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## **Romanticizing the Last Frontier**

*An Exploration of Christopher Johnson McCandless's Understanding of the Alaskan*

*Wilderness in Into the Wild*

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## Abstract

This study researched Christopher Johnson McCandless's understanding of the Alaskan wilderness, based on the main question: "In what ways does Christopher McCandless thematize and conceptualize the Alaskan wilderness in the novel *Into the Wild*." This study is relevant, since it provides insight into McCandless's motivations to seek out a solitary existence in the wilderness without including the findings of *Into the Wild*'s author Jon Krakauer. This study has regarded Christopher's personal writings: his journal, letters to friends, notes in margins of books he owned and a graffiti inside his place of residence in Alaska. By dissecting the concept of wilderness through nature theory, analysing and interpreting the literary choices in the writings of McCandless and relating them to psychological theory, this study has constructed a contextual framework for the contents of McCandless's writings. By relating these findings to his written accounts, and introducing additional theory by Abraham Maslow and Gary Snyder, among others, this study has constructed a multidimensional interpretation of his understandings. The results of the analyses show that Christopher McCandless's created a romanticized ideal of wilderness, not rooted in reality, but based on the writings of literary heroes, his own need to separate from society and the ambiguity of the concept of wild nature. This ideal of wilderness was to aid him in the rejection and 'death' of his old, socially imposed, self, and the emersion of a 'true self;' a transformation that was to match the writings of his literary heroes.

## Introduction

Scottish-American naturalist John Muir once wrote: "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity." This quote, taken from his 1901 novel *Our National Parks*, appears to perpetuate a certain appreciation of nature in its wildest form: the wilderness. This

particular conception of wilderness seems to have seeped into the minds of many modern-day adolescents and adults alike. They draw upon the writings of famous transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Aldo Leopold, and fiction writers such as Jack London and Mark Twain, who all agreed on the notion of retreating into nature as a means of self-discovery. Thoreau wrote: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (90). Seeking out the wilderness, as a means of escaping the constraints of society and returning to one’s ‘primal self,’ then becomes a spiritual journey. Going outside is not merely about enjoying the outdoors; instead nature becomes a tool, instrumental in discovering the essence of life. This conviction inspired Christopher Johnson McCandless, who set out in 1990 to hitchhike across North America without belongings and without money. He sought out a lifestyle which differed tremendously from the expectations present within his family.

McCandless envisioned Alaska as the final destination of a two-year journey across North America. It represented the final segment on his quest to self-discovery: the untouched wilderness, uncorrupted by the influences of man. McCandless’s story has become somewhat of a modern myth; each year scores of ‘pilgrims’ follow the now infamous Stampede Trail to visit the site of McCandless’s final days: the Fairbanks City Transit bus number 142.

When reading the novel *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer, it becomes apparent that McCandless lived with certain convictions about nature and about wilderness. As Gail McClain writes in “*I Now Walk Into the Wild’—Misguided and Misunderstood: An Ecocritical Study of Jon Krakauer’s Novel Into the Wild*,” McCandless commenced his journey with a misinformed understanding of nature, and specifically of wilderness. His conception of nature was based on the romanticized writings of his favourite authors: Jack London, Henry David Thoreau, and Leo Tolstoj, and the presentation of wilderness in media

“by only illuminating the beauties of nature while neglecting to inform readers of the harshness of the wilderness” (McClain 78).

Timothy Pursell and Maureen Hogan’s *Alaska’s Eternal Frontier: Rural Masculinity and Landscape Nostalgia* discusses the view of Alaska as a place of untamed nature, “a place for only the bravest and most rugged of souls who continue to engage in the pioneer experience, braving the dangers of Alaska for personal enrichment” (186), and talks about the construction of this ‘identity.’ Whilst Alaska is presented as a rugged place, there still echoes a sentiment of romanticism; only the bravest can conquer this place and become who they truly aspire to be, thereby deeming wilderness as a challenge to be overcome, and not seeing the true reality of a place that cannot be ‘tamed’ by man.

The aim of this thesis is to identify Christopher Johnson McCandless’s understanding of the Alaskan ‘wilderness’ from his written accounts within the novel *Into the Wild*, written by Jon Krakauer. The novel *Into the Wild* details McCandless’s story whilst weaving in autobiographical elements of the author’s own life. When one reads the novel, there is no escaping Krakauer’s personal opinions and interpretations of McCandless writings, his ideas and his ramblings. Jonah Raskin writes in “*Calls of the Wild on the Page and Screen: From Jack London and Gary Snyder to Jon Krakauer and Sean Penn,*” that the choices made by Krakauer and Sean Penn - director of the 2007 adaptation of *Into the Wild*, continue to perpetuate the idea of wilderness as an “archetypal quest” (202), taking into account that both the novel and movie are interpretations of McCandless.

This essay focuses solely on McCandless’s writings, and does not take into account Krakauer’s own interpretations or additions to the story. The research is conducted on the basis of the following research question: "In what ways does Christopher McCandless thematize and conceptualize the Alaskan wilderness in the novel *Into the Wild*." In the first chapter, the idea of wilderness in both literature and visual media is discussed. The concept of

wilderness is dissected and thorough analysis through an ecological lens emphasizes the ambiguity of the notion. The second chapter interprets the writings of Christopher McCandless, analyses his use of third person narration and the adoption of a pseudonym and offers insight into possible explanations for these specific literary choices. The last and final chapter of this thesis presents an in-depth analysis of McCandless's writings, by close-reading his journal entries, letters to friends and most importantly a graffito he left in his final place of residence in Alaska. By close-reading these segments of McCandless's life and weaving in theory about wilderness experience, a different narrative about his understanding of wilderness is established and offers insight into what motivated him to seek out an isolated existence.

