



# A loser CANON

*First-year seminars  
can expose freshmen to  
some fairly idiosyncratic  
topics while honing  
their communication and  
critical thinking skills.*

*By David Fyten*

WHEN WAKE FOREST INCORPORATED a mandatory seminar for first-year students into its curriculum in the mid-nineties, its primary goal was to instill sound habits of critical thinking and clear oral and written communication skills at the outset of college. Instructors were given considerable latitude with regard to content, and in the program's twelve years of existence, many have taught idiosyncratic topics that otherwise might not have fit comfortably into the conventional course canon.

This year alone, first-year seminar subjects include the anthropology of piracy, the analytical methods of Sherlock Holmes, fallout shelters and the Cold War, the globalization of professional baseball, movies and metaphysics, and the art of the deal. Unconventional stuff to be sure, but that doesn't mean it's without legitimate academic value. Often, instructors choose their topics as illustrative





of larger issues or as pathways into complex material that are more accessible to fledgling students. The Sherlock Holmes seminar, for example, uses the short stories and novels of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle as guides for development of the scientific skills of observation, deduction, and reporting. The baseball seminar uses the topic as a segue into issues of societal relevance, such as ethnicity and race, globalization, drug use, union activities, and federal anti-trust legislation.

Following are profiles of six of this year's seminars, grouped according to two themes: metaphors of the monstrous, the marvelous, the mysterious, and the manufacturing of intelligence; and myths in nineteenth-century portrayals of men, women, and the West. Collectively, they reveal the creativity—and, yes, the unconventionality and idiosyncrasy—to be found in the program.

## OF MONSTERS, MAD SCIENTISTS, AND MELANCHOLY ANDROIDS: METAPHORS OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

IN HIS FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR, “Melancholy Androids: On Emotion and Artificial Humanoids,” which he’s teaching this spring, professor and chair of English Eric G. Wilson (MA ’90) asks his students, “What makes Pinocchio sad?”

A curious question to some, perhaps, but not to a Romanticist by inclination and training, for whom esotericism,

idealism, and melancholia are recurrent themes. And certainly not in a seminar that explores the impulses behind the creation of artificial humans, or androids—from monsters like Frankenstein’s to puppets like Pinocchio (*see below*) and all the golems, automatons, robots, cyborgs, and various forms of artificial intelligences in between.

“There is a continuum of reasons why people [in myth, religion, literature, and film] create living machines,” says Wilson, whose book *The Melancholy Android: On the Psychology of Sacred Machines* was published in 2006. “For some, the intelligent machine represents transcendence of human limitation. For others—an



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### So why is Pinocchio sad?

For the answer, Eric Wilson invites our consideration of an 1810 essay on the fall of man by Heinrich von Kleist. The essay, called *The Marionette Theater*, proposes that the primary reason for the fall was self-consciousness.

“Before Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they knew only unity—with their garden environment, with each other, and with their God,” Wilson notes. “These harmonies fostered the most pleasing harmoniousness of all—unity with self; the feeling that thinking and acting are one, that awareness and spontaneity are not disjointed.

“However, after Adam and Eve ate from the tree, they immediately suffered fracture, a break with envi-

ronment, each other, and God,” he goes on. “These divisions caused them to become self-conscious and see themselves not only through their own eyes, but also through the eyes of others. Whereas before they were perfectly at home with their bodies, after the fall they became aware of how others might view their nakedness. They covered themselves with fig leaves, hiding their shame.”

With this idea of the fall in mind, von Kleist presents a dancer, Mr. C., who claims, rather startlingly, that humans pining for a return to the garden have much to learn from puppets. “Mr. C. claims that puppets dance with perfect grace because they lack affectation,” Wilson notes. “At

one with themselves, untroubled by self-consciousness, puppets always maintain a perfect center of gravity. They move as Adam and Eve moved before they ate of the forbidden fruit. This elegance, says Mr. C., reminds us not of humans, who are awkward and clumsy, but of gods, forever agile and comely. Neither puppet nor god is vexed by the fracture that bedevils human beings: the break between effortless being and partial knowing that gnaws; between lithe anatomy and the mind’s turbulence.”

