



ROCK AND ROLL AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What is the American Dream and how did Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash personify its ideals?

OVERVIEW

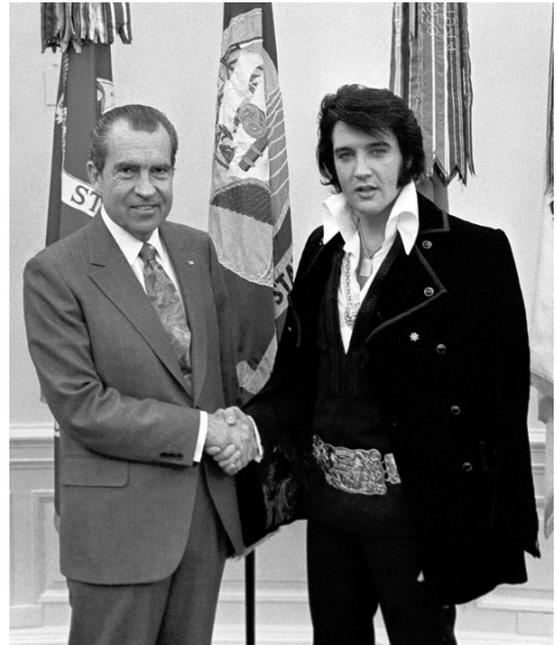
The American Dream—the idea that every person who calls him or herself an American has the opportunity to achieve a better life, to find a voice within the structure of the “nation,” to rise—is a concept that deeply permeates our American identity.

The American Dream is an essential part of the national lore used to explain what it means to be a citizen of the United States. The story is everywhere: The well-known biography of Abraham Lincoln begins in a Kentucky log cabin and ends in the White House. Horatio Alger Jr.’s nineteenth-century novels depict characters rising from rags to riches, as achieved through honest work, courage, and perseverance. In the 1930s, novelist John Steinbeck published *Of Mice and Men*, in which the protagonists, migrant laborers George and Lennie, maintain their dream of owning a farm even as they face brutal poverty and economic disenfranchisement.

Just as Lincoln, Alger, and Steinbeck offered different views into the very concept of the American Dream, Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash participated in updating the story for the Rock and Roll era, rising from working class beginnings to become legends in American life and culture.

In the eyes of his fans, Elvis didn’t simply live the American Dream; he embodied it. He was born at home in a two-room house in Tupelo, Mississippi in the midst of the Great Depression. The family later moved to Memphis, where they lived in a series of rented rooms and a public housing project while Elvis attended high school. All members of the Presley family worked several jobs, including Elvis, who worked as a machinist and drove a truck. Even in his earliest interviews, Elvis would say that all he wanted to do was to make enough money to buy his parents a house of their own, reminding his audience of his roots in the working class and just how far he’d risen.

By the spring of 1957, barely three years after recording “That’s All Right,” his first single for Sun Records, Elvis had already become a Pop superstar, both as a musician and a Hollywood



OVERVIEW (CONTINUED)

actor. It was that year when he purchased Graceland, a mansion in the Memphis suburbs. In the twenty years the Presley family lived in the home, the name “Graceland” became nearly interchangeable with Elvis himself, a symbol of the singer’s meteoric rise to fame and the possibility of a real “American Dream” coming true. Upon his death in 1977, Graceland became a spiritual mecca for music fans from all over the world looking to pay homage to the always larger-than-life King of Rock and Roll.

The American Dream story of Johnny Cash shares some similarities to the Elvis narrative, but with several key differences in the way Cash related to his audience and displayed his arrival. Born in Arkansas three years before Elvis, Cash was one of seven children. He grew up in a federal agricultural resettlement community, part of FDR’s New Deal, where the Cash family lived in a modest house and farmed the surrounding cotton fields. After serving in the U.S. Air Force, Cash worked in a Memphis appliance store. He first auditioned for Sam Phillips at Sun Records in 1954, not long after Elvis recorded his first songs on the same label.

