

Self-Transformation of Cheryl Strayed Reflected in *Wild* (2014) Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée (2014)

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze: (1) how traumatic experiences become the trigger for Cheryl Strayed's journey in Wild (2014), and (2) how her self-transformation is reflected in the film, using Abraham Maslow's theory of human needs. This research applies a descriptive qualitative method with the film Wild (2014) as the primary data source. Data were collected through observation, transcription of dialogues, classification of scenes, and interpretation based on psychological theory. The analysis reveals that Cheryl's personal traumas such as the death of her mother, drug use, and a failed marriage become the main motivations for her solo hike along the Pacific Crest Trail. Throughout the film, Cheryl gradually fulfills Maslow's five levels of human needs, from physiological needs to self-actualization. The findings conclude that Wild is a narrative not only of physical survival but also of psychological healing and identity reconstruction.

Keywords: *Wild, Self-transformation, Trauma, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Cheryl Strayed*

Introduction

Mental and emotional healing processes are often triggered by traumatic events. In literature and film, such processes are frequently presented through journeys, both literal and metaphorical. Cheryl Strayed's journey in *Wild* (2014), directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, is a compelling depiction of a woman seeking personal recovery after experiencing profound loss and self-destruction. Based on the memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* by Cheryl Strayed, the film narrates her 1,100-mile hike as a form of self-discovery and healing.

This study focuses on how *Wild* presents Cheryl's transformation through the psychological framework of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. By analyzing key scenes and dialogue, the research explores how her internal growth mirrors the fulfillment of human needs, starting from basic survival to achieving personal meaning. The study provides a psychological lens to understand how film can depict complex emotional development.

Literary Review

Psychology of Literature

Psychology of literature allows readers or viewers to understand the mental and emotional conditions of characters. According to Wellek and Warren (1949), this approach analyzes characters' behaviors, thoughts, and emotions, which reflect deeper psychological dynamics. In *Wild*, Cheryl's psychological condition is central to the narrative, making Maslow's theory a suitable framework.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow (1954) proposed a five-tier model of human needs: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Each stage must be fulfilled progressively to reach full psychological development. The model is often used to analyze character motivation and personal transformation in literature and film.

Fulfillment of Maslow's Needs

1. Physiological Needs

At the beginning of the journey, Cheryl struggles to meet her physiological needs. She often runs out of food, water, and faces harsh weather. Scenes where she panics over missing water tanks or wears tight shoes depict her physical hardship.

2. Safety Needs

Cheryl experiences fear of wild animals, unfamiliar terrain, and loneliness. She faces anxiety sleeping alone and recalls moments of abuse and insecurity. These moments illustrate her psychological battle with fear and her effort to find stability.

3. Love and Belonging

Flashbacks of her mother's death, failed marriage, and meaningless affairs depict her longing for connection and affection. Cheryl's journey reflects her attempt to reconnect with herself and rebuild her capacity to love and be loved.

4. Esteem Needs

Cheryl gains self-respect and confidence as she conquers each physical and emotional challenge. Compliments from fellow hikers and her own reflections on progress help fulfill her need for esteem and achievement.

5. Self-Actualization

Cheryl reaches a point of acceptance and personal growth by the end of her journey. Her reflection, *'What if I forgave myself?'* demonstrates her spiritual maturity and transformation. She no longer seeks external validation but embraces her flaws and experiences as part of her identity.

Research Method

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method. According to Creswell (2006), qualitative research is a method used to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The object of this research is a film entitled *Wild* (2014), directed by Jean-Marc Vallée. The film contains visual and verbal elements that reflect the psychological journey and transformation of the main character, Cheryl Strayed. The main data in this research are the dialogues and scenes from the film, while the supporting data are collected from books, journals, and internet sources relevant to the research topic. The method of collecting data is observation. The researcher watched the film and read the script carefully, then identified, classified, and selected the data related to Cheryl's self-transformation. The steps of data analysis include displaying the data, explaining the context, and interpreting the meaning through Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs as the theoretical framework.

Finding and Discussion

The research analyzes the issue in this chapter. The issue is about the types of delusional disorder and human's psychological condition that found in the main character of *I'm Wild* (2014).

1. Psychological Needs

Datum 1: Physiological Needs Lack of food

Cheryl : Hi, my name is Cheryl. I hiked along the PCT and I ran out of food. you can take me somewhere I can get something to eat?

Farmer : I work in the field now

Cheryl : Yes, I get it. Maybe when you're done, you can take me somewhere, and I can find a place to live around there.

Farmer : You must be starving. I brought some dehydrated food.

Cheryl : I have a stove but I took the wrong fuel.

Farmer : I still have a bit of work to complete. But you can wait for me in my truck.

(Valle, *Wild*, 00:23:17)

In the dialogue above, Cheryl travels so far when Cheryl sees a man, she finds a farmer and comes up to him and says, "*I hiked along the PCT and I ran out of food. Maybe you can take me somewhere I can get something to eat?*" She says for help because of hunger. The farmer replied that he was still working, but still showed concern by says, "*I brought some dehydrated food.*" This shows that even though they are busy, farmers are still trying to help. Cheryl also said that she could not cook because she brought the wrong fuel. Finally, the farmer allowed Cheryl to wait in his truck until she was done. From these conversations, to can be concluded that Cheryl received food and a safe waiting place and that Cheryl's needs are met and it means that her physiological needs are met.

