

Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and its Film Adaptation: An Ecocritical Odyssey

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Abstract

The quest motif has been a sempiternal element in literature. It has prominently resided in fiction, mythology and folklore of all cultures, to move a character towards his goal. From Homer's *Odyssey* to Tennyson's *Ulysses* to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, it has been used ingeniously. According to Howard, the journey is "a process of discovery in which the heroes learn essential truths about themselves, their society and the nature of human existence." Due to ecological crisis, humans now nurture the quest of self-discovery in the lap of nature. Jon Krakauer's protagonist of *Into the Wild* (1996) and its 2007 movie adaptation, views nature as pure and Edenic, where he intends to run away from the hard and ruthless city life. Wanting an unfiltered experience of the wild, Chris McCandless cuts ties with family and starts out to explore 'the wild.'

The proposed paper seeks to explore this desire of self-discovery away from civilization and attempts to view it through the lens of ecocriticism. By critiquing the dichotomous relationship of humans and nature in the novel and the movie, the researcher will probe the journey motif from (Greek) classicism through transcendentalism leading to ecocriticism. Further, the paper would try to uncover how Chris McCandless is an "othered" being in the dominant materialist culture, which he escapes to register his protest against the economically-inclined society.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Quest, Journey, Nature, Human, Society

In 1993, Chris McCandless' (though at some point on his quest into American wilderness he started to refer to himself as Alexander Supertramp)'s body was discovered in an abandoned bus on Stampede Trail in the Alaskan wilderness. McCandless made the decision to abandon civilization in favour of the untamed outdoors in 1992. Coming from a well-off family, he had recently graduated from Emory University and was about to enter law school. Instead, he made the decision to go into the bush and sever all ties to his family and past life.

McCandless' story is told in a non-fiction book called *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer. The original version of "Into the Wild" appeared as an article in Outside magazine in 1993, written by American mountaineer and writer Jon Krakauer. Not long after the body was discovered, the magazine article was released. After receiving a lot of criticism and public attention, Krakauer decided to look into McCandless' activities during his two years on the road after being inspired by the young man's story.

The result is a book, which depicts primarily McCandless' story and focuses on the call of the wild and his quest, attempting to understand people's need to get away from society. This paper investigates the role of nature in Jon Krakauer's non-fiction book *Into the Wild* and Sean Penn's film adaptation of this book. It makes an effort to examine the role of the quest motif and examine nature from three angles: first, the function and role of nature in the stories of the book and the movie; second, the relationship between the role of nature in the stories and the role of nature in Christopher McCandless' life; and third, the role that nature plays in the context of American culture.

A quest is a journey taken in the direction of a certain objective. In mythology and fiction, the term refers to a challenging journey toward a goal that is frequently symbolic or allegorical. Adventure stories are common in folklore throughout all nations and ethnic cultures. In literary works, the goal of a quest necessitates significant effort from the protagonist, who must surmount numerous challenges, usually involving extensive travel. Travelling gives the storyteller the opportunity to highlight far-flung places and cultures (which is a narrative goal, not a character goal). A quest's objective may also include supernatural abilities, frequently transporting the protagonist to different realms and universes. The moral of the quest frequently revolves around the hero's transformed

personality. In mythology and literature, the quest motif represents the imperative need for dramatic, rebellious, and creative change in the lives of individuals as well as in the lives of entire cultures. Animated things have to change and develop on a physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual level. Steadying this progress would be akin to encouraging stagnation. Typically, the goal of the quest is for the hero to find someone or something, and then use that item to get back home.

McCandless' journey is part of a long tradition of men seeking to find themselves in nature through this motif of quest, including writers such as Henry David Thoreau. Krakauer points out that McCandless had a particular fascination with Thoreau's *Walden: or Life in the Woods*, an extended personal essay in which Thoreau documents his experiences living in the woods of Concord, Massachusetts. Not only did McCandless carry a heavily annotated copy of the text with him throughout his travels, like Thoreau, who lived in a secluded cabin to simplify his life, McCandless made camp at an abandoned bus in the middle of Denali National Forest in order to find himself. Thoreau idealized such self-isolation in the wilderness, beautified nature, and romanticized its transformative power by closely observing the quality of animal behaviors and deeply analyzing the impact of the passing seasons upon his personal development. This created an American legacy steeped in reverence for those who seek themselves in the wild.

