

In Defense of Christopher McCandless: Dismantling the Image of the Erroneous Reading of Jack London

دفاعا عن كريستوفر مكندلز: تفكيك صورة القراءة الخاطئة لجاك لندن

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Abstract:

This paper is interested in Chris MaCandless, the famous Alaska trekker, whose journey was restituted in Jon Krakauer's Into the Wild. The article aims at examining Chris's reading of Jack London's Alaskan fictions in order to displace the pervasive view that the young voyager misread his favorite writer and entirely missed London's warning message against the indifference of nature. The defense of Chris relies on Norman Holland's concept of Identity Theme that excludes the value judgment of wrong/right reading in literature. Chris's reading of London is seen as a transformation of his inner fears, wishes and passions into an adventurous and transcending experience. Hence, what critics have 'unfairly' regarded as misinterpretation / misreading is indeed Chris's subjective response to London's legacy.

Keywords: *Reader-Response, Subjective Reading, Identity Theme, Adaptation, Fantasy, Transformation.*

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ملخص:

يهتم هذا المقال بشخص كريس مكندلز، رحالة ألاسكا المشهور مطلع التسعينيات و الذي وُثقت رحلته في كتاب جون كراكور "إلى البرية". يهدف المقال إلى مناقشة قراءة كريس لروايات جاك لندن من أجل إزاحة النظرة الشائعة حول قراءة الشاب الرحالة لروايات كاتبه المفضل قراءة خاطئة و إخفاقه في تلقي تحذير لندن حول عدم اكتراث الطبيعة للإنسان. يعتمد الدفاع عن كريس في هذا البحث على مفهوم هوية الموضوع و الذي يقصي الحكم على القراءة الادبية بالصحيحة أو الخاطئة. ينظر هذا البحث إلى قراءة كريس لندن كتحويل لمخاوفه، رغباته، وشغفه الداخلي إلى المجازفة. و عليه فإن حكم النقاد على قراءته كتفسير خاطئ هو في الحقيقة قراءة و تفاعل ذاتي مع تراث جاك لندن.

كلمات مفتاحية: إستجابة القارئ، القراءة الذاتية، هوية الموضوع، التكيف، الخيال، التحول.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most intriguing stories of our time is Chris McCandless's Alaskan adventure. Twenty-three years after his dead body was discovered by moose hunters in an abandoned bus in a remote trail in Alaska, the young man's story still fascinates. The McCandless phenomenon was made popular mainly after the mountaineer and writer Jon Krakauer wrote in 1996 *Into the Wild*. The non-fictional book retraces, through a documentary approach, Chris McCandless's life. What makes Chris and his story compelling for a literary study is, in fact, the young voyager's passion for reading renowned monuments in world literature: Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Melville. Yet, the author who had the strongest hold upon Chris's literary mind was Jack London. "Jack London is king" are the words he carved in a piece of wood in the 'magic bus', the final destination of his odyssey (Krakauer, 2018, p9). Jack London is King, and not a king among other existing ones, not to be compared, not to be challenged. Burrell, one of Chris's met in route fellows, describes his ardent passion for London, and that he would "try to convince every

snow bird who walked by that they should read *The Call of the Wild*” (Krakauer, 2018, p44). Krakauer tells us that Chris read the entire Londonian legacy, and *White Fang*, *The Call of the Wild* and *To Build a Fire* remain Chris’s favorites (Ibid.). Nonetheless, while Chris read in his idol’s words a call of the wild, of revolt and of freedom, many considered, when commenting on his perilous adventure and his death, that Chris misread London’s warning message against the threats of wilderness. Perplexed by Chris’s choices, and in the absence of enough information about him, many critics found it safe to accuse Chris of being a bad reader of the “King”. Fortunately, Christopher McCandless did not live to see the day he is unjustly accused of misreading his most treasured writer.

The intertextual allusions in Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* have been the subject of analysis of the few critics who showed interest in the role of literature in Chris’s journey instead of the circumstances of the young man’s death. In his *Preface to Jack London Special Section*, Kenneth Brandt writes: “one inside Krakauer’s narrative one soon discovers that McCandless was a serious reader, and the influences of London, Twain, Melville, Thoreau, Tolstoy, Jeffers, and others played significant roles in shaping his beliefs” (Brandt, 2011, p2). On the subject of McCandless’s passion for Jack London, Caroline Hanssen in *You Were Right, Old Hoss; You Were Right: Jack London in Jon Krakauer's Into the Wild*, criticizes the young man for being fond of a writer “whose works for at least a century have warned against man’s hubris in nature in general, and accidental death in the subarctic wilderness in particular” (Hanssen, 2011, p191). She indirectly alludes to the idea that Chris misinterpreted Jack London’s intentions. The critic puts forward that, despite the fact that Chris is a fervent admirer of London, his irrational risk-taking in his trek in Alaska is a piece of undiscussed evidence that he dismissed London’s realism. Hanssen describes Chris’s stubbornness to defy the hostile Alaskan environment as a misreading of Jack London’s tales (Hanssen, 2011, p193).

