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**THE ROLE OF NATURE IN JON KRAKAUER'S *INTO THE WILD*  
AND SEAN PENN'S FILM ADAPTATION**  
**MA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the role of nature in Jon Krakauer's non-fiction book *Into the Wild* and Sean Penn's film adaptation of this book. The main aim is to observe the role of nature from three aspects: firstly, which is the role and function of nature in the narratives of the book and the film; secondly, how the role of nature in the narratives relates to the role of nature in the life of Christopher McCandless; thirdly, which role nature fulfils in the context of American cultural background.

The thesis consists of an Introduction, two core Chapters and a Conclusion. The Introduction elaborates on the background of Christopher McCandless, whose life is the topic of Krakauer's book, and McCandless's literary role models and their influence on him.

Chapter 1 will provide the theoretical framework for the paper. It elaborates on the relationship between nature and culture by drawing on ecocriticism and the literary tropes of pastoral and wilderness. Chapter 1 also focuses on the importance of nature in American cultural context and the notion of frontier within American culture.

Chapter 2 focuses on the comparison of the role of nature in book and the film in the light of the theoretical framework of Chapter 1. The chapter will look into the differences in the role of nature in the two types of medium and will try to explain the possible shifts in the focus.

The results of the analysis are presented in the conclusion.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	2
INTRODUCTION .....	4
CHAPTER I: THE REPRESENTATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF NATURE IN CULTURE.....	8
1.1 Ecocriticism – linking nature and culture.....	9
1.1.1 Construction of nature .....	12
1.1.2 Literary tropes: pastoral and wilderness .....	14
1.2 Nature in the context of American ideals .....	17
1.2.2 American transcendentalism.....	22
CHAPTER II – COMPARISON OF KRAKAUER’S BOOK AND PENN’S FILM ADAPTATION .....	25
2.1 Differences between narrative in print and in film.....	25
2.2 Discussion of Jon Krakauer’s book <i>Into the Wild</i> .....	27
2.2.1 <i>Into the Wild</i> as a first-wave ecocriticism nature text .....	27
2.2.2 Constructions and depictions of nature in Krakauer’s <i>Into the Wild</i> .....	30
2.2.3 The American mind in Krakauer’s <i>Into the Wild</i> : frontier and transcendentalism .....	37
2.3 Sean Penn’s film adaptation of <i>Into the Wild</i> .....	41
2.3.1 Representation of nature in <i>Into the Wild</i> the film .....	43
2.3.2 On the centralisation human relationships, character study and the narrator .....	50
CONCLUSION .....	54
REFERENCES .....	57
RESÜMEE .....	60

## INTRODUCTION

In 1993<sup>1</sup>, Chris McCandless' (though at some point on his quest into American wilderness he started to refer to himself as Alexander Supertramp) body was discovered in an abandoned bus on Stampede Trail in the Alaskan wilderness. In 1992, McCandless had decided to leave behind society in favour of wild nature. From a financially well-secured family, he had just obtained a university degree from Emory University and was expected to start law school. However, instead he decided to cut all ties with his family and former life and trek into the wilderness.

McCandless' story is told in a non-fiction book called *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer. Jon Krakauer is an American writer and a mountaineer and *Into the Wild* started out as an article in 1993 in *Outside* magazine<sup>2</sup>. The magazine article was published shortly after the body was found. The article got a lot of feedback and gained public's attention and Krakauer, who was moved by the young man's story, decided to investigate McCandless' doings over the two years he spent on the road. The result is a book, which depicts primarily McCandless' story and focuses on the call of the wild, attempting to understand people's need to get away from society. Though McCandless and his journey is the main focus, the book also includes the wilderness experiences of the author himself as well as other people whose contact with wild nature was triggered by the pull of nature (Novikov 2008: para 1). By not limiting his study to McCandless only, Krakauer highlights this issue through recounting the stories of different people in history. Moreover, Krakauer

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<sup>1</sup> Biographical data has been taken from <http://www.christophermccandless.info/>

<sup>2</sup> The original article - <sup>2</sup> [http://chsenglishap3.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/5/2/13523052/death\\_of\\_an\\_innocent-original\\_outside\\_magazine\\_article.pdf](http://chsenglishap3.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/5/2/13523052/death_of_an_innocent-original_outside_magazine_article.pdf)

(1996: x) also points out that while doing research for the book, he reflected upon other larger subjects as well, such as the complicated father-son relationships, young men's need for adventure and "the grip wilderness has on on the American imagination", enabling the reader to gain insight into the meaning of nature and its importance in American cultural context. Krakauer (1996: xi) also states that he tries to minimize his authorial presence in order to remain as neutral as possible. Krakauer does not aim to provide answers to all the questions that are included the book; rather, he asks more questions about society, about the relationship between human beings and nature, and how this relationship is seen and interpreted.

In the book, Krakauer also elaborates on another significant aspect of McCandless's travels. While looking into the reasons of McCandless' retreat into nature, Krakauer brings out that McCandless was greatly influenced by the literature he read. He was an avid reader and greatly admired Tolstoy for his choice of living a simple life, Thoreau for his fascination with nature and the search of morality in nature. He was also so deeply touched by Jack London's stories that at times he seemed to forget that they were fictional (IW: 45). Feeling disappointed in the society and his family and encouraged by his literary role models, he decided to seek a life without pretense and obligations, a life where he would be able to discover his true inner self. Hence nature, as it is portrayed in literature, was a source of inspiration for him (IW: 18, 28, 45).

Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* was turned into film of the same name in 2007. It was adapted for screen by Sean Penn and the film was very well received by film critics (Ebert 2007<sup>3</sup>, Metacritic 2007<sup>4</sup>). The film follows the storylines of the book, but, according to Eugene Novikov, it is not "faithful" to the original book:

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/into-the-wild>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/into-the-wild-2007>

McCandless' story is similarly personal to Sean Penn, but Penn is interested in neither journalism nor, really, philosophy. His *Into the Wild* is neither a documentary nor a treatise; it's a character study. Some ambiguity remains, but a lot of the questions that Krakauer asks, Penn and his actors answer – Krakauer's doubts turn into emphatic assertions. Where the book was a searching inquiry, the movie is a skilled, insightful dramatization. A good film? Very much so. Faithful? Ha. (Novikov 2008: para 4)

As Novikov points out, Krakauer's book and Penn's film adaptation of the book both tell the story of McCandless's journey, but place their main focus on different aspects of it: Krakauer chooses to stress the importance of human-nature relationship while Penn's adaptation invests more into human drama.

After McCandless's death and the publication of the book and even more so after the film, in turn, there are many followers to McCandless' story, who consider him and the book and the film based on his life as their guides in life. Just as McCandless looked up to Thoreau and London, they look up to him and trek into the wilderness<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, as it proved to be fatal for McCandless, not all fans of *Into the Wild* have returned from their Alaskan pilgrimages safe and sound<sup>6</sup>.

