

Blended Learning and Reverse Reading Methodologies in the Literature Classroom (Reviewing the Canon Through Fantastic Narratives by Women Writers)*

Las metodologías del “Blended Learning” y la lectura inversa en la clase de literatura (Revisión del canon a través de las escritoras de lo fantástico)

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Abstract: El presente artículo recoge los resultados del proyecto de innovación docente “Pensar el género: Revisión del canon a través de las escritoras de lo fantástico”. Su principal objetivo es revisar el canon literario hispánico desde dos perspectivas: la feminista y la del cuestionamiento de los géneros literarios hegemónicos (fantástico vs realismo). Las actividades se han desarrollado a través del “Blended Learning”, combinando plataformas virtuales con las sesiones de clase presencial. La técnica del “Reverse Reading” (o lectura inversa) ha permitido a los/as estudiantes reinterpretar los textos canónicos (escritos por hombres) a la luz de otros textos “periféricos” (pertenecientes al género fantástico y de autoría femenina). Por último, el proyecto se ha propuesto “feminizar” el canon de obras leídas en las clases de Estudios Literarios, al considerar la escasa presencia de las creadoras en el currículum y conectar a los/as estudiantes con la creación de las autoras actuales que cultivan un género tan estimulante como es el fantástico. La evaluación del proyecto ha servido para reforzar la hipótesis inicial, pues confirma la falta de pensamiento crítico en la Educación Superior con respecto a la conformación del canon, así como los continuos procesos de construcción y transmisión de la Historia literaria.

Keywords: feminismo; canon; fantástico; blended learning; lectura inversa.

Resumen: This article reports on the results of the educational innovation project “Thinking Gender/Genre: A Review of the Canon through the Fantastic Narratives of Women Writers”. Its main aim is to revise the Hispanic literary canon from two perspectives: the feminist one and the questioning of the hegemonic literary genres (Fantastic genres vs Realism). The activities have developed via Blended Learning, a combination of virtual platforms with classroom sessions. The Reverse Reading Technique has enabled students to reinterpret canonical text (written by men) in the light of other “peripheral” texts (fantastic narratives written by women). Ultimately, the project intends to “feminise” the canon of works read in the Literary Studies classroom, considering the low presence of women writers in the literary curriculum, and connecting students with the creation of living women authors through such a stimulating and motivating genre as the Fantastic. The evaluation of the project reinforces the initial hypothesis and confirms the lack of critical thinking in higher education regarding the shaping of the literary canon and the ongoing processes of construction and transmission of Literary History.

Palabras clave: feminism; canon, the fantastic; blended learning; reverse reading.

Introduction

Any Literary History (and the courses we teach within this discipline) conveys an image of the canon to the reader, i.e., of an anthology or a body of texts and authors which are considered as valuable and thus worth reading and studying. Literary History is certainly driven towards the construction of a cultural and/or national identity. The selection processes at work in canon formation relate —as Sullà (1998) cautions— to the choice of authors and works, the highlighted aspects of schools, movements and generations to be studied, the criteria applied for such selection, their distribution across periods and time, etc. The idea of the canon transcends the merely

literary and acquires an evident social and political dimension, as it is controlled by institutions, i.e., by the ruling minorities, which in many cases means contemplating it as a (ideologically) conservative unit (Zavala, 1993, pp. 65-66).

Accordingly, the educational innovation project “Thinking Gender/Genre: A Review of the Canon through the Fantastic Narratives of Women Writers” the project intends to “feminise” the canon of works read in the Literary Studies classroom, considering the scarce presence of women writers across syllabi, and connecting students with the creation of living women authors through such a stimulating and motivating genre as the Fantastic.

To that end, we started from students’ previous knowledge so that we might carry out a meaningful learning process which might enable them to discover new senses of the concepts of canon and of Literary History¹. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic we planned our classes from diverse modalities of semi-face-to-face teaching. It was developed from the need to adapt to the post-normal times (Sardar, 2010)², in which processes of digital literacy of lecturers and students have accelerated. Thus, the educational innovation project that we will describe and analyse employs a series of methodologies aiming to generate an experience of Blended Learning. To do this, we combined the use of several online platforms such a blog (González Sánchez & García Muiña, 2010) and the Blackboard Collaborate and Zoom videoconference systems with face-to-face work in the

¹ “We should remember that meaningful learning derives from the non-arbitrary and non-literal interaction between new and previous knowledge (subsumption). Throughout subsequent interactions, a given subsumptor gradually acquires new meanings, becomes richer, more refined, differentiated and more able to function as an anchor for new meaningful learning” (Moreira, 2021, p. 34).

² For Sardar, post-normal times are characterised by the three “Cs”: complexity, chaos, and contradictions. Climate change, the Lehman Brothers crisis, and the swine flu pandemic (H1N1 in 2009), as well as the energy crisis, the changes in the geopolitical landscape, diminishing natural resources, the threat of terrorism and now the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted how the orthodox systems of political management and planning no longer work in the context of this new world, which is also applies to Education.

classroom. The Reverse Reading technique, which is about revisiting and reinterpreting a canonical text according to other “peripheral” ones, has enabled students to shed light on new senses of works written in the tradition (masculine in character and viewpoint) with the assistance of the literature written by women.

