

TEACHER'S
GUIDE

AMERICAN CLASSICS



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American Classics highlights the people, places, and things that embody the American experience. This series thematically chronicles the evolution of American icons from the familiar to the sublime, and explores how these symbols reflect changes in American culture and history. While there may be opposing views on what constitutes an American Classic, all of the icons featured in this documentary share a common thread: each defines a spirit that is uniquely American, and each has left a lasting imprint on the fabric of American life.

WARNING TO THE TEACHER

Certain segments of this documentary contain images and commentary that may be inappropriate for young viewers. Please preview the entire documentary before showing it to your students.

CURRICULUM LINKS

American Classics is suitable for middle and high school students in American history, media literacy, and economics classes.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

This teacher's guide fulfills the following Standards for United States History for Grades 5-12 as developed by the National Center for History in the Schools: Historical Thinking Standards 1, 2, 3, and 4 (Era 3, Standard 2; Era 4, Standard 2; Era 6, Standards 1 & 2; Era 8, Standard 3; Era 9, Standard 1; Era 10, Standard 2).





VOCABULARY

brand: (n.) a name or symbol that identifies a product

classic: (n.) something that is long regarded as a model and serves as an outstanding example of its kind; something that is well-known and typical

icon: (n.) an image or representation; a symbol

image: (n.) a representation of a person or thing; the concept of a person or thing that is held by the public, especially as a result of advertising or publicity

marketing: (n.) the business activity involved in getting products from a manufacturer to a consumer, including selling, advertising, and packaging

myth: (n.) a fictitious or imaginary story, person, or thing; a false belief

nostalgia: (n.) a bittersweet longing for the past

phenomenon: (n.) an unusual fact or event; a remarkable or outstanding person

popular culture: (n.) the arts, beliefs, customs, institutions, and other products of human work and thought that reflect the tastes and intelligence of ordinary people

PREVIEWING ACTIVITY

Review the words “icon,” “symbol” and “classic” with your students. Ask them to brainstorm the people, places, and things that come to mind when they think of American Classics. Identify and discuss the characteristics that their icons share.

VIEWING ACTIVITY

Have your students create and fill in the American Classics chart (below) to help them keep track of the facts and ideas expressed in the documentary. As they watch the documentary, students can record the name of the featured American icon, a description of the icon, important dates, decades, or events associated with the icon, and what ideas and emotions the icon has come to symbolize to the American public.

American Classic	Description	Dates/Events	Ideas/Emotions





HOUR 1: DEFINING A NATION



HOUR 1: DEFINING A NATION

During his lifetime President George Washington was elevated to superstar status. Children and towns were named after him; bowls, draperies and dress material bore his likeness; and his portrait hung in thousands of homes. After Washington's death, he became a cottage industry. *American Classics: Defining a Nation* traces how this phenomenon set the stage for Americans to embrace icons, which personified the country's sentiments from its pioneering days through the first half of the twentieth century. American Classics featured in this hour are George Washington, Uncle Sam, the Cowboy, John Wayne, Main Street, Woolworth's, Quaker Oats, Coca-Cola, Rosie the Riveter, and the Betty Grable pin-up.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why was George Washington a legend before and after his death? How has his image been reproduced over time? Why might Washington be called "the Elvis of his day"?
2. The legend of Uncle Sam began during the War of 1812 when businessman Sam Wilson won a contract to supply meat to feed the troops. How did the legendary image of Uncle Sam develop?
3. Describe the life of the cowboy of the real west. What was happening in America by the 1890s that helped make the cowboy an appealing image to many Americans? How did showmen, writers, artists, and later Hollywood, reinvent the cowboy?
4. In the 1880s, three-quarters of the population lived in small towns. Why did Main Street become an American icon? What does Main Street represent to many Americans?
5. One historian interviewed in the documentary argues that "immigrants stocked up on the American dream" at Woolworth's? What does this mean? What did Woolworth's represent to many new Americans?
6. How was Quaker Oats one of the first great examples of the power of packaging? Why is packaging so powerful? How did this concept help transform America?
7. How did the packaging and advertising of consumer products at the turn of the century allow immigrants to experience and understand America?
8. Do you agree that asking for a Coke is like asking for America? Why or why not?
9. One historian in the documentary argues that "our childhood is populated with corporate icons." What does he mean? What surprising example does he offer to support his argument?
10. Analyze the Rosie the Riveter and Betty Grable posters. How do these two images reveal the dual responsibilities that women had during World War II?
11. How can icons represent emotions? What emotions do the icons featured in this documentary represent? Whose emotions do they represent?



