



The Quest for a Transcendental Experience: A
Deconstruction of Binary Oppositions in Jon
Krakauer's *Into the Wild*

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Introduction

Jon Krakauer's biography *Into the Wild* was published in 1996 and follows the life and death of Chris McCandless, a young upper middle class American who after graduating from Emory University became estranged from his family, donated all his savings to charity, changed name to Alexander Supertramp and travelled around the United States taking up random jobs on the way. After two years McCandless ventured into the Alaskan wilderness in search of a transcendental experience. He managed to survive for four months before starving to death at the age of 24. The book is an expansion of Krakauer's 1993 article "Death of an Innocent", published in *Outside* magazine as a result of Krakauer's continued fascination with McCandless' life. Krakauer spent over a year retracing McCandless' steps which involved collecting material such as letters, journals and works of literature associated with McCandless and interviewing friends, family and people who happened to cross paths with McCandless. In his book, Krakauer also includes events of his own youth climbing the Alaskan mountain, Devil's Thumb as well as other similar stories of young men venturing into the wilderness. Although Krakauer explains that he could not write this biography from a completely objective perspective as "McCandless's strange tale struck a personal note that made a dispassionate rendering of the tragedy impossible" (x), he believes that the addition of his own life experiences would help to reveal some mysteries behind McCandless' life choices.

The reviewers of *Into the Wild* have mainly praised Krakauer for crafting McCandless's life into a "heart-rending drama of human yearning" (Lehmann-Haupt). However others have accused Krakauer of inventing and romanticising McCandless' experiences in Alaska, thereby turning a thieving poacher into a saint (Medred). It is fair to say that because *Into the Wild* is classified as a non-fiction book, the fascination with McCandless' life coloured by Krakauer's storytelling has divided readers into two sides. On the one hand, there are those who hail McCandless as a hero for his pursuit of escaping what he believed to be the limitations of American consumer society in order to search for freedom in the wilderness of Alaska. Even today, the story of McCandless inspires heaps of fans to travel to the derelict bus where McCandless spent the last time of his life. On the other hand, there are those who strongly criticise the life McCandless led. From the comments Krakauer received in response to the *Outside* magazine article, they especially condemn McCandless for the pain he caused his family by completely distance himself from them, accusing him of being "a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity" (Krakauer xi).

The focus of this essay, however, is not to praise or criticise the outcome of McCandless' life or the choices he made, but rather to investigate why McCandless chose the "wilderness" as an escape from American mainstream society. McCandless is unsurprisingly far from the first one who sought refuge from society in the American wilderness and so it is also of interest to research the foundation as well as the limitations of the wilderness ideology depicted in *Into the Wild*. Based on that, I will apply a deconstructive approach in order to facilitate the aims of this paper. Lois Tyson explains that finding binary oppositions in a text and identifying which opposition is favoured can reveal the text's ideology; furthermore, "[i]n order to discover the limitations of the ideology... one must examine the ways in which the two members of the opposition are not completely opposite, the ways in which they overlap or share some things in common" (254). After a close reading, it is evidently the dichotomy of society and wilderness that makes the ideology of wilderness possible. That is, the belief that one can exit the former and enter the latter. The privileged term of the opposition is wilderness, though the text also reveals other associated privileged oppositions like truth, adventure, freedom and individualism. A deconstruction of the binary oppositions will, however, demonstrate that the oppositions carry traces of each other, which proves that the concept of these polar oppositions is an illusion. Ultimately, through the theory of deconstruction this paper will reveal the limitations of the wilderness ideology; one cannot truly exit society and enter wilderness because they both share common traits and are therefore not opposites.

In the next sections I will investigate the cultural construction of the American wilderness in order to reveal the origin of the wilderness ideology. I will then further describe the theory of deconstruction, followed by an identification of the privileged binary oppositions in *Into the Wild*. Finally, the identified binary oppositions in the text will be deconstructed.

The Cultural Construction of American Wilderness

In this section I will focus on the cultural context behind McCandless' and many Americans' fascination with the wilderness. Before the 18th century, the concept of wilderness had almost the opposite meaning from the idyllic and romanticised view as a refuge from civilisation that attracts many Americans today. When the Europeans first arrived in the Americas, the concept of wilderness mostly had biblical connotations (Cronon 70). According to the Bible, wilderness was understood to be the opposite of "paradise" as it was to the

wilderness where Adam and Eve were sent after being thrown out of the Garden of Eden (Williams 11).

