

Fabulous Fifties Web Quest

On a blank sheet of paper, use the information below, as well as the embedded hyperlinks to answer the questions for the various aspects of 1950s culture.

Music




Compare/contrast the songs clips from Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, paying particular attention to the lyrics. What are they singing about? Is there anything similar about the style that is similar?

Frank Sinatra – A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening	Elvis Presley – Hound Dog

Elvis was known for his “controversial” stage presence, but also for his lyrics and the types of songs he sang. What do you think adults found objectionable about his songs?

Television

Television sets were first widely available in the late 1940s. By 1950, 9% of homes had a television; by 1954 it was up to 55%; and by 1960 an astonishing 90% of homes had a television set. Watch and compare the openings credits for Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver and the Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet. What do these shows have in common?

Father Knows Best	Ozzie and Harriet	Leave It to Beaver
		

According to these shows, what was the ideal or “typical” American family like? Do these shows appear to represent any of the fears of the 1950s that we’ve spoken about? What does it seem life was like in the 1950s? Do you think this was an accurate portrayal of life in the 1950s?

Watch the [Leave it to Beaver clip](#) to see how school was in the 1950s. (Backstory: Lumpy, the kid at the end is dating the teacher’s daughter, thinking it will get him a good grade in the class. Hilarity ensues.)

Movies

Movies had to make major leaps in the 1950s. In 1951, produce David O. Selznick said of Hollywood, “It’ll never come back. It’ll just keep on crumbling until finally the wind blows the last studio prop across the sands.” Why were people in Hollywood so worried?

Movies held a few advantages over TV; size, sound and color. 50% of films were in color by 1954, but color TV would not be common until the 1960s. The types of movies changed as well. Look at the trailer for [“Singing in the Rain”](#). What kinds of emotions are they trying to convey to the audience? If you had to give a message for the movie, just from the trailer, what would it be?

Now do the same for [“Rebel Without a Cause,”](#) [“The Wild One”](#) and [“Blackboard Jungle.”](#)

How do the last three films differ in tone, style, audience, etc from “Singing in the Rain”?

Literature/Poetry

Even though most mass media was aimed at a conservative, white audience, there was some discontent below the surface. The “beat” movement sprang from New York and California. They were writing things that clashed against the suburban growth of the period. They wanted to anything but conform to the social norms. The counterculture movement would lead to the Civil Rights and Anti-war movements of the 1960s.

Read the following excerpt from “Howl” by Allen Ginsberg and write down your thoughts

I saw the best minds of my generation
destroyed by _____
madness, starving hysterical naked, _____
dragging themselves through the negro
streets at dawn _____
looking for an angry fix, _____
angelheaded hipsters burning for the
ancient heavenly _____
connection to the starry dynamo in the who
bared their brains to Heaven under the El
and _____
saw Mohammedan angels staggering on

tenement roofs illuminated, _____
who passed through universities with
radiant cool eyes _____
hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light
tragedy _____
among the scholars of war, _____
who were expelled from the academies for
crazy & _____
publishing obscene odes on the windows of
the _____
skull...

Art

As literature moved into the counter-culture realm, so did art. Compare the paintings by Norman Rockwell to the ones by Jackson Pollock.

[Norman Rockwell – The Discovery](#)

[Jackson Pollock – Convergence \(1952\)](#)

[Norman Rockwell – Teacher’s Birthday](#)

[Jackson Pollock – Easter and Totem \(1953\)](#)

What differences do you notice? Are there any similarities? What do you think Pollock is trying to get across in his paintings? Why do you think there was such a massive shift? Do you think the Pollock paintings should be considered art? Why or why not?