Datum 2: Safety Needs Fear of Wild animals

Cheryl : "I'm fine... for now. But I can only walk a few miles a day. It would take me twenty years to complete. And today... I ran into a venomous snake on the trail. And walked slowly
(Valle, *Wild*, 00:33:48)

In the dialogue above, Cheryl continue her journey when on the road she sees a dangerous snake and then Cheryl says "*And today... I ran into a venomous snake on the trail.*" That incident scared Cheryl so she carefully run and stay away from the snake, she begin to have to continue to be vigilant and careful because the presence of these animals could endanger her. This is related to the need for a sense of security where Cheryl needs to protect herself from threats in the surrounding environment in order to stay safe and be able to continue her journey. So, Cheryl's fear of Wild animals like venomous snakes illustrates the importance of the need for a sense of security during travel in the Wild, where vigilance and self-protection are paramount to survival. This is part of the need for a sense of security that has not been met.

Datum 1: Love Belongingness Needs Trauma of her father

Cheryl : I don't want the sandwich.
Dad : You heard that? Should I hit him?
(Mother steps out, bringing her two children)
Dad : Come back here, you two!
Mom : Get in the car now!
(Valle, *Wild*, 1:16:55)

From the dialogue above, at the time of Cheryl's break, she recalls her childhood. Cheryl says, *"I don't want the sandwich."* From the sentence that Cheryl refuse the food, her father hear it make her father angry and says "Did you hear that? Should I hit him?" The mother inside hear that make the mother step out to protect her child from violence. Finally, the mother decide to go and bring the two children and hold her. The father saw it from the front of the house and says, *"Come back here, you two!"* When my dad gets angry at my indifferent mom, he says, "Get in the car now!" shows a family atmosphere full of tension, violence, and lack of affection. Cheryl rejects the simple sandwich, but instead receives threats from her father, who suggests that she grew up in an emotionally insecure and conflict-filled environment. This situation is related to the third level, which is the need for love, acceptance, and belonging. Children at that age desperately need the attention, affection, and warm relationships of their parents. However, in this quote, Cheryl instead experiences fear and rejection, which is likely to cause deep inner wounds. When this need for love and closeness is not met from childhood, it can affect the way a person views relationships, beliefs, and themselves as an adult. This is an unmet need for affection.

Datum 1 : A tribute from a hiking friend

Cheryl : Hi, I did it

Greg : Hi. You made it look at you! This is Cheryl...and her monster.

(Valle, *Wild*, 00:42:59)

In the dialog, When Cheryl traveled and met Greg in the woods, they got to know each other and also talked about a trip to Kennedy Meadows. At that time, Cheryl finally fulfilled the fourth stage of need, namely the need for self-esteem. When Cheryl says, *"Hi, I did it,"* it means that she feels proud and confident that she has succeeded in doing something. Then Greg replies, *"Hi. You made it, look at you! This is Cheryl...and her monster,"* which means that Greg acknowledges Cheryl's success and even introduces her to others. The phrase *"look at you!"* shows that Cheryl has been recognized by others for her efforts. This shows that Cheryl not only feels personally satisfied but also feels valued by others. This indicates that the need for self-esteem has been fulfilled because she has begun to be appreciated by others.

Datum 6 : The process of accumulation and transformation Remembering
his mother

Cheryl : I was thinking about you today...
I feel like I'm running out of strength.
Trying to remember why I'm doing all this.
I hope you wouldn't be mad at me
if I decided to quit.
(Valle, *Wild*, 00:16:30)

In the dialogue above, when she is sung a song by Kyle, she feels reminded of her mother. Cheryl's sentence, "*Trying to remember why I'm doing all this,*" shows that she is feeling tired and starting to doubt why she keeps fighting. This is part of the process of finding yourself and turning into a stronger person. When a person feels like giving up, it does not mean that she is weak in fact, it can be the beginning of an important change in her life. Cheryl is trying to re-understand the purpose and meaning of everything she does. Her honesty in acknowledging fatigue and the desire to quit is the first step towards deeper and more meaningful self-change. This is in need of actualization, and transformation has begun to be felt.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis in Chapter IV, the researcher concludes that the *Wild* movie illustrates the psychological struggles and emotional development of Cheryl Strayed as the main character. The first research question explores how traumatic experiences trigger Cheryl's journey. It is shown that Cheryl's past traumas such as her abusive father, the death of her mother, divorce, and involvement with drugs, become the main triggers that push her to find healing through the physical and emotional journey along the Pacific Crest Trail. Her traumas reflect unfulfilled needs in love and belongingness, safety, and emotional stability.

The second research question focuses on Cheryl's process of self-transformation. Through the fulfillment of Maslow's hierarchy of needs from basic physiological needs to the peak of self-actualization, Cheryl gradually undergoes a significant personal change. She grows from a broken woman into someone who finds strength, peace, and meaning in her journey. The journey

becomes a metaphor for self-discovery, showing that transformation is possible through perseverance, reflection, and accepting the past.

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