The change towards a positive view of the American wilderness started in the 18th century; however, it was not until the 19th century it became an established thought, which was mainly due to the cultural movement Romanticism and the American frontier (Cronon 71). With the advent of the former, wilderness was all of a sudden glorified and thought of as a place of the sublime and supernatural where one was most likely to meet and be one with God. Romanticism would also influence famous American nature writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who also praised nature as a true foundation of religion (Nash 86) and were major figures within the philosophical movement “transcendentalism”. The new positive opinion of wilderness was also caused by the emerging industrialisation and materialism that made many feel lost and insecure (Nash 86). As a consequence, they turned to the wilderness, which they believed had remained in a permanent unchanged state, unlike the rapidly growing society, in order to restore meaning in their lives. In his essay “Walking” Thoreau summed up this thought when he notably claimed that “in Wilderness is the preservation of the world” (thoreau.eserver.org).

The frontier ideology reached its peak with historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous 1893 thesis in which he claimed that America’s last frontier had disappeared. Turner believed that American wilderness was the foundation on which American identity had been shaped. When the European settlers arrived in the 17th century and moved to the American wilderness they “shed the trappings of civilization, rediscovered their primitive racial energies, reinvented direct democratic institutions, and by reinfused themselves as with vigour, an independence, and a creativity that the source of American democracy and national character” (Cronon 75). Basically, according to Turner, the wilderness had shaped the European settlers into refined Americans and now that the last frontier had disappeared an important part of American identity was lost. As America as a nation could not compete with the vast history, strong traditions and artistic accomplishments of the European countries (Nash 69), the incomparable and formative wilderness was very important to many American nationalists who had acknowledged that the greatness of the American wilderness was “a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem” (Nash 67).

As a consequence of these two movements, increasingly more Americans started to believe that the wilderness was the last place where one could once again be a free spirit far away from modern materialistic society (Cronon 75). The wilderness supporters, however, tended to have something in common; many of them were actually well-off white men from

the city who had not grown up anywhere near what they considered to be “wilderness” (Cronon 76). And so ironically, mainly the men who benefitted most from society and had least experience of living off the land were the ones who started regarding wilderness as a refuge from society. Under these circumstances, the concept “frontier masculinity” emerged. Based on research by Bonnet 1996, Little and Leyshon 2003, Miller 2004 and Kimmel 1987 on the subject, Sine Anahita and Tamara L. Mix explain that “[f]rontier masculinity as an ideal is built on romanticized understandings of wilderness, rugged self-sufficiency, courage, masculine bodily strength, autonomous individualism, and active subordination of nature” (333). The wilderness was considered to be a pure uninhabited land where men could be free men without the restrictions of society and its domesticating, feminine tendencies (Anahita et al. 334). Another great myth about the concept of wilderness was, of course, that it was believed to be uninhabited land, which completely ignores the fact that indigenous people had been living there for thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans (Cronon 77). Although the American wilderness is considered a vital part of what it means to be American, it is fairly clear that the idea of wilderness and the last frontier as concepts could not exist without society because that is also from where the concepts were partially constructed.

Alaska

As the main events of Krakauer’s book takes place in Alaska, it is important to also briefly explain the historical context of Americas’ 49th state. Alaska was purchased from the Russian Empire in 1867; however, at the time, it was mainly considered an uninhabitable wasteland. In 1879, nature writer John Muir was one of the first to release publications on the beauty of Alaska, which started to attract increasingly more tourists and, as a consequence, turned Alaska into a kind of wilderness mecca (Nash 275). As the last frontier of the West had ceased to exist in the 1890s according to Turner, more people started to consider Alaska as a newfound last frontier where a pure wilderness experience was still possible. At the end of the same decade the Alaskan Gold Rush started, which saw the arrival of thousands of gold hunters. Unsurprisingly, many of them turned out to be normal “city folks seeking a frontier experience. Many, in effect, tourists. Gold provided an excuse to leave urban situations...” (Nash 284). Authors such as Jack London, who had spent a winter in Alaska during the gold rush, inspired even more people to head north with publications like *The Call of the Wild* (1903). Alaska with its vast wilderness was ideal for frontier masculinity and according to Anahita and Mix many Alaskan state policies have been based on this concept (332). Although the indigenous people who already lived in Alaska were not killed or forcibly

removed like in other parts of the U.S, they were completely ignored in order for the concept of pure, uninhabited wilderness to exist (Nash 276-277). Alaska is even today considered by many to be a last frontier and, as a result, still attracts people who are looking for the wilderness experience that inspired so many to head to Alaska at the end of the 19th century. “McCandless [who] had been infatuated with London since childhood” (Krakauer 45) was certainly one of these people