## Chapter 1: The Idea of Wilderness

*“In wilderness people can find the silence and the solitude and the noncivilized surroundings that can connect them once again to their evolutionary heritage, and through an experience of the eternal mystery, can give them a sense of the sacredness of all creation.”*

– Sigurd F. Olson



Environmentalist, author and advocate for the protection of wilderness Sigurd Olson, observed that, once city folk resided in the backcountry wilderness for a while and were able to leave everyday demands behind, “ancient rhythms came to resonate with human spirits and they were renewed in body and soul” (Oelschlaeger 2). Especially in these modern times, where technology and innovation predominate, there seems to be a desire to return to a more primal way of life and to seek a stronger connection with wild nature.

Multiple notions or images may come to mind when contemplating wild nature or ‘wilderness’. After all, the meaning of wilderness is ambiguous, to say the least. There are different ways in which one may engage with the meaning of wilderness: in a literal sense, a figurative one and also a spiritual sense. Spiritual in a sense that being in the wilderness physically, or the presence of wilderness in itself (through imagery, film, or other media), profoundly affects the state of the human mind and spirit. In this chapter we will explore the meanings of wilderness in literature through an ecological lens, focusing on the wholistic relationship between man and nature, introducing the concepts of *arcadian-* and *imperial-* and *spiritual ecology*. The existing dichotomy of wilderness in visual media will also be analyzed

in an attempt to demonstrate the ambiguity of the concept. This analysis will illustrate that the equivocation of the phenomenon of wilderness contributes to misunderstandings about wilderness and misinformed ideas of reality.

Max Oelschlaeger argues in *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* that the meaning of wilderness lies on a continuum, with different, sometimes inconsistent and even contradictory ideas, also because the notion assumes new importance throughout the vagaries of history (3). Whilst the wording of different definitions might vary, the essence of the contemporary secular meaning of wilderness is clearly captured by Roderick Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind*. He proposes “a habitat of wild nature, of (a man in) an alien environment where the civilization that normally controls his life is absent” (2). This definition is secular in a sense that it does not adhere to a certain philosophy, religion, or historical movement, therefore remaining quite broad and general and in a sense timeless. In other words, there is no specific connotation to this definition: which is why this definition will be central to this work.

The portrayal of wilderness in different media such as film, print and the internet, contributes to its ambiguity. In literature we find that the portrayal of wilderness can be categorized in terms of ecological perspectives. The conventional connotation of *ecology*, described by Max Oelschlaeger implies, “that to look at things ecologically is to see them as connected, as constituting a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts” (261). Regarding wilderness in an ecological sense is relevant in looking at how literature treats the subject of nature, especially the connection between nature and man. This is essential in trying to establish whether particular writings treat the relationship between nature and man, or nature and culture as symbiotic or hierarchical.

During the 17th century Francis Bacon divided perceptions of nature into so-called *pastoral* or *arcadian ecology* and *imperial ecology*. “Pastoral ecology ‘advocated a simple,



humble life for man with the aim of restoring him to a peaceful coexistence with other organisms,' and imperial ecology aimed 'to establish, through the exercise of reason and by hard work, man's dominion over nature'" (Oelschlaeger, 103). This dichotomy represents opposing ideas about the wholistic and ecological relationship between man and nature, on the one hand viewing the relationship as symbiotic, and on the other hand as hierarchic.

In "Understanding Wilderness: Humans and Ecology in Alaskan Nature Writing," Rosemary McGuire correlates with Bacon's perceptions. "On the one hand, wilderness is depicted as a blank and threatening void, which we have a moral obligation to develop. On the other, it appears as a pristine, Edenic space uncorrupted by human influence" (551). She does note however, that "both of these presentations of wilderness have as their salient characteristic that they are anthropocentric: wilderness is defined by human absence" (552). Human presence seems to be the catalyst in either conception, it underlines the idea of either becoming one with the untamedness, upholding the idea that it should remain primeval, or trying to overcome and conquer an uncivilized habitat of wildness subjecting it to the dominion of mankind. Being aware of this division is relevant in understanding nature and wilderness writing, as it allows us to better understand and contextualize literary ideas and concepts, such as those written by McCandless.

Whilst the terms *arcadian* and *imperial ecology* seem to envelop the dichotomy of wilderness that is commonly used in literature, they do seem not to envelop the 'spiritual' side of wilderness and nature. A good example of spiritual ecology can be found in the writings of Henry David Thoreau. The 'grandfather' of nature writing, upon first glance, seems to fall into the category of *arcadian ecology*, writing in *Walden*: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (99). It would appear that Thoreau seems to want to retreat into nature to live in harmony with its rhythm, to

discover life away from the constraints of society and live in solitude. Yet, there is a deeper meaning to his motivations: retreating into nature to discover one's purpose and to be confronted wholly with one's own being cannot merely be described as *arcadian ecology* but fits more into the category of *spiritual ecology*. In *Earth Wisdom* Dolores LaChapelle writes that *spiritual ecology*, or alternatively *sacred ecology*, is an inherent part of Indigenous communities, whom, through ritual, festival, and prayer re-establish a deep running connection with nature and the land they inhabit (137). This connection to nature therefore is not only physical, but also divine in a sense. The ancient currents present in natural places are inextricably connected to the human spirit. Disconnectedness from these rhythms cause an imbalance in the human being, causing us to feel alienated or uprooted. A relationship with the land and with ancestors who resided there long before us, is crucial in understanding your own mind and evolving as a human being. Retreat into nature therefore is a deeply spiritual practice and seeking out the wilderness in order to restore the relationship with the self is something that has been done for millennia.

