

Between Eros and Thanatos: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*

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Abstract: This paper offers a psychoanalytic reading of Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* (2012) through Sigmund Freud's theory of the death drive, as introduced in his seminal essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920). Strayed's memoir, chronicling her 1,100-mile hike along the Pacific Crest Trail following her mother's death and personal disintegration, becomes a rich site for examining the dialectic between Thanatos and Eros. The narrative reveals a compulsive repetition of pain, risk, and isolation—what Freud identifies as the psyche's unconscious pull toward death and dissolution. However, this drive coexists with an emerging movement toward survival, connection, and pleasure, reflecting Freud's conception of Eros as the opposing, life-affirming force. The paper argues that Strayed's physical journey is a literal enactment of the psychic struggle between melancholia and mourning, as theorized by Freud in his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" ([1917] 1957). Through this analysis, *Wild* is situated not merely as a tale of healing but as a text that dramatizes the complex interplay of destructive and restorative drives within the grieving self. The study contributes to the intersection of psychoanalysis and contemporary trauma memoirs, and proposes *Wild* as a compelling example of the Freudian death drive at work in modern autobiographical literature.

Keywords: trauma, memoir, psychoanalysis, Freud, Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*

Introduction

In her 2012 *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*, Cheryl Strayed narrates her transformative solo journey along the Pacific Crest Trail in the aftermath of personal devastation. Following the untimely death of her mother, the disintegration of her marriage, and years of impulsive, self-destructive behaviour, Strayed embarks on

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an 1,100-mile hike through unforgiving terrain, seeking not just escape but survival. What unfolds is not simply a tale of physical endurance, but a profound psychological confrontation—one that echoes Sigmund Freud’s dialectic of Eros and Thanatos. Strayed’s memoir dramatizes the tug-of-war between the compulsion toward death and the will to live, situating *Wild* at the intersection of trauma, grief, and the psychoanalytic self.

The journey itself becomes a symbolic stage for psychic struggle. Strayed writes, “I was twenty-six years old and an orphan, too. An *actual stray*, a stranger had observed a couple of weeks before, when I’d told him my name and explained how very loose I was in the world” (Strayed 2012, 3). This admission by her sets the tone for a narrative, right in the beginning of the memoir, being driven as much by emotional collapse as by physical collapse. Her physical suffering, particularly the painful consequences of ill-fitted boots, becomes a metaphor for the masochistic repetitions of the death drive: “And all the while, those boots had blistered my feet and rubbed them raw... They had become not so much inanimate objects to me asexual tensions of who I was” (Ibid, 5). This compulsion toward self-punishment and risk mirrors Freud’s concept of Thanatos, the unconscious pull toward pain, regression, and dissolution. Yet, this drive does not exist in isolation. It is countered, however tenuously, by moments of vitality, self-recognition, and hope: “I’d started walking in the Mojave Desert and I didn’t plan to stop until I touched my hand to a bridge that crosses the Columbia River at the Oregon-Washington border with the grandiose name the Bridge of the Gods” (Ibid, 6). The trail, stretching 2,663 miles long, is a crucible for Strayed’s mourning process, where the isolation of grief becomes the very path toward psychic reintegration. As she reflects, “The wanting was a wilderness and I had to find my own way out of the woods. It took me four years, seven months, and three days to do it. I didn’t know where I was going until I got there” (Ibid, 27), positioning her trek not merely as geographical, but as deeply internal and symbolic.

This paper applies Freudian psychoanalysis to *Wild*, particularly his theories from “Mourning and Melancholia” (Freud [1917] 1957) and “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (Freud 1920) to argue that Strayed’s narrative embodies the dialectical tension between Eros - the life instinct, and Thanatos - the death drive. Through this lens, *Wild* emerges not just as a memoir of healing, but as a literary enactment of melancholia transformed by mourning, and a raw, compelling

illustration of the Freudian death drive at work in contemporary autobiographical literature.

Mourning and melancholia: Psychodynamic struggles

Freud's seminal essay "Mourning and Melancholia" offers a foundational distinction in psychoanalytic theory between two responses to loss. While mourning is a healthy, time-bound process where the ego eventually relinquishes the lost object, melancholia is pathological. In melancholia, the object-cathexis is not released; instead, the ego identifies with the lost object and turns aggressive energies inward, resulting in self-reproach, guilt, and psychic fragmentation. As Freud ([1917] 1957, 246) writes, "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself". Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* becomes a compelling narrative of this dialectic, demonstrating the complex psychological terrain between grief and healing, between a melancholic fixation on her deceased mother and the gradual movement toward mourning via the symbolic and literal journey along the Pacific Crest Trail.