Von Kleist’s essay illuminates the nature of artificial humanity, in Wilson’s estimation. “Not violations of divine law nor blasphemous efforts to become as gods, virtual human beings

—puppets, and also other humanoids, such as androids, automata, robots, and cyborgs—are in truth fulfillments of human potential; symbols of perfection to which breathing lungs and beating hearts and self-conscious minds can only aspire,” he states. “Indeed, these kinds of machines, smooth in their movements and devoid of doubt, highlight what humans are doomed to suffer—twitchy gestures and disconsolate skepticisms. Humanoid machines are double. They are at once holy paragons calling us to prelapsarian dignity, and difficult memorandums recalling our distance from grace.”

—David Fyten



egocentric scientist motivated by selfish sadness and the desire to replicate a lost loved one, for example—it is the overcoming of matter and death. In either case, there is something profoundly sad inherent in it.”

Among the possibilities that Wilson invites his students to consider are the idea that machines might be more human than humans and the notion that some humans are really machines. Wilson—a film lover and scholar whose recent book examines transcendental irony in the films of David Lynch—found his intrigue with these questions piqued by the classic science fiction film *Blade Runner*, based on a Philip K. Dick short story entitled, “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” “In the story, the ‘replicant’ [android] Roy Batty can think more clearly and feel more deeply than Deckert, the ‘blade runner’ [cop] who hunts him down,” Wilson notes. “It also offers the possibility that Deckert himself might be a replicant.”

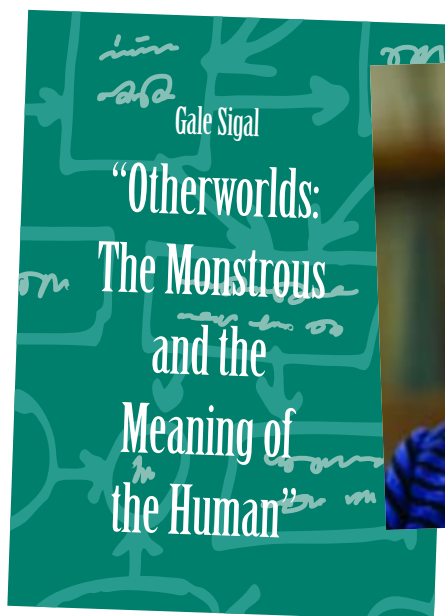
Other films besides *Blade Runner* the class is viewing are the original 1932 version of *The Mummy*, Fritz Lang’s futuristic silent film *Metropolis*, and Steven Spielberg’s *A.I.* Among the assigned texts are Victoria Nelson’s essay “The Secret Life of Puppets” and Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein*. Course requirements include several short essays, a longer research essay, and oral presentations.



ALTHOUGH SHE IS A MEDIEVAL-  
LIST by specialty, Wilson’s English colleague, Gale Sigal, has routinely taught *Paradise Lost*, John Milton’s epic 1667 poem about humanity’s fall from grace. But while she admires the poem greatly, Sigal has never completely resonated with its portrayal of evil as a

force apart from the natural order that was brought into the world by Satan and his minions.

“What interests me is the concept of an ‘otherworld’ where shades dwell in shadow and that intermingles with the real world,” says Sigal, who is in her twentieth year on the Wake Forest faculty. “In moving from black-and-white presentations of evil to the more shaded, we can ask: What role do monsters play in our consciousness? What’s the relationship between ‘normality’ and ‘monstrosity’? In what ways does the monster help humanity define itself? Is the human sometimes monstrous? Who is the true ‘monster’—the monster itself or its creator? How does knowing what is ‘monstrous’ in humans help us know and define what is good in them?”



Sigal and her students are probing these and other profound questions this spring in her first-year seminar titled “Otherworlds: The Monstrous and the Meaning of the Human.” Through essays by thinkers like Freud and Joseph Campbell, medieval texts, artwork, and films such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, they explore the various manifestations of the marvelous and

the monstrous that have captivated writers, artists, and thinkers since ancient times.