In *Into the Wild*, Krakauer explores this "grip wilderness has on the American imagination" by recounting the stories of Everett Ruess, Gene Rosellini, John Waterman, and Carl McGunn, young men like McCandless who perished in the wild searching for transcendent experiences (28). Leslie Fiedler, a literary scholar, argues in his book *Love and Death in the American Novel* that the main topic of American literature is the flight of American men and boys into the woods to escape civilization. This flight, which is frequently a response to heartbreak and occasionally occurs in the company of other men or boys, is the central theme of a wide range of books and stories, including *Big Two-Hearted River* by Ernest Hemingway, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. However, Krakauer also subverts this cliché by challenging the romantic narrative that encircles the way the American wilderness, its explorers, and their enigmatic disappearances are portrayed. Krakauer

complicates the uplifting picture of the American wilderness by contrasting literary passages that idealize nature with the real harsh conditions that McCandless faces in the outdoors

These classic books, one of which (*Walden*) Christopher McCandless actually carries with him as he “lights out for the territories,” in the words of Huck Finn, are similar in concept to Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (55). One of the central themes of *Into the Wild* is *Fathers and Sons*, the title of a book written by the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev in the 19th century. Christopher McCandless' life may have undergone a sea change when he learned that his father had a second, clandestine family. It appears that this realization motivates him to fully abandon his parents and set out on an adventure into the American wild. Krakauer complicates the uplifting picture of the American wilderness by contrasting literary passages that idealize nature with the real harsh conditions that McCandless faces in the outdoors.

Krakauer never holds back when describing the dangerous circumstances McCandless faces, such as barely escaping a flash flood in the Mojave Desert, getting lost in the Colorado River's channels, and almost dying during a storm off the coast of Mexico. This is true even when Krakauer acknowledges that nature is his source of inspiration. When he takes a wrong step on the glacier, he almost falls into an ice crevasse and nearly dies when the ice holding his pick axe drastically thins. Both experiences make Krakauer realize the horrible beauty and terrible power of nature, but they also suffocate him with a sudden fear of dying at the hands of the natural world. Krakauer emphasizes that everyone who enters Mother Nature's territory, regardless of skill level, is subject to her laws by describing the wilderness as both beautiful and ruthlessly cruel and hazardous. It implies that nature is beyond human control and that when you “surrender” to it, you become her subject, subject to her will and obedience, and she could care less if you survive or not. such as the River Teklanika.

When Christopher McCandless leaves his parents and the upper middle-class suburban environment in which they raised him, he expresses his disapproval of what he perceives to be American materialism in general as well as in particular and concretely when he gives away all of his savings, abandons his car in the middle of the desert, and burns his paper money on the ground. A major theme in the writings of one of Christopher McCandless' favourite writers, Jack London, is wilderness survival, or “living off the land,” as McCandless puts it (22). London's short story “To Build a Fire,” which tells the narrative

of a man who freezes to death in the woods because he is unable to do just that, is arguably the most stunning illustration of this. This tale sort of portends McCandless' own demise.

The book incorporates the author's own wilderness experiences as well as those of other people whose interaction with wild nature was sparked by the pull of nature, even if McCandless and his voyage are the primary subject (Novikov 23). By telling the tales of other historical figures, Krakauer draws attention to this problem by not restricting his research to McCandless alone.

Furthermore, Krakauer notes that in the process of researching the book, he thought about a number of more significant topics, including the complex father-son relationships, the need for adventure in young men, and "the grip wilderness has on the American imagination." As a result, the reader is given a deeper understanding of nature and its significance in the context of American culture. In the book, Krakauer raises more questions about society, the relationship between humans and nature, and how this relationship is perceived and understood than he does trying to answer every question.

Krakauer goes into further detail on another important facet of McCandless' trips in the book. Krakauer reveals that McCandless was heavily impacted by the books he read while investigating the causes of his retreat into wilderness. As a voracious reader, he held tremendous respect for Tolstoy's decision to lead a simple life and for Thoreau's interest in nature and the pursuit of morality in it. Additionally, he was sometimes so moved by Jack London's tales that he seemed to forget they were made up. He chose to pursue a life free of pretense and duties in order to find his genuine inner self after feeling let down by society and his family and inspired by the literary role models in his life. Therefore, he found inspiration in the literary depictions of nature. In 2007, a film titled *Into the Wild* based on Krakauer's book was released. Sean Penn adapted it for the big screen, and critics gave it positive reviews (Ebert 512).

Sean Penn finds McCandless' narrative to be similarly personal, although Penn isn't really interested in philosophy or journalism. His movie is a character study rather than a factual or dissertation. While there is still some uncertainty, Penn and his performers provide strong answers to many of the problems raised by Krakauer, transforming his misgivings into firm declarations. The movie is a deft, perceptive depiction, whereas the book was a probing investigation. As Novikov notes, both Krakauer's book and Penn's film adaptation of it

recount McCandless' journey, but they emphasize different parts of it: Krakauer emphasizes the significance of the relationship between humans and nature, while Penn's adaptation focuses more on human drama (88).

