



Cautionary, Not Visionary: Christopher McCandless's Tragic Pursuit of Freedom

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Abstract

Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* is a biography detailing the life of Christopher McCandless, a young American adventurer who abandons his comfortable life to explore the Alaskan wilderness. McCandless thrived on his rejection of materialism and social conformity, choosing instead to pursue an authentic life dedicated to self-reliance and total isolation. However, his romanticized vision of adventure contributed to his downfall. This paper will analyze McCandless's decisions through Krakauer's portrayal, specifically his idealistic beliefs, poor preparation for the wilderness, rejection of human interdependence, and long-lasting legacy. While some readers praise and strive to follow McCandless's ideals and his lifestyle, this paper argues that his story should highlight the consequences of entering situations with unbalanced idealism. Through an in-depth analysis of McCandless in Krakauer's book, this paper will demonstrate how neglecting practicality can lead to tragic consequences. *Into the Wild* should be read as a cautionary tale rather than an inspirational story for generations to come.

Introduction

In April 1992, a 22-year-old American man named Christopher Johnson McCandless made a fateful decision to leave behind his wealth and privileges in Washington, D.C. Motivated by a desire to reject the materialism and expectations stemming from his upbringing, McCandless willfully chose to pursue a nomadic lifestyle. Before beginning his tumultuous journey, he donated all of his money to charity and threw away his once valuable possessions, instead relying on his isolation as a crutch to survive. Despite several pushbacks from both his family and strangers he had met while trekking the unknown, McCandless remained unaware of the idea that his once adventurous pursuit would become his fatal demise.

McCandless's journey made headlines when his starved body was found on the Stampede Trail of the Alaskan wilderness. While some praised him for stepping out of his comfort zone, an idea that seemed nearly foreign to society, others severely condemned McCandless for his impulsive thinking and poor decisions. Jon Krakauer, a journalist who became deeply invested in the case of McCandless, compiled an entire timeline of events and interviews in his biographical narrative, *Into the Wild*. While Krakauer portrays McCandless heroically and describes his actions as purposeful instead of solely reckless, he balances his sympathy with critiques of McCandless's decisions.

The publication of *Into the Wild* only furthered the debates about McCandless, specifically regarding whether his actions were purposeful. Although readers praise McCandless as a symbol of freedom and self-discovery, his extreme idealism, inadequate preparation for the Alaskan wilderness, complete rejection of human interdependence, and the consequences of his legacy suggest that *Into the Wild* should be read primarily as a cautionary tale.

Idealism and Literary Influences

McCandless embraced idealism and shaped his worldview through the works of prominent authors such as Henry David Thoreau, Jack London, and Leo Tolstoy. His desire to experience sublime events completely overshadowed the dangers of entering situations without proper preparation.

McCandless was greatly inspired by Henry David Thoreau, a renowned author who lived during times of increasing conformity. Thoreau strongly believed in transcendentalism. In this philosophy, divine truth comes from spiritual beliefs and special connections with nature, not just from logic or scientific facts. [6] His novel *Walden* demonstrates his rejection of materialism and his renunciation of wealth and status. These ideas have become central to how modern society defines success. In this novel, Thoreau describes his journey in building his own cabin and living in it deliberately. He wanted to transcend everyday life and experience the sublime, overpowering feelings that cannot be felt through norms. In one scene that inspired McCandless, Thoreau writes, “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth” (Krakauer 120). *Walden* aimed to prove that material possessions do not create happiness. Instead, authentic joy is found in the strong feelings that arise from following intuition. McCandless highlighted this quote, showing his overwhelming need to live authentically. Both he and Thoreau felt deep dissatisfaction with society, where success meant wealth and affection rather than depth of heart or soul. However, Thoreau’s cabin was close to town, and he often interacted with others. McCandless, in contrast, chose total solitude in the Alaskan wilderness. He took Thoreau’s ideas to extremes, seeking adventure in the wild without knowing this journey would end his life. While Thoreau intended his new lifestyle to be taught and improved, McCandless focused only on living it out without considering consequences. This interpretation of Thoreau’s philosophy contributed to the decisions that endangered McCandless.