We are in front of this problematic situation simply because two facts are taken for granted. The first one is the certitude that a literary

text unfolds one and only meaning. The second more delusive fact is the strong conviction that all readers, regardless of their differences, must interpret texts similarly because writers draw a path of understanding we must walk through. It is time we stop looking at London and should turn instead to his readers such as Chris. Through his odyssey, Chris re-creates London's adventurous characters and gives them a sense of reality because they satisfy an inward need for him.

The Reader-Response approach, with its creed of Subjective Reading, would help to exonerate Chris's from this accusation. Thus, through the lens of Norman Holland, this article aims at examining Chris's reading of Jack London. The study will rely mainly on the critic's concepts of Identity Theme and the unconscious mechanisms that shape the reader's response to a text. In other terms, this article discusses how Chris's identity theme shaped his reading of London, trying by that to dislodge the groundless allegation that he is a bad reader of London. Restoring the McCandless reading of London is achieved through two steps. The first one consists of releasing Chris from the duality of wrong/right reader confinement by relying on Holland's idea of Subjective Reading. The second step traces how Chris's identity theme is recreated, through subconscious mechanisms, in his response to the texts written by his favorite writer. This step justifies why Chris's reading of London differs from other expected readings.

2. The 'McCandlessian' Reading of Jack London

2.1 The Identity Theme of Christopher the Reader

Many criticized Chris's 'naïve' and immature confusion between the wild limitless fiction of London and the real austerity of the Alaskan climate. Chris has long been seen as a daydreamer so deeply immersed in his favorite novels that he lost sense of reality, and this led to his tragic end. What these people regard as a blind imitation of fictional adventures can be explained through a completely different method or what Holland describes as "the most puzzling part of our entire response to literature" (Holland, 1968, p63). With reference to Coleridge's "willing suspension of

disbelief”¹, Holland describes readers’ initial interactions as follows: “Somehow, even before the curtain rises, even before our eyes have run over the screen credits or the first line of a poem or story, we have made a special gesture of “as if” ” (Holland, 1968, p4). It is a mental process through which we are willing to accept unrealities and fiction—for example, that a dog, Buck in *The Call of the Wild*, has human traits, can think in a deep way and take complex decisions. According to Holland, what a reader would never believe in reality, will completely take for granted in a work of fiction. The “as if” is so strong that we weep when the end of a movie discloses the death of the hero, though he exists only within the frontiers of imagination. Our imaginative involvement makes us suspend disbelief which is a natural reader’s instinct thanks to which fantastic literature, fables, fairy tales, and science fiction have a place in arts. Hence, the image of Chris as an impulsive young man who is unrealistic changes into the one of Chris who, like all readers, read *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang* and *To Build a Fire* with suspended disbelief.

One can imagine suspending disbelief as the preliminary phase in the reader’s response to a text. It establishes the necessary preparations to start the complex reading process. Once the reader decides to believe is a purely imagined world, Holland thinks, the different textual elements are built together in a way to recreate a unity built upon a theme that the reader considers the core of that text. It is a subjective reading that is shaped by ideas, thoughts, inspirations and feelings that have a strong overwhelming power on the reader, Holland opines that “each reader groups the details of the play into themes that he thinks important, and if he chooses to press on to a highly condensed central theme it will surely be something that matters to him” (Holland, 1975, p814). This assumption makes us question the most professional critics’ tendency to classify readers into good and bad ones. In other terms, Holland’s theory allows us to re-examine the idea that literary works embody fixed meanings on which all readers would logically agree, and any interpretation outside the circle of these meanings is judged irrelevant. Rejecting subjective

reading is like repressing the myriad possibilities of interpretations a text naturally offers, and thus eliminating the role of the reader.