Sigal, who considers part of the seminar’s purpose to be “a way of introducing medieval literature that is a little more accessible,” traces her fascination with the monstrous at least in part to her scholarly interest in the medieval notion of courtly love—and, in a broader sense, to human identity and individuality.

“To classical writers like Ovid and Virgil, individual love was conceived of as a kind of disease or compulsion,” she explains. “But in twelfth-century France the love of another began to be looked on as something that was ennobling or elevating. The knight would initiate a kind of lord-and-



vassal relationship, in which the lady was lord and he was her inferior. His love of her, to his way of thinking, made him a better man.

“Courtly love was about the individualizing impulse,” Sigal notes. “Because their love is private and secret, the bond between them alienates them from society. And when the couple separates from each other, they are truly alone, and their sense of separation is profound, as expressed, for example, in dawn songs [one of the

earliest forms of secular romantic music in the West].

“Similarly, at the heart of the monster is loneliness, an overwhelming sense of alienation and separation from society,” Sigal notes. “At the conclusion of Mary Shelley’s novel, the monster that Frankenstein created, stranded in the Arctic, ruminates on loneliness. Likewise, in humans, loneliness can create a monster, or at least aberrant behavior. Is not conformity, after all, really about the fear of isolation?”

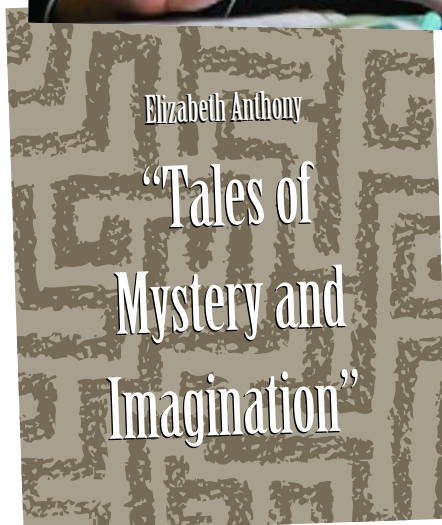
In Sigal’s view, monsters are potent metaphors for less desirable qualities in humans we might tend to ignore or shun but that deserve our scrutiny and sympathy. To encourage empathy in her students, she has assigned each of them to choose a different type of creature and become an expert on it—in a sense, to embody it.

“Looking at monsters is an opportunity to look beyond deformity and see what’s really there in another,” Sigal states. “How do we learn to deal with difference and distinguish between virtue and evil? In Shelley’s novel, the real monster is the doctor, the parent, who rejects his creation, his child. It’s the human monsters that are really scary. They’re like us; they are us.”



JUDGING BY HER PETITE STATURE and her sweet and unassuming disposition, one wouldn’t suppose the mysterious and the frightful would appeal to Elizabeth Anthony, a lecturer in French in the Department of Romance Languages. But “appeal” might be too weak to describe what seems more like mild obsession.

In addition to French crime stories, which she adores and teaches a course on, Anthony acknowledges feeling passionate about the films of Alfred



Hitchcock and Henri-Georges Clouzot, the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Robert Louis Stevenson, and other artistic expressions of things macabre, mysterious, and mad. She is conveying that passion to first-year students this semester in her seminar titled “Tales of Mystery and Imagination.”

Anthony, who holds a doctorate in contemporary French theatre from UNC-Chapel Hill and has taught at Wake Forest for nine years, thinks the subject—beyond merely entertaining the students—will challenge their assumptions and modes of perception.

“The texts we’ll be reading invite us to probe beyond perceived events,” she says. “They require us to become careful and attentive readers as we assume the role of detective, judge, or psychoanalyst. And they beckon us to consider the choices the authors made when constructing their tales of mad scientists, scorned lovers, and supernatural events.”

