

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

„Thou hast a voice great Mountain“: Literature- and Excursion-Based Approaches to Alpine Pasts and Presents

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A seminar offered by Eva-Maria Müller in the Summer Term 2015

Why study mountain literature and culture in the English department at the University of Giessen – in a mid-size city which is approximately 400 km away from the closest mountain range; in a department which does not study any of the cultures bordering on the Alps?

Mountain literature as a field of inquiry, which from the point of the study of English literature and culture, at first seems ridiculously nonsensical, proves to be inherently tied to the discipline:

*FIRST*, British Romantic poets traversed and rendered the Alps in writing during their Grand Tour. These poems of mountains have become canonical pieces of **British Romantic literature** and key texts in English undergraduate education: “Mont Blanc” (Shelley, 1820), “Hymn before Sunrise” (Coleridge, 1802), “About a Mountain” (Coleridge, 1802), and “Cambridge and the Alps” (Wordsworth, 1888).

*SECOND*, the most iconic as well as the highest mountain on the Earth’s surface were first summited by **British climbing parties**: the **Matterhorn** in 1865 and **Mount Everest** in 1953. This is, of course, no coincidence but closely tied to British imperialist thinking. The Alps appealed to the 19th-century mind in the same way that the distant, mysterious and exotic places of imperial conquest had and exploration became affordable after the construction of the railway. Victorian travellers swarmed over the Alps, equipped with quotations from Romantic poetry and with the nationalism, heroism, and imperialism of their age. Almost a century after the Matterhorn ascent, British **imperialist thinking** prevailed in mountaineering when Hillary and Norgay reached the summit of Everest on the night of Queen Elizabeth coronation; and British media representations portrayed the ascent of Everest as heralding the dawn of a New Elizabethan Age.

*THIRD*, mountain literature and culture are intrinsically linked to British intellectualism. The **first Alpine Club** was **founded in Britain** and by British thinkers and climbers; both of whom were Oxford and Cambridge scholars.

*FOUR*, it needed a certain distance, a certain education, and a certain economical strength in order to be interested in climbing, thinking, and writing about mountains. These were parameters that local mountain people rarely fulfilled. This led to local mountain imaginaries being rendered invisible in British writing, which provides an entry point into **postcolonial critical discourse**, and yet another reason to study English literature and culture through the lens of mountain fiction.

Because of these reasons it is not far-fetched to research, study, *and* teach mountain literature and culture in an English department; with students from the University of Giessen. In what follows I will briefly outline the course objectives, teaching and learning methods, as well as requirements and assignments for this seminar.

## ***COURSE OBJECTIVES***

Designed as a seminar for BA students in English studies, this course sought to familiarise participants with the core concepts and methodologies in English literary and cultural studies. This was done by working extensively with primary and secondary literature, with canonical and non-canonical texts, and through hands-on experiences.

### **Content- and context-based learning**

By the end of the course students should be able to

- understand how the treatment of mountains changed from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and how a study of mountain literature and nature can help understand these changes
- understand the socio-political transitions that triggered a (re)orientation towards the natural world
- define, depict, and critically reflect upon the most prominent cornerstones in the literary history from 1800 to the present
- understand why, how, and where cultural representations of different form and genre infuse our understanding and treatment of nature
- understand how and where a study of mountains intersects with other disciplines such as sports, politics, geography, biology, religion, and tourism
- how powerful cultural representations are in shaping (un)natural surroundings

### **Skill-based learning**

By the end of the course students should be able to

- define, utilize, and reflect on basic terms and concepts central to the study of English mountain literature and culture
- apply key concepts, terms, and techniques of literary and cultural studies to disciplinary *and* interdisciplinary settings
- understand and engage critically with central debates in English studies and interdisciplinary mountain studies
- read literature in their historical, socio-cultural, and natural contexts
- ask productive (research) questions about mountain literature and culture
- apply a variety of methods of analysing mountain nature, culture, and literature, drawing upon primary and secondary sources
- write about mountain literature and culture academically and reflectively
- understand the manifold relationships between nature, culture, and literature and behave responsibly in and with natural environments

