

# COURSE OUTLINE

## 1. **Course Number and Title:** Lit4402, American History Through Literature

Prerequisites: None

Credits: 3 hours

**2. Course Description:** This course proposes to view American history from an unconventional perspective. It invites students to abandon both the sequences of trivia and the dictates of ideology that have deadened and distorted our understanding of the American past. Instead, it regards American history as a drama (rather than as a simple morality play) of enormous consequence in which all the great questions of human life have been debated, fought over, decided, and revised.

To facilitate this vision and explore these questions, students will not read historians, but eighteenth- and nineteenth-American novels, supplemented by key primary documents, which reflect on such perennial themes as democracy and equality, order and individuality, the frontier and civilization, nature and religion, slavery and freedom.

As American writers reviewed the American past and witnessed the expansion of a prosperous civilization across the continent, they recognized the deep divisions and hidden tensions that threatened the nation's destruction. Americans, they believed, would inevitably lose their sense of innocent confidence and, like their European forebears, suffer the ravages of history from which they had tried to escape. Americans were not, after all, immune from the human condition.

**3. Course Goals:** Students will acquire new insights into classic American literature from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. These readings will inform and deepen the student's understanding of the American experience. In evaluating that perspective, students will hone their ability to read, think, and write critically and analytically.

**4. Course Learning Outcomes** Students will demonstrate their understanding of the subject by being able to do the following:

1. Describe and evaluate Hawthorne's commentary in *The Scarlet Letter* on the role of religious belief and social convention in achieving a balance between the demands of order and the desire for individual freedom;
2. Analyze the dilemma that arose in the early republic from the effort to cultivate civic virtue while also ensuring individual freedom as explored in Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntley*;
3. Compare and contrast the Puritan mission to create and maintain a life worthy

- of their abode in the “New Jerusalem” with the 19th-century communitarian experiments in Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance*. Contemplate the restless freedom that many have attributed to Americans, as well as to evaluate the American quest for change, reform, and progress.
4. Examine the tension James Fenimore Cooper’s *Deerslayer* between how Americans must live in an actual rather than a mythic America, and what that has meant, and still means, for American ideals and values, particularly the spread of civilization, the conquest of nature, the domestication of the frontier, and the meaning of progress.
  5. Explicate the role that Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* plays in combining the threads of American history. In particular, students will be able to identify how the regional clash of worldviews created different interpretations of a common history and heritage, and thus attributed different meanings to such ideas as freedom, order, progress, and humanity. Students will also confront the painful legacy of slavery and race and explore Twain’s vision of Europe and America.

## 5. Course Concepts

### Freedom, Order, & Religion

- The Puritans, Massachusetts Bay Colony; John Winthrop; Michael Wigglesworth; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*;

### The Republican Dilemma

- James Madison; Nathaniel Hawthorne; Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntley*;

### Progress and Reform

- Communitarian impulse; millennialism; individual and social perfectibility; transcendentalism; Utopian communities;
- Robert Owen: New Harmony;
- Adin Ballou: Hopedale;
- George Ripley: Brook Farm, Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*;
- John Humphrey Noyes: Oneida Community;

### The Frontier, Civilization, and Progress

- The westward movement; Thomas Jefferson, Louisiana Territory;
- Frederick Jackson Turner, “*The Significance of the Frontier in American History*”; frontier thesis; the impact of the closing of the frontier: James Fenimore Cooper, *The Deerslayer*;

### Race, Slavery, Freedom, & The Meaning of American History

- Old South/New South; displacement of history by memory; Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*;
- Sectional Conflict; Slavery; Civil War

**7. Required Texts:** These are all classics, which you can access online for free or purchase with the scholarship that most interests you. You are not required to buy any particular edition.

Brown, Charles Brockden. *Edgar Huntly*. Digireads.com.2007.

ISBN-13: 978-1420928969. \$10.99

Or, online at

[http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=K4qjw4vyTIEC&dq=Brown,+Charles+Brockden&printsec=frontcover&source=bll&ots=8hJHUUJCH9P&sig=T-7T8TUh9t5wHdAg3pWIGtd\\_2M8&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&resnum=12&ct=result-PPA3,M1](http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&id=K4qjw4vyTIEC&dq=Brown,+Charles+Brockden&printsec=frontcover&source=bll&ots=8hJHUUJCH9P&sig=T-7T8TUh9t5wHdAg3pWIGtd_2M8&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=12&ct=result-PPA3,M1)

Cooper, James Fenimore, *The Deerslayer* (Barnes & Noble, 2005) ISBN: 13:978-1-59308-211-6. \$9.36

<http://www.online-literature.com/cooperj/the-deerslayer>

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Blithedale Romance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. ISBN-10: 0192836978. \$17.99

Or, online at

<http://www.online-literature.com/hawthorne/>

Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Bantam Classics, 1981.

ISBN 10:0553210092. \$1.99

Or, online at

<http://www.online-literature.com/hawthorne/>

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2002. ISBN-10: 0140390464. \$11.64

Or, online at

<http://etext.virginia.edu/twain/huckfinn.html>

### **Recommended Texts**

See Bibliography in "Resources" in Izio