

QUEER COMING OF AGE STORIES

Coming of age stories—tales in which a young protagonist stumbles along the messy, confusing, exciting path toward adulthood—are central to our culture. *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Great Expectations*, *Little Women*: all are coming of age stories. But what happens to this centuries-old genre when it encounters people it has traditionally excluded? What do coming of age stories that feature LGBTQ+ youth look like? And, when queer youth are centered in stories about growing up, does that change the ways such stories are told?

In this course, we'll analyze queer coming of age stories in literature, film, and popular culture. We'll begin by reading *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Jeanette Winterson's classic 1985 novel about a teenage girl whose lesbianism puts her at odds with her fervently Pentecostal community. Next, we'll use scholarly theories about coming out stories and heteronormativity to analyze three films: *Pariiah* (about a teenager claiming her identity as a Black butch lesbian), *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (about a high schooler sent to a conversion “therapy” camp) and *Dating Amber* (about two closeted queer teenagers who pretend to date one another).

For their final paper, students will make a researched argument about a queer coming of age story of their own choosing. Possibilities include films (*Moonlight*, *Call Me By Your Name*, *Bottoms*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*), television series (*Heartstopper*, *Pose*, *Sex Education*), novels (*Giovanni's Room*, *A Boy's Own Story*, *Paul Takes the Form of a Mortal Girl*, *Freshwater*), and graphic novels (*Fun Home*).

What We'll Be Doing in Class

Unit 1: Close Analysis of a Single Source



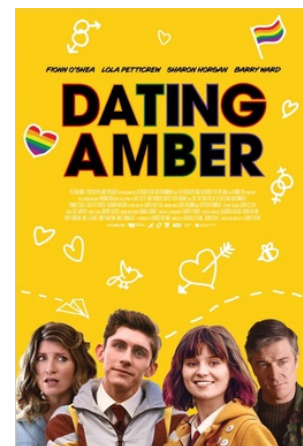
Stories about young queer people dealing with the challenges of growing up are more popular today than ever before. From the 2017 Academy Award Winner for Best Picture, *Moonlight*, to hugely popular television series like *Heartstopper*, *Pose*, and *Sex Education*, LGBTQ+ coming of age stories are suddenly everywhere. But new though it seems, the current boom in representation has deep historical roots.

In Unit 1, we will analyze one of the first English novels to center a queer protagonist as she comes of age: Jeanette Winterson's semi-autobiographical 1985 novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. We'll use this work to explore some of the course's core questions, including: What does it mean to “come of age”? How does being queer impact that experience? How are coming of age stories traditionally told in Western culture, and how do these stories change when they center young queer people?

For your first paper, you will perform a surface/depth analysis of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, making an argument about its deeper meanings. (We will define and practice this form of analysis throughout the semester.)

Unit 2: Analysis Using a Theoretical Lens

In our second unit, we will move from literature to film—and, in the process, from one mode of representing queer adolescence to another. Our primary sources will be three films, each of which focus in some way on teenage characters who come out as LGBTQ+: *Pariah* (2011), *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2018), and *Dating Amber* (2020).



To help us interpret these films and their deeper meanings, we will draw on scholarly articles written about the “coming out film” as a genre, as well as writings about heteronormativity (the assumption that heterosexuality is both the “natural” and “ideal” human sexuality) and homonormativity (a version of queer politics that urges LGBTQ+ people to assimilate into mainstream society).

For your second paper, you will use one of the scholarly essays we read to analyze how one of these three films represents the coming out experience. By practicing this form of analysis (known as “lens analysis,” or “testing a theoretical lens”), you will develop a deeper understanding of both your chosen film and of how to respond to peer-reviewed scholarship.

Unit 3: Making a Researched Argument



In our third and final unit, you will write an independent research paper that analyzes a queer coming of age story of your choice. (See the course description above for possible primary sources.) Your paper should investigate a tension or problem in how your chosen film, TV series, or novel depicts the experience of coming of age as a queer person.

To develop and defend your argument, you will enter a relevant scholarly or critical debate about your primary source, and/or about queer coming of age stories as a genre.

Who Teaches This Course?

I'm Dr. Pietras (he/they), a scholar who teaches courses in queer literature and history in the Harvard College Writing Program. Before coming to Harvard, I taught in the Writing Program at Princeton.

Please feel free to contact me at bpietras@fas.harvard.edu. I would be happy to talk more about the course's content and goals, and to answer any questions that you might have.