The Theory of Deconstruction

Deconstruction is a term invented by the Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida at the end of 1960s. The theory “refers to a series of techniques for reading texts...[which] are connected to a set of philosophical claims about language and meaning” (Balkin “Deconstruction” 1). Derrida was inspired by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s idea that words only have meaning based on their difference in relation to other words. For example, according to Saussure’s structure of language, a word or a “sign”, as he referred it to, follows the formula $Sign = Signifier + Signified$. *Signifier* stands for the sound image of the sign and *Signified* stands for the concept of which the signifier denotes (Saussure 20). In other words, the word “cat” (signifier) consists of the word we hear when someone pronounces it and the mental image (signified) of a four-legged furry animal we imagine when we hear the word. The reason why we can understand the meaning of these signs is due to our ability to recognise the difference between each item (Tyson 213). Basically, we know that a “cat” is a “cat” because it is not a “horse” or a “dog”. If we thought all animals were cats then the words “horse” and “dog” would have no meaning; accordingly, difference gives each word its identity. Furthermore, according to Saussure, the understanding of difference is most easily perceived through *binary oppositions* (Tyson 213). For example, we understand the meaning of “hot” because it is the opposite of “cold”.

The notion of binary oppositions, however, has been central in basically all Western philosophy since Plato. These polar oppositions as Derrida noticed are also hierarchical where “[o]ne of the two terms controls the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), holds the superior position” (*Positions* 36). Derrida uses the term “metaphysics” or “metaphysics of presence” to describe this kind of western philosophy because the favoured oppositions are privileged for “a kind of 'presence' over a corresponding kind of 'absence.' To Derrida, Western philosophical concepts proceed from the hidden premise that what is most apparent to our consciousness—what is most simple, basic, or immediate—is most real, true, foundational or important” (Balkin “Deconstructive Practice” 6). What metaphysics believe to be the most

“present” oppositions are classified as foundational or “originary” whereas the “absent” oppositions are thought of as deviations from the foundational opposition or the “transcendental signified” as Derrida terms it. As the name of the term reveals, the “transcendental signified” is believed to be outside time and space; “a concept independent of language” (*Positions* 20). This kind of thought is in many ways similar to that of many religions and so in order to describe Derrida’s term as simply as possible, I will use the binary opposition God/Satan. Basically, God is good and Satan is evil; however, according to the bible, God created the world, the earth and everything existing on it, which means that God also created Satan. Therefore God stands in the centre and Satan is a deviation from God. The metaphysical belief in a transcendental truth outside of time and language was, however, what Derrida considered to be a big illusion and, as a consequence, deconstruction is, simply put, a practice in “unearthing evidence of difference within their claims of absolute truth” (Ryan 65).

Going back to Saussure’s formula about the structure of language *Sign = Signifier + Signified*, Derrida then claimed that the signifier “never reaches the point when it refers to a concept, a signified” (Tyson 252). Even what is believed to be the concept of, for example, a “cat” is really more chains of signifiers referring to more chains of signifiers which have been acquired through the experiences of one’s life (Tyson 252). And so Derrida argues that there are no transcendental oppositions, they are all just part of different discourses. As he puts it, “the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences” (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 2). Ultimately, what is believed to be the favoured, foundational or independent opposition is really equally dependent on its unprivileged opposition “because both are related to each other in a system of mutual dependences and differences” (Balkin “Deconstructive Practice” 10). By combining the French words “to differ” and “to defer” Derrida invented the term *différance* as a way to describe this situation of mutual dependence and difference. Balkin explains that

[d]ifférance simultaneously indicates that (1) the terms of an oppositional hierarchy are differentiated from each other (which is what determines them); (2) each term in the hierarchy defers the other (in the sense of making the other term wait for the first term), and (3) each term in the hierarchy defers to the other (in the sense of being fundamentally dependent upon the other). (“Deconstructive Practice” 11)

When it comes to applying the methodology of deconstruction to a text, Derrida offers the following explanation:

An opposition of metaphysical concepts (for example speech/writing, presence/absence, etc.) is never the face-to-face of two terms, but a hierarchy and an order of subordination.

Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to neutralisation: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practise an overturning of the classical opposition, and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticises. (*Margins of Philosophy* 329)

In other words, deconstructing a text involves recognising the hierarchical oppositions and then temporarily reversing the hierarchical order as a way to search for new perceptions about the text (Balkin “Deconstructive Practice” 5) and discover the limitations of the text’s ideology (Tyson 262). Derrida’s idea of *trace* is also crucial in order to make deconstruction possible. That process essentially involves finding similarities between the binary oppositions. Like a yin and yang symbol, Derrida believed that each polar opposition carries traces of each other and so “by identifying the traces of the concepts in each other, we identify their mutual conceptual dependence” (Balkin “Deconstructive Practice” 11).

In Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, the most apparent binary opposition is society/wilderness where the latter is clearly favoured. Thus, the aim of this paper is to apply the methodology of deconstruction to the analysis of the text and its context in order to uncover that the two binary terms are not truly opposites and that they do, in fact, share some similarities. Ultimately, the purpose of deconstructing binary oppositions is to reveal contradictions that demonstrate the limitations of the ideology the text advocates (260 Tyson).

Evidence of Binary Oppositions in the Text

In this section I will present the evidence found in Krakauer’s work that illustrates the hierarchy of the binary opposition society/wilderness. McCandless’s core ideology is evident in a letter that he sent to his friend Ronald A. Franz, whom he met during his travels:

“[s]o 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. The very basic core of a man’s living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun. If you want to get more out of life, Ron, you must lose your inclination for monotonous security and adopt a helter-skelter style of life that will at first appear to you to be crazy. But once you become accustomed to such a life you will see its full meaning and its incredible beauty” (Krakauer 58).

McCandless associated life within “society” with negative terms like security, conformity and conservatism. He especially believed that security contributed to the illusion of happiness that

hindered so many people from actually changing their repetitious, futile lifestyle patterns. According to McCandless, the ever-changing horizon that constitutes the joy of life is associated with the term adventure. The term adventure, in turn, requires adopting a vagabond lifestyle outside of society. The textual evidence demonstrates that the polar opposition security/adventure is related to society/wilderness. What McCandless refers to as “outside of society” becomes clear when he states that he had been “poisoned by civilization” (Krakauer 162) and wanted to “take refuge in nature” (Krakauer 188). McCandless believed that wilderness was the opposite of society, which led him to assume that he could walk out of society and into the wilderness in order to find purity and absolute truth or as Krakauer puts it; “a raw, transcendent experience” (ix).

McCandless’s logic of associating wilderness with truth is a direct outcome of associating society with falsehood. After all, McCandless took to the wilderness in order to “kill the false being within” (Krakauer 162), which he believed was created by society. Evidence of McCandless’ quest for truth as well as his contempt for materialistic society is evident in one of his highlighted passages from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*: “Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices” (qtd in Krakauer 117). Coming from an affluent upbringing, McCandless most likely took Thoreau’s quote personally as he could relate to the fact that money and material abundance did not contribute to happiness in his own life. McCandless had also written the word “truth” at the top of the page which further reflects his wilderness ideology. He essentially wanted to remove himself from what he believed to be a meaningless existence in society and venture into the wilderness in order to find truth.

McCandless’s resentment towards society is further displayed in an interview with Franz in which he tells us that “McCandless’ face would darken with anger and he’d fulminate about his parents or politicians or the endemic idiocy of mainstream American life” (Krakauer 53). McCandless wanted to find meaning in life (Krakauer 58, 103, 167) which the institutions of American society failed to provide him with. Lack of purpose and being unable to relate to the norms of society escalated to disappointment and anger which led McCandless to search for life purpose elsewhere. Leaving society, as Krakauer concludes, would finally mean that McCandless “was unencumbered, emancipated from the stifling world of his parents and peers, a world of abstraction and security and material excess, a world in which he felt grievously cut off from the raw throb of existence” (22). In other words, McCandless’

anger is based on the idea that he was limited and cheated by society for not giving him meaning in life and, as a consequence, he associated society with falsehood. This belief also led McCandless to associate his new life outside of society with freedom. In a letter to Wayne Westerberg, for example, McCandless' claims that "I've decided that I'm going to live this life for some time to come. The freedom and simple beauty of it is just too good to pass up" (Krakauer 34). McCandless' new vagabond lifestyle made him feel free from the limitations of society and the absolute freedom was to be found in the Alaskan wilderness (Krakauer 162).

