

Title:

Cold War Era Film Censorship: *High Noon*– A Slive of Americana or Communist Propaganda?

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Abstract:

This five-day mini-unit for grades 9 through 12 is designed to be incorporated in a larger unit devoted to a study of the effects of the Cold War on the home front. The prior knowledge necessary to successfully complete these activities includes a basic understanding of the Cold War's two major countries (USA and USSR) as well as the overall goals of the United States (protect democracy and the American way of life.) Students will be asked to analyze the film *High Noon* according to an abbreviated version of the standards that films were judged by in the early 1950s and determine whether or not *High Noon* is “fit” to be released to the American public. Overall, this mini-unit serves as a good transition between a study of WWII and the Cold War.

State Standard(s):

B12.1 – Explain different points of view on the same historical event, using data gathered from various sources, such as letters, journals, diaries, newspapers, government documents, and speeches

B.12.2 – Analyze primary and secondary sources related to a historical question to evaluate their relevance, make comparisons, integrate new information with prior knowledge, and come to a reasoned conclusion

B.12.5 – Gather various types of historical evidence, including visual and quantitative data, to analyze issues of freedom and equality, liberty and order, region and nation, individual and community, law and conscience, diversity and civic duty; form a reasoned conclusion in the light of other possible conclusion; and develop a coherent argument in the light of other possible arguments

B.12.7 – Identify major works of art and literature produced in the United States and elsewhere in the world and explain how they reflect the era in which they were created

Essential Historical Question:

How did the fear of communism influence American popular culture in the post war era?

Perspectives on the Question:

HUAC (House Un-American Committee)	How can Americans be protected from the dangerous influence of communism?
American Public	What sorts of movies are Americans interested in during the post war era?
Hollywood Producers, Directors, Actors, etc. (Hollywood 10, specifically)	Should Hollywood censor itself in an effort to stay “pro-American”?

Learning Targets:

Knowledge

- HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee)
- Hollywood 10
- Cold War Era Terms (ex. blacklisting, censorship, propaganda, McCarthyism, Red Scare, Collectivism, Communism, Free Enterprise, etc.)

Processes and Skills

- Analysis of film (as popular culture)
- Discussion and debate
- Application of content knowledge to 2nd analysis of film (communism connection)
- Short essay writing
- Using a rubric to analyze

Reasoning and Critical and Creative Thinking

- History Thinking Standard 3.A – Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas, values, etc.
- History Thinking Standard 5.A – Identify issues and problems in the past
- History Thinking Standard 5.B – Marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances
- History Thinking Standard 5.E – Formulate a position or course of action on an issue

Dispositions and Attitudes

- Better understand freedom of speech, its limitations, and its value
- Appreciate movies for their underlying messages
- Relate to the emotions of the Cold War era

Instruction:

Day 1 – Introduce *High Noon*

- This mini-unit fits in nicely following study of WWII, as an introduction to an examination of the Cold War era.
 - Introduce the topic of popular culture following WWII
 - Discuss trends, lifestyles, etc.

- Discuss popular movies – list some titles, show overhead information about some
 - Top 50 Movie Rankings: <http://www.imdb.com/Charts/Votes/1950>
 - 1950s Culture: <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/home.html>
- Students, as part of their study of American culture in the 1950s, will view the movie *High Noon*. This film, a western shot in black and white, starred Gary Cooper as Marshall Will Kane and Grace Kelly as his future wife. Kane is about to resign his position as Marshall and get married when he hears that Frank Miller, an outlaw who had terrorized Hadleyville with his gang until Kane caught him, has been released from prison and is returning for revenge. He will arrive on the train at “high noon” and the members of his gang are waiting for him. Kane has only a short period of time to rally the townspeople of Hadleyville to defend themselves against these outlaws. Will he – and the town – be ready by noon?
- Background supplemental information
 - Before viewing the film, students should know that the western is actually as old as the movies – *The Great Train Robbery* being one of the first feature films ever produced. Throughout the twenties, thirties and forties, westerns were churned out by most studios. During the 1950s, westerns dominated prime time programming on television – they were the “reality shows” of the day.
- Possible questions for discussion prior to viewing the film:
 1. What did audiences like about westerns?
 2. Were westerns uniquely American?
 3. Did you ever watch a western before? What did you like/dislike about it?
 4. Who were usually the heroes and villains?
 5. What audience were westerns aimed at?
 6. What star comes to mind when you think about westerns?
 7. How do you think women and children were usually treated in westerns?
- Play *High Noon* – (Total Running Time - 85 minutes)

Day 2 – Complete *High Noon*

- Complete viewing of *High Noon*

Day 3 – Analysis of Film, Censorship Content

- See Appendix A (available online) for plot analysis suggestions
- Possible questions to be discussed on Day Three
 1. What happened in this film?
 2. Who were the heroes and who were the villains?
 3. Were there any lessons to be learned from this film?
 4. What did you think of the citizens of Hadleyville? The marshall?

