

Study Questions: Robert Pielke, “Elvis and the Negation of the Fifties”

1. How, if at all, did rock’n’roll challenge the values of mainstream Americans during the Cold War?
2. Why did parents and self-appointed “cultural arbiters” denounce rock music? Were they overestimating its power or were they right to see it as a threat? What explains their obsession with Elvis Presley in particular? Why did they “dread” him?
3. Why is it significant that rock music seems to have gotten its start in the South? What were the contributions of southern rockabilly and rhythm and blues to rock music?
4. Why did it matter that Elvis appealed to working-class *and* middle-class kids?
5. According to Pielke, Elvis was a revolutionary. In fact, without him there would have been no revolution – “A white man had to play the blues.” Why does he say this? Do you agree?
6. On page 149, Pielke says, “The point is that he [Elvis] knew very well what he was doing, and we knew that he knew, and he knew that we knew that he knew. Ed Sullivan didn’t know and our parents didn’t know, but we didn’t care, and he didn’t care either, and we and he knew that too.” What does all of this mean?
7. Pielke argues that there was a “real” Elvis and a “symbolic” Elvis. What was the difference between the two? Why does Pielke find one more interesting than the other?
8. Why did parents prefer Pat Boone and teenagers prefer Elvis?
9. What was the difference between “Beats” and “Greasers?” Why did kids envy them and parents fear them? What role did the media play in popularizing these two “types?”
10. How did Elvis Presley “negate” accepted beliefs about race, sex, and the Protestant work ethic?