Holland claims that every reader brings his own personality and experience to a text, and given the vast variety of personalities, we cannot expect that we all react to a text in the same response (Holland, 1975, p815). The critic uses the term “Identity Theme” to explain this phenomenon, and defines it as a very complex psychological process that we can imagine close to a recurring element unique to every individual (Ibid.). It is evidently this identity theme that influences how we read a text, what theme we extract from it, how we identify ourselves to its elements, and interject them at the same time. Identity theme can be seen as a framework or a structure that undergoes variations from a person to another one, this is the reason why “[m]y reading of a certain literary work will differ from yours or his or hers. [...] each of us will bring different kinds of external information to bear [and] seek out the particular themes that concern him [resulting in] different ways of making the text into an experience with a coherence and significance that satisfies” (Holland, 1975, 816).

2.2 Krakauer’s Misreading of Christopher’s Reading of London

Krakauer himself believes that Chris died because he read Jack London inaccurately. In his account, he reports that the young man’s strong passion for London mesmerized him to an extent that he forgot that *The Call of the Wild*, *To Build a Fire* and *White Fang* were mere fictions: “He was so enthralled by these tales, however, that he seemed to forget that they were works of fiction, constructions of the imagination that had more to do with London’s romantic sensibilities than with actualities of life in the subarctic wilderness” (Krakauer, 2018, p44). Krakauer believes that reading and rereading these texts made Chris lose contact with reality and embrace a world of imagination instead. He “overlooked”, the writer says, realities and was under the spell of London’s “turgid portrayal of life in Alaska” (Ibid.). Be that as it may, at a certain moment we feel that Krakauer seems confused and puzzled on how to explain the impact of London’s books on Chris’s decisions. Sometimes he shows that the young man’s reading is peripheral; at other times he puts blame on

London himself as he “mesmerized” and “infatuated” Chris’s spirit and led him to death.

Krakauer’s allusion to an erroneous reading reduces all London’s adventure books to mere warning signs. He indirectly assumes that there is only one right and appropriate way of reading London and evidently Chris failed in finding this way. In the second chapter of *Into the Wild*, Krakauer writes two epigraphs; Chris’s famous “London is King” graffito that celebrates his favorite author, and just below he adds another epigraph, a passage he selects himself from London’s *White Fang*:

Dark spruce forest frowned on either side the frozen waterway. The trees had been stripped by a recent wind of their white covering of frost, and they seemed to lean toward each other, black and ominous, in the fading light. A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness. There was a hint in it of laughter, but of a laughter more terrible than any sadness—a laughter that was mirthless as the smile of the Sphinx, a laughter cold as the frost and partaking of the grimness of infallibility. It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life. It was the Wild, the savage, frozenhearted Northland Wild. (London, 1993, p11)

Krakauer does not reveal much about his own reading of London, but the choice of this passage is significant especially that it comes just after Chris’s glorification of London. In the passage nature is depicted as being a destroyer and humans who venture too close inside its realms are helpless and powerless. Maybe the aim of Krakauer is to reveal the warning aspect of London’s text that Chris is blind to. This situation where we are in front of two opposed readings of the same writer brings evidence to Holland’s idea that no reading is right or wrong, but responses are shaped by individual personalities and experiences. There are some interesting common points between

Krakauer and Chris that might have directed them towards the same literature. They were both driven by feelings of anger against the oppressive presence of their fathers, and they both saw healing and liberation in journeys in the heart of wilderness. However, Krakauer's hard climbing experience in Alaska made him aware of how hostile the natural environment is. When a man is lonely in the immensity of wilderness everything acquires a melodramatic facet. We cannot pretend that their experiences into the wild developed differently. Like Krakauer, Chris' last weeks in Alaska exposed him to the hostility and indifference of nature; however, in absence of evidence, one cannot claim that his reading of London changed in the last days of his experience or not. However, all that we can say is that while Chris's graffiti was written at the peak of his passion for freedom, Krakauer selected the passage from *White Fang* for his epigraph, with the impact of his difficult experience on him.

The interaction of psychology with art makes it possible to bring explanations to such differences in responses by examining differences in the personalities of the readers. Thus, we can assume that interpretations vehicle the identity theme of the interpreter. The reader response functions according to a very complex mechanism through which identity recreates itself. It is a mechanism that is hard to examine for a general critic as it needs an expert in psychology and psychoanalysis to analyze the unconscious of the reader. It is also impossible to do it in this study, since all the reader-response specialists relied on specific questionnaires answered by a sample of readers to have access to their subconscious and examine the nature of their individual response to a given text². So a prior knowledge of the personality history of a reader is necessary to grasp the complex process of transformation of his identity theme into a specific response to a text. Chris is dead, and the data we have about his personality is very poor to conduct such an investigation. We can however try to identify the identity theme of Chris and observe how he made Jack London's novels into an experience. Holland himself admits that even if "[e]ach reader poems his own poem", it is very hard describing this "poeming," or the way the reader recreates subconscious urges and

demands. He maintains that “[t]oday’s literary critics are expert in pointing out an essence for any literary work. Today’s psychologists—particularly the psychoanalytic psychologists—are equally adept at conceptualizing the essential dynamics of individuals. Yet we do not know how literature and readers interact” (Holland, 1975, p819). Moreover, we do not expect from general critics to psychoanalyze readers, we are rather interested in observing how an identity theme produces a subjective reading that thanks to the Reader-Response theory we are not obliged to assess its validity. Thus, we can assume that contrary to the widely held view, Chris is not a bad reader of London. Rather, his act of reading recreates his identity theme.