In order to study the role of nature in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and Sean Penn's adaptation, the thesis first will first elaborate on the relationship between nature and literature, exploring why nature and environment occupy such an important place in cultures in the first place. As Novikov claimed, Krakauer focuses more on the human-nature relationship while Penn focuses more on the relationships between characters. Despite the different foci, nature plays a role in Krakauer's book as well as Penn's film adaptation. A comparison of the book and the film will be conducted in the main body of the work. The aim of this comparison would be to see which is the nature's role when compared to the depiction of human relationships in the book and the film and how does

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<sup>5</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=3680748>  
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/18/alaska-into-the-wild-chris-mccandless-bus-mystic-hiker>

<sup>6</sup>There have been instances in which people have died trying to follow in McCandless' footsteps.  
<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/jacketcopy/2010/08/into-the-wild-fan-dies-.html>

nature reflect the main character's ideals; how the portrayal of nature derives from the respective genre conventions and the possible expectations of the audience. The results of the study are discussed in the conclusion.

## CHAPTER I: THE REPRESENTATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF NATURE IN CULTURE

In his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* Raymond Williams (1985: 219) states: "Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language". It is not Williams's intention to claim that the meanings of the other words he studies in his book, which discusses the history of a number of widely used and often misunderstood words, would be overt; rather, he aims to suggest that the word 'nature' is so widely used and seems to be so elementary that it is difficult to use only one definition and give an absolute meaning. Kalevi Kull (1998: 344) discusses the same topic and his view on the impossibility of defining nature in a singular manner is that "the notion of nature is itself the result of certain opposition and there are many ways to build up further binary oppositions in human-nature relationships used in different circumstances, which delimit or split nature in various ways", implying that the concept of nature comprises of multiple layers, at times embedded within each other.

Kull (1998: 346) points out that human-nature relationships are connected to deep cultural processes. Kull underscores Jacob von Uexküll's notion of *Umwelt*, which states that every organism has its own subjective environment, including human beings (Kull 1998: 354). However, it is precisely the human *Umwelt* which Kull considers to be problematic. He points out that the human *Umwelt* can be further divided into three separate dominions, with the nature outside the *Umwelt* – zero nature, absolute wilderness – in opposition with them (ibid.). *Umwelt* itself can be divided as follows: "**first** nature is the nature as we see, identify describe and interpret. **Second** nature is the nature which we



have materially transformed, this is materially translated nature, produced nature. **Third** nature is a virtual nature, as it exists in art and science" (Kull 1998: 355). Zero nature stands on its own and it is the "objective nature itself". First nature is zero nature filtered through language to our consciousness; second nature is the reflection of first nature as seen and manipulated by our minds and deeds; third nature is a construction, "the image of image of nature" (Kull 1998: 355). Although Kull (1998: 356) suggests that the role of zero nature and first nature is greatly diminished in a human *Umwelt*, he highlights that second nature has to be based on something, stressing the importance of zero nature and first nature as the source for other natures. Thus, the interpretation of physical nature is translated through our perception of it into our culture.

The following theoretical chapter aims to investigate the relationship between nature and culture both in general terms and more specifically in the context of American culture and ideals.

## **1.1 Ecocriticism – linking nature and culture**

Ecocriticism, the field devoted to the study of the nature-culture relationship, aims to pay attention to the importance of nature and its appropriation in culture. Greg Garrard (2004: 5) writes: "The widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term 'human' itself". Hence, it may be suggested that in terms of ecocriticism, humanity is not a fixed concept, but is open to analysis and the resulting re-interpretation. The influence of nature could be studied in any aspect of culture, but possibly the richest area for studying the representation of nature is literature. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism in terms of literature as follows:

Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. (Glotfelty 1996: xviii)

As a critical discourse ecocriticism acts as a mediator between the human and the nonhuman (Glotfelty 1996: xix), stressing the influence of the actual physical environment on human beings and the representation of human perceptions of nature in literature.

Ecocriticism as critical discourse has developed over time and changed its focus. Generally, the development of ecocriticism is divided into two waves. However, the boundary between the two waves and differences in their approaches is by no means clear-cut. Lawrence Buell (2005: 21), one of the key figures in ecocriticism, has analysed the differences between first-wave ecocriticism and second-wave ecocriticism. He explains that first-wave ecocriticism focused mainly on the divide between a human being and the natural environment, equating the environment with physical nature and seeking to unite humanity with the environment, or, as John Elder has put it, to overcome "the hierarchical separations between human beings and other elements of the natural world" (Elder quoted in Buell 2005: 22). This view also holds that nature writing is "the most representative environmental genre" (Buell 2005: 22). Second-wave ecocriticism, on the other hand, does not impose strict limits to what constitutes environment. Rather, the term environment does not apply only to nature, but also to artificial (built) environments and possible combinations of the two. Moreover, the two waves of ecocriticism have different views on humanity:

According to the former way of thinking, the prototypical human figure is a solitary human and the experience in question activates a primordial link between human and nonhuman. According to the latter, the prototypical human figure is defined by social category and the 'environment' is artificially constructed. (Buell 2005: 23)

Considering both of these approaches, Buell (2005: 23) comes to an important conclusion: "...in both instances the understanding of personhood is defined for better or for worse by environmental entanglement". In other words, humanity cannot be viewed as standing completely apart from the physical environment because they form an essential part in defining each other, similarly to Garrard's definition which pointed out the changeable nature of the definition of humanity.

Buell (2005: 7) states that ecocriticism is unlike other theories of culture and literature, because differently from feminism, for example, it does speak for the behalf of something (nature), but does not enable the speaker/writer to identify themselves with the subject - "no human can speak *as* the environment, *as* nature, *as* a nonhuman animal". The closest one can come to that is by writing about nature and studying texts to see how nature has been depicted, which means reading someone else's vision of it, thus creating a parallel with Kull's nature's multiplicity, where zero nature as the source of all interpretations passed through several filters before becoming a human construct of nature. Hence, it is hard to achieve an unbiased analysis of nature writing. Nature texts possibly come closest to actual nature when they focus on cases where humans come face to face with nature. This is suggested by Buell (2005: 8), who stresses the importance of texts depicting encounters with nature, believing that it is more efficient to analyse texts "where critical reflection is embedded within narratives of encounter with nature" than to engage in the discussion of elaborate theories. What becomes relevant for the analyser is the choice of texts. In his earlier writings, Buell's (2005: 25) most important requirement for an environmental text is that "the nonhuman environment must be envisioned not merely as a framing device but as an active presence". However, as he (2005: 25) points out, his views have changed since then and he has come to believe that it is more beneficial for the researcher to widen the scope of possible environmental texts and assume that

environmentality is present in all texts, "suggesting human history's implication in natural history" (2005: 25). Thus, if any human-created text can be considered to bear some relation to environment, it could be seen how deeply people's surroundings influence them.

