

**CHAPTER**  
**19**

**Section 2**

**GUIDED READING**

*The American Dream in the Fifties*

**A.** As you read this section, write notes about how Americans were affected by various trends of the 1950s.

Trends	Effects
1. Business expansion: conglomerates and franchises	
2. Suburban expansion: flight from the cities	
3. Population growth: the baby boom	
4. Dramatic increase in leisure time	
5. Dramatic increase in the use of the automobile	
6. The rise of consumerism	

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**B.** On the back of this paper, briefly explain **planned obsolescence**. Then tell how **Dr. Jonas Salk** affected American society in the 1950s.

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RETEACHING ACTIVITY *The American Dream  
in the Fifties*

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**Reading Comprehension**

The statements below are headlines that could have been written during the 1950s. In the space provided write several sentences that support each headline with specific details.

1. America Becomes Home to the Organization and Organization Man

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2. A New Suburban Lifestyle Takes Hold

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3. An Automobile Culture Emerges

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4. Consumerism Abounds in America

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**CHAPTER**  
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**GEOGRAPHY APPLICATION: HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTION**

*The Baby Boom*

**Section 2**

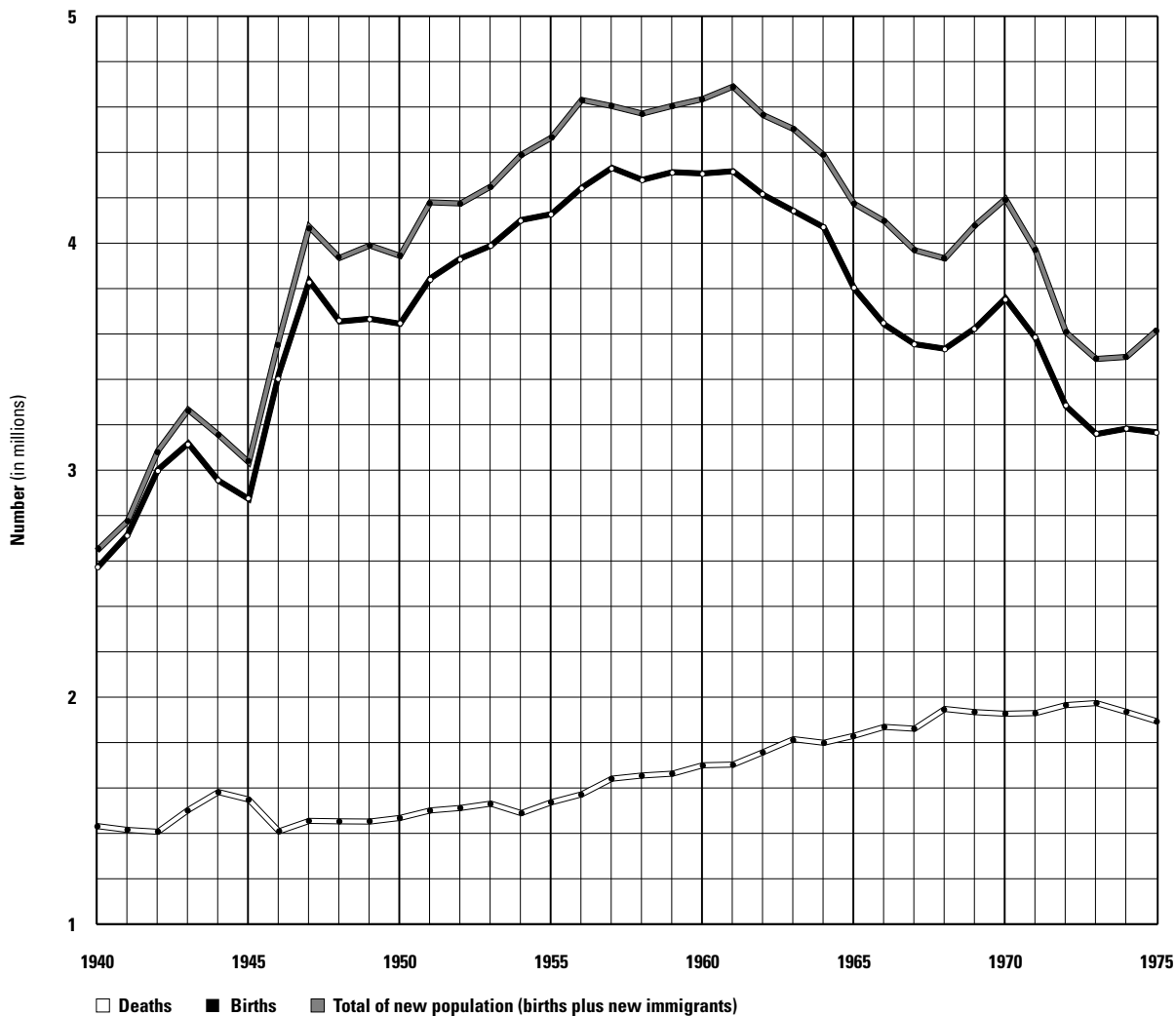
*Directions: Read the paragraphs below and study the graph carefully. Then answer the questions that follow.*

