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### The *Happy Days* Façade of the 1950s

As Americans look back on the 1950s, several images might come to mind: Pink Cadillac's, leather jackets, the birth of rock and roll, TV dinners, and shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy*. Although these all appear to be examples of the happiest decade in recent American history, to which every decade is compared, this was merely a façade of what life was really like. The Cold War was at its peak, the Civil Rights Movement was starting to be realized, and even pop culture had its share of troubles. The 1950s were a decade lived in fear and conformity, filled with cries for freedom, from whatever the injustice.

After World War Two, the United States decided that although the Soviet Union had helped us out during the war, we were not going to acknowledge the country because of its communist government, capitalism's enemy, during times of peace. What resulted was the Cold War. The U.S. adopted the Truman Doctrine, which was to govern our foreign policy for a generation, and led us into the Korean Conflict, a war that America neither supported nor opposed (Bailey 908). Although our political goal of containment had been achieved in Korea in 1953, the country remained divided at the 38 parallel, where it was in 1950 before the war began. The next major step in the Cold War was the launching of *Sputnik I*, a Russian satellite on October 4, 1957. This breakthrough shattered Americans' confidence in our country and its government. The communists had won, and if they could fire heavy man made objects into space, "they could certainly reach the United States with ballistic missiles" (Bailey 921). This led to an increase in

the fears of Russians, and Americans started taking precautions. Americans began building bomb shelters in their basements so they could be prepared for the worst. Schools started administering air raid drills, which led children to believe that the Russians could strike at any minute. *Sputnik I & II* also led to the establishment of the National Defense and Education Act (NDEA), which focused on teaching school children sciences and languages, to catch up with the Russian education program. The Space Race increased America's fears and the country never quite recovered until Neil Armstrong made one giant leap for America's Space Program on July 20, 1969.

The South of the 1950s was filled with turmoil and injustice. The blacks were fed up with all of the racial injustices that were still around although the Civil War had freed them over 85 years earlier. "Separate but equal" accommodations became clearly unequal. President Eisenhower turned a blind eye to the matter, and Congress resisted passing civil rights legislation. It was up to the Supreme Court to do something about the inequities of life in the South between the blacks and whites. The Civil Rights movement began with the landmark case *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which declared that segregation in the public schools was "inherently unequal" and thus unconstitutional. In December of 1955, Rosa Parks, a college-educated black woman from Montgomery, Alabama, decided to sit in the "whites only" section of a city bus, and refused to move when asked to do so. She was arrested, and this led to a year-long boycott of the city buses. The city finally listened, and so did the rest of the country. The blacks were starting to get fair treatment. Because of the successful bus boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. rose to fame and gave blacks everywhere hope for the future. He promised that one day people would not be "judged by the color of their skin, but by the

content of their character.” It would take blacks more than a decade of strife before King’s dream was realized.

Even in America’s pop culture we had our share of tragedies. In the entertainment industry, life was not as pleasant as it appeared on the silver screen. Some of the biggest names in Hollywood had some of the darkest personal lives. Marilyn Monroe, born Norma Jean Mortenson, never knew who her father was, saw her mother committed to a mental institution, was sexually abused as a child, and escaped her past by changing her name, and going into show business. She began to drink heavily, and became addicted to drugs, namely sleeping pills. Her destructive behavior finally caught up to her on August 5, 1962 when she died in her home from an overdose of sleeping pills (Marilyn Monroe site). James Dean represented America’s youth in the mid-50s. His portrayal of a rebellious teenager looking for his father’s attention in 1955s *Rebel Without a Cause* lead to his admiration of teenagers everywhere for his personification of the restless American youth. Unfortunately, he died in a tragic highway accident before the movie made its premier, and the teenagers of America lost their voice (James Dean site). Music thrilled teens during the 1950s, and performers such as Elvis Presley excited audiences in an otherwise strict world. Rock and roll was here to stay, although many conservative religious groups “condemned it as the devil’s music” (Murrin 970). Even the new sounds of rock and roll had tragic endings. Just as Elvis had left the public eye, three of the only voices left for rock and roll were killed in a plane crash on February 3, 1959. Also known as “the day the music died,” the plane was carrying rock icons Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper. The generation lost its identity, and hope as well.

The 1950s, no matter how they were portrayed on such TV shows as *Happy Days* and in movies such as *American Graffiti* and *Grease*, were not nearly as happy as they appeared to be from a later generation's point of view. The Cold War was a major fear that crept into the hearts of Americans every night and civil rights did not accomplish nearly as much as it needed to during the 1950s. And even such beloved shows as *I Love Lucy* were extremely censored. The word "pregnant" could not be mentioned on TV, and when Lucy was to have a child, they had to constantly say she was "expecting" or "with child." Happy, carefree days? The evidence supports otherwise.

## Works Cited

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