

## The Good and the Wild in Nature: H. D. Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and J. Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1997).

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### Abstract:

*American Transcendentalism was a philosophical and religious movement in the 19th century that advocated for simple living and interconnection with nature. As a response to the sudden shift to a fast-paced lifestyle, Americans began to view nature as a refuge where they could achieve a greater sense of freedom. Hence, this paper examines Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and how both of them utilized nature, more specifically the wilderness as a means to achieve "ultimate freedom". The two protagonists in these works share a similar conceptualization of nature and how it evokes spiritual awakening and a rejection to social norms yet experience it differently. Therefore, this article follows a comparative perspective of the human experiences and interpretations of wilderness and nature in two case studies while shedding light on two main aspects: the Good and the Wild from the lens of Thoreau's solitary experience at Walden Pond and the ideals of human-nature relationship found in Krakauer's nonfiction biography in recounting the captivating story of Chris McCandless. The findings reveal how McCandless' idealistic romanticization views on nature resulted in a tragic denouement, his own death. Thus, the most practical approach with remote wildness is to accept both the Good and the Wild without any biases or idealization.*

**Keywords:** Henry David Thoreau; *Into the Wild*; Jon Krakauer; Nature; Wilderness.

## **1. Introduction**

Henry David Thoreau is still regarded as a pivotal figure in the American Transcendentalism movement. His most prominent work, *Walden*, is a reflective account of Thoreau's solitary adventurous stay at Walden Pond from July 1845 to September 1847. His rejection to the 19th century industrialized America and the exceeding materialism pushed him to experience life from, as he calls it, a 'primitive' angle, opposing to fall for materialism and rather to live near nature and seek a meaningful life away from the urbanized lifestyle. The concept of finding solace in nature has been frequently captured in American philosophy and literature. For example, Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* is another American classic that truly represents the essence of the ambivalent relationship between man and nature.

Krakauer narrates the true story of Christopher McCandless' "waldenesque" adventure towards the wilderness of Alaska. He turns to nature for guidance after graduating from college, yet nature had other plans for him for it resulted in his death after approximately 113 days of living alone.

Despite the dissimilar periods of time these two figures lived in, they are both associated through their eagerness to experience nature and wilderness. McCandless can even be regarded as a contemporary of Thoreau and this is exemplified in their equal interest in the quest for a spiritual rebirth through the external world with its beautiful landscapes alongside its wild façade that does not welcome unwanted intruders. Both protagonists' interests meet through their shared enthusiasm to live an "unfiltered experience" (Krakauer, 2009, p. 26).

## **2. Philosophical View of the American Wilderness**

According to Meriam Webster Dictionary, wilderness is "a tract or region uncultivated and uninhabited by human beings" (2023). The idea of wandering in the wilderness was present in the American history ever since the sixteenth-century when the European settlers first stepped into the New World and delimited the *wild* land and founded colonies.

As Gary Snyder declared in New York Times "*Week in Review*" (1994) "A person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth." It is a quality of one's own consciousness. The planet is a wild place and always will be" (p. 6). In other words, anybody can experience the wilderness, despite the time or the place they are in, it is not exclusive to a certain category of people or a particular set of places and landscapes.

Furthermore, Elisa Aaltola in *Wilderness Experiences as Ethics: From Elevation to Attentiveness* (2015) argues that wandering in the wilderness and seeking solace in it away from one's responsibilities and problems found in the urban life is not "the exclusive possession of philosophers or poets" (p. 285). Nowadays, anyone can go wander in the wilderness and

share the same experiences as those great thinkers which proves the main point discussed by Snyder at the beginning that anyone can “experience the wilderness anywhere on earth” (1994, p. 6).

According to a study carried out by Matthew McDonald et al. (2009), wilderness experiences result in a spiritual clarity from “merging with or being at one with the wilderness, world or universe” (p. 378). The feedback from the participants in this experiment are a proof of this claim: “For a fleeting moment, you are one with the earth that is as hostile as Jupiter, yet at the same time you are able to imaginatively explore, empathise with, enter into and truly understand” (2009, p. 379). Such statements are exemplary of the transcendence which Thoreau talks about in his writings; the ability to acknowledge its autonomy as well as connect with the “unseen world” (McDonald et al, 2009, p. 382). Consequently, Aaltola (2015) argues that there are two themes found in this study which will also be seen in the works analyzed in this paper: “(1) transcendental clarity (a sense of gaining epistemological meta-perspective) and (2) a feeling of ontological interconnectedness.” (p. 28).

