"In the Heat of the Night" The 1967 film, on the surface a thriller, [winner of best picture Oscar] is both entertaining and a very strong statement on race relations in the context of the time it was made. Set in the time it was made, this was a controversial film and it is possible that it would not have been shown in many communities in the south. Sidney Poitier was already a star but the anger he had shown in the stage and film versions of "A Raisin in the Sun" was not something all American filmgoers were comfortable with. Forty-one years later, we are not free from controversies over how black people should behave or present themselves to the majority, whether as filmgoers or as voters. This was the period not just of civil rights conflicts and advances but also of the Vietnam War. The backlash against President Johnson for the conduct of the war and for the violence that seemed to go along with civil rights advances was ongoing. The formerly "Solid Democratic South" was starting to move toward the Republican Party. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy would be assassinated the following year. This was also a time when there were very few African-American police officers or office holders in the South.

The film is also noteworthy for the cinematography and production, accomplished on a small budget and in a period with few special effects. This was one of the first movies to use a jazz score and it was one of the first films scored by Quincy Jones. The "extra features" that go with the 40th anniversary DVD are interesting and I will try to find the time to show at least some of them. Among other things, it is made clear that the filmmakers thought filming in the south was too risky so most of the filming was done in Sparta, Illinois. Calling the town in the film Sparta was done in order not to have to put up different signs on businesses seen in the film.

Although born in Miami, Poitier grew up in the Bahamas and his accent is indicative of this. The other star, Rod Steiger, who won the best actor Oscar for this film, was from New York, and is actually best-known for playing Marlon Brando's brother in "On the Waterfront" in the 1950s. The director, Norman Jewison, is a Canadian who has made many wonderful films [including "Moonstruck"] and has always been committed to social justice.

You will probably notice that the pace of the film is less frenetic than current thrillers tend to be. Other things to pay attention to relate to the words in the title of the class: "Social Differentiation and Inequality." There is a particular scene in the film which was considered a real "shocker" in 1967. See if you can identify it.