Nineteenth-century American literature is marked by a quest for social justice and personal liberation and by an effort to define a distinctly American subject matter and aesthetic. Literature in the first half of the century, produced almost entirely on the east coast, was imbued with the spirit of Romanticism and paid new attention to nature and other-worldly experience. The fundamental belief in an empowered citizenry and the ideals of the Transcendental movement enlivened demands for the abolition of slavery, educational and labor reform, and the increased enfranchisement of women. In the second half of the century, Realist fiction took a cue from journalism and the new social sciences to chronicle the lives of the working and middle classes in a nation that now spanned the continent.
The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, Washington Irving, 1820
The Last of the Mohicans, James Fenimore Cooper, 1826
First tales of Edgar Allan Poe, 1832
“The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1837
The Life, Frederick Douglass, 1845
Woman in the Nineteenth Century, Margaret Fuller, 1845
“The Resistance to Civil Government,” Henry David Thoreau, 1849
The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1851
Moby-Dick, Herman Melville, 1851
Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852
Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman, 1855
Little Women, Louisa May Alcott, 1868
The Portrait of a Lady, Henry James, 1881
A Modern Instance, William Dean Howells, 1882
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain, 1884
Poems of Emily Dickinson (posthumous), 1890
The Red Badge of Courage, Stephen Crane, 1895