3. From The Call of the Wild to the Magic Bus³

3.1 The Adaptation of Christopher’s Fears and Wishes

Holland describes the three modalities through which the identity theme recreates itself and the first one is adaptation. According to him, a defense mechanism is “an unconscious process of the ego which the ego puts into action automatically at a signal of danger from the external world, the id, or the superego. Such a thing, of course, happens in a mind rather than a literary text” (Holland, 1975, p816). Even if, as mentioned before, it is impossible to describe the highly complex unconscious process through which the ego of Chris activated a defense mechanism that resulted in his ‘different’ reading of London, we can however identify the ‘signal of a danger’ he might have reacted against and described its impact in his response to the texts.

Literary works incarnate worlds so vast that everyone finds in texts things they desire or fear the most, and it is at this moment that invites us to dig deep into those texts to extract from them strategies to deal with our own fears and wishes. The very authoritative figure Chris’s father represents is for the young man a source of danger. He sees that the kind of mode of life his father dictates on him is a stumbling block in the face of his passion for adventure, freedom and novel experiences. With their predominant theme of human transcendence and myth of primitivism, his most loved novels allow him to create an

alternative that satisfies his strong demands. Maybe his fears were adapted in the characters of Hal and Charles, the main antagonists in *The Call of the Wild*. They are abusive, belittling and treat very badly the dogs. However, the two heroes of the novel can adapt Chris's wishes. Both Buck and Thornton could connect with their primitive instincts, transcend the enslavement of civilized life and find freedom in wilderness. What mattered the most for Chris is that rage he had against the modern society's rough materialism and hypocrisy; he felt an urgent need to free himself from these tricks that represent a gradual assassination of human aspirations. He shapes the material London's *The Call of the Wild* offers him to transform it into what he both wished and feared. *The Call of the Wild* explores in depth the themes of the power of instincts and self-transcendence. It also presents characters that fiercely fight for survival. Hence, from Holland's lens, this might explain the reason why Chris is particularly attracted to the frustration versus freedom motif in London's tale and the elements in which it is incarnated. Even if we lack enough evidence to presume so, we can suppose that Chris put onto the characters not only the revolt and the urge of freedom aroused by London's tales, but also the revolt and the urge of freedom he strongly feels toward his parents.

3.2 The Rise of the Fantasy

Once the adaptation strategies are in function, the second modality, fantasy, takes place. However, it is preceded by a process of sublimation through which "the changing of a forbidden impulse or idea into something socially or morally acceptable, or even more important, acceptable and pleasurable to the individual's ego" (Holland, 1968, p163). This idea can be used to explain Chris's romanticizing London's representation of wilderness. In Holland's view, it is the normal defense that helps Chris transform his inner anger against his father into a pleasurable idea which takes the form of the ideals of freedom and liberation he reads in London's wilderness. So Chris by denying his favorite writer's warning message, he thus sublimates the cult of the journey within wilderness. Consequently, he transforms his inner frustrations and gives way to his identity theme to

dominate his reading of London. Chris reminds us of Raskolnikov's idea of the mother-murder in *Crime and Punishment* justified by a theory of Napoleonism⁴. Even though Chris does not commit a series of crimes, he exposed himself to serious dangers out of a deep fear of being 'devoured' by his despotic father. In other terms, London's idea of venturing in a perilous environment is rationalized as a defense mechanism against the dangers that Chris sees in his pre-journey life with his parents.

The Sublimation process facilitates and activates the second modality, fantasy. It is a mechanism that feeds on the adaptation material to construct individual images that provide relief and pleasure. The role of fantasy is to feel gratification through a content that can of course vary according to the differences of the identity theme from a reader to another one. In this sense, we can suppose that when reading London's texts, Chris first gave them a shape that "can pass through the network of [his] adaptive and defensive strategies" to cope with his own desires and fears (Holland, 1975, p818). Second, and here comes the most interesting part in Chris's response, he recreated the fantasy of a journey into the wild to satisfy his inward demands.

