

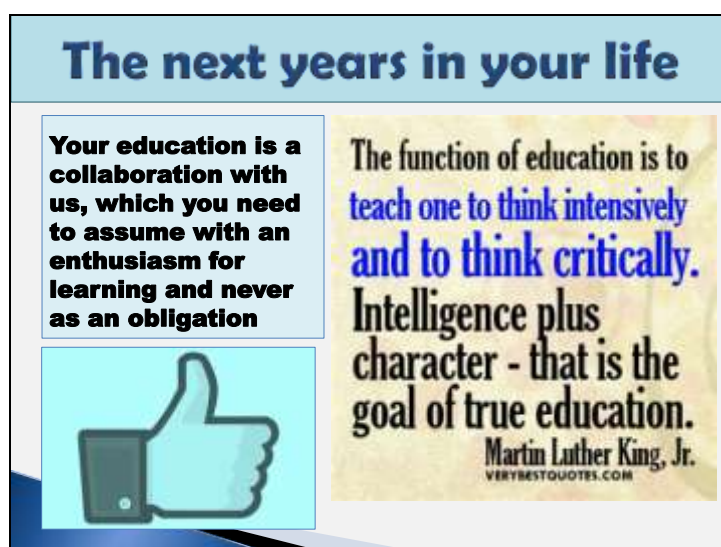


**NOTE: This is the text and PowerPoint presentation of the lecture I delivered to first-year students for the inauguration of the academic year 2018-19 of the BA in English Studies of the Universidad de Murcia on 19 September 2018**

It is a pleasure to be here with you in Murcia, a city which I visit for the third time and from which I keep very fond memories. Thank you very much for the invitation!

I have been asked to tell you about what we, teachers, do as researchers in the Humanities. A researcher, by the way, is an investigator of a specific field and a producer of knowledge, mainly through publications in our case but also through the application to real-life practices and objects of whatever we find out in the course of research.

I'll take the chance here to argue that you are not only students who need to learn from us but also *potential researchers* from whom we can learn.



Sara Martín Alegre, 'Opening Up the Humanities', 2018

I will also insist that the next years in your life will be of paramount importance in your personal biography. Your education, I need to stress, is a collaboration with us, which you need to assume with enthusiasm for learning and never as an obligation. As a teacher and researcher, I have made a point of carrying into my professional life all the passion for learning that I had when I was your age, thirty-five years ago. I would be very happy if I can transmit a little of it here today.

**Cultural Studies**

**Texts, including the university, must be studied in the context of the material conditions of their production**

Before I speak about popular fiction, I need to describe to you the current state of the institution you have joined, the Spanish university. I am a specialist in Cultural Studies and, so, I teach that texts must always be studied within the context of their material conditions of production. The university is a very big text that needs to be ‘read’ and understood in this way.

**Research: producing knowledge**



**CONTRA LOS RECORTES EN EDUCACIÓN**

**The university is supposed to provide teachers/researchers with the infrastructure to do good work but this is not happening**

- Registration fees are expensive, there are few grants
- Students need to work or apply for loans

We, university teachers, are very different from secondary school teachers because we are supposed to combine teaching students with doing research, that is to say, producing new knowledge. As Mary Shelley narrates in her famous novel *Frankenstein* (2018), now celebrating its 200th anniversary, Victor Frankenstein, a university student, does his research alone in his private lab. This is quite absurd, for knowledge can only progress if researchers share their work and learn from each other's findings. The university is supposed to provide us with the infrastructure and the facilities to do our work as best as we can but this is not at all what is happening.

I am sure you have already noticed that something is wrong with the Spanish university: to begin with, registration fees are expensive and there are few grants. This might not be the case for you, but most of my students, from the second year onwards, work. This is not an ideal situation (as I know, for I was also a working student). In other countries, such as the United States, students get loans that take decades to repay. I was horrified to read this summer that an American bank is forcing the family and friends of a young man who died aged 23 to return his student's loan of 100,000\$.

**Working conditions**

**Students should be aware of who your teachers are and in which conditions we work**

- **1: it is very difficult to do good research when you are hired only part-time**
- **2: force the Government to invest much more money in your education**
- **3: many of your teachers are making a major effort to offer quality teaching**

Our working conditions = student learning conditions

If on the side of the students, then, things are hard, you should know that they are also very hard on the side of the teachers.

I believe that students should be aware of who your teachers are and in which conditions we work. Perhaps you think that we are a privileged bunch that earns a lot of money and that being hired for a full-time position is easy, given the right contacts. Well, this is not correct. I am one of the most privileged teachers but even so, although I was hired when I was 25, I had to wait for eleven years, until I was 36, to get tenure, that is to say, a contract for life (I'm a 'Titular',

technically, then, a civil servant of the Spanish Government). My British equivalent earns twice my salary...

Since 2007, with the excuse of the crisis, it is impossible for any young teacher to be hired full-time, as I was; only part-time positions as 'profesor asociado' are offered, which means that, unless you are very lucky and get a grant, you need to self-finance your doctoral studies and work elsewhere.

This situation has been going on for so long that in my Department the average age is now 53!!! Some associates, now in their 40s, have been waiting for more than fifteen years to get a full-time job, which means that the generational gap between us and you, students, is fast growing. Why am I telling you this? For three reasons: one, to explain that it is very difficult to do good research when you are hired only part-time; two, to stress that you need to force the Government to invest much more money in your education and three, because you must understand that many of your teachers are making a major effort to offer quality teaching.

