

**\*\*Provisional Partial Syllabus\*\***

Harvard University  
Expos 20  
Spring 2022

**Journeys of Self Discovery**  
**MW 9:00-10:15 a.m./ MW 10:30-11:45 a.m.**

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Office Hours by Appointment  
Zoom link for office hours: <https://harvard.zoom.us/j/7196139926>

**Course Description:**

"Who am I?" Our sense of self imbues every aspect of our daily lives. Yet how do we come to know who we are, both as individuals and as members of a group? On our journey of self-discovery, what life events, desires, values, belief systems, emotional or cognitive biases, and cultural or societal structures shape our development and our ultimate sense of our self? In this course, we will consider several complex pathways to self-discovery depicted in a wide range of literary works. The writers we study investigate answers, propose complications, and spur debates about the central questions of this course: How do we discover, claim, and represent a sense of identity? What are the bases by which we measure and define the self? How can we go about cultivating an expression of the self through our own unique voice? Is the self ultimately knowable—or not? We will explore these questions in three distinct units. We will begin with a psychological portrait of the self in *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna Kaysen's memoir of her adolescent years in a psychiatric hospital located near Harvard University. In the process of narrating her experiences there, Kaysen questions our fundamental notions of and assumptions about selfhood and sanity. Next, we will read a diverse set of voices, including short nonfiction works by James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Tim O'Brien, Gary Soto, and Amy Tan, who speak of life events in which complexities, contradictions, conflicts, and paradoxes weigh in on decisions to conform to or defy expectations that are imposed upon shaping or reshaping the self. Finally, we will explore the self in cinema, debating how questions of the self and self-discovery inform films of various genres, examining filmic modes within visual portrayals of self-discovery, in the context of critical discussions.

**Required texts:**

Kaysen, Susanna. *Girl, Interrupted*. Vintage, 1994. (Available for rent or purchase at Harvard Coop: <https://tinyurl.com/W22-EXPO-20-263>)

Other texts will be provided without cost via our Canvas course website, including: “Girl” (Jamaica Kincaid), “Salvation,” (Langston Hughes), “Two Kinds” (Amy Tan), “Autobiographical Notes” (James Baldwin), “The Things They Carried” (Tim O’Brien) and “The Jacket” (Gary Soto), “Identities and Social Locations” (Kirk and Rey), and “The Cycle of Socialization (Harro); and the following films, subject to change based upon availability: *Saturday Night Fever*, *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, *Citizen Kane*, and *Inside Out*.

**You should come to each class with the relevant readings/viewings completed and ready to participate actively in discussion.**

We will use this class to develop, sharpen, and master the foundational skills of both college and “real world” success: how to listen, think, read, and write critically. An important goal of the course is to develop your ability to write clear, engaging, and coherent analytical essays of the kind that you will be asked to produce frequently at Harvard, as well as to demonstrate an awareness of the writing process, to properly cite sources, and to show an ability to critique your own work and the work of others. With this in mind, the class is structured to give you the opportunity to work in a sustained and systematic way on improving your skills.

During the semester you will write three essays. The thematic units and their associated writing assignments are described below. Each essay will include response papers and draft cover letters, to be outlined in further detail when we reach each unit.

## **UNIT 1:**

*Essay assignment: close reading of a text (Length: 4-6 pages). Writing focus: close reading, asking analytical questions, evaluating arguments, composing thesis statements and arguments, gathering and effectively analyzing evidence.* In this first unit we will devote our attention to *Girl, Interrupted*, Susanna Kaysen’s memoir recounting her adolescent years in a psychiatric hospital located just a few miles from Harvard University. In the process of narrating her experiences there, Kaysen explores the “shimmering, ever-shifting borderline” (159) of madness, and questions our fundamental assumptions about sanity and madness. In doing so, Kaysen also enters into a debate about how we define or conceptualize the self and what the concept of self-discovery might mean. In this unit, you will perform a close reading of the memoir and interpret Kaysen’s position in the debate over the nature of the self and/or of self-discovery.

