

Thematic Analysis of Humanity as Seen in *Cold Mountain*

CHI Ren^{[a],*}; HAO Yu^[a]

^[a]Changchun University of Science and Technology, Changchun, China.
*Corresponding author.

Received 26 April 2013; accepted 13 August 2013

Abstract

The epic novel *Cold Mountain* sets its course through the troubled Civil War era. Many characters come through the unrest adventure and tell tales of hardships and despair, some of which are war stories. Frazier suggests that the war damaged Southerners both personally and politically. What *Cold Mountain* concerns is that the evolution of human relationships in tandem with the seasonal changes and variations of the natural world. This paper talks briefly about such universal literary subjects as theme, characters, human relationships and especially the educational meanings uncovered in novel.

Key words: *Cold Mountain*; Journey; Humanity; Human relationships

CHI Ren, HAO Yu (2013). Thematic Analysis of Humanity as Seen in *Cold Mountain*. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 5(2), 80-84. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/j.hess.1927024020130502.C168>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.hess.1927024020130502.C168>

INTRODUCTION

Cold Mountain, Charles Frazier's debut novel, won critical acclaim and the National Book Award for fiction when it was published in 1997. As an author of travel books and short stories, Frazier had ample experience in writing about landscapes and using a condensed prose style. Frazier applied these literary skills in crafting *Cold Mountain*'s episodic structure and detailed descriptive passages.

1. THE SETTING OF THE NOVEL *COLD MOUNTAIN*

The novel sets its story around one fictional village called "Cold Mountain" in the southern Appalachian. This village is the area around the present day Waynesville, North Carolina, which sits in the shadow of the 5000 feet Cold Mountain. The people in the story run their farms in the old nineteenth century way, by hand and with animal power. The time is the mid-1860s, one of the most transformational periods of American history. It is towards the end of the Civil War. The people in this setting have absorbed into the conflict and exhibit the uniquely Appalachian response to the war. They first fight out of the loyalty to the hometown, but then see the true face of the war itself. The farms in the setting have been devastated and discarded by the war; the women, children and old folk remain on the land.

1.1 Background of the Civil War

The American Civil War (1861-1865) between the industrial North and agricultural, slave-owning South is, first of all, a historical and political event. There are a lot of works and articles dealing with this subject both in Chinese and English. To introduce the political and economic causes and the historical process of the Civil War is not what we should focus on. Instead we should pay attention to the effect of the war to American's daily life.

Among all those elements of the setting mentioned above, the war between the States is the foundational and exclusive one. Most of the readers agree that *Cold Mountain* is a book about the American Civil War Appalachian. However, as a reader of *Cold Mountain*, we should definitely have some knowledge about the Civil War, but knowing it as the historical background of the story is enough. Throughout the book, there are too many indications reminding the reader of the historical background of the story. For example, in the first chapter,

“The Shadow of the Crow”, the names of the places like Cold Harbor, Petersburg, Fredericksburg and that of people like General Lee, Longstreet and Stuart are familiar to everyone who has some basic knowledge about the American Civil War.

The Civil War not only involved an unprecedented proportion of the population in military service, but also brought an overwhelming effect to American people. Because it is the first modern war in American history, it introduced Americans to sophisticated death-dealing weapons, scorched-earth policies, wretched concentration camps, and the employment of a large part of the civilian population. The war touches the daily lives of almost everyone in one way or another. As the most large-scale war in the history of America, the Civil War resulted in “the death of 600000 Americans. The number of dead American soldiers during 1861-1865 is almost equal to the sum of that of the Americans in all the wars carried by the United States”. In the south, the invading northern armies brought the war to the doorsteps of a large part of the population; in the North, the war also broke a large amount of the common families via taking their fathers’ or sons’ lives. The social and historical sense of the American Civil War can be portrayed in the perspective of its destruction to the daily lives of the mass, the man in the broadest sense.

