

# Guarding, Waiting, Wisdom—the Analysis of Ada in *Cold Mountain* from the Perspective of Myth Criticism

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**Abstract:** *Cold Mountain*, as Charles Frazier’s first work, achieved great success immediately upon its publication and was hailed as an American Odyssey. This study employs Northrop Frye’s myth criticism to examine Ada Monroe, the female protagonist, as a modern reincarnation of Penelope in the *Odyssey*. Through analyzing Ada from the archetype of Penelope as the waiting figure, the homeland guardian, and the wise woman, this study demonstrates how Ada both perpetuates and transforms ancient mythic patterns so as to form a better understanding of her image and her further transformation into an independent woman, as well as woman’s own strength, providing insights for the contemporary society.

**Keywords:** *Cold Mountain*; *Odyssey*; Ada; Penelope; Archetype; Myth Criticism.

## 1. Introduction

Charles Frazier (1950-), born in 1950 in Asheville, North Carolina, is an American novelist known for his debut work, *Cold Mountain*. Published in 1997, the novel won the U.S. National Book Award and was called an American *Odyssey*. Against the background of the American Civil War, it employs a parallel dual narrative to tell the homeward journey of Inman, an outlier from the Civil War, and the transforming journey of Ada, a former Southern aristocrat. Along his homeward journey, Inman encounters numerous hardships, including violence, poverty, and moral decay. At the same time, his lover Ada also struggles to learn farming skills, adapting to a new life after her father’s death, and in the end becomes an independent woman with the help of Ruby.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

Northrop Frye’s myth criticism emerged in the mid-20th century with the publication of his seminal work, *Anatomy of Criticism*. Through the analogy that “the real structural principles of painting are to be derived, not from an external analogy with something else, but from the internal analogy of the art itself (Frye, 1957: 134),” he further deduces that “the structural principles of literature, similarly, are to be derived from archetypal and anagogic criticism (Frye, 1957: 134).” The Bible and classical mythology mainly serve as the literary archetype. This argument reflects the shared aspirations and pursuits of human society, embodying the common experiences that transcend time and space.

Literature also shows the displacement of myth. According to Frye, displacement can be generally named as the techniques employed to address certain technical challenges when incorporating a mythical structure into realistic fiction to make it plausible and logical (Frye, 1957). That is to say, while literature draws upon the frameworks, themes, and characters of myths, it also integrates the author’s psychological state, writing intentions, and social background to align with the expectations of society at that time, rather than simply imitating myths.

When Frazier first heard the story of Inman and Ada, his mind immediately conjured up Homer’s *Odyssey* because

they bear much resemblance in the plot and characters. McDermott states that a more detailed comparison between *Cold Mountain* and the *Odyssey* encourages readers to explore the similarities and differences of the protagonists, ultimately revealing how the resulting intertextuality contributes to the novel’s themes (McDermott, 2004). Therefore, this study aims to explore Ada from the archetype of the homeland guardian, the waiting figure and the wise woman, which will enhance a deeper understanding of Ada’s personality, particularly her transformation into an independent woman, and offer insights to modern society.

## 3. The Archetype of the Homeland Guardian

Frye proposed that “literature is a reconstructed mythology, with its structural principles derived from those of myth (Frye, 1961: 605).” *Cold Mountain* not only continues the parallel dual narrative as that in the *Odyssey*, but its female protagonist Ada is also depicted as a homeland guardian like Penelope in the *Odyssey*.

Penelope is the daughter of Icarus, the king of Sparta, born into royalty and receiving an aristocratic education like weaving, household management, and religious rituals. Given the gender division between public and domestic affairs in ancient Greek polis, where men dominate warfare, politics, and diplomacy while women are in charge of the household, slave supervision, and marital affairs, Penelope, before Odysseus left for the Trojan War, would not have governed her kingdom of Ithaca. After Odysseus’s departure, Penelope works as a faithful homeland guardian. She resists the temptation of suitors, waits for Odysseus’ return, and struggles to maintain the integrity of her home. By weaving the shroud during the day and unraveling it at night, Penelope delays her remarriage, which in essence is a calculated power struggle for control over Ithaca’s leadership (Zhang, 2023). In *Cold Mountain*, Ada inherits this archetype. Before her father passed away, “Monroe had employed a white man and his part-Cherokee wife to run the place, leaving Ada with little to do other than devise a weekly menu. She had therefore been free, as always, to occupy her time with reading and needlework, drawing and music (Frazier, 1997: 15).” While after her father’s death, her life is completely in chaos.