There are a lot of people who are drawn to McCandless' narrative and view him, the book, and the movie that are based on his life as role models for life. This is especially true in the wake of his passing, the publication of the book, and the release of the film. They hike into the forest and look up to him in the same way that McCandless looked up to Thoreau and London. Moreover, not all *Into the Wild* devotees have made it back from their Alaskan pilgrimages unscathed, as McCandless' experience proved to be fatal. There have been cases where people have lost their lives attempting to emulate McCandless.

There is an undeniable focus on the relationship between nature and literature, discussing why nature and environment occupy such an important place in cultures in the first place. According to Novikov, Penn concentrates more on the interactions between characters, whereas Krakauer concentrates more on the relationship between humans and nature (76). Nature appears in both Penn's film adaptation and Krakauer's book, despite their disparate points of emphasis. In the major body of the work, a comparison between the book and the movie will be done. The purpose of this comparison is to determine whatever role nature plays in regard to how human relationships are portrayed in the novel.

William Rueckert, who broke away from Cultural Studies, first used the term "ecocriticism" in his 1978 essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." It is described as a field of study that looks at the texts we create to understand our lives' significance in the larger context of the world of non-human animals. It is an interdisciplinary study of literature and environment that looks at the different ways that literature is portrayed in literature and analyses works from the perspective of nature. Some ecocritics also offer solutions to the existing ecological scenario. However, in its larger context it could be seen as incorporating with the numerous variants of human life. It juxtaposes literature with culture, geography, psychology and ecology.

According to Lawrence Buell, ecocriticism is distinct from other theories of culture and literature because, unlike feminism, it does not allow the speaker or writer to identify with the subject; rather, it speaks on behalf of something (nature), but "no human can speak as the environment, as nature, as a nonhuman animal" (7). Writing about nature and studying

texts to see how it has been portrayed are the closest things one can do to that. This is because one is reading another person's interpretation of nature and drawing a parallel with Kull's theory of nature's multiplicity, which holds that zero nature—the source of all interpretations—passes through multiple filters before becoming a human construct of nature.

Hence, it is hard to achieve an unbiased analysis of nature writing. Nature texts possibly come closest to actual nature when they focus on cases where humans come face to face with nature. This is suggested by Lawrence Buell, who stresses the importance of texts depicting encounters with nature, believing that it is more efficient to analyse texts “where critical reflection is embedded within narratives of encounter with nature” than to engage in the discussion of elaborate theories (8).

The books selected become important to the analyst. According to Buell's previous writings, “the nonhuman environment must be envisioned not merely as a framing device but as an active presence” is the most crucial prerequisite for an environmental narrative (25). But as he notes, since then, his opinions have evolved, and he now feels that it would be better for the researcher to assume that environmentality is present in all texts and broaden the range of potential environmental texts, “suggesting human history's implication in natural history” (25). Thus, if any human-created text can be considered to bear some relation to environment, it could be seen how deeply people's surroundings influence them.

Greg Garrard puts forth the idea that non-fictional nature writing is considered secondary to fiction because researchers prefer to study human relationships instead of focusing on the relationship between the human and the nonhuman (53). This suggests that when it comes to literature analysis, nature typically takes a backseat and gives up a lot of its potential to be portrayed through human characters. Buell confirms this by reflecting on his own secondary school literature classes and acknowledging that the “setting” of a literary work was viewed as “mere backdrop for the human drama that really counted” (24). He further notes that this was the case even with works that focused solely on nature, like Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, where nature plays a major role. In order to analyse the depiction of nature as an active part of the narrative, it needs to be established how is the presence of nature integral to the narrative. This, in turn, requires an understanding of how different ideas concerning nature are constructed.

The study of ecocriticism focuses on how nature is portrayed in culture, particularly in literature. Buell claims that nature writing is the most useful resource for researchers researching representations of nature, and that the works that describe human interactions with nature are the most objective of these. A voyage into nature is indeed depicted in *Into the Wild*. Additionally, first-wave ecocriticism—which concentrated on the division between physical nature and humans and the potential for reestablishing that connection—was notably drawn to these books. McCandless is the “solitary human” who is attempting to establish a personal relationship with nature, if the first-wave texts are to be believed. The main thrust of *Into the Wild* is this call of nature, which thrusts McCandless and many other young men into situations where they must confront the wilderness. These trips are not just walks; rather, they could be likened to quests, since they incorporate a desire for spiritual rejuvenation that one hopes to find in nature.