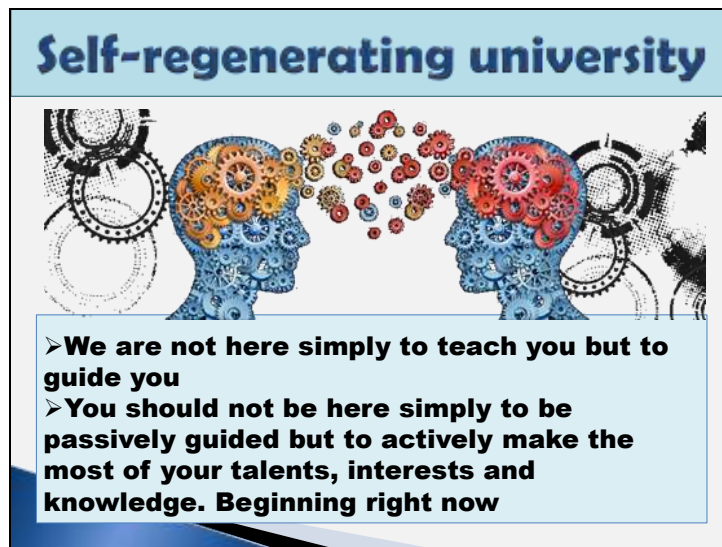


This is why it is so important that you help us to do our job. How? By taking your education into your hands.

I don't know how things work here but in my university, the Autònoma of Barcelona, students are free to attend class or not. We don't check whether they take notes in class or read the books we discuss; it is easy to see, however, that if you come to class having prepared the lessons in advance and take notes, half the work is done. We often get students who are bored in class and once a student told me to my face that she would never visit the library just because I said so. This is the equivalent of an athlete declaring that she doesn't like sport!!

Sara Martín Alegre, 'Opening Up the Humanities', 2018

Students must be interested in their education, otherwise there is no point in being here with us. For this is who we, the teachers, are: people who love studying so much that we have never stopped. This is the basis of our research. Sadly, we see our classroom often treated as an extension of secondary school, a place for compulsory advanced education. This is not what we offer. We are, believe me, highly qualified professionals who try to do our best with the limited resources and possibilities of the Spanish university. Do use us, please, we're great resources.



Now that I have got off my chest the speech on the sorry state of the university, I can announce the main topic of my talk, my thesis: the Humanities cannot grow without your contribution.

Unlike secondary school, the university is a self-generating machine, since it is not just a place where students train but a constant instrument to innovate knowledge. How can you innovate, however, without listening to what younger people have to offer? Although this will sound like personal marketing, and it is, I am going to tell you about my own case as a teacher and a researcher, not because it is modelic in any way but because I hope it makes you think about what you can contribute to the Humanities. I'll repeat, then, my main message: we need to work as a team, students and teachers. Although this may sound paradoxical, we are not here simply to teach you but to guide you. You should not be here simply to be passively guided but to actively make the most of your talents, interests and knowledge. Beginning right now.

**Popular fictions:  
Genres**

- **Action and adventure**
- **Fantasy**
- **Science fiction**
- **Gothic and horror**
- **Detective fiction**
- **Romance**
- **Historical fiction**
- **Children's fictions**
- **Young adult**
- **Western**



**Ellen Ripley, first  
modern female hero**

My second message refers to the specific field I specialize in within the Humanities. My area is English Literature and Cultural Studies, which is immense. I teach and do research on popular fictions, above all in relation to gender, since I am also a Gender Studies specialist. I write academic criticism from a feminist, anti-patriarchal point of view, trying to find positive representations of men and women in popular texts.

Many people still resist the idea that the gender representations we see on the media and in fiction are not relevant for real life. I am sure, however, that you are very much aware that how men and women are represented is very important. Representation is actually so important that in Spain Franco's dictatorial regime (1939-1975) established a very harsh type of censorship to control their social impact. Censorship actually lasted until 1980, already in democratic times.

***El Ministerio del Tiempo***

- **Spanish science fantasy series about time travel**
- **Created by Javier Olivares & Pablo Olivares**
- **RTVE, 2015-2017, 34 episodes**



Representation is particularly important for women, as it is still very limited. Let me give you an example, and a reason why popular fiction should be studied within the Humanities. The popular Spanish fantasy series *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (2015-17) offered an interesting lesson about the education of women. As you probably know, and much more so if you are a 'ministérico' as the series' fans are called, Aura Garrido played a 19th century female character called Amèlia Folch, who was actually a composite of three real-life women: the first three female students who got a five-year degree, a 'Licenciatura', in Spain.



That happened back in 1882 and they were three Catalan students of Medicine: Maria Dolors Aleu i Riera, Martina Castells i Ballespí, and Maria Elena Maseras Ribera. Dolors Aleu i Riera was the first woman ever to obtain a university degree in Spain, and also the first to work as a doctor, once she obtained her doctorate. Actually, Martina Castells was the first woman to complete a doctorate, which is the highest type of degree, in Gynaecology and Paediatrics, but she could never practice Medicine because of the negative pressure she endured. The same happened to Elena Maseras, the first woman ever to register in a Spanish university, back in 1872.