1.2 The Concern about What the War Does to the Human Body and Spirit

The best specific examples to illustrate the destructive power of the war to human body, in the *Cold Mountain*, are the cases of Inman and Bali. The first page of the novel depicts the seriously wounded Inman with a long cut at his neck. It draws the flies “at the first gesture of morning,” and “the sound of their wings and the touch of their feet” are more potent than a yardful of roosters in rousing a man to wake”. The number of the flies can help the reader to imagine how long the “wound” on Inman’s neck is, and that the wound is the mark of “fighting outside Petersburg” leaving in Inman. The condition of Bali is even worse than Inman’s. His right foot has been “taken off by grape at Cold Harbor,” and the stub seems “not to want to heal” and has “rotten inch by inch from the ankle up”. His amputation has “proceeded past the knee,” and he smells “all the time like last year’s ham”. Just in the opening pages Frazier presents the cruel things that the war does to men, making the reader nowhere to escape the realization of them.

There is one evident thing that the war can do: to cause men to die at once in the fighting field, or, to die for the wound caught in the war. For the second kind of death, Bali is the valid evidence. He dies without stirring any surprise in Inman, his roommate in hospital, because the incurable wound is caught in the special “slaughterhouse” of war. As for the first kind of death, the fighting, at Fredericksburg stated in Inman’s tale is enough to explain.

In that fighting, the Confederates occupy the favorable Maryes Heights, and the Federals just keep on marching “by the thousands at the wall all through the day, limbing the hill to be shot down,” and after a while, there are many Federal crowding behind the brick houses” scattered out through the field”. Inman, as a Confederate soldier, even gets “hating them for their clodpated determination to die”. This is, however, what the war is. Even though in the “heroic” soldiers’ hearts there is the fear of being shot to die out of the human nature, but they still have to fight on until being wounded or dead. Just like Longstreet says: “the federals fell that long afternoon as steady as rain dripping down from the eaves of a house”. That fighting results in “thousands of men lay dead and dying on the sloping field below the wall”. The war here is identical with a massacre, an altisonant excuse for killing without taking the punishment.

The wrecking power of war to the body of man is first aspect of the presentation of the theme in *Cold Mountain*. The same horrifying effect of war to the spirit of men, if we say, they have spirit, is also depicted in the opening chapter of the novel. First, let us still take a look at Inman. The long wound at his neck is deadly and nobody thinks that he can survive it at the first sight. The fact is that his body survived the war indeed, but the war, along with all his experience in it together, leaves him a broken spirit, a broken soul, with all his forces “scattered”. When he thinks into the future, after he has seen “the metal face of the age,” all he can vision is just “a world from which everything he counted important” has been “banished” or has “willingly fled”. The war desperately breaks his hope for the future. For Inman, the nightmare is his flashback to the Battle of Frederickerburg while he is lying in an eastern North Carolina hospital bed. In his mind’s eye, Frederickerburg is the brutal and inhumane horror of recalling “the slap of balls into meats,” of charging Federals and a Confederate soldier dispatching wounded foes by hitting them with “hammer” blows to their skulls, and all punctuated by that dream of the “scattered bloody pieces-arms, heads, legs trunks” reconfiguring in “mismatched” order. It is a nightmare which continually revisits Inman and which, combines with the screw of violence that he finds himself continuously and ironically plunged into throughout his journey back home, almost convinces him that his spirit is “ruined beyond repair”, and that he would become “so lost in bitterness and anger” that he could not find his way back.

What does the war do to other soldiers who are not yet dead or wounded? Seeing the dissembled bodies of the Federals on the ground, a man “walking next to Inman” says, “If I had my way everything north of the Potomac would resemble that right down to the last particular”. Another man is killing a group of dreadfully wounded Federals “by striking them in the head with a hammer.” He arranges the Federals in a row, “with their heads all pointing one way,” and then he moves “briskly down the

row, making a clear effort to let one strike apiece do.” He does it without anger, “just moving from one to one like a man with a job of work to get done”. People in peaceful time would not do, even could not imagine, things like that. It is the war that makes the men so dehumanized that they are rather like a killing-machine than a human being. The voice of Inman in telling these to the blind man is cold and calm, but that kind of voice is right the best accusation to the war, because the brutal behaviors of men in the inhumane war are in good quantity, too many to rouse any shock in him.

