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AN ECOLOGICAL SANCTUARY AND SACRILEGE: EXPLORING THE REGIMES OF WILDERNESS IN *INTO THE WILD*

Abstract

Fed up with the modern materialistic society, Chris McCandless, an American youth goes for a great adventure into the Alaskan wild which ends with his tragic death. This paper attempts to bring out the existential crisis experienced by Chris pursuant to his rejection of the modern American Dream and, his attempt to find his true identity in the wilderness. To Chris, nature was the right place to experience life in all its true essence. Unable to understand the pulse and nature of the wild, Chris gets trapped in the labyrinth of the wild. The life of Chris hands a lesson for all mankind that man is merely a tiny speck in the universe. Using theories of eco-criticism and transcendentalism, this paper also explores the sovereign status of nature with respect to human deficiencies and limitations.

Keywords: contrast to the American dream, Existentialism, search for identity, Eco-criticism, Transcendentalism.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the life of Chris McCandless as described in Krakauer's non-fictional work *Into The Wild* (1996). Jon Krakauer, the author of *Eiger Dreams*, *Into Thin Air*, *Iceland, Under the Banner of Heaven*, *Where Men Win Glory* and *Into The Wild*, is a mountaineer, primarily known for his writing about the outdoors, especially hill climbing. "He is an astonishingly gifted writer: his account of 'Alex Supertramp' is powerfully dramatic, eliciting sympathy for both the idealistic, anti-consumerist boy- and his parents" (Guardian). *Into The Wild* unravels a layer of fear within the heart of every man who hankered for mother nature's soft embrace. In April 1992, Chris McCandless set off a journey unaided into the Alaskan wild. He had donated his reserves to charity, abandoned his car, burned the money he had and was determined to live a life of solitude. He was found starved to death after four months by the Alaskan hunters. In blending together, the last journey of this extraordinary young man's life, Jon Krakauer writes about the core of the wilderness, its dreadful beauty, and its unforgiving ruggedness. In doing so he created a modern classic of travel literature that sparkles perilously with man's craving for adventure and his self-destructive instincts. This paper focuses on McCandless' quest for transformation as well as the role of nature in his destiny.

Quest for Transformation

Into The Wild (1996), as the title suggests, is about the journey of Chris McCandless in search of his true identity. From the modern society, he goes into the deep woods of the Alaskan wild to experience the truth of life. Chris McCandless, the protagonist, was an idealistic young man, an extremist and an aesthetic voyager whose home was the road. Having grown up in a wealthy family, he was successful, academically and athletically. Chris graduated from Emory University in 1990. Life bestowed him with everything an American youth would desire, except love. As a child, Chris was discontented and enraged with his father for not being a perfect parent. After his graduation, Chris donated his entire savings to charity, rejecting the hypocritical materialistic society. In sharp contrast to the American dream, gaining instant wealth was ignored by the character Chris. Gaining good education, decent livelihood and accumulating wealth epitomize true American dreams. But Chris renounced all his material possessions, along with his old car on his journey to Alaska. His lackadaisical notions towards materialistic life are well portrayed by the author. His revulsion towards worldly acquisitions is showcased through his

actions and dialogues. In stark contrast stands Chris' family's unhesitant indulgence in acquiring the latest materialistic possessions for their family. Chris was agitated when he learnt of his parents' plan to buy a new car as a gift for him. He says 'do you think I want some fancy boat? Are you worried what the neighbors might think? I don't need a new car, I don't want a new car, I don't want anything, okay! (Film). He did not want to be poisoned by the hypocrisy of the modern civilized society.

McCandless traveled across the United States, not in pursuit of a flashy lifestyle life but, find something more profound and arduous to achieve. An escape from the "sick society" was what he desired. Chris aspired for the ultimate freedom to enjoy the beauty of life, for which, he preferred total isolation from the wasteful, pleasure-seeking American society.

