



The Zoot Suit: Style and Swing in the Wartime Economy

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What was the cultural, social, and historical significance of the zoot suit during the period of World War II?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students consider the role fashion plays in reflecting and contributing to social relations by examining the popularity of the zoot suit. Students will investigate primary sources including interviews, newspaper articles, and radio shows to consider the meaning behind the zoot suit, its association with swing music, and the reason the zoot suit provoked backlash. In the process, they are introduced to the Sleepy Lagoon Murder Trial and subsequent “Zoot Suit Riots” that occurred in Los Angeles between 1942 and 1943.



The origin of the zoot suit is more legend than history. Sociologist Emory Bogardus contends that the zoot suit was an American adaption of a native costume from Pachuca, Mexico (hence zoot suiters often being referred to as “Pachucos” in Los Angeles.) *The New York Times* traces the origin to Clyde Duncan, a Black busboy who ordered a customized suit from a department store in Gainesville, Florida. Some trace it to part of the “Killer Diller” style that began in Georgia and spread throughout the South. Others argued the zoot suit’s first inspiration was the clothing worn by Clark Gable in the 1940 film *Gone with the Wind*.

Regardless of its origins, the zoot suit grew to be a cultural phenomenon in the World War II era, and became practically synonymous with Swing Music, a dance music performed by large Jazz Big Bands in clubs and ballrooms. Popularized by Swing musician Cab Calloway, young people across the country adopted the suit, characterized by ballooning pants, long coats which accentuated shoulder pads, a pork pie or large-brimmed hat (often sporting a large feather), and a hanging chain that almost touched the floor. For many working class Americans, attaining a zoot suit became a sign of status, and an opportunity to shed working clothes to go dancing in style.

Like many popular trends, the zoot suit was also met with backlash. Fabric rationing related to the war effort led to claims that the excesses of the zoot suit were unpatriotic. In 1942, the War Productions Board issued Order L-85, regulating the maximum measurements of men’s suits and pants in a clear strike against the production and sale of the zoot suit. The zoot suit also

threatened gender norms at the time. It's ballooning pants and jacket gave the men wearing them what critics claimed was a "girlish waist." At the same time, female zoot suiters (who often complemented the suit with a skirt, hosiery, and huarache sandals) were accused of not presenting themselves as feminine enough.

Arguably the greatest backlash against the zoot suit was less to do with the style of the outfit, but rather the people that wore it. While young people across the country danced in zoot suits, the outfit became especially associated with working people of color – most directly Black Americans in Harlem and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles. As such, the zoot suit became a symbol of racial resentment among a group of Anglo-Americans – its luxury a testament to the social mobility of America's Black and Mexican communities. Such racial resentment came to a head in Los Angeles in the summer of 1943, when a group of sailors rioted throughout the city, beating Mexican-Americans, stripping them of their zoot suits, and burning them in public.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How Swing music defined the first half of the 20th century
- The elements of a zoot suit and its association with Swing music
- The state of the U.S. economy and society during World War II
- The Zoot Suit Riots, and their impact on U.S. history
- The Sleepy Lagoon murder and trial (extension activity)

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to articulate the way fashion represents and contributes to social relations by investigating the zoot suit and the Zoot Suit Riots in Los Angeles through primary sources.

ACTIVITIES

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Distribute **Handout - Fashion Design Template**, and provide colored pencils to students. Instruct students to design and draw their ideal outfit. Once complete, ask volunteers to share the drawing of their outfit (*Note: if under time constraints, teachers may simply ask students to describe their ideal outfit without drawing it.*) Ask student volunteers:
 - Why would you wear an outfit like the one you designed? When and where would you wear it?
 - Does this outfit reflect aspects of your personality? If so, which aspects?

- Would you anticipate any pushback or criticism of your outfit? If so, by whom? Why might they criticize it?

2. Following the share-out, ask the class:

- What role might fashion play for an individual?
- What are some of the roles fashion plays in society? What might choices in fashion reveal about the current culture and politics of a society?

PROCEDURE

1. Inform students in class they will be discussing the social effect of the zoot suit: an outfit associated with Swing music in the 1940s. Ask students:

- Have you ever heard of a zoot suit? If so, how would you describe it? Who wore it?
- Have you ever heard of Swing music? If so, how would you describe it?

2. Explain to students they will be watching a clip from Cab Calloway, a Swing musician who helped popularized the zoot suit. Play **Clip 1, Cab Calloway, “Minnie the Moocher.”** Then ask students:

- Does the music you heard in the clip remind you of anything? If so, what?
- What did you notice about Cab Calloway’s outfit?