Greg Garrard (2004: 53) puts forth the idea that non-fictional nature writing is considered secondary to fiction because researchers prefer to study human relationships instead of focusing on the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. This implies that nature usually takes the backseat when it comes to literature analysis and surrenders much of its potential to the depiction of human characters. This is confirmed by Buell (2005: 4) when he thinks back to his own literature classes in secondary school and admits that the "setting" of a literary work was considered to be "mere backdrop for the human drama that really counted", pointing out that this had been the case even with works concerning purely nature, such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, in which nature occupies a central place. In order to analyse the depiction of nature as an active part of the narrative, it needs to be established how is the presence of nature integral to the narrative. This, in turn, requires an understanding of how different ideas concerning nature are constructed.

### **1.1.1 Construction of nature**

It was established by Raymond Williams that the word "nature" has multiple meanings. Based on the three senses of nature proposed by Kull and taking into account the importance of literature in culture, it can be suggested that nature and the way it has been represented in human culture are not the same phenomenon.

In order to be able to represent something in the first place, an understanding of the concept is needed. Thus, the representations of nature present in culture are reflections of people's ideas— of their perceptions of nature. Lawrence Buell calls this act of expressing one's perception "the idea of nature" and states that "in one form or another, the 'idea of nature' has been a dominant or at least residual concern for literary scholars and intellectual historians ever since these fields came into being" (Buell 2005: 2). Kate Soper states that although it holds true that the 'reality' of nature and its representations in culture cannot be separated, it does not mean that ideas about nature could be thought of as being equal to the physical nature itself. In order to illustrate her point more vividly, Soper compares the 'real' ozone layer and the discourse of pollution surrounding it, stating: "It is not language that has a hole in its ozone layer; and the 'real' thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier" (Soper 1995: 124). Drawing on this, Soper (1995: 125) continues by distinguishing three "ideas of nature". Firstly, the "metaphysical idea" which denotes "the concept through which humanity thinks its difference and specificity" – it is what is the opposite of human, the opposite of cultural – the nonhuman. Secondly, "the realist idea", referring to "the structures, processes and causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical world" and thirdly, "lay or surface idea of nature" is the one that one encounters daily: it is the opposition between the natural and the urban and everything that they include – this is the physical world. While the three ideas seem to be able to stand on their own as separate notions, they are, as Soper (1995: 126) concludes, all connected to each other as are their meanings interrelated with their definitions depending on each other. It could be said that Kull's and Soper's definitions of nature indicate the impossibility of effectively drawing a line between nature and its interpretations, despite the existence of seemingly different meanings.

Terry Gifford, in his discussion of construction of nature, mentions that notions of nature are socially constructed and determine how one perceives their experiences with nature. This, in turn, means that these social constructions also influence the manner in which the experiences are communicated (Gifford 2000: 174). Therefore, a person's encounters with nature are always influenced by the social constructs of nature, meaning that the written experiences (for example, in literature) are also influenced by culture. The same conclusion was also drawn by Martin Drenthen, an environmental philosopher, who finds that although nature and culture are generally believed to be in an opposition, wilderness as an idea, a concept, actually has an important role within culture (Drenhten 2009: 3). Thus, there are certain ideas, certain constructions of nature that are constantly repeated in culture. They are present in different texts and are recycled till the point they become deeply embedded in culture. In order to shed more light on the most common ideas about nature, the next section will take a closer look at two literary tropes– namely pastoral and wilderness (Garrard 2004: 33).

### **1.1.2 Literary tropes: pastoral and wilderness**

The idea of pastoral as the idyllic countryside is of great importance when it comes to tracing the representation of nature in literature. Pastoral is the perfect rural scene, it is calm, pure and invigorating. Garrard summarises the essence of pastoral as follows: "At the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies" (Garrard 2004: 56). Traditionally, pastoral is perceived as a constant against the fast pace of the world, offering an escape from the urban environment to the countryside, where one can be in peace while reflecting upon

their life in quiet surroundings. However, just as was the case with the meaning of 'nature', so is the concept of pastoral multifaceted. Terry Gifford (1999: 2) distinguishes three kinds of pastoral: the literary tradition that mainly concerns literature up to the 18th century and that Garrard (2004: 34) terms "classical pastoral"; a more general pastoral, "any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban" (Gifford 1999: 2) and the pejorative sense of the pastoral "implying that the pastoral vision is too simplified and thus an idealisation of the reality of life in the country" (Gifford 1999: 2). Based on this division of pastoral, it could be supposed that the general pastoral is the most common and represents the prototype rural scene that most people associate with pastoral in the first place. Although pastoral originates in Europe and its classical literature, it is of immense importance in the American context and will therefore be discussed more thoroughly in the section concerning nature and American literature.

The other trope of great significance is wilderness. Greg Garrard seeks to clarify what is meant by the wilderness idea and how it is expressed:

The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. It is a construction mobilized to protect particular habitats and species, and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city. (Garrard 2004: 59)

Based on this definition, one might assume that pastoral and wilderness are quite similar as constructions because both of them possess the qualities of purity and morality which are thought of as being in opposition with the urban scene. However, Garrard points out that despite sharing the theme of escape into nature and return to the society, pastoral and wilderness present and employ completely different ideas about nature (Garrard 2004: 59). Wilderness concept belongs to the New World, representing the pristine nature, untouched by humans. All the same, with the first settlers to the New World came their cultural concepts, which began to shape the wilderness of the New World according to the familiar

traditions (Garrard 2004: 59), thus inflicting their cultural interpretations of nature onto the uncultivated landscape they found. This fear of the unknown is pointed out by Garrard (2004: 61) as he suggests that one of the main differences between pastoral and wilderness lies in the relative familiarity and safety of pastoral when compared to the unpredictability and ambivalence of wilderness.

Despite the attempts to appropriate it, wilderness both on the physical level and on the level of an idea always seems to retain a certain sense of "otherness". William Cronon writes in his article 'The Trouble with Wilderness' :

Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, it is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are-or ought to be. (Cronon 1995 )

With these words, Cronon summarises the appeal of nature, which is the central theme of most wilderness texts - texts depicting human encounters with wild nature. This appeal gives the promise of the ultimate truth and the purest form of existence because in nature, away from the society, it is possible to be yourself without any pretense. This mystic appeal of wilderness is also researched by Drenhten, who, in his paper dealing with the possible meaning(s) of wilderness, uses the notion of "wilderness ethic" to describe the different morality which wild nature embodies when compared to the modern civilization (2008: 14-15). Drenhten claims that although generally nature is perceived as the other, something existing outside the boundaries of human society, some of the highest human values, such as ethics and freedom, are still associated with it. This, in turn, outlines the following problem with wilderness: wilderness is only untouched when it is free of human existence; however, a true wilderness narrative requires the presence of a human being in wilderness, even more so, not merely a presence, but "the most authentic existence"



(Garrard 2004: 70-71). It follows that only in proper wilderness, not on a pastoral landscape, can one hope to detach oneself from the society.

