

Falmouth Conference

Title: Walking, Place, and Invisible Disability: Restoring the Derwent Valley as a Landscape of Women's Writing

Abstract:

This paper introduces the idea of the Derwent Valley women writers, bringing together Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Florence Nightingale, and Alison Uttley as writers whose relationships to place, embodiment, illness, and movement shaped their writing in distinct but connected ways. It uses walking both literally and metaphorically: as a mode of reading landscape, as a way of tracing literary inheritance, and as something complicated by invisible disability.

I argue that the Derwent Valley is a neglected site of women's literary production, and that invisible disability is a shared but under-read condition shaping women's writing, mobility, and imagination. Re-reading the Derwent Valley as a women's literary landscape, the paper shows how walking and imagined mobility take on new significance when considered alongside illness, pain, exhaustion, and bodily limitation. In doing so, it recovers a literary space for these writers, across genre, period, and form, and proposes a new way of understanding the relationship between women's writing, place and embodiment.

As a writer with invisible disabilities, this influences my own creative/critical methodology. The paper draws on the interplay between creative practice and critical research to explore the lived experience of invisible disability, restoring the literary heritage of the Derwent Valley through a group of women writers.

Biography:

Suzanne Helen Reynolds is a final year PhD Creative Writing student at the University of Derby. As part of her thesis, she has produced an extended prose poem that takes a bedbound protagonist on an imaginary journey down the Derwent Valley in Derbyshire from Matlock Bath to Derby, where she has lived all her life. She is a member of the Arkwright Society at Cromford Mills, as well as a member of the Research Group of the Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site.

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