

Wandering into the Wilderness of Womanhood

An Ecofeminist Reading of the Relationship between Women
and Nature in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* and Cheryl
Strayed's *Wild*



BA Thesis
Name: Janneke Lourens
Student number: 4151534
Supervisor: Dr. Mathilde Roza
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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between women and nature in contemporary North American literature. This relationship has been researched in the novel *Surfacing* (1972) by Canadian author Margaret Atwood and in the memoir *Wild* (2012) by American author Cheryl Strayed. This thesis researches these two literary works by Atwood and Strayed in the light of ecofeminism: a theory that links women to nature. Both women and nature suffer from the dominant influences of a male-oriented society. Both women have written about female experiences with nature either from a fiction or non-fiction point of view. Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* can be seen as a prototypical ecofeminist work whereas Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild* is not necessarily an ecofeminist work at all. This thesis looks at the differences in depicting a woman's relationship to nature between an ecofeminist work and a non-typical ecofeminist work. The relationship between women and nature is much deeper and more spiritual in an ecofeminist work than it is in a non-typical ecofeminist work. *Wild* depicts the relationship between the female lead character and nature as a bonding experience whereas *Surfacing* depicts the relationship between nature and the female protagonist as a necessity to survive in a patriarchic society.

Keywords: Women, Nature, Transcendentalism, Ecofeminism, Ecocriticism, Margaret, Atwood, Surfacing, Cheryl, Strayed, Wild

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Introduction

*She died a famous woman denying
her wounds
denying
her wounds came from the same source as her power*

(Adrienne Rich, *Power*)

The genre of nature writing has produced many literary works that revolve around the theme of escapism. There seems to be a need for men and women to escape the consumer society and the longing to find resolution and quietness in nature. Nature as a medium has allowed women to go back to their roots to find their inner source of power again. The experience of women drawn to the wilderness is different from that of men. Men, in this genre, are mostly portrayed as the conquering male stereotype who seek adventure in nature. American author Jon Krakauer once said about climbing the Mount Everest that “getting to the top of the mountain was considered much less important than how one got there: prestige was earned by tackling the most unforgiving routes with minimal equipment, in the boldest style imaginable” (Krakauer, 1997, 20). Male wilderness memoirs and non-fiction literature, such as *Into The Wild* (1996) and *Into Thin Air* (1997) by John Krakauer, are focused on an adventure in nature and the need to conquer it. The reasons for women to go into the wilderness are therefore different than they are for men. Women have sought the refuge of the deep wilderness to escape but most importantly to heal. This thesis attempts to take an in-depth study of Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972) and Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild* (2012), from an ecofeminist perspective. The specific parallel that I want to hone in on is the relationship between nature and women in contemporary North-American nature writing. *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood is a Canadian novel about a woman’s survival in a capitalistic patriarchal society in where she has lost touch with her own true self and where she eventually finds her way back through her experience in nature. American author Cheryl Strayed’s memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail* is about Strayed’s solo long-distance hiking journey on where she wants to walk herself back to the woman her mother thought she was. Both literary works are about a woman’s survival in the twentieth century and the fact that they are both trying to find healing and rebirth in nature.

The combination of nature and a woman’s quest to find her inner self again is a central theme in the literary works by Margaret Atwood and Cheryl Strayed. I have used the theory of ecofeminism to analyze both works. Ecofeminism as a literary theory is interested in this

relationship between nature and women. The theory looks at the similarities between nature and women and how they are both being oppressed by the western patriarchic society. Ecofeminism deals with making sense of what is expected of women and what women want for themselves in a society that is mainly male-oriented. In order to explore this relationship, ecofeminists make use of dualistic thinking. They review ecofeminist issues and analyze them with the use of binary oppositions such as nature versus culture, and men versus women. They look at the relationship between this mode of thinking and the resolution that can be found in nature.

Both literary works deal with women and nature. What they have in common is that both works are focused on the relationship between women and nature. However, there are also noticeable differences between the two literary works. The first difference between these two literary works is that *Surfacing* is a novel and *Wild* is a memoir. I am aware of the fact that there is a gap between the two works as one is a work of fiction and one is a more personal account, but on the other hand, it is also interesting to see if that has indeed an influence on the way the relationship between women and nature is represented in both works. The second difference between the two is that *Surfacing* is written by a Canadian author and *Wild* is written by an American author. I have decided to not focus on this difference between the two literary works, because I have taken them together and used the term contemporary North American literature to refer to both works. I am more interested in the relationship between the two main characters and nature than in the difference between nature and women in Canada compared to the United States. The third difference deals with the fact that *Surfacing* was published in 1976 and *Wild* is a quite recent work of literature as it was published in 2012. This is of course a difference I have not ignored. The seventies are often associated with the second wave of feminism and this has had an influence on Margaret Atwood's novel as well. I will explain the influence of the second wave of feminism in the chapter on *Surfacing*. Women were also treated differently within society in the seventies than they are now. The complication with *Wild* is that it is published in 2012, but it is a written account of Strayed's hiking journey in the nineties. Therefore, there is not only a difference between the seventies and the nineties but also between the seventies and the twenty-first century. Since it has been written in the twenty-first century, I have chosen to compare the seventies to the twenty-first century. An additional advantage of analyzing two literary works that were written forty years apart is the opportunity to see whether the relationship between women and nature has remained unchanged at the core. The last difference I have taken into account while comparing both literary works is that *Surfacing* is a prototypical ecofeminist

work of literature and *Wild* is not. *Surfacing* is a prototypical ecofeminist work of literature because the novel is explicitly focused on the oppression of women in relation to the oppression of nature. *Wild* seems to be a non-typical ecofeminist work of literature because there is no focus on the oppression of women and nature apparent in this memoir. However, I have still tried to uncover some ecofeminist traits in the memoir to see if and how they influence the relationship between women and nature. Besides the fact that I have looked at the depiction of the relationship between women and nature in both literary works, I have also looked at the differences between an ecofeminist work of literature and a non-typical ecofeminist work of literature to see if that has an influence on how this relationship has been depicted.

This thesis answers the following question: in what ways does the relationship between nature and women differ in a prototypical ecofeminist novel compared to a non-typical literary ecofeminist work, exploring this comparison by looking at the novel *Surfacing* by Canadian author Margaret Atwood and the memoir *Wild* by American author Cheryl Strayed? The first chapter of my thesis will start off by dealing with the relationship between people and nature from a transcendentalist perspective to introduce how nature and humans have been connected in the North American (literary) sphere. After that, I will move on to the theory and movement of ecofeminism to explore how nature and women are interconnected according to ecofeminists. The third part of my theoretical framework will focus on ecocriticism as a mechanism to analyze the relationship between people and nature in literature. Ecocriticism has helped to translate the theory of ecofeminism to a more literary criticism level. In the methodology section, I will explain how I am going to research the relationship between women and nature in the light of transcendentalism, ecofeminism and ecocriticism in both literary works. The second chapter of this thesis will consist of a background and context of the novel *Surfacing* as well as an ecofeminist analysis of the novel. Furthermore, the third chapter will consist of a background of the memoir *Wild* and an ecofeminist reading of this memoir compared to the novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood. The goal of this thesis is to compare an ecofeminist novel to a non-typical ecofeminist work of literature to see how they both address the relationship between nature and women.

Chapter 1

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep.

(Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*)

1.1 Transcendentalism

Nature is perceived as a source of inspiration and self-knowledge in the United States during the Romantic era. These ideas are preached by the transcendentalists. Their ideas are rooted in English and German Romanticism and the transcendental philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

American transcendentalists are essentially a group of idealists that are known by the movement of Transcendentalism (Bakratcheva 3). American Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Margaret Fuller believe that the universe is spiritual in nature (Boller 64). Emerson once wrote that “the foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face through their eyes. Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (Gray, 2004, 130). Emerson believes in what he calls the ‘over-soul’ or universal spirit. He agrees with Alexander Pope when Pope says that “[a]ll are but parts of one stupendous whole, Whose body, Nature is, and God, the soul” (Pope 20). Spirituality plays an important role in the transcendental thought because it creates a link between the spiritual and God and nature. According to Emerson, this relates to the idea of an over-soul.

In his essay “The Over-Soul” (1841), Emerson muses about the human soul and its existence and nature, personal ego, relationships between different human souls and he especially focuses on the relationship between the human soul and God. The over-soul was something from “which all things emanate” (Gray, 2004, 130). Emerson believes that the “most primitive agency of the Soul enjoys nature by identifying with it” (Bishop 57). Transcendentalists in general believe that “the natural world was a projection and symbol of [the] Universal Spirit” (Boller 67). Therefore, nature for Emerson is the “externalization of the soul, mind precipitated, the incarnation of a thought, the plantations of God” (Boller 67-68). Emerson was not the only one to focus on this spiritual relationship. To put differently, nature, for many transcendentalists, was “a manifestation of the spirit” (Gray, 2004, 130). They believe that every individual spirit is part of the “entire rhythm and pulse of nature” (Gray, 2004, 130). Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau argues that nature consisted of the “circulations of God” and he illustrates this by saying “the earth I trod on is not a dead inert mass. It is a body, has a spirit, is organic” (qtd. in Boller 68). He believes in the natural mode

of existence and to live life in the purest form possible. The way to be your best true self is to live a life in nature.

A big part of living life in a natural setting was that one should be self-reliant. Self-reliance plays a key role in the transcendental philosophies. Margaret Fuller is one of those transcendentalists that believes that this individualism should be part of everybody's life, especially women. She muses about becoming self-dependent and to live freely. She explains that what women need is not "as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely and unimpeded, to unfold such powers as were given to her when we left our common home" (qtd. in Rose 60). Margaret Fuller is a women's rights advocate and thus has stated that "if the woman be a soul, appareled in the flesh, to one master only they are accountable"; and that master is certainly not man" (qtd. in Gray, 2004, 137). She believes that women should not be under the dominating influence of men nor should they feel the need to idolize them. Women should lead a life of "self-dependence and self-reliance," and education would enable them to do so (Gray, 2004, 137). Margaret Fuller was one of the few who philosophies and wrote about the growth of capacities for women and the possibilities one could find in nature. The relationship between women and nature has been further researched and developed in the spheres of ecofeminism.

1.2 Ecofeminism

Ecofeminism is concerned with analyzing the relationship between women and nature in the light of male oppression. Ecofeminism as a movement emerged in North America and Europe in the 1970s. It is a part of 'green theory' and therefore focused on issues related to ecology¹. Ecofeminism has been perceived as a movement that links ecology with feminism. In a way, it is often seen as a combination of the two important contemporary movements. Ecofeminists draw upon the "deep ecological theory to the extent that they conceptualize human relations with 'nature' as a form of domination" (Cudworth 101). These ecofeminists are frequently perceived as either women who are feminists or feminists who are focused on the environment (McGuire, 1991). Yet many ecofeminists have argued that ecofeminism is not simply "a subset of feminism or ecology," and they have stated that "in many respects [it is] meta-feminism," which offers "a distinct and more broadened methodology for understanding the world" (McGuire, 1991). Ecofeminism is therefore seen as "an insight" or an "exposition of current problems" and sometimes it has even been perceived as "an eco-political strategy" (Eaton 2). However, the approach they all have in common is that they all focus on

¹ An interdisciplinary scientific study of the environment

domination by a male-oriented society.

Ecofeminism is seen as a theory of domination (Salleh ix). Well-known ecofeminists such as Charlene Spretnak, Judith Plant, Karen J. Warren, and Val Plumwood, are focused on the relationship between women and the natural world in the sense that the two are interconnected. They talk about the repression and exploitation of women that is interrelated with the repression and exploitation of nature. French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne is believed to be the first one to coin the term 'ecofeminism'. In her book *Le Féminisme ou la Mort* (1974), she specifically discusses these *connections* between women and nature. Other ecofeminists such as Starhawk, Lori Gruen, and Greta Gaard argue that the main cause of the issues concerning women and nature is male dominance. Men are often seen as superior to women in western society, even so as culture is often perceived as being superior to nature. In general, humans view themselves as superior to the natural environment and patriarchy is seen as the "villain behind the ecological crisis" (Plumwood 11).

Women are culturally tied to nature according to ecofeminists. The oppression of women and its connection to nature is stated in many traditional sources, but these are hardly ever positive (Plumwood 19). Edmund Burke stated that "a woman is but an animal and an animal not of the highest order" (qtd. in Morgan 187). Jonathan Swift said that "I cannot conceive of you to be human creatures, but a sort of species hardly a degree above a monkey" (qtd. in Morgan 191). Sigmund Freud wrote that "women represent the interests of the family and sexual life; the work of civilization has become more and more men's business" (qtd. in Morgan 80). These comments are misogynistic² and the connection these men make between nature and women are quite superficial. Nature in this case is a problematic concept because it can refer to so many different things. Ecofeminist Val Plumwood states that the term nature is a contrast to reason as it "includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilised, the non-human world, matter, physicality and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness" (19-20). This shows that nature is more of an umbrella term that includes a set of different aspects. The aspect I am interested in is the non-human world that has been dominated by society.

The origin of this social domination is obscure and ambiguous. What we do know is that social domination is "at the core of civilizations that are patriarchal" (Eaton 41). This androcentric³ world view indirectly creates a society in where women receive "less education than men, [...] are given to their husbands or take their husbands' name in marriage, receive

² Refers to fear, disrespect, hatred and/or distrust of women (Eaton 6)

³ Refers to a male-centered framework (Eaton 7)

lesser salaries for equivalent job, [and] choose predominantly caring professions rather than political careers” (Eaton 39). Women are perceived as homemakers and are considered to be “mothers by nature” (Eaton 39). Women were steered towards work in the sphere of “nature- the home- where their caring, emotions and body (pregnancy, breastfeeding and child-rearing) are central” (Eaton 39). This role of women as mothers in western society is often compared to the role of nature in society. Even though mothers are the homemakers of a house, they are also perceived as invisible in the framework of the family. This is often compared with the invisibility of nature in society. In a cultural society, the mother is background to her child and his/her father (Plumwood 22). The social skills she teaches her child is “merely the background to *real* learning, which is defined as part of the male sphere of reason and knowledge” (Jagger 314). This relates to invisibility of nature because nature is merely viewed as the ‘environment’ in relation to humans (Plumwood 22). The natural world is viewed as feminine and is background to society and humanity which are viewed as masculine.

