

**ENGL4335: Senior Seminar**

**Exploring AI in Lit, Film, & Society**

# Instructor: Dr. Glenn Jellenik E-mail: gjellenik@uca.edu

# Office: Irby 410 Time: MW 6-9

**Office Hours:** By appointment **Place:** Irby 312

**Course Description:** It’s no accident that in the last two years, three of the finest novelists in Britain published works that center artificial intelligence (Ian McEwan, *Machines Like Me* (2019); Jeanette Winterson, *Frankissstein* (2019); and Kazuo Ishiguro, *Klara and the Sun* (2021)). The fact is, a subject that used to be on the literary fringe—territory of speculative & sci-fi writers—has recently become a central issue for literary fiction. This class will work through a series of recent texts (novels, short stories, films) that treat AI in order to consider the questions, issues, anxieties, and possibilities that such explorations allow us to rehearse, as literary critics and as human beings. In doing so, we will consider the ways in which transhuman and posthuman possibilities permit us to question and process what it means to be human today, as well as consider if technological advances and possibilities are forcing/enabling us to re-evaluate the fundamental assumptions of western humanism (you know … the philosophical underpinnings of the Enlightenment). We will explore these cultural rehearsals of AI in order to examine the ways that literature and film can reflect and drive our societal concerns and possibilities with regard to technology and being human. In the end, we will question and consider whether this movement toward the posthuman signals our arrival in a brave new world, a new future … or a return to a pre-Enlightenment past.

**Learning Outcomes:** At its heart, this is a cultural-studies course. Its primary outcome will be a greatly enhanced ability to use a set of texts to trace, process, and understand large-scale historical, social, and cultural developments that occurred in the culture that produced and consumed those texts. But the university loves quantifiable bullet points & lists, so you will …

1. Practice reading literature in its capacity to reflect and drive culture, and make connections and associations between literature and culture.
2. Practice tapping into the arguments, claims, and implications of that literature to produce arguments of your own.
3. Explore critical approaches to AI literature and conduct research concerning the literature, including finding, recognizing, and using authoritative sources.
4. Write two critical essays: 1 close-read and 1 research, addressing some aspect of AI literature. The close-read essay may be used as the basis for the research essay.
5. Assemble a portfolio that demonstrates mastery of the course topic and reflects on the progress and culmination of your undergraduate literary studies.

**My Policies.**

**Participation**: It comprises 10% of your final grade. That means that I expect everybody to participate in our discussions. Seriously, you do *not* want to listen to 50 straight minutes of my talking head every Tuesday and Thursday. That said, we will explore a wide range of texts and topics in class; not only would it be impossible for all of you to agree on everything, it would be boring. I highly encourage you to disagree with one another, and I highly encourage you to disagree with me. All I ask (actually, I don’t ask, I demand) is that you disagree with one another (and me) in a **constructive** manner that fosters conversation rather than shuts it down. Show respect for one another’s views, opinions and ideas.

In keeping with the idea that this is a safe space to share and test out ideas, I encourage you all to speak to one another in our discussions. That is, not all comments have to go through me at the front of the room. Let ideas bounce around the room—address one another directly. This will be best accomplished if you learn each other’s names. If done properly, we can all join together in a lit-crit sister and brotherhood. We will now join hands and sing Kumbaya.

At this level, this shouldn’t be a concern, but in the interest of dotting all t’s and crossing all i’s: In order to truly participate productively in class, you need to have done the assigned readings. If it becomes obvious that you haven’t been doing the readings—and it’s not difficult to tell—I’ll be forced to administer annoying quizzes at the beginning of each class. Don’t make me administer annoying quizzes. Do the readings.

**Course Content Disclaimer:** You should anticipate the possibility of being challenged intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and morally in this course, for such challenges are among the effects good film and literature. You’ll be expected to move beyond emotional reactions to texts, arrive at reasoned analyses, and at all times respond to texts, one another, and the me with open-minded civility. Texts that engage cultural issues of crucial importance are by their nature controversial. Given this, you should anticipate being made uncomfortable by some material, which occasionally engages with adult language, adult themes, and adult situations, including depictions of violence, sex, and sexuality. Though I consider none of the texts outside the mainstream, such content (and our processings of it) might challenge or clash with your ways of seeing the world. Finally, while I’ve selected texts on the basis of their artistic, cultural, & thematic relevance, they do not necessarily represent my views or the university’s.

**Attendance:** If you intend to make a premium grade (A or B), you should attend class as frequently as possible, preferably every class day. Your final grade for this course will drop two points for every absence after two, except in rare situations. Infrequent absences caused by illness or accident, family death, official university functions, or inclement weather are acceptable. If you should miss 4 or more classes, I will strongly recommend that you drop the class.