Before the war, Ada, the only daughter of Monroe who is a widower preacher, really can be portrayed only as a well-educated, extensively reading and carefree lady. But besides, she has a poor concept of the life in the mountain area, she “had taken little part in the garden...had latched itself to the product-the food on the table-not the job of getting it there”. When Monroe the father is still alive, “living was little more laborsome than drawing on bank accounts, abstract and distant.” Now, when the States are in fighting, “simply living” becomes such a “tiresome business” for Ada. She is “frighteningly ill-prepared in craft of subsistence” when her father passes away. The inflation spreads in the South; the war brings turbulence to the economy, the way of life, but more important, it brings a big challenge to people’s spiritual world. As for this point, the author can think no better illustration of this idea than the example of Ada. Here I want to divide her life into three periods, in order to present the changes in her life clearly. The first period certainly points to her life in Charleston. There she had her childhood, and the early years of her girlhood. Judging from her own memory, the days she spent there were not so comfortable at all, though at that time she and her father were still the members of the gentle class. Her soul was lonely and aloof among those city residents. Then they moved to the village called Cold Mountain and beginning the second period of her own life. She was so unsocial that “every time she was approached,” she “took a step back until she fetched up against the headstone of a man who had fought in the Revolution”. It is the war that brings Ada into a new period of her life in which she has to quit that world with piano. The war takes the man she likes far away from her. It is also in the wartime that she loses her only guardian, and begins the fighting for survival. The war’s effect on her is definitely great, especially on her spirit.

2. THE AMERICAN JOURNEY HOME

2.1 Inman’s Journey

Inman’s geographical journey starts from the hospital ward, from that “open triple-hung window”. He has imagined throughout the summer that window in his ward could lead him to his “childhood places”. His memory of walking away from whipping at school foreshadows

Inman’s intent to walk away from the carnage of the war. The multi-page description of the battle at Fredericksburg not only exemplifies this carnage, but also personalizes the historic massacre and draws the reader into Inman’s mind. Readers come to understand why Inman copes with such atrocities by turning to the writing of William Bartram. Inman carries this book on his journey.

The homecoming journey does not only provide Inman with the rough tracks through the North Carolina mountains, but also the test of the nature such as the colder and colder weather, wild beast like bear, and the various encounters including both helpers like the goat woman, Potts, Sara, and barriers like Juniors, Lila. Inman is always cold, wet and possible lost but he still keeps putting one foot in front of the other on his journey. Along with the proceeding of Inman’s journey, the reader also sees a true and honest elucidation of the meaning of the war to the mountain people. For the most part, it is not their fight. Few if any of them own slaves. It is just like what Inman and the goat woman has exchanged: they are fighting so that their homeland will not invaded by change, by a strange way of life. The mountain people get caught up in the social and political savagery in a system of which they are barely a part.

As early as he is in the hospital, Inman has to take Barton’s *Travels through North and South Carolina* as the tonic for his own brooding. “He had pulled it from a box of books donated by ladies of the capital eager for the intellectual as well as the physical improvement of the patients. The doings that kind lone wanderer—called Flower Gatherer by the Cherokee in honor of his satchels full with plants and his attention all given to the growth of wild living things—never failed to ease his thoughts”. Almost every night Inman has to read Bartram “until he was calm enough for sleep”. Inman is extremely despairing at the beginning period of his journey. He abominates the flatland around him; he is dreadful and fearful about that Ada will not accept him since he has been not the original self before he enrolled. The more important is that, to some degree, he has been dehumanized by the war. He has become to be addicted to killing, being good at it. He has once tried to kill the smith four times. With his journey going on, the terrain becomes closer and closer to that of his homeland, and his memories of Ada turn richer and richer. Consequently, he has been more and more softened, and though he really thinks that preachers Veasey blamed and worthy of being killed, he chooses another way to punish him. In addition, besides Bartram, his spirit is comforted with his memories about Ada. Until he meets another helper image- the goat woman-his spirits begin the process of healing really and truly by means of envisaging the war and his motivation of fighting in it.