What did women who wanted a university education do before? And, of course, I mean upper and middle-class, not working-class women (or men).

Well, Concepción Arenal, a key figure in 19th century Spanish intellectual life, had to disguise herself as a boy to attend the Law School lectures in Madrid's Universidad Central between 1841 and 1846; when she was discovered, Arenal was granted the privilege of attending the lectures (sitting apart from her male peers) but not of taking the degree officially.

I'll ask you now to imagine the young men here in this classroom pretending to be women for you to understand how Arenal must have felt. Cross-dressing can be great fun but not when this is the only chance to get an education.

### Concepción Arenal (1820-1893)

- **Key figure in 19th century Spanish intellectual life (feminism, paedagogy, justice, social issues)**
  - *La mujer del porvenir* (1869)
  - *La cuestión social* (1880)
  - *La instrucción del pueblo* (1881)



La sociedad no puede en justicia prohibir el ejercicio honrado de sus facultades a la mitad del género humano.  
— Concepción Arenal —

Emilia Pardo Bazán, one of the greatest Spanish authors and intellectuals, could never attend university because her wealthy father denied her an advanced education. She eventually became in 1916 the first 'catedrática' (the highest teaching rank) in Spain, in charge of Neo-Latin Literatures at the Universidad Central de Madrid, today Complutense. In protest, the students—all young men—refused to attend her lectures, until she quit. I know how I would feel if my male students decided to walk out on me, and I think I understand how humiliated she felt.

### Emilia Pardo Bazán(1851-1921)

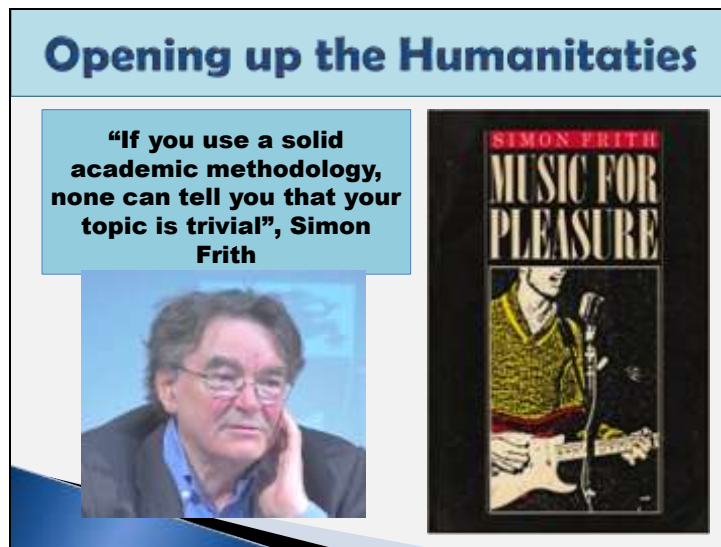
- **Key author in Spanish Literature, realism (*Los pazos de Ulloa*, 1886) and fantasy**
- **Feminist vindicator of the education of women (*La mujer española*, 1890)**



- **First woman professor (1916), Neo-Latin Literatures, Universidad Central de Madrid (Complutense)**
- **Could never teach (male students' boycott)**



Please note that women could only register in the Spanish universities freely from 1910 onwards, a little more than 100 years ago. In 1940, one year after the end of the Civil War, girl students were only 12'6% of all students in Spain; now they are a 54% majority and 58% of all graduates. And I learned all this because I got curious about Amèlia Folch in *El Ministerio del Tiempo*. I'll thank now Javier Olivares and Pablo Olivares, the series' creators, for bringing to our collective attention the issue of women's education in the past.




How, then, do we open up the Humanities to include the study of texts such as *El Ministerio del Tiempo* or any other popular fictions you might find relevant? How do we overcome the crisis of legitimation so that certain excluded topics can be part of our degrees and our research? I once asked this question to Professor Simon Frith, who teaches English Literature at the University of Stirling in Scotland and has devoted his whole career to researching pop and rock. He gave me an unforgettable answer: "if you use a solid academic methodology, none can tell you that your topic is trivial".

Actually, I still get negative criticism depending on my choice of topic. I think, however, that you will easily understand that the relevance and interest of a topic has nothing to do with the research results. You can innovate on any subject, from William Shakespeare to *Harry Potter*, to which I will return, but this does not mean that if you choose Shakespeare your work automatically has a higher value than if you focus on Rowling. As Professor Frith taught me, this depends on your commitment and quality as a researcher, as an investigator. Here is my message, then: if you're passionate about something within your area of studies, there are ways to incorporate your passion into your own studies and our collective knowledge, as long as you present your ideas with

academic rigour, following a method. If you ever ask yourself ‘how come they don’t teach this or that...?’, then you need to become the specialist, the innovator.

**‘How come they don’t teach...?’**

➤ **If you’re passionate about something within your area of studies there are ways to incorporate your passion into your studies and our collective knowledge, as long as you present your ideas with academic rigour, following a method**



**If you ever ask yourself ‘how come they don’t teach this or that...?’, then you need to become the specialist, the innovator**

Please, forgive me for using my own case but this is the one I know best... As a student, I wanted to learn more about how adaptations connect Literature with film and television. I also wanted to know more about the history of gothic, fantasy and science fiction. This is why I asked my most receptive teachers to guide me. They did so, and very generously, even in the case when their own research interests were very different from mine. Often, students simply assume that certain topics cannot be dealt with but my advice is that *you always ask*. Trust me: teachers love answering questions, just don’t be afraid of asking them.