Overall, the project has set three general objectives:

1. To develop a semi-face-to-face educational environment that might promote activities of critical thinking and theory with both a collaborative format (among students) and a guided one (by lecturers and students) from the Reverse Reading technique.
2. To analyse the experience of b-learning and to verify whether virtual — asynchronous— exchanges at the blog and at the Blackboard & Zoom platforms of telematic face-to-face —synchronic— interaction and the face-to-face sessions enabled us to encourage learning and to achieve a higher level of efficiency in the teaching methodologies regarding intellectual exchange and quality of the debates.
3. To support critical thinking which may question the modes of production of Literary History, as well as the canon formation and literary genres from new frameworks of interpretation which may help to revise the themes and motives of fantastic texts from a feminist perspective.

1. Thinking the Gender/Genre: Literature Class Versus the Western Canon

1.1. Canon, Literary History and Feminist Criticism

Although the canon has always been an object of controversy, it has been strongly questioned since the 80s by Postcolonial Studies, New Historicism, or Women and Gender Studies, to mention but a few critical schools, that have exposed its close relationship with power and the prevailing ideology. The introduction of new perspectives on the canon has had the benefit of reducing the alleged “objective” value of Literary History as a faithful description of a specific system, giving way to a destabilization of the canon, currently regarded as an ideological construction along the parameters of “highbrow” literature written by white men and based on socially accepted sexuality models

—with the subsequent marginalization of literature on non-normative sexualities³.

This is the reason why teachers of Literature should be aware of the historical nature—therefore subject to change—of the canon we work with, constantly exposed to review, re-examination, and reinterpretation. The feminist approach entails a particular challenge to the established tradition. Although it may enrich canonical texts by reading them from different perspectives—for instance, analysing feminine characters or the conception of woman through the “great” literary works, generally male authored—it encourages, above all, to reform the canon opening it to female authors by retrieving their texts and making them visible (Zavala, 1993; Golubov, 2012; Fariña, 2016). Though, the available literary histories—which are the ones our students currently read—present a huge gap in terms of women’s artistic work and the syllabi, programmes and corpora used in the Academia contribute to maintain the invisibility of women’s literary works.

In courses of Contemporary Spanish and Latin American Literature, opening the canon and letting women writers in would not only allow the tradition to be reordered, but would also help to draw attention to the criteria for inclusion in this tradition. This would raise several questions on the part of the teachers: What is our aim when we teach literature? Should we base ourselves exclusively on aesthetic criteria—when we know that these criteria are not universal, but contextual and that the idea of quality has been shaped by a cultural predisposition towards the masculine? Should we resort to representative criteria that allow us to be “fair” to those women writers who have been systematically excluded from the tradition? We don’t have an answer and often opt for that “uncomfortable” compromise Lilian S. Robinson (1998, p. 126) mentions when she refers to the

³ It should be borne in mind that Bloom’s “Western Canon” (1994) includes twenty-six white male authors, with the exception of only two women. Moreover, its scope is mainly English-speaking (Sullà, 1998, p. 13).

operation of selecting women's literature that conforms to traditional canons of judgement and taste⁴.

It seems important to us, however, to bring the debate on the presence of women into the classroom, for, as Jonathan Culler (1998, p. 150) warns, “the humanities in the university cannot simply provide a culture [in this case, teaching the great literary monuments], but need to carry out a cultural critique”, even questioning, why not, the established culture. Both things, it seems to us, are compatible: we can use the best works for critical work, assuming that these works need not always be the most canonical. As Elena Gajeri lucidly states: “One of the indisputable merits of feminist criticism has been to provide fresh points of view and to dismantle the myth of intellectual neutrality” (2002, p. 479), even though some scholars may see the revision of the canon as an extension of the class struggle that promotes social change over the aesthetic and the artistic.

1.2. Non-realist genres versus the canon

When approaching the fantastic —and other related genres such as science fiction— from the realm of academic research, a critical revision of the canon is required, as well as an analysis of the processes that shape the various literary genres. In the areas of Hispanic narrative, the prevailing repertoire has been fundamentally realist; therefore, promoting the inclusion of non-realist texts may also be considered an additional challenge. In our teaching practice, however, we have sought to defend the existence of this other tradition —less obvious or less canonical— which, having arisen in Romanticism, has continued uninterrupted up to the present day. On the basis of the themes addressed and the selection of certain works, we have tried to encourage a confrontation between a relatively traditional view (the authors under study have the recognition of the literary institution, in the form of prizes, anthologies, critical and academic reception) and a relatively traditional view with another vision aimed at reconstructing a line of texts and works that, while not completely marginal, have been

⁴ See, for example, the work of Ballester Pardo (2021) about the presence of female authors and/or LGTBIQ+ subjects in Secondary Education.

marginalised due to questions of genre and gender. The growing scholarship on fantasy and science fiction, as well as the increased attention paid to the work produced by women (both academically and commercially) has provided context and encouragement for our project⁵. These works have highlighted the scarcity of critical attention to non-mimetic forms in Spain and Latin America: most textbooks and histories of literature either avoid discussing fantastic texts, which are buried under realist production, or, when attention is paid to them, they are reduced to spurious and even sub-literary expressions. However, if we look at Hispanic narrators, it is not only evident that there are many fantastic narratives of high quality, but also that they have continued to appear even at times when the pressure of the realist aesthetic has been strong, as, for example, during the 1950s and 1960s, when social realism became the dominant paradigm in Spain⁶.

In Latin America the fantastic has certainly become better integrated into the literary canon. Thus, the tradition of the fantastic is outstanding in Río de la Plata and México (with authors such as Horacio Quiroga, Leopoldo Lugones, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo or Elena Garro) and so is that of magic realism in Colombia (headed by Nobel awarded Gabriel García Márquez). Both have become fully consolidated and legitimised literatures. However, it is necessary to take into account that the presence of the fantastic became relevant in Latin America after the so-called boom of the 1960s, whose publishing and literary phenomenon hardly included women writers (Araujo, 1983).