He was an "angry young man," unhappy with materialism, gift-taking, and giving, rules and regulations etc. Chris McCandless was a courageous hero unafraid of challenges. Chris measured himself and those around him, by a fiercely rigorous moral code. Chris clashed with his parents and others, who repudiated his thoughts and feelings. According to Chris, to experience life, one should go into nature. Though impetuous and crazy at times, there are qualities in him to be admired. Krakauer examines Chris' history, friendships, and probable motivations through interviews with his families and friends. Krakauer brings out a comparison between Chris and other young men who perished or disappeared in the wilderness: Gene Rossellini, John Mallon Waterman, Carl McCunn, and Everett Ruess. Jon Krakauer himself had experiences similar to Chris. Krakauer used his own life experiences and thoughts to characterize Chris on a very intimate and personal level. Krakauer saw his innermost self in Chris.

Chris McCandless was extremely confident, rather proud of his self-posessions. Quite evidently, there was something bizarre and powerful about the man. Chris felt professional careers as 20th-century gimmicks and institutions of abusive power. Chris profusely adored nature, much more than the hypocritical, urban lifestyle. He hated etiquette and norms imposed by society. Chris McCandless was impatient to take on even hazardous projects that he firmly believed in. McCandless created a strong bond with the people he met during his Alaskan journey. Chris felt inspired by the books of Jack London and John Muir. Their works enthused Chris's quest for transformation. Chris also ignored the advice from more experienced, wiser people he met in life. Chris demanded his own principles in his life. Chris sometimes seems to be very weird in his actions. Jon Krakauer paraphrases Thoreau – "Rather than love, than money, than faith, than fairness, give me truth" (117). Chris wants this principle in his life to enjoy the experience of inner

self. To live unaided in a world of rules and regulations is his idea of ultimate freedom. Chris influenced many people during his journey across the Alaskan wild. Chris found the secret relationship with his father as one reason for his transformation. Chris and his sister Carine didn't get any attention during their childhood; parents were too busy with their work. Lack of love made Chris arrogant in his actions. Chris's sister, Carine remarks, "Dad's arrogance made him conveniently oblivious of the pain he caused in his own kin." This made Chris mentally stubborn. (64)

Chris, through his nomadic trek in the Alaskan wild, was actually trying to abscond from earthly sojourn; he parried the love offered by a young girl. Chris remarks this in his conversation with Ronald Franz, "Don't settle down and sit in one place. Move around, be nomadic, make each day a new horizon". (58) Carine remarks, "Chris had always been driven, had always been an adventurer. When he was four years old he once wandered six blocks away from home at 3:00 in the morning" (128). McCandless' parents failed to understand and embrace the wildness within him. McCandless left a deep impression on the people he met during his journey, but he was escaping from the social predicaments towards the loneliness of wild places.

Chris, imitating the romantic notion of life, followed his passions without social and cultural restrictions a life completely free of bonds and bondages was his goal. Chris rejection of the modern society, was partly due to the failure of his family life. His parents, who were too busy building a secure material life for themselves, failed to provide the care and love which Chris and his sister were looking for. Success in life was judged on one's materialistic success and they gave little attention to spirituality and inner happiness. Morality was also a false assumption. Chris's felt his father's relationship with another woman exhibited the false morality in the society.

Creating one's own identity in a community or society is not commonly accepted by society. The social norms despise any deviations from the traditional rules of society. Chris's teacher often complained about his non-chalet attitude in the classroom. He feared no one and obeyed no rules of the school. He wore shoes without socks; he wouldn't take a bath daily. These activities were considered eccentric by his fellow workers at Mc Donald's. Nevertheless, they remembered him as a nice kid who was hardworking and dependable.

"Society everywhere is in a conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater." (Philip, 139). Sujata Gurudev in her book *American Literature: Studies on Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman* Volume V, Issue VI June 2017

comments that “in order to be a transcendental man one has to be a non-conformist. One has to live and die by one’s values.” Chris lives by his own values and in the end, dies for it. In this sense, he was a transcendental man but what he lost was the true essence of transcendentalism.