**Late arrivals/Early departures:** Avoid these at all costs; if it’s unavoidable, be as considerate as possible to your classmates.

**COVID Pivot Policy:** In the situation where the university pivots to virtual learning for the semester, we will conduct all classes listed on this syllabus synchronously, at the official class times listed on this syllabus, via Zoom.

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*!!!!!!Cell Phones!!!!!!\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

 

Hear this now: Cell phone interruptions drive me nuts—seriously, they give me facial tics. So please turn off and stow all cell phones before class. Seriously, I don’t even want to see your cell phone. Really. Prove to yourself that you’re not addicted to the little monster: spend our 50 minutes out of its presence (#giveyourthumbsarest).

**Late Work:** I do not accept late work. All assignments are due on the day indicated on the syllabus, at the start of class. Period.

# Grades: Ahh, grading! Here’s the rub. One of the major sticking points between teacher and student comes down to a potential disparity in goals. My goal is that you develop as a thinker, reader and writer. Often (I didn’t say always, so don’t be offended!), your goal is to obtain a grade that will make you happy. See the potential conflict? Honestly, if I thought that handing out A’s were the best way to improve your thinking/reading/writing, I’d do it. Unfortunately, everything about your academic training to this point has worked in an opposite direction. In our system, I tie a carrot (grade) to a stick and dangle it in front of you as you pull the millstone. Sorry. I didn’t invent the system, but it’s where we work. On the bright side, in my experience, it’s relatively rare for the grade not to reflect the effort of the student.

Extra credit opportunities **may** be offered throughout the semester, but they exist in order to enhance your engagement with the college and our material, not to explicitly improve a student’s grade (though, of course, they will improve your grade). What I’m saying here is, don’t ask me to devise extra extra credit opportunities to make up for missed or poor work.

**Assignments and Grade value:**

Participation 10%

SWAs 10%

Abstracts 15%

\*Essay 1 (6/13) 20%

\*Essay 2 (7/10) 30%

Portfolio 7/10) 15%

\*You cannot pass the class without completing **both** essays.

**University Policies.**

**Academic Integrity:** The University of Central Arkansas affirms its commitment to academic integrity and expects all members of the university community to accept shared responsibility for maintaining academic integrity. Students in this course are subject to the provisions of the university's Academic Integrity Policy, approved by the Board of Trustees as Board Policy No. 709 on February 10, 2010, and published in the Student Handbook. Penalties for academic misconduct in this course may include a failing grade on an assignment, a failing grade in the course, or any other course-related sanction the instructor determines to be appropriate. Continued enrollment in this course affirms a student's acceptance of this university policy.

**The Americans with Disabilities Act:** The University of Central Arkansas adheres to the requirements of the Americans withDisabilities Act. If you need an accommodation under this Act due to a disability, please contact the UCA Office of Disability Services, 450-3613.

Students should familiarize themselves with all policies included in the Student Handbook, particularly the **Sexual Harassment Policy** and **Academic Policies**. You are responsible for acting in accordance with these university policies. If you have any questions about these policies and how they pertain to you, do not hesitate to ask me for clarification.

**Emergency Procedures:** Emergency Procedures Summary (EPS) for the building in which this class is held will be discussed during the first week of this course. EPS documents for most buildings on campus are available at <http://uca.edu/mysafety/bep/>. Every student should be familiar with emergency procedures for any campus building in which he/she spends time for classes or other purposes.

**Title IX disclosure**: If a student discloses an act of sexual harassment, discrimination, assault, or other sexual misconduct to a faculty member (as it relates to “student-on-student” or “employee-on-student”), the faculty member cannot maintain complete confidentiality and is required to report the act and may be required to reveal the names of the parties involved.  Any allegations made by a student may or may not trigger an investigation.  Each situation differs and the obligation to conduct an investigation will depend on those specific set of circumstances.  The determination to conduct an investigation will be made by the Title IX Coordinator.  For further information, please visit:  <https://uca.edu/titleix>.  *\*Disclosure of sexual misconduct by a third party who is not a student and/or employee is also required if the misconduct occurs when the third party is a participant in a university-sponsored program, event, or activity.*

**Course Texts:** *Frankissstein* (Winterson, 2019), *Machines Like Me* (McEwan, 2019), *Klara & the Sun* (Ishiguro, 2021), Readings (Blackboard)

**Schedule**

**Unit I: Objectification, Labor, & Agency**

M 5/16. Introductions.

