

Same Same but Different: The Ripples of Thoreau's *Walden* in Penn's *Into the Wild*

Walden is Henry David Thoreau's narrative about his two-year retreat at Walden Pond. Thoreau went into the woods in order to "live deliberately" and "suck out all the marrow of life" (1028). Sean Penn's 2007 film *Into the Wild* – based on the narrative of the same title by Jon Krakauer – tells Christopher McCandless's twentieth-century trek through America and into the Alaskan wild. Sandra Shapshay and Steven Wagschal call the film *Into the Wild* "a tragic action," and classify Christopher McCandless as "an idealistic young adult from an upper-middle-class family, who tries to gain freedom from society by leaving it." According to Shapshay and Wagschal, McCandless is "strongly influenced" by Henry David Thoreau (170). Others, like Jonath Raskin, call Penn's film an "adventure picture with a moral message," a story that tries to "make sense of McCandless's outward-bound odyssey" (200). According to Raskin, McCandless only distantly resembles Thoreau and is an "all-too-predictable young man who read too little, too much, and not deeply enough" (202). I believe the truth lies somewhere in the middle; Despite the differences between the two, Christopher McCandless's motives to journey into the wilderness, as represented in Sean Penn's 2007 film *Into the Wild*, resemble, just as much as they differ from, Henry David Thoreau's motivations for moving into the woods of Walden Pond.

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods;

There is a rapture on the lonely shore;

There is society, where none intrudes,

By the deep sea, and music in its roar:

I love not man the less, but Nature more,

(Lord Byron qtd. in *Into the Wild*)

There are a few striking similarities in Thoreau's and McCandless's stories. Lord Byron's lines illustrate them most profoundly: both Thoreau and McCandless have conflicted feelings toward nature and society. Thoreau tells us that one of the most important reasons for moving into the woods was his love of nature. He sees in nature a dynamic arena, a display of ever changing and reoccurring wonders that have the ability to spiritually guide us, but which form a bleak contrast with modern society: "you may melt your metals and cast them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me like the forms which this molten earth flows out into" (1141). Nature's simplicity is seen by Thoreau as a counterforce for a society that turns people into slaves of their possessions: "I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of" (982). McCandless, too, chooses the isolation and challenges of nature. His goal is "To find yourself at least once in the most ancient of human conditions. Facing the blind deaf stone alone, with nothing to help you but your hands and your own head." Penn's images of clouds, wide landscapes, and uninterrupted wildlife emphasize the lure of nature which, the film suggests, must have drawn McCandless in. Moreover, McCandless, like Thoreau, does not want to be a slave to society, and tells others that he thinks "careers are a twentieth-century invention," which he isn't interested in.

Both Thoreau and McCandless believe that independence from society and intellectual and spiritual growth are obscured by materialism. As McCandless's sister explains in the voice-over: "Chris wanted to emancipate himself from false securities and material excess." McCandless's issues with materialism first surface in *Into the Wild* when his parents tell him they want to buy him a new car. McCandless's response is: "A new car? Why would I want a new car? Are you worried what the neighbours might think?" McCandless doesn't need a new car; he doesn't want any of these "things, things, things," and he definitely doesn't care about what others think of it. In addition, he gives away all his money to charity and destroys all his 'plastic'. Paraphrasing Thoreau, he says: "rather than love, than money, than faith, than fame, than

fairness, give me truth.” Thoreau, too, objects to materialism as he warns his readers that “Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end” (1007-08). For Thoreau, anti-materialism is not just a way of living, it is also a spiritual stance (1151). Thoreau believes that simplifying one’s life does not mean it becomes less pleasant, quite the opposite: it will enrich it (997). He begs his fellow citizens to “not become the tools of their tools,” but instead appreciate the differences among men, who, according to Thoreau, all march to “a different drummer” (1000, 1152).