Following McCandless journey into the Alaskan wilderness it is clear that he associated wilderness with individualism similar to the concept of frontier masculinity. Although he made new friends on the journey, McCandless mainly travelled alone and made sure to be on his way again before becoming too close to anyone (Krakauer 56). McCandless' fear of intimacy is most likely an outcome of the strained relationship with his parents that finally led him to completely cut contact with everyone he knew. McCandless' longing to experience individualism in the wilderness is evident in a conversation with Gaylord Stuckey just before walking into the Alaskan wilderness in which he stated that "he didn't want to see a single person, no airplanes, no sign of civilization. He wanted to prove to himself that he could make it on his own, without anybody else's help" (Krakauer 158). On a sheet of plywood, inside the derelict bus that served as his home during his time in the Alaskan wilderness, McCandless wrote an even clearer statement of romanticised individualism: "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 162). Writing in third person could also be seen as statement of McCandless' transformation to Alexander Supertramp and the quest for identity which he believed could be found through rugged individualism in the Alaskan Wilderness. And so if "individualism" is related to wilderness then of course "group" is related to society which presents yet another related binary opposition.

To conclude these passages we learn that McCandless thought "society" had poisoned his soul and, as a consequence, wanted to find spiritual fulfilment in the "wilderness". Apart from the main binary opposition society/wilderness there are also other related oppositions such as falsehood/truth, security/adventure, limitations/freedom and group/individualism which will be deconstructed in the following section.

Deconstructing the Binary Oppositions

In previous sections, I have demonstrated the hierarchy of the binary opposition society/wilderness as well as other related oppositions such as falsehood/truth, security/adventure, limitations/freedom and group/individualism. In order to further clarify the contradictions of these binary oppositions, it was also important to include a section on the cultural construction of the American wilderness. The section showed that the concept of American wilderness was partially created by society in order to shape an American identity. This demonstrates that the favoured element of the opposition, wilderness, could not exist without society and can therefore not be a transcendental signified outside time and space. As will be clarified later in the analysis, the two polar concepts share common traits and are equally dependent on each other in what Derrida refers to as a relation of *différance*.

Unaware of the cultural construction of the American wilderness, McCandless still believed that the further into the wilderness he walked the closer he would come to some kind of sublime absolute truth and, in turn, further away from the falsehood of society (Krakauer 162). According to that mind-set and the traditional frontier mentality extolled by writers he admired, McCandless' final journey to Alaska becomes fairly logical. In the extreme wilderness of what is considered to be the last frontier, McCandless could finally come closer to the truth he was looking for, which he describes as "the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution" (Krakauer 162). However, as described above, McCandless' romanticised idea of the Alaskan wilderness was largely a creation of similar urban white men from well-to-do backgrounds who wanted a wilderness experience through which they could live out their frontier masculinity fantasies. As a result, the idea of finding truth in the wilderness as opposed to in society is rather contradictory because the concept of the former is partially constructed out of misconceptions and falsehoods of the latter. And so one cannot completely exit the falsehood of society and enter the truth of wilderness because they are not binary opposites; they both share common traits and are concepts mutually dependent on each other in a relation of *différance*.

The concept of wilderness as a transcendental signified is therefore an illusion and that might be what McCandless realised when he wrote his last words "Happiness only real when shared" (188) after reading Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. McCandless' statement and that he tried return to society, only to find it impossible to cross the Teklanika River that was at full flood, suggests a wish to live among people where happiness can be shared. This is in stark contrast to the autonomous self-sufficiency and rugged individualism that constitutes the ideal of frontier masculinity and wilderness ideology. McCandless could have come to the

conclusion that his romanticised idea of venturing into the Alaskan wilderness in search for a transcendental experience was an unrealistic project that would never materialise and therefore he changed his mind and wanted to return to society. It could be suggested that McCandless came to the same realisation as Thoreau did, after his own experience with the extreme conditions in nature, that “man’s optimum environment is a blend of wildness and civilization” (Nash 81). This seems like a possible assumption based on McCandless’s highlighted passages in Tolstoy’s *Family Happiness* that also resonates with his last words stated above.

He was right in saying that the only certain happiness in life is to live for others....