Based on the discussion so far, it could be said that nature is reflected in human culture, but the representation of it is not the same as our physical environment. Instead, we have the reflections of the "idea of nature", as Buell put it. It could be suggested that cultural interpretations of nature are always influenced by the values that in a particular community are associated with nature, which leads to the construction of certain relatively fixed ideas concerning nature. The circle becomes complete when these ideas are expressed in writing and contribute to reinforcing themselves.

## **1.2 Nature in the context of American ideals**

In his *Virgin Land: the American West as Symbol and Myth*, Henry Nash Smith (1970: 3) writes "[... ] one of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward [...]". Smith refers to the appeal of the frontier, which was the border between the civilised world and the unknown territory. According to Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis, the presence of the frontier in many aspects is responsible for American development because the very idea of an enormous amount of free land changed the settlers, encouraging them to become pioneers and spread out over the continent (Turner 2007: para. 1-4). Moreover, the obsession with expansion beyond the frontier, towards the West, echoes in American culture constantly. Besides the obvious material benefits of westward movement, such as free land and the possibility of fortune, there are a number of idealistic features attributed to the frontier and the open territory behind it. However, despite its prospective benefits, the frontier is still ambivalent,

promising no safe haven for the settlers. The central myth of the frontier and these ambivalent features are going to be discussed in this section in connection to two notions mentioned above – pastoral and wilderness.

### 1.2.1 Nature as a cultural symbol

In his study of the importance of the American West, Smith defines the terms 'symbol' and 'myth', "I use the words to designate larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image" (Smith 1970: xi). Thus, symbols and myths are in some aspects similar to literary tropes discussed in the previous section, with the difference that they are not restricted to literature. The frontier myth is one of the defining aspects of American culture. It could be suggested that the frontier myth embraces both, wilderness and pastoral, incorporating them into a many-sided cultural idea.

At the time of its discovery, America was a subject of great fascination, onto which hopes, dreams and endless possibilities were pinned. However, even then the perceptions of the newly found continent were very different, with two opposing sides. Leo Marx states in *Machine in the Garden*:

On the spectrum of Elizabethan images of America the hideous wilderness appears at one end and the garden at the other. The two views are traditionally associated with quite different ideas of man's basic relation to his environment. We might call them ecological images. Each is a kind of root metaphor, a poetic idea displaying the essence of a system of value. (Marx 2000: 44)

We have the idyllic garden, a cultivated and cultural landscape on the one hand and wilderness on the other. Pastoral could be seen as being a sort of middle ground between the two extremes. Both of the symbols, garden and wilderness, reflect upon different aspects of nature. In his book, Marx investigates the role of pastoral in American culture

and seeks its roots from Europe. Conducting an analysis of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* concerning the role of nature and the similarities between then newly-found America and the mythical island depicted in the play, he comes to the conclusion that the play embraces both the cultivated side of nature and the wilderness: "The island, like America, could be Eden *or* a hellish desert" (Marx 2005: 66). Thus, when America was first discovered, the entire new continent could be viewed as frontier and that frontier could be seen as encompassing both "ecological images", pastoral and wilderness. This ambivalence of the frontier is also noted by Smith (1970: 52), who distinguishes between two types of West within the myth of the frontier: firstly, the common agricultural frontier, which could be compared to the pastoral and secondly, the Wild West of adventures, which could be the equivalent of wilderness. Both of the Wests have certain types of people associated with them: the agricultural frontier is the home of farmers while the Wild West is the realm of people who seek solitude and closeness with nature. The figure of the "Western hunter and guide" (Smith 1970: 53) as a solitary person challenging the wilderness was not admired because of his connection to wilderness but because he could be followed by practical and productive farmers, making the land useful, or as Patricia A. Ross (2006: 5) has put it, "once the land has been claimed, both materially and rhetorically, that "howling" frightening, sinful wilderness becomes Edenic."

While it was already established that generally pastoral is more connected with the civilised Old World and wilderness with the unruly New World, pastoral can still be seen to describe the New World as well. Marx (2000: 3) finds: "The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination". Marx (2000: 5) separates two kinds of pastoralism: "one that is popular and sentimental, the other imaginative and complex". While the complex pastoralism is expressed in great American literature, as he points out,

the sentimental kind is closer to a certain feeling, the need to get closer to nature. This collective idea of nature is exploited on all levels of culture. For example, Marx (2000: 6) states that everything sells better when it is advertised in connection with getting closer to nature, "a rustic setting". Marx goes on to explain that this "closer to nature" idea is the root of all pastoralism and while this yearning is not characteristic of Americans only, it is more central in American culture than others (Marx 2000: 6). Relying on Ortega y Gasset and Sigmund Freud, Marx theorises that the success of the pastoral ideal rests upon people's need to distance themselves from the ever-complexifying society and seek for a simpler life, provided by the natural or rural scene, in the literary sense, the movement "away from the city toward the country" (Marx 2000: 9-10). Marx's views on the movement towards a simpler life in a pastoral landscape suggest that this act of gravitating away from culture is cyclical. This is confirmed by Garrard, who finds that pastoral was and will be important in American culture because "it continues to supply the underlying narrative structure in which the protagonist leaves civilisation for an encounter with non-human nature, then returns having experienced epiphany and renewal" (2004: 49), a model followed in both, fiction and non-fiction. This model is brought forward in Marx's analysis of *The Tempest*, which he considers to be the precursor to the "classic American fables, and especially the idea of a redemptive journey away from society in the direction of nature", in which the protagonist leaves his place in society and opts for a journey into or even a life in nature (Marx 2005: 69). Moreover, according to Marx in celebrated American classics, such as *Walden* and *Moby-Dick*, nature does not offer a safe and ideal haven, but in its wildness it offers hope because it is untainted by civilization and allows "a temporary return to first things because "in the wilderness only essentials count" (Marx 2005: 69).

