

EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES IN CHERYL STRAYED'S *WILD: A JOURNEY FROM LOST TO FOUND*

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to analyse different aspects of emotional experiences as reflected in Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found*. Strayed is one of the greatest American novelists of the twentieth century. The novel details her 1,100-mile hike along the Pacific Crest Trail and spotlights personal struggles and journey towards redemption. The central theme is to overcome grief that Strayed went through due to the loss of her mother to lung cancer, as well as the split of her family and marriage. Her choosing illegitimate relationships with men and heroin addiction as a coping mechanism are analysed. Her decision to go on a hike in order to discover herself, brings out her retrieval journey.

Ke words: Grief, Cancer, Family, Marriage, Relationship, Heroin, Hike.

Introduction

Travel writing is a flourishing and highly popular literary genre. Readers indulge their taste for the exotic, or for adventure, or simply for news of the wider world, by drawing on a vast array of both contemporary and historical travel books. For much of the twentieth century, the genre was dismissed by literary critics, and cultural commentators as a minor, somewhat middle-brow form. However, travel writing's reputation rose sharply in the latter part of the twentieth century with the appearance of a new generation of critically acclaimed travel writers such as Paul Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, Ryszard Kapuscinski and Robyn Davidson.

Some of the most influential travel authors of all time, whose works have inspired wanderlust and have contributed to the study of travel literature include Bill Bryson, an American and British author whose book *Notes from a Small Island* brought him to prominence among travel writers. His travel books include works about travel in America, England, Australia, Africa, and other countries in Europe. Paul Theroux is an American novelist and travel writer, best known for his book *The Great Railway*

Bazaar. Bruce Chatwin is an English novelist and travel writer, whose first book *In Patagonia* is considered a classic in the genre.

Cheryl Strayed was born in Spangler, Pennsylvania, the second daughter of Barbara Anne and Ronald Nyland. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree, with a double major in English and Women's Studies. Strayed worked as a waitress, youth advocate, political organizer, temporary office employee, and emergency medical technician throughout her 20s and early 30s, while writing and often traveling around the United States. In 2002, she earned a Master of Fine Arts in fiction writing from Syracuse University.

Cheryl Strayed is also a podcast host. She is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found*, which was made into an Oscar-nominated film. Strayed's other books are the critically acclaimed novel, *Torch*, and the bestselling collection *Brave Enough*, which brings together more than one hundred of her inspiring quotes. Her books have sold more than five million copies around the world and have been translated into forty languages. Her award-winning essays and short stories have been published in *The Best American Essays*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post Magazine*, *Vogue*, *Salon*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Sun*, *Tin House*, *The Rumpus* and elsewhere. Strayed has also made two hit podcasts, 'Dear Sugar' and 'Sugar Calling.'

Strayed's second book, the memoir *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found*, was published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf on March 20, 2012. The week of its publication, *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found* debuted at number seven on the *New York Times* best seller list in hardcover non-fiction. In June 2012, Oprah Winfrey announced that *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found* was her first selection for her new Oprah's Book Club 2.0. Winfrey discussed *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found* in her video announcement of the new club and interviewed Strayed for a two-hour broadcast of her show 'Super Soul Sunday' on the Oprah Winfrey Network. The next month *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found* reached number one on the *New York Times* best seller list, a spot it held for seven consecutive weeks.

The novel won the Barnes and Noble Discover Award and the Oregon Book Award. Three months before the novel was published, actress Reese Witherspoon optioned it for her production company, Pacific Standard. Nick Hornby wrote the screenplay, and the film *Wild* was released in 2014, with Witherspoon portraying

Strayed. The film was a box office hit, grossing \$52.5 million, and led to Academy Award nominations for both Witherspoon and actress Laura Dern, who played Strayed's mother.

Bird's eye view

Grief is the anguish experienced after significant loss. It often includes physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, yearning, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future. Grief is not limited to the loss of people, but when it follows the loss of a loved one, it may be compounded by feelings of guilt and confusion, especially if the relationship was a difficult one. Grief involves coping with loss. Death, divorce and the loss of a home are all major events that people grieve. The idea of growing around grief acknowledges that grief does not always disappear with time but life will grow around the grief.