5. Is *High Noon* a western that would appeal to children and adults? Why or why not?

Record student responses on the board or overhead.

TRANSITION - The class has been discussing *High Noon* as a western. Now ask the class questions in this vein:

1. If Hadleyville is an American town, how are the Americans who lived in Hadleyville portrayed?
2. Could this film be viewed as anti-American?
3. What is propaganda?
4. Could this film be viewed as anti-American propaganda?
5. Is it possible that this film was perceived as communist propaganda?

Day 4 – Censorship Content Continued

- Complete study of HUAC information
- Complete study of Hollywood 10 information
- Allow time to complete checklist in preparation for tomorrow’s assessment question

Students will return with their checklists and answers. The teacher will use these as the basis of discussion. Is there a consensus of opinion among the students? What is the majority opinion of the film? Is it “American” or “Unamerican?”

The assignment will expand into a further examination of blacklisting and the Hollywood Ten, and the anti-communist crusade. Most texts have information on this era.

Example: Nash, Gary B. *American Odyssey: The United States in the 20th Century.* McGraw Hill, 1999, Pages 648-651, “The Hollywood Ten – A Case Study.”

Pass out the handout “**Film and Communist Red Scare of the 1950’s.**” Read and discuss as a class.

Note: It would be advantageous at this point for students to access a computer lab to check the hyperlinks.

The lesson will conclude tomorrow with the evaluation. There are a number of possible extra credit projects the students may do.

Extra Credit Options

1. Research the contemporary critical reviews of *High Noon*. Was there a consensus of opinion by the critics. What was it?
2. Write your own critical review of the film.

3. Using the “Screen Guide For Americans,” analyze a recent film you’ve seen.
4. In 1994, the *National Review*, a leading conservative magazine, published a list of the 81 top conservative movies of all time. *High Noon* made the list at number 57. Could it really be that *High Noon* was a conservative, pro-American film all along? Write an essay explaining this point of view.
5. View the film *Rio Bravo*, the movie John Wayne made as an answer to *High Noon*. Write a critical essay, comparing the two in plot, character development and quality. Which do you prefer – and why?

- HW: prepare for assessment

Day 5 – Assessment, Comparison of Results

- Pass out assessment directions
- Allow time to complete assessment
- Discussion/Share time for Film Censors
 - ASK: How many wrote about censoring or banning the film according to your criteria?
 - ASK: How many wrote about allowing the film to be produced/released?
 - CONCLUDE CLASS WITH THE ESSENTIAL QUESTION:
 - ASK: How did the fear of communism influence American popular culture in the post war era?
 - Review and revisit specific examples from the 1950s
 - Review and revisit government reactions on the home front

OPTIONAL: use this conclusion to introduce a discussion of McCarthyism to be examined in further detail in the days to come

Assignment: Students will address and complete the “Screen Guide For Americans” and “Film Analysis Form” about the film (both available online). These checklists were given to executives in the film industry to warn them about possible communist infiltration in their industry.

Assessment:

Goal of Performance or Product:

Enable students to analyze, interpret, and understand how the fear of communism affected American life (and the movie industry.) A second goal would be for students to better understand free speech and censorship as it relates to their lives.

Role of Student:

Film Censors (self-regulating producers)

Audience of Performance or Product:

“HUAC” (teacher who evaluates the assessment)

Class and teacher

Situation:

Students will play the role of film censors who are asked to evaluate the popular 1950s western *High Noon* according to Cold War era movie standards.

Criteria Used to Evaluate Performance or Product:

Opinion

Content connections

Paragraph format

Completion of checklists in advance

Scoring Rubric available online.

Resources:

General Sites for the 1950s

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/home.html>

<http://www.fiftiesweb.com/fifties.htm>

<http://search.csmonitor.com/durable/1997/11/28/feat/tv.1.html>

Cold War Sites:

<http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/lectures/lecture24.html>

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/CinemaStudies/AllPowers/film.html>

<http://www.jpbutler.demon.co.uk/badweb/huac.html#filmog>

Propaganda:

<http://www.propagandacritic.com/articles/intro.why.html>