The oppression of nature starts with anthropocentrism⁴ where humans place themselves above the natural world. The oppression goes a bit further by linking it to female oppression by male society. Ecofeminism is not all about feminizing nature in order to deal with patriarchic oppression. Dr. Heidi Hutner from Stony Brooke University comments on the problematic association of feminizing nature. She states in her personal blog that:

The earth is depicted (both currently and historically) in feminized terms, and this descriptive language is complex and fraught with ambivalence: nature is portrayed as fertile, nurturing, and protective (stereotypically maternal); sexualized and seductive (as observed and possessed by men); and wild, dark, and dangerous (needing to be tamed and civilized). (Hutner, par. 2)

Val Plumwood argues that this idea of feminine traits linked to nature is what sets ecofeminists apart from feminists. This creates a point of friction between feminism and ecofeminism. Feminists state that this feminine connection with nature is “regressive and insulting” (20). Plumwood states that feminists “view the traditional connection between women and nature as no more than an instrument of oppression, a relic of patriarchy” and that now this issue has been brought to light the focus should be shifted towards women’s rights (20-21). Ecofeminists like Plumwood state that this issue should not be viewed as common-

⁴ Refers to a human-centered framework, and one that assumes human supremacy (Eaton 6)

sense but should “remain a central issue for feminism” (21). She calls for an ecological feminism in which “women consciously position themselves *with* nature” (21). This is when social oppression becomes related to the domination of the natural environment. Ecofeminist Karen Warren often speaks about the logic of domination⁵ when she is referring to this oppression because it is not only based upon gender and the natural world but also on “ethnicity, class, [...] and sexual orientation” (Eaton 7). In my research, I will only focus on oppression that is based upon gender and nature.

Ecofeminists have tried to solve and deal with these oppressions. There has been a political and social movement of ecofeminism that was concerned with this issue. This has been referred to as “ecofeminist peace politics” (Warren 186). Warren uses the metaphor of quilting to explain the “different historical and socioeconomic circumstances” of ecofeminist peace politics (186). This metaphor was also used to describe the social movement concerned with AIDS back in the twentieth century. Warren explains that the quilts tell “unique, individualized stories about the quilters and the circumstances of their lives; they are candidate patches for a larger, global mosaic” (Warren 186). These quilts offer a platform for everybody to share their own personal stories, but they also create a network for the ecofeminist movement throughout the world. Warren explains in her analogy that the ecofeminist peace politics quilt “represents and records the stories of people of different ages, ethnicities, affectional orientations, race and gender identities, and class backgrounds committed to nonviolence, [...] or appropriate resourcefulness” (186). The features that are present in an ecofeminist peace politics quilt are the opposition of all “isms of domination” such as sexism, racism, classism, naturism, and this quilt also contains and explains how these isms of domination are “maintained and reinforced by patriarchalism” (Warren 187). As an addition to that, Warren states that this quilt also exposes and challenges “uses of power which function to maintain, perpetuate, and justify isms of domination and other oppressive relationships,” and most importantly it conceives of humans as “essentially, and not accidentally, socially constructed beings-in-relationships” (188-189). Overall, it becomes clear that ecofeminism is a theory and a movement that is focused on male domination that finds its roots in the isms of society that substantiate the oppression of women and nature.

1.3 Ecocriticism

Ecofeminism is not necessarily a form of literary criticism. Therefore, I would like to combine it with an ecological theory that is rooted in literature: ecocriticism. Ecocriticism in

⁵ Refers to the combined patterns of domination that make up Euro-western societies (Eaton 7)

literary studies deals with the application of ecological concepts to literary texts. There are many different explanations to what ecocriticism in literature might entail. William Rueckert was the first one to use the term ‘ecocriticism’ in his essay “Literature and Ecology” (1978), and argued that ecocriticism is “the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature” (Rueckert 107). Ecocriticism includes a “triple-allegiance to the scientific study of nature, the scholarly analysis of critical representations, and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world” (Heise 506). Dutch scholar Astrid Bracke mentions in her dissertation on ecocriticism that the term ‘ecocriticism’ gained popularity through Cheryll Glotfelty and Glen A. Love when they called for an “ecological criticism” at 1989 Western Literature Association Meeting. Glotfelty explains in the introduction of her *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996) that ecocriticism is not only “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” but as an addition, ecocriticism “takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artifacts of language and literature” (“Introduction” xviii-xix). She states that ecocritics ask questions such as:

How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does physical setting play in a novel? How do metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre? Do men write about nature differently than women? How has the concept of wilderness changed over time? In what ways has literacy itself affected humankind’s relationship to the natural world? What bearing might the science of ecology have on literary studies? How is science itself open to literary analysis? (“Introduction” xviii-xix)

These questions help scholars analyze literary works in the light of ecocriticism, but in a way these questions also complicate the relationship between nature and literature because it offers a broad spectrum of analysis.

Ecocriticism has been described as an interdisciplinary field of studies. Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer (2006) have stated that we need to further develop ecocriticism as a methodology by re-examining “the history of ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically motivated conceptualizations of nature” (10). They have also stated that the “the function of its constructions and metaphorisations in literary and other cultural practices” need to be taken into consideration (Gersdorf and Mayer 10). They argue that we need to look at “the potential effects these discursive, imaginative constructions have on our bodies as well as our natural and cultural environments” (Gersdorf and Mayer 10). Robert Kern (2003), on the other hand,

states that “ecocriticism, ultimately a form of environmental advocacy, is primarily a critical and literary tool,” and that this tool is “a kind of reading designed to expose and facilitate analysis of a text’s orientation both to the world it imagines and to the world in which it takes shape” (260). Thus, the importance of nature has been dealt with extensively in literature. These ideas about nature in general and nature in literature are also rooted in the literary works of Margaret Atwood and Cheryl Strayed. The analysis of nature in literature has been developed in the literary theory of ecocriticism that, in a way, has laid the groundwork for ecofeminism in the form of literary criticism.

1.4 Methodology

Transcendentalism, ecofeminism and ecocriticism all deal with the relationship between people and nature. In my analysis, I have combined these three approaches and I have tried to translate it to a more literary criticism approach. The analyses contain the description of the relationship between nature and the female lead character and of two binaries that are linked to ecofeminism. But firstly, I will start my analyses by describing the general relationship between the female lead character and nature. I will look at how nature has been depicted in these literary works and also how both female protagonists relate to the natural environment that surrounds them. This also relates back to the movement of transcendentalism and how they look at the relationship between people and nature. Thereafter, I will dive into the ecofeminist part of the analysis. For *Surfacing* I will do an ecofeminist analysis and for *Wild* I will do an ecofeminist reading because it is not a typical ecofeminist work of literature. The ecofeminist analysis and reading consists of two prominent binary oppositions since ecofeminists use them a lot in their analyses. The first opposition I have chosen to look at is the victim versus oppressor binary. Through this binary, I will explore the relationship between nature (victim) and culture (oppressor) and the relationship between women (victim) and men (oppressor) in both literary works. This binary will help me analyze the relationship between women and nature and relate this to the ecofeminist notion of patriarchal oppression. The second binary I will use is the internal versus the external binary. I have chosen to look at the relationship between the internal mindset and external landscape of both protagonists to explore the connection between womanhood and nature as an important trait of ecofeminism. Both literary works focus a lot on the influence of nature on the mindset of the protagonists and the other way around. This binary will help me understand how the psychological state of mind (internal) of the two protagonists and the natural environment (external) relate to each other. The internal mindset influences the external landscape and vice versa. I am interested in

how this has been dealt with and illustrated in both literary works. This binary also relates to the transcendental thought of becoming one with nature. This paragraph will therefore also focus on the spiritual awakening of both female lead characters. Since I am going to compare a prototypical ecofeminist novel to a non-typical ecofeminist work, I will include a brief comparison between the two in the third chapter of my thesis that deals with the analysis of Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild*.