From the scraps Krakauer could gather about the life of the young traveler, we learn that Chris started reading London in childhood when his father was already dictatorial and violent. So, we assume that his fantasy grew at the same time as his loath for his father was gradually escalating. Chris's bitterness was as strong as his response to Jack London's fictional odysseys that displaced Alaska from a sturdy fantasy to a plan or a quest.

3.3 From Fantasy to Reality

Here comes the third modality described by Holland as transformation. According to him the fantasies are so overwhelming that they arouse negative feelings of guilt and anxiety and in some readers they need to be transformed into real experiences. The very subjective reading experience creates the need to transform a raw fantasy into a total experience. Chris transcended his fantasy when he left behind him a conventional life to start an adventurous journey into

the wild, and this seems to have offered him real happiness. Holland describes this modality in the reading response as a moral and aesthetic experience. Chris seems to have satisfied an inner need through his choice of leading a life ‘in the woods’. He reached an inward peace he was long looking for, and achieved the aim of his quest encapsulated in truth. In one of Chris’s rare expressive moments, the letter he wrote to Ron, he encourages the old man to go beyond his conventional life because nothing is more damaging than “a life of security, conformity and conservatism” (Krakauer, 2018, p57). For him, real happiness lies in challenging conventions and being open to new experiences and mobility: “don’t settle down and sit in one place” (Ibid.). Chris rationalizes his own experience and draws out of it a morality, a whole philosophy about the essence of life and existence, reaching by that the summit of the subjective reading experience. He decodes an equivocal message that was hidden in the secret patterns of his subconscious, through god knows what complex mechanisms, into a maxim, a celebration of freedom and wilderness. Thanks to his reading experience his identity theme was flattened to a point that had a full vision of it, and could distance himself and describe his euphoric journey using the third point of view:

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 civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild. (Krakauer, 2018, p163)

4. CONCLUSION

All the people who crossed the road of Chris gave tribute to his remarkable intelligence. At every station of his journey, Chris had the habit to leave out objects of his own that kept him in contact with a former life he hated more and more. Only his books were his forever road companions with whom he reached his dreamland. This only shows how literature was important to Chris. Besides, throughout his investigation, Krakauer could build an image of McCandless of a well-educated young man with an above-average intellect. This is the reason why defending Chris against the accusation of having misread Jack London motivated writing this article. As for Chris's personal life, his very troubled relationship with his father, and his uneasiness with a money-dominated life, are the reasons behind his odyssey. It was evident that the most pertinent way to examine Chris's reading of London was drawing the link between his response as a reader and his personality. The most helpful way to defend Chris, the reader, has been through an approach that tolerates the idea that no reading is wrong or right. Holland's concept of Identity Theme made it possible to observe how Chris's reading of London is based on inner frustrations and wishes. His favorite Alaskan tales offered him a space where all his fears and desires related to his restlessness about the life imposed on him by his father, is adapted. The adaptation mechanisms built Chris's fantasies about freedom and self-transcendence. His fantasy was so strong that transforming it into an experience translated itself in Chris's big journey into the wild. In fact, Chris could live the euphoria of any passionate reader who would dream of transforming a fantasy nourished in a literary text into a lived reality.

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¹ **Suspension of Disbelief** or **Willing Suspension of Disbelief** is a term coined in 1817 by the poet and aesthetic philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It implies that including reflective elements of reality into a fantastic/fictional tale creates an impression of verisimilitude in the reader and makes the narrative plausible. Suspension of disbelief is necessary for the reader to accept the impossible worlds in fiction of action, comedy, fantasy, and horror genres.

² In Norman Holland's book *Five Readers Reading*, the critic makes an experiment on five students\ readers using with them personality tests and detailed inquiry to collect data about their psychology. Then, Holland exposed them to the task of reading and interpreting Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*.

³ The Magic bus is the name Chris gives to the abandoned bus he found in Stampede Trail in Alaska and where he lived 114 days till his death. It has always been visited by McCandless's fans as an attractive site and has long pushed many hikers to risk their lives by crossing the Teklanika River. Because of many incidents and the death of some people who tried to reach the Magic Bus, the State of Alaska decided to remove it from the trail in June 2020

⁴Romanovich Raskolnikov is the protagonist the Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. He is fond of Napoleon Bonaparte. For him, the French emperor's acts of violence and immorality through which he achieved power are justified by his superiority over ordinary men. Raskolnikov sees himself in Napoleon and strongly in his superiority to justify his own crimes.