Major themes in American Literature

- American individualism
  - Also known as the self-made man
  - Celebration of ambition and achievement
  - Original colonists came for religious freedom
  - Later colonists came looking to make their fortune with opportunities not available in class-based European societies.
Major themes in American Literature

- **The American Dream**
  - Closely linked to American individualism
  - The idea that anyone can become whatever he or she wants to become through hard work, determination, and perseverance
Major themes in American Literature

- **Cultural diversity**
  - A society that *welcomes legal immigrants* of diverse backgrounds
    - **The melting pot theory**—Immigrants assimilate into our culture and become Americans
    - **The salad bowl theory**—Immigrants retain their separate identities while making up part of the whole and adopt a hyphenated American name (Chinese-Americans, for example)
Major themes in American Literature

○ **Tolerance**
  ○ *Religious tolerance* was one of the first principles in American life.
  ○ More recent issues have included race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.
The Native American Period
(pre-1620)
Native American Period (pre-1620)

- **Oral tradition** of song and stories
  - Original authors unknown
  - Written accounts come after colonization
  - **Includes**: creation stories, myths, totems
  - **Archetypes**: trickster and conjurer

- Focuses on:
  - The natural world as sacred
  - Importance of land and place
Native American Period (pre-1620)

○ **Myth** – an anonymous oral story
  ○ Relies on the supernatural to explore a natural phenomenon, human behavior, or mystery
  ○ Explain why the world is the way it is/they help make sense of the world
Native American Period (pre-1620)

- Notable Works:
  - “The Earth on the Turtle’s Back”
  - “When Grizzlies Walked Upright”
  - “Grandmother Spider Steals the Sun”
  - “Creation by Women”
The Colonial Period
(1620-1750)
Historical Context

Colonial Period
(1620-1750)

- When colonists arrived in the new land, they created villages and towns and established new governments (while protesting the old ways in Europe)
  - French, Swedes, Dutch, German, Scots-Irish, Spanish, Africans (mostly slaves)

- Did not consider themselves “Americans” until mid-1700s

- Enormous displacement of Native-American civilizations
Colonial Period (1620-1750)

- Literature of the period was dominated by the **Puritans** and their religious influence
  - Emphasis on faith in one’s daily life
    - **Predestination** - A person’s fate is determined by God
    - **Original Sin** - All are corrupt and need a Savior
    - **Puritan work ethic** — belief in hard work and simple, no frills living
  - **Theocracy** — government ruled by Bible/church
Colonial Period (1620-1750)

Types of Writing
- Sermons
- Diaries
- Personal Narratives

Writing Style
- Writing is Utilitarian
  - not professional writers
- Writing in instructive
- Puritan Plain Style
  - Simple and direct
Colonial Period (1620-1750)

- Representative Authors:
  - William Bradford (journal)
  - Anne Bradstreet (poetry)
  - Jonathan Edwards (sermon)
  - Mary Rowlandson (captivity narrative)
  - Phillis Wheatley (poetry)
  - Olaudah Equiano (slave narrative)

Though not written during Puritan times, *The Crucible* by Author Miller & *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne depict life during the time when Puritan theocracy prevailed.
Colonial Period
(1620-1750)
Colonial Period
(1620-1750)
Revolutionary Period

(1750-1815)
Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)

- Occurred during/after the Revolutionary War
- Writers focused on explaining and justifying the American Revolution
- Writers pondered *what it really means to be an American*
- After the War of 1812 (when last British troops were removed from North America) there was an even greater focus on nationalism, patriotism, and American Identity
Revolutionary Period
(1750-1815)

- Emphasis on **reason** as opposed to faith alone; this was a **reaction to the Puritan way of life**

- Shift to a more print-based culture; **literacy** seen as a **sign of status**

- Instructive in values, **highly ornate writing style**; highly political and **patriotic**
Revolutionary Period
(1750-1815)

- Representative authors:
  - Benjamin Franklin (biography, common sense aphorisms)
  - Patrick Henry (speech)
  - Thomas Paine (pamphlet)
  - Thomas Jefferson (political documents)
  - Abigail Adams (letters)
Revolutionary Period (1750-1815)
Revolutionary Period
(1750-1815)
Romanticism
(1800-1865)
Romanticism
(1800-1865)