Chapter 2

I am not an animal or a tree, I am the thing in which the trees and animals move and grow, I am a place.

(Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*)

2.1 Background

In this chapter, I will analyze Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1972) as a typical ecofeminist work. Margaret Eleanor Atwood was born in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada in 1939. Her father was an entomologist and therefore the family resided in the backwoods of northern Quebec. Her love for nature comes back in almost all of her novels. Especially her novel *Surfacing* is inspired by nature. And in particular by the relationship between people and nature. The novel was written in the sixties and eventually published in 1972. At this time the second wave of feminism became prominent in the United States as well as in Canada. The second wave of feminism spread throughout North America and the Western world in the sixties and seventies. This period of feminist activity was different from the first wave of feminism which was focused on suffrage and gender equality in the political spheres. The second wave of feminism broadened the field by including issues such as sexuality, family domestic life, and the workplace. The fight against sexism became extremely important. Scholars like Joni Lovenduski noted that the two waves of feminism "were instrumental in achieving agenda status for the suffrage and emancipation acts of the early part of the twentieth century, followed by the equality and anti-discrimination initiatives of the 1970s and the 1980s" (246). However, a lot of critique followed this movement. Scholar Drude D. Dahlerup stated that "when fighting for equality and justice and participatory democracy 'in general', women become tired of just making tea for the revolution, sleeping with the leaders and typing their manuscripts" (5). The fight became larger than just legal discrimination. Inequality in the private sphere became just as prominent as in the public sphere. Inequality based on gender and being dominated by men became the main source of concern for these women. Ecofeminists were also part of this feminist movement. Margaret Atwood became associated with this movement because of her literary works. Her works contain a strong feminist undertone with a clear link to the natural world. *Surfacing* is one of her novels that takes this relationship and tries to deepen it out with a radical relationship between a woman and the natural environment that surrounds her.

Atwood introduces a female protagonist who is haunted by men, states of mind and landscapes. The story centers on a nameless female protagonist who returns to her former

hometown to find out what has happened to her missing father. After having lived in the city for years, she finally returns home to the Canadian countryside where she grew up. She is accompanied by her three friends – Anna, David and Joe. During her journey, she revisits her childhood memories in order to understand her father’s mysterious disappearance. After she has found some possible clues, she is convinced that her father might still be alive. This eventually leads to her psychosis. She goes back into nature and back to basics in order to understand everything that has happened in her life and eventually she reinvents herself again.

The central themes in this novel are separation, feminism and nature. Separation is dealt with in the disconnection between people and nature, but also on a more nationalistic level such as the disconnection between an English-speaker in the French-speaking nation Quebec that wishes to become an independent nation. The protagonist feels disconnected to everyone and everything around her. In the beginning of the novel, she especially feels disconnected to the landscape around her. Surroundings have changed and sometimes she does not even recognize the way back home. Feminist notions are dealt with through the relationships the female protagonist has with other people, but also through observing the relationships of the men and women around her. It is also interesting to note that Atwood has framed the story as a “wilderness quest and detective story – which are traditional masculine formats” (Bouson 41). Nature and the natural environment have been dealt with extensively throughout the storyline. The description of the surroundings are vivid and often related to the protagonist state of mind. Therefore, this novel can be viewed as an ecofeminist work of literature.

2.2 Ecofeminist analysis

The relationship between nature and women in *Surfacing* is intense and highly influenced by the interference of men. According to ecofeminists, this can be seen as an issue that finds its roots at the core of their movement. Before being able to discuss the interference of men in relation to nature and women, I will first analyze the relationship between the female protagonist and nature in the novel. The protagonist grew up in a natural environment where she had close relations to nature. Her mother, in a way her role model, taught her that nature was something precious. Something she should enjoy delicately. The male characters around her were more of a conquering type and saw nature as an opportunity to show off their manliness. The protagonist’s relationship with nature was nothing like that. She had very strong opinions about going alongside the rhythm of nature, not against it. In a way, she felt related to the natural environment around her. From an ecofeminist point of view this is seen

as an important notion because the connection between the protagonist and nature is one on a spiritual level. This means that when nature is attacked by culture or men, the protagonist feels attacked too. Parts of the natural environment of Canada in this novel has been ravaged by the manliness of culture. The protagonist believes that the influence of the men in her life and the influences of patriarchic society in general have poisoned her mind the same way as they have poisoned the natural environment that surrounds her. However, this is only one aspect of ecofeminism in the novel. I would also like to view this relationship by looking at the influence of men and the patriarchic society have on the protagonist and how this relates to the influence of a masculine society on the natural environment that surrounds the protagonist.

Ecofeminists make use of binaries to illustrate how nature and women are connected and oppressed by the cultural male society. The two major concerns in this novel are the relationships between nature and people in general and the relationships between women and men. Patriarchic oppression plays a key role in the novel and ultimately leads to the binary of victim and oppressor. This binary consists of a victim party, such as women and/or nature and an oppressor party such as men and/or culture. It becomes clear in the novel that both nature and women are being oppressed by this male-oriented society. The novel presents itself with a complex and omnipresent engagement with nature mostly from a female perspective. George Woodcock refers to the environmental aspects of the novel by stating that the “narrative is constantly drawing attention to the way the landscape has been repeatedly ravaged and robbed” (53). The focus on environmental destruction by male culture and how this effects the female protagonist is deeply rooted in the novel. Because when the nameless female protagonist is driving back to her hometown to look for her missing father, she talks about nature being victimized by the Americans. She mentions that the Americans have had a lot of influence on the Canadian landscape. They are viewed as the male dominators to the nature of female Canada. Atwood hints at ‘Americanism’ being the disease that cruelly destroyed the natural Canadian landscape. She illustrates this in the first sentence of the novel by stating:

I can't believe I'm on the same road again, twisting along past the lake where the white birches are dying, the disease is spreading up from the South, and I notice they now have sea-planes for hire. (Atwood 3)

This passage states that America is exploiting the Canadian environment. Everything has to be new and industrialization has spread from the south (USA) to the north (Canada). This passage illustrates a protest against environmental destruction. The natural environment pays

the price and becomes damaged goods because of all the ‘foreign’ influences, according to the narrator. From an ecofeminist perspective, this relationship of exploitation through industrialization is destroying the environment where the Canadians are so proud of. The narrator expresses her care for the natural environment and sees this change in her hometown as an invasion. She views this as a constant mode of destruction. The female protagonist starts to feel alienated from the landscape around her and she mentions that she does not even recognize the way back home anymore. Ecofeminism pays special attention to these notions of natural destruction mostly at the hand of a male-oriented society.