**Recent TFG (dissertations)**

**Ana Sáez Garrido, “Discourses of Masculinity in Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* Trilogy: Defending the Alternative Man, Peeta Mellark”**



Sara Martín Alegre, ‘Opening Up the Humanities’, 2018

Now I am the kind of teacher to whom students approach with all sorts of proposals, which is great for me because in this way I learn much. Let me tell you about some recent cases. In 2017 I tutored a TFG (a BA dissertation) about Peeta Mellark's alternative masculinity in Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*. Then, I included the trilogy in my elective course on Gender Studies the following year, 2017-18, and my tutoree Ana Sáez Garrido (who chose the topic of her TFG) was a guest lecturer. I have now finished my own article about *The Hunger Games*, which deals with President Alma Coin's relationship with Katniss Everdeen, thanks to Ana's inspiration.



Although I am not a gamer, I have so far tutored two TFGs on videogames. Josué Monchán, a professional videogame script writer and teacher, produced a great dissertation on *The Walking Dead* in 2017. Inspired by him, Andrea Atrio chose me in 2018 to tutor her TFG on *The Last of Us*. Her wonderful work on the representation of women in this videogame was essential for me to offer a lecture last March 2018 on masculinity in *The Last of Us*. This was for Josué's class in the degree in Videogame Design at the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid. A nice way of exchanging knowledge! I am, however, too inexperienced to formally introduce Games Studies in my university, for which someone like Andrea would be necessary.

The best innovative collaboration ever with my students in my 27 years as a teacher has been, no doubt, the elective course on *Harry Potter* that I taught in 2013-14 within the degree in English Studies at UAB. Look how it started. During the Christmas break in 2011, I saw all the Harry Potter films and wrote a post in my blog—*The Joys of Teaching Literature*, <http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalagre>—saying that I would like to teach a course on Rowling's saga.

A student, Alicia Vázquez, emailed me at once to ask me what I needed. I replied that I needed 20 students. I got eventually 45, of which 10 were auditors (from our BA and MA degrees).

**Harry Potter elective(2013-14)**

***The Joys of Teaching Literature,***  
**[blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre](http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre)**




I designed the *Harry Potter* course checking with the first 10 or 12 students that answered Alicia's call on Facebook which topics they were interested in. I left the lectures on fan fiction directly in the hands of some students, for they had the expertise which I lacked. I applied Professor Frith's lesson to the study of Rowling's series and I can tell you that the two e-books we published on the digital repository of UAB are excellent academic work, to the point that the more successful one is the volume with the students' papers (more than 2700 downloads). The other volume, which gathers together their essays on the experience of reading *Harry Potter*, has been the basis of my own research, which is now focused on Voldemort.

**The online volumes (2014)**

***Charming and Bewitching:  
Considering the Harry  
Potter Series***  
**[https://ddd.uab.cat/record/1  
22987](https://ddd.uab.cat/record/122987)**  
**+2700 downloads**

***Addictive and Wonderful:  
The Experience of Reading  
the Harry Potter Series***  
**[https://ddd.uab.cat/record/1  
18225](https://ddd.uab.cat/record/118225)**  
**+1300 downloads**



**I'm Ravenclaw!!! And you...?**



**Pottercon 3 (24-25 November),**  
<https://bcnpottercon.wordpress.com/>  
**Lecture on Severus Snape**  
**Sara Martín Alegre**  
[Sara.Martin@uab.cat](mailto:Sara.Martin@uab.cat)

I learned, in short, even more than my students both as a teacher (I tried all kinds of experiments!, and even had an MA student give a lecture dressed as Prof. Quirell...) and as a researcher. Besides, I can now say that I am Ravenclaw! You'll find me next November in the third Pottercon festival in Barcelona, where I hope to discuss Severus Snape. If, by the way, you want to get in touch about *Harry Potter* or any other topic, my name is, remember, Sara Martín Alegre and here is my email address.

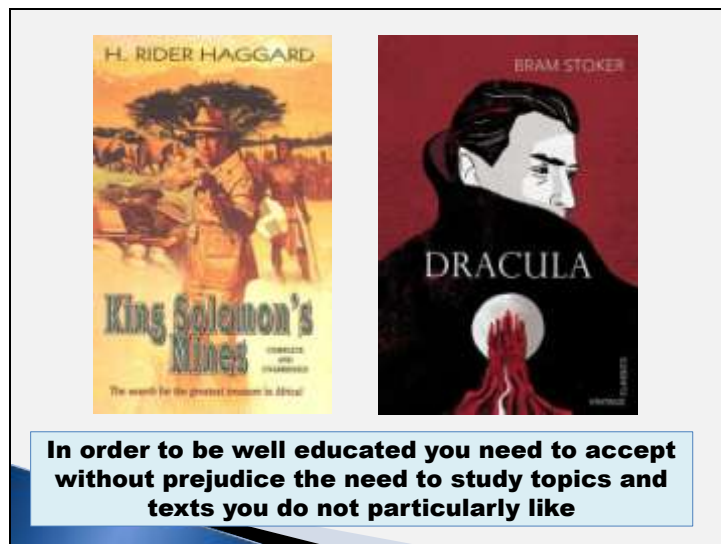
Let me please clarify that our reading of J.K. Rowling's series was extremely critical and not at all a fan club celebration (though we were all Potterheads). The best thing for me as a teacher was the certainty that every lecture would be great fun because everyone in class had read the text and wanted very much to debate it. I was often corrected by my students, a great pleasure!

**Victorian Literature 2017-18**



Sara Martín Alegre, 'Opening Up the Humanities', 2018

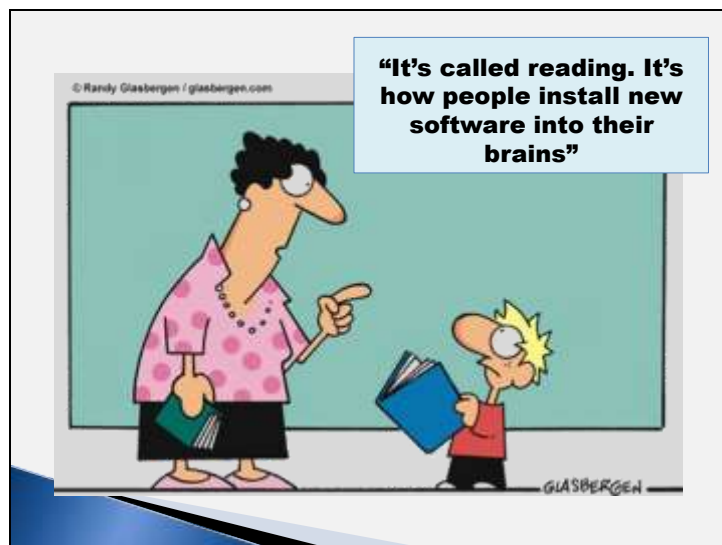
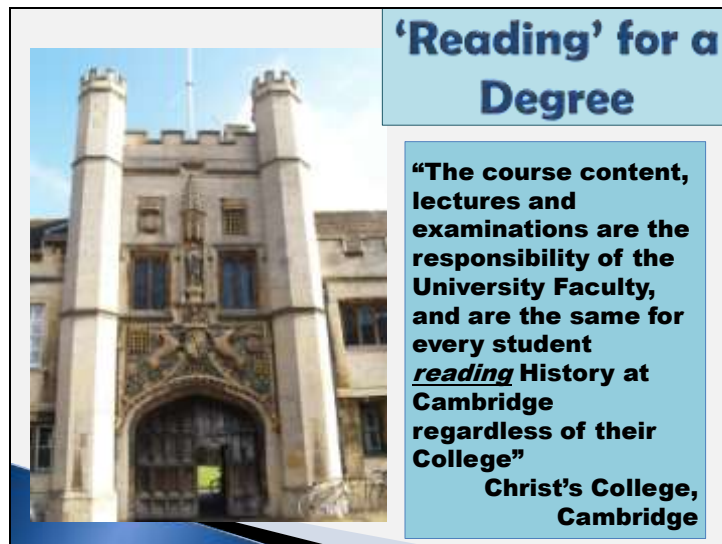
I have never found again that enthusiasm, even though in the last edition of Victorian Literature, a second-year course which I have taught for many years, my two colleagues and I decided to include Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. I understand that not everyone finds Charles Dickens as marvellous as I do but why our classes were half empty when we three taught *Dracula* depressed me so much that this year I have asked to teach some other course (English Romanticism).



When I asked the keener students who did attend my lectures about their classmates' lack of interest they told me that your generation rejects obligation (do you?). Victorian Literature is compulsory (obligatory), like most courses you will take, so here's another important message: in order to be well educated you need to accept without prejudice the need to study topics and texts you do not particularly like. As a Literature teacher I fail to understand why students do not read the books we choose. You register in our degrees *freely* and we assume that you do want to learn— if reading *Dracula*, which is great fun, becomes an awful obligation then you're in the wrong place... A university education is a great opportunity to develop your own abilities and this passes through opening your mind to all kinds of texts and ideas. You cannot do that if you systematically reject what we offer.

My concern with students' reluctance to reading goes far beyond Literature. Just consider this sentence on the website of Christ's College in Cambridge, about their History BA degree: "The course content, lectures and examinations are the responsibility of the University Faculty, and are the same for every student reading History at Cambridge regardless of their College". 'Faculty', by the way, does not mean 'Facultad', which translates usually as 'School' in English but 'academic staff'. Look at the verb before 'History': it is not 'study' but 'read'. The University of Cambridge

(where, by the way, students actually take few lectures and seminars) understands that being a student is a task concerned primarily with reading, for you can only study if you read. Here in Spain we tend to spend too many hours in the classroom, which affects negatively the time for reading but my point is still valid: *a student is a person who reads to learn*. All the time.



This is why a student who does not like reading can never be a successful student. The same applies to students who never make notes, the majority in my classes. Obviously, one can also learn by listening at a teacher, in the classroom or on YouTube, but within limits. I recently heard a student leaving the classroom of another teacher ask a classmate 'so, will you read the book he recommended?'; the young man replied 'no need; the teacher has described it well enough'. I just fail to see how my analysis of Emily Brontë or Stephen King could replace the much richer

experience of reading their texts. Beyond Literature, let me stress that what can be learned in one hour in class is very little in comparison to one hour of reading. I mean pencil in hand to make notes and underline passages (not in the library books!).