Chris was strongly influenced by Thoreau and Jack London’s approach to life. Thoreau’s *Walden* and London’s *Call of the Wild* were Chris’s Bible. In *Walden*, the narrator left the society and lives in the Walden pond for nearly two years supported by no civilized men. The romantic description of life in the woods was so fascinating to Chris. “London was his favorite. He’d try to convince every snowbird who walked by that they should read *Call of the Wild*.” (45). Buck, the central character of the novel was a dog who fought with the wilderness and civilization and was a hero in all sense. *In both the works of fiction, the protagonists were victorious in their journey away from society.* The woods created new homes for them. Chris, who was isolated from the busy society, found solace in books from his childhood onwards and those works of fiction convinced him than the reality did. “He risked what could have been a relentlessly lonely path but found company in the characters of the book he loved.” (film)

Chris preferred the fictitious characters more than men in society. Those characters became his soul companions. His journey, away from the society was in search of a unique identity, an identity not molded by the urban society, but an identity acquired by Thoreau in *Walden* and Buck in *The Call of the Wild*. There is a true identity in every man which is hidden. Society rejects the true identity. To be a part of society, to be a perfect social animal, one has to hide his true instincts. Chris was in search of his true identity. As a transcendental, he turned towards nature to know his true self.

His travels were an exploration of lands and lives. In the beginning of his attempt to find his inner self, he explored the outer nature of America. At first, he became a man of no identity by burning all the documents of his social identity. He considered even the name Chris McCandless, which was given to him by the modern society, as a false and imposed identity. Hence, he chose a new name, Alexander Supertramp, “master of his own destiny.” (23). Money was not a necessity in nature. Chris often says that “money make people more conscious”. Money and power were just illusions for him, illusions which were created by society.

According to the psychoanalyst Eric Erikson, “an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself” (Abraham, 465). Jasmine Ruby Rossana, a critic has pointed out that “the refusal of Chris to call himself by his real name and create a new identity for him as Alexander Supertramp could be seen as him doing just that. Many

of Chris's diary entries used throughout the book are written in the third person, which is unusual for a diary and could imply that McCandless was detached from himself." It is from this detachment of the self, Chris tried to find himself.

Chris was trying to create a new fiction in which his alter ego, Alexander Supertramp was the hero. Like the protagonists in *Walden* and *The Call of the Wild*, Alexander was also creating his own identity by leaving the society for the woods. Before going into the Alaskan wilderness, he wandered through the continent's vast land. He escaped from social bondages only to create new bonds and relations. The itinerant couple, Jan Burres and Bob whom he met at the US Highway 101 was like parents to him. Chris had written contacts with them till he went to the Alaskan wild. Jan advised him to drop his plan of going into the wilderness and also suggested him to return to his parents. But he rejected the warnings given by Jan and Bob. Jan, a motherly figure for Chris failed to convince him. Chris, though hesitant to the modern society, was undoubtedly a product of it. Thus, he was not able to fully free himself from the social bonds. In his journey, he was just creating a new identity with new bonds and relations.

Wayne Westberg, who owns a grain elevator in Carthage, was also a fatherly figure to Chris. Westberg was a contrast to Chris's father, Walt McCandless. Though McCandless had a great friendship with Westberg, he didn't allow himself to know deeply about Westberg. McCandless threw a ray of light into the dark life of Ronald Franz. The kid created a great impression on the old man, Franz. Chris was a new hope in Franz's life. "the boy unmasked the gaping void in Franz's life even as he helped fill it. When McCandless departed suddenly as he would arrive, Franz, found himself deeply and unexpectedly hurt". (45) Chris was able to create great impressions on those people whom he had accustomed with. Even though Chris kept a safe distance from everyone and went in search of happiness, those people whom he had departed were grieving for him.

Chris had decided to go to the Alaskan woods and no one was able to persuade him. His involvement with real people was not effective as his involvement with the fictional characters. Books were his source of inspiration and the characters in those books were his real guides. He trusted them more than the real people. According to him the people depending on the modern society were unreliable. In this sense, he failed to understand the real nature of humanity.

To set a goal in life and to work towards its fulfillment is not a bad thing in life. But setting a goal which is considered as weird in the modern society and working for its fulfillment may invite harsh criticisms. Chris aspired for solitude and happiness. He believed that the society in

which he lives could not fulfill his aspirations. The wild fascinated him but at the same time, he lacked the first-hand experience of the wild. He was unable to understand the pulse of nature. Wild has its own rules and regulations and it doesn't welcome intruders.