In visual media, such as film, we too see a division of understandings of wilderness. On the one hand wilderness is envisioned as a sacred 'wild' place to turn to when the burdens of society become too heavy, or to live according to the rhythm of nature, some examples being the 2014 movie *Wild*, *The Way* (2010), *A Walk in the Woods* (2015) and *Captain Fantastic* (2016). And on the other hand wilderness is perceived as a ruthless and unforgiving place, something to be overcome in order to be truly 'alive,' in a sense being about 'survival,' examples being: *The Revenant* (2015), *Never Cry Wolf* (1983), *The Edge* (1997), and *The Grey* (2011).

Additionally, other types of visual media, such as outdoor magazines, the internet, videos and nature documentaries often exhibit a romantic ideal of wilderness. The most breathtaking imagery of wild nature accompanied by an exquisite soundtrack and dramatic

editing, instills in us the idea that seeking out the wilderness resembles stepping into a movie. Only the pinnacles of natural beauty, optimal weather conditions and peaceful coexistence between organisms are shown whilst the reality of wilderness, with its unpredictability and vigor, is often neglected.

All these representations of wilderness, both in literature as well as in visual media, influence and shape the perception of what it will be like to seek out the wilderness and experience wild nature for oneself. However, since the conceptualizations and thematizations of wilderness differ so greatly, it can be arduous to determine what one should expect.

## Chapter 2: Interpreting the Writings of Christopher McCandless

*“In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says, -- he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me.”*

– Ralph Waldo Emerson



For Christopher Johnson McCandless, the protagonist of the novel *Into the Wild*, wilderness was something he sought out from a young age. In this chapter we will interpret McCandless’s way of writings during his voyage in the wild, particularly his adoption of a pseudonym and his use of third person narration. We will look at his encounters with wilderness during his youth and adolescence in order to establish a contextual framework which provides insight into the literary choices he made in his writings about wild nature. These literary choices – the adoption of a pseudonym and third person narration – will then be interpreted by relating them to the writings of McCandless’s literary inspirations and psychological theories in order to offer insight into possible explanations for these conscious (or subconscious) decisions.

Christopher’s grandfather Loren Johnson lived in Iron Mountain, a small mining town in Michigan. Johnson could, more often than not, be found in the forests stretching far and wide and was always raising wildlife. “‘Billie’s (Christopher’s mother) dad didn’t quite fit into society,’ Walt McCandless (Christopher’s father) explains. ‘[I]n many ways he and Chris were a lot alike’” (Krakauer 108). Apart from the occasional visit to his grandfather, Chris spent time hiking and camping with his father Walt and Walt’s children from another marriage, when school was out. They visited the Blue Ridge Mountains to climb ‘Old Rag,’ and Rocky Mountain National Park to brave Longs Peak or Keyhole. Walt recalls: “There

was always a little wanderlust in the family, and it was clear early on that Chris had inherited it” (Krakauer 108).

The affinity for the outdoors came not merely from family influences; Chris spent copious amounts of hours indulging in the writings of some of his favourite authors: Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Leo Tolstoy and Jack London. The latter writing in particular details about the Alaskan wilderness, the last great American frontier. The detailed depictions of the north in London’s novels, perpetuate a certain ideology about Alaska. Particularly that of a place that seems to have escaped the grasp of civilization and therefore has remained ancient and wild. Pursell and Hogan detail this idea of Alaska that still remains present today:

Alaska calls to mind images of vast undeveloped lands and vast quantities of wildlife. Beautiful and big, cold and scary, Alaska must be a place for only the bravest and most rugged of souls who continue to engage in the pioneer experience, braving the dangers of Alaska for personal enrichment, resource development, or somehow to perpetuate and preserve authentic American values that have been lost and degraded “Outside” in the overly urbanized Lower 48. (186)

This construct of wilderness, and in particular the Alaskan wilderness, instilled in Chris the idea that society’s corruption seeped unknowingly into the lives of everyday people. He longed to escape from the invisible grip that society held on his life. Andy Horowitz, one of Chris’s friends from his days at Emory, recalled Chris having said that: “He was born into the wrong century. He was looking for more adventure and freedom than today’s society gives people” (Krakauer, 174). Another college friend, Joshua Marshall said that Chris seemed to have a desire to stay away from convention, that he seemed to deliberately put himself in

tenuous positions and told his friends of his endeavors on the road (Brown). This desire to escape society eventually led to Chris abandoning most of his earthly possessions, donating the savings on his account to Oxfam, and setting out on a two-year journey across North America. All the meandering across the country would eventually lead to the great North: Alaska.

The way Christopher McCandless documented his voyage can be likened to a scavenger hunt. McCandless left behind him a trail of written material that, altogether, comprise his story. Having neglected to pack writing paper, Chris started a brief journal on some blank pages on a copy of *Tanaina Plantlore* written by Priscilla Russell, which is an ethnobotany guide of Southcentral Alaska. Whilst he wrote in this journal incidentally, other trains of thought and inspirations can be taken from notes he wrote in the margins of novels that influenced him, passages he underlined, photographs, and postcards and letters he wrote to friends he met along the way. One particularly important piece of written material is a graffito McCandless wrote on the inside of the abandoned 142 Fairbanks Transit bus, in which he resided during his time in Alaska. This piece of writing is central in the analysis of McCandless's understanding of the wilderness, and will be corroborated by the other pieces of written material he left behind.