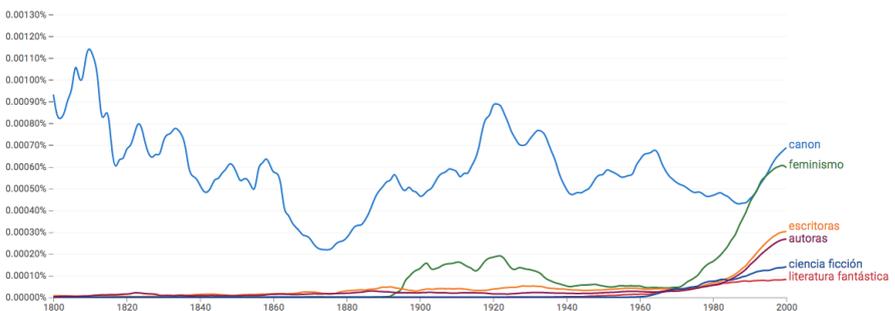
⁵ Focusing on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the works by Roas & Casas (2008 and 2016), Roas (2017), and López-Pellisa (2018) provide an overview of interest for the Spanish context, as those by López-Pellisa & Ares (2020 y 2021), and Morillas (1991), do so for Latin America.

⁶ Spanish historiography is still too much indebted to that conception —increasingly questioned— which sees Realism as an essential and defining characteristic of our literature. Such a vision of literary history is compromised by the fact that the fantastic has not been reserved only for the so-called marginal authors, but that many of the great names of Spanish literature (some of whom, such as Bécquer, Galdós, Pardo Bazán, Baroja, Valle-Inclán, Unamuno, Aub, Benet, Marías, Merino, and so on so forth, occupy a place of honour in the canon) have assiduously cultivated this genre, and not as something occasional or exceptional in their work.

A significant fact with respect to science fiction is that it was not until 2014 that the first anthology by women was published. That year, stories by Spanish and Latin American women writers appeared in the volume *Alucinadas*⁷, thus inaugurating a process that has been continued in other countries such as Cuba, with the publication of *Deuda Temporal* (2015); México, *La imaginación: la loca de la casa* (2015); Spain, *Posthumanas* (2018) and *Distópicas* (2018); and finally, *Insólitas. Narradoras de lo fantástico in Latinoamérica y España* (2019).

Figure 1

Search results for the (Spanish) words *canon* (Eng. ‘canon’), *feminismo* (Eng. ‘feminism’), *escritoras* (Eng. ‘women writers’), *autoras* (Eng. ‘women authors’), *ciencia ficción* (Eng. ‘science fiction’) and *literatura fantástica* (Eng. ‘fantasy literature’) through the Google Ngram Viewer



Source: own elaboration

This simple graph [fig. 1] shows how the problematic of the canon has been present in Hispanic publications from the 19th century to the present day. However, terms such as ‘feminism’, ‘women writers’, ‘women authors’, ‘science fiction’ and ‘fantastic literature’ were on the margins of the system until the end of the twentieth century. The data show an upturn in the presence of words such as

⁷ The *Alucinadas* Project consists of a contest of short stories for Latin American and Spanish women writers; it is organized by the Palabaristas publishing house. The award includes the amount of 500 euros for the winning short story and the publication of a selection of the best stories sent to the contest. Five anthologies have been published: *Alucinadas I* (2014), *Alucinadas II* (2016), *Alucinadas III* (2017), *Alucinadas IV* (2018) and *Alucinadas V* (2019).

‘feminism’ and ‘canon’ in the 1920s, already in the context of Modernism and the avant-garde—their aesthetics opposed to realist representation—, as well as during the consolidation of the first feminist wave. It is not, however, until the 1980s that the curve rises significantly for the expression ‘literatura fantástica’ (‘fantastic literature’). As Roas & Casas (2008: 41-46) have shown, that decade saw the normalisation of the genre in Spain thanks to the consolidation of authors like Cristina Fernández Cubas, José María Merino, Pedro Zarraluki or Pilar Pedraza, to whom the influence of the Latin American anti-realist imaginary (which had gained strength a few years earlier) is added with authors such as the aforementioned Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar and Jorge Luis Borges as well as others also relevant like Alejo Carpentier o Silvina Ocampo. The 1990s marked a turning point towards the progressive maturity of non-mimetic genres. The data seem to indicate, in short, that in the 21st Century there is a paradigm shift towards a greater visibility of fantasy and science fiction, together with the unstoppable feminist rise. The question now arises as to whether this change is reflected in the literary curriculum and whether our students in higher education know, and study texts written by women authors in the orbit of the non-mimetic.

2. Methodology and Work Plan

2.1. Context

The Innovation Project “Thinking Gender/Genre: A Review of the Canon through the Fantastic Narratives of Women Writers” has been developed at Alcalá University with lecturers affiliated to this institution as well as with lecturers from the Autonomous University of Barcelona and Turin University. Based in the practice of the Reverse Reading, one of the goals of our project is to combine online teaching with classroom teaching (Blended Learning) for the purpose of questioning the canon from a gender perspective.