In addition to Aaltola and Snyder, Peter Ashley (2007) confirms that this kind of participants are collectively left with the same feelings of being “beyond the self, of transcendence,” and that wilderness “appears to facilitate the grasping of the ethereal, the intangible, the non-material.” (p. 65). Therefore, several researchers agree on the impact of Wilderness on the human’s psyche and emotional state and that it is not merely restricted to philosophers or the Romantics and nature writers, any mundane individual can have the same experience.

Nonetheless, William Cronon (1996) also observes how there is a preference for big wilderness which according to him “reflects a romantic frontier belief that one hasn’t really gotten away from civilization unless one can go for days at a time without encountering another human being” (p. 22). If it is not big enough, wild enough and far away enough from society, it is “too small, too plain, or too crowded to be *authentically* wild” (p. 22). This is undoubtedly present in McCandless’ story and his desire to wander alone the Alaskan landscapes instead of a simple and safer excursion closer to his hometown.

Therefore, Sarah Jaquette Ray in *Risking Bodies in the Wild* (2009) asserts that the appeal of mountaineering in dangerous places was “a direct response to social instability and nation building during the Progressive Era” and can be traced back to Social Darwinism (p. 258) which according to Shari Michelle Huhndorf in *Going Native: Indians in the American Cultural Imagination* (2015), Americans could prove their advancement by ‘going native’ and by practicing primitive survival activities such as hunting and living “off the land.”

Thus, risky outdoor adventures necessitate danger as stated by David Brooks in *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and how They Got There* (2001) “One must put oneself through terrible torment” emphasizing on “a cold mountain or in a malarial forest” as an attempt to “experience the spirituality uplifting magnificence of *brutal* nature.” (p. 210). Nowadays, such statements on social media can push certain individuals to pursue jeopardized experiences in wilderness, whether be it consciously or unconsciously, to reach the stage which is always glorified; the zenith of the “Higher Self” that can be found mainly in wild and forsaken locations that can result in *Ugly* consequences.

### **2.1. Running Away from Society to Nature**

In a diary entry from January 6<sup>th</sup> of 1857, Henry David Thoreau expresses his disdain to living in an urbanized society for he feels “invariably cheap and dissipated” while on the other hand, he wishes to wander alone “in distant woods or fields” and feels that the cold and solitude are his companions. Thoreau here views this experience as sacred and even regards it as “equivalent to churchgoing and prayer” (1857).

Furthermore, In *the Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature* (1996) William Cronon asserts that wilderness “offers us the illusion” through which any individual can “escape the cares and the troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us” (1996, p. 16). This confirms Thoreau’s statement in *Walden* (1854) on how “we can never have enough of Nature,” as well as the need “to witness our own limits transgressed” in nature (p. 318).

### **2.2. The Good in Wilderness**

Thoreau’s essay *Walking* (1862), which was delivered at Concord’s Unitarian Meetinghouse in 1851, is considered as his most fruitful and explorative piece of writing for it analyzes the concept of “wildness” or “the wild” as he famously states it: “Wildness is the preservation of the world” (p. 82).

Thoreau also views wilderness as a sacred place and expressed it articulately in *Walking*: “When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter the swamp as to a sacred place, a *sancturum sanctorum*” (Thoreau, 2000, p, 518).

In the essay entitled *Walking* (1862), one can easily detect Thoreau’s eagerness to live close to nature and far away from urbanized communities:

Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free. ... Let me live where I will, on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and I am ever leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness. I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen. I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. (p, 8)

In this passage, Thoreau explicitly points out his frustration towards Americans turning toward Europe for enlightenment when the West was their new *tabula rasa*, where they can destroy “Father Europe” and are now offered a new chance to a “re-baptism in the Wilderness” (Baltz, 2018, p, 13) In addition, American transcendentalist also asserts his conception of America’s nature as a means to distinguish its superiority over Europe:

The heavens of America appear infinitely higher, the sky is bluer, the air is fresher, the cold is intenser, the moon looks larger, the stars are brighter, the thunder is louder, the lightning is vividder, the wind is stronger, the rain is heavier, the mountains are higher, the rivers are longer, the forests bigger, the plains broader. (Thoreau, 1862, p, 10)

Thoreau in this excerpt confidently exalts American landscapes and glorifies every aspect by using comparative adjectives to convince the reader such as “louder”, “vividder”, and “broader”.