The term *baby boom* refers to the years 1946 to 1964 when the population of the United States soared due to a dramatic postwar increase in the annual birthrate. The birthrate had been declining fairly steadily for decades, falling below 20 births per 1,000 people for the first time in 1931. In 1941, however, the birthrate edged back up over 20 and stayed above that figure through 1964.

At the height of the baby boom, from 1954 to

1961, more than 4 million babies were born in the United States every year. Many women who might have stayed childless at other times decided to have children. One sociologist wrote about the “pro-child social values” that characterized the period: “Those who didn’t want children were an embarrassed and embattled minority. It [not having children] was almost evidence of a physical or mental deficiency.”

**The U.S. Baby Boom in Perspective, 1940–1975**



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**Interpreting Text and Visuals**

1. What happened to the number of births in the two years prior to 1946? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What was probably the major cause of the beginning of the baby boom? \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Look at the graph's 1959 totals. What does the 4.30 level indicate? \_\_\_\_\_

What does the level of 4.60 indicate? \_\_\_\_\_

What does the level of 1.66 indicate? \_\_\_\_\_

By how much did the U.S. population increase in that year? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Nearly 60,000 more people immigrated to the United States in 1965 than in 1964.

Why then does the top line in the graph dip down between those years? \_\_\_\_\_

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5. What is significant about the number of births in 1972? (Hint: Look at the number of births for the first year of the baby boom.) \_\_\_\_\_

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Why do you think 1964 is considered the final year of the baby boom? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. Contrast the patterns of births and deaths during the years 1940–1975. \_\_\_\_\_

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PRIMARY SOURCE *from The Organization Man*

*Through the “looking glass” of the typical suburban community of Park Forest, Illinois, William H. Whyte, Jr., examined 1950s beliefs and values. As you read this excerpt from Whyte’s study, think about his concept of the organization man.*

This book is about the organization man. If the term is vague, it is because I can think of no other way to describe the people I am talking about. They are not the workers, nor are they the white-collar people in the usual, clerk sense of the word. These people only work for The Organization. The ones I am talking about *belong* to it as well. They are the ones of our middle class who have left home, spiritually as well as physically, to take the vows of organization life, and it is they who are the mind and soul of our great self-perpetuating institutions. Only a few are top managers or ever will be. In a system that makes such hazy terminology as “junior executive” psychologically necessary, they are of the staff as much as the line, and most are destined to live poised in a middle area that still awaits satisfactory euphemism. . . .

The corporation man is the most conspicuous example, but he is only one, for the collectivization so visible in the corporation has affected almost every field of work. Blood brother to the business trainee off to join Du Pont is the seminary student who will end up in the church hierarchy, the doctor headed for the corporate clinic, the physics Ph.D. in a government laboratory, the intellectual on the foundation-sponsored team project, the engineering graduate in the huge drafting room at Lockheed, the young apprentice in a Wall Street law factory.