Life in the woods was not as easy as Chris expected. dependence on books alone can't help a man survive in the dark woods. The reality of the day to day living in the wilderness was not as romantic as he imagined it to be. Having been raised in modern society, living in the wilderness was not an easy task. Chris' was unable to live, in peace neither in urban society nor in the woods. He went in search of his identity as a human being, free from the man-made bonds and conventions. Wilderness was the birthplace of human civilization. He went in search of him, back to the woods thinking that he was meant for the woods. Understanding the complexities of life in the wilder outdoors was not as easy as rejecting the social bonds. In the journey through the continent before going to the Alaskan woods, Chris was making himself ready for his great adventure. But unfortunately, the journey on land was entirely different from the journey in woods. His journey was backward, from land to the woods whereas the mankind traveled from the woods to the land and finally into the modern society. He consciously undertook a reverse transformation and was trying to fit himself in the woods as a primitive man but he was not successful.

Nature as Destiny

"Emerson's rediscovery of nature was that a man's excursions into nature become a means of recovering his own 'power,' his charismatic capacity for the mastery of life." (29-30, American) This chapter focuses on Chris's exploration in the wild, where he learns the secrets of nature and finally succumbs to her and encounters a tragic death. "To experience life, you should go into the wild" (film). From the outer nature, Chris voyages into the inner nature where he aspires to find spiritual beauty. Chris goes into the wild to experience a true life, unlike the life in the modern society. But the Alaskan forest was not a perfect habitat for a modern gypsy. Chris was warned about the harsh realities of Alaska by many, including the natives of Alaska. But his aspiration towards exploring Alaska has deep rooted in him that no one was able to stop him from his journey. The book commences with the journey of Christopher McCandless towards the Alaskan wilderness. His final encounter with another human being, before going to the Alaskan wilderness, is portrayed in the first chapter itself.

In the final phase, Chris was ill-prepared as he approached to live in nature. He spent only a little time to study about how to lead a life in harmony with nature in the Alaskan region. This

young man was ignorant of the inner spirit of nature. He walked into the wild without having any precautions with a hope of conquering the wild easily. Contradicting Chris's attitude towards nature, Sujata Gurudev referring to Emerson's poetry in her book *American Literature: Studies on Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman* wrote that,

“The poet ‘Caesar of his leafy Rome’ having left his society behind, enters the ‘Woodland Walks’. He approaches Nature with a receptive child- like submission having laid aside all hostility- the fishing rod, gun or scythe. He is alive to feelings of wonder, love, enchantment and knowledge.” (21)

When Chris entered the Alaskan forest, he was full of positive enthusiasm, considering himself as an explorer of the wild and of his life but lacking the “childlike submission.” At the time of going into the Alaskan wild, the river which he had crossed was calm, quiet and romantic and the woods attracted him towards the interior. The woods seemed to be a perfect place for him as the Walden pond was to Thoreau.

“wilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with a man and his works. It not only offered an escape from the society but also was an ideal stage for the romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his own soul. The solitude and total freedom of the wilderness created a perfect setting for either melancholy or exultation.” (Roderick Nash, *Wilderness, and the American Mind*)

What Chris failed to understand was the true identity of the woods. He lived a primitive man's life. Primitive men were not as greedy as the modern men are; they accepted what nature provided them. Unlike the modern humanity, they hunted only to fulfill their needs. “McCandless was enough of a realist to know that hunting game was an unavoidable component of living off the land, he had always been ambivalent about killing animals” (165). McCandless killed animals only for food and never even wanted to waste any part of the flesh. Likewise, he tried to mimic the primitive lifestyle. Like the Alaskan hunters, he tried to preserve the meat but was not able to do so. His attempts to impersonate the primitive man were futile. He penned in his journal on June 14, “I now wish I had never shot the moose. One of the greatest tragedies in my life. (166) Perhaps it was the beginning of his tragedies. He started realizing that his life in the woods was not as smooth as expected.

Chris embraces risks which even cost his life. In fact, he considered his whole life as an adventurous sport. It was eventually his love for risk which killed him. Crossing a small stream in

the winter was not a big deal for Chris, but the same river turned violent in two months. The two months of solitary life in the woods taught him the real power of nature.

“Satisfied, apparently with what he had learned during his two months of solitary life in the wild, McCandless decided to return to civilization: It was time to bring his ‘final and greatest adventure ‘to a close and get himself back to the world of men and women, where he could chug a beer, talk philosophy, enthrall strangers with tales of what he’d done... Maybe he was prepared to forgive their imperfections; maybe he was even prepared to forgive some of his own. McCandless seemed ready, perhaps, to go home.” (167).