Thoreau was not the only American figure to glorify nature, William Wordsworth expressed a similar vision in a poem entitled *The Tables Turned*: “One impulse from a vernal wood may teach you more of man, of mortal evil and of good than the sages can” (1798, p. 244). This idealization made by Thoreau will be labeled as the *Good* in wilderness, where the author does not only glamorize nature but also shares the darker side which will be referred to as the *Bad*.

### **3.1. The Animal Within us**

In 1854, Thoreau, as an American transcendentalist, rejected the newly built railroads as he explains: “Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things” (p. 33), a radical refusal of materialism or as he views it “an illusion” that is not always “a positive advance”. This exemplifies his non-conformity with the novel discoveries and technologies at the time and his wish to seek solitude more, mostly in nature and that is how the idea of *Walden* came to life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s protégé spent two years living as a hermit in the woods beside Walden Pond and created what Robert Fanuzzi in *Thoreau’s Urban Imagination* (1996) calls an “artistic realization” of American society (p. 322). Furthermore, while living at Walden and documenting his daily introspective adventures, Thoreau noticed novel sides to his identity he did not know existed before, which he labeled as the “Wild”; a “primitive” individual who can be driven by any animalistic intrusive thoughts, and the “Higher” self who aims at transcending the natural world to find the ultimate truth through a spiritual life (p. 210). This dualism will be demonstrated in his experience at Walden Pond.

In his chapter entitled “Higher Laws” in *Walden* (1854), Thoreau states that “Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome” (p. 221). The American Transcendentalist here intertwines both aspects of nature together, the spiritual and the animalistic, the *Good* and the *Wild*.

He begins with narrating his experience after coming home from finishing and how a primitive and sudden urge possessed him. Seeing a woodchuck cross his path, he felt a “strange thrill of delight” and he was also tempted” to seize and devour him raw” not out of hunger but out of “wildness” (p, 210). Thoreau also explains how sometimes he would venture alone in the wood “seeking some kind of venison which [he] might devour.” (p. 210). The image of a half-starved hound illustrates this ‘primitive’ and ‘animal-like’ desire he gets when turning to nature for the truth; it can unleash the ‘wild’ side of him or as he confirms his equal interest in both of these sides : “found in [himself], . . . , an instinct towards a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another towards a primitive rank and savage one, and [he] reverence[s] them both. [He] love[s] the wild not less than the good.” (p. 210).

To be fully intact with one’s spirit, you must tame down the animalistic instincts and not give up, instead seeking out alternatives. And here comes the role of the spiritual role of Transcendentalism and how it aims at *transcending* such urges which can become unmanageable and reach the so-called “Higher-Self”.

Thoreau later rethinks his decision of consuming animals’ meat thinking it was “essentially unclean” yet once again, the primitive side of him remains present despite all: “If I were to live in a wilderness, I should again be tempted to become a fisher and hunter in earnest.” (1854, p. 214). This wild nature he has within him can be, to a certain extent, controlled, but cannot be eliminated and he goes on explaining: “possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature.” (p. 219).

Thoreau in this section explains how we are “conscious of an animal in us” and it is revived when our “higher nature slumbers” (1854, p. 219)

#### **4. *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer**

The Book *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer first published in 1996 narrates the true story of a 24-year-old young man named Christopher Johnson McCandless who is fed up with social norms after his graduation from Emory University, refuses to accept a new car for a graduation present, pursues no career, gives his savings away to charity, decides to leave everything behind him and to embark on a hitch-hiking adventure across the United States. He lived alone in an abandoned hippie-camper called the Magic Bus, alongside his deep desire to live an “unfiltered life” (p. 22). He believed that this was the best way to experience life without any of the constraints of society.

Chris McCandless chooses to abandon the comfort of being part of an American middle-class family in the 1990’s and his decision to travel to the

Alaskan wilderness can be viewed as an act of rebellion against a hyper-consumptive society as he explains to one of his friends:

I think you really should make a radical change in your lifestyle and begin to boldly do things which you may previously never have thought of doing or been too hesitant to attempt. So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality, nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. (Krakauer, 2009, p. 54)

This passage evidently illustrates Chris' state of mind during the trip, and how despite the difficulties he faced, he still believed he was on the right path and his refusal to be dependent on anything but himself is considered as a sign of weakness, and of conformity.