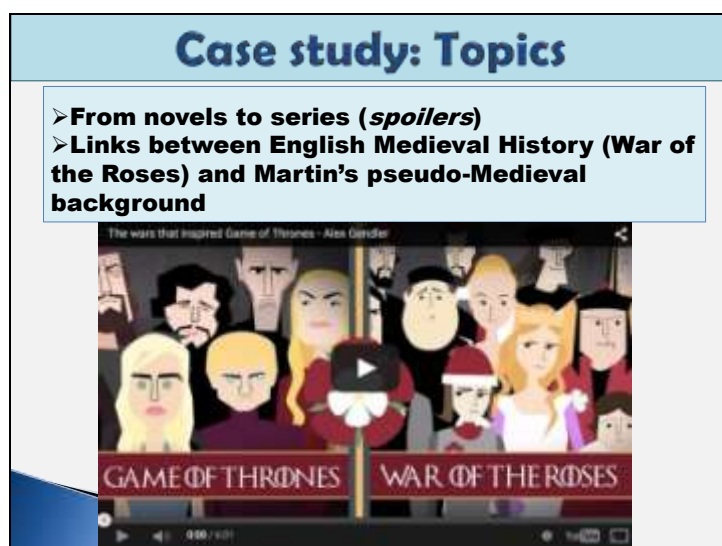
Many attribute the loss of interest in reading among university students to the impact of popular fictions, above all in their audiovisual versions, as film or TV. I don't agree, simply because students tend to read books that have been adapted. The staff in the History degree at Cambridge which I have mentioned are worried because the demand for these studies have gone up. Why is that worrying, you may wonder? Well, the teachers argue that students' interest springs from their watching series like *The Tudors* or reading Hilary Mantel's popular historical novels. I should think that, on the contrary, the teachers could use these popular fictions as a tool to teach History instead of squandering the students' interest in them.

Actually, whereas in Spain we are tied down by the strict rules of the Ministerio about what we can teach, in the Anglo-American universities there is a potent offer regarding popular fiction based on demand. Harvard has already offered this past 2017-18 the course "The Real *Game of Thrones*: From Modern Myths to Medieval Models". The database of Modern Language Association (MLA), already offers a list of 95 academic works on Martin's saga and its TV adaptation, including 63 book chapters, 26 journal articles and 4 collective volumes. Perhaps, after all, we're not doing so poorly because Dialnet, the main Spanish academic database, offers a list of 20 works on *El Ministerio del Tiempo*, though I doubt very much that it has been the central topic in a course or seminar.





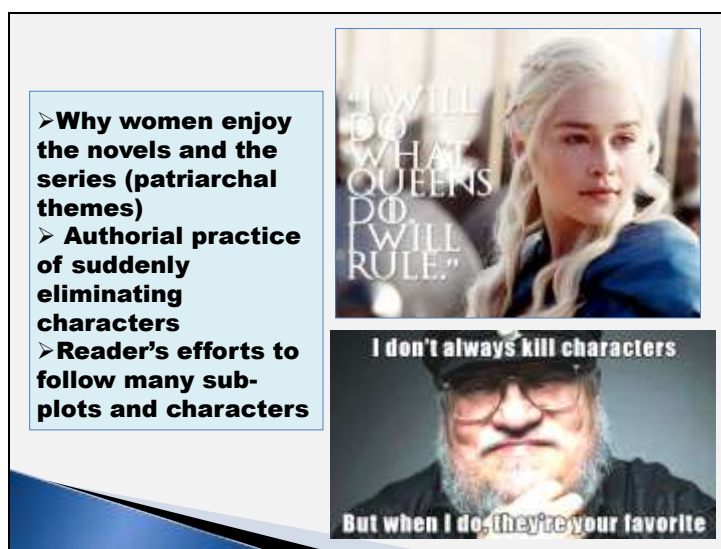
*Game of Thrones* is a fascinating case study. As you know, it's a series created by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, produced by US pay television network HBO. It was launched back in 2011 and it is expected to offer its final eighth season in 2019. This is the most popular series of recent times and the recipient of multiple awards. The plot narrates, against a pseudo-medieval background with fantasy elements, the confrontations of three powerful families or houses: Targaryen, Lannister and Stark. As I'm sure you also know, the series is based on the saga *A Song of Ice and Fire* which American author George R.R. Martin started publishing in 1996. A constant procrastinator, Martin has repeatedly failed to meet his publisher's deadline for *The Winds of Winter*, the sixth volume in the seven-volume series. He published the fifth one, *A Dance with Dragons*, back in 2011, when the series was first broadcast. Some are joking that he's too interested in watching the TV series to go on with the novels...