All is not as it seems at the boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds, according to Anthony. “Often, these stories are told as flashbacks by a first-person narrator, or as a framed narrative told by a third party,” she notes. “You can search for rational explanations of the events that transpire, such as the narrator was crazy or drunk or that it was all a dream, or you can consider supernatural causes. Or perhaps the narrative is a metaphor, such as the belief by some critics that Mr. Hyde was Dr. Jekyll’s homosexual alter ego, at least at the outset of the story. Whatever way one approaches the text requires careful reading, deduction, and analysis.”

Besides a selection of short stories from the *les contes fantastique* (“tales of the fantastic”) movement in nineteenth-century France featuring writers such as de Maupassant, Balzac, Mérimée, and Barbier d’Aurévilliers, the students will read Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*; short stories by Poe such as *The Black Cat* and *The Gold Bug*, and critical essays; and will view Clouzot’s classic thriller *Les Diaboliques* and Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, and *Notorious*. “There is very little lecturing in the seminar,” Anthony says. “It’s about the students expressing their own ideas clearly and coherently.” An oral presentation and four short papers, one of which will be rewritten, are among the requirements.

## OF EXALTED MEN, FALLEN WOMEN, AND THE EXPANSIVE WEST: MYTHS OF THE AMERICAN IDENTITY

ALYSSA HOWARDS WAS RAISED IN Bellingham, Washington, within a half-day's horseback ride of the Canadian border. Bellingham might not have been the frontier, but you sure as blazes could see something resembling it from there. As a child, she adored the books of Laura Ingalls Wilder and anything written about horses. *Shane* was her favorite movie and she relished the fishing trips she took with her father to the wilds of Montana. By location and inclination, she was a girl of the golden West through and through.

Years later, as a budding scholar, she turned her attention to Germany, where she discovered... the West. In the pulp fiction and travel journals of German writers of the nineteenth century, she found renewed ardor for the American frontier. Sometimes, it seems, the farther you go, the closer you get to home.

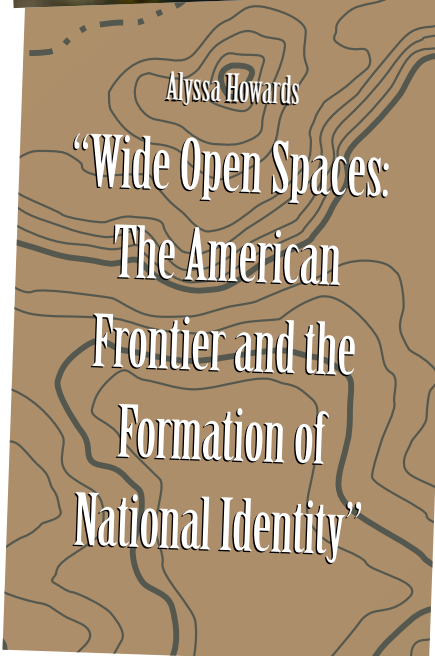
Howards, now an assistant professor of German at Wake Forest, instilled her frontier fervor this fall in a seminar titled "Wide Open Spaces: The American Frontier and the Formation of National Identity." Through fictional and non-fictional accounts of the American frontier, the seminar investigated how the nation's distinctive history of settlement and westward expansion contributed to the formation of American culture, and how its past continues to influence our self-perception.

As a doctoral student in German literature at Washington University in St. Louis in the late nineties, Howards read the works of Karl May, a prolific and

hugely popular nineteenth-century German novelist whose sixty books have sold an estimated 100 million copies and have been translated into more than thirty languages. May's tales of the West, which centered on the adventures of a noble Indian named Winnetou and his virtuous German blood brother, Old Shatterhand, enraptured the German people. "Theirs was a small country, and they were

captivated by the wide open spaces of the American West," Howards notes. "Industrialism was gaining momentum, a scary prospect for many. The tribes of the American Indians paralleled their own tribal past. At a time when anti-modern sentiments were growing, the novels of May aroused [in readers] feelings of longing and nostalgia."

