

AQA AS Level English Literature Activities and Exam Practice

Charles Frazier's

Cold Mountain

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(Sample pages)

Themes

To really understand *Cold Mountain*, you have to know that your texts work on many levels. Ideas and events which are clearly and simply stated make up the subject of a novel. However, by now you'll be aware that texts

work on another level; that there is a sub-text made up of those ideas which are suggested, not directly stated, by the writer. These ideas are the themes of a text. Do not confuse subject and theme.

So how do you recognise a theme?

- It's often an *idea* which keeps popping up throughout the book.
- It's rarely directly stated by the author – it is *suggested* in a number of ways.
- Often a recurring image, known as a *motif*, will point the reader towards the theme.
- The theme is usually an *abstract idea*; for example in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare explores the idea of how a character can deal with noble, ideal beliefs in a world which is not ideal and the hero Hamlet himself is flawed. However, Shakespeare doesn't say this directly, it is *suggested* by the actions and language of the characters. The theme is beneath the surface language, discussed indirectly. Nevertheless, Shakespeare points the reader to the idea and we soon realise that it's a central issue in the play.
- Themes are often ideas which are 'universal'. In other words these ideas are fundamental to human beings and can apply to people in different cultures and different times.

So why are themes important? Put simply, the themes tell us about the main ideas in a book. Most literature deals with human nature, so themes tend to be ideas about human concerns, such as ambition, the pursuit of happiness, religious beliefs, or love.

The theme should, in a well written book, be a unifying idea which holds the story together in the mind of the reader. It should make the reader think about the ideas, to think beyond the action in the book.

Remember – there may of course be more than one theme in a book!

Keeping track of themes

It's a good idea to find useful ways to make notes about the themes in the book as you read. Jot down your observations, quotations

and page references as you work through chapters. This will –

- be a really good way to become familiar with the subject matter and story
- fix relevant quotations in your mind
- make you focus on the individual themes
- cut down on revision time as you'll have accessible notes on individual themes
- save you having to search the text for quotations when you write essays or revise
- allow you to hit the Assessment Objectives effectively; particularly AO3

Use the ***Tracking themes*** sheet to help you organise notes on the different themes.

Themes in *Cold Mountain*

Look at the list below of some themes in *Cold Mountain*. Remember that a theme can be referred to and discussed in slightly different ways. For example, the theme 'Instinct' could also be understood to mean 'Intuition'. 'Self-knowledge' and 'Truth' may refer to some of the same ideas. Be prepared: alternative words for the same idea may appear in an exam question. The alternatives can be close in meaning and may not alter your understanding of the ideas.

Love	Isolation/Alienation
Forgiveness	Truth
Religion v Spirituality	Knowledge v Instinct
Nature	Man's Inhumanity to Man
Loneliness	Self- Knowledge
Kindness/Generosity	Exile
Quest	Suffering

As you read and discuss *Cold Mountain* you may identify other themes, so add them to the list.

Themes in focus

Isolation

The theme of **Isolation** is established from the beginning of the story. Images of loneliness, of not being a part of society are presented throughout the book. Frazier poses questions about how people fit into society, about how they cope with literally being alone and also with the idea of someone being with people but still being alone spiritually and psychologically.

Inman

At the beginning of *Cold Mountain* the two central characters are presented as being isolated. Inman is surrounded by people in the military hospital yet we don't really see him interacting with them, there is no conversation and soon Frazier makes the reader aware of how cut off Inman feels. The first few pages of the book focus entirely on Inman's inner life, on his thoughts only. Look closely at how Charles Frazier writes the opening of the book and the techniques used to establish these ideas.

The first few lines show Inman surfacing from sleep. In sleep he is literally separated from the world and he drifts into consciousness to a room in which the other patients are asleep. The first impression we have is of someone

preoccupied with his own thoughts, in a silent world. The first noises are of flies and other people waking up but not of conversation. Most of the sounds in the first few pages are part of Inman's memories. In the present Inman literally turns his back on his fellow patients and escapes into a silent world of books or of studying the view on the outside. Even when he leaves the ward and talks to the blind man (page 5), he is separated by the man's inability to see him. His experiences of the war have changed him profoundly and he feels an emptiness which separates him from the events around him. He needs the peace and, as he sees it, the clean air of Cold Mountain. He also realises that if he can get back to Ada there may be some hope that he will be able to feel better, to recover what has been taken away by the war and the horrors he has seen.

The attempt to break down his isolation and to search for contact, for love, and for his former place in the world, forms the basis of the story. The first sign of this is at the end of the first chapter when he writes to Ada to tell her that he is coming home.

Ada

Ada Monroe is also presented as an isolated figure. The first image of her is linked to Inman in that she is also writing a letter – a solitary, silent activity. We don't know straight away that the letter is to Inman but we can guess that this is the case because of the structure of the chapters and the content of the letter. Both letters reveal some sense of longing, a need to be together. So Ada is linked to the sense of loneliness created around the figure of Inman.

Ada is isolated in different ways. First we learn that she is literally on her own since the death of her father. She tries to cope by ignoring the real world and retreating into books to compensate for the lack of conversation. Inman, on the other hand, retreats into books because he cannot bear to talk to the other patients and the doctors, but Ada relies on books because of the absence of people in her life. It is also her way of avoiding dealing with her situation. We learn that she has always tended to isolate herself from people – unlike Inman who is part of the community.

Ada is also isolated by a number of other factors. The first is that she does not belong to Cold Mountain. She and her father came from

Charleston and therefore are not part of the community and their ideas about God are not welcomed by the local people. However, even in Charleston Ada is seen as someone apart from society. Ada is also isolated by her own ignorance of the world in which she now lives. In Cold Mountain Ada is lost in a world where she does not know the most basic survival skills. She is on a farm but unable to work out how to find food. The irony is that she has been brought up to think of herself as educated and accomplished. She is now lost in an alien world and has to rely on someone to rescue her and teach her how to live.

Both Ada and Inman question their relationship to their faith and this separates them from the comfort of unquestioned belief in God. They have both experienced things which undermine their sense of security and this makes them feel alone.

These ideas are developed in detail as the story progresses. You should make notes on the theme of **Isolation** as it is at the heart of the story and could be the focus of examination questions. Studying the theme will also give an insight into the two central characters.

Activities: The theme of isolation

- 1 Read pages 1–5 carefully and use the 'Tracking themes' sheet (next page) to make notes about how the theme of **Isolation** is established in Chapter 1. Some examples have been done for you.
- 2 Read the beginning of Chapter 2 and makes notes about the theme of **Isolation** with reference to Ada. You may not have time to collect detailed notes for every chapter – so focus on collecting key points and quotes.

Tracking themes

Where it appears	How it's presented	Supporting quotation
Ch. 1, line 1	In the name of the central character, Inman . The author is using the character's name to suggest something about him and his condition; his state of mind. 'Inman' suggests 'inner man' or someone looking inward rather than out at the world. The name is central so it's used as a <i>motif</i> , something which crops up regularly and acts a suggestion or trigger for other ideas.	'Inman's eyes and the long wound'
Ch. 1, line 13	Inman prefers to read rather than talk to anyone.	'Had it not been too dim, Inman would have read to pass the time until breakfast.'
Ch. 1, line 19	The need to avoid the other wounded, not to see the horror of what has happened, makes Inman distance himself by choosing to look away.	'So he rose and dressed and sat in a ladderback chair, putting the gloomy room of beds and their broken occupants behind him.'