A vital aspect one encounters when reading the diary entries written by McCandless during his journey, is his particular way of writing. When McCandless commenced his endeavour, he adopted a pseudonym: 'Alexander Supertramp,' or 'Alex' in short. This name seems to both be a rejection of his old identity and life and an embodiment of the person he inspired and aspired to be. Whilst McCandless never touches upon this choice of name in his writings what his motivations were behind choosing this particular name, it is clear that it held particular significance for him. The name Alexander could be was the name of the Tzar in the novel *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoj, a novel that McCandless carried with him throughout

his journey and referenced often, describing it as “a highly powerful and symbolic book” (Krakauer 33) in his letter to his friend Wayne Westerberg. The surname ‘Supertramp’ could symbolize the superlative embodiment of adventure and counterculture, a ‘tramp’ being “a person with no home or job, who travels from place to place” (“tramp”). McCandless describes to Westerberg “‘rubber tramps’ - vagabonds who owned a vehicle; as distinguished from ‘leather tramps,’ who lacked personal transportation and were thus forced to hitchhike or walk” (Krakauer, 17). More so, assuming this new identity enabled him to travel freely without the concern of his parents knowing about his whereabouts. Westerberg noted: “He never explained why he’d changed his name. From the things he said, you could tell something wasn’t right between him and his family” (Krakauer, 18). Chris’s sudden and complete disappearance from his parent’s life, in a way seems like a punishment; a premeditated decision, stemming from years of ‘oppression’, misunderstanding and resentment. In a letter to his sister Carine he wrote:

Since they won’t ever take me seriously, for a few months after graduation I’m going to let them think they are right, I’m going to let them think that I’m “coming around to see their side of things “ and that our relationship is stabilizing. And then, once the time is right, with one abrupt, swift action I’m going to completely knock them out of my life. I’m going to divorce them as my parents once and for all and never speak to either of those idiots again as long as I live. I’ll be through with them once and for all, forever (Krakauer 64).

In addition to this, another distinctive feature of McCandless’s writing is his use of third person narration in his journal entries. This differentiates from his first person writing when addressing friends in his letters or postcards. An example of this: “All hopes collapse! The canal does not reach the ocean but merely peters out into a vast swamp. Alex is utterly confounded. Decides he must be close to oceans and elects to try and work way through

swamp to sea” (Krakauer 35). In psychology, third person writing is often referred to as ‘psychological displacement,’ meaning that it is used to create distance between the person in question and their experiences in order to objectively evaluate these specific events (Seih Y. T., et al. 40). Psychological displacement is a defense mechanism, first introduced by Anna Freud as “a way in which the mind unconsciously attempts to reduce anxiety and restore emotional balance” (Freud 123). It could be argued that McCandless’s use of psychological displacement through third person narration and use of a pseudonym is a coping mechanism. This coping mechanism might stem from a need to process the profound stress he was under whilst undertaking this endeavour. Through psychological displacement, Christopher might have been able to dissociate from the extremity of his situation, and objectively evaluate the things he was experiencing.

A different, yet not unlikely interpretation could be that, by taking on pseudonym and using third person narration, McCandless created a literary alter-ego for himself. The use of an alter-ego is not unfamiliar in literature: it is a compelling way of exploring one’s life with the aid of a ‘parallel’ self. Well-known examples are: Ernest Hemingway’s *Nick Adams Stories*, where Hemingway’s own life can be experienced through the eyes of his alter-ego Nick Adams; Charles Bukowski’s Henry Chinaski, and most importantly again Leo Tolstoy’s Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy was an important influence on McCandless, and he later donated the book to Wayne Westerberg, inscribing it with: “Transferred to Wayne Westerberg from Alexander. October, 1990. Listen to Pierre” (Krakauer 19; underlining is part of the original text). Tolstoy’s protagonist Pierre Bezukhov is altruistic and questing (Krakauer 19) and McCandless’s seemingly identified with the attributes of the character. By assuming an alter-ego, McCandless appeared to already take on the role as author of his own story. Westerberg mentioned: “I got the impression that this Alaskan escapade was going to be his last big adventure ... He said he was going to write a book about his travels” (66). By



documented his own experiences, thoughts, ramblings, fears and findings through the eyes of his counterpart Alexander Supertramp, Christopher might have already started becoming the author of a story that he eventually wanted to share with the world.

Lastly, McCandless's literary choice of third person narration in an attempt to fully submerge himself in his wilderness experiences, could be interpreted as 'ego death,' explained as "the complete loss of subjective self-identity" (Johnson, et al. 613). A more applicable term, however, would be 'psychic death' used in Jungian psychology, and referring to a fundamental transformation of the psyche: "[I]t implies a shift back to the existential position of the natural self, i.e., living the true purpose of life" (Ventegodt and Merrick 1021). McCandless's need to experience 'psychic death' can be related to the contempt he felt for his family, upbringing and environment. Consciously and perhaps unconsciously it had instilled ideas in him which he despised. To reinvent himself, to start with a clean slate, free from the priorly implanted ideas of society, his old self needed to die. This death of the ego stems from the belief that in wilderness one loses the overwhelming influence of the ego. In many traditional cultures this ritual is described as "wilderness passage" (Taylor 1749), which constitutes a journey inward in which there are different phases that relate to death and rebirth: the death of the "false self" and the emergence of the "true self" (Rosen 228).

McCandless's distinct literary choices might have been deliberate decisions to convey the ideals about nature and society which he established during his youth. Nonetheless, they may have also been partially subconscious manifestations of his psychological state of mind. These interpretations of his writings however, aid us in trying to decipher his understanding of wilderness and add depth and intricacy to his documented journey.

