

History 2155A

The History of Celebrity

Fall 2026

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This is a **draft** outline, and is subject to change. If you have questions about the course or potential changes, please contact the instructor. The final version of the syllabus will be posted on the course website on OWL Brightspace.



Photos: (1) Charles Lindbergh standing beside his airplane with his mother, c. 1927 (Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-99816); (2) Secretary of War receives autographed balls and bats from Babe Ruth for citizens military training camps, 28 May 1929 (photo by Harris & Ewing; Library of Congress, LC-DIG-hec-35392); (3) Gangsters Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, 23 May 1934 (Library of Congress / <https://blogs.bu.edu/guidehistory>); (4) Michael Jackson's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Los Angeles, California, 2012 (photo by Carol M. Highsmith; Library of Congress, LC-DIG-highsm-22300); (5) Beatles press conference, Hotel Warwick, New York City, August 1965 (photo by Stanley Wolfson; Library of Congress, LC-DIG-ds-04102).

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Course Description

When did the concept of “celebrity” originate? Why do we choose to elevate certain individuals to celebrity status? How has celebrity culture changed over time?

Starting with an exploration of the meaning and origins of the concepts of “celebrity” and “fame” (and also “infamy”), we will examine the evolution of celebrity culture through different periods of history. How have our definitions of, and ideas about, celebrity changed? Why do they change? What does a society’s celebrity culture reveal about the time period and the people of that society? We will attempt to answer these questions by undertaking case studies of a wide selection of celebrities from various eras and representing various venues of celebrity, including the worlds of Hollywood, music, sports, business, politics, religion, crime, social media, and reality TV.

In this course, we will seek to determine how celebrities throughout history have reflect society’s collective values and needs, as well as its best aspirations and, sometimes, its darkest fantasies.

Course Syllabus

Learning Outcomes and Objectives

In this course, students will:

- Learn to think critically about modern celebrity culture and its significance by placing it within the context of the history of celebrity;
- Trace continuity and change in the evolution of celebrity culture throughout history;
- Study and compare celebrities from different time periods to determine how these individuals reflect their eras and their societies;
- Practice using both primary and secondary sources;
- Learn to synthesize lecture and reading material and demonstrate the ability to do so in a midterm and a final exam;
- Practice oral and written communication through class discussions and short writing assignments.

Expectations:

- Attendance at lectures.
- Completion of each week’s assigned readings before the start of class.
- Courtesy and respect towards all other members of the class.
- Be present! Put away cell phones and other electronic devices during class. Laptops may be used to take notes and to refer to course readings; they are NOT to be used for other purposes during class. Use of a cell phone in class may affect your participation grade.
- Academic integrity. This includes not using GenAI in this course.

Course Materials:

Weekly course readings will be provided online on the OWL course website, or will be accessible online through the Western Libraries website.

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Methods of Evaluation:

- Midterm exam (in class, October 29th) 30%
- Final exam (during the December exam period) 30%
- Attendance 10%
- Short in-class response papers and other written activities 30%

Exams:

There will be a 2-hour midterm exam that will be written in class on October 29th. It will consist of short answer and essay questions. Requests for a make-up midterm exam must be submitted through Academic Advising. SRAs may not be used.

There will be a 2-hour final exam that will take place during the December exam period. (Students are advised not to make travel plans or other commitments for December until the university publishes the exam schedule.) The final exam will be in the same format as the midterm exam, but will focus on material covered since the midterm.

Make-up tests, midterms, and exams can only be approved by Academic Advising. Please see https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for department procedures and requirements involving make-up tests and exams.

No electronic devices, books, notes, etc., will be permitted during the midterm and the final exam.

Attendance:

Attendance will be taken at each lecture. Students may miss two lectures without penalty. (If you must miss a lecture, make sure to get a copy of a classmate's lecture notes. Review the notes, complete the readings, and if you have any questions about the day's material, please see the instructor.)

In-class papers and activities:

Each class will include an in-class assignment or activity. These may be response papers, document analyses, group work, or other activities. Together, these assignments will constitute 30% of your final grade. In order to build in some flexibility in case of necessary absences from class, the two lowest grades earned on these assignments will not be counted.

Given this built-in flexibility, requests for further consideration will generally be denied.

Additional Statements

Communication policies:

The best way to contact me is by e-mail. (Please write "HIS 2155" or "Celebrity" as the subject line of your e-mail.) I may not be able to answer immediately, but I will do my very best to

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respond within 48 hours. You are welcome to chat with me before or after class, or to drop by my office during my office hours. You can also e-mail me to request a meeting at another time that is more convenient for you, or a meeting over Zoom.

I am available to answer your questions about the course, review your assignments with you, help you with study tips for the exams, etc.—or just to chat with you. I appreciate the opportunity to get to know you better!

Use of electronic devices:

Students may use laptops during class to access course readings and to take notes, but not for any other purposes. The use of other electronic devices (cell phones, audio or video recording devices, etc.) is not permitted during class. The use of a cell phone during class may negatively affect your participation mark.

No electronic devices are permitted during the midterm or final exam.

Use of generative artificial intelligence (AI):

The goals of this course include learning to think critically and creatively, to locate and evaluate historical sources, to use your analysis of these sources to formulate and support an argument, and to communicate your argument clearly and in your own words. The use of GenAI bypasses these important learning activities.

Therefore, you may not make use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in this course. Any use of such tools for any of the work in this course will be considered a form of academic misconduct and handled accordingly.

And finally...

Please review the Department of History's shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.