Male domination of the natural environment has been one of force as well. Many of the male characters in the novel have this constant need to show their male qualities and desires as if they are superior to the environment around them. Scholar Ambika Bhalla mentions in her analysis of *Surfacing* that the narrator feels very strongly about the difference between natural predation and hunting for pleasure (2). The narrator has nothing against hunting for food or out of necessity, but she is very much against men hunting for pleasure to show off their manliness. The protagonist identifies herself with the natural environment and therefore she is horrified by the unnecessary killing of animals, especially when they come across the senseless killing of a heron. The protagonist not only identifies herself with the dead heron, but she also compares it to the oppression and violation of women in general. She uses the dead heron as a metaphor:

Why had they strung it up like a lynch victim, why didn't they just throw it away like the trash? To prove they could do it, they had the power to kill, otherwise, it was valueless...the only relation they could have to a thing like that was to destroy it.
(Atwood 149)

The narrator develops a deep compassion for nature throughout the story and she realizes that every human being is related to nature. This connection cannot and should not be ignored, but she only realizes this after she identifies herself with the broken landscape around her. She feels this deep bond with nature because she believed that “human beings are not radically separate from nature; that the fulfillment of our humanity is profoundly linked with learning to appreciate the nature within us and without” (Atwood 43). The protagonist is convinced that humanity is intrinsically linked to nature not only on the inside but also on the outside and therefore men have no right to violate it or act superior to it. This is an extremely interesting standpoint from an ecofeminist perspective. Atwood highlights the ecofeminist notion of nature and women being interconnected. After this passage, the protagonist also

learns to reject the stereotypical way of thinking of Americans as exploiters of the Canadian natural environment. She learns that the ‘Americans’ who killed the heron turn out in fact to be Canadians. Therefore, Americanism becomes “a short hand for an attitude of mind which endorses the exploitation of nature” and the protagonist learns that “we are all guilty of that” (Ingman 177). The narrative includes this when the protagonist describes the forest:

We’re on the trail inside the forest; the first part is fairly open, though now and then we pass gigantic stumps, level and saw-cut, remnants of the trees that were here before the district was logged out. The trees will never be allowed to grow that tall again, they’re killed as soon as they’re valuable, big trees are scarce as whales. (46)

The narrative constantly focuses on this human destruction of the environment in which the landscape has been dominated by culture such as wood that has been used for social and cultural purposes. Humans that dominate nature are a part of culture. They act as if they are superior to nature. This passage focuses on all humans being guilty of environmental destruction. The bigger picture is not only about men invading nature but humans in general which includes women. Atwood makes a valid point here, however, it is not related to the ecofeminist notion that men are responsible for this destruction.

In the novel, the male characters not only feel the need to act superior to nature, but also to the women around them. Therefore, not only the relationship between nature and culture is described as a relationship where one takes advantage of the other. The relationship between the men and women in the novel is also one of exploitation. The relationship of David and Anna is extremely off balance. David’s constant need to dominate and humiliate Anna becomes visible throughout the storyline. Bouson notes in his analysis of *Surfacing* that the character of David “draws attention to the oppression of women in a male-defined order of hierarchical and oppositional roles that empower men at the expense of women” (43). David’s character is described as a male predator and Anna is seen as his prey who has to abide by David rules (Bouson 43). Anna eventually tells the protagonist that “if I break one of them [rules] I get punished, except he keeps changing them so I’m never sure” (Atwood 145). Anna is not only being victimized and terrorized by David but she is trapped in this web of society dominated by men and their need to boast their manliness at the expense of women. This notion of male domination over women is another topic that has been dealt with extensively in ecofeminism. Ecofeminists argue that women should not live under the influence of men. They do not need to be terrorized by male society. The same goes for the natural environment that suffers at the same expense. The suffering of women and nature are

intrinsically linked. This male domination, therefore, also has an influence on the internal mindset and external landscape that is presented in the novel.

The internal mindset and external landscape in the novel creates the metaphorical layer that is present in the novel. This notion can also be related back to the transcendental thought of being one with nature. The idea that the natural environment can influence the mind but also the other way around, that the mind can influence the way a person looks at or relates to the natural environment. The female protagonist feels alienated from not only the people and landscape around her, but also from herself. She transcends her alienation by giving herself to nature. This, in a way, relates back to the transcendentalism and the idea that one's soul enjoys nature "by identifying with it" (Bishop 57). The transcendental idea of a soul becoming part of the rhythm of nature is also explored in this novel. The protagonist finds herself on a psychological journey to redemption in nature by becoming part of her natural surroundings. The landscape around her becomes the wilderness of her unconsciousness and the unconsciousness of nature becomes her "inner terror of the soul" (Davey 155). When looking back upon her life, the protagonist realizes that she was exploited and abused because of her powerlessness. Her past, such as her relationship with the teacher and the abortion, and the present, such as the death of her father, have led her to her emotional death. Another example of this can be seen in the scene where the protagonist expresses her feelings about her pregnancy as "[h]e imposed it on me, all the time it was growing in me I felt like an incubator. He measured everything he would let me eat, he was feeding it on me, he wanted a replica of himself; after it was born I was no more use" (Atwood 39). From an ecofeminist point of view, this is a very strong illustration of the influence of men on the mindset of women. Women were only a means to an end to them. This passage relates to the idea that the protagonist believes she has attacked nature herself by viewing her abortion as a horrendous and murderous mistake. She thinks of herself as being wounded and feels like she has failed nature. The protagonist believes that the only to repay this debt to nature is becoming part of the external landscape in order to heal her internal mindset. She blends in with the rhythm of nature and lives nakedly in the forest surviving on natural food such as plants and berries only. She purifies herself by linking her life to natural things only. She needs the spirit of her dead mother and father to reinvent herself again. This spiritual layer in the story is very important to her healing process. She can only heal with the help of her deceased parents. By stripping herself from all cultural layers, she is finally able to find her inner power and strength again in and around the natural environment. She becomes a human being in a natural state. This notion of a natural state is also rooted in the transcendental thought of

linking the self to the natural mode of existence as Thoreau has described by saying that the way to be your best true self is to live a life in nature. This is exactly what the protagonist tries to achieve. Although after a while, she realizes that nature cannot give her an identity. In the process of this spiritual awakening, she comes to realize that she needs to revolt against this exploitation and social oppression. She realizes that it is a deep and structural problem in society, because “women suffer both from structural oppression and from individual men” (Kelly 113). She, however, refuses to be the victim of society and uses Joe to get pregnant but she refuses to marry him. She wants to do right by her child this time and she is determined to keep herself and the child deeply rooted in nature.

Margaret Atwood’s novel is a prototypical ecofeminist work because it shows the struggles of women and nature at the hand of a patriarchic society. The main character reflects the paradox of being a female in the seventies. On the one hand women were free to work and do what they want, but on the other hand they were pushed into gender roles and had to obey by the rules of men. The natural environment relates to this oppression in the same way. (American) culture has spread over the (Canadian) country destroying many pieces of nature. This victim and oppressor binary relationship is at the core of ecofeminism. Ecofeminists such as Karen J. Warren and Starhawk view the relationship between women and men and nature and men in the light of victim and oppressor. The second binary that was more on a metaphorical level focuses on the inner and outer landscape of the main character. The protagonist feelings were connected to the natural environment around her. This relationship between women and nature is again an ecofeminist trait. Ecofeminists such as Greta Gaard and Vandana Shiva believe that this relationship has often been ignored in society which again adds to the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of this bond. Margaret Atwood has paid a lot of attention to these details. The relationship between the female lead character and nature is depicted on a somewhat spiritual level. The two are linked or, as ecofeminist would say, interconnected.

Chapter 3

To believe that I didn't need to reach with my bare hands anymore. To know that seeing the fish beneath the surface of the water was enough. That it was everything. It was my life – like all lives, mysterious and irrevocable and sacred. So very close, so very present, so very belonging to me. How wild it was, to let it be.

