



**Instructor:** Ira Wells

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**Course Number:** ENG250Y5Y

**Course Title:** American Literature

**Course description:** “The American community,” according to one cultural historian, “had a beginning at a particular moment in history, in contrast with traditional communities that, far from having a precise historical origin, rose out of the bottomless darkness of time.” America, in other words, is not only a nation but a conscious undertaking—a political, economic, and cultural construction. It is also a *literary* construction, one based on written texts available to all and open to revision. Starting with Puritan sermons and ending with Junot Diaz’s postmodern novel about a lovable “ghetto nerd,” we will familiarize ourselves with the major writers, literary movements, and critical debates in American letters. We will pay particular attention to recurring symbols (such as the frontier), character types (such as the “American Adam” and the “frontiersman”), and mythologies (such as Algerian “self-made man”), in works from a wide range of genres and periods. Our encounters with these authors will reveal illuminating reciprocities not only between their literary works, but between literary and cultural events: in other words, “America” is not the safe contextual background for these works, but a rhetorical battleground of internally contending ideas and values.

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**Required Reading:**

Texts likely to include: John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity”; William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*; Thomas Morton, “New English Canaan”; Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”; *The Declaration of Independence*; Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*; Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” and *Nature*; Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*; Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*; Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*; F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*; Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*; Edward Albee, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*; Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*; Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. We will also examine poetry by Anne Bradstreet, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, Amiri Baraka, and John Ashbery.

**First Three Texts/Authors to be Studied:** Winthrop, Bradford, Morton.

**Method of Instruction:** Lecture / Discussion

**Method of Evaluation:** Two essays, mid-term test, class participation, final exam.