Similar to McCandless, Jack London tried to escape a hostile, ordinary working life. His novel, *The Call of the Wild*, illustrates naturalism. Naturalism is a movement that holds that social, environmental, and possibly genetic conditions determine a person's lifestyle and fate, not the person themselves. In *The Call of the Wild*, the dog must adapt to the harsh, snowy conditions of Alaska. These “negative influences” were what he wished to escape. [1] McCandless internalized the themes of London's novels, greatly romanticizing survival and isolation. These feelings likely gave him a sense of control, letting him become “a master of his own destiny.” However, London, while writing with strong naturalistic beliefs, did not follow them, as he was only championing a popular literary movement. By contrast, McCandless took *The Call of the Wild* literally. This misjudgment led to his downfall in the wilderness. While London appears to glamorize Alaska and its harsh nature, his little experience there caused McCandless to overestimate his capabilities. His view of Alaska was rooted in literature, not reality. As a result, McCandless appeared to treat *The Call of the Wild* and other works less as literary fiction and more as survival guides. Even though he desired a connection to nature, McCandless's blurring of philosophical literature and reality turned his journey into a forewarning, not an inspiration.

McCandless learned about the benefits of a nomadic lifestyle from Leo Tolstoy, a Russian author who denounced the artificiality and materialism of modern society. Tolstoy famously gave up his aristocratic lifestyle for simplicity. McCandless drew great inspiration from this as he set out on his own adventures. Tolstoy's novella, *Family Happiness*, expressed his desire to live a life free of constraints [2]. McCandless saw conventional society as a source of misery. He adopted Tolstoy's asceticism, driven by a need for a world based on ethics. Masha, the main character in *Family Happiness*, is fueled by the need to experience true happiness. This, however, can only be found through inner perfection. Tolstoy captures her longing, stating that “She wanted movement and not a calm source of existence. She wanted excitement and danger and the chance to sacrifice myself for my life” (Krakauer 22). McCandless read this as an escape from society. He aimed to follow Tolstoy but failed when he began to see the world as if it were literature. The gap between literature and reality became indistinguishable as McCandless embraced these ideals too much. He wanted to mirror this passion, but he sadly chose to pursue his dreams in a world requiring skill, communication, and—above all—reliance. Alaska does not reward the philosophies these thinkers promoted. The wilderness is only a

great mix of beauty and struggle. McCandless suffered as he learned that ideals cannot beat reality. In his final moments, he slowly garnered this realization, blaming his failures on a lack of preparation and overconfidence. These philosophical influences did help McCandless seek freedom and authenticity, but they left him with the unrealistic belief that he could survive alone. In the end, his extreme idealism led to misjudgment and put him at risk, especially where interdependence is vital.

Inadequate Preparation for Alaska

Beyond his philosophical flaws, McCandless's lack of preparation transformed his romantic pursuit into a fatal, everlasting mistake. Firstly, McCandless's journey into the wilderness symbolizes his desire to uncover life alone. While explaining his reasons to explore Alaska, Krakauer says, "In coming to Alaska, McCandless yearned to wander uncharted country, to find a blank spot on the map" (Krakauer 174). Here, Krakauer portrays McCandless's craving to enter a world untouched by greed and status. The phrase "blank spot" suggests a space free from societal conventions that McCandless seeks to escape. Krakauer uses this to represent both the myriad of opportunities and the underlying emptiness that McCandless finds. The Alaskan frontier is important because it offers McCandless a chance to start his life the way he wanted, which was to be free from the "poisoned" values he grew up and defined himself with. Krakauer uses this landscape to show that McCandless's beliefs lie in both struggle and independence, completely masked by his desire to find truth. By ambitiously and confidently confronting nature, Krakauer develops the idea that McCandless readily commits to this lifestyle because he can live by his own principles.