## **UNIT 2:**

*Essay Assignment: lens essay (Length: 5-7 pages). Writing focus: close reading, critical analysis, key terms, applying a theoretical lens, use of secondary sources.*

In Unit 2, we will examine influences on identity formation, and the choices and decisions that diverse individuals have made to conform to or defy such influences within their journeys of self-discovery. We will read and discuss the following short creative

nonfiction works: “Girl” (Jamaica Kincaid), “Salvation,” (Langston Hughes), “Two Kinds” (Amy Tan), “Autobiographical Notes” (James Baldwin), “The Things They Carried” (Tim O’Brien) and “The Jacket” (Gary Soto). The experiences of self-discovery portrayed in these pieces occur amidst the pressures, expectations, needs, desires, belief systems, and imposed stereotyping of family, peers, and/or society. We will also take a look at two theoretical texts, “Identities and Social Locations” (Kirk and Rey) and “The Cycle of Socialization” (Harro), and apply concepts explored in these texts to the primary works we are reading. This unit will ask you to weigh in on the complexities, contradictions, conflicts, and paradoxes of identity in relationship to the process of self-discovery and the factors that influence the shaping, reshaping, and/or expressing of the self.

### **UNIT 3:**

*Assignment: entering into a scholarly conversation/researching and using multiple sources (Length: 10 pages). Writing Focus: complex arguments; the research process; framing a successful research question; identifying, evaluating, and incorporating multiple sources and different kinds of evidence.*

In our final unit, we’ll learn and apply the language of film analysis to our exploration of the topic of self-discovery and you’ll write an essay in which the central text is a film (*Saturday Night Fever*, *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, *Citizen Kane*, or *Inside Out*), and broaden your arguments by including an array of sources: other scholars’ writings about film, theoretical essays about film, essays that offer context or disciplinary perspective, and film reviews. One of the challenges of this essay is to work with multiple sources, creating a context within which to view the film you select. Another challenge—and also a great opportunity—is that you’ll work more independently in this essay. You have the chance to take this essay in the direction that interests you most (selecting a particular focus within the broad theme of the course), shaped by your own intellectual interests.

### **Grading:**

I will grade only the revisions (that is, the final version) of your essays, not the drafts. You should expect to extensively revise each of your drafts (after receiving feedback from your instructor) before submitting your work for a grade. Course grades will be earned according to the percentages listed below. Your drafts, conference attendance, response papers, cover letters, and participation in our class activities will comprise your engagement grade.

(Revised) Essay 1: 20%

(Revised) Essay 2: 30%

(Revised) Essay 3: 40%

Engagement: 10%

**Class Etiquette:** Just as you will have the opportunity to learn from your classmates, you will be expected to contribute to the class dialogue. This does *not* mean that I expect you to always have something profound to say or to know the answer to my prompts; on the contrary, asking questions counts. For this class to succeed, it is essential that we hold ourselves to the highest standards of respect. With that in mind, please do not keep yourself from asking a question because you fear it will sound “stupid” or obvious. All questions are useful. It follows that I forbid any behavior that would make anyone else in the class feel attacked or the subject of ridicule, particularly on the basis of identity. Take care to remember your classmates’ pronouns and how to pronounce their names. Do not repeat slurs or hate speech even if they appear in the texts we are discussing. Be willing, even when it is difficult, to learn from each other. Please listen respectfully to your fellow students when not offering your own insights, as this will ensure a constructive environment in which everyone can learn together. Given that we each are arriving to our class from different places and backgrounds, we will undoubtedly disagree with each other from time to time—this is not something to avoid, but is an opportunity for robust discourse and important learning. If you ever feel uncomfortable about sharing your ideas for any reason, please let me know right away so that we can work to repair the situation. The goal is to create and maintain a secure environment in which each of you can contribute your own voice and perspective. Note: Texting/checking phones or websites not associated with our class discussion during class will negatively affect your engagement grade.

*(Full syllabus to follow on our first day of class.)*