Strayed herself explicitly frames the death of her mother as the moment her life unravelled. "Watching my mother die and having to live without her, that was the hardest thing I'd ever done." (Strayed 2012, 95) This trauma is not merely a source of pain but the origin of a profound psychic rupture that would instigate an inward spiral in which her marriage collapses, her family dissolves, and she turns toward drug use and sexual recklessness. These reactions function not merely as narrative devices but rather reflect Freud's concept of melancholic compulsion. Freud describes melancholia as a condition in which "the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object" (Freud [1917] 1957, 249). This process results in a form of internal self-destruction indistinguishable from self-loathing. According to Freud, melancholia involves the replacement of the emotional loss of the loved object with identification: "In this way, an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego altered by identification" (Ibidem). This dynamic is clearly evident in the memoir *Wild* as Strayed's identity undergoes disintegration. She relinquishes her married name and consciously adopts the name 'Strayed,' a symbolic reflection of her psychological state. The name itself, she writes, means: "*to wander*

from the proper path, to deviate from the direct course, to be lost, to become wild, to be without a mother or father, to be without a home, to move about aimlessly in search of something, to diverge or digress” (Strayed 2012, 96). The very name signals the melancholic disorientation, where the self and the lost object merge in the unresolved space of psychic mourning.

Strayed’s self-destructive choices, particularly her heroin use and indiscriminate sex, are not random. They function as compulsions, echoing Freud’s later articulation of the ‘repetition compulsion’ in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (Freud 1920), where trauma manifests as a drive not toward mastery but toward re-enactment of suffering. “...compulsion to repeat [is] something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides” (Ibid, 23). Strayed’s repeated immersion in pain-emotional, physical, and sexual, functions as a melancholic holding onto the trauma of her mother’s death.

Cheryl Strayed’s decision to hike the Pacific Crest Trail can be understood as both literal and symbolic—a ritualized enactment of working through grief. In psychoanalytic terms, it resembles melancholia which Freud describes as follows: “melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness” (Freud [1917] 1957, 245). The trail functions as an analytic space: a shifting terrain across which Strayed must confront and eventually relinquish her melancholic attachment. Her journey reflects the painful and prolonged transition from melancholia to mourning, a process marked by psychic labour and the acceptance of symbolic loss. This is further evidenced by Strayed’s own reflection: “Perhaps the impulse to purchase the PCT guidebook months before had been a primal grab for a cure, for the thread of my life that had been severed” (Strayed 2012, 95). The ‘thread’ metaphor recurs as she hikes: “I could feel it unspooling behind me—the old thread I’d lost, the new one I was spinning” (Ibidem). The act of walking, physically forward, mirrors a psychic reintegration—a narrative rethreading of selfhood disrupted by traumatic loss.

Strayed’s memoir also dramatizes the Freudian idea that mourning requires memory work. In his 1914 essay “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,” Freud outlines the process by which the subject moves from traumatic repetition to symbolic processing. “...the patient does not remember anything of what is forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he

repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it” (Freud 1914, 150). Strayed frequently engages in this form of working-through, recalling episodes from her past—her mother’s optimism, her impoverished childhood, her failed marriage—not in a linear sequence but through spontaneous, sensory-laden flashbacks. The trail, in this way, becomes a site of deferred processing, echoing what trauma scholars term *nachträglichkeit* or deferred action, where the trauma becomes fully traumatic only in retrospect. Even her dreams and internal monologues operate as spaces of psychic mourning. In one vivid recollection, she says, “I was her daughter, but more. I was Karen, Cheryl, Leif. Karen Cheryl Leif. Our names blurred into one in my mother’s mouth all my life” (Strayed 2012, 13). The symbolic fusion of self and sibling identities under maternal love further evidences Freud’s point that melancholia often coexists with narcissistic identification. Her mother’s death, therefore, is not just a loss of a person but a dismembering of the psychic scaffolding of the self.

Notably, *Wild* never presents mourning as complete. Rather, healing is framed as incremental and cyclical. Trauma theorist Dori Laub observes that, “Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect” (Laub 1992, 69). Strayed’s return to key memories, her verbalization of pain in the wilderness, and her solitary encounters with grief align with this notion of re-dramatization, when she revisits the moment when her mom is diagnosed with cancer: “We didn’t exchange a word. Not because we were so alone in our grief, but because we were so together in it, as if we were one body instead of two” (Strayed 2012, 12). The language fuses identities, underscoring the melancholic fixation and hinting at how deeply intersubjective her grief remains.

