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Topics in Literature

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## American Literature and Composition: A Thematic Approach

### Course Overview:

This unit is designed for an 11<sup>th</sup> grade, college prep level American Literature and Composition course taught on a 4 x 4 block schedule.

### Thematic Overview:

The overarching theme for this semester study in American Literature is “The American Dream.” The objective of the course is to encourage students to explore and identify what defines “The American Dream”; in other words, students will explore, through a series of themes, American literature as it relates to their lives and their heritage. As they explore literature in the context of various themes, students will begin to examine their own identities, their own heritage, their own hopes and dreams, and their own views of what constitutes “The American Dream.” Students will gain insight into lives present and past as they explore the themes of Rebellion versus Conformity, Identity and the Inner Struggle, Loss of Innocence, Moral Struggle, and Equality and Independence. This 18-week study will be broken down into the following 3-week units (*3 weeks are reserved for semester intro, conclusion, library/research time, and for testing*):

#### I. Rebellion vs. Conformity

- *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller (play) [pp. 1233-1334]
- “Self Reliance” by Ralph Waldo Emerson (essay) [pp. 391-392]
- “Another Brick in the Wall” by Pink Floyd (song)
- from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau (excerpt) pp. 402-411
- *ANTZ* by DreamWorks (film clip)
- “Much Madness is Divinest Sense” by Emily Dickinson (poem)
- *Edward Scissorhands* (film clip)
- “anyone lived in a pretty how town” by E. E. Cummings (poem) [pg. 777]
- *Pleasantville* (film clip)
- “Speech in the Virginia Convention” by Patrick Henry (speech) [pg. 191]

#### II. Identity and The Inner Struggle

- *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry (play)
- “Complicated” by Avril Lavigne (song)
- “Mirror” by Sylvia Plath (poem) [pg 1180]
- “The Unknown Citizen” by W.H. Auden (poem) [pg. 779]
- “Upon the Burning of Our House” by Anne Bradstreet (poem)
- “A Noiseless Patient Spider” by Walt Whitman (poem) [pg. 445]
- “Everyday Use” by Alice Walker (story) [pp. 1056-1064]
- “Two Kinds” from *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan (story)
- “Where is Here?” by Joyce Carol Oates (story) [pp. 374-382]
- “Ambush” from *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien (story) [pp. 1222-1224]
- “Average Waves in Unprotected Waters” by Anne Tyler (story) [pp. 1028-1036]

### III. From Innocence to Reality (The American Dream/Nightmare)

- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (novel)
- "Richard Corey" by Edwin Arlington Robinson (poem) [pg. 668]
- "Out, Out—" by Robert Frost (poem) [pp. 888-889]
- "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe (poem) [pp. 326-330]
- "To Build a Fire" by Jack London (story) [pp. 608-622]
- from *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer (novel excerpt)
- "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" by Ambrose Bierce (story) [pp. 508-516]
- "The Far and the Near" by Thomas Wolfe (story) [pp. 786-790]
- "Mexico, Our Nearest Neighbor to the South" from *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros (novel excerpt)
- "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" by Mark Twain (story) [pp. 569-574]

### IV. Moral Struggle

- *The Natural* by Bernard Malamud (novel)
- from *Poor Richard's Almanack* by Benjamin Franklin [pp. 146-148]
- "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" by Jonathan Edwards (sermon) [pp. 108-112]
- "Rappaccini's Daughter" by Nathaniel Hawthorne (story)
- "The Devil and Tom Walker" by Washington Irving (story) [pp. 242-252]
- "The Black Cat" by Edgar Allan Poe (story)
- "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" by Flannery O'Connor (story) [pp. 972-982]

### V. Equality and Independence

- *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck (novel)
- "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin (story) [pp. 634-638]
- "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (story)
- "Prologue" by Anne Bradstreet (poem)
- "On the Pulse of Morning" by Maya Angelou (poem)
- "I Have a Dream" by Martin Luther King, Junior (speech)
- "I, Too" by Langston Hughes (poem) [pg 448]
- "My Bondage and My Freedom" by Frederick Douglass (slave narrative) [pp. 496-502]

### Narrative:

In a 1991 study, M. W. Smith set out to determine the cognitive differences between successful and less-successful readers. He used a think-aloud protocol to measure ten students' responses to two stories. Upon analyzing the students' oral responses, Smith discovered that successful readers are more likely to make connections with texts than are less-successful readers. What does this suggest, then, about the teaching of literature? Smith concludes that teachers must develop opportunities for students to make connections with the literature they read. A good place to start, he says, is to teach literature thematically. (pp. 263-271) Similarly, in his essay "New Directions in Research on Response to Literature," R. Beach explains, "research on intertextual linking suggests the

value of continually relating current texts to past texts so that students build a sense of their own histories as readers (1990, p. 70). Thus, in addition to giving my students the opportunity to relate personally to what they read, it is also important that I give students an opportunity to create text-to-text links while they read. Teaching literature thematically will allow me to do both.