Sara Martín Alegre, 'Opening Up the Humanities', 2018

If I were to teach a course on *Game of Thrones*, I'd rather wait until Martin published the last novel. But, since this might happen after I retire, here are some notes about the topics I would deal with (in case *you* can teach the course):

- how have plot and characters been altered in the process of adaptation?
- how have the script writers coped with Martin's delays?
- how should we understand the concept of the spoiler as applied to *Game of Thrones*, series, since the novels are there to be read? (at least some!)
- the links between English Medieval History, specifically the War of the Roses between the Lancasters, Yorks and Tudors of the 15th century with the fight for power of the Lannisters, Targaryens and Starks in Martin's fake Middle Ages
- why *Game of Thrones* is so successful among women, despite its blatant patriarchal narrative focused on monarchic power and, subsequently, how gender issues are presented in the series
- the authorial habit of suddenly eliminating principal and secondary characters
- the strategies readers use to remember so many characters and subplots, particularly in view of the differences with the series (what happens if you see the series first)




- why the series is successful world-wide and how this connects with HBO's business model, very different from that of RTVE, the public television behind *El Ministerio del Tiempo*
- the problem of how we can measure audiences in our time of illegal downloading; is the audience for *Game of Thrones* bigger or actually smaller than that for 1990s series such as *Twin Peaks* (ABC) or *X-Files* (Fox TV)?

■ Martin's place in the history of modern fantasy, from Tolkien to Terry Pratchett

➤ **Martin in the context of modern fantasy, from J.R.R. Tolkien to Terry Pratchett**

➤ **Reasons for the popularity of the series (HBO's business model)**

➤ **Actual audiences (bigger than *X-Files*?)**



All, as you can see, great topics. Incidentally, I'm aware that colleagues in the schools of Ciencias de la Comunicación, or similar, might object that TV series belong exclusively to their academic territory. My opinion, however, is that any text originally in English belongs in English Studies, whether this is Literature or a videogame. It is, of course, more adequate to study *Game of Thrones* from a multidisciplinary perspective with participation of all the fields in the Humanities rather than from a single academic division.

**Culture = shared texts**



A central problem connected with *Game of Thrones* and all popular fictions is whether they can stand the test of time and become lasting cultural referents (like Shakespeare, who worked mainly for Elizabethan *popular* theatre). Culture is built on the basis of our allusions to the texts we

share. In our time, for instance, we barely recognise the classical and Biblical allusions that were basic in all Humanistic education until the late 20th century. Some years ago, I taught the delicious novel by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman *Good Omens* within an elective course about humour but I found that it didn't work because few of my students knew about the Antichrist in the *New Testament*. This novel narrates his arrival, so you can imagine how flat the humour fell...

We have recently seen in cinemas Wonder Woman, a character from DC Comics presented as an Amazon of Greek mythology; even Maui, the god of mischief in a number of Pacific cultures is the male protagonist of *Vaiana*, a film for children. You may say that identifying the mythological references is not essential, just as we need not study the historical Lancasters to appreciate the story of the manipulative Lannisters. This is not true: we have the duty as students of the Humanities to work on increasing our culture as much as we can, for only in this way can we be proficient critics. And, thus, innovators.



My personal impression is that the immense popularity of *Game of Thrones*, and other successful popular texts, springs from the very human need of finding common cultural referents in an extremely fragmented environment. Webs like GoodReads or IMDB produce the illusion that we share our tastes with large numbers of people and that we live in the best of times to express our likes and dislikes. I am quite sceptical, as I am old enough to remember the time when some popular fictions were the topic of conversation with neighbours, friends, family and colleagues at a nation-wide level, and not on the internet.

In comparison to the many who followed the exploits of J.R. Ewing in *Dallas* (1978-1991) or of Agent Cooper in *Twin Peaks*, actually few follow *Game of Thrones* among us, in Spain. But, then,

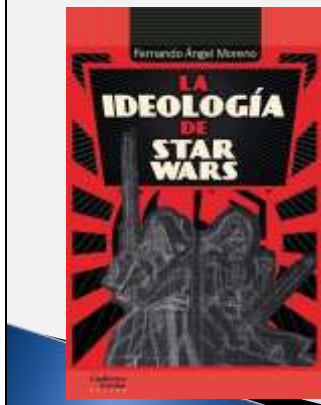
Sara Martín Alegre, 'Opening Up the Humanities', 2018

no other title can compete with *Game of Thrones* in popularity. I'll risk my reputation by stating that even so, popular fictions play a major social role that cult texts cannot play: they create community. I need to warn, though, that not all popular fictions are so popular. As an avid reader of science fiction there are moments when I think that possibly poetry has a bigger readership in Spain, even though sf is supposed to be a popular genre.



So, am I saying, going back to *Game of Thrones*, that it is not worth studying because its impact might not be as big as we assume, or because it might be soon as forgotten as hits from the past such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*? (I stand here corrected—there's a re-boot of *Buffy* in development...). Not at all. As a Literature specialist, I invest a great deal of my time in works written in the past hardly ever read outside the university but still considered very important and worth preserving for the future. Yet, as a specialist in Cultural Studies, I think that we, Humanists, have the duty to open up the university to our cultural present. If a high-impact cultural phenomenon is happening right now among us, *why should we ignore it?* We must, on the contrary, study it constructively even when it is not part of our preferences. As a spectator, I'm not much interested in *El Ministerio del Tiempo* but I have mentioned it under a positive light because it has done a good task of interesting the younger generation in key figures, including, to the scandal of many conservative academics, Lope de Vega. When he appeared in the series, as quite a roguish guy, the Wikipedia page about him started receiving thousands of visitors. How can this be negative?