I have lived through much, and now I think I have found what is needed for happiness. 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. And then, on top of all that, you for a mate, and children, perhaps—what more can the heart of a man desire? (Krakauer 168)

A secluded life on the countryside combined with a life lived for others seem to be a wish to find the perfectly balanced environment of society and wilderness that Thoreau stated. It can at least be said that in these passages McCandless seem to move away from the idea of finding absolute truth and a transcendental experience in the extreme conditions of the Alaskan wilderness.

When further investigating the binary opposition falsehood/truth in relation to society and wilderness it becomes clear that Krakauer’s narrative voice versus his portrayal of McCandless’ wilderness ideology also show inconsistency. Krakauer as a biographer seem to shift from being a passive and objective storyteller to an active and subjective one that romanticises McCandless’ experiences. On the one hand he demonstrates the contradictions of finding truth in the wilderness by referring to other young men, including himself, who were drawn to Alaska for similar reasons and points out that none of them found the transcendent wilderness experience they were looking for. From his own experience after climbing the mountain Devil’s Thumb, Krakauer explains that “I thought climbing the Devil’s Thumb would fix all that was wrong with my life. In the end, of course, it changed almost nothing. But I came to appreciate that mountains make poor receptacles for dreams. And I lived to tell my tale” (154). Although McCandless stated in a letter to Franz that “[y]ou are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships” (Krakauer 58),

we are left with the idea that McCandless most likely changed his mind about the romanticised rugged individualism in the wilderness because one of the last statements he left behind was the note “happiness only real when shared” (188), which was described in the previous paragraph. Krakauer implies that McCandless might have realised the contradictions with the wilderness ideology and was once again ready to return to society (188).

On the other hand, Krakauer romanticises McCandless’ life and ideology, most notably during his time in Alaska. From McCandless’ experiences of walking into the Alaskan wilderness, Krakauer is faced with the problem of having no other material to draw from than McCandless’ last belongings, including some works of literature with a few of McCandless’ highlighted passages and notes and McCandless’ journal of which Krakauer states “is little more than a tally of plants foraged and game killed” (182). As a consequence of the lack of appreciative descriptions of the surroundings by McCandless, “Krakauer speculates that McCandless must have developed an emotional awareness of the land, perhaps to the extent that it becomes emotional consciousness” (Kam 5). Krakauer even goes as far as to compare McCandless’s Alaskan experience to that of cultural ecologist Paul Shepard’s observation of the nomadic group Bedouin, originating from the Arabian-Syrian desert whose “life is so profoundly in transaction with nature that there is no place for abstraction or esthetics or a ‘natural philosophy’ which can be separated from the rest of his life...” (qtd in Krakauer 183). In other words, Krakauer suggests that the reason why McCandless did not write more passages about the environment is due to his profound experience of nature. Although there is next to no evidence to support Krakauer’s claim, this glorification of McCandless might, however, be what Kam refers to as a strategical move by Krakauer as a storyteller in order to satisfy the intended reader, most likely to be the nature enthusiast (Kam 5).

In the last sentence before the epilogue when describing the last photo McCandless took of himself before dying of starvation is another instance where Krakauer romanticises McCandless’ life. Krakauer states that “there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God” (198). An interpretation of McCandless’ previous statement and realisation that happiness is only real when shared should indicate that a lonely death of starvation in the wilderness must have been an extremely tragic experience. However, as Kam points out, Krakauer “turns [McCandless’] death into a transcendent, holy experience in which the subject peacefully embraces death” (6). As a storyteller this is of course a powerful way to end an adventure. What is interesting though is that in order to apply this dramatic effect, Krakauer must acknowledge the existence of the privileged term of the opposition and the idea of finding absolute truth in the wilderness.

In a way, Krakauer's own voice fulfils McCandless' quest for a transcendental experience in the Alaskan wilderness, which partially makes *Into the Wild* such a fascinating story.

However, due to lack of material, Krakauer cannot support McCandless' Alaskan experiences with textual evidence.

Krakauer's way of romanticising the life and death of McCandless has gained the admiration of many followers, some who have even been inspired to set out on their own journeys into the Alaskan wilderness in search of a transcendent experience. McCandless' death has also been exposed to a lot of criticism due to him being unprepared for the extreme conditions in Alaska. Interestingly enough, as Krakauer confesses, most criticism had come from local Alaskans, which in a way confirms the idea that "[t]he dream of unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living" (Cronon 79). The advocates of wilderness still seem to mainly be the ones furthest removed from the concept they are actually advocating.