"Cookery had become a pressing issue for Ada. She was perpetually hungry, having eaten little through the summer but milk, fried eggs, salads, and plates of miniature tomatoes from the untended plants that had grown wild and bushy with suckers (Frazier, 1997: 14)." It can be seen that both figures are constrained by the feminine roles imposed by patriarchal society, yet they equally strive to transcend these conventional images of femininity.

Ada, with the help of Ruby, gradually learns farming skills to restore order in the homeland. She rises early, learns to cook, and becomes proficient in gardening. As the novel states, "Ruby counted her first victory when Ada succeeded in churning cream to butter. Her second victory was when she noted that Ada no longer always put a book in her pocket when she went out to hoe the fields (Frazier, 1997: 52)." Under Ada and Ruby's diligent management, their homeland gradually becomes orderly and even attracts more people to the area. Ruby's father, after deserting from the war, comes to Ada's home to steal corn. Later, he brought another partner called Pangle. One night, they gather around the campfire, sharing roasted meat, playing music, and recollecting the past events—all of which create a convivial atmosphere, as if war were distant from them. Frye reckons that myth can present writers "with a ready-made framework, hoary with antiquity, and enables him to devote all his energies to elaborating its design (Frye, 1961: 598)." Frazier not only continues the narrative framework of the *Odyssey* but also shapes Ada into a female character similar to Penelope. Through the existed story structure, he situates *Cold Mountain* against the background of the Civil War to explore humanity in the war and contemporary female roles, injecting the narrative with both classical resonance and contemporary significance.

Ada rebuilds the order of her homeland through her own hands and labor, much like how Penelope guards her homeland through her wisdom. The repetition of this narrative pattern highlights the resilience and strength of women. Both Ada and Penelope are confronted with internal troubles and external pressures, yet they do not yield. They use their diligence and intelligence to overcome obstacles and protect their homelands. "Myth is a presentation of human history in a participating form, so that in a myth one can feel that one's own life and fortunes are involved in the story being told (Frye, 1984: 473)." Ada carries on the archetype of Penelope as the homeland guardian, challenging the meek images of women in a patriarchal society, and inspiring readers to reconsider their perceptions of female characters, because in many traditional narratives, women are often depicted in weakness, waiting to be rescued by male heroes. However, Penelope and Ada break this stereotype by taking matters into their own hands, actively guarding their homelands.

#### 4. The Archetype of the Waiting Figure

Myth stands as the bedrock of narrative, the ancestral source from which all subsequent storytelling springs (Liszka, 1989). *Cold Mountain* "pays homage to Homer's epic poem through structure, theme, and many mythical echoes to the adventures of Odysseus (Simmons, 1998: 2)." And waiting is one of the themes. Like Penelope, Ada's beloved Inman is also far from home, fighting in the war. Thus, in addition to guarding their homelands, both women work as the loyal waiting figures for the return of their lovers.

Faced with Odysseus' twenty-year absence from home and the temptations of numerous suitors, Penelope adheres to her

original intention, resisting the allure and remaining unmoved. She devises the scheme of weaving by day and unraveling by night to buy time for Odysseus's return. She also inquires about Odysseus' whereabouts everywhere. When someone brings news of Odysseus to Ithaca, she will prepare a sumptuous dinner to entertain them. "A myth is not so much a true story as a story on which truth is based, a story which people may infuse with their truth (Doniger, 1988: 35)." Homer crafted the image of a loyal wife awaiting her husband's return, thereby expressing the timeless theme of love in human society. Frazier inherited this theme, and through adaptation and transformation, the image of Penelope has been carried forward into Ada, demonstrating that pure love endures even under the devastation of war on human nature.