### Chapter 3: Christopher McCandless's Thematization of Wilderness

*"Wilderness is the one kind of playground which mankind cannot build to order.... I contrived to get the Gila headwaters withdrawn as a wilderness area, to be kept as pack country, free from additional roads, 'forever.'"*

– Aldo Leopold

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Examining McCandless's writing provides some insight into how he appears to have understood wilderness. Excerpts from his diary, notes in the margins of his books and fragments of wisdom he shared in letters to his friends all help to compose and theorize his perception. There is one specific piece of writing however, that wholly encapsulates McCandless's state of mind during his travels and serves as a representation of the wilderness he visualized. Whilst residing in the arctic tundra, McCandless wrote a 'declaration' on the walls of an abandoned bus in which he bivouacked during his months in the wilderness. He carved a message into a piece of plywood as if to make sure it would draw attention and would survive weather conditions better than if it had been written on a piece of paper. It stated:

Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool. No pets, no cigarettes, ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, 'cause "the west is the best." And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring

him to the great white north. No longer to be poisoned by the civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild. (Krakauer 163)

This poetic piece of writing seems to be the embodiment of his motivations in commencing this voyage north. It encapsulates his expectations of his stay in the wilderness and is corroborated by the other written accounts he left behind. There are several aspects of the graffiti that are examined in this chapter to construct McCandless's understanding of wilderness. They are the concept of 'freedom,' and what this resembled to McCandless, his personal characterization of an 'extremist,' and how this relates to his own conviction, his proclamation of being an 'aesthetic voyager,' and how this can be interpreted in three different ways, and lastly the meaning behind his intention of becoming 'lost in the wild.' These aspects are essential to consider since the emphasis on these particular concepts in the graffiti indicate the importance of these elements were in the construction of his understanding of wilderness. These concepts in the graffiti will be examined one by one, and supplemented by his additional written accounts or other theoretical writings. The aim is therefore to paint as clear and complete a picture as possible of the intended meaning.

According to the graffiti McCandless' strived for "ultimate freedom." To McCandless freedom seemed to resemble complete separation from society. The constraints of society forced him to conform to a socially desirable ideal, a mapped out path that would eventually lead to a comfortable life and financial security. These social demands alienated McCandless from himself and left him feeling lost in civilization. This caused him to seek out the one thing that opposes all the concepts and beliefs inherent in modern society: the wilderness. Wilderness in his eyes was the polar opposite of civilization, the escape from the extremes of conventional structures. To be freed from the shackles of institution, wilderness was his only liberation. This ethos ties in well with his own characterization as an "extremist." Going into the wilderness is the extreme: the ultimate test of his abilities and the ultimate rebellion

against societal expectations. The solitary conquering of the wilderness is a testament to McCandless's ideology of needing to distinguish himself from the path that society had laid out for him and others his age.

McCandless strived to separate himself from the collective we all start out as part of. As we grow, our family, friends, culture, religion and environment all play their part in shaping our personality. As we grow older, the need to distinguish ourselves and develop our own individual ideas and beliefs becomes increasingly important. Philosopher Carl Jung, who is recognized as one of the most influential psychiatrists of all time, has written extensively about developmental psychology. Jung believed that regardless of age, one is always moving towards a more complete level of self-realization. He wrote about the 'process of individuation:' the path to optimal personal development for an individual. This individuation is the process of becoming what one is destined to become from the beginning (Stevens 131), or as Jung described in his own words, "the process by which a person becomes a psychological 'in-dividual, that is, a separate, indivisible unity or 'whole'" (Jung 275). McCandless's entire endeavor can be viewed as a process of individuation. By detaching himself from society, he separated himself from the collective that created him, only to shape himself as an individual to his liking and his own ideology. The convictions, ideas and beliefs that arose within McCandless as he grew older, did not align with the expectations of his social environment. His ideas about self-development, fulfillment, wealth and relationships differed from the ones that his family and the academic climate stimulated. This opposition in ideas prompted McCandless to break away with the entrenched ideals of society and seek out an environment where he would be out of reach of these influences, to develop as an individual without interference.

McCandless's need to be independent and to assert agency over his own path in life is no strange phenomenon. Acts of rebellion, especially against the established order is

something which, especially in youth, can be regarded as part of growing into adulthood. Joseph Kramp discusses idealistic American youth's rebellion against societal constraints through self-isolation in nature. It is here that they construct an ideology which the author refers to as 'nature religions:' "Nature religions seek to experience reality more authentically through the 'purification of falsehood' (68) which is present in society, and to compensate for the lack of community and connectedness". Through immersion into nature, whether that be solitary or communal, adolescents seek to establish a new connection with their surroundings and break apart from the imposed rules of the normative social order. In his graffiti McCandless speaks of "killing the false being within and victoriously concluding the spiritual revolution." In a way, McCandless has constructed his own "nature religion." He has chosen the Alaskan wilderness to be the destination of his solitary submersion into wild nature. Here he expects to undergo a profound spiritual transformation with the intention of washing himself clean of all traces of the impositions and ideals of the capitalist society, to emerge a new man with new ideals and beliefs about personal fulfillment.