Our aim to rethink the literary canon led us to design a series of activities which linked two subjects⁸ taught at the *MA in Spanish & Hispanic Literary and Cultural Studies* at University of Alcalá with the online seminar “Fantásticas e insólitas II: Ciclo de encuentros con las escritoras de lo inquietante” [“Fantastic and Unusual Women Authors II: A series of literary meetings with women writers of the uncanny”], held during the academic year 2020-21 (October 2020—June 2021). This monthly seminar included the participation of nine women writers from Spain and Latin America⁹. The project focused on three of them and their selected works which matched the activities: *La primera vez que vi un fantasma* (2018) [*The First Time I Saw a Ghost*], by Solange Rodríguez Pappé (Ecuador), *La habitación de Nona* (2015) [*Nona’s Room*, translated by Kathyne Phillips-Miles & Simon Deefholts, Ed. By Peter Owen (2017)], by Cristina Fernández Cubas (Spain), and *Fruta podrida* (2007) [*Rotten Fruit*], by Lina Meruane (Chile). Thereby, the project has sought to integrate university teaching related to the themes of the cycle through subjects whose central axes are gender studies and cultural studies with live encounters with the authors. In the same way this project has allowed us to delve into a genre (the fantastic), often marginalized in literary programmes — which tend to privilege Realism— and into a gender (women) unjustly minimized if not excluded from the literary canon and academic studies.

To this end, we gathered seventeen students from the Master's degree in Hispanic Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of Alcalá, one student from the Master's degree in Comparative Literature: Literary and Cultural Studies at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, two PhD students (from the programmes of Literary Theory and Comparative Literature at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and Linguistic, Literary and Cultural Studies at the University of

⁸ “Themes and Motifs of the Hispanic Literacy and Cultural History” and “Literature, Society and Power”.

⁹ The Cycle, held entirely online, required the participation of the audience through Zoom, under previous registration, although it could also be followed through the Youtube channel of the University of Alcalá, with free entrance. The average number of people attending the Cycle was 80 people, and most of the sessions can still be viewed through this channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/UniversidadDeAlcala>).

Barcelona, respectively) and three more from the Degree in Comparative Modern Cultures at the University of Turin. The mixture of students from different universities and/or countries, as well as different levels (with different academic and cultural traditions) has undoubtedly enriched the participants intellectually and emotionally¹⁰.

2.2. Methodology

A significant part of the methodology of this project involved a combination of classroom teaching with the complementary online training activities, which enabled the Blended Learning (b-learning) (Bustos, 2004; Garrison & Anderson, 2005; Turpo, 2010)¹¹. The possibility of telepresence has allowed students to carry out tasks asynchronously and in collaboration with students from other cities and countries. As is known, b-learning, with the use of virtual classrooms based on asynchronous work forums (Hernández & Romero, 2011), can favour creativity for the implementation of critical reflection and debate exercises. These exercises are based on the multidirectional writing modality, which makes students carry out activities as writers, readers, and evaluators of the work of the classmates with whom they collaborate, by engaging in dialogue with their comments (López-Pellisa, Rotger & Rodríguez-Gallego, 2020). The use of blogs (González Sánchez & García Muiña, 2020; Morán Rodríguez, Álvarez Ramo & Valdivia, 2015) has enabled a transformation of the didactic context by making the selected reading and writing skills become meaningful to the community in which they are inserted. In our case, it has become a platform for the management of argumentative texts and students' opinions.

¹⁰ The origin of the students must also be considered: approximately half of the students come from Spanish-speaking countries (one from Argentina, one from Chile, three from Colombia, one from Costa Rica, one from Cuba and four from Spain); the other half, on the other hand, do not have Spanish as their first language (three Italian students, one Egyptian student and eight Chinese students).

¹¹ The current post-covid scenario has encouraged teachers to implement a significant number of b-learning actions in their classes (Sanz & López-Iñesta, 2020; Singh *et al.*, 2021).

For the text analysis we applied the Reverse Reading technique, which consists in reading a contemporary work and then turning to the classical text which may have inspired it or may offer a conversation at the levels of form and theme. In many cases, reversing the direction of reading enabled participants to grasp hidden senses of the classical narratives, understood in particular ways by the contemporary works. Reverse reading encourages “unmasking” and shaking “the specular reading of the reader’s intertext so that comprehension becomes a scrutiny of the Other in the self and a reformulation of authorial meaning in the democratic sense of each reading” (Guerrero, Caro & González, 2011: 189). Thus, we would first read a piece of narrative written by a contemporary woman writer which elaborated on a classical motive or theme (the ghost, the double and body technologies) that happened to be central in a canonical narrative by a male author which we would read subsequently. In all cases, the texts authored by women encouraged participants to apply a gender perspective in the reading process of well-known and disseminated works such as *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) by H.G. Wells.

2.3. Activities

In order to develop this Innovation Project, we used a free software blog (<https://fantasticaseinsolitas.weebly.com/>), which enabled us to create a space for us to publish readings, where students were able to share their commentaries about the texts analysed in the classroom and outside the classroom (López-Pellisa *et al.*, 2021). In this way we programmed a series of activities which might be developed throughout several sessions, subject to *Flipped Classroom* theories (Walvoord & Anderson, 2010; Santiago & Bergmann, 2018). The scheme had the following parameters [fig. 2]:

- 1) Reading a novel or a collection of stories by the contemporary woman writer.
- 2) Reading a canonical narrative written by a male author.
- 3) Reading a theoretical text which might offer a conceptual framework to analyse the selected narrative texts.

- 4) Participation in the blog; students should include critical reflections about the novels or collections of stories connected to the theoretical framework discussed in the classroom. Reflective dialogue.
- 5) Synchronic session with live and online debate for students and lecturers via the Blackboard Collaborate platform, where students should debate the questions posited in the blog. Dialogues with the invited women writers were prepared here too.
- 6) Meeting and dialogue with the invited woman writer via Zoom.