They are all, as they so often put it, in the same boat. Listen to them talk to each other over the front lawns of their suburbia and you cannot help but be struck by how well they grasp the common denominators which bind them. Whatever the differences in their organization ties, it is the common problems of collective work that dominate their attentions, and when the Du Pont man talks to the research chemist or the chemist to the army man, it is these problems that are uppermost. The word *collective* most of them can’t bring themselves to use—except to describe foreign countries or organizations they don’t work for—but they are keenly aware of how much more deeply beholden they are to organization than were their elders. They are wry about it, to be sure; they talk of the “treadmill,” the “rat race,” of the inability to control one’s direction. But they have no

great sense of plight; between themselves and organization they believe they see an ultimate harmony. . . .

[My concern in this book] is the principle impact that organization life has had on the individuals within it. A collision has been taking place—indeed, hundreds of thousands of them, and in the aggregate they have been producing what I believe is a major shift in American ideology.

Officially, we are a people who hold to the Protestant Ethic. . . . [T]here is almost always the thought that pursuit of individual salvation through hard work, thrift, and competitive struggle is the heart of the American achievement.

But the harsh facts of organization life simply do not jibe with these precepts. This conflict is certainly not a peculiarly American development. . . .

It is in America, however, that the contrast between the old ethic and current reality has been most apparent—and most poignant. Of all peoples it is we who have led in the public worship of individualism. . . . We kept on, and as late as the twenties, when big organization was long since a fact, affirmed the old faith as if nothing had really changed at all.

Today many still try, and it is the members of the kind of organization most responsible for the change, the corporation, who try the hardest. It is the corporation man [who] . . . honestly wants to believe he follows the tenets he extols, and if he extols them so frequently it is, perhaps, to shut out a nagging suspicion that he, too, the last defender of the faith, is no longer pure. Only by using the language of individualism to describe the collective can he stave off the thought that he himself is in a collective.

*from William H. Whyte, Jr., The Organization Man (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 3–5.*

## Discussion Questions

1. What characteristics defined an organization man?
2. What conflict does Whyte see between the American value of individualism and the fact of organization life?
3. Do you think the conflict Whyte identifies for the 1950s still exists today? Explain.

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LITERATURE SELECTION *from The Man in the Gray  
Flannel Suit* by Sloan Wilson

Section 2

*Tom Rath, the main character of this novel, married Betsy when he was 21 and then served as a paratrooper during World War II. After the war, the Raths settled down to life in a Connecticut suburb; Tom commutes to his job in Manhattan, while Betsy stays at home to raise their three children. As you read this excerpt, think about how the Raths feel about the pursuit of the American dream.*

By the time they had lived seven years in the little house on Greentree Avenue in Westport, Connecticut, they both detested it. There were many reasons, none of them logical, but all of them compelling. For one thing, the house had a kind of evil genius for displaying proof of their weaknesses and wiping out all traces of their strengths. The ragged lawn and weed-filled garden proclaimed to passers-by and the neighbors that Thomas R. Rath and his family disliked “working around the place” and couldn’t afford to pay someone else to do it. The interior of the house was even more vengeful. In the living room there was a big dent in the plaster near the floor, with a huge crack curving up from it in the shape of a question mark. That wall was damaged in the fall of 1952, when, after struggling for months to pay up the back bills, Tom came home one night to find that Betsy had bought a cut-glass vase for forty dollars. Such an extravagant gesture was utterly unlike her, at least since the war. Betsy was a conscientious household manager, and usually when she did something Tom didn’t like, they talked the matter over with careful reasonableness. But on that particular night, Tom was tired and worried because he himself had just spent seventy dollars on a new suit he felt he needed to dress properly for his business, and at the climax of a heated argument, he picked up the vase and heaved it against the wall. The heavy glass shattered, the plaster cracked, and two of the laths behind it broke. The next morning, Tom and Betsy worked together on their knees to patch the plaster, and they repainted the whole wall, but when the paint dried, the big dent near the floor with the crack curving up from it almost to the ceiling in the

*The crack remained as a perpetual reminder of Betsy’s moment of extravagance, Tom’s moment of violence, and their inability either to fix walls properly or to pay to have them fixed.*

shape of a question mark was still clearly visible. The fact that the crack was in the shape of a question mark did not seem symbolic to Tom and Betsy, nor even amusing—it was just annoying. Its peculiar shape caused people to stare at it abstractly, and once at a cocktail party one of the guests said, “Say, that’s funny. Did you ever notice that big question mark on your wall?”