Inman is wandering, lost, unable to glean any sense of direction because the sun, moon and stars have been

concealed by storm clouds and fog for days. He has used the goat woman's medicine and his wounds are well towards healing. His thoughts however are still grave. He is out of food, living on creek water and wild cress. He cannot even bear to look upon his own image reflected in the water. He stills hates the war and what the war has done to him. This foreshadows that moment when he resorts to violence to take back the hog and chickens robbed by the hungered Federals. Nevertheless, he continues his footsteps forward, reckoning that Ada will not recognize or accept the present him but still looking forward to that meeting. It is proved that what he worries is so reasonable that Ada really does not recognize him at the first sight. Inman does not complete his own spiritual journey until that climactic moment of death.

2.2 Ada's Self-discovery Journey

Ada's journey is a kind of spiritual one, one of self-discovery. Although spiritual journey is a repeating image in many literary works, Ada's is still so distinctive that it has the power to impress to move the reader. At the beginning of her journey, she is brilliant and cultured in art and academics, but clueless to the ways of nature. Her perception when gazing out of her window is a sharp contrast to Inman's window. It is difficult for Ada to like the fields and ridges of Cold Mountain whereas Inman sees in them home and comfort. But just the same fields and ridges disliked by her have a strong magic power that draws her tightly with them together, which is one significant reason why she does not choose to leave here for Charleston after the death of Monroe.

Ruby comes to help Ada in farming, with only one condition, that is, "everybody empties their own night jar". Ada realizes that Ruby is demanding "Something on the order of equality". Since before that Ada had made her Mind to stay at Cold Mountain right, to have a partner is not a bad thing for her at all, let alone she strikes that deal with Ruby not only out of necessity but because of a feeling of happiness she feels with her. At last Ada finds out to survive in an isolated mountain valley which involves leaning the necessities, "plow, plant, hoe, cut, can, feed, kill." She learns that contentment may be found in such things as picking apples in one's orchard. She holds "sharp yearning" to the lives in mountains, seeing the possibility of finding value, order and meaning there. In the end, she totally becomes an independent citizen of Cold Mountain. In the rhythm of the old way without any powered equipment, Ada is now completely self-sufficient, she cuts wood, burns brush, milks the cow, etc. This is a powerful contrast to the hopeless Ada of beginning point of her spiritual journey. Ada has found herself, and she has also found new depth and contentment in nature. This is a new Ada, who lives in the mountain but feels in place.

2.3 Journeys of Some Minor Characters

Stobrod before the war, in his daughter's memories, was

unlike a father at all. He was described by Ruby as a slovenly, selfish man, without any sense of responsibility. He "had been a notorious local never-do-well and scowflaw called Stobrod Thewes". He never put his weight to take care of Ruby, letting her feed herself even when she was only a little child. "[F]eeding herself was Ruby's to do as soon as she was old enough to be held accountable for it, which in Stobrod's opinion fell close after learning to walk. As an infant, Ruby foraged for food in the woods and up and down the river at charitable farms". Later when the war broke out, he enlisted in the army. He rode on the hinny away, leaving Ruby "high and dry" and being unable to "plow the sorry fieds".

When the reader meets Veasey at the first time, he was trying to drop a soporous girl over the cliff into the river. He is a soon-to-be-married preacher, but he has gotten this girl pregnant. His journey is totally different with that of Inman's. He has not a destination, not any spiritual support or guidance. He is not a man of discipline. He starts trouble by drawing Inman's gun, and being seduced by an immense black whore Veasey and that big whore have a conflict. As a result of that, he is cut and bleeding but he tells Inman the next day that his night with the black whore is wonderfully memorable. On the way eastwards, they are shot by the Guards: Inman survives while Veasey dies. So at the end of his life, Veasey has not been transformed or even changed. His journey is proved to be a failure.

3. THE CHARACTERS AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE NOVEL

3.1 The Love Between Inman and Ada

Inman's character reflects a conflict between moral precepts and the horrific realities of life. When the novel opens, Inman is wounded and psychologically scarred by memories of war. The ghosts of dead soldiers haunt his dreams at night and thoughts of Ada fill his days. Despite his crippled psyche, Inman remains an honorable and heroic man. Throughout the novel, Inman's conscience guides his actions. Although he is troubled by the death he has witnessed and doesn't wish to add to them, Inman is willing to resort to violence if necessary. Frazier characterizes his protagonist as a warrior equipped to fight moral and physical battles.