While both musicians enjoyed remarkable success, Elvis and Cash ultimately adopted very different public identities. Elvis became a teen idol like the world had never seen, releasing pop records and starring in movies, while Cash cultivated an adult-oriented Country audience and wrote songs to suit his self-made “outlaw” image, including “Folsom Prison Blues” and “Don’t Take Your Guns to Town.” Elvis stood out from the crowd by wearing long sideburns and dressing in flamboyant colors and materials. Cash became known as the “Man in Black,” a reference to his dark and somber suits, which reflected his desire to memorialize those downtrodden people who had not shared in his success but who were, in some way, his brothers and sisters. While Elvis established a musical residency in Las Vegas, where several of Elvis’ own show business idols had performed, Cash strayed from his busy touring schedule to play free shows for inmates at Folsom and San Quentin State Prisons.

The exceptional lives of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash are pivotal tales that became representations of the American Dream, demonstrating the ability of Rock and Roll culture to transport a person from the margins of society to a place of power, wealth, and universal recognition, where their voices cut through the clutter of modern life.

In this lesson, students will explore the persistence of the American Dream by juxtaposing the writings of Horatio Alger Jr. and John Steinbeck with the artistic output of Elvis and Cash. If the American Dream as an ideology has always been a balance between myth and reality, these artists, and Rock and Roll culture more generally, gave the myth something real. Through a survey of literature, album art, songs, television news reports, film, and other materials, students will examine how these artists became symbols of the American Dream for their many fans.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How authors Horatio Alger, Jr. and John Steinbeck interpreted the American Dream through their fiction
- How Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash exemplified elements of the American Dream throughout their successful musical careers
- How Graceland became a geographical and allegorical symbol for Elvis Presley's rags-to-riches story

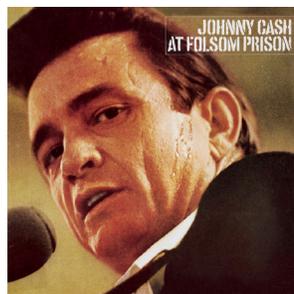
2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Draw thematic comparisons between the works of Horatio Alger, Jr. and John Steinbeck
- Discuss the connection between the American Dream and Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash's cultural impact
- Common Core: Students will work in groups to develop a sophisticated understanding of the concept of the American Dream by interpreting evidence gathered by an investigation of literary texts, songs, videos, album covers, and essays connected to the lives of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash (CCSS Reading 2; CCSS Reading 5; CCSS Speaking and Listening 1; Speaking and Listening 2)

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. **Display two album covers: Elvis Presley's 50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong (1959) and Johnny Cash's At Folsom Prison (1968). Ask students to study these images closely. Discuss as a class how each of these two artists are depicted differently. The discussion should cover styles of dress, physical poses, personalities (if apparent), album titles, and any other visible design elements. What assumptions can we make about the artists and their music based on the album covers?**



2. **Explain that both Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash began their lives under similar circumstances before launching their massively successful performing careers:**

- Presley and Cash were born three years apart in the American South, Presley in Mississippi and Cash in Arkansas;

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

- Both came of age during the Great Depression and grew up extremely poor;
- Both worked various jobs to support their families before recording for Sun Records in Memphis in the mid-1950s.

3. Explain that students will be analyzing the idea of the “American Dream,” how it has changed over time, and how it relates to the music and popularity of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash.

