The aim of this course is to provide you with an overview of the ways in which the notion of “America” and the concept of American citizenship were constantly being formulated and reformulated within the nation’s literature, from the earliest moments of the founding of the new nation to the late nineteenth century. Starting with the basic hypothesis that much of early American literature revolves around the drama of an individual who transgresses authority, we will attempt to understand how American literature reflects an on-going process whereby state authority is both critiqued and affirmed for reading audiences. Tales of Indian captivity; sentimental tales about the perils of passion and desire in the post-revolutionary era; gothic stories about murder and the supernatural; dramatic romances about adultery and slave revolt; post-Civil War texts about greed and biological determinism—these and other types of stories will give us a chance to see a culture telling itself a story about itself. We will have to decide as a class how to define the ultimate the exact nature of that story, but suffice it to say that it is one which in which individual passion, desire and pleasure are on a collision course with guilt, shame and discipline to form the unique and often perverse “American” selfhood evolving under the experiment known as democracy.

Required Texts:
- Hannah Webster Foster, The Coquette
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter
- Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
- Mark Twain, Pudd’nhead Wilson
- Frank Norris, McTeague
- Edgar Allan Poe, The Fall of the House of Usher and other Writings