

### Films with Legal Themes

The plots of both timeless and modern films can serve in the study of American legal principles, landmark court decisions and the themes of law and justice. These are only a few of the many such great works on legal themes throughout history.

#### ***Amistad* (Steven Spielberg, Dreamworks 1997)**

This historical drama is based on the true story of the 1839 slave mutiny above the ship *La Amistad*, and the legal battles that followed. This case was heard before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1841.

#### ***A Civil Action* (Steven Zaillian, Touchstone 1998)**

This drama is based on an actual environmental pollution case in Woburn, Massachusetts: *Anne Anderson, et al., v. Cryovac, Inc., et al.* (1986). In the film, Attorney Jan Schlittman (John Travolta) stakes his professional career and finances in a class action lawsuit against two large corporations that contaminated the local water supply with a toxic chemical, leading to the deaths of multiple children.

#### ***A Few Good Men* (Rob Reiner, Columbia 1992)**

When two U.S. Marines are charged with murdering a fellow Marine, Naval investigator and lawyer JoAnne Galloway (Demi Moore) pressures Navy lawyer Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise) into bringing the case to trial instead of arranging for a plea bargain. As Kaffee prepares to defend his clients, he discovers evidence of a high-level cover-up.

#### ***A Man for All Seasons* (Fred Zinnemann, Columbia 1966)**

The plot of this film is based on the true story of Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England in the 1500's. A religious man of conscience, he refused to sign a request asking the Pope to grant King Henry VIII a divorce, and refused to take an oath declaring the King as the Supreme Head of the Church of England, to great personal cost.

#### ***Anatomy of a Murder* (Otto Preminger, Columbia 1959)**

In this courtroom trial drama, small town lawyer Paul Biegler (James Stewart) is matched against big city prosecutor (George C. Scott) in a murder case. Biegler attempts to win his client's case by using an "irresistible impulse" defense.

***Criminal Law (Martin Campbell, Hemdale 1989)***

In this thriller film, defense attorney Ben Chase (Gary Oldman) successfully gets his client, wealthy playboy Martin Thiel (Kevin Bacon), acquitted of serial murder charges – only to discover that he indeed was guilty. However, Thiel cannot be tried again for the same charges due to the double jeopardy rule.

***Ghosts of Mississippi (Rob Reiner, Columbia 1996)***

This film is based on the true 1994 trial of white supremacist Byron De La Beckwith (James Woods), accused of assassinating civil rights activist Medgar Evers in 1963.

***Gideon's Trumpet (Robert L. Collins, Hallmark Channel 1980)***

This film relates the story behind the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Gideon v Wainwright* (1963), which gave criminal defendants the right to a state-funded attorney if they couldn't afford one.

***High Crimes (Carl Franklin, 20th Century Fox 2002)***

Lawyer Claire Kubik (Ashley Judd) is shocked to discover that her husband Tom is actually called Ronald Chapman (James Cavizel), a former Marine and covert operative charged with the murders of nine Latin American villagers. She seeks help from Charlie Grimes (Morgan Freeman), to navigate the complex military justice system.

***Inherit the Wind (Stanley Kramer, United Artists 1960)***

This film presents a fictionalization of the 1925 Scopes "Monkey" Trial, as a parable of the McCarthy trials.

***Judgment at Nuremberg (Stanley Kramer, MGM 1961)***

At the Nuremberg trials in post-Nazi Germany, Chief Judge Dan Haywood (Spencer Tracy) attempts to understand how the ordinary German people could allow themselves to be complicit in the innocent deaths of so many others.

***Kramer Vs. Kramer (Robert Benton, Columbia 1979)***

This movie tells the story of Ted (Dustin Hoffman) and Joanna (Meryl Streep) Kramer's divorce, and their custody battle over their young son, Billy.

***My Cousin Vinny (Jonathan Lynn, 20th Century Fox 1992)***

In this comedy film, new lawyer Vincent Gambini (Joe Pesci) tries to defend two New Yorkers in rural Alabama, for a murder they did not commit.

***Narrow Margin* (Peter Hyams, TriStar 1990)**

District Attorney Robert Caulfield (Gene Hackman) escorts murder witness Carol Hunnicut (Anne Archer) on the way to a trial against a powerful mobster – only to find hit men aboard their train.

***Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, United Artists 1957)**

Loosely based upon the true story of four French soldiers who were executed during WWI for mutiny; in the film, Colonel Dax (Kirk Douglas) tries to defend these soldiers against the charge of cowardice in a court-martial.

***Reversal of Fortune* (Barbet Schroeder, Warner Bros. 1990)**

An adaptation of law professor Alan Dershowitz's 1985 book, *Reversal of Fortune: Inside the von Bulow Case*, is based on an actual case. When socialite Sunny von Bulow (Glen Close) inexplicably falls into a coma, her husband Claus von Bulow (Jeremy Irons) is charged with attempted murder – Dershowitz takes on the case to defend him.

***Rules of Engagement* (William Friedkin, Paramount 2000)**

In this military/legal drama, Marine Colonel Terry Childers (Samuel L. Jackson) is court-martialed on the charges of disobeying the rules of engagement and slaughtering civilians outside the U.S. embassy in Yemen.

***The Caine Mutiny* (Edward Dmytryk, Columbia 1954)**

Based on the 1951 Pulitzer Prize winning novel of the same name, this film depicts the fictitious court-martial of two officers charged with mutiny aboard a WWII destroyer minesweeper.

***The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (Luc Besson, Gaumont 1999)**

A young French girl receives supernatural visions to lead the French army against the English – and does so with great success. Later captured by the English, she is charged with witchcraft and heresy in an ecclesiastical court.

***The Rainmaker* (Francis Coppola, Paramount 1997)**

This adaptation of a John Grisham novel, centers around Rudy Baylor (Matt Damon), a young, inexperienced Tennessee lawyer who takes on his first major assignment: a tort “bad faith” case against a major insurance company.

***The Trial* (Orson Welles, Paris-Europa Productions 1962)**

In this classic film based on the book by Franz Kafka, Josef K (Anthony Perkins) wakes up one morning to find himself under arrest and awaiting trial – but no one is willing to tell him why.

***The Verdict* (Sidney Lumet, 20th Century Fox 1982)**

Downtrodden and alcoholic lawyer Frank Galvin (Paul Newman) takes on a medical malpractice suit. However, moved by his client's situation, he decides to turn down a generous settlement offer – and to take the case to trial.

***The Wrong Man* (Alfred Hitchcock, Warner Bros. 1956)**

This Alfred Hitchcock film, starring Henry Fonda and Vera Miles, is based on a true story of an innocent man mistaken for someone else, and charged with crimes that he did not commit.

***Twelve Angry Men* (Sidney Lumet, United Artists 1957)**

Adapted from a teleplay of the same name, this film revolves around a 12-man jury deliberating a homicide trial – and the single juror who tries to sow the seed of reasonable doubt in the minds of his peers.

***Witness for the Prosecution* (Billy Wilder, United Artists 1958)**

In this film, based on the short story by Agatha Christie, Leonard Vole (Tyrone Power) is arrested for the murder of a wealthy widow. His wife Christine (Marlene Dietrich) agrees to give her testimony – not in his defense – but as a witness for the prosecution.