McCandless's idea of a spiritual transformation in nature can be likened to the concept of a rite of passage. A rite of passage, or rites of passage are terms that are subject of study in anthropology. Usually these rites mark an important stage in someone's life, or transitions from one stage to the next, most famously: the transition from childhood into adulthood. According to Arnold van Gennep, rites of passage are a universal phenomenon that involve three different stages: *separation*, in which the subject is distanced from the structure of everyday life in the social order; *transition*, in which the subject undergoes an intense experience within circumstances that differ vastly from the regular social structure; and *aggregation* (or [re]incorporation), through which the subject re-enters the social order in a different state of being (vii). Elaborating on this, Ken Andrews writes that, from an anthropological perspective, wilderness expedition can be viewed as an important

phenomenon in which participants “journey from the conventional structures of society through the transitional phase of liminality and back into society again” (35) resembling the three stages in a rite of passage.

McCandless’s intention of submerging himself into nature with the purpose of undergoing a spiritual transformation therefore closely resembles a fusion of van Gennep and Andrews’s observations. His wilderness expedition attempted to transition into a different stage in his life. By separating himself from society and submerging himself into nature he passed into the liminal stage of his rite of passage; the phase of transition. To then leave behind the old self that was conditioned by society, and emerge a new man; an individual shaped only by his own ideals and beliefs, adhering solely to the laws of nature, not those of man.

It is likely that McCandless, once he felt he had fully experienced living off the land, intended to return to civilization, completing the final stage of his rite of passage; ‘aggregation’. Perhaps it then proved to be time to enlighten others about the benefits of seeking out the wilderness in the journey of self-discovery. This passion of encouraging others to adopt a lifestyle similar to his life on the road becomes apparent in the letters McCandless wrote to his friends along his journey. His conviction of the advantages of this way of life becomes evident in a letter he wrote to Ron Franz: “nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man’s living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun” (Krakauer 56-57).

The “spiritual revolution,” McCandless wrote about in his graffiti manifested itself as a rite of passage to a new phase in his life, part of the nature religion – solitary submersion

into the wilderness – that he had constructed for himself. His completion of the rite however, never occurred: due to his untimely death, McCandless never returned to society.

Another element of the graffiti that is important to consider is McCandless's fixation on aesthetics. This is because it can be explained in three distinct ways, but all three seem equally important in contributing to his understanding of wilderness. Characterizing himself as an "aesthetic voyager," this designation emphasizes the importance of beauty and the visual portrayal of his travels. Aesthetics; "a set of principles concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty" ("aesthetics"), is central in the literary works McCandless read. The depiction and description of wilderness in particular, is something that writers he admired, such as London, wrote about in great detail. This idealistic and romantic portrayals of the wilderness became the main representation for McCandless, basing expectations of the North on these aesthetically pleasing depictions. He beatified London, carving "Jack London is KING" (Krakauer 9; underlining is part of the original text) on a piece of wood. Since Chris was planning to write a book on his travels, the need to have his voyage fall into the same aesthetically gratifying category as his literary examples was particularly important. His idolization of literary ideals in a sense became guidelines for his own experiences in nature; they needed to meet the aesthetic standards of the works he had read. To have his own novel be as close to one of those classical works would be validation of his capability and quality as a writer and would create validity and authenticity in his own eyes.

A further critical component of his characterization as an "aesthetic voyager" is that there is a strong correlation between aesthetics and spirituality in general and aesthetic experiences lived in nature in particular. Bergmann and Eaton write that aesthetic experiences increase a person awareness of their surroundings, in turn influencing "the interconnectedness of the inner and outer, the bodily and the spiritual, the surrounding and the inhabitation" (Bergmann and Eaton 3). Awareness of who we are, and how we are connected with nature is

crucial, as a lack of awareness creates alienation, from our environment as well as from ourselves. It seems that this alienation was one of McCandless's main motivations to seek out aesthetic experiences. The alienation he had experienced at home in his (urban) surroundings and his contempt for the normative social order, created friction and estrangement from himself. He wanted to live out his own ideals and shape his existence according to his own beliefs. In order to rediscover his connection to his surroundings and to reestablish a connection with himself, he needed to flee the society and retreat into nature to seek out the aesthetic experiences that would restore this balance. In *Doctor Zhivago* McCandless wrote "[n]eed for a purpose" (103) in the margins of a passage that stated:

Everything had changed suddenly ... As if all your life you had been led by the hand like a small child and suddenly you were own your own, you had to learn to walk by yourself. There was no one around ... whose judgment you respected. ... [Y]ou felt the need of committing yourself to something absolute – of being ruled by it in place of the man-made rules that had been discarded. You needed to surrender to some ultimate purpose more fully, ... more than you had ever done in the old familiar, peaceful days, in the old life that was now abolished and gone for good" (Krakauer 103)

What seemed to be lacking from McCandless's previous life, as can be deduced from this quote, was a sense of purpose; the idea that his experiences were meaningful and fulfilling and were part of a grander scheme. By retreating into nature, McCandless was convinced he would find a (renewed) sense of purpose. The alienation McCandless experienced in his old life, which he left behind, was replaced by a sense of belonging through aesthetic experiences in the wilderness.