This enthusiasm, as previously seen in Thoreau's experience at Walden Pond in 1845, was ambivalent and did not last. In McCandless' case, the beginning was positive and good but ended badly because of many factors; the lack of experience, misrepresentations of nature throughout the media, and ideal fictional writings. However, this young man's story remains famous till this day amongst youngsters who regard him as an American icon.

#### **4.1. Ecological Refuge**

Christopher Johnson McCandless longed for a refuge, somewhere to be "unencumbered, emancipated from the stifling world of abstraction and security and material excess" (Krakauer, 2009, p. 26). Krakauer insists on defending Chris' sanity and that "he wasn't a sociopath, he wasn't an outcast" (Cited in Vera, 2013, p, 19). Accompanying this, McCandless' experience differs greatly from that of Thoreau: "Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather to explore the inner country of his own soul" Krakauer clarifies. (2009, p. 161).

On his Alaskan odyssey, Chris experienced meaningful relationships with many people or as Wendell Berry would call in his essay "Writer and Region" (1990) "a beloved community" and defines it as "common experience and common effort on a common ground on which one willingly belongs" (p. 85). Coming from an unhappy childhood, Chris for once experiences what it feels to be in a *beloved community*. Jan Burres and Bob for example remained in touch with him until he embarked on the Alaskan land. Jan even advised him to cancel his trip. Wayne Westberg could also

be considered as part of a beloved community, and even a father figure for they shared a great friendship, contrary to that with his biological father. Another genuine relationship was with Ronald Franz who declares that “the boy unmasked the gaping void” in his life, which after his departure, Franz “found himself deeply and unexpectedly hurt” (Krakauer, 2009, p. 54).

Some would argue that he certainly had other motives and aims behind this radical change in his life. To answer this, one must go back to his childhood and upbringing. Krakauer (2009) explicitly states that this decision was the result of “his need to assert so adamantly his autonomy [and of] his need to separate himself from his parents” (p. 149). Catherine McCandless validates this claim in *the Wild Truth* (2006) she narrates the real and *wild* story of her brother and the harrowing domestic abuse they both went through. She courageously exposes how their father maltreated them: “He forced us down together, side by side” and then began yanking them. She writes, “The snap of the leather was sharp and quick between our wails.” She describes their father’s “sadistic pleasure that lit up” resembling “an addict in the climax of his high.” (p. 20). Sadly, the family dysfunctionality did not stop here, Walt McCandless was already married when he met their mother, Billie, at Hughes Aircraft and kept lying to both his wife, Marcia, the mother of Chris and his sister Carine. Christopher did not know of this story until he was in high school. Consequently, the shock accompanied by the turbulent childhood led him to take drastic decisions and find solace in nature, away from everyone.

Despite his linear approach to nature, he conceives wilderness as an escape, a refuge from one’s mundane problems which, according to Rebecca LaMarche (2010) in *Matters of Independence* results in his adoption of ultimate self-reliance, another significant principle in the American Transcendentalism movement. But in his case, it was extreme.

The ambitious twenty-four-year-old Christopher adopted a positive attitude in relation to nature which can be clearly seen in a paragraph he had written in which he clarifies the motive behind everything was “the climactic battle to kill the false being within” (Krakauer, 2009, p. 145). This confirms Krakauer’s claim of McCandless’ against those who criticized that he was not a “sociopath” or an “outcast”, he simply wanted to “kill the false being within” and to be “lost in the wild” (p, 145).

McCandless lived true to his principles till the very last minute. On his last days, he weighed 30 kilos, was injured and his symptoms were worsening yet this did not stop him from taking one last self-portrait photo, smiling, holding a farewell note which said: “I have had a happy life and thank the lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!” (Krakauer, 2009, p. 176).

Christopher did not want to conquest nature or have control over it as it is promoted in Western culture, instead, he acted like an associate rather than a master. Sadly, this romanticization is soon put into question as the



other side of nature, the *Bad*, the *Wild*, unravels and he is found in disturbing situations that will unfortunately lead to his death.

#### **4.2. The Alaskan Odyssey Finally Ends**

Sujata Gurudev in *American Literature: Studies on Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman* (2006) asserts 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”. In this sense, Christopher McCandless’ story was purely transcendentalist.