(Cheryl Strayed, *Wild*)

3.1 Background

In this chapter, I will examine the relationship between women and nature in Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild* (2012) in comparison to Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing*. Cheryl Strayed (née Nyland) was born in Spangler, Pennsylvania on September 17, 1968. She grew up with her mother Bobbi, sister Karen, brother Leif and an abusive alcoholic father. Her mother divorced her father when Strayed was six years old and they moved to Chaska, Minnesota. When Strayed was thirteen, she and her siblings moved with her mother and her boyfriend Glenn to Atkin County where they lived on the countryside in a self-built house. Strayed marries her boyfriend Marco Littig (named Paul in her memoir) in 1988. In 1991, her mother was diagnosed with lung cancer at the age of forty five and died quickly after she was diagnosed. Strayed was only twenty-two years old and was waitressing fulltime in order to pay for her college degree. After she suddenly lost her mother to cancer, she started cheating on her own husband and using drugs. At age 26, she stated in her memoir that she had reached the lowest point of her life and this is when she decided to walk herself back to the woman her mother knew she was. In the summer of 1995, she hiked the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) from California to Washington where she walked 1700 kilometers from the Mojave Desert in California to the Bridge of the Gods that connects Oregon to Washington. She published her memoir on her hiking journey seventeen years later. On her journey, she sought self-realization and resolution. In her memoir, she describes the physical challenges and her spiritual realizations on the trail. This memoir is not a typical ecofeminist work of literature. It is a personal account of a past event and is therefore not explicitly focused on social criticism. I will compare Strayed's relationship with nature to Atwood's depiction of a woman's relationship with nature in the light of ecofeminism. The relationship between nature and a woman plays a key role in this memoir. Strayed is haunted by the loss of her mother and is slowly drowning in her own grief.

This memoir deals with themes such as separation and disconnection, patriarchy, grief and nature. The female protagonist has separated herself from everything and everyone

around her after her mother had died. She felt disconnected to not only the people around her but also to her inner self. She had lost touch with who she was and who she wanted to become. This all started with the loss of her mother which she describes in the beginning of her memoir. In this memoir, the role of motherhood is viewed as the strongest bond a human being can have with another human being. Motherhood was seen as something sacred, something that is so very close to the bane of your existence that if you need to live without it, it will paralyze you. She illustrated this by saying:

Nothing could ever bring my mother back or make it okay that she was gone. Nothing would put me beside her the moment she died. It broke me up. It cut me off. It tumbled me end over end . . . I would suffer. I would suffer. I would want things to be different than they were. The wanting was a wilderness and I had to find my own way out of the woods. (27)

The fact that Strayed's mother had died so suddenly caused the narrator to experience some sort of psychological death. She had lost herself in her grief and became a person she did not recognize anymore. Before she made the decision to go on this hike, she had found out that she was pregnant and even worse was the fact that she was not sure who the father was. At this crucial moment in her life, she made a life-altering decision. She decided to stop this mode of self-destruction by having an abortion and to stop cheating and doing drugs. She had realized that she needed to change, and so she did something drastically: she decided to go on a solo-hike for three months. Even though, this memoir is not a typical ecofeminist work of literature, I am going to examine the relationship between men and women and men and nature in this memoir to see if it is possible to analyze this work at the hand of ecofeminism in order to compare this memoir to the novel *Surfacing*.

3.2 Ecofeminist reading

In the memoir, the relationship between Strayed and nature is described as an objective one. During her hike through nature, she was able to be the purest form of herself stripped from all cultural necessities. She was not able to shave her legs or wear make-up or even take care of her personal hygiene. She was stripped naked, metaphorically, of almost all cultural traits and became one with the rhythm of nature. From an ecofeminist point of view, it would be interesting to see if culture and male society had a negative impact on her as an individual. Strayed, however, does not speak of nature being oppressed by a patriarchic society. I would argue that is because this memoir is a personal account of her hiking journey and not a

critique on how she was treated in society and how she felt about that. Nor is nature being depicted as something that has been damaged by culture. Nature plays a very specific role in her journey. I would argue that Strayed used nature as mechanism that helped her to get forward, literally and mentally, on her journey. The role of nature in this memoir is not only viewed as a mechanism but nature also plays a metaphorical role. It is used as a vehicle to describe her emotional state of being. The psychological state of mind of the narrator is illustrated via natural objects. In the beginning of the memoir, she compares herself to a disintegrating flower. She illustrates this by saying:

I set my toothbrush down, then leaned into the mirror and stared into my own eyes. I could feel myself disintegrating inside myself like a past-bloom flower in the wind. Every time I moved a muscle, another petal of me blew away. Please, I thought. Please. (Strayed 38)

In this passage, her psychological state of mind is illustrated at the hand of natural objects such as a flower. She compares herself to a dying flower to illustrate how she feels in that particular moment. In this case, her relationship to nature is perceived as a descriptive one. Further on in her memoir when she has already embarked on her journey, the narrator compares herself to a mountain that has its heart removed and was turned into a wasteland of lava and ash. It had turned into an empty bowl and it took a very long time to heal. All she could see now was “the stillness and the silence of that water: what a mountain and a wasteland and an empty bowl turned into after the healing process” (Strayed 263). This passage illustrates that nature has a way of healing itself over time. This was what she was doing as well. Through her journey she was trying to heal herself. Her close connection to nature was based on her physical presence but also on her psychological relationship with nature. They understood each other. Nature also has a very present and physical role in her memoir. The love of nature is one of the many things that Strayed inherited from her mother. Her mother believed that you could choose to put yourself in the way of natural beauty, and this is precisely what Strayed did when walking the PCT. She had put herself in the way of beauty. She became a part of the rhythm of nature, which included that she had put herself as far away from society and culture as she could. The only cultural artifacts she carried with her was her camping gear, books and a diary. She was amazed by the fact that she could carry everything that she needed in order to survive on her back: “and most surprising of all that *I* could carry it” (92). Strayed’s relationship with nature was very personal but also spiritual. The idea that she was able to collect her thoughts and breathe again through the quietness of

nature relates back to the transcendental thought of the over-soul. Strayed connects to nature on a spiritual level as she feels that she is part of a bigger whole.

Ecofeminist binaries such as nature versus culture and men versus women play a key role in this memoir. The first binary I looked at is the victim and oppressor binary which is present in the critique she has on her mother but also on women in general. Strayed criticizes the need of men to oppress women. Even though, Strayed very much appreciated her mother, she also criticized her for marrying an abusive alcoholic. She simply could not understand why her mother did not regret that choice of living under the abusive rule of her biological father. Women were supposed to be free to do what they want and they should certainly not be oppressed by the men in their lives. Women were pushed into certain roles that would control their lives. Her mother shifted from being a daughter to being a wife and mother. In a way, she did not receive or took the opportunity to become her own woman until much later in life, but sadly by then it was already too late. Another example that illustrates the dysfunctional relationship and comparison between men and women would be when Strayed becomes acquainted with a male writer who writes about hobos. She tells him that she is not a hobo but that she is on a solo-hike and happens to have no home address for the time being. He was still convinced that she was a hobo and goes on by saying that hobo women are not easy to find. She explains to him that this was probably because “women were too oppressed to be hobos. That most likely all the women who wanted to be hobos were holed up in some house with a gaggle of children to raise. Children who’d been fathered by hobo men who’d hit the road” (Strayed 180). In a way, Strayed is critiquing society of pushing women into certain roles of homemakers and that there is almost no way out of it. Most women do not have the opportunity to just quit their lives and take a break. And when they do they are immediately labeled as irresponsible, selfish or even naïve. Male oppression is translated into society’s way of thinking. When men are about to go on a solo-hike they are praised, but when women are hiking or even hitchhiking then that would immediately be linked to an invitation for getting raped. This hints at the notion that men only need to watch out for nature and animals, but women should also watch out for horny men that want to take advantage of them. Women are therefore immediately pushed into the role of victims of society. From a feminist point of view, this is a very interesting case because it shows the hardship of women in the nineties, but for an ecofeminist it is not that useful because there is no direct link to the oppression of nature. The oppression of nature in that sense is not mentioned at all in the memoir. Strayed does hint at the relationship between nature and culture to a certain point, which can be viewed in the light of the victim and oppressor binary to the extent that nature has given