HOUR 2: AMERICA IN MOTION

Throughout history, Americans have taken to the road in search of freedom, opportunity, dreams, and even themselves, and in the process forever changed the landscape of the country. Rarely have cultural icons had as much influence on the American way of life as vehicles and the roads they traveled across. From the covered wagon to the steam locomotive to the racy sports car, *American Classics: America in Motion* tells the story of America's love affair with motion and with the symbols that evoke a sense of danger, mystery, adventure and fun. American Classics featured in this episode are the Covered Wagon, Locomotive, Model T, Route 66, '57 Chevy, Cor

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some reasons that Americans have taken to the open road? How does the fact that America is a land of immigrants play a role in this fascination with the open road?
2. How is the American road a mythological place?
3. Beginning in the 1840s, where did covered wagons take Americans? What opportunities did these wagons make possible for Americans?
4. One of the prominent artists of the American West, Fannie Palmer, had actually never been west of Hoboken, New Jersey. Why do you think her covered wagon scenes were still popular with so many Americans?
5. How did the steam locomotive symbolize a new America?
6. How did the Model T create the popular assumption that owning a car was something that all Americans ought to have the right to do?
7. Why did the Ford Motor Company not have to spend a single dollar on advertising for its Model T between 1917 and 1923?
8. How was Route 66 used during the 1930s and 1950s? What did the road mean to Americans during each of these eras?
9. The corvette was originally a failure and couldn't sell. What changes were made to make it a success?
10. The NASA astronauts of the 1960s drove corvettes. Why were these men powerful marketing tools for the sports car?
11. How can the Harley-Davidson be considered a democratic symbol?
12. How did owners of a Model T, '57 Chevy, or a Harley-Davidson develop personal relationships with their vehicles? How did these relationships help to transform these vehicles into national icons?



HOUR 3: AMERICA TRANSFORMED



HOUR 3: AMERICA TRANSFORMED

Postwar America was energized as it entered into an era of prosperity and accelerated change. American icons changed too, becoming more domestic and more commercial. Americans flocked to the suburbs in search of the American Dream. The affordable single family home, equipped with the latest technology, like the television set, became the hallmark of success. Women entered the workforce in greater numbers, and TV Dinners saved the day. The seeming stability of the 1950s gave way to the life altering chaos of the 1960's—assassinations, racial unrest, the Vietnam War, the women's movement and the sexual revolution. Tired of the turmoil, Americans in the 1970s focused on self-indulgence, and the time was indelibly cast as the “me” decade. American classics featured in this episode are Levittown, Ozzie & Harriet, TV Dinners, Good Humor Man, Smiley Face, Muhammad Ali, Disco Ball. This hour ends with a segment on Playboy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many people think of the 1950s in America as wholesome and worry-free era. Why do the fifties have this image? Is it accurate?
2. How did Levittown “sell a new way of life” to Americans? What were the characteristics of this new lifestyle? Why was this lifestyle appealing to so many Americans immediately after the war?
3. What did “Ozzie and Harriet” represent to American families? How did this television show blur the line between fantasy and reality?
4. How did television become a “social regulator” in the 1950s? Does television still serve the same function today? Why did Americans need or desire such guidance in the 1950s? Do Americans seek the same guidance today?
5. How did the success of the TV dinner reflect Americans’ confidence in science, technology, and modernity?
6. By the 1950s, one quarter of married women worked outside of the home, and by the 1960s, this figure had increased to one-third. How did the reality of women’s lives compare to the image of women portrayed in popular culture during these decades?
7. Why might someone remember their neighborhood Good Humor Man, and not their elementary school teacher? How does this help explain why the Good Humor Man has become a national icon?
8. An author interviewed in the documentary argues that “When it comes to individuals, icons are people who manage to sum up the conflicts, the stresses, and the unities of a population.” How does Muhammad Ali manage to represent these aspects of the 1960s?
9. The Smiley Face is a symbol that is understood by everybody. What is it about this image that has captured the public imagination? Have there been other icons as simple that have achieved the same popularity?
10. What can the disco ball itself reveal about the attitudes and lifestyles of Americans in the 1970s?