This 18-week course in American Literature and Composition includes the following themes: Rebellion vs. Conformity, Identity and the Inner Struggle, From Innocence to Reality (or, The American Dream/Nightmare), Moral Struggle, and Equality and Independence. Not only do these themes work well to encompass all of the major literature selections I want to teach my students, but they also clearly apply to my students' lives. The overarching theme that encompasses each of these sub-themes is "The American Dream." I selected this theme because it provides a basis for exploring ideas like 1) What does it mean to be an American? 2) How did our ancestors define The American Dream? 3) How do we define the American Dream today? 4) What sacrifices have been made and what conflicts have occurred that define who we are as individuals and as a nation?

In a 1992 study, A.N. Applebee compared the literature studied in public, Catholic, and independent schools. The findings highlighted a lack of diversity in the texts students were reading in school (pp. 27-32). When making literature selections, I kept Applebee's study in mind, selecting authors and works that encompass a variety of genders and ethnicities. I also selected literature to which my students can relate. In a couple of instances, I pulled in outside texts to replace selections found in the student textbook; the subject matter and overall readability of my selections are better suited for the needs and ability levels of my students. In addition, I incorporated literature in areas the textbook neglects (mainly, Latin-American, Asian-American and women's literature).

Research suggests that teachers incorporate popular culture in the language arts classroom in order to bridge the gap between what students already know and what teachers want them to know (Evans, 2004; Vetrie, 2004). Thus, where appropriate, I have incorporated popular songs, films, and novel excerpts to draw on students' prior knowledge. Throughout the semester I will also encourage students to share song lyrics that they feel relate to any of the units of study. Students will then become actively involved in the connecting process. The purpose of these enrichment pieces is to make group discussions more comfortable for students by asking them to discuss something with which they are already familiar. The objective is to move from these simple texts to the more complex: "By showing the connection between a selected theme and specific lines in ... song lyrics, [students] engage in critical thinking about literature ... in much the same way they will when using quoted passages to support their assertions in academic writing about the literature we study" (Evans, 2004, p. 33).

Because the state requires that I teach my students the characteristics of each of the major American literary periods, I had to be creative in coming up with a plan to approach the literature thematically but also to teach the literature within the context of the literary periods. What I have decided to do is to give my students a historical overview of American literature at the beginning of the semester. I will put a timeline on the wall in my classroom, and each time we read a selection, I will have my students place the title of the work and the author's name where it belongs on the timeline. As we study the literature in each thematic unit, we can talk about why these authors addressed the same themes at different times in history. I might ask my students to consider, for example, what Emerson, a Transcendentalist, would have said to Tituba or to Reverend Parris in *The Crucible*. Would he have spoken up against the court in Salem for condemning supposed witches (town outcasts)? Every six weeks my students will complete a one to two page writing

assignment in which they will compare and contrast two works of literature from two different periods. Essays, for example, might contrast works of Puritanism and the age of reason, or they might compare works of the Puritans and the Dark Romantics. Rather than tell my students what their topics for writing are, I will provide guidance but will allow them to decide which works they want to compare or contrast. This way I am encouraging higher-level thinking skills, requiring students to synthesize and analyze on their own.

The first three-week unit I will teach explores the theme of rebellion versus conformity. The main selection in this unit that ties the works together is Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. I will use Jerome Evans's idea, beginning the unit with a song like Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall," setting the tone for a unit study on organized society and how it can both enhance and inhibit our personalities and our freedoms (2004, p. 32). Other works I will use to explore the theme of rebellion versus conformity include Thoreau's *Walden*, paired with a clip from the film *ANTZ*; Emerson's "Self-Reliance;" Dickinson's "Much Madness is Divinest Sense," paired with a video clip from *Edward Scissorhands*, and E. E. Cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town," paired with a video clip from the movie *Pleasantville*. As students read *The Crucible*, I will employ various reading strategies from Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis's *Strategies that Work*. In addition, students will meet in literature circles to analyze and discuss the play. Students will respond to film clips and poems in reader response journals and in class discussions based on the questioning strategies outlined in Aiden Chambers's *Tell Me: Children Reading and Talk*. Through the course of the unit students will research how Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, and Miller were ostracized by many of their contemporaries. I will encourage students to make personal connections by asking them to remember times when they were considered different and mistreated—or times when they mistreated others for being different. I will also ask them when they went along with the crowd just to

be accepted. When did they stand up for themselves and do something different? How were they treated as a result? Students can respond to such questions in their reader response journals. As we conclude the unit, hopefully students will connect the societies in *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Giver*, and *The Truman Show* to the ones exhibited in the new texts they read.