However, Krakauer also indicates that McCandless's selfish desires erase the guide that comes from sharing human experiences. McCandless enters Alaska with a singular rifle, little food, inadequate clothing that cannot sustain the intense weather, and no detailed map. His poor decision-making was not an act of bravery; it was rooted in overconfidence. Jim Gallien offered McCandless a map, but he declined to use it. However, when he soon became trapped by the Teklanika River, practically sealing his fate in the overbearing wilderness, McCandless realized that the resources he had worked so hard to neglect were available to him for assistance, not to embarrass him for having a lack of survival knowledge. Krakauer highlights the irony that McCandless takes valuable material possessions on his journey, yet he remains

steadfast in his philosophical views. Thus, he becomes rather indifferent to the ideas of others, instead focusing on the forceful integration of literary influences into real life.

This rejection of practical knowledge reveals the central flaw in McCandless's philosophy. Rather than viewing the maps, equipment, and advice as useful tools, he deems them as a cop-out from his initial strategy. From his perspective, these obstacles hinder him from pursuing his goal of surviving alone in the wilderness, free of any civilization-based resources. This decision shows how deeply idealism has reframed his worldview. McCandless may believe that the wilderness needs to be experienced through complete independence, but Alaska's twists and turns reflect the opposite. Alaska does not reward total isolation and separation from society; rather, with the proper tools, resources, and knowledge, success is possible. By entering a situation that is immediately dangerous due to his lack of preparation, McCandless transforms a once-adventurous pursuit into an easily avoidable one. While Krakauer acknowledges the lengths that McCandless went to establish his independence from civilization, he also portrays both physical and emotional challenges that followed. Krakauer's depiction of McCandless's journey is transparent and vulnerable; his ideas ultimately outweighed his actual preparation, and the tragic outcome of his journey only serves as a testament to ill-decision making.

Krakauer even acknowledges the sudden realization that McCandless has, stating that "[McCandless] was fully aware when he entered the bush that he had given himself a perilously slim margin for error. He knew precisely what was at stake" (Krakauer 171). Krakauer had made it clear that readers' opinions on McCandless should be formed based on the information that he had included in the novel. While Krakauer acknowledges the minimal success McCandless achieved, he does not fail to recognize the fatal consequences that followed immediately. Krakauer proves that survival is crucial, especially in an area that seems nearly foreign. Instead of putting full trust in one's surroundings and one's own beliefs, he emphasizes that taking caution is absolutely necessary. McCandless failed to exercise caution on his journey, despite several opportunities to avoid certain risks. As a result, his tragic tale becomes one to remember as a warning rather than as inspiration.

The Epiphany of Human Interdependence's Importance

McCandless's strong belief in self-reliance led him to reject meaningful relationships with others, despite greatly benefiting from their support. From a young age, McCandless was rebellious against his parents, often tired of conforming to their traditional standards. His sister, Carine McCandless, reveals the impositions his parents imposed on them while they were growing up, which only fueled her brother's desire to break free from their control. His initial display of this was evident when he quickly abandoned his own identity, marking the beginning not only of his journey but also of his rebellion against societal norms.

While driving out of Atlanta, McCandless crafts a new name for himself. Krakauer notes, "No longer would he answer to Chris McCandless, he was now Alexander Supertramp, master of his own destiny" (Krakauer 23). McCandless's adoption of the new name, Alexander Supertramp, demonstrates the great extent to which he sought to separate himself from his previous identity, rejecting the values that he grew up surrounded by. Here, Krakauer illustrates a complete reinvention of McCandless's identity. McCandless redefines himself as a man in pursuit of meaning and self-revelation [5]. His original name, "McCandless," symbolizes the power and wealth that stem from his upbringing, but his new name, "Alexander Supertramp," detaches from those values, instead stepping towards the perceived ideals of freedom. McCandless's extreme attempts to remove himself completely from society prove that his actions were driven deeply by dissatisfaction with traditional life. Yet, Krakauer's usage of the phrase "master of his destiny" presents this detachment with irony. While McCandless seems to have full control over his reinvention, his vision is illusory, as he takes apart the pieces of himself that his loved ones have built and given meaning to. In the attempt to discover his authentic self, McCandless abandons the relationships that helped shape his identity in the first place. Krakauer's views toward McCandless are mixed; he admires McCandless's self-assuredness but harbors an underlying caution about the severity of his actions. McCandless misunderstood the meaning of having relationships with others. As he strays away from a traditional life, McCandless enters dangerous situations that reveal the cost of his idealism.