With pastoral being the first, the other aspect of the ambivalent frontier is wilderness. Ross (2006: 1) describes wilderness as "at once a bitter enemy and a paradise promising new beginnings", supporting Marx's proposition concerning the double nature of the newly found America. However, despite the fact that both, wilderness and pastoral, provide the chance of getting closer to nature, they have completely different things to offer. Ross (2006: 2) claims: "[...]wilderness represents a proving ground, a place where we can continually play out our rugged individualist American roots by proving ourselves against a wildness that cares not if we flourish or perish. What the American wilderness myth represents – self-reliance, rugged (if somewhat misguided) individualism [...] permeates our everyday lives." These characteristics, which describe wilderness, also describe the frontier. Elaborating on the same topic, Ross discusses the opposition between the frontier and wilderness, an opposition between essentialism on the behalf of wilderness and constructivism on the behalf of the frontier. "[...] in the end, there is no such thing as a 'true' wilderness, anymore than there is a 'true' frontier. Both are myths constructed in stories, legends, newspaper articles, advertisements, films, documentaries, paintings, photographs. The list of vehicles that can textually construct a myth, especially the myth of the wilderness in America, is endless" (Ross 2006: 3).

It becomes evident that wilderness and pastoral, though both dealing with nature, can be viewed as having contrasting qualities – they depict entirely different interpretations of nature, which both abound in cultural images and symbolism attached to them. At the same time, the myth of the frontier is associated with both of them, creating an even more powerful cultural idea concerning new beginnings and endless possibilities, especially in American collective psyche. Wilderness is a part of American culture despite the fact that most of the "true" wilderness seems to have been tamed, but it is important as a symbol when to remember Ross's suggestion of the lack of the real wilderness or the real frontier.

There is only the symbol and this symbol "too much a part of the American mythos to be ever fully conquered" (Ross 2006: 1). The importance of nature in American culture on a spiritual level and its associations with values and ideals is expressed in a cultural ideal that has its roots in America, namely transcendentalism, which is going to be discussed in the following section.

### **1.2.2 American transcendentalism**

American transcendentalism as a separate cultural movement emerged in the first half of the 19th century. The core beliefs of transcendentalism included the belief that God is connected to everything and that everything in nature originates from God. The vision of transcendentalism was outlined by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay *Nature*, in which he states that humans are always in a relationship with nature. However, this is an unequal relationship because people take from nature but do not appreciate or respect it. In order to experience divine wholeness, people need to further themselves from the disarray of the society and seek solitude in nature to improve themselves (Emerson 1836: Chapter I para. 4). People create nature and their visions of nature based on what they see when they look at it. Emerson found that (1836: Chapter III: para. 10): "The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation", thus creating artworks as a reflection of nature. In addition to viewing art as a reflection of nature, transcendentalism believes that all human beings are innately good, thus rejecting the idea of original sin as a restraint on the purity of the mind of a human being (Manzari 2012: 61). Nevertheless, as Alireza Manzari points out, only nature is not enough in terms of transcendentalism – in order to be complete, a person needs to interact with both nature

and society as "only through focusing on both can we live a complete life and make a better society to live in" (Manzari 2012: 61). Manzari (2012: 65) also explains that Emerson used nature as a symbol of a person's potential growth and rejuvenation, enabling them to see nature as a source for inspiration.

According to Manzari, the transcendentalist movement affected American literature significantly. Henry David Thoreau, who is one of the best known transcendentalists and nature writers, was an avid follower of Emerson and was greatly influenced by his writings. As Manzari (2012: 62) points out, both Emerson and Thoreau's writings consider a human's close relationship to nature the path to grasping the truth. Emerson's essay *Self-reliance* was probably his greatest influence. In this essay, Emerson discusses spiritual self-reliance and the effects that the society has on the needs and wants of people. Emerson (1841: para. 6) points out that the price of being a part of a society is conformism, which, however, hinders the possibility of listening to your true self. Yet, it is difficult for a person to survive in solitude. Thus, as Emerson (1841: para. 5) writes: "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." Thoreau took Emerson's vision of transcendentalism to a new level by using this ideology to express his contempt for the society and the government, valuing individualism and separating himself from the rest of the world as much as possible. His aim was to live in nature and "test his transcendental outlook in the concrete physical world" (Manzari 2012: 62). Besides being spiritually self-reliant, he also aimed to be economically self-reliant, thus avoiding material attachments.

Garrard (2004: 48) has written that Henry David Thoreau is generally considered to be the father of American ecocriticism, providing the essential basis of non-fiction nature writing. Thoreau's best known work is *Walden*, which is partly autobiographical, partly

philosophical and deals with the time he spent living at Walden Pond. In *Walden*, Thoreau becomes so close to nature that he not only sees its benevolent side, but he "embraced its harshness as well" (Manzari 2012: 62), thus seeing beyond nature's superficial beauty and fully accepting its multiplicity. Garrard stresses that with Thoreau's *Walden*, the Old World pastoral ideal in American literature came to an end as it "collides with both the technology and autonomous cultural confidence of the young republic" (Garrard 2004: 48), providing a new outlook on nature and through it, also a new and fresh look on society, which, to a certain extent, could be seen as a bystander's view.

Thoreau's influence on how American culture views nature and nature writing has been extensive. Ashton Nichols (2009: 348) suggests, "Many earlier explorers, naturalists, and authors had described the natural wonders of the new American continent, but until Thoreau no author had located 'nature' at the center of one vision of the American psyche". In *Walden*, which according to Lawrence Buell (2005: 42) is "the most canonical of Anglophone nature books", Thoreau "sets forth a way of thinking", which as Ashton Nichols (2009: 349) describes as the moment of awakening: "most people were asleep most of the time and that his goal was to awaken them, to rouse them to a new form of conscious awareness". Thus, it might be suggested that transcendentalism values nature primarily as a source of truth and knowledge.

Based on the analysis so far, it would appear that nature has an important part in American culture. Moreover, some of the ideas related to ideas of nature, for example the myth of the frontier, are an essential part of everything that is American in the first place. It could be said that it is precisely the ambivalence of the frontier that keeps the focus of Americans on it: the dangers of wilderness hopefully followed by the peace and plenty of the pastoral. The theoretical framework provided in this chapter will be used to analyse the book *Into the Wild* and the film of the same name in the next chapter.



## **CHAPTER II – COMPARISON OF KRAKAUER'S BOOK AND PENN'S FILM ADAPTATION**

The following chapter is going to focus on the representation of nature in the book *Into the Wild* and the film based on it in the light of the theoretical material presented in the previous chapter. In order to compare the book and the film, some of the basic characteristics of word-based narratives and film narratives will be discussed to account for the differences in the film and the book, which derive from respective genre conventions and not from their respective portrayals of nature.

