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Thirst And Transformation: Water As Life Force in Cheryl Strayed's Wild**Ms. Archana Bhupal Nandagave**

M.A., M. PHIL., SET (ENG)

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Cheryl Strayed is a famous writer as well as podcaster from America. Her notable works are Torch, Tiny Beautiful Things, Brave Enough etc. Wild: A Journey from Lost to Found is written by Cheryl Strayed in 2012. Her memoir, Wild (2012) is widely acknowledged as a tale of survival, grief, and transformation. On one level, it recounts the experience of a woman who hikes over a thousand miles of the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) by herself, on another level, it narrates the story of a fractured daughter in search of renewal following her mother's death and the disintegration of her personal life. Throughout the memoir, the elements of nature—heat, mountains, deserts, and animals—play a significant role in shaping Strayed's journey, yet none is as pivotal or symbolically significant as water. More than merely a life-sustaining element, water serves in Wild as a potent metaphor for Strayed's challenges and development. It symbolizes survival during times of scarcity, hope during moments of relief, purification during times of cleansing, and transcendence during moments of culmination. Thus, water emerges as both a physical necessity and a spiritual ally in her quest for rebirth.

Key words: Journey- external and internal, water as a thirst quencher, water as a means of transformation

Introduction

The memoir recounts Strayed's 1,100-mile trek along the Pacific Crest Trail in 1995, portraying it as a path of self-discovery. Cheryl was devastated by her mother's death. Her family was scattered. Strayed took divorce from her husband, and spoiled her own life. In pursuit of self-discovery and to address her persistent grief and personal difficulties, Cheryl embarked on her journey, venturing out alone despite having no previous hiking experience. Throughout her journey the role of water was quite noteworthy not only for her sustenance in the wilderness but for her spiritual growth also.

Water in Wild transcends being merely a resource; it serves as a metaphorical current that flows through Strayed's journey. It symbolizes survival, humility, purification, emotional liberation, and transformation, reflecting her journey of mourning, healing, and re-establishing her roots in life. In Wild, Cheryl Strayed's interactions with water unveil a complex metaphor: thirst signifies vulnerability and sorrow; water represents survival, purification, and renewal. Through alternating phases of scarcity and plenty, Strayed undergoes a transformation—not merely enduring the PCT, but reestablishing her connection with the fundamental forces of life.

Water as a Means of Survival

At the most fundamental level, Strayed's trek is influenced by her urgent need for water. The Pacific Crest Trail traverses unforgiving deserts, especially in the Mojave section where Strayed commences her expedition. In these initial chapters, water transforms into a daily fixation: she meticulously checks the guidebook for water caches, calculates the distances between sources, and anxiously assesses her dwindling supply. At one moment, she remembers feeling faint, her lips chapped, her thoughts entirely consumed by thirst. The lack of water represents not merely a physical challenge but also serves as a stark reminder of her fragility. This physical deprivation parallels her emotional desolation following her mother's passing. Just as her body suffers from thirst, her spirit has been depleted by sorrow, failed relationships, and self-destructive behaviors. The desert stands as a metaphor for her internal condition—barren, expansive, and unwelcoming. Thus, water signifies not only the essence of survival in a literal context but also the potential for rejuvenation. Each time she discovers it, her determination is validated: every sip represents both a continuation of her physical existence and a minor advancement toward emotional recovery.

Water as a Source of Nourishment and Relief

After enduring days of lugging heavy bag under the relentless sun, Strayed's encounters with water sources become instances of profound relief. One such instance arises when she unexpectedly discovers her first stream following an arduous dry spell. She recounts drinking deeply, feeling as though the water is a form of salvation. These moments are striking not only because they highlight the hiker's fundamental need but also because they express a sense of spiritual liberation. In these instances, water represents sustenance and hope. Strayed's delight in drinking transcends mere thirst quenching—it serves as a reminder that life, even amidst its most challenging circumstances, bestows gifts of grace. The sight of a flowing stream reassures her that perseverance yields nourishment. Symbolically, the revitalizing essence of water mirrors her gradual realization that healing is attainable. Just as water restores her dehydrated body, instances of beauty and connection begin to rejuvenate her thirsty spirit.