In the first scene of *Into the Wild*, McCandless gets picked up by a motorist when he is “shivering in the grey Alaska dawn” (3). McCandless makes it apparent right away that he is more than just a hiker and has assumed a moral responsibility when he informs the driver that his goal is to reach Denali National Park, where he plans to “walk deep into the bush and live off the land for a few months” (3-4). Krakauer, who views McCandless as a pilgrim, likewise affirms this (85). Furthermore, even McCandless’ declaration that he would “live off the land”—presented in the book as a direct quote from McCandless—shows that he intends to be completely self-sufficient and suggests a closer bond with the natural world than one might anticipate from an average hiker. Even worse, McCandless only takes a pair of rubber boots in exchange for his watch from the worried driver and declines his offers to purchase better hiking equipment. The driver refuses to accept it until McCandless says that, in his opinion, neither the place nor the time matter anymore (7), implying that he aimed to fully immerse himself in life apart from civilization. It’s interesting to note that Eddie Vedder (Pearl Jam) composed the background music for the film “Society.” Vedder establishes a contemplative, melancholic tone. Vedder personifies society and addresses it as if it were a single entity. “Society, you’re a crazy breed.” It is almost as though Society is saying goodbye and is his strange friend, one that he can’t quite put his mind around. He is bidding society farewell due of its corruption and greed, and he does not wish to be a part of it.

From the perspective of first-wave ecocriticism, the narrative's integration of nature serves as an additional criterion for nature texts, in addition to the nature versus human dichotomy. The nature portrayed in the literature must be "an active presence" rather than a passive setting in order for it to be considered a first-wave ecocritical text. This, however, may be debatable in the case of *Into the Wild*. Upon initial observation, one could argue that *Into the Wild* presents nature as a separate entity. On closer reading, though, it becomes clear that Krakauer also uses nature to tell stories. His descriptions of the natural world seem to have two main goals in mind: to give the reader an accurate idea of McCandless' location in North America and to provide illustrations of McCandless' journey. For instance, Krakauer goes into great detail in Chapter Four (25–26) about the bear-paw poppy, a rare flower. This extensive description serves a purpose: it serves as a prologue to the story of the explorers who discovered McCandless' abandoned automobile, justifying the earlier description of a seemingly insignificant flower. In order to familiarize the reader with the characteristics of the area and provide an explanation for the unexpected flood that initially damaged McCandless' automobile, Krakauer (27–28) presents the landscape of Detrital Wash in the same chapter. Based on these instances, one may argue that the primary purpose of these descriptions is to further the plot.

These descriptions can also be viewed as integral parts of the narrative. In terms of the story itself the flash flood which catches a peacefully camping Chris so unexpectedly, serves as a reminder of the unpredictability of nature. The generous nature abruptly turns into a wilderness with the flood, heavily influencing the story. "Instead of feeling distraught over this turn of events, moreover, McCandless was exhilarated: he saw the flash flood as an opportunity to shed unnecessary baggage" (29) is how the flash flood inspires McCandless to go farther on his road of living with as little as possible. One may argue that the same descriptions that served the specific purpose of framing the story also serve as a reminder of how nature is mutable, which connects them to the story itself. *Into the Wild* is a first-wave ecocritical work because it depicts experiences with nature, which typically include a lone human being in the outdoors, allowing nature to be seen as an active rival to human pursuits.

In conclusion, it can be claimed that through analyzing the novel's and the film's dichotomous portrayal of humans and nature, an investigation has been made into how Chris McCandless is an "othered" entity in the prevailing materialist culture, from which he flees in

order to express his disapproval of the society's economic orientation. While nature plays a part in both Penn's adaptation of Krakauer's novel and Penn's movie, the roles are very different. Nature plays a major role in Krakauer's *Into the Wild* as a plot device, an integral part of American society, and a major impact on McCandless' life—both as an aspirational ideal and as the natural force that ultimately results in his death. In contrast to the book, Penn emphasizes the importance of human ties on McCandless' life by reversing the roles of nature and human relationships in his adaptation, placing the latter in the background. Compared to Penn's adaptation, Krakauer's book provides a more comprehensive representation of the various facets of the term "nature" through the functions of nature. As a result, Krakauer's book offers a comprehensive examination of both nature and McCandless' existence, highlighting the intimacy of the interaction between humans and nature, which is not as fully explored in Penn's adaptation.

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