W 5/18. Read: *R.U.R.* (Capek, 1923)

Due: SWA 1

M 5/23. Read: *Machines Like Me* (McEwan, 2019)

Due: SWA 2

W 5/25. Read: *Machines Like Me*

M 5/30. **Memorial Day. No class**

W 6/1. Watch: *2001: a Space Odyssey* (Kubrick, 1968)*/Wall-E* (Stanton, 2008)

Due: SWA 3

M 6/6. Watch: *Free Guy* (Levy 2021)*/Ex Machina* (Garland, 2014)

Due: SWA 4

**Unit II: Categorical Imperatives: Humanism in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction**

W 6/8. Read: *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro, 2021)

Due: SWA 5

M 6/13. Read: *Klara and the Sun*

**Due: Essay 1**

W 6/15. Read: “The Lifecycle of Software Objects” (Chiang, 2010)

Due: SWA 6

M 6/20. Watch: “Be Right Back” (Harris, 2013

Read: “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin, 1935)

Due: SWA 7

W 6/22. Read: *Frankissstein* (Winterson, 2019)

M 6/27*.* Read: *Frankissstein*

Due: SWA 8

W 6/29. Watch: *Her* (Jonze, 2013)

Due: SWA 9

M 7/4. **Independence Day. No class**

W 7/6. **The End (of Humanism?)**

Read: “Biology and It’s Discontents” (O’Connell, 2017)

Due: SWA 10

**Final essay & portfolio due: Sunday 7/10**

**Machines Like Us (Summer 2022)**

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| [**Burnham, Joshua T.**](https://ssbprod.uca.edu/PROD/bwlkosad.P_FacSelectAtypView?xyz=NDcwMTQz) |
| [**Harrell, Molly**](https://ssbprod.uca.edu/PROD/bwlkosad.P_FacSelectAtypView?xyz=NDYzMjIz) |
| [**Mabry, Katie N.**](https://ssbprod.uca.edu/PROD/bwlkosad.P_FacSelectAtypView?xyz=NDUyMzQz) |
| [**Runkle, Bailey J.**](https://ssbprod.uca.edu/PROD/bwlkosad.P_FacSelectAtypView?xyz=NDQzODMz) |
| [**Simon, Noah J.**](https://ssbprod.uca.edu/PROD/bwlkosad.P_FacSelectAtypView?xyz=NDIxNzkx) |
| [**Wood, Kari A.**](https://ssbprod.uca.edu/PROD/bwlkosad.P_FacSelectAtypView?xyz=NDQ2MTc0) |
| [**Woody, Jaden V.**](https://ssbprod.uca.edu/PROD/bwlkosad.P_FacSelectAtypView?xyz=NDUyNDAz) |

**Film & Lit. Hey Siri, What’s AI: Exploring AI in Lit, Film, & Society (1000-level)**

*\*Pygmalion & Pinocchio* (1 week)

*\*Bladerunner* (2)

*\*R.U.R.* (1)

*\*Klara & the Sun* (2)

\*“Bicentennial Man” (1)

\*“I’ll be right back” (*Black Mirror*) (1)

*\*Free Guy* (1)

\*“The Lifecycle of Software” (Chiang) (1)

*\*Bladerunner 2049* (1)

*2001: a Space Odyssey* (1)

*Wall-E* (1)

*Ex Machina* (1)

*Her* (1)

16 classes

**Texts:**

*Klara & the Sun*

*Machines Like Me*

*Frankissstein*

“The Lifecycle of Software Objects”

“Pygmalion”/“Pinocchio”

“Bicentennial Man”

“I’ll be right back”

*2001: a Space Odyssey*

*Wall-E*

*Ex Machina*

*Her*

*Free Guy*

“Biology & its Discontents”

**Unit I: Hey Siri, what’s the pre-history of AI?: The Imitation Game (2 classes)**

Day 1: Open with “Drowned in the Sun” … analyze the song … ask about the implications on originality and our definition of what it means to be human … core concept … Pygmalion & Pinocchio … other sets of implications …

\*Computing 101: Babbage & Lovelace.