Water as a means of Purification and Renewal

One of the most prominent symbolic functions of water in *Wild* is its role as a means of cleansing and rebirth. Strayed's lengthy days on the trail leave her dirty, blistered, and fatigued. Upon encountering lakes or rivers large enough for swimming, she utilizes them to cleanse herself—and in this process, she undergoes not only a physical renewal but also a spiritual one. A significant moment transpires when Strayed arrives at Oregon's Crater Lake, a renowned landmark along the PCT. As she immerses herself in its deep, pristine waters, she articulates feelings of vitality, exhilaration, and a profound connection to the natural environment. This act is akin to baptism: submersion in water followed by a rise into a new existence. In various religious traditions, baptism signifies the removal of sin and the commencement of a renewed life. For Strayed, bathing in natural waters performs this same ritual of purification. Each immersion enables her to release a layer of grief, guilt, and confusion, cleansing not only her skin but also her mind. In this context, water is transformative—it permits Strayed to perceive the trail not merely as a challenge of endurance but also as a refuge of rebirth.

Water as a Challenge and an Opportunity for Growth

Water in *Wild* is not always gentle or restorative; at times, it presents a challenge that must be endured and overcome. Strayed's journey leads her across rivers swollen with snowmelt, where she is compelled to test her courage and physical strength. While crossing these rivers, she confronts dangers posed by cold currents, slippery rocks, and the potential of being swept away. These experiences highlight the dual nature of water: it can provide salvation, but it can also pose a threat. In a similar vein, snow—frozen water—serves as a persistent obstacle. In the Sierra Nevada and other mountain ranges, Strayed is compelled to navigate treacherous snowfields, where she risks losing her footing or straying off the path. Snow acts as both a hindrance and a resource: it is perilous to traverse, yet it also provides hydration once it melts.

Symbolically, these challenges mirror the role of grief and hardship in Strayed's life. Like rivers and snow, grief serves as both an obstacle and a teacher. It tests her, slows her down, and endangers her progress, yet enduring it fosters resilience. The trials presented by water in its perilous forms reflect the necessity of confronting her sorrow directly, rather than evading it. By overcoming these watery challenges, Strayed illustrates her ability to grow and her resolve to continue moving forward.

Water as the Pinnacle and Elevation

Strayed's odyssey culminates at the Bridge of the Gods, which stretches across the Columbia River, connecting Oregon and Washington. This mighty river, expansive and formidable, stands as the ultimate emblem of her metamorphosis. As she gazes down at its turbulent waters, Strayed contemplates her journey, her sorrow, and what lies ahead. The Columbia River acts as both a physical landmark—the conclusion of her expedition—and a metaphorical boundary. Traversing the bridge signifies not merely the conclusion of a tangible journey but the commencement of a revitalized existence. The river flowing beneath her symbolizes continuity and elevation. It represents the passage of time, propelling her onward, while also serving as a reminder that life is inherently fluid, unpredictable, and resilient. The memoir concludes with Strayed coming to terms with her mother's death, acknowledging her past errors, and facing the ambiguity of her

future, all while welcoming the opportunities that await. At this pivotal moment, water signifies liberation: she no longer fights against her grief but permits herself to move with it, akin to the current of a river.

Conclusions

In *Wild*, water functions on three interconnected levels: literal, emotional, and spiritual. It serves a literal purpose as a necessity for survival during Strayed's thousand-mile trek. Emotionally, it mirrors her grief—at times scarce and suffocating, at other times abundant and overwhelming. Spiritually, it possesses a cleansing, baptismal quality that leads her toward renewal. The Mojave's parched thirst, the relief provided by streams, the immersion in Crater Lake, the perils of rivers and snow, and the climax at the Columbia River collectively integrate water into the memoir as a symbolic foundation.

By the conclusion of her journey, Strayed is transformed by water in a manner akin to how rivers give new shapes to landscapes: gradually, painfully, yet profoundly. Her narrative demonstrates that survival encompasses not only the quest for water in the desert but also the acceptance of life's currents. In *Wild*, water is not merely passive scenery; it is a fundamental force that steers Strayed from despair to rebirth, rendering it essential to the memoir's significance.

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