Not just the power of nature, but he had also learned the importance of sharing happiness within a social circle, from the solitary life at the woods. Alarmingly gaunt and sunken cheeks, Chris’s life in the wild was doleful. Inspired by Tolstoy’s *Family Happiness*, he began to generate the notion, “the only certain happiness in life is to live for others...” (168). Chris’s ideologies when he stepped into the woods had undergone tremendous changes within a short span of time. He scribbled down in his diary “HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED” (188).

“A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them; then work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books, music, love for one’s neighbor- such is my idea of happiness.” (168)

It was not easy for him to return home, as he expected. It seemed that the whole Alaskan forest conspired against Chris. The river turned violent, which stopped Chris from going home and this was one of the greatest misfortunes in the story. This was unexpected by Chris, he had more to learn from the woods but, as a product of modern society, he was not equipped to acquire it. The tribal or the primitive men were born in the woods and the wilderness was imprinted in them but, Chris though tried to be like them, lacked this inborn experience. The Alaskan forest, which at once fascinated Chris, petrified him in the end. He scribed in his diary entry, “Disaster...Rained in. River looks impossible. Lonely. Scared.” (169)

In his attempt to survive in the wilderness Chris relied too much upon books. Depended on Kari’s book, he started digging and ate wild potatoes which were poisonous, which eventually lead to his death. The greatest tragedy of Chris rested in the fact that, he had decided to return to the civilization to live among them as a happy human being. Chris was dejected with his self-imposed identity, Alexander Supertramp. At the end of his journey, he switched to his original identity,

Christopher McCandless. According to the psychologist James Marcia, this could be understood as Chris finally realizing who he really was and seemed to be committing to his true identity, as on his birth certificate.

Chris went into the woods with a great deal of romantic and idealistic notions but in his attempt to find himself in the wilderness he failed pathetically. According to the Western concept, wilderness is masculine. They explored and conquered the woods to establish civilizations. Western identity was formulated with reference to this conflict between the wild and man. Chris was not really fighting against the wild but rather he was trying to get accustomed to it. Living a harmonious life in the woods, respecting and understanding the rules of the wilderness was rather an orient concept. It was a mistake, to explore the Alaskan wild with an orient notion of nature. Krakauer compared Chris to an Indian woman, in his endeavor to understand the nature, “It was easy to imagine Chris McCandless making the same mistake as the Indian woman and becoming similarly incapacitated” (191).

Chris was unable to understand the pulse and nature of the wild. Even the Alaskan hunters went into the woods with a map and other essential tools for survival. But Chris was unprepared and carried no map or other equipment. He may be able to survive if he had a map with him. He held the view that the wild will provide him what he needed. He had in his mind a completely harmonious life with nature. He cut no trees, kill no animals for pleasure, nature was for him a part of himself. As the man started his civilized life from the wild, Chris too experienced the true essence of social life from the darkness of the woods. He never followed what others told him rather he discovered the spirit of civilized life, on his own. As John Muir said, “The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness” (Muir, 313). But the Alaskan forest, though revealed the beauty of public life, never permitted Chris to enjoy the bliss of social life. For all the violations done by the mankind towards nature, it was Chris who sacrificed his life.

Instead of building a kingdom like every man, Chris preferred to live like an associate rather than a monarch. Chris gave a sovereign status to nature. However, he seemed to be a tiny speck in the cosmic universe. It was not Chris’s decision to explore the wilderness but he was forcefully attracted to the rough country. It was his destiny to die in nature isolated from humanity. Death for Chris was a liberation as Sujata Gurudev commented “Death is the liberation of man. It will return him to nature from whence he began.” (23, Sujata) Chris’s destiny, his tragic death served as a warning to the modern, materialistic oriented society, a recollection about the invincible power of nature. A man comes from nature and returns to nature, though he masters the urban

society, in the wilderness he has to surrender his dictatorship to the power of nature. “God and Nature first made us what we are, and then out of our own created genius we make ourselves what we want to be. Follow always that great law. Let the sky and God be our limit and Eternity our measurement.” (163, Marcus)

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