Through this psychodynamic lens, Strayed’s physical suffering in the form of the blisters, the lost toenails, the hunger, also gains metaphorical weight. These bodily marks of distress externalize what psychoanalysis would recognize as internal lacerations of melancholia. The trail strips her down and literally wounds her, enacting a corporeal form of grief. Yet, paradoxically, this same physical pain becomes the medium through which Strayed can begin to re-anchor herself in the world. As Freud noted, mourning requires that “reality-testing has

shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object” (Freud [1917] 1957, 244). Each step Strayed takes becomes a reality-testing manoeuvre, a working-through of loss.

In the end, *Wild* enacts what Cathy Caruth describes as trauma’s disruption of narrative coherence—a structure governed not by linear progression but by rupture, repetition, and belated meaning-making” (Caruth 1996, 4). By situating Strayed’s journey as both an unconscious compulsion and a conscious confrontation, we see her movement from Freud’s melancholia toward mourning—not through forgetting, but through the labour of remembrance and the painful reshaping of self.

Eros rising: Encounters with nature, others, and self

In his essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” Freud introduces the concept of Eros as the life drive, a force that seeks to “combine organic substances into ever larger unities” (Freud 1995, 43). This drive stands in opposition to Thanatos, the death drive, which aims to return the organism to an inorganic state. Cheryl Strayed’s memoir *Wild* exemplifies this dynamic interplay, illustrating how the protagonist’s journey along the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) becomes a conduit for the reactivation of Eros, facilitating healing and self-reintegration.

Strayed’s initial foray into the wilderness is marked by physical and emotional turmoil, indicative of Thanatos at play. However, as she progresses, the natural environment begins to exert a restorative influence. She writes, “The universe, I’d learned, was never, ever kidding. It would take whatever it wanted and it would never give it back” (Strayed 2012, 209). This acknowledgment of nature’s indifference paradoxically becomes a source of solace, allowing her to relinquish control and embrace the present moment, highlighting a shift from the compulsive repetition of past traumas to the acceptance of life’s unpredictability.

Freud posits that the pleasure principle governs the psyche’s pursuit of gratification, but it is the reality principle that tempers this pursuit, aligning desires with the constraints of the external world (Freud 1995, 7). Strayed’s journey embodies this transition. Initially driven by the desire to escape pain, she confronts the harsh realities of the trail, leading to a recalibration of her expectations and desires. This alignment with the reality principle signifies the resurgence of Eros, as she begins to seek sustainable sources of pleasure and fulfilment.

The physical challenges of the PCT serve as metaphors for Strayed's internal struggles. Her encounters with extreme weather, wildlife, and physical exhaustion mirror the process of working through psychic pain. Strayed's perseverance through the trail's hardships reflects this therapeutic process, as she confronts the rawness of her grief and gradually integrates it into her evolving sense of self. Interpersonal connections along the trail further catalyze Strayed's healing. Her interactions with fellow hikers and trail angels provide moments of human connection that counterbalance her isolation. These relationships, though transient, offer glimpses of mutual support and understanding, reinforcing the life-affirming aspects of Eros. Freud notes that love and social bonds are manifestations of the life drive, contributing to the cohesion of the ego and the community. Strayed's reflections on her mother's death reveal a shift from melancholic fixation to mourning. She writes, "I didn't know where I was going until I got there" (Strayed 2012, 27), indicating a movement away from compulsive rumination toward a forward-looking orientation. This transition aligns with Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, where mourning involves the gradual withdrawal of libido from the lost object, allowing for new attachments and growth (Freud [1917] 1957, 244).

The natural environment plays a pivotal role in facilitating this mourning process. The vastness of the landscape and the rhythm of walking create a meditative space for introspection. Strayed observes, "I did not feel sad or happy. I didn't feel proud or ashamed. I only felt that in spite of all the things I'd done wrong, in getting myself here, I'd done right" (Strayed 2012, 189). These affirmations signal the reconstitution of the ego, as she internalizes a sense of agency and resilience. The trail becomes a transitional space where the boundaries between self and environment blur, enabling a reconnection with the life drive. Scholarly analyses support this interpretation. In a phenomenological-psychoanalytic study, researchers found that individuals often experience a profound sense of kinship with nature, describing feelings of being "kindred with nature," which fosters a reconnection with the self and promotes psychological healing (Schweitzer et al. 2018, 7).