Strayed the quietness to think about her life and also to look it in the eye, whereas culture provided Strayed with the means to hide from her true feelings. She had sex with men she did not know, she used heroin and she isolated herself from the people who cared about her. Culture had a bad influence on her behavior whereas nature pushed her to become a better person. This part is interesting from an ecofeminist point of view because it shows the influence of nature on a woman's state of mind. However, since there is no direct link to the oppression of women by men, it becomes hard to link this to ecofeminist notions.

The second binary is the binary of the internal mindset versus the external landscape in this memoir. The internal mindset and external landscape contribute to the metaphorical layer, as Strayed's journey was double-layered. She went on a physical journey where she had to walk 1700 kilometers and at the same time she went on a psychological journey where she came to terms with life, herself and her life choices. I refer to her journey as double-layered because the psychological journey goes deeper than the physical one. The psychological journey would force her to revisit her childhood memories and translate them to the present whereas the physical journey would force her to stop running away from her emotions and focus on the present and what is in front of you. The trail would both shatter and shelter her (strayed 207). The psychological journey maddened her as she did not know what she was doing or where she was going or what she wanted to do with her life without her mother. In a way, her mother was part of her journey. She kept seeing a ginger fox on the trail now and then. The fox had the same eyes as her mother's and it would just stand there and stare at her for minutes. She thought of the fox as her mother who kept an eye on her. Her physical journey, on the other hand, was simple. She merely needed to walk:

I walked and I walked, my mind shifting into a primal gear that was void of anything but forward motion, and I walked until walking became unbearable, until I believed I couldn't walk even one more step. And then I ran. (Strayed 288)

She needed to walk all the physical and psychological pain out of her system. The natural rhythm of walking and being in nature gave her the time and space she needed to cope with her life and all the bad that had happened to her. After a while, the wilderness had strengthened her. After she noticed that she was able to survive on her own, she grew stronger and stronger. In the end, the journey had healed her. She felt as she was part of the wilderness:

That perhaps being amidst the undeseccrated beauty of the wilderness meant I too could be undeseccrated, regardless of what I'd lost or what had been taken from me,

regardless of the regrettable things I'd done to others or myself or the regrettable things that had been done to me. Of all the things I'd been skeptical about, I didn't feel skeptical about this: the wilderness had a clarity that included me. (Strayed 143)

This quote illustrates that the beauty of nature created a space in her mind in where everything became clear. On the PCT there was only one version of herself. The hike stripped her raw and got to the core of who she really was. She was no longer a daughter or wife or sister. She did not belong to anyone. She only belonged to the PCT and to the natural environment that had surrounded her. She had to rely on her own strength and longing for life. From a transcendental point of view, this passage is very interesting because it shows that becoming one with nature heals the spirit. This passage also relates to Margaret Fuller's notion of becoming self-reliant. Strayed was forced to find a way to keep herself safe and to stare her fear down. She said in her memoir that she was not out there to keep herself from having to say she was not afraid. She said, "I'd come, I realized, to stare that fear down, to stare everything down, really – all that I'd done to myself and all that had been done to me. I couldn't do that while tagging along with someone else" (Strayed 122). This moment of awakening has allowed her to set herself free. She could not take back all the bad things she had done and all the bad things that had been done to her. She decided that there was no excuse for all of it other than the fact that it needed to happen because it got her where she is now. The only thing she could do to set herself free was to forgive herself. She realized that she did not need to become someone else or a better version of herself. She just needed to be in the moment of life and let it happen. Nature had healed her spirit. In the end, all she needed was to let go of all the anger and pain. And she did.

There were so many other amazing things in this world. They opened up inside of me like a river. Like I didn't know I could take a breath and then I breathed. I laughed with the joy of it, and the next moment I was crying my first tears on the PCT. I cried and I cried and I cried. I wasn't crying because of my mother or my father or Paul. I was crying because I was full. Of those fifty-some hard days on the trail and of the 9,760 days that had come before them too. (Strayed 234)

By allowing nature to take her in, she allowed herself to take herself in. It was not only an outward journey but mostly it was an inward journey. Strayed's relationship to nature was peaceful and sacred. Nature became a new home for her. A home that would let her be who she was and that would just be enough. This relationship between her and nature gave her the

confidence to let go. It led her into the world of acceptance.

The relationship between Strayed and nature is more focused on the transcendental thought of integrating back into the natural environment than it has to do with ecofeminist notions of oppressions. This memoir can also be referred to as an ego-document where Strayed has written down her own thoughts and experiences with nature and her journey. This alleged ego-document is only focused on Strayed's personal experiences and is therefore not focused on the thought process of other people or people in general. She does not talk about other women in society nor does she explicitly critique their place in society. The relationship between a woman and her natural environment in this memoir is described on a personal but objective level. Nature has allowed Strayed to be in the present and not caught up in affairs like running away from her true feelings and grief. She does compare herself to natural objects while walking the PCT but this is more on a metaphorical level where she describes her emotions and thoughts, not on a social criticism level where she would describe the oppression of nature by culture. These are all reasons that attribute to the fact that *Wild* is not a typical ecofeminist work of literature.

3.3 Comparison to *Surfacing*

In comparison to *Surfacing*, this memoir does not contain a lot of ecofeminist traits. Strayed is portrayed as a feminist because she decides to become her own woman and to stop being a victim of her own life. The need to become a strong and independent woman in control of her own life is very much present. The struggle with this inner desire, her grief and the influences of a patriarchic society on women has troubled her. Her storyline is more focused on the personal struggles and the process of healing in nature than on a criticism towards men and their domination of women and nature as is portrayed in *Surfacing*. Both female lead characters experience some sort of psychological death that brought about the desire to embark on a journey through nature but the connection between nature and the nameless protagonist in *Surfacing* is much deeper than the connection between Strayed and the natural environment she is in. For Strayed, nature is a mechanism to move forward and to give her the time to heal. The deeper meaning of her story is self-discovery and self-realization, and coming to terms with reality and coping with the pain and heartache from the past. The female lead character in *Surfacing* needs nature to reinvent herself because she believed that she stole from nature when she aborted her child. In my opinion, *Wild* is more rooted in the transcendentalist thought of preserving nature and to escape the consumer society to find some quietness in nature, whereas *Surfacing* is more concerned with the oppression of nature

and women by a patriarchic society and what that does to a person. This is the angle I have researched with the help of the first binary that looked at the connection between victim and oppressor. This binary was not as present in the same way in *Wild* as it was in *Surfacing*. The victim and oppressor binary was present in the way that Strayed becomes a victim of her own grief that can also be related back to the beginning of her life where she became a witness of the abusive relationship of her parents. This is not the same as the victim and oppressor binary from an ecofeminist point of view that is focused on the relationship between men and women and culture and nature. Thus this is exactly the difference between an ecofeminist novel and a non-typical ecofeminist work of literature. In the second binary, I have looked at the link between the spiritual and physical bond with and in nature. Both women experienced some sort of spiritual awakening on their journey. The nameless protagonist in *Surfacing* sought the spirit of her father and mother in nature to heal herself. She needed to strip herself from all cultural artifacts and become one with nature on a spiritual level. The protagonist had a much closer relationship with nature than Strayed had in *Wild*. Strayed's spiritual awakening consisted of dealing with her emotions and just let them be part of who she is. She believed that the spirit of her mother would be a part of her journey. Before she left, she even ate parts of her mother's ashes so she would always be with her wherever she would go. Every now and then, a fox would stare at her with big blue eyes. The fox did not seem real to her and in a way she was convinced that this was her mother who checked up on her every now and then. Both protagonists have become the victims of their own grief, which resulted in the split of mind and body.