### **2.1 Differences between narrative in print and in film**

Film critic and author James Monaco (1977: 29) claims that among narratives, films share the closest bond with novels as "both films and novels tell long stories with a wealth of detail and they do it from the perspective of a narrator", stressing the similarities between the two mediums. Due to that, Monaco (1977: 29) also states, "whatever can be told in print in a novel can be roughly pictured or told in film", suggesting that the transformation of a word-based narrative into a film narrative should be not only possible, but due to their close relations also be capable of remaining reasonably close to the source text. However, despite the similarities, there are a number of differences between the written narrative and film narrative. Comparing the same narrative presented in two different forms can reveal which aspects of the narrative are relevant in the written form

and which become more prominent in a film narrative. Monaco (1977: 29) finds that film narratives are considerably shorter, thus there is a need to omit certain details, which, however, can be compensated for with visual devices, for example allowing a scene to focus on some aspects longer than on others and thus making it easier for the viewer to discover different nuances themselves.

The greatest difference according to Monaco is the fact that novels are much more easily controlled by authors than films (Monaco 1977: 29). In novels, we only read what the writer has provided us with, "whatever the novelist describes is filtered through his language, his prejudices and his point of view", thus lacking objectivity. In the case of film narratives, however, despite in a way being told by directors as authors as well, the viewer is able to experience much more because while the novel presents a fixed point of view, in films the viewer can be more active and discover different aspects of the same scene, allowing multiple readings (Monaco 1977: 30). On the other hand, while the viewer of a film can seemingly be more actively involved in the process of unraveling the story, the reader of a verbal text has much more room left for their own imagination as they are free to interpret the author's words and envision them as they choose to. Film narratives are concrete and offer the viewer a ready-made vision, as Monaco (1977: 31) points out: "film does not suggest, in this context: it states", thus imposing limits on the viewer's imagination.

Vision is not the only sense that is engaged while viewing a film. Lilian Jõesaar's Master's thesis dealt with the issue of film adaptation of a novel and she (2007: 11) discusses the use of sound effects in films, which widen the possibilities for film-makers: a writer is only able to describe sounds through words, but film-makers have the option to use sound to set the necessary mood. Thus, it could be claimed that films stimulate more senses than written texts do but at the same time, they offer another person's (the

director's) vision of the written source text. Written narratives, however, while engaging fewer senses, pose a more challenging task for the reader's imagination, inviting the reader to create their own vision of the narrative.

## **2.2 Discussion of Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild***

The following section will focus on the portrayal of nature in the book *Into the Wild*. It will firstly discuss *Into the Wild* as an environmental text, proposing it to be viewed as a text belonging to the field of study of first-wave ecocriticism and then proceed to study the different aspects of nature represented in the book.

### **2.2.1 *Into the Wild* as a first-wave ecocriticism nature text**

As it was explained in Chapter 1, ecocriticism deals with portrayals of nature in culture, especially in literature. According to Buell, nature writing is the most fruitful source for those studying depictions of nature and the most unbiased of those are the writings, which depict human encounters with nature (see p. 11, above). *Into the Wild* does depict a journey into nature. Also, such texts were characteristically of interest to first-wave ecocriticism, which focused on the separation between physical nature and humanity and the possibilities of regaining the link between the two. If seen in correspondence with the first-wave texts, McCandless is the "solitary human" on the path of trying to find his personal connection with nature. This call of nature, the central theme of *Into the Wild*, leads McCandless and numerous other young men into situations in which they come face to face with wilderness. Such journeys are more than hikes; rather, they could be compared

to quests, as they incorporate a longing for spiritual renewal hoped to be found from nature.

*Into the Wild* opens with a driver picking up McCandless, who is "shivering in the grey Alaska dawn" (IW 1996: 3). McCandless tells the driver that it is his aim to reach Denali National Park, where he wants to "walk deep into the bush and live off the land for a few months" (IW 1996: 3-4), thus making it clear from the very beginning that he is not simply a hiker, but has taken a moral obligation on himself. This is also confirmed by Krakauer, who considers McCandless to be a pilgrim (IW: 85). Moreover, even McCandless's words [which in the book are presented in the form of a direct quote by McCandless], "live off the land", demonstrate his intention of being entirely self-sufficient, indicating a deeper relationship with nature than what could be expected from a regular hiker. Even more so, McCandless also refuses the concerned driver's offers to buy better hiking gear and only accepts a pair of rubber boots, trading them for his watch. The driver is unwilling to take it until McCandless states that for him neither the time nor the place he is in matter anymore (IW: 7), suggesting that he sought to immerse himself completely in life outside society.

Besides the nature versus human opposition, another criterion for nature text from the point of view of first-wave ecocriticism is the way nature has been integrated in the narrative. In order for the text to qualify as a first-wave ecocritical text, nature presented in the text needs to be "an active presence" instead of a passive setting. In the case of *Into the Wild*, however, this aspect could be arguable. At the first glance, it could be claimed that nature is indeed presented in *Into the Wild* as an entity in its own right. However, a closer inspection of the text reveals that nature also functions as a story-telling device as the main aim of Krakauer's descriptions of nature seems to be providing McCandless's journey with illustrations and to give the reader McCandless' location in North - America as exactly as

possible. For example, in Chapter Four (IW: 25-26), Krakauer describes the bear-paw poppy, a rare flower at considerable length. This thorough description is there for a purpose: it acts as a prologue to introduce into the narrative of the explorers who came across McCandless's abandoned car, hence providing a justification for the previous description of a seemingly unimportant flower. In the same chapter, Krakauer (IW: 27-28) describes the landscape of Detrital Wash to make the reader acquainted with the conditions of this place and explain the sudden flood, which destroyed McCandless' car in the first place. Stemming from these examples, it could be claimed that these descriptions mainly serve the specific aim of advancing the story-telling.

These descriptions can also be viewed as integral parts of the narrative. In terms of the story itself the flash flood which catches a peacefully camping Chris so unexpectedly, serves as a reminder of the unpredictability of nature. During the flood, the benevolent nature becomes wilderness in just an instant (IW: 29), participating forcefully in the narrative. The flash flood encourages McCandless to take a step further on his path for living with as little as possible, "Instead of feeling distraught over this turn of events, moreover, McCandless was exhilarated: he saw the flash flood as an opportunity to shed unnecessary baggage" (IW: 29). It can be claimed that the same descriptions which were dedicated to a certain purpose – framing the narrative - also function as reminders of the changeable character of nature and therefore link to the narrative proper. Taking into account that the book is dedicated to depicting encounters with nature, which mostly occur in the form of a solitary human being in nature, allowing nature to be considered an active counterpart to human endeavors, *Into the Wild* is a first-wave ecocritical text.

### **2.2.2 Constructions and depictions of nature in Krakauer's *Into the Wild***

Most of the divisions of the meanings of nature outlined in Chapter 1 agreed that the notion incorporates more than a single layer of meaning. The simplest division of these layers could be the juxtaposition of physical nature, "zero nature" in Kull's terms, on the one hand and constructed ideas concerning nature on the other. Construction of nature in culture suggests that ideas concerning nature are reflected in culture and are repeated until they become concepts in their own right, which, in case of literature, were called literary tropes (see Garrard, p. 14 above).

