



Films about the Fifties: Teenagers, Identity, Authority, and Choice

Guide for Curriculum Unit 98.01.01
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This unit is designed for high school courses in U.S. History, American Literature, American Studies, humanities or sociology. Parts of it may also be appropriate in courses on film or music. This unit intends to guide students through an understanding of the United States in the fifties by focusing on the issues faced by teenagers in three films, either from or set in that time period: "American Graffiti" (1973), "Imitation of Life" (1959), and "Dead Poets Society" (1987). All three films deal with young people learning about relationship dyads, with their tensions, insights, and possibilities; male/female, older/younger, teacher/student, black/white, rich/poor, good girl/bad girl, mother/daughter, father/son, brother/brother, life/death. These films also deal with four main themes, especially relevant to the fifties: the search for identity, the tension between authority and autonomy, the tension between choice and restriction, and the tension between community and wandering.

There are five lesson plans at the back of the unit:

- (1) Story of a Person from a Subculture,
- (2) Surveying the School's Subcultures,
- (3) Fifties Musical Playwriting Workshop,
- (4) Comparing the Fifties to the Present Using Debits and Credits, and
- (5) Comparing the Characters from "American Graffiti" and "Dead Poets Society" to Students in the School Today.

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