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. (Thoreau 1149)

No matter how similar, there are a few very clear distinctions between Thoreau’s and McCandless’s motivations as well. Thoreau makes his intentions for embarking on his adventure very clear at the beginning of his narrative: his independence from society was an experiment that had always been intended to be a temporary one. Thoreau wanted to see if he could live on the bare essentials; he wanted to search for meaning and self-knowledge, to find himself spiritually and develop himself intellectually, for Thoreau’s time at Walden Pond also included his desire to write and deliver a message to society. The “mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” he writes, and Thoreau is trying to find ways to convince his fellow men that all can reach for their own stars (984). He does not want to withdraw himself from society but is rather trying to find the answers to the questions it poses. McCandless’s intentions to leave his life behind are far less clear-cut than Thoreau’s, and Penn’s *Into the Wild* actually leaves us speculating on whether McCandless had the intention of returning to society at all. *Into the Wild* gives us the impression that McCandless does not have a pre-constructed plan – “I told you;

we're going nowhere!" – and it is clear that he is entirely unprepared for what is in store.

McCandless educates himself with practical knowledge, but this cannot prevent him from unintentionally wasting the meat of the moose he has killed. He later refers to this disaster as "one of the worst tragedies of my life"; ironically, the ultimate tragic consequence of his naivety is that he eats the berries that lead to his death.

As opposed to Thoreau, McCandless is not trying to find his way within society, but basically decides to check out from it. McCandless leaves his family and friends behind, without letting them know where he is going or maintaining any contact with them. He doesn't consider relationships to be the main force behind "the joy of life," and he avoids making lasting connections on his journey. McCandless's sister tells us that Chris discovered that their parents were "masking an ugly truth," which might have led to his abrupt and complete disconnection from his past. For McCandless "there is no truth" in his present life, and so he decides to look for it in far and remote places. Thoreau, on the other hand, stays in contact with his friends and acquaintances the entire time he is at Walden Pond. Moreover, as Maura D'Amore points out, "Thoreau's house was not located in the wilderness; it stood about a mile and a half south of Concord's centre on land [...] that was owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson." Thoreau had other people living close by, and "the community knew about his experiment" (69-70). Thoreau, therefore, never gives us the impression that his stay at Walden Pond was an escape from his private world or the people in it. If anything, his narrative shows his true appreciation of both.

McCandless's road trip of two years was just as big a part of his story as were his last months of solitude in the Alaskan wild, and McCandless's escapism does not comply with Thoreau's primary objectives of gaining self-knowledge and insights for public benefit. Moreover, *Walden* is a well-constructed narrative by Thoreau's own hand, while McCandless's story is not only based on indirect information, but also was never supposed to become a story in the first place. Therefore, a comparison of Thoreau's and McCandless's intentions for walking

“into the wild” can only be based on assumptions. However, Penn’s *Into the Wild* is most certainly more than a film that “struggles to understand why a college-educated young man [...] would throw away his privilege” (Raskin 198). Both Thoreau and McCandless wanted to find truth, away from society’s dictations, and within themselves. This is exactly what becomes clear in both Thoreau’s *Walden* and Penn’s *Into the Wild*. As Eddie Vedder sings on the soundtrack of *Into the Wild*, both men did not “fear” to be “alone,” and both believed they would “always be better-off than before.” Thoreau and McCandless had a motivation to change their way of life in exchange for self-reliance and knowledge. By doing so, they set an example for inquiring minds all over the world. To quote Lawrence Buell: “a myth of personality invests Thoreau and causes many [...] to hear him as a voice, and to think of his significance in terms of an exemplary life” (373). Penn’s 2007 film with Vedder’s soundtrack, too, has made an even bigger myth of McCandless than Krakauer ever could. Therefore, *Into the Wild* does not tell the story of a Thoreau-disciple gone bad, but shows us a searcher in the spirit of Thoreau – like *Walden*, *Into the Wild* tells us it is alright to “build castles in the air,” as long as you “put the foundations under them” (1149).

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