\*Turing, “Computing Machinery & Intelligence”

\*Good, “Speculation Concerning the First Ultra-intelligent Machine”

**Unit II: Traditional/Classic anxieties. Nightmares & fantasies (all fit “neatly” into Humanism … though they begin to ask, Who’s the real monster?) (4 classes)**

\**Frankenstein*

\**Frankissstein*

“Bicentennial Man”

\**Ex Machina*

\**Wall-E*

\**Free Guy*

**Unit III: Complexifications & other posthuman possibilities: AI & Kant (10 classes)**

\**Machines Like Me*

\*“The Lifecycle of Software Objects”

\**Klara & the Sun*

\*“I’ll be right back” (*Black Mirror*)

\*“Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin)[[1]](#footnote-1)

\**Her*

\*“Biology & its Discontents”

\*Immanuel Kant’s Categorical Imperative. \*Marx

Review of 3 novels:

Philip K Dick wrote about it in 1968 … Stanley Kubrick made a movie about it that year, as well. And then he and Stephen Spielberg made another movie about it in the 1990s. And now, British novelists are writing about it. The fact is, a subject that used to be on the literary fringe—territory of speculative & sci-fi writers—has recently become a central issue for literary fiction. And it’s quite interesting that 3 of Britain’s top novelists are each working through the implications of artificial intelligence at the same time. All of them—McKewan, Winterson, and Ishiguro, use AI—the speculative shift to the posthuman—in order to leverage their explorations of our very real human problems. Thus, we find the novels chock full of class & economic issues, as well as a large compliment of gender issues and considerations.

It’s also particularly interesting that all three seem to ascribe to what I’ll call the Ted Chiang School of AI concerns (as opposed to the James Cameron/Elon Musk School). We all know the Cameron/Musk fear: It can be delivered in that deep and dramatic movie-trailer voiceover voice: Everyone thought the machines were fantastic … until they took over! In a world where humans have become the product and machines the consumer … The idea there is simple enough—it is the stuff of all hubristic science fiction: we create a technology that we lose control of and that leads to our downfall. In the best case scenario, Musk theorizes, these hyper intelligent and uber powerful machines will view us as cute pets. But Ted Chiang positions the concerns about the creation of intelligent machines differently. Chiang sees the probability that, if we are are to create AI with consciousness, we will treat it the same way we treat other animals on the planet—which is to say, cruelly: we will abuse it, exploit it, and cause it untold suffering. And from Chiang’s perspective … well, we shouldn’t bring more suffering into the world.

Again, all three of these novelists are considering the lives of AI from the perspective of the AI themselves—however they view them not as a new species fundamentally different than humans but rather as a surrogate/metaphor for exploited, troubled, complex organic people. In the same way that all books about monsters are really about us, all books about Artificial Intelligence are really about Organic Intelligence (us). That is, despite the fact that they’re told from the perspective of AI, these books are less about technology itself than they are about the effects of technology on humanity. Salman Rushdie (who has yet to write about AI) has called humans “the storytelling animal, the only creature on earth that told itself stories to understand what kind of creature it was” (Joseph Anton). And here we see AI as storytelling “animals,” as well. Though the stories are less about understanding what kind of creature the AI is than about continuing Rushdie’s fundamental project: understanding humans.

So what do they tell us about us? Again, what they’re all understanding seems to rhyme with Chiang’s central conception of our relationship with AI—it is the story of all Enlightenment breakthroughs: capitalism … the industrial revolution … imperialism—it is the story of exploitation.

NOTE: Holy crap! Beyond the Fence is a musical written by an AI (called Android Lloyd Webber!). What does this do to our concepts of originality.

1. In Part 4 of Klara and the Sun, the Mother and Capaldi reveal their plan to merge Klara into the “portrait” should Josie die. The idea is that Klara would become a mechanical replacement for Josie. The question at that point would be whether or not there is something about US that is irreplaceable, or if we’re essentially fungible in every way, provided enough art and technology. Capaldi thinks yes. Obviously, Benjamin thinks No. The idea here is that what Benjamin refers to as ‘aura” with regard to a work of art would also be true of a person. And we also see this concept at work in the “I’ll Be Right Back” episode of Black Mirror. Interestingly, Domnhall Gleeson’s double and Klara suffer very similar fates as AI—both get exiled—Gleeson to the attic, and Klara to the cupboard. While Klara never gets the opportunity to test whether or not she could capture Josie’s essence, Gleeson gets the opportunity and fails to do so. Proving Benjamin’s point. We also see this possibility in Branagh’s Frankenstein and Spielberg’s AI. There’s clearly a larger essay here!!! The idea of the ways that we commodify AI—the fact that we make it so human, only to commodify it and use it as a product means that we deny it full rights as defined by the Second Formulation of Kant’s Categorical Imperative: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.” In fact, use all 4 of Kant’s Formulations for this. But the Second is the most important. It also pushes on Marxist concepts, primarily exploitation of the laboring (or created) class. Indeed, Marx is pushing on capitalism’s failure to heed Kant’s Imperative: labor functions as a means for capitalists, not as an end in and of themselves. They are positioned by capitalists in the same way as machines. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)