The two literary tropes outlined above were pastoral and wilderness. Pastoral is understood as the perfect rural scene, tame and refreshing. Wilderness, on the other hand, is nature untouched by humans and thus retaining its "otherness" and remaining distant, as Cronon noted. In popular mind, however, the two are not always clearly separated. The Alaskan man, who gives McCandless a ride at the very beginning of the book, expresses the duality of nature in his somewhat rough, but apt words, pointing out that it is common for people to come to Alaska, inspired by a magazine article and live out their "ill-considered Jack London fantasies" (Krakauer 1996: 4), suggesting that people have been seduced by what Soper termed as the "lay or surface idea of nature" (p. 13). On the spot, however, people find that the nature they encounter is much more uninviting and harsher than what they made it out to be. A clash of the expectations of a pastoral landscape and the reality of wilderness mostly disheartens the people who have not been prepared for it. McCandless created his "idea of nature", to use Soper's term, based on the works of

Tolstoy, Thoreau and London, but was so consumed by them that he seemed to forget that London's tales, for one, were fictional and neither Thoreau nor Tolstoy left behind society as completely as he did (IW: 45). Thus, after McCandless' story received wide media coverage, "the prevailing Alaska wisdom held that McCandless was simply one more dreamy half-cocked greenhorn who went into the country expecting to find answers to all his problems and instead found only mosquitoes and a lonely death" (IW: 73). Krakauer as a person, who is familiar with the pull of the wild, aims to understand it and to help the reader understand it as well. Hence, his view on nature is reflected in his descriptions of nature.

Previously it was stated that Krakauer's descriptions are mostly practical in their purpose, functioning as story-telling devices. However, this does not mean that nature, as presented by Krakauer, would be simplistic or inexpressive. Describing the nature surrounding McCandless as he tramps through the American wilderness, Krakauer quite often combines characteristics of both wilderness and pastoral in a single description (e.g IW: 28, 29, 34). There are a number of notable descriptions in the book, but few demonstrate the mixture of pastoral, wilderness and humanity as deeply as the description accompanying McCandless's journey towards the Gulf of California. As McCandless travelled on a canoe, "he drifted past saguaros and alkali flats, camped beneath escarpments of naked Precambrian stone. In the distance spiky, chocolate-brown mountains floated on eerie pools of mirage" (IW: 33). This description, depicting an image of peaceful contemplation and even serenity, makes nature seem warm and inviting. As he moves on to the description of the Colorado River, Krakauer reminds the reader that the river is not as calm in all its length,

this lower stretch of river, from Hoover Dam to the gulf, has little in common with the unbridled torrent that explodes through the Grand Canyon, some 250 miles upstream from Topock.

Emasculated by dams and diversion canals, the lower Colorado burbles indolently from reservoir to reservoir through some of the hottest, starkest country on the continent (IW: 32)

In this passage, the river is placed in the centre of the description. More than being just a part of the scenery, passively in the background, the river is given more attention and is described as being of changeable nature, starting out as a wild torrent and then developing into a calmer, idly flowing river as its course has been tamed by human hands. Moreover, Krakauer also manages to relate his description of the river to the state of mind of the human being, highlighting that "McCandless was stirred by the austerity of this landscape, by its saline beauty. The desert sharpened the sweet ache of his longing, amplified it, gave shape to it in sere geology and clean slant of light" (IW: 32-33). By doing so, Krakauer chooses to place nature in the centre of the human perceptions instead of forcing to remain it in the background: the human feels, but his feelings are brought forward by the nature he is surrounded by, hence also stressing the link between humanity and nature.

The idyllic pastoral trip suddenly becomes harsh and troublesome, even more amplified by the fact that when McCandless finally reaches the Gulf, he goes to admire the tidal waves and leaves his canoe unattended, although seemingly sufficiently far from the water. Suddenly,

violent gusts started blowing down from the desert, and the wind and tidal rips conspired to carry him out to sea. The water by this time was a chaos of whitecaps that threatened to swamp and capsize his tiny craft. The wind increased to gale force. The whitecaps grew into high, breaking waves (IW: 36)

and the deceptive calm is over in an instant. After that incident, McCandless decides to abandon his canoe and head back to north, walking and seeing no other living soul for thirty-six days, being completely alone "under a bleached dome of sky, huge and empty" (IW: 33), stressing the immensity of the uninhabited landscape. At that point, the empty landscape devoid of any human beings is not an enemy nor is it a welcoming presence. It



just is, allowing the solitary human to experience "the most authentic existence", as was previously noted by Garrard in connection with wilderness narrative (p. 16).

After getting a lift and a pair of rubber boots from the Alaskan man (p. 28), McCandless walks into the Alaskan nature and his stopping point becomes the Magic Bus, an old abandoned bus used by hunters during the open season. In his journal, McCandless writes about his road so far and his ongoing ultimate Alaska adventure:

"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 pilgrimage. 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". (IW: 162)

As McCandless himself notes, he is seeking "the wild", not a pastoral landscape as he wants to prove that he is able to survive in wilderness. However, as Krakauer points out, the reality he finds proves to be different. While he manages well in nature before his Alaskan journey, in Alaska, his final challenge, the circumstances grow harder. He has difficulties in finding food while keeping moving towards his final goal- the West. McCandless dreamt of reaching the Bering Sea, a destination which would have concluded his "spiritual pilgrimage" in his own words. Unfortunately, the journey proved to be too difficult and he was forced to return to his original camp site in the Magic Bus (IW: 164), thus not being able to take the ultimate test of survival in wilderness.

Besides Krakauer's own experiences, which are included in his book, another person whose story bears similarities to McCandless', whose experiences are discussed by Krakauer, is Everett Ruess. Everett Ruess, born in 1914, was a young man from California, who at the time he went missing during a trek into nature was twenty years old. Like McCandless, he was drawn towards wilderness and like McCandless, he was believed to be influenced by literature. Everett Ruess identified himself with Captain Nemo as

"withdrawal from organized society, his disdain for worldly pleasures, and his signatures as NEMO in Davis Gulch, all strongly suggest that he closely identified with the Jules Verne character" (IW: 95), just as McCandless felt the connection to Tolstoy, Thoreau and London – his literary role models. The depiction of nature in literature is a manifestation of Kull's concept of third nature – nature as we reflect it back in our culture (p. 9). Separate from the zero nature, wilderness, third nature can be quite distant from its original source as it has been through a number of transformations, as even Kull's first nature has been through a transformation by merely being perceived by the human being through their cultural prism. Both McCandless and Ruess had created their vision of nature based on the literature they read, which served as the inspiration for their treks. They sought for nature which would be in accordance with their literary ideals but which stood far from what they encountered in reality.