Strayed's narrative arc culminates in a moment of symbolic rebirth. Upon reaching the trail's end, she reflects, "I had arrived. I'd done it. It seemed like such a small thing and such a tremendous thing at once" (Strayed 2012, 309). This declaration signifies not only the completion

of her physical journey but also the culmination of her psychic transformation. The integration of her experiences along the trail consolidates a renewed sense of self, characterized by acceptance, resilience, and openness to future possibilities. The final line of her memoir states, “How wild it was, to let it be” (Ibid, 311). It serves as a poignant embodiment of Eros in its purest form.

Wild serves as a compelling case study of Freud’s dual-drive theory in action. Strayed’s journey illustrates the oscillation between Thanatos and Eros, with the latter ultimately prevailing through the processes of mourning, ego reintegration, and the establishment of new libidinal investments. The interplay between the individual psyche and the natural world underscores the therapeutic potential of embodied experiences in facilitating psychological healing.

Conclusion

Cheryl Strayed’s memoir, *Wild*, thus offers a profound narrative of personal transformation, encapsulating the oscillation between the life drive (Eros) and the death drive (Thanatos) as conceptualized by Sigmund Freud. Through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, Strayed’s journey along the Pacific Crest Trail can be interpreted as a manifestation of the dynamic interplay between these opposing forces, illustrating the human capacity for resilience and self-reconstruction in the aftermath of trauma.

Freud’s essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” introduces the concept of the death drive, positing that beyond the pursuit of pleasure, there exists an unconscious drive toward destruction and a return to an inorganic state. This compulsion manifests in behaviours that repeat traumatic experiences, often to the detriment of the individual's well-being. In *Wild*, Strayed’s initial descent into self-destructive behaviours, substance abuse, promiscuity, and reckless decision-making can be seen as expressions of Thanatos, reflecting an unconscious desire to annihilate the self in response to the profound loss of her mother. However, Freud also identifies Eros as the countervailing force to Thanatos, encompassing the instincts for survival, reproduction, and creativity. Eros seeks to bind individuals together, fostering cohesion and the continuation of life. Strayed’s decision to embark on the arduous journey of the PCT signifies the activation of Eros, representing a conscious effort to move away from self-destruction toward healing and self-discovery.

Throughout her journey, Strayed confronts the rawness of nature and the solitude of the trail, which serve as catalysts for introspection and emotional processing. The physical challenges she endures mirror the internal struggle between Eros and Thanatos, as she grapples with grief, guilt, and the desire for self-preservation. The repetitive act of walking becomes a form of sublimation; a defense mechanism wherein unacceptable impulses are transformed into socially acceptable actions. By channelling her pain into the physical exertion of hiking, Strayed engages in a therapeutic process that facilitates the integration of her traumatic experiences. The concept of mourning, as delineated in Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," further elucidates Strayed's psychological journey. Mourning involves the gradual withdrawal of libido from the lost object, allowing the individual to invest in new relationships and pursuits. Strayed's reflections on her mother's death evolve over the course of the memoir, transitioning from paralyzing sorrow to a more nuanced understanding of loss. This progression signifies the successful navigation of the mourning process, enabling her to re-engage with life and form new attachments.

Moreover, Strayed's interactions with fellow hikers and trail angels underscore the role of interpersonal connections in reinforcing Eros. These relationships, though transient, provide moments of empathy and support, counteracting the isolating effects of grief. Freud emphasizes the importance of love and social bonds as manifestations of the life drive, contributing to the cohesion of the ego and the community. Through these encounters, Strayed experiences the restorative power of human connection, further facilitating her psychological healing. The culmination of Strayed's journey is marked by a sense of acceptance and self-reintegration. Her arrival at the trail's end symbolizes not only the completion of a physical endeavour but also the resolution of an internal conflict. By confronting her pain and embracing the challenges of the trail, Strayed reclaims agency over her life, embodying the triumph of Eros over Thanatos.

In conclusion, *Wild* serves as a compelling case study of Freud's dual-drive theory in action. Strayed's narrative illustrates the oscillation between the destructive impulses of Thanatos and the life-affirming forces of Eros. Her journey along the PCT becomes a metaphorical and literal path toward healing, demonstrating the human capacity to transform suffering into growth through the mechanisms of mourning, sublimation, and interpersonal connection. This psychoanalytic reading of *Wild* underscores the enduring relevance of

Freud's theories in understanding the complexities of human behaviour and the potential for resilience in the face of profound loss.

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