Furthermore, aesthetic voyages, especially towards and within places of pristine nature often entail the experience of wonder. Robert Fuller connects these phenomena by stating:



“Wonder most frequently occurs as a response to something that strikes us as intensely powerful, real, or beautiful” (70). Natural places can often invoke wonder, since they are aesthetically pleasing and engaging to the senses. In nature, McCandless pursued this sense of wonder, but also desired a more profound and elevated state of being. In his journal he wrote: “It is the experiences, the memories, the great triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent in which real meaning is found” (Krakauer 37; underlining is part of the original text). Living to the fullest extent signified that McCandless did not want to merely be moved by his adventures; instead he wanted grandeur and intensity in the experiences in his life; he wanted the experiences in nature to be profound to such an extent that it would expand his consciousness and perception. He broke free from the monotony of a ‘normal life’ just to experience the ferocity of an unpredictable and uncertain life. Abraham Maslow was the first to introduce the phenomenon called “peak experiences.” Peak experiences are “moments of highest happiness and fulfillment that generally carry with them some important meaning and/or insight for the individual” (McDonald et al., 3). Places of pristine wilderness and beauty, therefore places of great aesthetic value, are triggers for these moments of elated consciousness. Maslow argues that peak experiences are sought out in the process of “self-actualization,” which, in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, is the highest level of psychological development where one’s full personal potential is achieved (Maslow 383). McCandless inclination to seek out “peak experiences” in the wilderness appears to be a desire for self-fulfillment and self-actualization which could not be achieved if he was still part of the normative social order.

Another important aspect to consider is the final line of the graffiti. McCandless wrote that he fled civilization to walk alone upon the land and become “lost in the wild.” This suggest that he tended to truly immerse himself deeply into the wilderness, to fully disappear. On April 27<sup>th</sup> 1992, he wrote to Wayne Westerberg: “This is the last you shall hear from me

Wayne. ... I now walk into the wild” (Krakauer 69). While McCandless aimed to be lost in the wild, it appears as though he did not truly know what it meant to be ‘lost in the wild’. Through the imagery conjured up by London, images in *Outdoor*-magazine and novels he had read, the idea of being lost in the wild became a romanticized idea. McCandless came to understand what being truly lost in the wild means, when he quite literally became lost. According to Jim Gallien, an Alaska Native who dropped McCandless off at the Stampede trail, he did not carry any equipment that would help him survive in the wilderness: no compass, no snowshoes, no waterproof clothing, no axe, just some bare essentials, ten pounds of rice and a book about edible plants. McCandless stated: “I’ve got ten pounds of rice and that’s all I need” (Brown). McCandless followed the Stampede Trail into an area that is known as the Outer Range, a region of mainly arctic tundra with little shelter against external influences. Gallien told him that there were way better places to go to experience Alaska’s wild nature (Brown), but McCandless was fixated on his own plans.

McCandless seemed convinced of his own ability to brave a part of the world that is considered to still be a wild area of nature. These parts of nature have not been (fully) subjected to the hand of man, and therefore will not give any consideration to the presence of man. Gary Snyder, who explored Alaska and is intimately familiar with the wilderness of America, wrote in a letter to Jonah Raskin: “[T]he wild is demanding and orderly, not chaotic and romantic. ... [I]nhibitory people, archaic or recent people who lived by hunting and gathering, subsistence, did not seek adventures” (Raskin 202). What McCandless did not seem to grasp, is that in the wilderness, being ill prepared in most cases equals death. Hogan and Pursell even go as far as saying that: “McCandless seemed to have intentionally tried to limit his ability to survive” (79). A more probable explanation would be that McCandless wanted to rely on himself as much as possible, to rid himself of as many possessions as possible, and to fully experience living off the land, adhering to a minimalistic lifestyle. An

“extremist” in his own words, would not load up with gear to accommodate himself in the wilderness, but would seek out a demanding existence that constantly pushed boundaries. The more challenging the experience, the more McCandless embraced it, writing: “Malnutrition and the road have taken their toll on his body. Over twenty-five pounds lost. But his spirit is soaring” (Krakauer 37). The solitary quests his literary heroes London, Thoreau, and Muir undertook convinced him that he too was capable of braving the wilderness alone, with the sole guidance being his own (limited) knowledge. In reality, Alaskans underline the importance of taking advice and knowledge from people who are familiar with the land (Hogan and Pursell 79), relying on wisdom being passed down and on by those who are more experienced.

McCandless wanted to be lost in the wild, yet it can be argued that this idea of being lost is very different than what it actually means to be lost. The idea McCandless created in his mind was of him conquering the wildness of Alaska, transforming psychologically and reaching his fullest potential. Chip Brown writes: “What he had envisioned before he came was the Alaska of shining mountains and immense herds and smoke curling above archetypal cabins – a far cry from the base world of insects, darkness, and death.” The early days in the wilderness of Alaska made McCandless elated, writing in his journal: “I am reborn. This is my dawn. Real life has just begun” (Krakauer 168; underlining is part of the original text). After two months in the wilderness, he seemed to have completed stage two of his rite of passage: he emerged with a changed perspective on life, and was ready to get himself back to the world of man. It was only then, however that McCandless learned what it meant to be truly lost in the wild. To trail back to civilization, McCandless needed to cross the Teklanika River, yet, when he returned to where he had crossed the river in spring, he found a wildly flowing river that was impossible to wade through. Panic took hold of McCandless, he wrote: “Disaster. ... Rained in. River looks impossible” (Krakauer 170). Had McCandless owned a

map of the area, which he deliberately did not have, he would have discovered that “that about half a mile north, where the Teklanika narrows into a two-hundred-foot channel and rushes through a canyon, there was a gauging station. If he had gone to investigate, he might have discovered a cable tram spanning the river” (Brown).

Having no means of navigating anywhere and no vantage point, McCandless returned to the bus that had been his home for the past two months. Here he spent the remainder of the summer, living off small game he could shoot, berries, mushrooms and plants he tried to identify in *Tanaina Plantlore*. On day 100, he wrote in his journal: “Made It! But in weakest condition of life. Death looms as a serious threat, too weak to walk out, have literally become trapped in the wild – no game” (Krakauer 195). He blamed his weak condition on the consumption of the ‘wild potato,’ which was later identified as *hedysarum alpinum* or wild sweet pea. The seed contains an antimetabolite which, when consumed in large quantities, can result in death (Krakauer). Had McCandless informed himself more on the edible fauna of Alaska, or consulted an indigenous expert, he might have stuck to trying to identify plants with more distinguishable features.