Themes explored in the seminar included the vastness of space and its effect on national consciousness; the origins and nature of American violence; the role of women then and now; and the impact of myths like Manifest Destiny and limitless expansion on how the rest of the world views the United States today. Among the classic novels of the West the students read were Wilder's *The Little House on the Prairie*, Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *The Ox-Bow Incident*. The latter, a tragic story of prejudice and vigilantism, prompted a lively discussion of its parallels to immigration issues today.



IN ELIZABETH HOWIE'S SEMINAR, the Old West is a land not of myth but of hard knocks and a hardscrabble existence for women. Prostitution flourished in its frontier towns and mining camps, and photographers captured in portraiture its practitioners, many of whom had traveled west to become seamstresses or to pursue promises they'd been given of dance-hall jobs, only to be impressed into a trade that offered privation and the risk of abuse or death at the hands of the rough customers they serviced.

Those images, along with metaphorical paintings and photographic portraits of prostitutes in New York,



Paris, New Orleans, and other venues in the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, were the subjects of “Fallen Women and Fine Art: The Aesthetics of Commercial Sex,” taught by Howie this fall.

Howie, an adjunct assistant professor of art history, used the subject material to train her students to look closely for clues and subtleties in works of art and as a topic for exploring larger themes, such as urbanization, colonization, and the changing status of women. “The students were

often was their only recourse. As a result of all these factors, prostitution was viewed by social commentators as a necessary evil.”

Necessary or not, depicting prostitutes in artwork was implicitly forbidden, so the more daring avant-garde artists—especially the Impressionists, who began to burgeon in the 1860s—resorted to visual metaphors, according to Howie. “Nudes were tolerated as long as they were of classical subjects such as goddesses,” she says.

but as aggressive or even monstrous. The viewer cannot enter the space, and the prostitutes are far from acquiescent and beguiling, even though they pose lasciviously. In its presentation of prostitutes, which is violently de-idealized, it has been described as making fun of male desires.”

Laundresses and milliners were among other visual substitutes for prostitutes by virtue of the domestic settings of their labors and, in the case of laundresses (painted famously by

Edgar Degas), loose clothing.

“Many Impressionist works, such as those portraying beautiful young women dancing in dappled sunlight with dashing young men, actually signified situations related to prostitution,” Howie explains. “Degas’ ballerinas were another. [With all of the artistic stand-ins], one couldn’t always tell [in real life] who was a prostitute and who wasn’t. Honest women would be accosted on the street as a result.”

The painting of prostitutes was likewise not tolerated in

America’s formal art circles, but that didn’t discourage adventurous artists and photographers from depicting them—and in not-so-subtle ways. John Sloan, a member of the Ash Can School of social realism painting at the turn of the century, lived in New York’s notorious Tenderloin District and was himself married to a prostitute. His unabashed and non-judgmental paintings depicted the ladies of the night as leading generally glamorous and carefree lives.

The photographic portraits of Storyville prostitutes by the famed E.J. Bellocq, as well as those by various itinerant photographers in the West, are striking in their revelation of the



Elizabeth Howie  
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wonderful,” she says. “We were circumspect in our approach to the material, but still, we looked at some difficult images, and they remained equanimous and respectful throughout.”

Howie explains that in nineteenth-century Europe, bourgeois women were not supposed to exhibit any hint of sexuality. “They were to be the ‘angel of the house’—to care for the children and household, period,” she says. “Men were supposed to preserve the virtue of their wives by satisfying their urges with prostitutes. Among the lower classes, as males from rural areas flooded into Paris looking for work, they left their women behind. It was said that for poor Parisian women, purity was not always an option, meaning prostitution

“Édouard Manet broke ground [in 1865] with his painting of a nude, reclining Olympia, which he intended to be a subtle but undeniable euphemism for a prostitute.”