Figure 2

Timeline and work structure

	Contemporary woman writer	Classic author	Reverse Reading	Supporting theoretical texts	Blog comments	Blended learning debate (classroom and Blackboard Collaborate)	Meeting with the author (Virtual synchronic format)
1 st Activity	Solange Rodríguez Pappe (Ecuador, 1976)	Henry James (US, England, 1843-1916)	<i>La primera vez que vi un fantasma</i> (2018) ⇔ <i>The Turn of the Screw</i> (1898) Students UAH-UAB-UB-UNITO	"Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", by J. J. Cohen	23 comments (task 6-18 November 2020) Students UAH-UAB-UNITO	20 November 2020 Students and/or teachers UAH-UAB-UNITO	27 November 2020 Zoom UAH Participants Innovation Project + audience of the Cycle "Fantastic and unusual"
2 nd Activity	Cristina Fernández Cubas (Spain, 1945)	Robert Louis Stevenson (Scotland, 1850-1894)	<i>La habitación de Nona</i> (2015) ⇔ <i>The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll y Mr Hyde</i> (1886) Students UAH-UAB-UB-UNITO	"Una semántica para la temática: el caso del doble", by L. Dolezel; "Doble" (<i>Diccionario de motivos de la literatura universal</i>), by E. Frenzel	27 comments (task 11-19 January 2021) Students UAH-UAB-UNITO	21 January 2021 Students and/or teachers UAH-UAB-UNITO	Innovation Project + audience of the Cycle "Fantastic and unusual"
3 rd Activity	Lina Meruane (Chile, 1970)	H. G. Wells (England, 1866-1946)	<i>Fruta podrida</i> (2007) ⇔ <i>The Island of Doctor Moreau</i> (1896) Students UAH-UAB-UB-UNITO	"El sexo de la biotecnología", de V. Stolcke; -";Qué hay de malo en la eugenesia?", by V. Camps; - "A History of Transhumanist Thought", by N. Bostrom	30 comments (task 11-19 april 2021) Students UAH-UAB-UNITO	23 April 2021 Students and/or teachers UAH-UAB-UNITO	28 May 2021 Zoom UAH Participants in the innovation + audience of the Cycle "Fantastic and unusual"

Source: own elaboration

The first activity consisted in reading the book of short stories *La primera vez que vi un fantasma* [The First Time I Saw a Ghost] (2018), by Solange Rodríguez Pappel, and then *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), by Henry James. The aim was to work on the motif of the ghost and, in general, the monstrous figuration and its meanings, which is why the close reading of a short theoretical text was also requested: “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” (1996), by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen [fig. 3].

Figure 3

Instructions for activity 1

- Elegid un tema y un motivo de *La primera vez que vi un fantasma* (Solange Rodríguez Pappel, 2018) e identificad similitudes y diferencias con *Una vuelta de tuerca* (Henry James, 1898). Tendréis que hacer al menos una intervención en este blog con un texto de 300-500 palabras. No olvidéis incluir referencias bibliográficas si citáis obras críticas. Las fechas para completar esta tarea son del 6 al 18 de noviembre. Comentaremos vuestras intervenciones en nuestra sesión de *Temas y motivos* el viernes 20 de noviembre, en la que también participarán integrantes de este proyecto de innovación docente.



Source: López-Pellisa *et al.*, 2021¹²

Eighteen students produced twenty-three commentaries, trying to answer the question posed in the blog. The reading of Rodríguez Pappel's book encouraged them to unravel some of the keys to James's text, analysing it from a feminist perspective. Thus, among the most substantial contributions, the interstitial consideration of the ghost and its value as a cultural apparatus stand out: if, in Rodríguez Pappel the ghost highlights the gender differences and stereotypes that condition women's lives, in James's novel it stages the sexual and affective

¹² [Choose a theme and a motif from *La primera vez que vi un fantasma* (Solange Rodríguez Pappel, 2018) and identify similarities with and differences from *The Turn of the Screw* (Henry James, 1898). You must contribute, at least once, with a 300-500 words text. Don't forget to include references when quoting from critical works. This task should be completed between 6-18 November (2020). Contributions will be discussed in our session *Themes and Motifs* on Friday, 20 November (2020) in which members of this higher education innovation project will also take part].

frustration of the protagonist, subjected to an extremely repressive and stratified social order. Similarly, narrative voices were scrutinised, in some cases leading our students to notice the “monstrosity” inherent in the narrators of both Rodríguez Pappe and James: the Ecuadorian writer’s empowered female *monsters* stress the ambiguity of the governess character in *The Turn of the Screw*, who, obsessed with purity and the dangers that beset her, ends up feeling “a perverse horror of herself” and her erotic inclinations. Finally, the corporeality of the stories in *La primera vez que vi un fantasma* (in which words such as *cuerpo* [‘body’], *sangre* [‘blood’], *olor* [‘smell’], *dientes* [‘teeth’] are repeated profusely) has led one of the male students to note the absence of such terms in James’s novel and the recurrent presence, instead, of the word *rostro* (‘face’), closer to the representation of the psychological. This student notes a reappropriation of the body (and the liberation of desire) by female characters in recent narrative and thus highlights the denial of the body in *The Turn of the Screw*, which is precisely what haunts James’s protagonist.

After the debate on the blog and the outlining of some lines of discussion during the face-to-face classes, a joint session took place with the students at the University of Alcalá and two of the lecturers in the classroom and with the rest of the participants (students and lecturers from other universities) through Blackboard Collaborate. In this session, the lecturers provided feedback on the blog comments and further discussion was generated around Rodríguez Pappe’s and James’s works. A week later, there was an online meeting with the author, invited for the occasion to the “Fantastic and unusual” series, to whom several members of the project addressed questions and comments.