McCandless met several people during his journey, and they openly offered their generosity, but he refused. Franz represents pure, genuine human connection. He is one of many people from whom McCandless has received much kindness. While many had condemned or strongly disapproved of his decisions, Franz hoped to assist McCandless on his

journey and form a meaningful bond with him. Franz cared for McCandless like a family member, teaching him various leatherworking skills and providing gifts and valuable resources. At one point, Franz even asked McCandless to be his grandson because spending time with him was like “sunshine after a month of rain” (Krakauer 50). Here, Krakauer suggests that McCandless suffered not only physically, but also severely emotionally, as he realized that his journey came at the cost of losing meaningful relationships. His decision to embrace a nomadic and isolationist lifestyle led him to neglect his own emotional needs. It is rather interesting that McCandless took physical possessions from Franz and many others he met, but he refused to adopt their beliefs; instead, he enforced his idealistic worldview and attempted to inspire others to join it. In the end, McCandless’s overwhelming belief that isolation is seemingly necessary for survival overshadows the faith that people have had in him. His once-meaningful connections are diminished as he lets his philosophy take over, blinding him to relationships already available to him. Krakauer depicts the emotional aftermath of McCandless as he suffers in his final moments, but also the devastation of his loved ones as they have lost a person with overarching beliefs. Franz found parts of himself in McCandless, and despite welcoming him with open arms, McCandless always maintained a strict emotional barrier between himself and others. His refusal to truly connect with anybody makes his death even more tragic, which Krakauer highlights as he describes the emotional toll it had on Franz, somebody who looked at McCandless as more than just an idealistic, “stupid” man.

While Franz attempted to resonate with McCandless on an in-depth, emotional level, Gallien was purposefully more practical with him. McCandless was not only offered physical resources that assisted him in his journey, but he was also given notable advice intended to help him confront his growing ideologies. McCandless was stubborn in changing his worldview, but Krakauer presents the irony as McCandless ends up taking material belongings on his journey to Alaska. Gallien’s experience with McCandless is the first scene of the novel, a brief yet meaningful glimpse into McCandless’s personality and his immediate refusal of any assistance. As Gallien recalls his encounter with McCandless, he mentions that “There was just no talking the guy out of it...He was determined. Real gung ho. The word that comes to mind is *excited*. He couldn’t wait to head out there and get started” (Krakauer 4). McCandless’s enjoyment and exhilaration appear to have blocked out the warnings given by Gallien. He was acknowledged by Gallien, who had lived in Alaska for four decades, and advised to seek more resources.

However, his idealism struck through greatly, leaving little margin for error. McCandless's tragic story was caused not just by nature but also by his unwillingness to accept assistance when it was absolutely needed. Gallien represents realism and practicality, while Krakauer portrays McCandless as youthful and heavily idealistic. Krakauer also presents the irony that, while McCandless rejected society and materialism, he survived in part on resources others had given him. Gallien's warnings foreshadow the tragic death of McCandless, as well as the fatal mistake he made in conflating confidence with preparation.

Finally, McCandless's realization that human connection is essential shows his understanding that self-reliance cannot provide genuine happiness. On the walls of his bus, McCandless scribbles, "Happiness is only real when shared" (Krakauer 189). This quote marks a turning point in the novel, when McCandless has an epiphany that the joy of life comes from mutual dependence. The statement serves as a challenge to the philosophies that guided him throughout his journey, as well as his inspiration and reason to continue. Through this realization, Krakauer conveys that the pursuit of "ultimate freedom" is faulty. He critiques the extreme journey for self-understanding in idealism, emphasizing the balance needed between solitude and society [5]. Krakauer suggests that love and truth can coexist and that there is no need to rely solely on one. This quote symbolizes the truth of the human search, showing that emotional fulfillment cannot arise from isolation but from sharing love with others. The simplicity of the line also stands in stark contrast to the harsh reality of his death. Society has built McCandless, but his nomadic lifestyle dismantles it. His death serves as a warning for the destructive consequences of pursuing idealism without preparedness. McCandless's inability to recognize the need for human interdependence seals his unfortunate fate.