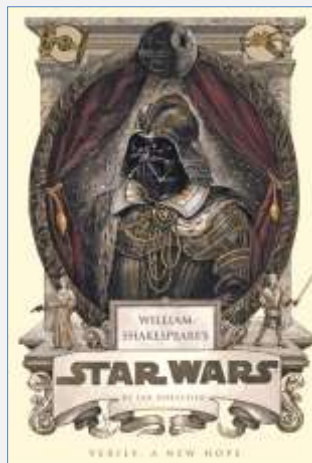
## The strange case of *Star Wars*



Not all is so simple, however. A serious problem with popular fictions is that some texts are so immense that they can hardly be studied by one researcher or even a large team. Think of *The Simpsons*, first broadcast back in 1989. There are also strange gaps. Fernando Ángel Moreno, a colleague at the Complutense, tried to hold last year the first conference in Spain about *Star Wars*. I'm sorry to say that he abandoned the project because the few proposals he received were not of sufficient quality. Instead, he has published the first academic book on the saga in Spain, *La ideología de Star Wars*. The absence of good academic work on *Star Wars* is a problem that extends to the anglophone world for reasons that I cannot explain very well. In contrast, every little corner of the saga is covered in the extensive Wookipedia produced by the fans.

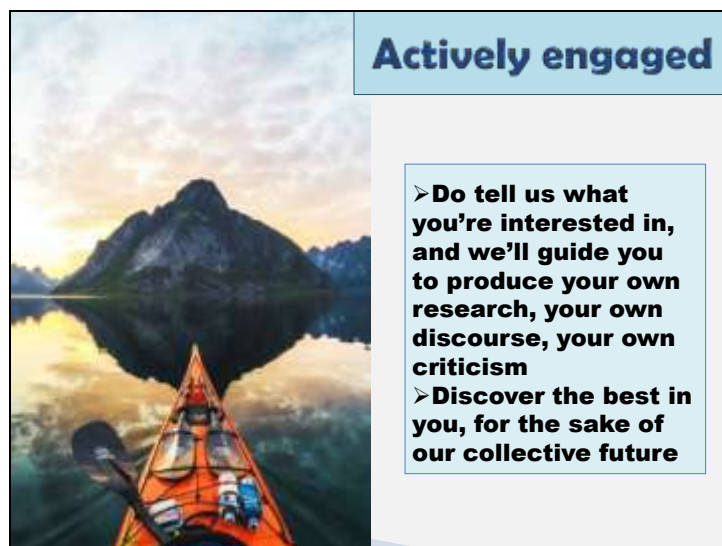
## *Frikis* and/or humanists

- We have an obligation to understand why *Star Wars* matters so much to so many people
- The person familiar with *Star Wars* and with Shakespeare is far more cultured, and a much better humanist, than someone who only knows one of them



This is indeed a very important matter: fans, the people we call in Spanish ‘frikis’, are not only very generous with their time but often more erudite and better informed than many scholars. Yet, they mostly lack the academic training that allows us to produce critical analysis from the Humanities—and not just online encyclopaedias and wikis, necessary as they may be.

I insist, in any case, that we have an obligation to understand why *Star Wars* matters so much to so many people. The person who is familiar with *Star Wars* and with Shakespeare is far more cultured, and a much better humanist, than someone who is only familiar with one of them. Besides, only they can appreciate the humour behind Ian Doescher’s clever version of the saga in pseudo-Shakespearian verse...



Let me finish then by appealing to you again: do tell us what you’re interested in, and we’ll guide you to produce your own research, your own discourse, your own criticism. We must all engage in the intergenerational mechanism that keeps the Humanities alive. Do bring to class fresh, new ideas and, above all, enthusiasm, for we all need that energy if teaching is to succeed.

Finally, I wish you from the bottom of my heart that the studies you have started this week help you to discover the best in us, your teachers and, above all, the best in you—for the sake of our collective future. Thank you.

## NOTES

- In order to see what has been published about a specific text in English Studies, you should check the MLA (Modern Language Association) database which is part of the much bigger

Proquest database. Ask your teachers and librarians how to access both. In Spain, the main database is Dialnet.

- Check my website if you're interested in any of my publications:  
[gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre](http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre)
- Take a look at my blog, *The Joys of Teaching Literature* now and then (thanks!). If you like it, you can follow the weekly posts through Twitter (@SaraMartinUAB).
- If you like *Harry Potter* and have already read *The Hunger Games*, please read a novel by the late Terry Pratchett (in the original English version, not translation). His Discworld series combines fantasy and comedy in wonderful ways. If you don't know where to begin, I suggest that you try *The Truth* or Tiffany Aching's trilogy.



## CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE



### Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (by-nc-nd)

**You are free:** to Share — to copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following *conditions*:

**Attribution** — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

**Non-commercial** — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

**No Derivative Works** — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. You're specifically forbidden to generate academic research and publications based on this paper, though you may quote from it. If you wish to cite it, the correct **citation** would be:

Martín Alegre, Sara. "Opening Up the Humanities: Popular Fictions and What Students Can Contribute". Bellaterra: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2018.

This should be followed by the DDD web address of the document where you found it.

**Notice** — For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. If in doubt, contact the author, Sara Martín Alegre ([Sara.Martin@uab.cat](mailto:Sara.Martin@uab.cat))