Perspectives Of Gender In Homer’s The Odyssey And Charles Frazier’s Cold Mountain

Homer’s The Odyssey and Charles Frazier’s Cold Mountain are works of historical fiction about a homeward journey that explores the different perspectives of gender. Set during the American Civil War, Frazier’s narrative explores a deserted soldiers perilous journey home to his wife, encountering numerous obstacles along the way. Homer’s epic explores war hero, Odysseus’s, numerous battles with mythical creatures and the wrath of the gods as he attempts his journey home. Throughout the Odyssey, the masculinity of Odysseus is evident through his wit and strength, whilst still allowing his wife, Penelope, to thrive unaided. Contrastingly, Cold Mountain explores women in desperation that require a man to be able to succeed, starkly different toward the strong nature of Penelope. Through the use of a range of literary techniques, both authors explore the theme of home and hero, love, war, life and death.

Homer and Frazier explore Odysseus and Inmann, both using their intellect to their advantage throughout the Odyssey and Cold Mountain. They are both hero’s; yet, Inman is a modern rendering of a classic hero. Homer portrays Odysseus as fiercely intelligent, his cunning behaviour allowing him to survive against foes. This is evident when Odysseus uses his cunningness to outwit the cyclops, telling him “Nobody- that's my name. Nobody- so my mother and father call me, all my friends”. Similarly, during Cold Mountain, Inman equally uses his wit to achieve his goal of returning to his wife, stating that “what needs doing is mine to do”. As protagonist of the story, he is faced with numerous hardships throughout his story and defeats his foes using his intelligence rather than his brawn, similar to Odysseus. However, the protagonists conclusions for their respective wars, both ended differently. Odysseus returned home victorious, the twelve year campaign against Troy ending successfully. Despite him being wearied of the war, he had nevertheless remained until the end as a hero. Contrastingly, Inman returned home after deserting, becoming too wearied of the killing and fighting, stating “I’m ruined beyond compare is what I fear”. The grisly images of war depicted in the narrative suggests a considerable different mindset between the two male protagonists. Inman is haunted by horrific dreams of war, manifesting in the black crow that follows his journey home. He feels a sense of profound loneliness and growing misidentification with the human world as a result of his War experiences. In contrast, Odysseus never appears perturbed or horrified by the turmoils of the Trojan war, he was “essentially self-possessed,…such was his inner harmony and strength.” The reader is positioned to view both protagonists as clever and strong, the audience reading their perilous journeys. However, Odysseus is portrayed as heroic, the audience being satisfied with his ending but saddened with Inman’s unheroic ending.

Throughout the Odyssey and Cold Mountain, both authors explore the different aspects of femininity. In the Odyssey, Penelope, Odysseus’s wife, remains faithful towards her husband’s return. She appears loyal and biddable but in her quest to wait faithfully, she needs to be strong to the court. Yet in private, she was said to be “weeping in her chamber” every night. Frazier also conveys Ada to be broken emotionally after Inman’s absence, lacking drive to continue tasks and longing for her husband’s return. After the death of her father, she questioned natures “preference for particular order: parents dying, then children dying”, believing that by accepting it, “means that the fortunate find themselves orphaned.” This phrase echoes Penelope’s question regarding the death of men, how it seems to be accepted that “men’s

lives are short” and that strong men “will be mocked in death”. Both characters display the theme of longing for their loved ones return; however, the personalities of both Ada and Penelope contrast greatly. During Inman’s absence, Ada became weak and melancholy, neglecting her own physical needs when she was unable to rely on someone. She was unable to keep the farm and house in good condition, neglecting everything she had previously cared about. She states that what she “has lost will not return” to her and that what is missing “will always be lost, you’re only left with your scars to mark the void”. It was not until the arrival and assistance of Ruby, that Ada regained her emotional strength and independence. Homer’s portrayal of a female in Ancient Greece, the ‘wise Penelope’ is sharply contrasted to Frazier’s Ada. Steadfast and always hopeful of her husband’s return, despite having no evidence he is alive, she keeps the kingdom stable, even with the suitors plundering her household. She uses her intelligence to “deceive” the suitors “blind.” She states that she will not marry until she finishes Laertes’ burial shroud; yet, “by night… she would unravel all she’d done… three whole years she seduced us with this scheme.” This astute and deceitful tactic displayed her underlying stoic nature that she possessed, unlike Ada. Despite being the female submissive archetype from that era, Penelope’s cunning nature was contrary to her loyal attitude toward Odysseus. Both authors explore the female archetype of loyalty that women possess towards their husbands. Whilst Penelope remains steadfast and true to herself, Ada has a stronger character arc that explores the development of grief and sudden independence.

Both texts explore the different perspectives of gender during separate eras. Odysseus and Inman are the “heroes” of their texts, yet receive a different fate. The female counterparts personalities differ greatly but both share a loyal nature towards their lovers. During Cold Mountain, a reference to a philosopher provides foreshadowing about a prominent theme evident later in the text, that the ravages of war can only be undone when people are reattuned to natures “endless arc of the sun, wheel of fortune”, the theme of fate. This theme is evident throughout The Odyssey as free will is depicted as the choices that the characters make, but fate is the consequences that are dealt out due to their actions.