



## 1950s American Society and Conformity

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did the presence of Latin American artists challenge the image of 1950s American society seen in popular media?

#### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will explore popular 1950s television shows and films to examine how Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican artists challenged the ideas of American society seen in that media.*

*Students will then consider how more contemporary television shows and series represent current society, and compare it to television today as well as television in the 1950s to understand how society has changed over time.*



Desi Arnaz and His Orchestra

Society in 1950s America was shaped by several different factors. One major component was the post World War II economic boom that brought America into a time of prosperity. Another was the uptick in population due to the baby boom that happened post war because Americans felt optimistic that the worst days were behind them.

The rise of the white middle class and suburbs also defined the 1950s. White families were moving out of the cities to the first suburban community started by William Levitt in Levittown, New York. Construction of these communities spread across the country and suburban life became part of American society. Black Americans faced discrimination when trying to purchase homes in the suburbs and were denied access to the same opportunities. The white middle class now had disposable income and more leisure time to watch television, which also played a role in American society during this decade.

The Second Red Scare as the Cold War began also had an impact on life during the 1950s. U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy led the hunt for communists along with the House Un-American Activities Committee. It was a time of fear and paranoia of communists and the Soviet Union at the height of Cold War tensions. Government employees, Hollywood, and other industries were questioned and investigated with little evidence. Americans did not want to be accused of being a communist due to the risk of losing their job and being blacklisted as well as possible legal consequences. Therefore Americans did not stray too far from societal norms of the time.

America in the 1950s is often viewed with nostalgia, a decade that was wholesome, prosperous, and a society at its peak. However, this is not an accurate portrayal of all of American society during the time period. The rise of the middle class and economic growth mostly reached white communities. Jim Crow segregation was still widespread in America and people of color faced

discrimination in many aspects of society. Civil liberties and political expression were also suppressed during this time due to McCarthyism.

This nostalgic view of the 1950s can be seen in a majority of television shows during the decade. The TV families that audiences saw were white with a working husband, a home-maker wife, and two to three children. One of the most popular live music shows on television, *American Bandstand* also had a majority of white performers and allowed only white dancers that followed a strict dress code onto the show.

There were acts of rebellion to break through the conformity seen in 1950s television. Desi Arnaz was a real life Cuban band leader who played the same role in *I Love Lucy* as Ricky Ricardo. Arnaz brought Cuban culture and music into the living rooms of Americans every week, and demonstrated a contrast to the white “nuclear family” seen in most 1950s television shows. From California, Mexican American Ritchie Valens was one of the few people of color to perform on *American Bandstand* in the 1950s. Valens brought American’s “La Bamba” and influenced Rock and Roll in his short career before his death at the age of 17. Rita Moreno, who is best known for her portrayal of Anita in *West Side Story* in 1961, also challenged the conformity seen in the 1950s as a Puerto Rican woman pursuing a career outside home. In the 1950s, Moreno faced discrimination in the film industry as she was only cast into stereotypical ethnic roles. Despite this discrimination, she persevered being one of only 18 people who have received an EGOT (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony) and is an inspiration to Latin American artists today.

The presence of Arnaz, Valens, and Moreno in television and film represent small fractures in the society of the 1950s that was seen on television. They challenged the idea of 1950s society portrayed in television as a whole through the use of culture and music.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- 1950s American society in terms of post-war life, the Red Scare, and Conformity
- How 1950s American society was portrayed in popular television shows
- The role television played in 1950s American society
- How Latin American artists challenged the image of 1950s American society seen in popular television shows

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to identify how artists Desi Arnaz, Ritchie Valens, and Rita Moreno presented a version of 1950s American society that was often erased in pop culture through the analysis of artist bios, images, television clips, and music.

## ACTIVITIES

### PREPARATION

1. Before class begins, display the 5 images in the **1950s Television Gallery Walk** images around the room.
2. Ensure that devices that can access the internet are available for student group work.

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:
  - Have you ever heard the term “nuclear family” before? What is a nuclear family?
2. Show **Image 1, Nuclear Family Definition**. Read the definition aloud, then ask students:
  - What sort of families are included in the definition of a nuclear family? Which sorts of families are not?
  - Do you think a nuclear family represents the “normal” or “ideal” family in America? Why or why not?
  - Where might people see depictions of the nuclear family?
3. Distribute **Handout - 1950s Television Gallery Walk Questions** to students. Ask students to examine the images from **1950s Television Gallery Walk** displayed throughout the classroom, and then answer the questions on the handout. Following the activity, ask students to share their answers with the class.

### PROCEDURE

1. Distribute **Handout - 1950s American Society Graphic Organizer** (Teacher’s guide available) and encourage students to take notes on the handout while playing **Clip 1, 1950s American Society**. Then ask students:
  - What does the word conformity mean? (*To behave like everyone else, and to follow social norms.*)
  - How did Americans conform to societal norms in the 1950s? (*Dressing similarly, buying the same houses and goods, following what others were doing, not speaking out against the politics of the time.*)
2. Organize students into pairs, and distribute **Handout - Leave it to Beaver and I Love Lucy** to each student in pair (Teacher’s Guide available). After completing the activity described in the handout, ask student pairs to share with the class:
  - How do the images you looked at in the Gallery Walk support what you saw in the video about the 1950s?

- How does each show represent the conformity of the 1950s?
- How does each show challenge the conformity of the 1950s? “cultural manifestations”?

3. Divide students into groups of three, and inform them that they will now participate in a jigsaw activity. Pass out to each group **Handout - Desi Arnaz**, **Handout - Rita Moreno**, and **Handout - Ritchie Valens**. Explain that first, each group member will become an expert in one of the artists by reading and answering questions in the appropriate handout. Then,

they will then reconvene with their group as an expert on their assigned person and share with their group members what they learned. After the activity, ask students:

- How did the presence of Arnaz, Valens, and Moreno challenge the idea of American society seen in 1950s television and film?
- What role do you think the presence of Arnaz, Valens, and Moreno in television and film played in the future movements for equal rights in the 1960s and beyond?

### SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students to reflect on a TV show that they think represents U.S. society today. Ask student volunteers to share their thoughts. Then ask the class:
  - How has representation of race, gender, and social class changed in television since the 1950s?
  - How has representation of race, gender, and social class stayed the same in television since the 1950s?

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Learn more about Ritchie Valens and the song “La Bamba” with the TeachRock lesson **Ritchie Valens** (<https://teachrock.org/lesson/ritchie-valens>).
2. Discover how Latin Music became popular in the United States with the TeachRock lesson **Latin Music and Puerto Rican Migration to New York City** (<https://teachrock.org/lesson/latin-music-and-puerto-rican-migration-to-new-york-city>)
3. Watch the Rita Moreno documentary, *Rita Moreno: Just a Girl Who Decided to Go For It* (<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/stream-rita-moreno-documentary/11654>).
4. Explore how *American Bandstand* became desegregated.
5. Trace the history of the original version of the traditional Mexican song, “La Bamba.”

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Text Types and Purposes 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Comprehension & Collaboration 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.



## **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)**

*Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

## **NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS**

*Connecting*

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.



## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- 1950s American Society

### HANDOUTS

- 1950s Television Gallery Walk
- Handout - 1950s Television Gallery Walk Questions
- Handout - 1950s American Society Graphic Organizer
- Handout - 1950s American Society Graphic Organizer (Teacher's Guide)
- Handout - *Leave it to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy*
- Handout - *Leave it to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy* (Teacher's Guide)
- Handout - Desi Arnaz
- Handout - Rita Moreno
- Handout - Ritchie Valens