“Reader, I married him.” As this famous line from Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* reminds us, writers have long been preoccupied with matters of the heart. Love stories are everywhere, from the novels of *Jane Austen* (and their film adaptations) to the “rom-coms” of the 1980s and 1990s to essays in the “Styles” section of the *New York Times*. For centuries, marriage was primarily an economic relationship, and love outside of marriage ended in humiliation or even death. But what happens when society expands the options for living and loving? What happens to love stories when divorce has been normalized, taboos have been trampled, and the definition of marriage is ever-expanding? When couples are as likely to meet through *Tinder* as they are through mutual friends? In this course, we’ll explore what love stories can tell us about changing concepts of gender, sexuality, family, and freedom. We’ll start with short stories by *Kathleen Collins*—a playwright and filmmaker working during the 1970s and 1980s, in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and Black Power movement—and *Lydia Davis*, an acclaimed contemporary writer of epigrammatic short stories. In our second unit, we’ll look at a couple of love stories through the lens of feminist and queer theories. Our texts for this unit will include an essay by the black feminist poet and theorist *Audre Lorde*, the Academy-Award-winning film *Brokeback Mountain*, and the viral *New Yorker* short story “Cat Person.” Finally, in our third unit, students will pick a modern love story of their choosing—a *novel*, a *memoir*, a *film*—and, drawing on the work of critics and scholars, make an argument about what this story shows us about our society’s romantic and sexual mores.

You may be wondering: why study love? Isn’t that a specifically non-academic experience, something that takes place outside of class? Shouldn’t our classes be devoted to serious topics like the economy and organic chemistry and world history? This is a good question! And the scholars who study love—they include anthropologists, behavioral scientists, literary scholars, and gender theorists—have thought about the best ways to answer it. Some have pointed out that romantic relationships are often informed by specific cultural values and practices; in other words, if you want to know more about a culture, see how the people in it date and mate! Others have pointed out that the economy and romance are interrelated: dating changes with the economy, and many businesses thrive on the dating market (think about all those restaurants!). Still others think that concepts of power and freedom are best revealed when we look at sexual practices: who gets to date, or marry, and in what ways, tells us a lot about who is free in our society.

The work of these scholars informs this course, but I have my own reasons for being interested in this subject. As a young adult, and particularly as a young woman, I was both overwhelmed and confused by the different messages I received about romantic love: it was the most important thing that could happen to me, and yet somehow not as important as school or work or any of the other activities I actually spent time pursuing. It was totally beyond my control, something that would happen when I least expected it, and yet it was also something I should be training for, or orchestrating for myself, or “manifesting.” Being the object of romantic attention made me a valuable and worthy person, but I was also supposed to love myself, since you can’t love anyone else until you do so. I should be fully independent and self-sufficient, and yet also ready to give myself over to another person fully.

At the time, I had no framework for thinking about these ideas, and I had no resources—academic or otherwise—for helping me navigate these conflicting messages. I spent a lot of time talking with my friends: we analyzed romantic love with the same seriousness and rigor that we brought to our intellectual work. We got pretty far on our own! We also sought out intellectuals and theorists, many
of them feminist intellectuals and queer theorists, who offered insight into these questions. We
developed our own “canon” of love theory, some of which made its way into this course. My hope
for those of you in this class is that our readings and our discussions will give you some portable
concepts and theories that you can test in your own lives outside the classroom.

My other hope is that what we do in class helps your writing in a variety of contexts, academic and
otherwise. Over the course of the semester, you’ll learn the elements of an academic argument,
develop a vocabulary for talking about writing (both yours and your classmates), and practice
refining your ideas as you revise your written work. Each unit will have specific goals, ad units build
on each other over time. By the end of the course, you’ll be a stronger writer, with a better sense of
your strengths and with a new set of skills with which you can address challenges. You’ll also
become a more creative and supple thinker; after all, writing is simply a mode of thinking. You’ll be
well prepared to meet the intellectual challenges that await you at Harvard and beyond.