3. Show **Image 1, Zoot Suit.** Walk through the components of the outfit with students. Then ask students:

- What is your opinion of the zoot suit? Do you think it is fashionable?
- Does the zoot suit or elements of the zoot suit remind you of any contemporary fashions?

4. Distribute **Handout: Wartime Economy, 1941-1945 Graphic Organizer** (*Teacher’s Guide also available*). Explain that throughout the class students will be using the handout to make notes on important concepts and terms introduced in the class.

5. Play **Clip 1, Wartime Economy, 1941-1945** and encourage students to take notes on their graphic organizer as they watch the clip.

6. Work through the graphic organizer together as a class, filling in notes for all the terms on the handout. Use the Teacher’s Guide of the organizer to help spur thinking (*you may need to rewatch portions of the video with the class*).

7. Create a “Big Paper” classroom discussion. First, attach images from **Gallery - Zoot Suits in the 1940s** onto the center of a large sheet, and hang the sheets around the classroom. Distribute markers to students, and ask them to write on the big paper what stands out to them about the image and quote, or any thoughts or opinions they might have. Have students circle the classroom multiple times, and encourage them to respond to other students comments to create a silent conversation. (*An example result of the Big Paper Activity can be found here: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/big-paper-building-silent-conversation>.*) While conducting the gallery walk, feel free to play this playlist in the background: <https://>

www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQXXISq_vcCaxlhyZBb_Rtz-QwVmClf0K

8. After students complete the Big Paper activity, ask:

- Were there any similarities you noticed about the fashion across the images?
- Did you notice any similarities with the people in the photographs?
- Based on the quotes, what were some of the reasons zoot suits had significance for people?
- Why might zoot suits have been considered “dangerous” or “bad” by some people?

If this lesson is split between multiple sessions this would be a good stopping point.

9. Inform students that in the 1940s, zoot suits became so popular and controversial, a series of riots in Los Angeles was named after them. Tell students they will take on the role of historical investigators to determine the

potential causes of the zoot suit riots. To aid in their investigation, they will be analyzing a collection of historical documents. Distribute **Handout - Zoot Suit Riots Document Set** to individual students or student groups.

10. As students work through the document set, display **Image 2, Zoot Suit Riots Prompt** as a reminder of their task. To aid their investigation, distribute to groups **Handout - Guiding Questions for Document Set**. Once students or student groups complete their analysis, ask them to answer the questions in the image. Then ask students:

- What was the relationship between zoot suits and the riots that occurred in Los Angeles in 1943?
- How did the documents differ when recounting the riots and their cause? Did you feel any particular accounts were biased? If so, which ones?
- How would you summarize the causes of the zoot suit riots?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 3, Moral Panic Definition**. Read the definition aloud. Then ask student volunteers to define “moral panic” in their own words.
2. Display **Image 4, Summary Activity Prompt**. Organize students in groups to discuss the prompt, and ask students to report on their discussions. Then ask students:
 - Can you think of an example of a contemporary moral panic?
 - How is it different or similar to what occurred with zoot suits in the 1940s?



EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. As mentioned in the lesson, one of the events that preceded the Zoot Suit Riots was the Sleepy Lagoon Murder and Trial. In groups or individually, read through **Handout - The Sleepy Lagoon Murder and Trial Document Set**, and answer the questions on **Handout - Sleepy Lagoon Murder and Trial Questions**.
2. Listen to some of the music zoot suiters likely danced to with this youtube playlist: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQXXISq_vcCaxIhyZBb_Rtz-QwVmClf0K

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

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

Craft and Structure 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.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12) (Extension Activities only)

Text Types and Purposes 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 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.

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Comprehension & Collaboration 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such

that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

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

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority, and Governance

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)

Core Music Standard: Connecting

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

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

Connecting

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- Cab Calloway, "Minnie the Moocher."
- *Wartime Economy, 1941-1945*

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Fashion Design Template
- Handout: Wartime Economy, 1941-1945 Graphic Organizer
- Handout: Wartime Economy, 1941-1945 Graphic Organizer (Teacher's Guide)
- Gallery Walk - Zoot Suits in the 1940s
- Handout - Zoot Suit Riots Document Set
- Handout - Guiding Questions for Document Set
- Document Set: The Sleepy Lagoon Murder and Trial (Extension Activity)
- Handout - Sleepy Lagoon Murder and Trial Questions (Extension Activity)