The second three-week unit explores the theme of identity and the inner struggle. To introduce the unit I will read the children's story "Hope for the Flowers" by Trina Paulus (the story of Yellow and Stripe, two caterpillars who become butterflies), setting the tone for a study on purpose, self-discovery, and the internal conflicts that arise as we struggle to define our identities. We will also listen to Avril Lavigne's "Complicated." The main piece in this unit is Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which students will view.

Supplementary texts include Sylvia Plath's "Mirror," W.H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen," Anne Bradstreet's "Upon the Burning of Our House," Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider," Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," Amy Tan's "Two Kinds" from *The Joy Luck Club*, Joyce Carol Oates's "Where is Here?," Anne Tyler's "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters," and Tim O'Brien's "Ambush" from *The Things They Carried*. Each of these poems and short stories deals specifically with identity and internal conflict. I chose these works because they provide a wide array of identity struggles—from Puritan mother to Asian-American daughter. Because identity is an issue my students struggle with daily, I think these works will provide them with many opportunities for making personal connections. I will employ the same strategies cited above for teaching the literature in this unit. The primary instructional strategy for *A Raisin in the Sun*, "Everyday Use," and "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters" will be literature circles. For the other works I will use a mixture of guided class discussion, reader response journals, and graphic organizers from Jim Burke's *Tools for Thought*. Students will use post-it notes to make personal and text-

to-text connections while they read. The purpose of this thematic study is to continue students' understanding of rebellion versus conformity by exploring the various components of an individual's identity.

Some of the literature outlined in these units will be read in class, and some will be read at home. I will assess student reading by asking them to participate in literature circles, asking them to write a personal response to a work, or by asking them to use sticky-notes while they read. At the end of each unit students will be given a test over the literature, and they will be asked to complete a project that has to do with the unit theme.

Three days a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday) my students will have 15-20 minutes of sustained silent reading time at the end of the class period. They will read novels of their choice, and they will be asked to present an alternative book report once during the semester. Students will also be asked to keep a reading log throughout the course of the semester to keep track of what they read during SSR time as well as at home. The purpose of this scheduled in-class reading time is to help students discover that reading can be fun.

## American Literature and Composition QCC's:

- **Standard 28 Reading/Literature:** Recognizes different purposes and methods of writing; identifies a writer's tone and point of view.
  - ✓ Teacher will use "tell me" questions from Aidan Chambers's *Tell Me: Children Reading and Talk* (How does this story make you feel? Whose story is this? How do you know?).
  - ✓ Students will be asked to compare and contrast works in essay format according to tone and message.
- **Standard 29 Reading/Literature:** Reads, discusses, and analyzes American literature representing diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity).
  - ✓ Students will explore diversity in each thematic unit, especially in rebellion vs. conformity, identity and the inner struggle, and equality and independence units.
  - ✓ Selections purposefully encompass a wide range of author and character backgrounds (e.g., European-American, African-American, Latino-American, Asian-American, Native-American, women's literature, etc.).
  - ✓ Additions to traditional text have been made where necessary.
- **Standard 30 Reading/Literature:** Writes and speaks critically about literature.
  - ✓ Students will be asked to compare and contrast works in essay format according to tone and message.
  - ✓ Students will respond to selections in reader response journals, small group discussions, and large group discussions.
  - ✓ Students will be encouraged to make personal and intertextual connections to the literature they read, encouraging higher levels of interpretation of texts.
  - ✓ Students will read and create their own questions about the text.
- **Standard 31 Reading/Literature:** Applies knowledge of literary terms to works of literature.
  - ✓ Literary terms will be taught in context of the literature (e.g., study repetition and alliteration while reading "The Raven").
  - ✓ Students will examine theme with each work.
  - ✓ Students will examine setting, characters, plot, etc. in literature circles.
- **Standard 32 Reading/Literature:** Develops an understanding of the effect of history on American literature (e.g., literary movements and periods).
  - ✓ Teacher will give overview of literary movements and periods at beginning of semester.
  - ✓ Students will determine the historical context of each work.
  - ✓ Students will identify period characteristics in the literature.
  - ✓ Students will compare and contrast works from different periods.
- **Standard 33 Reading/Literature:** Understands major cultural, religious, philosophical, and political influence on the literature of a given period or culture.
  - ✓ Teacher will give overview of literary movements and periods at beginning of semester.
  - ✓ Students will determine the historical context of each work.
  - ✓ Students will identify period characteristics in the literature.
  - ✓ Students will compare and contrast works from different periods.