The one thing both female lead characters in essence have in common is the split of mind and body. The split of mind/body dualism proves to be a central theme in both literary works. The disconnection between the protagonists bodies and their emotions are at the core of their broken identity. The protagonist of *Surfacing* describes her first meeting with her lover, Joe:

What impressed him that time, he even mentioned it later, cool he called it, was the way I took off my clothes and put them on again later very smoothly as if I were feeling no emotion. But I really wasn't. (Atwood 22)

The protagonist explains this split between mind and body by saying that "the trouble is all in the knob of the top of our bodies. I'm not against the boy or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate" (Atwood 95). This is also exactly what happens with the protagonist in *Wild*. After her mother has died, she detached herself from her

emotions. She sought escape in cheating and drugs to avoid her emotions getting a hold of her. She told her therapist about her sex life and said, "I'm like a guy, sexually" (Strayed 129). He asked her what a guy is like and she answered him by saying that guys are detached. She went on explaining that "many of them are, anyway. I'm like that too. Capable of being detached when it comes to sex" (Strayed 129). Both female characters had trouble with dealing with their emotions and preferred avoiding them. This, interestingly, is what drove them to find resolution in nature. But it is also something that can be traced back to transcendentalism and their ideas of finding yourself back in nature.

Cheryl Strayed's memoir is indeed not a typical ecofeminist work of literature. The relationship between the main character and nature has been depicted differently in this memoir when comparing it to Margaret Atwood's novel. Nature is viewed as something that has been oppressed by culture and male society according to ecofeminists. The same goes for women and therefore the parallel has been drawn between the two. And even though culturally this might still be the case in the nineties when Strayed went on her hiking trip, it however did not take part in the storyline of her memoir. The layer of social criticism is a large part of Atwood's novel but it has no role in Strayed's memoir. This is the most important difference between the two, and it is also the reason why the relationship between women and nature differ in these two books. Nature has become a kind of 'person' that is being oppressed in *Surfacing*. A child she wants and feels obligated to protect. This personal touch to and identification with nature is not present in *Wild* and that why the two are different from each other in depicting their relationship with nature.

Conclusion

*You fit into me
like a hook into an eye*

*a fish hook
an open eye*

(Margaret Atwood, *Power Politics*)

This research started from a transcendentalist perspective and moved from the analysis of the natural world in literature towards exploring the relationship between women and nature in an ecofeminist analysis of the novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood and an ecofeminist reading of the memoir *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed. The relationship between nature and women differ in a prototypical ecofeminist novel when comparing it to a non-typical ecofeminist work of literature. The most important difference is the level of social criticism that a work of literature contains. Atwood's novel has taken a lot of interest in exploring the relationship between women and nature through the lens of social criticism. Strayed's memoir, however, is more focused on the personal account of her acquaintance with nature. In a way, the female protagonist of *Surfacing* develops a relationship with nature whereas the female protagonist of *Wild* is more about the influence of nature on her mindset.

Ecofeminism as a theory has proven to be very useful in identifying the relationship between women and nature in both literary works. Even though, *Wild* has proven not to be a typical ecofeminist work of literature, it certainly contained a few ecofeminist notions when analyzing the two binaries in this memoir. The first binary I have used to explore and analyze the level of social criticism towards the relationship between women and nature is the victim and oppressor binary. In *Surfacing* it became clear that this binary is used throughout the entire novel. The relationship between women and men and the relationship between nature and culture was viewed and described as one of domination. This was not necessarily the case in *Wild*. There are some examples to be found in this memoir that illustrate this binary, but these examples do not play a larger role in the storyline and they are more focused on the relationship between women and men than that they are linked to the oppression of nature. The second binary explores the connection between the internal mindset and external landscape in both literary works. This binary has helped me to analyze the influence of a woman's psychological state of mind on her natural surroundings, but also the other way around by looking at how the natural environment can have an influence on a woman's

psychological state of mind. The latter has proven to be a very influential factor. The calm exterior of nature has had a positive influence on how both protagonist experience their memories and emotions. This binary is only linked to ecofeminism to a certain extent. On the one hand, it does create a bond and link between women and nature which plays a key role in ecofeminist analyses. On the other hand it is more about a spiritual relationship that is linked to oppression of nature and women in *Surfacing* but not in *Wild*.

There were a few differences and difficulties when comparing these two literary works. Firstly, it has proven to be a very difficult task to compare a novel to a memoir because the approach to these two different stories is very different. Genre has therefore proven to be an obstacle in comparing these two literary works because it is difficult to compare a work of fiction to a work of non-fiction, mainly because one is a made-up story about patriarchic oppression, identity crisis and a missing father that leads to a mental breakdown and the other one is a personal account of a hiking trip in nature that leads to the healing of psychological wounds. But the one thing they have in common is that they both refer to nature as something that can have a physical presence in their lives as well as spiritual one. It has been instructive to see how these two different approaches to the relationship between nature and women differ from each other, but also how they are in essence alike. Both characters need a place to just be and let go, and nature has offered them that special place that they were looking for. Hence the reason why might be different in both literary works, though the essence of the stories are very much alike. Therefore, I would also argue that time, as in when both works of literature are written, has not very much to do with that. This idea of going back to your natural roots and to escape consumer society for some peace and quiet was something that the transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau also talked about. Overall, this research has shown that even though two works of literature can be very different from each other, there is always some common ground that links the essence of the stories together. The essence here is the healing powers of nature on a woman's psychological state of mind.

For further research it would be useful to include several different female nature writings (non-fiction, fiction, etc). It would be interesting to see how different storylines and genre that deal with the theme change over time or how they perhaps do no change over time from a more transcendentalist work of the nineteenth century to a more recent work from the twenty-first century. Another angle would be to compare female literary works to male literary works to see how they differ in viewing and exploring nature or to keep it more on a broader level by looking at the general relationship between humans and nature. Furthermore,

it would also be interesting to research different literary works from different countries all over the world. Non-western countries still have a lot of issues with the natural environment or the oppression of women. It would therefore be useful to compare a western literary work to a non-western literary work to explore the influence of setting on this relationship. Overall, this research has shown that there are a lot of aspects to the relationship between women and nature and most importantly that there are many differences when it comes to exploring the relationship between women and nature in literature, especially when researching this from an ecofeminist perspective.

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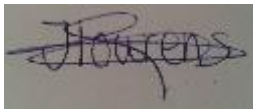
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