One of McCandless’s last journal entries was written in his copy of *Doctor Zhivago*. Next to the passage “And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness... And this was most vexing of all,” McCandless wrote, “HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED” (Krakauer 189). This documentation can be perceived as a testament to McCandless’s solitary spiritual revolution. It can be interpreted to mean that he was ready to conclude the finale stage of his rite of passage, to re-integrate into the human community with renewed insights, understandings and wisdom. It might have meant he was keen to shed a light on how wilderness can change one’s perspective: how removing yourself

from structure and routine can completely alter a person's preconceived ideas about how the course of one's life should run.

Yet this declaration perhaps also emphasizes how important it is, to immerse yourself in an experience with preparation and a realistic idea of what to expect. McCandless experienced firsthand that the romanticized and unrealistic concept of wilderness he created in his mind was in stark contrast with the harsh reality of the rugged nature up north in Alaska. This idea that wilderness would aid him in becoming "whole" as a human, in the end cost him his life.

Despite this, it seems that his own rite of passage through submersion in nature, did change him in some significant way, as he intended. Yet it provided him with knowledge that contrasting his own initial ideas and assumptions about the wisdom he would gain. The wilderness, which he had constructed into his own spiritual teacher, did not confirm that a solitary and extreme existence in nature was the only path to true fulfillment. Instead it held up a mirror in front of him and showed him that happiness comes not from experiencing life cut off from the intimacy and connection of family, friends or acquaintances; true happiness can only be achieved when one can share experiences and joy with others.

## Conclusion

In the summer of 1990, Christopher McCandless abandoned most of his possessions and took to the road. He changed his name and invented a new life for himself, embarking on a nomadic voyage across North America that would eventually lead him to the wilderness of Alaska. That wilderness beckoned McCandless, he had spent countless hours reading the works of London, Thoreau and Tolstoy and was inspired to embark on a solitary quest into the wild to subject himself to his own spiritual revolution. McCandless wanted to be lost in the wilderness, and had constructed a certain idea of wilderness that would aid him in realizing his potential as a man.

By analyzing McCandless's writings, separate from the additions and interpretations of *Into the Wild*'s author Jon Krakauer, this study has constructed a multidimensional interpretation of McCandless's understanding and thematization of wilderness. By first dissecting the concept of wilderness, demonstrating its ambiguity and then relating this to McCandless journal entries and other written accounts, there are several things that can be concluded about McCandless's perception of the concept.

McCandless viewed wilderness as a teacher: he expected his experiences in the north to be profound to such an extent that it would change him fundamentally, revealing to him and confirming that a full life can only be lived when one breaks free from the normative social order and adopts a solitary lifestyle of extremities. McCandless expected the wilderness to be the environment for his own rite of passage, before re-entering civilization enriched by the knowledge nature provided him. Moreover, wilderness to McCandless was refuge, a haven far from the society he had abandoned and which he seemed to despise. He sought to eliminate the alienation he felt in the social environment he grew up in. Wilderness to him was a harbor of solace; a romantic idea of a place that would welcome him and protect him from the harmful influences and expectations of modern society.

What is more, wilderness experience to McCandless was an ‘aesthetic voyage,’ a journey that needed to meet the aesthetic values of his literary heroes, later to be captured in a novel of his own. The aesthetic depiction of his travels was equally as important as the actual experiences, and the depth of the grandiosity of his trials in nature had to be felt by those who would eventually read his book.

However, only when McCandless truly became lost in the wild, was he confronted with the aforementioned romanticized ideas he had created of the wilderness. The reality of being lost is frightening and disorienting and shakes the foundations of one’s beliefs. The romanticized construct of wilderness led McCandless to an isolated and lonely existence, one he previously longed for, but which now subjected him to an environment he was misinformed about and ill-equipped for. His dismissal of indigenous knowledge and expertise left him stuck in the wilderness with no capability to leave. By viewing this wilderness as the ultimate goal in life – living of the land and banishing human relations – he prevented himself from enriching his existence with the pleasure of camaraderie, intimacy and familiarity. In the wilderness he came to understand that his ideas and views were, in the end, not the recipe for happiness. Experiences in the wild and beautiful moments in nature are phenomena that result in the most happiness when one is surrounded with likeminded individuals to share them with.

This study has thus revealed that McCandless’s perception of the concept of wilderness is not a one dimensional idea. His beliefs were layered and complex, and created utopian expectations of his experiences as a solitary traveler. To expand on the complexity of McCandless’s perception of wilderness further research should be done into his writings in combination with the concepts of aesthetics, individuation, rites of passage, peak experience and self-actualization as the scope of the current project did not allow for such conceptual explorations. These concepts are fundamental in trying to understand how the human mind

operates and how the need for connection, individuality and happiness, can contribute to the need to escape from the norms, expectations and ideas imposed by society, in order to find oneself.

While McCandless's romanticized perception of wilderness should be an admonition to those who seek out wilderness experience, one thing that can be taken from McCandless's story is that, nature is in fact a teacher to us all. By observing our natural environment and spending time outdoors we can achieve peace of mind and gain important insights into life. Nevertheless, gaining wisdom and experience in nature does not require a life based on extremity, and adequate preparation and information will prove valuable to all those that enjoy spending time outdoors.



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