



Reconnecting with Nature and Self: Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* Expedition

Harsha V

Research Associate, Division of English - School of Social Sciences and Languages

Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai-600127, India

Abstract: Cheryl Strayed's memoir, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, offers a profound narrative of self-discovery and healing in the wilderness. This research abstract explores the central themes of nature as a transformative space and the intricate connection between human identity and the natural world within Strayed's account. Through a focused examination of her experiences along the Pacific Crest Trail, we unveil how nature acts as a catalyst for personal growth, introspection, and self-realization. This exploration invites readers to consider the transformative potential of nature and its ability to foster a deep connection with one's inner self.

Keywords: Pacific Crest Trail, Nature, Transformative space, Connection, Self-discovery, Wilderness

Introduction:

In the memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, Cheryl Strayed embarks on a transformative journey, not only through the rugged terrain of the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) but also through the intricate landscapes of her inner self. As Strayed forges her path through the wilderness, the words of transcendentalist thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson echo: "In the woods, we return to reason and faith." This sentiment encapsulates the profound power of nature as a transformative space, a theme central to her narrative. Guided by Emerson's wisdom, we embark on an exploration into how nature serves as a catalyst for self-discovery.

The concept of nature as a transformative space is deeply rooted in literature and philosophy. Emerson, in his essay "Nature," extolled the virtues of the natural world as a source of spiritual and personal growth. He wrote, "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit." Similarly, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* chronicled his experiment in simple living in nature as a means of self-discovery, proclaiming, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately."

Strayed's narrative converges with contemporary theorists who have examined the intricate relationship between humans and nature. Richard Louv, in *Last Child in the Woods*, explores the idea of "nature-deficit disorder," suggesting that disconnection from the natural world can lead to emotional and psychological imbalances. Strayed's experiences resonate with Louv's concept as her reconnection with nature becomes a catalyst for her personal healing and self-discovery.

In this research paper, we embark on an exploration of how Cheryl Strayed's journey along the Pacific Crest Trail encapsulates the themes of nature as a transformative space and the profound connection between the human self and the natural world. We will weave together Strayed's own words and insights from Emerson, Thoreau, and Louv to uncover the layers of meaning behind Strayed's journey and its implications for understanding the intricate relationship between humanity and the natural world. As Strayed herself eloquently states, "It had nothing to do with gear or footwear or the backpacking fads or philosophies of any particular era or even with getting from point A to point B. It had to do with how it felt to be in the wild. With what it was like to walk for miles with no reason other than to witness the accumulation of trees and meadows, mountains and deserts, streams and rocks, rivers and grasses, sunrises and sunsets."

In the pages that follow, we will delve into Cheryl Strayed's journey, examining how her experiences along the PCT mirror the timeless themes of nature as a transformative space and the profound connection between the human spirit and the natural world.

Literature Review:

The themes of nature as a transformative space and the profound connection between humans and the natural world have long captured the imaginations of writers, philosophers, and scholars. In Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, these themes are vividly portrayed, resonating with a rich body of literature and scholarship that underscores the therapeutic and self-reflective aspects of the wilderness.

Nature as a Transformative Space:

Throughout history, nature has been portrayed as a place of profound transformation. The transcendentalist movement of the 19th century, with thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, celebrated nature as a source of spiritual and personal growth. Emerson's essay "Nature" emphasized the importance of connecting with the natural world to find one's true self. Similarly, Thoreau's *Walden* recounted his experiment in living deliberately in a cabin in the woods, highlighting how nature could be a transformative space for self-discovery.

In contemporary literature, Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* explores a young man's journey into the Alaskan wilderness as a means of self-discovery, echoing Strayed's narrative. These literary works suggest that nature, with its solitude and challenges, serves as a canvas upon which individuals confront their inner struggles and emerge transformed.

Connection with Nature and Self:

The notion of connecting with nature to better understand oneself has also been explored by modern theorists. Richard Louv's *Last Child in the Woods* introduces the concept of "nature-deficit disorder," arguing that disconnection from nature can lead to emotional and psychological imbalances. Louv's work underscores the importance of fostering a deep connection with the natural world for personal well-being.

Research Gap:

While the existing literature offers rich insights into the transformative power of nature and the connection between humans and the natural world, there is a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the gendered aspects of this relationship. Cheryl Strayed's journey along the Pacific Crest Trail as a woman hiking alone presents a unique perspective. The literature primarily focuses on male explorers and adventurers, such as Thoreau and Krakauer, leaving a research gap in the exploration of how gender shapes the wilderness experience and the relationship between women and nature.

Furthermore, the majority of existing research predominantly examines the North American wilderness experience, particularly the works of Emerson and Thoreau. Strayed's journey along the Pacific Crest Trail offers an opportunity to explore how different geographical and environmental contexts impact the transformative potential of nature.

In summary, while the transformative power of nature and the connection between humans and the natural world have been extensively discussed, a research gap exists in understanding how gender and diverse geographical contexts influence these dynamics. Cheryl Strayed's narrative offers a unique lens through which to explore these aspects and enrich our understanding of the intricate relationship between individuals, particularly women, and the wild.