Hereby this seminar clearly fulfils the learning outcome determined in the module description for Faculty 05 – *Language, Literature, Culture* (SLK, MFKW, NFF): “Students gain fundamental knowledge of the concepts and terminology of literary studies, the ability to analyse and judge literary texts in their cultural and historical contexts, the use of analytical techniques on examples from different genres, fundamental skills for autonomous research work (researching, demonstrating and writing)” (Version 6, Dec 2012).

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING METHODS**

In order to help my students achieve these goals I applied methods, which were research-oriented and reflective, happened in- and outside the seminar room, and were characterised by low hierarchy. All of these activities, regardless of whether they happened on campus, in the climbing hall, or in the Bergwerkswald were didactically meaningful and carried out as individual activities (IA), partner activities (PA), group activities (GA), or in mini-lectures.

- **learning through research *and* reflection**
  - From the first to the last session students were encouraged to think and work **research-orientedly**; this was done by supporting them in improving their ability to ask critically reflected questions.
    - Day 1: introducing “The Big 4 - questions to approach cultural representations” in a guided PA on Caspar David Friedrich’s “Wanderer above the Sea of Fog” (1888)
    - Day 2: working on Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” (1820) with “The Big 4”
    - Day 2: guided IA to read nature by using the methodology of literary and cultural studies as well as “The Big 4”
    - Block 2 - 3: develop study questions for *Icefields* (1995) in IA
    - Day 4: reflect study questions on *Icefields* (1995) in plenum
    - Day 4: develop research questions for research paper in IA, GA, plenum writing workshop
    - Day 4: learn how to conduct and communicate research in writing careful lecturing and IA and PA (in cooperation with ZfbK)
  - I am convinced that successful and unique research is the result of **critical reflection**, which is why students were encouraged to develop their reflective skills throughout the seminar. This was particularly important for, but not solely confined, to the excursion blocks. Students were asked to submit writing reflections after each block and received feedback on each of these reflections via e-mail, which was a way to encourage critical and reflective thinking, and to provide individual support despite the high number of participants.
  
- **learning in- and outside of the classroom**
  - Successful learning happens when we draw on experience and stimulate many of our senses. This is true for all teaching but it is especially true when teaching mountain literature and culture, which is why this course combined classroom learning situations as well as reading and writing activities, with outdoor hiking and climbing activities – all of which were combined meaningfully, thoroughly introduced, and critically reflected (see *Student Evaluations*).
  
- **learning with didactically meaningful activities**
  - In line with the various goals of the course, this seminar offered varied modulated activities. Ranging from large- to small-scale teaching methods,

this course effectively applied: contextualized excursions, skill-based workshops, reflective writing tasks, research-oriented open work spaces, and step-by-step learning models such as the “Lernspirale”, “Schneeballmethode”, and “Expertengruppe”.

- **learning with and from each other**
  - Literary critical inquiry is a collective and unending process in which all students – and this includes teachers – have to find their own way into and through the material. My teaching field – interdisciplinary mountain studies and (post)colonialism – is a study of conflating disciplines and of cultural production that has taken place over a long period of time. It therefore goes without saying that no one in my field can genuinely claim to be an ‘expert.’ I take this fact to be pedagogically enabling, and have learned that providing spaces of learning in which listening is as important as speaking, is crucial to successful teaching (see *Student Evaluation*).

#### **ASSIGNMENTS AND REQUIREMENTS**

- students had to submit a reflection writing task at the end of each block and after each excursion on which they received feedback via e-mail
- students had to submit study questions for the novel *Icefields* (1995) between Block 2 and 3 on which they received feedback as part of the writing workshop
- students will submit one reflection paper of 1,000 to 1,500 words and one research paper of 3,000 to 3,500 words which will be graded transparently based on the guidelines established during the writing workshop