**11<sup>th</sup> Grade American Literature and Composition**  
**Semester Theme: The American Dream**  
**Sub-themes: Rebellion vs. Conformity & Identity and the Inner Struggle**

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
w e e k  1	Intro: Pink Floyd "Another Brick in the Wall"  Movie clip: ANTZ; RRJ  <b>SSR</b>  HW: <i>from</i> Walden	Lit. Circle: Walden  Read "Self-Reliance" aloud; letter to Emerson	<i>Crucible</i> Act I using sticky notes  <b>SSR</b>  HW: prepare part for literature circle	Read <i>Crucible</i> Act II using sticky notes    HW: prepare part for literature circle	Lit. Circle <i>Crucible</i> Acts I & II  View: <i>Crucible</i> Act III; RRJ  <b>SSR</b>
w e e k  2	View <i>Crucible</i> Act IV; RRJ  <b>SSR</b>  HW: prepare part for literature circle	Lit. Circle <i>Crucible</i> Acts III & IV  Class discussion: Emerson and <i>The Crucible</i>  Assign project	Video Clip: <i>Edward Scissorhands</i> & RRJ  Dickinson's "Much Madness is Divinest Sense" Group Discussion  <b>SSR</b>	Video Clip: <i>Pleasantville</i> & RRJ  E. E. Cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town" think, pair, share  Work on unit projects	Creative writing activity: a story that depicts life in a town like the one Cummings describes in his poem  Work on unit projects  <b>SSR</b>
w e e k  3	Patrick Henry's "Speech in the Virginia Convention"  <b>SSR</b>  HW: literary period connection: Age of Reason	Intro to persuasion  Explore persuasive techniques in Henry's speech  Select essay topic based on rebellion vs. con-formity	Persuasive essay outline & body  Work on unit projects  <b>SSR</b>  HW: finish essay body	Persuasive essay intro & conclusion  Unit project due   HW: study for test	Essay test on rebellion vs. conformity    <b>SSR</b>
w e e k  4	Intro: Avril Lavigne's "Complicated"  Story: "Hope for the Flowers"  <b>SSR</b> HW: read "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters"	Lit. Circle: Tyler's "Average Waves in Unprotected Waters"  RRJ: internal conflict & making difficult choices  Assign unit projects	View: <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Act I & RRJ  <b>SSR</b>  HW: prepare part for literature circle	View: <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Act II & RRJ    HW: prepare part for literature circle	Lit. Circle <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Acts I & II  Read aloud Amy Tan's "Two Kinds"; RRJ: compare & contrast main character w/ Beneatha  <b>SSR</b>
w e e k  5	View: <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Act III & RRJ  <b>SSR</b>  HW: prepare part for literature circle	View: <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Act IV & RRJ    HW: prepare part for literature circle	Lit. Circle <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> Acts III & IV  Making connections: mother in previous story & Ruth; Walter Lee & "The Unknown Citizen"  <b>SSR</b>	Sylvia Plath's "Mirror" & "Ambush" RRJ: How do these two characters struggle with their identities?  Work on unit projects  HW: read "Everyday Use"	Lit Circle: "Everyday Use"  Work on unit projects  <b>SSR</b>
w e e k  6	Oates's "Where is Here?" w/ sticky notes  Creative writing activity: tell the story behind the stranger (what happened there?)  <b>SSR</b>	Bradstreet's "Upon the Burning of Our House" & internal conflict  Work on unit project  HW: literary period connection: Puritanism	Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider"  Work on unit projects  <b>SSR</b>	Essay: select two works & explain how each illustrates the themes of identity and internal conflict  Unit project due  HW: study for test	Essay test on search for identity and internal conflict    <b>SSR</b>

## References

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This study compares quadratic equations sections of Korean and American textbooks. The number of topics, contents and mathematics items were analyzed. The results show Korean students learn some topics relatively earlier than American students. This result could indicate that textbooks might not be the reason for American and Korean students' performances in international comparative studies. More studies analyzing other standards based textbooks and teaching practice might be needed to have further understanding of mathematics education in two countries. Teachers in semester schools were likely to report use of a greater variety of instructional materials. American literature, the body of written works produced in the English language in the United States. External Websites. Annenberg Learner - What is American Literature? An Overview. PBS LearningMedia - Harlem in the 1920s. Britannica Websites. Articles from Britannica Encyclopedias for elementary and high school students. American literature - Children's Encyclopedia (Ages 8-11). American literature - Student Encyclopedia (Ages 11 and up). What are the periods of American literature? American literature is often divided into five major periods A block schedule consists of three or four daily longer periods. Widely used forms of block scheduling are the alternate-day schedule (A/B schedule), the 4/4 semester plan, and the trimester plan. The alternate-day schedule (A/B schedule) is typically 90 minutes long and students and teachers meet every-other-day rather than meeting every day for shorter periods of time. The Plano ISD elected to participate in the A/B alternate-day schedule format. Sample A/ B Schedule. (week 2 is the opposite of week 1). In the 4/4 semester plan students complete four "yearlong" courses that meet for about 90 minutes every day during a 90-day semester. Many charter schools follow this format. The table below represents a sample 4/4 block schedule. 4/4 Semester Plan.