○ A reaction to the previous decades in which reason and rational thought dominated

○ Period of invention, Manifest Destiny, abolition movement, and the “birth” of truly American Literature

○ Growth of urban population in Northeast

○ Growth of newspapers, lectures, debates

○ Revolution in transportation and science

○ Industrial revolution made “old ways” of doing things irrelevant
Romanticism (1800-1865)

- Writers celebrated:
  - Individualism
  - Nature
  - Imagination
  - Creativity
  - Emotions

- Types of writing:
  - Short Stories
  - Novels
  - Poetry

- Interest in **fantasy** and **supernatural**

- Writing can be interpreted two ways—surface and depth
  - Good triumphs over evil
  - Imagination over reason
  - Intuition over fact
Romanticism
(1800-1865)

Early Romantics

Authors began the tradition of creating imaginative literature that was distinctly American

Authors

- Washington Irving (folktales)
- William Cullen Bryant (poetry)
- James Fenimore Cooper (novels)
Romanticism (1800-1865)

Fireside Poets
- The most popular poets of the time were read in the home by the fireside
- Poetry contained strong family values and patriotism
- Taught in elementary schools for memorization

Poets
- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
- Oliver Wendell Holmes
- James Russell Lowell
- John Greanleaf Whittier
Romanism
(1800-1865)

Transcendentalists

- Hippies of the Romanticism
- Belief that man’s nature is inherently good; “divine spark” or “inner light”
- Man and society are perfectible (utopia)
- Stress individualism, self-reliance, intuition

Important Authors

- Ralph Waldo Emerson (essays, poetry)
- Henry David Thoreau (essays)
Romanticism (1800-1865)

Dark Romantics

- AKA—Gothic or Anti-Transcendentalism
- Man’s nature is inherently evil
- Use of supernatural
- Strong use of symbolism
- Dark landscapes, depressed characters

Poets

- Nathaniel Hawthorne (novels, short stories)
- Herman Melville (novels, short stories, poetry)
- Edgar Allan Poe (short stories, poetry, literary criticism)
Romanticism
(1800-1865)
Realism

(1850-1900)
Realism (1850-1900)

- The **Realistic Period** includes the Civil War, significant industrial inventions, and extensive westward expansion.
- Rejection of **Romantic view of life as too idealistic**.
- Writers write about **real-life issues** and complex events of the time rather than idealized people or places.
- **Objective narrator**
Realism
(1850-1900)

- Realistic authors convey the reality of life, however harsh
  - Characters reflect ordinary people in everyday life: determined yet flawed, struggling to overcome the difficulties of war, family, natural disasters, and human weaknesses

- Good doesn’t always triumph over evil

- Nature is a powerful force beyond man’s control

- Racism persisted beyond slavery—Reconstruction, Jim Crow, KKK, etc.
Realism
(1850-1900)

**Transitional Writers**
- Transition from Romanticism to Realism
- Express Transcendental ideas in poetry, **with realistic detail**
- Experimented with **new poetic techniques** such as **free verse** and **slant rhyme**

**Authors**
- Walt Whitman (poetry)
- Emily Dickinson (poetry)
Realism
(1850-1900)

Civil War Writers
- Primarily concerned with:
  - The war
  - Slavery
  - Women’s suffrage (right to vote)

Authors
- Abraham Lincoln
- Robert E. Lee
- Mary Chesnut
- Sojourner Truth
- Harriet Beecher Stowe
- Frederick Douglass
Realism (1850-1900)

Local Color Writers (Regionalists)

- Focused on a particular region of the country
  - Seeking to represent accurately the culture and beliefs of that area

- Emphasized:
  - Physical landscape
  - Habits
  - Occupations
  - Speech (dialect) of the area’s people

Authors

- Mark Twain (Mississippi River valley)

- Kate Chopin (the South, particularly Louisiana)

- Willa Cather (the Midwest, particularly Nebraska)
Naturalism
(1880-1940)
Realism turned to **Naturalism** when literary writers were exposed to the views of three scientific/political works:

- **Charles Darwin**—biological determinism
- **Sigmund Freud**—psychological determinism
- **Karl Marx**—socio-economic determinism

**Determinism**—the belief that humans cannot be held morally responsible for their actions due to circumstances beyond their control.
Naturalism (1880-1940)

- Focused on grim reality
- Observed characters like scientists observe lab animals
- Viewed nature and the universe as indifferent, even hostile, to man
  - Universe is godless, cold, and indifferent
- Life is meaningless
- Fate = Chance (no free will)
- Characters are helpless victims—trapped by nature, the environment, or their own heritage
Naturalism (1880-1940)

- **Jack London** (novels, short stories)
- **Stephen Crane** (novels, short stories, poetry)
- **Edwin Arlington Robinson** (poetry)
- **Ambrose Bierce** (short stories)
Modernism
(1900-1950)
Modernism (1900-1950)

- Writers affected by:
  - World War I, World War II, fear of communism, beginning of the Cold War
  - Roaring 20s, the Great Depression, commercialism
  - Increased population from immigration
  - Lingering racial tensions
  - Technological changes
  - Fear of eroding traditions
Modernism
(1900-1950)

Modern writers are known for:
- Themes of **alienation** and **disconnectedness**
- Frequent use of **irony** and **understatement**
- Experimentation with new literary techniques in fiction and poetry
  - **Stream of consciousness**
  - **Interior dialogue**
  - **Fragments**
- Creating a unique style
- Rise of **ethnic female** writers
Modernism (1900-1950)

**The Lost Generation**
- A group of writers who chose to live in Paris after WWI
- Themes of alienation and change
- Confronted people’s fears, despair, and disillusionment

**Writers**
- T.S. Eliot (poetry)
- F. Scott Fitzgerald (fiction)
- Ernest Hemingway (fiction)
Modernism (1900-1950)

Harlem Renaissance
- Flourishing of African-American authors
- Included music and art
- Two goals:
  - Write about African-American experience
  - Create literature by African-Americans that could rival anything created by anyone else

Writers
- Langston Hughes (poetry)
- Zora Neale Hurston (fiction)
- Claude McKay (poetry)
Modernism  
(1900-1950)

Southern Renaissance
- Follow in the footsteps of earlier local color writers, in that they focus on the South

Writers
- Margaret Mitchell
- William Faulkner
- Flannery O’Connor
Modernism (1900-1950)

Traditional Poets
- Carl Sandburg
- Robert Frost

Experimental Poets
- e.e. cummings

Modern dramatists
- Arthur Miller
- Tennessee Williams
Postmodernism
(1950-present)
Postmodernism (1950-present)

- unprecedented prosperity
- global conflict
  - Korean War, Vietnam War, the end of the Cold War, the rise of terrorism, Gulf War, 9/11, Iraqi War. War in Afghanistan
- social protest
  - the civil rights movement, the women’s rights movement, the gay rights movement
- mass culture and consumerism; media saturation
- rise of technology and space exploration
- the digital revolution
Postmodernism (1950-present)

- **Eclectic** — a collection of a little bit of everything
- Create traditional works without traditional structure
- **Address social issues** related to gender/race/youthful rebellion
- Questions **traditional values**
- Often **critical** and **ironic**
- No heroes/anti-heroes are common
- Detached, unemotional
- Individuals are **isolated**
Postmodernism (1950-present)

The Beat Poets
○ Pre-hippies, highly intellectual, exuberant language and behavior
  ○ Jack Kerouac
  ○ William S. Burroughs
  ○ Allen Ginsberg

Confessional Poets
○ Used anguish of their own lives to reveal hidden despair
  ○ Sylvia Plath
  ○ Anne Sexton
  ○ Robert Lowell
Postmodernism (1950-present)

**American Authors**
- J.D. Salinger
- James Thurber
- John Updike
- Truman Capote
- Stephen King
- Joyce Carol Oates

**Multicultural Literature**
- **Jewish**
  - Elie Wiesel
- **African-American**
  - Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker
- **Latino-American**
  - Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros
- **Asian-American**
  - Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston