

COURSE SYLLABUS

Course Title: Popular Culture in America
Number: HIS 21
Credits/Hours: 3 credits/3 hours

INTRODUCTION

History 21 begins with the roots of early American popular culture and ends at the present day. The course attempts to cover aspects of popular culture in the United States from a variety of perspectives. It tries to connect the development and history of popular culture forms and content in a thematic and analytical way.

What are some of the major types of popular culture that have appeared throughout American history? What social and cultural factors gave rise to their development? How has popular culture reflected changes in contemporary society and its mores in different eras? What does American popular culture say about those who produce and/or consume it? To answer these and other historical questions, the class integrates elements of history, media studies, political science, and art and literary studies to present a multifaceted history of America and its popular culture.

OBJECTIVES

A primary objective of the course is for the student to achieve a deeper insight into the American experience, past, present, and future, as viewed through its popular culture forms and content. Through intensive study of those who shaped, produced, and consumed popular culture, undergraduates will develop a sense of perspective and a broader frame of reference for their own individual and collective histories. The knowledge students acquire in our learning environment will provide them with the necessary intellectual and cultural background to define for themselves what it means and has meant to be American.

Additionally, as a central offering in the Liberal Arts, the course acquaints students with many of the core concepts, theories, and methodologies essential to academic and cultural literacy. Through emphasis on reading and interpreting texts and audiovisual media, comparative conceptual analysis, the explication of graphic charts and illustrations, and communicating clearly and effectively through writing, the course develops and enhances student skills in the areas of critical thinking, reading comprehension, and both oral and written communication.

ASSESSMENT

History 21 employs a variety of pedagogical techniques including lecture, discussion, audiovisual, and computer-based (online and web-enhanced) instructional technologies. Oral presentations, low-stakes writing assignments, and small discussion groups are also encouraged.

Assessment of student learning will be based on class assignments, which include readings from primary and secondary texts, group discussions in class and/or online, class presentations, and written work, which may take the form of essays, journals, reports, research papers, or other assigned writing. The specific forms and combinations of assignments are left to the discretion of individual instructors.

In addition to informal or low-stakes assignments, student achievement of basic skills and knowledge will be measured through examinations and term papers. Examinations require essay writing, and will test reading comprehension and fluency as well as mastery of critical thinking skills. Specific weighting of various assignments and requirements is determined by individual instructors. However, students in all sections are expected to master a common body of information as measured by their responses to selected questions.

COURSE OUTLINE

The following topics will be covered by the course. Given the breadth and fluidity of this subject, it is expected that instructors may vary the content, organization, and overall approach of their sections.

I. Early Popular Culture

Introduction to key concepts in the history of popular culture; early developments in American popular culture before 1800.

II. Antebellum Popular Culture

Theaters and shows in Jacksonian America; the frontier and regionalized cultures; middle-class literary culture; minstrel shows and the meaning of race; P.T. Barnum and dime museums.

III. Post Civil War era

Industrialization and the rise of immigration; Nativism, Progressivism, and immigrant popular cultures; urban amusements.

IV. Turn of the Century

Vaudeville; the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893; Coney Island; electricity and the transformation of popular culture – phonographs, radio, and moving pictures.

V. World War I and the Jazz Age

Nickelodeons; popular culture and propaganda in wartime; social change and popular culture in the Jazz Age; 1920s radio, music, and the development of jazz; Harlem Renaissance; the Lost Generation; the New Woman.

VI. The Great Depression and World War II

The effects of the Depression on the American people and popular culture; realistic and escapist responses to the crises of the Depression; popular culture and propaganda in wartime.

VII. Postwar America

Post-WWII prosperity, development and suburbanization as reflected in popular culture; youth culture and rock and roll; social criticism in art, literature, and poetry.

VIII. The Sixties

Changes in youth culture, the generation gap, and the Vietnam War; popular culture responses to massive cultural change; increasing commercialization in the production of popular culture forms and content.

IX. The Modern Era

Media consolidation; computer and digital technology; commercialization, advertising, and cross-marketing; youth culture today.

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STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning Goals:

The purpose of this course is:

1. To introduce students to the basic concepts, questions, and problems addressed by historians of American popular culture;
2. To trace specific historical developments in American popular culture in terms of forms and content;

3. To foster skills needed to read, interpret, and analyze primary sources such as documents, audio-visual materials, and other texts;
4. To foster skills needed in historical methodology;
5. To foster skills needed to write a historical essay;
6. To enable students to apply their learned knowledge to their understanding of ongoing current events in American society and popular culture.

Learning Outcomes:

As a result of taking this course, students will learn or be able to:

1. Read and comprehend primary source texts;
2. Identify and understand key vocabulary terms used within the discipline;
3. Identify and analyze historical problems from a variety of viewpoints;
4. Explain and defend historical arguments;
5. Write clearly, critically, and effectively;
6. Develop and use research skills;
7. Use a variety of learning strategies including traditional lectures, oral presentation, collaborative learning, and/or computer-assisted learning (in certain hybrid-online sections).

Measurement:

Strategies to be used in demonstrating that students' learning has been achieved will include:

1. Quizzes
2. Classroom discussion
3. In-class ("low-stakes") writing assignments
4. Group discussions and/or presentations
5. Take-home writing assignments
6. Examinations (essay and objective/factual)
7. Essay papers (short and/or term papers)
8. On-line and web-enhanced exercises and assignments

Evaluation:

Based on the above measurements, the following quantitative and qualitative evidence will provide evidence that students have achieved their learning outcomes:

1. 75% passing grades on quizzes
2. Discussions and writing assignments reflect students' understanding of texts and class material, as well as their facility in explaining and defending their position
3. Writing assignments reflect students' ability to think and write clearly, effectively, and critically
4. Examination results demonstrate knowledge of basic concepts and ability to analyze historical problems.