“It’s only a crack,” Tom replied.

“But why should it be in the form of a question mark?”

“It’s just coincidence.”

“That’s funny,” the guest said. Tom and Betsy assured each other that someday they would have the whole wall replastered, but they never did. The crack remained as a perpetual reminder of Betsy’s moment of extravagance, Tom’s moment of violence, and their inability either to fix walls properly or to pay to have them fixed. It seemed ironic to Tom that the house should preserve a souvenir of such things, while allowing evenings of pleasure and kindness to slip by without a trace.

The crack in the living room was not the only reminder of the worst. An ink stain with hand

marks on the wallpaper in Janey’s room commemorated one of the few times Janey ever willfully destroyed property, and the only time Betsy ever lost her temper with her and struck her. Janey was five, and the middle one of the three Rath children. She did everything hard: she screamed when she cried, and when she was happy her small face seemed to hold for an instant all the joy in the world. Upon deciding that she wanted to play with ink, she carefully poured ink over both her hands and

made neat imprints on the wallpaper, from the floor to as high as she could reach. Betsy was so angry that she slapped both her hands, and Janey, feeling she had simply been interrupted in the midst of an artistic endeavor, lay on the bed for an hour sobbing and rubbing her hands in her eyes until her whole face was covered with ink. Feeling like a murderess, Betsy tried to comfort her, but even holding and rocking her didn't seem to help, and Betsy was shocked to find that the child was shuddering. When Tom came home that night he found mother and daughter asleep on the bed together, tightly locked in each other's arms. Both their faces were covered with ink. All this the wall remembered and recorded.

A thousand petty shabbinesses bore witness to the negligence of the Rathes. The front door had been scratched by a dog which had been run over the year before. The hot-water faucet in the bathroom dripped. Almost all the furniture needed to be refinished, reupholstered, or cleaned. And besides that, the house was too small, ugly, and almost precisely like the houses on all sides of it. The Rathes had bought the house in 1946, shortly after Tom had got out of the army and, at the suggestion of his grandmother, become an assistant to the director of the Schanenhauser Foundation, an organization which an elderly millionaire had established to help finance scientific research and the arts. They had told each other that they probably would be in the house only one or two years before they could afford something better. It took them five years to realize that the expense of raising three children was likely to increase as fast as Tom's salary at a charitable foundation. If Tom and Betsy had been entirely reasonable, this might have caused them to start painting the place like crazy, but it had the reverse effect. Without talking about it much, they both began to think of the house as a trap, and they no more enjoyed refurbishing it than a prisoner would delight in shining up the bars of his cell. Both of them were aware that their feelings about the house were not admirable.

"I don't know what's the matter with us," Betsy said one night. "Your job is plenty good enough. We've got three nice kids, and lots of people would be glad to have a house like this. We shouldn't be so *discontented* all the time."

"Of course we shouldn't!" Tom said.

Their words sounded hollow. It was curious to believe that that house with the crack in the form of a question mark on the wall and the ink stains on the wallpaper was probably the end of their personal road. It was impossible to believe. Somehow something would have to happen.

Tom thought about his house on that day early in June 1953, when a friend of his named Bill Hawthorne mentioned the possibility of a job at the United Broadcasting Corporation. Tom was having lunch with a group of acquaintances in The Golden Horseshoe, a small restaurant and bar near Rockefeller Center.

"I hear we've got a new spot opening up in our public-relations department," Bill who wrote promotion for United Broadcasting said. "I think any of you would be crazy to take it, mind you, but if you're interested, there it is. . . ."

Tom unfolded his long legs under the table and shifted his big body on his chair restlessly. "How much would it pay?" he asked casually.

"I don't know," Bill said. "Anywhere from eight to twelve thousand, I'd guess, according to how good a hold-up man you are. If you try for it, ask fifteen. I'd like to see somebody stick the bastards good."

It was fashionable that summer to be cynical about one's employers, and the promotion men were the most cynical of all.

"You can have it," Cliff Otis, a young copywriter for a large advertising agency, said. "I wouldn't want to get into a rat race like that."