The idea that wilderness is a platform for rugged individualism and freedom obviously arouses mixed feelings in people in Western cultures. Individualism and freedom are, for example, the foundation of the ideology of capitalism on which American society is based on and precisely the society McCandless tried to escape. Whether or not a capitalist society can actually fulfil these ideals is of course another thing and conducting a brief Marxist deconstruction of the ideology of capitalism will clearly present us with a lot of contradictions regarding the concepts of rugged individualism and freedom. The ideology of capitalism rests on the notion that every individual is equal and has the freedom to acquire large sums of wealth based on how hard one works. A few people like Steve Jobs and Oprah Winfrey have managed to realise this ideal of rags-to-riches through hard work; however, these are rare exceptions which the ideology of capitalism tries to generalise. In fact, as can be clearly seen in America, capitalist society is not rooted in equality; just look at the big proportion of poor and homeless people who will never accumulate wealth no matter how hard they work. When the ideology of capitalism is put into practice in a society that is not based on equality, "the acquisition of a wealthy lifestyle for a few—rests on the misery of the many" (Tyson 58) and so, in other words, the individual freedom to acquire wealth, which capitalism advocates, can in reality only be achieved by a small minority of citizens.

When scrutinizing the concept of rugged individualism, Tyson explains that it "is an ideology that romanticizes the individual who strikes out alone in pursuit of a goal not easily achieved, a goal that often involves risk and one that most people would not readily undertake" (Tyson 60). Noticeably the description is almost identical to that of frontier masculinity as

described previously by Anahita et al. Another distinct notion is that the ideology advocates the ideal that all of us are independent individuals free from the influence of other ideologies; however, this is clearly a delusion because institutions like family, schools and corporations constantly influence the choices we make and play a part in forming our worldview (Ryan 118). In fact, according to Marxism, rugged individualism is an “oppressive ideology because it puts self-interest above the needs—and even above the survival—of other people. By keeping the focus on “me” instead of on “us,” rugged individualism works against the well-being of society as a whole and of underprivileged people in particular” (Tyson 60). This is of course a little bit ironic because McCandless was outraged over the injustices and unequal distribution of wealth in the world (123).

As the concept of American wilderness was partially constructed by people from the city (Nash 44,) especially the very people who benefitted the most from capitalist society (Cronon 76) and that the ideology of rugged individualism and frontier masculinity are similar, it is fair to assume that they applied the same principles of individualism and freedom within the ideology of capitalism and reassigned them to the wilderness. This also assumes that these two favoured members of the binary oppositions associated with wilderness carry traces from society, especially American society.

McCandless thought of himself as a free and adventurous spirit and that security was a hindrance to his personal development. However, when investigating the security/adventure opposition and how far away from security McCandless journey really took him there might be some contradictions. When McCandless walked into the Alaskan wilderness, he declared the following: “Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate Freedom. An extremist. Anaesthetic 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” (Krakauer 162). McCandless seem to assume that he had travelled the world for the last two years and was on the verge of setting out on his greatest adventure in the Alaskan wilderness. He believed his journey was an escape from the societal securities and limitations and that it was, firstly, a way to experience absolute freedom on the road and, ultimately, a transcendental encounter in the wilderness. McCandless was clearly not afraid to romanticise and exaggerate the extent of his journey and adventure because he did not really travel the earth. Apart from briefly crossing the Mexican border on his canoe trip and crossing Canada in order to reach Alaska, McCandless did, in fact, just travel one country. The United States might be a large country with a lot of cultural diversity, but its citizens still mostly share common traditions, a common language and are

exposed to common national values such as the American Dream promoting liberty, freedom, equality, opportunity, democracy and other similar ideals. These traits are all elements contributing to familiarity which is closely related to security. For example, a person from the American West Coast moving to the East Coast will most likely not suffer from an extreme culture shock in the same way as if the same person were to move to say, China or even a relatively near neighbouring Latin American country.

Interestingly enough, Krakauer mocks Thoreau's famous statement about being satisfied with just having travelled in Concord in the 1850s (Krakauer 182); however, having travelled only the U.S nearly like McCandless 140 years later is not that much more adventurous. Investigating McCandless's journey from this angle we can see that he was still within the security of his native country. McCandless was, for example, not exposed to any cultural differences, language barriers, tropical diseases, different social models or similar circumstances that are usually part of an "adventurous" journey abroad. Even when investigating the most extreme part of McCandless's journey in the Alaskan wilderness, he was never far from the security of society as Krakauer points out (164). Had it not been for McCandless's misjudgement of Teklanika River being at full flood by the time he decided to return to society, he could have just as easily walked back to security (Krakauer 168). If McCandless had managed to walk back to security we would most likely never have heard of McCandless's adventure or maybe not even considered it as such.

