

19th Century American Popular Culture

- I. Some definitions and considerations of the role of popular culture.
- II. Tensions upon which popular culture focused.
- III. For each source of cultural angst, some ways it was treated, in media both traditional and new.

Popular:

- Of a belief, attitude, etc.: prevalent or current among the general public; generally accepted, commonly known.
- Of, relating to, deriving from, or consisting of ordinary people or the people as a whole; generated by the general public; democratic.
- Of low birth; not noble; plebeian.
- Vulgar, coarse, ill-bred.
- Adapted to the means of ordinary people; low or moderate in price.
- Aware of or cultivating the favour of the populace. Also: supporting the cause of the common people (rather than that of the nobility, etc.).
- Liked or admired by many people, or by a particular person or group.
- Designating forms of art, music, or culture with general appeal; intended primarily to entertain, please, or amuse.

Culture: The distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular society, people, or period. Hence: a society or group characterized by such customs, etc.

The work of popular culture is to reflect and disseminate a body of ideas, concepts, to reflect a world view.

- I. The fact that Americans, mainstream white Protestant Americans, **had forced the Indians off their land**, had, in effect defeated them by the 19th century. How could that fact be made culturally acceptable?
- II. **Slavery**—the central dilemma of the century. How could enslavement of a people be seen as anything but an evil? How to reconcile the economic reality of a “free” country built on a slave economy, benefiting both North and South? Or—how to bring change?
- III. **Growth of industrialization and urban life**—along with a growing capitalist economy, and, as Rodgers notes, the very real anxiety and ambivalence of reliance on “wage workers.” How to reconcile this changing landscape with older image of simple, usually rural or small town life?
- IV. **Massive immigration**, first the Irish who come earlier in the century, fleeing the potato famine in Ireland. Then, the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe—not only alien, but Catholic or Jewish. How can the alien influence be contained, while the immigrants’ cheap labor is needed by some, feared by others?
- V. **“Problem” of women**—agitating for the vote and equal status with men. Should the solution be radical or conservative? How can women act, in Arendtian sense?
- VI. **The Civil War**—How to reconcile, literally, the North and South? How would the country deal with free black people, in the North or in the South?

Ideas are disseminated into the popular culture/world view:

PRINT—

Books

Genre fiction

Sentimental fiction

Dime novels

Children's books

Newspapers—

Cheap, sensational

Mainstream newspapers

Magazines—

e.g. Harper's, Atlantic Monthly,

St. Nicholas Magazine

Advertising—

Newspapers

Magazines

Posters

IMAGE—

Paintings (and their print reproductions)

Photography (daguerreotype>photograph)

Cartoons

Advertising

PERFORMANCE—

Theater

Sermons

Traveling shows

Political speeches

Chautauqua

End of the century—Chicago World's Fair
(1893)

I. Americans, mainstream white Christian Americans, had forced the Indians off their land, had, in effect defeated them by the 19th century. How could that fact be made culturally acceptable?

In fiction:

James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales (1827-1841) *The Deerslayer*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Pathfinder*, *The Prairie*, *The Pioneers*.

Catherine Sedgewick's *Hope Leslie*

A whole genre called "captive narratives"

Westerns—Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902)

Ned Buntline's Dime Novels

Images—

Captive narrative paintings

Hudson River School—vanishing Indian

Frederick Remington—Indian wars

Edward Curtis—photographs

Advertising—

Performance—

Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show

Ned Buntline's Dime Novels

II.Slavery—the central dilemma of the century.
How could enslavement of a people be seen as anything but an evil? How to reconcile the economic reality of a “free” country built on a slave economy, benefiting both North and South? Or—how to bring change?

Print:

Fiction

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851)

William Wells Brown’s *Clotel: or The President’s Daughter* (1853)

Sermons—

both abolitionist and apologist

Newspapers—

articles, editorials, both against and supporting slavery as an institution

Image:

Photography

Prints

Performance:

Political speeches

Theater (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in hundreds of versions)

Sermons

III. Growth of industrialization and urban life—along with a growing capitalist economy, and, as Rodgers notes, the very real anxiety and ambivalence of reliance on “wage workers.” How to reconcile this changing landscape with older image of simple, usually rural or small town life?

Print:

Fiction:

Sentimental novels

Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*
(1850)

Called “America’s first best-seller)

Hundreds of stories validating small town
life, temptation of the city.

Horatio Alger stories for boys

Louisa May Alcott’s stories for girls

Mainstream fiction

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of
Seven Gables* (1851)

Westerns

Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*

Magazines

Harper’s, Atlantic Monthly, regional
titles.

Saturday Evening Post

Advertising:

For first suburbs—post civil war

Image:

Currier and Ives

Photographs

IV. Massive immigration, first the Irish who come earlier in the century, fleeing the potato famine in Ireland. Then, the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe—not only alien, but Catholic or Jewish. Immigrants from Asia in the West. How can the alien influence be contained, while the immigrants' cheap labor is needed by some, feared by others?

Print:

Newspapers—

Most famously, a series in *New York Tribune*, then a book by Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890)

Articles (and book-length “exposes”) about the dangers of “White Slavery”

Fiction:

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905)

Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918)

Dime novels

Images:

Cartoons

Photographs: Jacob Riis, Lewis Hines

Performance:

Political speeches—Know Nothings (1840s-1850s)

Sermons—Dangers of Catholicism, “Popery”

Later, some early silent films with immigrants as protagonists.

V. “Problem” of women—agitating for the vote and equal status with men. Should the solution be radical or conservative? How can women act, in Arendtian sense?

Print:

Fiction—

Sentimental novel as conservative response

Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868-69)

Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850)

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

(1851)

“Schoolgirl stories”

Domestic Sphere books.

Most notably, Catherine Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (first published 1849, goes through many editions.)

Magazines—

Harpers and The Atlantic Monthly with articles on suffrage, women’s role, the home.

Images:

Advertising—

Photography—portraiture

cartoons

Performance/Events-

Seneca Falls Convention—(1848)

Many of the speeches printed and in wide circulation

Suffrage speeches

Chicago World’s Fair (1893)

VI. The Civil War—How to reconcile, literally, the North and South? How would the country deal with free black people, in the North or in the South?

Print:

Fiction—

post civil war novels, like G.W. Henty's *With Lee in Virginia* (188?)

Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936)

Dime novels about the "Old South"

Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman* (1905)

Magazines—

Early on, articles in magazines like Harpers and Atlantic that focused on radical reconstruction and changes for free blacks in the defeated South, but later, more focus on the plantation system in its new form—in the Jim Crow South.

Articles about education reform in the segregated south—dealing with Plessy v. Ferguson. Conservative Black writers like Booker T. Washington.

More radical stances in print, e.g. Frederick Douglas

Images:

Advertising—

Use of images like Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, Gold Dust Twins—demeaning and resonant.

Performance:

Movie: D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915)

Movie: *Gone with the Wind* (1939)

Other:

By the 1880s—lots of parades, honor of Civil War Veterans (Union and Confederate)

War Memorials and monuments—in towns and cities as well as battlefield monuments, e.g. Gettysburg, PA