The young man is unable to survive due to natural and uncontrollable hardships; the Taklanika river blocked his path restraining him from passing to the other side which resulted in his starvation and later on his death in August 1992. However, in 2013, Krakauer discovers that the reason of his death was in fact a toxic amino acid in wild potato seeds. This incident renders McCandless incapable of joining the civilization he tried so hard to run away from. He is finally fully aware of the consequences of such actions, of complete solitude accompanied only with wilderness forgetting that the latter, just like his society, cannot be controlled either and has negative features as well.

Chris McCandless’ story is the embodiment of a tragic satire, his aim was to abandon civilization and shun away from modern society to nature, enjoy solitude, and learn more about his authentic self. However, his fate had other plans for him. On his dying days, the Alaskan forest which once captivated him, intimidated him. He wrote in his diary entry: “Disaster.... Rained in. River look impossible. Lonely, scared.” (Krakauer, 1997, p. 119).

Chris McCandless left “Happiness only real when shared” as a note on a book he read while at the bus. (Krakauer, 2009, p. 166). This statement encapsulates his radical change, or as Krakauer interprets it “to mean that he was ready, perhaps, to shed a little of the armor he wore around his heart,” meaning that if he were to return to civilization “he intended to abandon the life of a solitary vagabond, stop running so hard from intimacy, and become a member of the human community” (p. 167).

In essence, McCandless’ story was influenced by many factors, be it his naïve ineptitude, his harsh upbringing, or the unattainable high expectations of literary misrepresentations. No matter what the reason might be, hopefully, contemporary youngsters will not commit the same mistakes and idealize his life just like Chris did to Thoreau, London, Tolstoy, and many other nature writers.

Molly Hartzog in *Scapegoating in the Wild: A Burkean Analysis of Two Outdoor Adventures Gone Wrong* (2014) makes a distinction between Aron Ralston, a mountain climber, and his almost-fatal incident in an isolated canyon in Utah and Chris McCandless. The author argues that: “Aron

Ralston is valorized while McCandless is vilified.”, and that both represent “a unique American ideal of the wilderness” which is embodied in “the desire for an intimate connection with nature” (p. 2), and an urge to have control *over* nature. She also states that McCandless’ experience differs from Ralston’s through the lens of technology, the latter being “*acceptable* human-nature relationship” (p. 3) because of his acceptance to use modern and technological devices such as a camera or the multitool he used to cut off his arm and eventually save his life. Despite McCandless’ extremist rejection of anything remotely related to society, he could have potentially saved his life with a map, but he chose not to carry one.

However, the romanticization shown in the films and books recounting stories of such individuals as Chris McCandless are causing more harm than good. His story still inspires people till this day, YouTube videos and blogs are still being produced which showcases the authenticity of McCandless’ story three decades later. As a result, to prevent any future incidents like that of Christopher’s, the Department of Natural Resources removed the Magic Bus #142 from the Stampede Trail outside of Healy, Alaska in June 2020.

Krakauer (2009) tries to redeem Chris’ actions by arguing that this young man followed some of Thoreau’s principles and that despite his fatal destiny, he was “at peace, serene as a monk gone to God” (p, 176). However, he also admits that many like-minded people, “dreamers and misfits” (p, 11) were persuaded to follow McCandless’ footsteps, and to never be found again (p, 18). Therefore, the author depicts Chris’ story as entirely Thoreauvian, despite its fallacies.

## **5. Conclusion**

“I love the wild not less than the good.” Thoreau (1854, p. 210) asserts in his book *Walden* when talking about nature and the struggles that come along with it. Both works reflect the *Good* and the *Wild* sides of their stories. Thoreau and McCandless devoted their lives to pursue an idea, that nature was their way to spiritual rebirth and truth. Nevertheless, each one of them had a different approach which resulted in different endings as well. Both the Good and the Wild are part of nature and that is the essence of these two figures and their stories.

The romanticized interpretations of Thoreau’s ideals in Krakauer’s recount of this young man’s journey offer the world a closure to unanswered questions about his motives and choices. Yet, the binary conceptions of wilderness: what is primitive is not humane, and what is societal is not wild are apparent in both Thoreau’s stay at Walden Pond and in McCandless’ extremist excursion to Alaska. Thus, this paper examined how both works are correlated yet remain distinct, both in the approach as well as the ending.

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