the false sentiments that Keyes witnessed him recounting. Neff's final panicked attempt at an exit, completely empty-handed (without even a lecture from Keyes, who simply says, "Walter, you're all washed up"

(1:40:09)), is the final proof of the fact that this truly is no confession. It is an elaborately designed manipulation that ultimately fails because of Keyes' perceptiveness, and when Neff realizes that he cannot pull one over on him, his fear leads him to simply attempt to pick up and walk off. He thus does not truly take responsibility for his actions and shows no true inner anguish about what he has done.

The inconsistency between the smooth and calculating way that Neff recounts the plot of *Double Indemnity* through the Dictaphone voiceover and the sometimes-bumbling way that he handles communication in person gives us an interesting insight into the character of a man who recognizes the power of the language he uses to manipulate and to control even the most extreme situation. Though Neff never really repents and justly comes out the loser in the end, the mastery of language that he employs through the multiple levels of this manipulation is extraordinary to witness, and is a crucial tool in the development of the thrilling plot of this film.