The main conflict in *Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found* is the protagonist's struggle to come to terms with the loss of her mother, Bobbi, who was diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer at only forty-five years old. Cheryl's grief over her mother's death leads her to spiral into a self-destructive lifestyle, which includes drug addiction and infidelity, and ultimately leads to the breakdown of her marriage. In an attempt to find herself and heal from her past, Cheryl decides to hike the Pacific Crest Trail from the Mojave Desert to Oregon, a journey that forces her to confront her inner conflicts and come to terms with her past mistakes.

Late-stage lung cancer refers to stage 3B or 4 cancers, where the cancer has spread from the lung to other parts of the body. The final stage of lung cancer means there are no more treatment options and cure are not possible. John Green in *The Fault in Our Stars* states, "That's the thing about pain . . . It demands to be felt" (63). Cheryl thought about her older sister Karen, her younger brother, Leif. She thought about her husband Paul, about her mother's parents and sister who lived thousand miles away. Cheryl mentions that she and her siblings were her mother's kids, her comrades, the end of her and the beginning. The amount that her mother loved them was beyond her reach and that it could not be quantified or contained. Her mother's love was full-throated, and all-encompassing and unadorned. George Orwell in 1984 states, "Perhaps one did not want to be loved so much as to be understood"

(252).

Bobbi married Cheryl's father while she was nineteen and pregnant. Three days later, Cheryl's father knocked Bobbi around the room. Bobbi left him but went back to him again. Her father broke Bobbi's nose and her dishes. He skinned Bobbi's knees dragging her down a sidewalk in broad daylight by her hair. By twenty-eight, Bobbi managed to leave Cheryl's father for the last time. Cheryl had to go through her father abusing her mother. She encountered domestic violence at home. Bobbie met Eddie, who was eight years younger than her, but they fell in love instantly. Karen, Leif and Cheryl fell in love with them too. He was a carpenter who could make and fix anything. Bobbie and Eddie took twelve-thousand-dollar settlement and bought forty acres of land in Aitkin County. Colleen Hoover in *Reminders of Him* states, "There was before you and there was during you. For some reason, I never thought there would be an after you." (248).

Cheryl knew everything about Bobbi's life. Throughout her childhood and adolescence Cheryl would ask Bobbi to tell her life story again and again. But now that Bobbi was dying, Cheryl knew everything. Bobbi was in her already. One day at the hospital, the nurse gave Bobbi morphine and told that morphine was what they gave to dying people and that it meant no hope. Bobbi cried from the pain. Leif and Karen stayed away making excuses that Cheryl found inexplicable and infuriating. A doctor said that Bobbi was actively dead. Bobbi would beg for morphine to the doctor. Leif didn't visit Bobbi. Karen came after Cheryl insisted that she must. Cheryl was heartbroken and enraged in disbelief. Cheryl's husband Paul, did everything he could to make Cheryl feel less alone.

Bobbi advised Cheryl to accept things as they were. Cheryl assured Bobbi that the next morning they all will be there together with Bobbi. She bends to kiss Bobbi's cheek but Bobbi fended Cheryl off in too much pain to endure a kiss. Cheryl said that she loved Bobbi and left the room. While Cheryl and Leif arrived, a nurse approached them in the hallway and told that they have kept ice on Bobbi's eyes for Bobbi wanted to donate corneas. Cheryl and Leif ran to Bobbi to find her dead. Bobbi died fast but not all of a sudden.

She couldn't leave Minnesota as her family needed her. She wondered if she had to help Leif grow up, to be there for Eddie in his loneliness, to make thanksgiving dinner and carry the family traditions. Someone had to keep what remained of their

family together. Part of her was terrified by the idea that Paul would leave her behind; another part of her desperately hoped he would. Paul deferred his admission for a year. Cheryl realized that she was not able to keep her family together for she wasn't her mom. It was only after Bobbi's death that she realized who she was. Bobbi was the apparent magical force at the center of their family who had kept them all invisibly spinning in the powerful orbit around her. Without Bobbi, Eddie slowly became a stranger. Leif, Karen and Cheryl drifted their own lives. They were four people floating separately among the flotsam of their grief, connected only by the thinnest rope. Cheryl never made to the thanksgiving.