PROCEDURE:

1. Write “The American Dream” on the board. Ask students to spend 5 minutes conceiving and writing down a definition in 1-2 sentences. Share definitions aloud.
2. Show clips of Elvis Presley on the Milton Berle Show (1956) and Johnny Cash on Ranch Party (1957). Explain that for a young musician in the 1950s, it was considered a major accomplishment to appear on one of these network television shows. Discuss as a class:
 - What traits do these artists seem to have in common? (Possible answers include: similar instruments, hair styles, Country influences.)
 - What traits make each of these artists unique? (Possible answers include: Elvis’ dancing and hiccupped vocals, Cash’s deep, commanding voice and unadorned style of singing.)
3. Distribute Handout 1: Horatio Alger. As a class, read aloud a short biography of Alger and an excerpt from one of his stories. Discuss as a class:
 - What is Dick (the protagonist) likely to achieve by diving off the boat to save the drowning child?
 - Based on this scene, what does Alger imply about the protagonist’s moral character?
 - In a larger scope, what does Alger suggest about a person’s opportunity to achieve upward mobility in America? In other words, what traits does an American need in order to succeed?
4. Distribute Handout 2: John Steinbeck. As a class, read aloud a short biography of Steinbeck and an excerpt from *Of Mice and Men* (1937). Discuss as a class:
 - In passage 1, what kind of imagery does George use to describe the farm to Lennie? How does George’s vision connect to the idea of the American Dream?
 - In passage 2, how does Crooks respond to George and Lennie’s dream of owning a farm? What does Crooks’ observation suggest about the state of the American Dream during the time of the Great Depression?
 - Explain how Steinbeck’s understanding of the American Dream is similar to or different from that of Alger’s.
5. Divide students into small groups. Distribute Handout 3: Elvis’ Houses. Students will analyze two houses Presley lived in during his lifetime: a two-room wooden house (sometimes called a “shotgun shack”) in Tupelo, Mississippi, and the Graceland mansion in Memphis, Tennessee. Groups will make observations about the two houses and discuss the accompanying questions. Poll answers aloud.



PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)

6. Play trailer for the movie *Love Me Tender* (1956). Discuss as a class:

- What do you notice about Elvis' performance style and the character he is playing on screen? Why might a wide, popular audience be attracted to Elvis in this film?
- What are some of the titles you see in the trailer? How do these titles support the real life story of Elvis' emergence as a superstar?

7. Distribute Handout 4: *The Man in Black*. As a class, read a short biography of Cash detailing his persona as the "Man in Black" and his identification with marginalized people, including Native Americans and prisoners.

8. Play audio clip of "Folsom Prison Blues" (1968). Explain that while Cash first released the song in 1955, this version is from a live performance for the inmates of Folsom Prison and was recorded in 1968. Discuss as a class:

- What kind of imagery does Cash evoke in the song?
- In this recording, Cash is performing before an audience of inmates. However, "Folsom Prison Blues" became one of his most popular and famous songs. Why do you think this song might appeal to a wider audience?
- Does this song seem to align more to Alger or Steinbeck's vision of the American Dream? How?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

Watch ABC Nightline clip from 25th anniversary of Elvis' death.

Students will write a short paragraph about the lasting impression of Elvis on his fans. How does the author of the letter describe herself and the rest of Elvis' fan base? How does her description relate to the idea of the American Dream as presented by Alger and Steinbeck?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

Have students read Handout 5: *The King and I - A Visit to Graceland* by Michael Gray. Imagine that you have just visited Graceland as a tourist and write a one-page letter to a friend or family member describing your trip. Be sure to include your own thoughts about what the American Dream means to you personally and how Elvis' life, as displayed at Graceland, compares to your own ideas for a successful life. Students may also refer to the ABC Nightline clip as further evidence of the Graceland experience.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text

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

Reading 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Reading 5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

Writing 3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12

Speaking and Listening 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.

Speaking and Listening 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

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

RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Elvis Presley – “Remembering the King” – ABC News – Nightline (2002)
- Johnny Cash – Get Rhythm (1957)
- Elvis Presley - Love Me Tender Trailer (1956)
- Johnny Cash – “Folsom Prison Blues” – From At Folsom Prison (1968)
- Elvis Presley - Hound Dog (1956)

FEATURED PEOPLE

- Johnny Cash
- Elvis Presley

HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Horatio Alger
- Handout 2: John Steinbeck
- Handout 3: Elvis' Houses
- Handout 4: The Man in Black
- Handout 5: The King and I - A Visit to Graceland