Similarly, Ada is also a figure of loyal waiting. After her father's death, Ada can choose to either stay in Cold Mountain or return to Charleston. When Ada visits the Esco, Mrs. Esco suggests that she go to the well beside their house to catch a glimpse of her future with a mirror. She sees "a black silhouette of a figure moved as if walking, but the image was too vague to tell if it approached or walked away (Frazier, 1997: 24)." And Ada questions this indication, "Am I meant to follow, or should I wait its coming (Frazier, 1997: 24)?" Finally she makes her mind to stay in Cold Mountain, which implies that she will wait for Inman's return. Moreover, Ada will often check for any letter from Inman, even though her hope is dashed several times. Nevertheless, she persists in writing to Inman whenever she has the chance. In one of her letters, she writes that "come back to me is my request (Frazier, 1997: 179)." In Ada's mind, she not only waits for Inman's replies but also expects the day that he will return to her side.

However, Ada also showcases the displacement from Penelope. The writer uses displacement to make stories credible, logically coherent, morally justifiable and lifelike (Frye, 1961). By displacing the characters within the mythical narrative pattern against the social context of the time, Frazier presents a contemporary image of an independent woman. It narrows the gap between the archetype and reality, thus rendering it more illuminating. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is dependent on men. Without a king in Ithaca, the queen is expected to remarry and find a new husband to ensure her survival. From this perspective, Penelope's waiting is partly passive, constrained by the patriarchal society. In contrast, in *Cold Mountain*, it is Ada herself who chooses to wait for Inman actively. Through her manual labor on the farm, she gradually grows into a self-reliant and independent modern woman. She no longer needs to depend on Inman for survival as she had once relied on her father. Instead, she can choose her own partner autonomously as she states in a conversation with Ruby, "I know I don't need him. But I think I want him (Frazier, 1997: 212)."

On the one hand, Ada, as the waiting figure, faithfully awaits Inman's return, embodying the archetype of Penelope in mythical narratives. On the other hand, Ada's waiting becomes an act of self-determination, transforming the archetype from partly passive to active choice. Ada, though as a ladylike figure crafted based on the traditional Southern concept of femininity, shatters this established stereotype and reconstructs the spiritual connotation of female independence and autonomy in a novel and profound manner, which endows her with unique artistic value (Lin, 2014). She breaks away from the traditional female image of Penelope, who relies on

men for survival, and embodies the subjectivity that women share with men in society, offering a new sight that women are not just passive participants but also decision-makers of their own destinies.

## 5. The Archetype of the Wise Woman

Humans demonstrate a romantic impulse—a cognitive tendency to identify latent mythological structures in subjective experience (Frye, 1957). When Frazier first encountered the story, he was irresistibly reminded of the *Odyssey*. Thus, that Penelope is depicted as a wise woman finds full expression in Ada. Beyond portraying her as a well-read intellectual, the novel highlights Ada's transformation through months of labor, during which she achieves both spiritual and material independence, embodying the wise woman archetype of Penelope.

Penelope first devises a strategy of weaving a shroud for Laertes by day and unraveling it by night to deceive the suitors and thereby prolong the remarriage time. Subsequently, she ingeniously orchestrates an archery contest, compelling the suitors into futile competition. Furthermore, drawing from prior incidents in which individuals impersonated Odysseus to deceive her, she tests Odysseus by asking him to relocate their marriage bed—a task inherently impossible, as the bed's construction is rooted in an olive tree trunk, a secret known only to the couple. This “scenario in which Penelope recognizes Odysseus sooner rather than later can be seen as affirming her cleverness (Murnaghan, 2011: 47).” Penelope as a wise woman from Homer's *Odyssey* resonates in Ada as a potent modern incarnation of the wise women archetype, demonstrating literature operates within a great matrix of myth where recognizable patterns recur across time and culture.