McCandless's Unwavering Legacy

In the aftermath of McCandless's death and the release of *Into the Wild*, many people, specifically young tourists, expressed a desire to meet the man who stepped beyond the limits of conformity. However, in the journey to see the abandoned bus, countless lives were at severe risk due to the extreme danger underlying the scene. Just recently, in 2019, Belarusian director and actress Veranika Nikanava drowned while attempting to cross the Teklanika River in Alaska. Often described as brave and adventurous, Nikanava thrived in a world where she could explore and live every moment to the fullest. [4] Her story is one of many that demonstrate the

consequences of imitating McCandless. Stranded tourists would require assistance from Alaska State Troopers, creating both financial and survival burdens. Instead of using *Into the Wild* and his story as a warning against seeking nonconformity on the grounds of unpreparedness, some readers attempt to emulate McCandless's nomadic lifestyle, viewing his journey as an opportunity to break free from society. Morally, McCandless resonates with society on a deeper, emotional level; he was one person against a world of people who were satisfied with their everyday lives. Yet, McCandless was so focused on his reinvention that he started to take pieces of himself off, pieces that his loved ones and surroundings had given love and meaning to. McCandless was largely adamant about refusing help, and he sought to rid himself of his possessions as a groundbreaking stance against materialism.

People remember the romantic image of freedom and are inspired by it, ultimately ignoring the warnings woven into the story. These continued pilgrimages to the bus reveal how readers of McCandless's story focus heavily on his rebellion, forgetting the tragic consequences of his choices. This selective interpretation demonstrates how appealing idealism can be from a certain viewpoint, despite the dangers that remain clearly present. McCandless's idealistic view might have been agreeable, but his poor preparation and quick willingness to give up his possessions to enter a world that he hardly knows should also be remembered. Alaska, with its chilly weather and breathtaking landscapes, requires extensive knowledge and communication devices to survive. McCandless dismisses the basic survival tips offered to him, unaware that this would lead to his demise. Essentially, solitude became the force that isolated him from the interpersonal relationships he soon realized he could not live without.

Modern society often equates stability with success, and this idea has been rather prevalent for a long time. Life's primary goal is to reach financial stability while securing a baseline in career and status. While this goal is attainable and feasible to many, it feels as if society has taken away emotional, meaningful desires. One's desire to finish a book may not appeal to many, whereas another's need to become the owner of a large, multimillion-dollar company does. Through *Into the Wild*, Krakauer teaches that while seeking only stability may be beneficial for small joys, this approach to civilization has major downsides that can dramatically alter worldviews. Krakauer does not just reject idealism, but he advocates against unbalanced

idealism. One can be both comfortable but unfulfilled in life, and this idea is what McCandless—and many others of his kind—were so strictly against.

Conclusion

Ultimately, McCandless should be viewed as a cautionary figure, and his tragic story should be a warning, not an inspiration. *Into the Wild* remains compelling not because McCandless succeeded in his ideology, but because his story demonstrates the consequences of pushing boundaries too far. Krakauer explores the underlying tension between freedom and responsibility. McCandless's search for authenticity may resonate deeply with readers, but his tragic fate shows that extreme self-discovery can come at the expense of preparation and human relationships. Yet his story endures because it reflects a conflict many experience: the divide between freedom and responsibility. Krakauer suggests that genuine, heartfelt fulfillment requires a balance of independence and human connection, not just flat-out rejecting society. Thus, society should take McCandless's story as a warning, not as an inspiration for their own respective endeavors.

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