The structure of the other two activities is quite similar, so they will not be described in detail. We will only highlight the main contributions of the students in the blog; comments and indications for carrying out each of the activities may be found in López-Pellisa *et al.* (2021).

The second activity was based on a comparative reading of Cristina Fernández Cubas's *La habitación de Nona* [Nona's room] (2015) and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), this time with the motif of the fantastic double as the central axis. In order to elaborate a small conceptual framework, we proposed the reading of two theoretical texts: "Una semántica para la temática: el caso del doble" (2003) ["A Semantics for Thematic: the Case of the Double"], by Lubomír Dolezel, and the entry on the "Double" (2003) in the *Diccionario de motivos de la literatura universal* (1980), by Elisabeth Frenzel.

This time, nineteen students responded, leaving twenty-seven comments on the blog. The contrast between Fernández Cubas's book of short stories (especially her short story "Nona's Room") and Stevenson's novel enriched the gender perspective that the project aimed to stimulate. Thus, the students explored aspects related to the representation of otherness, which is much more ambiguous in Fernández Cubas than in Stevenson: in the Spanish story, the female narrator is not aware of her condition as a double, while Hyde emerges when Jekyll takes a chemical compound and, therefore, is aware of both his own existence and the physical transformation he undergoes. This binarism of doubles in Stevenson (Hyde embodies the dark and repressed part of the good doctor) has no place in the contemporary formulation, as several students point out, since in Fernández Cubas's story the continuities between original and copy are indistinguishable. The exploration of identity in "Nona's room" also presents specific aspects that favour the reading of gender, as a certain parallelism is established between the problem of the double and the transformation of the female body and psyche at puberty (the story emphasises Nona's voracity and her unusual size, as well as her isolation from the rest of the family). Finally, the idea of normality, destabilised in Fernández Cubas's story, is, on the other hand, resolutely established in Stevenson's novel, which is transcended by the values of Victorian society, which has led our students to suggest an existential formulation of the double in "Nona's Room" and a more psychological one in *Jekyll and Hyde*.

To finish, the third activity of the project consisted of comparing the novels *Fruta podrida* [*Rotten Fruit*] (2007) by Lina Meruane and *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) by H.G. Wells for students to work on issues related to biotechnology, biopolitics, transhumanism and feminism. They were asked to read the following theoretical texts: “El sexo de la biotecnología” [“The Sex of Biotechnology”] by Verena Stolcke (1998), “¿Qué hay de malo en la eugenesia?” [“What’s Wrong with Eugenics?”] by Victoria Camps (2002), and “A History of Transhumanist Thought” by Nick Bostrom (2011).

Nineteen students took part in this action and posted thirty comments on the blog. The dialogue between Meruane’s novel *Fruta podrida* and H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* focused on the limits of bioethics and patriarchal technology. The reflections included in the blog highlighted the absence of female characters in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, unlike in Meruane’s novel, where the protagonist narrator is a woman. In both texts, however, the scientists belonging to the ruling class are males who aim to control and dominate the creation of life. In this sense, the students considered that in both works nature, animals, and female bodies (as fertile organic matter) became objects rather than subjects. Again, they noted the centrality of the female body as a contemporary concern in the authors’ narratives: while Wells focuses on ethical and philosophical questions about the limits and consequences of genetic manipulation (and science), Meruane denounces the abuses of biotechnology and the neoliberal market of the pharmaceutical and health industries on women’s bodies (patriarchal biopolitics). The animals that Dr. Moreau experiments on, as well as the female bodies in Meruane’s novel, are placed on the same level, becoming subaltern and vulnerable living beings. The reading of *Fruta podrida*, in short, allowed the students to realise that, while Meruane’s novel is traversed by issues of class, race, gender and the sexuality of the characters, the eugenic practices posited in Wells’ novel do not consider such intersectionality.

3. Project Evaluation

In order to evaluate this Innovation Project, we generated a multiple answer questionnaire for students to express their views on b-learning and Reverse Reading, as well as their perception of the various aspects regarding both the implemented pedagogical design and the learning they acquired (López-Pellisa & Casas, 2021). Only ten women students (out of twenty-three participants) participated in the survey. Within this sample, 100 % are women from diverse geographical origins in Asia, Latin America, and Europe. It is interesting to note that 80 % of them had never participated in an educational innovation project before, so their motivation in relation to the proposal may be perceived as quite high.

In this section we offer a brief analysis of the main results obtained during the three activities of the project: reflections on b-learning, Reverse Reading, and the critical revision of the canon from the fantastic and feminism.

3.1. Reflections on b-learning

Regarding b-learning, 50 % of the students prefer the hybrid format (Online-Onsite) for the development of the Innovation Project; 30 % are indifferent to either format while 20 % would have preferred it if activities were largely virtual [fig. 4]. It is likely that our proposal was reinforced by the acquired habits imposed by the [COVID19] confinement and that during the following months our students had normalised this mixed system.

Figure 4

(Left) In which format would you have preferred this teaching innovation project to take place? [Online format only / Face-to-face format only / Hybrid format (online & face-to-face) / Indifferent.] (Right) Has the participation of teachers and students from other institutions enriched the debate and the exchange of critical opinions? [Yes / No / Sometimes].