Howie points to Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) as another historical anchor for any discussion of the representation of prostitution. “[In the work,] Picasso was responding specifically to Matisse’s *Joy of Life*, a dreamlike utopia of freedom and a lack of inhibition depicted with simplified curvaceous nude forms in an abstract landscape,” she says. “It invites the viewer in. By contrast, the *Demoiselles* fractures space and presents women’s bodies not as inviting,

unashamed and confident—even defiant—aura of their subjects. Unglamorous, rugged-looking, and typically unattractive, they tended toward eccentric clothing and idiosyncratic names like Squirrel Tooth Alice and Crazy Horse Lil. It was a man's world, and the women who lived in it did what they had to do and became who they had to be.

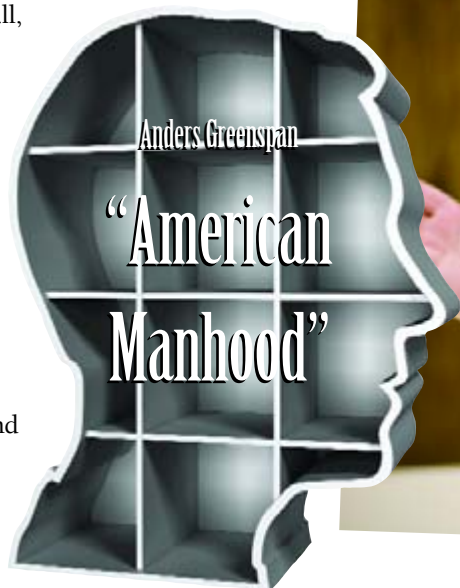


IT MIGHT BE A MAN'S WORLD, but that world orbits men's roles and image. In his seminar "American Manhood," which he taught this fall, Anders Greenspan examined issues of manhood and masculinity in the United States from the middle of the nineteenth century through World War II and how the nation's myths of manhood helped to define what it became.

In the 1840s and 1850s, being a man meant marriage, a stable family, a secure job, and an engaging social life. "In the decades just before the Civil War, men began to migrate from rural areas to cities in large numbers," says Greenspan, a visiting assistant professor of history who holds a doctoral degree in cultural history from Indiana University. "Typically, they worked as clerks in business and professional offices. Life became less manual and more intellectual."

Then the War Between the States erupted—and manhood became something entirely different. "Being a man suddenly meant proving your masculinity on the field of battle," he says. "Masculinity became a quiet bravery; a conquest of personal fear and cowardice."

The settlement of the West in the quarter-century after the war brought to the fore the qualities thought to be necessary to tame the wilderness—ruggedness, adventurousness, fearlessness, will, independence, strength, and so forth. But as Greenspan notes, the closing of the frontier with the Oklahoma Land Rush of 1889, coupled with the increasing urbanization and industrialization of the nation, which were seen by many as corrupting influences, caused many men to struggle with what it meant to be a man in the modern era.



According to Greenspan, American men after the turn of the century turned, curiously enough, to Harry Houdini and Tarzan as models of manhood. The former appealed especially to the nation's burgeoning immigrant population and was a vibrant symbol of escape—in a metaphorical sense, from everyday life—while the latter represented, for men struggling in an urban jungle with loss of independence and self-sufficiency, a return to a natural, pristine state.

Greenspan notes that American manhood took a hit during the Jazz Age

As a soldier, explorer, and outdoor sportsman, Theodore Roosevelt projected an image of rugged manliness, and he used his bully pulpit as a war hero and president to exhort American males to cultivate character through masculine pursuits like hunting and horseback riding, and to excoriate weaker elements of society that he said would sap the nation's vigor. By pursuing an aggressive foreign policy, Roosevelt projected his personal notions of manhood onto the country's collective identity and aroused its passion for military, cultural, and economic hegemony.

and the Depression. During the twenties, ambiguous morals and gender roles and literary characters like Jay Gatsby who were not what they seemed once again called into question what "manhood" really was. And during the Depression, the inability of so many males to support their families devastated their sense of their own masculinity. But manhood came back strong during World War II, when men discovered renewed purpose in upholding and defending lofty ideals of liberty and justice. "Manhood became ennobled," Greenspan says. "It meant doing something for more than just yourself."