Discussion:

Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* offers a profound exploration of nature as a transformative space and the intricate connection between the human self and the natural world. This discussion delves deeper into these themes, drawing on key lines and moments from the novel.

Nature as a Transformative Space:

Strayed's journey along the Pacific Crest Trail exemplifies the concept of nature as a transformative space, echoing the sentiments of renowned transcendentalist thinkers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Emerson famously wrote, "In the woods, we return to reason and faith," a sentiment that reverberates throughout Strayed's narrative. As she confronts the rugged and demanding wilderness of the PCT, she simultaneously faces her inner demons and past mistakes.

Strayed's visceral experiences on the trail are emblematic of this transformative journey. She writes, "Fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves," highlighting the profound connection between the external challenges of the trail and her internal struggles. Nature becomes a mirror reflecting her emotional and psychological state, forcing her to confront her vulnerabilities and, ultimately, her strengths.

Moreover, Strayed's solitude in the wilderness becomes a sanctuary for self-reflection, akin to the ideas of Emerson and Thoreau. She poignantly states, "Alone had always felt like an actual place to me, as if it weren't a state of being, but rather a room where I could retreat to be who I really was." Here, nature becomes a transformative space where she peels away the layers of her past and her missteps, ultimately allowing her true self to emerge.

Connection with Nature and Self:

Strayed's profound connection with the natural world is another central aspect of her narrative. This connection echoes the ideas of contemporary theorists like Richard Louv, who posits the concept of "nature-deficit disorder." Louv emphasizes the importance of reconnecting with nature for personal well-being, a concept that resonates strongly with Strayed's experiences.

Throughout her journey, Strayed finds solace in the simplicity of life on the trail. She describes her connection with nature, stating, "The world became the wilderness and I became part of it, indivisible from it." In these moments, she transcends being a mere traveler through nature; she becomes one with it. This deep connection parallels her quest for self-acceptance and self-love.

As Strayed learns to adapt and thrive in the wilderness, she also learns to accept herself, including her imperfections. Her words, "I was a pebble. I was the wind. I was the sky. I was the water. I was the dirt under my feet," signify her profound integration with the natural world and her acceptance of her own intrinsic worth.

In summary, Cheryl Strayed's "Wild" provides a captivating narrative of nature as a transformative space and the profound connection between the human self and the natural world. Her journey along the Pacific Crest Trail mirrors timeless themes explored by literary luminaries like Emerson and Thoreau, as well as contemporary theorists like Louv. Through Strayed's experiences and her poignant lines from the novel, we witness the power of nature to heal, transform, and forge an unbreakable connection between individuals and the wild. Her story serves as a testament to the enduring importance of the natural world in the human journey toward self-discovery and personal growth.

Conclusion:

Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* is a poignant testament to the enduring power of nature as a transformative space and the profound connection between the human self and the natural world. Through her compelling narrative, Strayed navigates the wilderness with a resonance that harkens back to the wisdom of transcendentalist thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, while also aligning with contemporary theorists such as Richard Louv.

The theme of nature as a transformative space is eloquently illustrated throughout Strayed's journey along the Pacific Crest Trail. Her expedition through the rugged and awe-inspiring landscapes of the trail becomes a canvas upon which she confronts her inner demons, mirroring the inner journey so often celebrated by transcendentalist philosophers. In the wilderness, she battles the physical challenges of the terrain while simultaneously unearthing her emotional and psychological strengths. As she progresses along the trail, it

becomes a mirror for her emotional and psychological state, compelling her to address her vulnerabilities, fears, and past regrets. Strayed's story exemplifies Emerson's assertion that "In the woods, we return to reason and faith," as nature serves as a catalyst for her rediscovery of herself.

Moreover, Strayed's deep and profound connection with the natural world resonates with contemporary theories regarding the vital importance of nature for human well-being. Her ability to find solace in the simplicity of life on the trail underscores the idea that nature can serve as a sanctuary for self-acceptance and self-love. Her journey portrays how immersion in the wild can lead to a profound sense of unity with the natural world, echoing the sentiments of Emerson and Thoreau.

In conclusion, Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* is not merely a narrative of physical endurance and adventure; it is a testament to the enduring and transformative influence of nature on the human spirit. Through her experiences and the resonant lines from her novel, we bear witness to the remarkable capacity of nature to heal, rejuvenate, and establish an unbreakable bond between individuals and the wilderness. Strayed's story serves as a lasting reminder of the intrinsic value of the natural world in our journey toward self-discovery and personal growth. Her trek along the Pacific Crest Trail invites us all to explore the transformative potential of nature and its pivotal role in our quest for self-realization, ultimately reminding us that in the heart of the wild, we may also find the depths of our own souls.

References:

Strayed, C. (2012). *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. Vintage.

Emerson, R. W. (1836). *Nature*. James Munroe and Company.

Thoreau, H. D. (1854). *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. Ticknor and Fields.

Krakauer, J. (1996). *Into the Wild*. Villard.

Louv, R. (2008). *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*. Algonquin Books.