Source: own elaboration

The possibility of working from the blog and the semi-virtual debates has allowed the exchange with students from other universities and promoted the internationalisation of our activities. These interactions have been positively valued: 90 % of the students consider that the participation of lecturers and students from other universities has enriched the debate and the exchange of critical views [fig. 4]. Regarding the results obtained in terms of learning and inter-university interaction through the development of the blog, 90 % of the participants consider that reading other people's reflections has helped them to develop their comments, contributed ideas and made a significant contribution to their learning process. Paradoxically, even though the readings of others were positively valued, only 2 % wrote their contributions after reading the comments of their peers, and 5 % always wrote on the blog without reading what others had expressed. This leads us to think that the assigned task has been solved immediately, often in a hurry, rushing to meet the deadlines, although students did read the other comments on the blog afterwards and prepared the different points of view for their participation in the debate and sharing their views. 5 % considered that the information, references and quotations included by others in the blog would be useful for their future work, and 6 % acknowledged that seeing how others work helped them to structure and organise their own critical thinking. They considered that activities which encourage mirror learning are highly beneficial. The students were particularly satisfied with having been

active agents in the process of interpreting the texts and the critical-theoretical exchange of the issues addressed in the classroom.

Even though the hybrid format proposal met with student satisfaction, 30 % noted that the University of Alcalá lacks adequate technological resources. The hybrid sessions (face-to-face class combined with videoconferencing via Blackboard Collaborate) were often hampered by sound and latency problems, as the classroom lacks multimedia facilities prepared for telepresence. This may have hindered the fluency of the interventions and occasionally broke the natural rhythm of the conversation.

3.2. Reverse Reading applications and results

The Reverse Reading methodology requires the Flipped Classroom to develop properly, as students must read and prepare in advance —on their own— the texts to be discussed in the classroom. The lowest rated sessions were those aimed at evaluating the guidelines given by teachers to enable them to carry out Reverse Reading. Regarding the first activity, 50 % answered the question with “good”, 3 % with “very good” and 1 % with “fair”. Regarding the second activity, 60 % considered that the guidelines offered were “very good”, compared to 2 % who answered “good” and 1 % “fair”. Finally, regarding the third activity, 60 % responded “very good” and 2 % “good”. It may be seen, therefore, that the activities which demanded harder work were those that had to be prepared at home following the lecturers’ instructions. We think that the third activity was the most highly rated, because, at this point in the project, the students already had sufficient experience. We believe too this may be due to the poor Reverse Reading habit in the field of literary studies and to their reading inertia (based on diachrony and on the idea of heritage and influence)¹³.

¹³ One of the students who responded to the survey says revealingly: “Personally, I found it difficult to relate the two works to be contrasted —I didn’t really understand what conclusion could be drawn from the exercise of reading them in a different order. I also found it difficult to apply the selected theme to one of the works. But in the end, it was an experience from which I was able to learn a lot. Now I unconsciously apply this knowledge to new contents”.

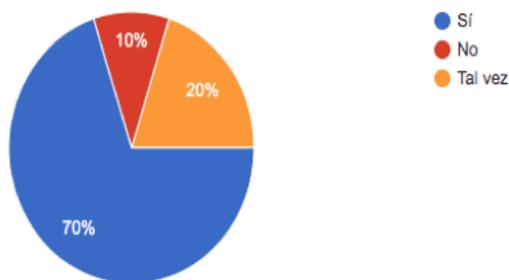
Nevertheless, although students were not actively aware of the procedure, as we will see in the next section, their commentaries revealed a good use of Reverse Reading.

3.3. A critical review of the canon from the angles of the fantastic and feminism

One of the aims of this Project was to allow the students to develop capacities and mechanisms to analyse the canon critically: 70 % considered that the Project had helped them to develop skills and abilities for the critical analysis of the literary canon and 60 % asserted that reading contemporary women writers had enabled them to consider aspects of the canonical texts that had not been addressed before. It is relevant to note that as answer to the question of whether male and female authors approach the same themes from different perspectives, 70 % of the participants considered that the author's gender implied a distinctive point of view and approach to the issues [fig. 5].

Figure 5

After your participation in the Project, do you think that the male authors approach the same issues from different perspectives than the female authors? Yes / No / Maybe



Source: own elaboration

The examples provided by the students reinforce the idea of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1991) and of gender as a cultural and performative construction (Butler, 1990). Thus, the attention to the body, the greater presence of female protagonists, the inclusion of certain themes such as motherhood (conventional and alternative), the

reflection on power structures based on sexual binarism, etc., are constants in fantasy literature produced by women, so that many of the classic motifs of the genre are revisited in order to raise issues closely linked to the feminine. We provide below some reflections by the students on these differences:

- I think that, perhaps, the themes “of the moment” are addressed by both (male and female authors). The different perspective is due to the structural problem of society that has always instructed us on “how to approach” or look at those themes and, in accepting it, I suppose we also let it show in our writings. However, I do not believe that this is always the case. Nor do I believe that the same themes are always dealt with. But I have to say that I do think it is logical (and it is seen in all the works by women that we have read) that women expose subjects that have always been taboo and of which men (if I may say so) have no idea. It is also curious how (in most cases, not so much in Henry James, but basically too) women writers present women as protagonists in their works and male writers present men as protagonists. I can’t think of any specific examples right now...
- Rodríguez Pape approaches the theme of the monster as a figure of resistance in relation to the monstrous in society, she gives the monster a voice and vindicates its transgressive role, unlike James, where the monster shows, but does not say. I think that in the first case the monster is a symbolic figure and in the second it is an indicial figure, so I know that the approach is different, richer, more complex.
- In the case of “La habitación de Nona” and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, space is of decisive importance as a key to the reading of both texts. It is possible to establish an analogy in the delimitation between the interior and exterior realms, the former being the one that confers, in both cases, the possibility of liberation, of allowing oneself to be without the impositions enforced by the opposing outside world. In Fernández Cubas, however, we are dealing with a female character between childhood and adolescence, which means that the whole space is configured from a diametrically opposed perspective to that of Stevenson’s novel, in which we are presented with an aristocratic Londoner, a bachelor. Likewise, the need for the double in one and the other has very different origins. We could almost speak of triviality if we overlook the criticism from the point of view of psychoanalysis when we speak of the

emergence of Dr. Jekyll's double, while Nona's double is self-justifying.