Inman's name suggests that he is self-reflective man, alone in the thrall of forces greater than his own will. Inman cannot direct what happens to him, so he seeks a measure of control by inwardly questioning his past and speculating about his future. While it would be too simplistic to state that Inman finds himself in Ada, he clearly identifies in her the kind of life he wants to live—a life of peace, stability, and affection. Thus Inman grows from a tortured and disillusioned man into a calmer, more self-aware individual. Indeed, after a journey fraught

with suffering and spiritual turmoil, Inman is temporarily redeemed by love. Ultimately, however, Frazier suggests that Inman's true redemption—an escape from the world with which he has become so disillusioned—can only be attained through death.

Ada's reunion with Inman testifies to her newfound openness. She overcomes her initial feeling of estrangement by addressing her fears and hopes for the future. Having laid roots in the community of Black cove, Ada admits to Ruby that she fears a solitary future. However the stark topography around Cold Mountain offers her sanctuary from feeling marginalized and eccentric. This landscape, moreover, provides a homeland she can share with Inman. After Inman's death, Ruby's family and Ada's own daughter continue to provide Ada with a source of emotional solace. In truth, Ada is not alone. Frazier demonstrates profound change in his female protagonists as she grows to find security living close to nature. In particular, the peaceful certainty of Ada's domestic routine indicates her comfort with the natural world's cycles and repetitions.

3.2 The Human Relationships: Cross-Racial or Otherwise

3.2.1 Inman Befriended by Black People

Inman has encountered a lot of colorful characters both in his life before the war at Cold Mountain and in his homeward journey. They are from different racial backgrounds; among them some even are slaves. Different with the aspect of human relationships incarnated in Ada, to intend to establish a reasonable interpretation of the cross-racial relationships, the reader must take the story's historical context into account. There is another important cause for Inman's difficulty in understanding the necessity of treating the colored people unequally even inhumanly; his own experience with those colored people such as Indians like Swimmer, the goat woman, the racially mixed group of gypsies and the yellow slave with undisclosed racial background.

3.2.2 Ada as the Assisted and the Assistor

For reasons like the war's breaking out, her father's death, the Southern economy's collapse, and the worthless paper money, Ada has to live the toughest period of her life at Cold Mountain. Ada does have to be assisted by the

Swaggers constantly even after they had helped her to manage her father's funeral. Later after Sally finds that Ada needs a helper in keeping her farm work done, she suggests Ruby to help her. At the first meeting of Ada and Ruby, Ada has realized one thing, that is, the only demand of Ruby is "the order of quality" instead of money. What Ruby asks is not a relationship of master and servant or slave but one based on equality. This can be viewed as the first lesson from Ruby to Ada who comes from an environment of the middle class in Charleston, and she accepts such a lesson very naturally and agreeably.

At the same time, Ada has acted as an assistor to those in need of help. Recalling the original Ada, who even did not know her direction of life or anything about "a measure of applied knowledge in the area of food production and preparation", the new Ada is not only self-sufficient but also helpful to others. Besides this point, the relationship between Ada and Ruby has gradually changed from the assisted and the assistor, the disciple and the instructor into friends based on the mutual care and trust. This kind of friendship does not only happen between women, but also between men, even though this is wartime.

REFERENCES

- Arthur, A. (1986). *On the trail to Cold Mountain*. Ohio University Press.
- Chang, Y. X. (2004). *A survey of American literature*. Tianjin: Nankai University Press.
- Frazier, C. (1998). *Cold Mountain*. Cambridge University Press.
- Glancy, R. (1999). *Images of war and peace: Parallelism and anthesis in the beginning and ending of Cold Mountain*. Greenwood Press.
- Manning, S. B. (1971). *Domestic tradition and women's identity in Appalachian literature*. Yale University Press.
- Phillips, B., & Shields, J. (2002). *Cold Mountain*. Tianjin: Tianjin Science & Technology Translation & Publishing Co. Ltd..
- Robert, B. (1974). *Symbolic artistry in Charles Frazier's Cold Mountain*. Humanities Press.
- Wu, W. R. (2001) *History and anthology of American literature*. Beijing: Minzu University of China Press.