Ada's wisdom is manifested not only in her intellectual pursuits but also, more profoundly, in her spiritual awakening, her attitudes toward nature, and her interpersonal conduct. “She had grown up in Charleston and at Monroe's insistence had been educated beyond the point considered wise for females (Frazier, 1997: 14).” She is well-read, highly proficient in painting, and skilled at needlework—a trait she shares with Penelope. She also has some competence at the piano, a good command of French and Latin, and possesses a rudimentary knowledge of Greek. Ada has received a sound education which surpasses that of ordinary women in her time, establishing her as a veritable intellectual female figure. Nevertheless, after her father passed away, she realizes that “none of them seemed exactly to the point when faced with the hard fact that she now found herself in possession of close to three hundred acres of steep and bottom, a house, a barn, outbuildings (Frazier, 1997: 14).” Therefore, She even harbors a tinge of resentment about her ignorance about survival. Later on, with Ruby's arrival, Ada ceases to wallow in chaos and idleness. She joins Ruby in managing the farm with perseverance, though she feels tired sometimes. During months of labor, she learns to plow, plant, hoe, cut, can, feed, and even kill animals, which greatly enhances her spiritual and material development. Moreover, She is greatly influenced by Ruby's perspective on nature. “In Ruby's mind, everything—setting fence posts, making sauerkraut, killing hogs—fell under the rule of the heavens (Frazier, 1997: 67).” And “Ada, increasingly covetous of Ruby's learning in the ways living things, inhabited this particular place (Frazier, 1997: 67).”

she decides to honor the rule and also lives in accordance

with nature. Through her diligent labor on the farm, she gradually achieves self-sufficiency. In terms of interpersonal relationships, Ada almost keeps a rational attitude. In Charleston, even when confronted with confessions of affection from the one that she does not like, she avoids hurting his destiny through direct rejection. She never inquires about Stobrod's affairs, yet she accompanies Ruby in caring for him when he gets gunshots. When Inman is about to depart, she initially restrains her emotions; however, she soon regrets her reserved behavior towards him. Consequently, the following day, she goes to Inman's home and expresses both her apologies and her affection.

Both women confront the survival predicament, embodying social instability and internal struggle, but in the end, they use their intellect and resilience to create order from encroaching chaos. Frye proposed that “an archetype should be not only a unifying category of criticism, but itself a part of a total form, and it leads us at once to the question of what sort of total form criticism can see in literature (Frye, 1951: 99).” Penelope as a wise woman finds its manifestation in Ada, offering insights into the author's conceptualization of female figures. Moreover, both Penelope and Ada, as the embodiment of female wisdom, bear historical significance: they represent the principle of preservation, continuity, and the application of intellect and endurance against destructive forces, often masculine and martial. It also demonstrates that survival and the restoration of order depend not solely on the hero's return, but also on the wise woman's patient, resourceful, and deeply rooted labor of preservation.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has delved into the archetype of Penelope as the homeland guardian, the waiting figure, and the wise woman to analyse Ada in *Cold Mountain* from the perspective of myth criticism. Ada indicates these archetypes through learning to manage her farm, choosing to await Inman's return and achieving self-sufficiency and spiritual awakening. This portrayal not only subverts the traditional Southern female characters during the Civil War but also illuminates the enduring strength of women across time and space, offering profound insights about female images in contemporary society.

According to Frye, an archetype is a symbol that bridges the connection between poems, thereby facilitating the unity and integration of literary experience (Frye, 1957). In *Cold Mountain*, Frazier initially inherits Penelope's roles as the homeland guardian, the waiting figure, and the wise woman through Ada, while he also achieves a displacement and recreation of the *Odyssey* by endowing Ada with subjectivity—her proactive mastery over her destiny. At their core, however, both narratives embody universal human experiences. Whether Ada or Penelope, both characters strive to restore domestic order and await their lovers' return, reflecting humanity's collective pursuit of order, love, and wisdom.

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