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A Story of Overcoming Feminine Standards

All alone, for 100 days, with no experience. Cheryl Strayed wrote the compelling novel *Wild: From Lost to Found on The Pacific Crest Trail* that demonstrates her own personal story of hiking the trail after going through some of the toughest years of her life. When the novel is looked through a feminist literary lens, it comes apparent to the reader how Cheryl was viewed differently because of her gender. As a woman hiking the Pacific Crest Trail solo, she encountered many people who doubted her ability to complete the task, or who took advantage of her. This is shown by the constant comments by men, and the sexualization of Cheryl by others at the end of the novel. However, her growth proves the comments made by the people to be wrong.

When hiking, Strayed comes to meet many people on the trails. Being a young 26 year old, others constantly bombarded her with comments about her age and gender, saying she shouldn't be hiking alone, especially her being a woman " 'You've got to be kidding me! *You've got to be kidding me!*' the firefighters took turns exclaiming when I explained to them what I was doing". Observing the novel through a feminist literary lens lets the reader see how when being a woman still in the 1990s, people still made comments about activities regarding your gender. Cheryl is a shock to everyone on the trails and in the towns she passes by, many people doubt her for hiking and only truly understand why she is doing it when she tells them her story

leading up to the trails. It is not only others who make comments about her ability to hike, Cheryl doubts herself too. Her mix of low self-esteem and lack of education often causes her to question why she is even hiking the Pacific Crest Trail in the first place. Part of Cheryl's journey is to accept herself for who she is. When she doubts herself she puts herself in gender oriented stereotypes because she thinks that it is because of her gender she is not able to complete the hike. Near the end of the novel she is able to break free of the standards and accept why this was necessary for her to do.

Throughout the novel the reader constantly sees Cheryl questioning her own safety while meeting new people and wondering if hitch-hiking as a woman is going to help her or put her at risk for being sexually assaulted. Her journey for the most part consists of helpful people who are nothing but kind. People would allow her to hitchhike, sleepover and the people on the trails become her motivators. However Cheryl eventually comes into contact with a man who uses sexist comments and comes close to assaulting Cheryl "It's a free country," he said. "I'll go when I'm ready". This shows that even despite all of her wonderful experiences with people on the trails she was still compromised with a moment where being a woman puts her safety at risk. In the beginning of the novel she almost accepts that if she is going to be sexually assaulted there is nothing she can do to stop it, because she has no power as a woman. When she does encounter this bearded man in the woods she has a knife in her hand and she has found the power to defend herself if necessary "I went to the Swiss army knife". This was another example of her breaking free of her own expectations of herself. Overall, even though she was put at risk because of her gender she broke through the molds and was able to prove others and herself wrong.

Regardless of the constant comments and the occasional safety concern, Cheryl defies the standards that were put to her name because of her gender. She shows growth throughout the novel, which not only shows her overcoming her past life, but her breaking the mold for female hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail. By the end of the novel she is even called the queen of the PCT “So we came up with a trail name for you ... The Queen of the PCT” by Richie, Josh and Rick who she met on her journey. Her troubles on her journey were painful and she went through many obstacles, at each of the parks she logged her journey and near the end she finds people who were reading her logs and saying how she was their motivator. Cheryl once was in their position finding other hikers to be motivated by, and then at the end she becomes an inspiration for people. This shows how even though she faced comments about her gender and had her safety at risk, she was able to overcome these gender standards and help herself grow as a person. One example of growth that Cheryl demonstrates is with her water purifier/pump. At the beginning of her hike, she struggles pumping water at Hat Creek Rim. It is almost a point of failure for her. At the end she grows and proves her own standards wrong and eventually helps other people on the trail to filter water and succeed in the forest “You have to give it some muscle”. Despite her being viewed differently she once again shows the reader that even though she has been judged for hiking solo she breaks through the gender boundaries she was put in.

In conclusion Cheryl Strayed was a demonstration of how anyone can overcome Gender Standards. When looking through a feminist literary lens it is clear to see how Cheryl was viewed differently when hiking because she was female. She constantly had people judging her for hiking alone as a woman, put at risk of sexual assault but she was able to overcome these

challenges by learning throughout her 100 day hike on the Pacific Crest Trail. When she overcame these she was able to grow as an individual and she proved others wrong.

Works Cited

Strayed, Cheryl. *Wild: from Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. Vintage Books, 2012.