To conclude, after analysing the process and the results of the activities, as well as the answers to the evaluation questionnaire, we may see that the proposal has enabled the students to develop a critical judgement of the processes of canonisation of literary works. In the comments below, a change in the students' outlook and behaviour in relation to Literary History may be perceived, as well as a relativisation of concepts often assumed uncritically, such as quality and universality. We provide some answers to the question "To what extent has this innovation project influenced your training?", "Why?":

- Rethinking history and analysing it critically and with a gender perspective, in the world in which we find ourselves (which seems to be offering us this opportunity) is very important, especially for our graduate or postgraduate courses related to literature. This project has had an impact on me, "obliging me", at least, to do it for a few hours or a few days. Although, in my case, frankly, I usually do it daily and away from the project and the classroom. But I am aware that other fellow students are not used to it, and it is a great influence and a necessary cultural, social, and political enrichment.
- I definitely have a new critical view of the literary canon and this critical view brought by the innovation project may be extended to other areas of knowledge and to my work as a professional.
- I think I have already said it a bit if we join the previous comments. This project has been key to demystifying the influence of the (male) authors of the canon and their texts on the rest of the writers who succeed them in time and, above all, on women writers, on whom the prejudices of "daughters of", "heirs of", weigh even more heavily. If we understand this exercise as the configuration of a counter-canon (women writers of the fantastic) from which to read the "established" authors, we feel that we have subverted this condition of female successors.

The widespread idea (Bloom, 1998: 193) that the consideration of "classic" comes from the work itself is revealed as questionable, to say the least, when we understand that literature is part of a system in which dominant social groups, educational institutions, certain critical traditions, etc., manage to make their criteria prevail. Starting from the students' previous knowledge of fantastic literature and of certain well-

known and extremely popular authors, our project has tried to offer new *significant super-ordered learning*, in Moreira's terminology (2012: 31), to the extent that new concepts have managed to subordinate older ones.

Conclusions

Despite the size of the sample, the results of the project highlight the extent to which uniformity and homogeneity in education favour neither diversity nor the inclusion of other gazes besides the ones established by the institutional canon (Johansson, 2021; Ballester Pardo, 2021). The survey with the students involved in the project has yielded overwhelming results: while 90 % of the respondents were familiar with the names of H. James, R. L. Stevenson and H.G. Wells, and 50 % had read at least one of their works, merely 10 % were familiar with the names of Solange Rodríguez Pappe, Cristina Fernández Cubas and Lina Meruane [figs. 6, 7]. None of the students had ever read their works. It is a remarkable fact, as none of these women writers are on the margins of the literary system. They have received important awards, their work is published by renowned publishers, they are visible and appear relatively frequently in academic venues, in the media and so on. One of them, Cristina Fernández Cubas, was awarded the “Premio Nacional de las Letras” [the National Arts Prize].

Figure 6

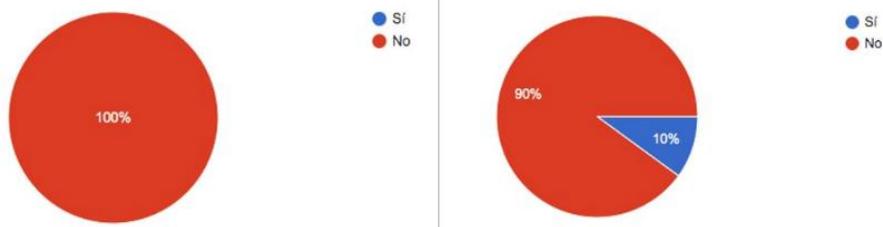
(Left) *Had you read the works of these authors prior to this project?* (Right) *Did you know the names of these authors prior to this project?*



Source: own elaboration

Figure 7

(Left) Had you read the works of these female authors prior to this project? (Right) Did you know the names of these female authors prior to this project?



Source: own elaboration

The answers regarding the study and the presence of fantastic literature and science fiction in higher education were also significant. 90 % of the students had never worked with any male or female author of fantastic literature and/or of science fiction before, which shows the marginality of these genres against the predominance of realism. We also noted a deficit in the teaching of contemporary literature. We think that introducing it, connecting it with the social reality of the moment and with the literary system of which it forms part, could benefit our students, and increase their degree of satisfaction. The fact that the students were able to meet the authors in person was very enriching for them, as well as having a positive impact on their motivation regarding the learning process. It should be borne in mind that, in the faculties of Philosophy and Arts, most students are women, so we think it is important to reflect on who the academic content is aimed at and what our students' interests, profiles, and needs are.

Finally, the canon, as everything else, is built around social conventions bound to power relations and class which should not go unnoticed for readers, critics, institutional discourse, and academia. We need to re-think our choice of books and our criteria so that the Literature classroom may become a space of reflection where we may invite our students both to read (and to analyse) our classics and to question the canon, so that the latter may not seem unquestionable, but fluid, in an ongoing process of development. Following the results obtained, we hope that projects such as this one may help to reflect on how we develop our literary curriculum and make our syllabi more inclusive.

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