HOUR 4: LET US ENTERTAIN YOU

As the undisputed entertainment capital of the world, America has created some of the most celebrated and beloved American Classics. Entertainment is a universal language capable of transporting ideas, images, and popular trends throughout the world. Celebrities are raised to mythic status, doggedly followed by legions of fans, yet only a few survive their 15 minutes in the spotlight. *American Classics: Let Us Entertain You* looks at icons of movies, television, and rock 'n' roll that have left an indelible mark on the psyche of society. American Classics featured in this episode are *It's A Wonderful Life*, Marilyn Monroe, *I Love Lucy* and Elvis Presley.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did so many Americans have an intense personal reaction to the movie *It's A Wonderful Life*? How did the movie reflect the way Americans see themselves and the American way of life?
2. *It's A Wonderful Life* became a popular phenomenon after its copyright lapsed allowing for free broadcasting on television. Why did this event help boost the film to icon status?
3. Marilyn Monroe was one of many sexy screen actresses of her era. What about her career, personality, and life made her such a singular icon?
4. How was the image or idea of Marilyn Monroe generated? How did she become more a symbol than a real person in the eyes of the American public?
5. What are some examples of high culture? What are some examples of mass culture? What are the differences and similarities between the two?
6. How does modern American television get invented with "I Love Lucy"? How did this television show shape the lives of millions of Americans?
7. How does understanding the year 1956 help you understand the rise of Elvis Presley? In what ways does the historical moment help define an icon? Does an icon, in turn, help define an historical moment?
8. Elvis Presley was one of the first mass-marketed superstars. His journey to icon status was propelled not just by talent but by marketing. Who are some modern superstars whose images and careers have been similarly created by marketing campaigns?
9. When Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev visited the U.S. in 1959, he asked to see Disneyland and to meet Marilyn Monroe and John Wayne. What do his requests reveal about the impact of American popular culture?
10. What emotional connection do Americans have to each of the icons featured in this documentary? Provide specific examples.

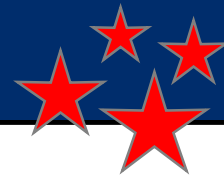




EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Immigration and industrialization have influenced the development of many of the American icons featured in this documentary. Divide your class into two groups. Have each group create an illustrated timeline of one of these major trends in American history. Have each member of each group choose an icon that was influenced by the major trend to include on the timeline. Display the timelines and discuss student findings.
2. Cultural icons help to document the American story at any period in history. Have your students research an American icon of their choice. Have them create a poster presentation on the rise of this icon, incorporating the events of the year of the icon's rise or height of popularity. Ask students to consider how this icon embodies the spirit and values of its time.
3. Many cultural icons are the products of marketing efforts and advertising campaigns. Have your students develop how-to pamphlets that explain how to create an American icon. They can use examples from the documentary and from their own experiences.
4. How many Academy Award nominations did *It's A Wonderful Life* receive? How many Elvis songs appeared on Billboard's Hot 100 Pop Chart in America? How many Model Ts were purchased in 1908? Sheer numbers can tell us a lot about cultural icons. Have students conduct research to collect statistical evidence that supports the status of a cultural icon of their choice. Have students present and analyze this data.
5. What would your students choose as their *American Classic: The Next Generation*? Have students write a five-minute documentary segment that explains the significance of their chosen icon.





RESOURCES

WEB SITES

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/ncdhtml/eaahome.html>

Advertising in America from the Library of Congress's American Memory Collection

www.virginia.edu/gwpapers

The Papers of George Washington from the University of Virginia

home.nycap.rr.com/content/unclesam.html

Pictures and historical information about Uncle Sam

www.quakeroats.com

Quaker Oats homepage

www.bombshells.com/grable

A Betty Grable site, with a biography and image galleries

www.hfmgv.org/exhibits/showroom/1908/model.t.html

The Henry Ford Museum's Model T online exhibit

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ccmphtml/colahome.html>

50 Years of Coca-Cola Television Advertisements from the Library of Congress's American Memory Collection

www.lihistory.com/specsec/levmain.htm

A history of Levittown from Long Island History.com and Newsday.

www.elvis.com

The "official" Elvis site for "Evlisology"

BOOKS

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Crispin-Miller, Mark. *Boxed-in: The Culture of TV*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998.

Patton, Phil. *Open Road: A Celebration of the American Highway*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987.

Plunkett-Powell, Karen. *Remembering Woolworth's: A Nostalgic History of the World's Most Famous Five-and-Dime*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001.

Richard Francaviglia. *Main Street Revisited: Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996.