Tom glanced into his glass and said nothing. Maybe I could get ten thousand a year, he thought. If I could do that, Betsy and I might be able to buy a better house.

***"I don't know what's the matter with us," Betsy said one night. . . . "We shouldn't be so discontented all the time."***

## Discussion Questions

1. What condition is the Rathes' house in?
2. What is their attitude toward the house after they have lived there for seven years?
3. Betsy Rath does not understand why they are not satisfied with what they have, why they are so discontented. What do you think is their problem?
4. Do you think the Rathes' problem is characteristic only of the post-World War II era, or is it characteristic of other times as well? Explain.



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**19**

LITERATURE SELECTION *from 1959*  
by Thulani Davis

Section 3

*Set in the South, 1959 is narrated by a 12-year-old African-American girl named Willie Tarrant. As you read this excerpt from the novel, pay attention to aspects of late '50s popular culture such as fashion, music, dances, and TV programs.*

That evening [my brother] Preston shined his loafers with the tassels, slapped on the Aqua Velva, left the collar button open on his shirt, and split before anyone could find out where he was headed. Naturally I had to wonder if he'd gone over to Ulysses Grant Street, yet I was inclined to dismiss the whole idea. It was obvious, first of all, that he was too young for Cassie. On the other hand, Preston was cute, in the pretty-boy way. But then he dressed like a college kid, not like the slick pretty boys with their high-waters, tight black socks, and close-cut hair with the part on the side. Jack Dempsey had been more like them, even though he wasn't skinny like most of the cool boys. They didn't go out for athletics—they went in for wine.

When he'd left, I went in his room to play some 45s. I laid the Elvis Presleys to the side—that was his stuff. I stuck pretty strictly to the old and fast ones. "I'm searchin' . . . searchin' every whiiiiitcha way . . ." Actually, Jack Dempsey had been really cool. It was obvious Cassie would have liked him, everybody did. She must be heartbroken. I'd seen him outside the high school, even in the paper. He had a *Quo Vadis* cut and wore a black leather over his varsity sweaters. And even though I thought Preston could be cool, he was still Preston, too nice to be really cool. He wasn't ever going to be really cool, just like I knew I wouldn't ever really be cool. Too straight. And as for me, there was just too much stuff I didn't know. I was always late on the pickup. . . .

Preston's record collection wasn't keeping up. He hadn't gotten my new song, "Personality." I could pull it out at the record store and take it in the booth and listen to it, but I almost never had money when I got to go down there. The Coasters and Chuck Willis would do. I practiced the stroll back and forth to "Betty and Dupree" in his room. Everybody had been doing the slop, but this new line dance was on TV, and now it was the thing. Black kids made the stroll look colored, better than on *Bandstand*. We put an easy rock on it, like a walk with a dip, casual—the same as we did with all the dances. . . .

Saturday was dedication day on WRAP—Rrrap Radio—and we had put the radios on in the living room and our bedrooms. The colored station was nonstop, rapid-fire jokes, plus a lot of commentary from the DJs on why they were great. On Sundays, though, we listened to the white stations because WRAP did church from can-do to can't. That involved a lot of dial flipping because the other stations only played r&b every tenth song. Every Sunday I counted to see if they would ever play more than two an hour, or even two an hour twice in a row.

Fat Freddie was running his mouth and reading out the plays. All the Busters and Judys and Cookies and Marvins were on the waves in love. Preston and I could never understand how come we never knew any of them. Of course, Preston maintained he was too cool to call in to a radio show. All the same, with all the Negro kids going to three schools, it seemed as though we should at least have *heard* of anybody calling in. Just how many colored kids were out there anyway? We made the old man keep it on in the car. If we did hear some familiar names, it would be something to talk about.

### Activity Options

1. Rewrite this passage, giving it a 21st-century twist. Use contemporary references to popular culture instead of references to 1950s clothes, music, dance, and so forth. Then read your passage aloud to classmates.
2. Listen to music by performers who were popular in the fifties, including Elvis Presley, the Coasters, and Chuck Willis. Discuss with your classmates some of the similarities and differences between '50s music and popular music today.
3. Find out how to do the stroll, the slop, or another dance that was popular in the 1950s and then demonstrate it for the class.