Cheryl's grief obliterated her ability to hold back her attraction toward other men. Bobbi had been dead a week when she kissed another man. She had intimate relationship with him and others that followed vowing not to cross a sexual line that held some meaning to her, but still she knew she was wrong to cheat and lie. She felt trapped by her own inability to either leave Paul or stay true.

Few months past the second anniversary of Bobbi's death, Cheryl was not worried about crossing the line with men. She was trying to heal, to get the bad out of her system, to cure, but she was not able to. When she returned to Minneapolis to live with Paul, she knew she had to tell him, that she had an affair with another man. Her mom was dead three years by then. It is not that she did not love Paul but that she had to be alone, though she didn't know why. When she told everything to Paul, they both fell on the ground and sobbed. Paul moved out. Slowly they told their friends that they were splitting. Another woman made out with Paul. Cheryl was hurt and jealous. She was told by another friend that she deserved and tasted her own medicine. Three months into separation, she neither wanted to get back with Paul nor wanted to divorce. Paul was dating several women, but she was suddenly celibate. Now that she had smashed up her marriage over sex, sex was the furthest thing from her mind. Her friend Lisa suggested her to move out of Minneapolis and to visit her in Portland. Cheryl later moved into drugs to relieve pain.

At Portland while Cheryl went to visit Lisa, she met a man named Joe at a bar. She hadn't slept with anyone since Paul and she had a breakup three months back. That night she had sex with Joe. He asked if she ever tried heroin. Joe had just started using it when he met her. It was something Joe did, separate from her with his friends. She could have glided past it but something compelled her to pause instead. She was intrigued, unattached, in her youth and sorrow, and was

ready to self-destruct. Within a few days, she wasn't in Portland to visit Lisa and escape from sorrow anymore. She was in Portland falling into a drug-fueled half love with Joe. She moved into his apartment. It was like she found an actual planet that didn't know had been there all along, named Planet Heroin. It was a place where there was no pain, where there it was unfortunate but essentially okay that her mother was dead and that her biological father was not in her life, and her family had collapsed and that she couldn't manage to stay married to the man she loved.

Conclusion

It is observed that the novel teaches about various stages of overcoming grief. It profoundly highlights the roller coaster of emotions. Cheryl Strayed introspects her life and evolves as a better person. Cheryl also recollects memories of good moments. Anne Frank in *The Diary of a Young Girl* states "I love you, with a love so great that it simply couldn't keep growing inside my heart, but had to leap out and reveal itself in all its magnitude" (179). While Cheryl reached for a wash cloth during hike, she got reminded of her mother saying that the first thing she did when each of them were born was to kiss every part of them. Contrast of emotions are highlighted throughout the novel. At times, her pain was magnified about a thousand times. There weren't only those sad facts about life but also the additional fact that Cheryl's life was a pile of mess. She washed her face and sobbed. She told herself that she was not what she is.

Cheryl moves on to the next stage of relieving grief. It was a world Cheryl had never been to and yet had known was there all along, one she would stagger to in sorrow, confusion, fear and hope. It was a world she thought would both make her into the woman she knew she could become and turn her into the girl she had once been. It was a world that measured two feet wide and 2662 miles long. It was a world called the Pacific Crest Trail. The PCT was a continuous wilderness trail that went from the Mexican border in California to just beyond the Canadian border along the crest of nine mountain ranges. Cheryl healed throughout her hike. She recovered on the whole when she stated about marrying a man, having two kids one of whom she names Bobbi, her mother's name. They four ate ice cream cones right at the place where she ended her hike. She never knew life would change drastically for the good. It was her life, like all lives, mysterious, irrevocable and sacred. She felt her life so close and belonging to her. She felt how wild life was to let it be.

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