When investigating the other side of the argument that society equals security there are also contradictions. Many people in cities like New York, London, Paris and Shanghai would probably describe their existence as a struggle against financial insecurity, job insecurity and emotional insecurity. However, coming from a prosperous white upper middle-class suburb of Washington, D.C. McCandless had never experienced these sorts of struggles in society and therefore he associated society with security. Less fortunate people on the other hand would most likely not make the same associations. For example, had McCandless walked into a favela in Rio de Janeiro instead of the Alaskan wilderness would not that have been classified as an adventure where even fewer would have expected him to last 16 weeks as was the case in Alaska? McCandless would not even need to travel that far, there are many parts in American cities too that are far from secure. In fact, McCandless did stay "on the streets with bums, tramps, and winos for several weeks" (Krakauer 37) in Las Vegas as well as in San Diego (Krakauer 54); should that not also be characterised as an adventure far from security even though it took place in society? However, from the viewpoint of McCandless' privileged background, society was consequently associated with security.

Like many other young white men from similar privileged circumstances, as I have mentioned earlier in this paper, McCandless assumed that the concept of adventure could only be experienced in the wilderness in the form of rugged individualism and frontier masculinity. Ironically, this romanticised view is also a cornerstone of the ideology of capitalism. This could explain why people who have benefitted the most from society tend to make up a big portion of the advocates of the wilderness ideology. They just applied what they considered positive traits with capitalist society and applied them to the concept of wilderness. With that said, I believe it is safe to assume that a deconstruction of the binary opposition security/adventure in relation to society and wilderness clearly shows conflicts. Although McCandless experienced drastic life changes when he commenced his journey into the wilderness, the concepts of security and adventure can clearly be experienced in society as well as in the wilderness because they carry traces of each other.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to examine why McCandless ventured into the wilderness as a means to liberate himself from society. In order to comprehend what inspires certain kinds of people to seek refuge in the wilderness, I also investigated the origin of the concept of American wilderness and how it had been culturally constructed. Through the theory of deconstruction I identified the hierarchy of the most evident binary opposition society/wilderness and examined the contradictions of the wilderness ideology that is promoted by McCandless. As it turns out, McCandless is far from the only one to use the wilderness as an escape from society. Ever since the 19th century, when the concept of the American wilderness as a platform for rugged individualism and frontier masculinity was established, people, especially young men who come from well-to-do backgrounds, like McCandless have continuously sought refuge in the wilderness. Inspired by nature writers such as London and Thoreau and by the belief in the polar opposition society/wilderness, McCandless was in search of a transcendental experience. A quest that was only feasible if he could exit society and enter wilderness. However, a deconstruction of the binary opposition which involves identifying what the polar oppositions shared in common revealed that society and wilderness are not entirely opposite. Each of the associated binary oppositions falsehood/truth, security/adventure, limitations/freedom and group/individualism also demonstrate similarities with ideas of society and wilderness respectively. As a consequence this also demonstrates the inconsistency with the wilderness ideology, as one cannot exit one

of the opposite categories and enter the other because, they are equally dependent on each other in what Derrida refers to as a relation of *différance*.

Interestingly enough, a deconstruction of Krakauer's *Into the Wild* revealed that the ideology of wilderness share many similarities with the ideology of capitalism such as the concepts of rugged individualism, frontier masculinity and freedom. McCandless who despised American capitalist society was obviously not aware of the origin of his own wilderness ideology and its limitations. Furthermore, Krakauer's own ideology versus his portrayal of McCandless' also demonstrate inconsistency. This seems to coincide with the lack of material Krakauer had to work with when McCandless ventured into the Alaskan wilderness. As McCandless' sad ending draws near, Krakauer's storytelling begins to romanticise McCandless' wilderness ideology and even goes as far as to grant him the transcendental experience he sought in the form of his death. Krakauer does state that he is not an impartial biographer (x) and there is, of course, no denying that McCandless death at such a young age is a tragedy; however, it is Krakauer's glorification of McCandless's life that ultimately turns "a young adventurer into a legend greater than the man himself (Kam 10).

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