Not all the journeys into nature are motivated by literature, however. Krakauer's own journeys into nature are also spiritual, but differently from McCandless and Ruess's stories, lack the literary influences. Unwilling to follow the path that Krakauer's father had in mind for him, Krakauer opts for mountaineering as a hobby, seeing it as a source of freedom and independence. One of his most important goals is to climb the Devils Thumb in Alaska, which he compares to medical school his father had envisioned for him, representing the same type of laborious journey with the reward of a sense of achievement "He never understood that the Devils Thumb was the same as medical school, only different" (IW: 149). It also stands as an act of defiance towards his father and the traditional way of living, with the peak symbolising the destination of his quest for independence and self-discovery. Krakauer recounts the experience of climbing the Devil's Thumb:

"Because I was alone, however, even the mundane seemed charged with meaning. The ice looked colder and more mysterious, the sky a cleaner shade of blue. The unnamed peaks towering over the glacier were bigger and comelier and infinitely more menacing than they would have been were I in the company of another person. And my emotions were similarly amplified: the highs were higher; the periods of despair were deeper and darker" (IW: 138).

After failing for the first time, he returns three days later. Failing the second time, he acknowledges that he will not be able to reach the top the way he intended, but "Because I wanted to climb the mountain so badly, because I had thought about the thumb so intensely for so long, it seemed beyond the realm of possibility that some minor obstacle like the weather or the crevasses or rime-covered rock might ultimately thwart my will" (IW: 150). Adamant on not giving up his dream completely, Krakauer decides to take an alternative route and finally reaches the top, finding that the Devil's Thumb was a gloomy and uninviting place, "Fittingly, the summit was a surreal, malevolent place, an improbably slender wedge of rock and rime no wider than a file cabinet" (IW: 152). A while after returning from his climb, Krakauer comes to the conclusion that he had expected conquering the Devil's Thumb to fix his life, but in the end it changed nothing. However, he realizes that "mountains make poor receptacles for dreams" (IW: 154), acknowledging that he had pinned all his hopes and dreams on this single conquest and instead of enlightenment he found a cold, uncaring piece of rock. Krakauer's story represents one young man's quest to find his independence and his "self" in nature. However, Krakauer's story focuses more on finding his personal path than finding pure and uncorrupted contact with nature.

Near the end of the book, Krakauer describes his visit he made to understand McCandless better to McCandless's last campsite, the abandoned bus on Stampede Trail. A seasoned hiker and climber, Krakauer admits that the terrain is challenging and seems dangerous: "There is something disquieting about this Gothic, overgrown landscape. It feels more malevolent than other, more remote corners of the state I know" (IW: 175),

being seemingly influenced by the tragic death that took place there. Krakauer's perception of the otherwise neutral nature around him is filtered through his knowledge of the death that occurred there combined with pre-conceived cultural notions concerning nature, cause him to see nature as a more hostile environment because he is familiar with its multifaceted and potentially dangerous essence. This sensation of gloominess translates into Krakauer's description as Gothic, indicating that his view on nature is filtered through his cultural and literary background, enforcing the idea that nature proper, zero nature cannot be described or portrayed – human beings always see nature through their cultural prism.

Krakauer's depictions of nature in *Into the Wild* seem to fall into either of the two categories: Pastoral descriptions of nature, such as McCandless's peaceful canoe trip along the Colorado river (p. 31) mostly do not actively participate in the narrative and allow human contemplation to take the scene, thus succumbing to the traditional role of nature as the backdrop for human drama. However, when nature interrupts the narrative, such as the incidents of the flash flood (p. 29) and the lost canoe (p. 32) it is nearly always wilderness, which offers possibilities for independence and self-assurance, but at the same time, remains distant and unpredictable. Nevertheless, wilderness and pastoral are not the only dimensions of nature represented in *Into the Wild*. As the book is by an American author and focuses on the stories of American men, it is also vital to consider nature in the context of American culture in order to discuss the portrayal of nature.

### **2.2.3 The American mind in Krakauer's *Into the Wild*: frontier and transcendentalism**

Wallace Stegner has said, "It should not be denied... that being footloose has always exhilarated us. It is associated in our minds with escape from history and oppression and law and irksome obligations, with absolute freedom, and the road has always led west" (Stegner 1987: 22). As noted in Chapter 1, the pull towards nature holds an important place in American culture. In American culture, the movement towards the mythical West and the frontier act as symbols of freedom and independence. The frontier itself embraces both pastoral and wilderness. The frontier in the American imagination could be seen as the last resort for those who seek adventures or do not find a place for themselves within the boundaries of society.

In terms of *Into the Wild*, the final frontier for McCandless is Alaska, which is "a magnet for dreamers and misfits, who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing" (Krakauer 1996: 4), echoing Krakauer's own experience with the Devils Thumb. Nevertheless, the potential hardships do not frighten away the few who are intent on living in wilderness, as was the case with McCandless, just as Krakauer (1996: x) highlights: "When the boy headed off into the Alaska bush, he entertained no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey; peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking", suggesting that the nature McCandless sought for was wilderness as he imagined it based on the literature he read.

When McCandless settled on Alaska as his last destination on his journey, he wanted to find an empty place, a spot devoid of any possible human contact in order to be completely immersed in wilderness, not unlike a place which is described by Thoreau in *Ktaadn*:

Here was no man's garden, but the unhand-sold globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever, - to be the dwelling of man, we say, - and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. (Thoreau 1864: para. 1)

Thoreau's description brings out the same characteristics, which were of importance to McCandless: a place as untouched by human hands as possible, where he could live out his dream of living off the land – in Thoreau's terms use the land. Thus, McCandless was searching for a space with certain characteristics. Paul Ricoeur points out that people have a meaningful relationship with their environment in order to transform mere environment into a meaningful world as space is turned into a meaningful place (Ricoeur quoted in Drenthen 2009: 2). Lawrence Buell, one of the scholars who has been researching this topic, makes a clear distinction between "space" and "place". Space, as he points out, "entails spatial location, entails a spatial container of some sort" whereas place is more abstract. Place is "space to which meaning has been ascribed" (Carter, Donald, and Squires 1993: xii quoted in Buell 2005: 63). Thus, as Buell continues, people most commonly long for a place rather than space as place carries emotional connection and value (Buell 2005: 63). In McCandless's case, however, it can be stated that he sought to reverse that process: it was exactly the "place" that he was escaping – society with its prescribed norms and values.

McCandless's longing for an empty space is much like the longing for the West, free of cultural baggage, which is deeply embedded in American culture. However, McCandless creates a paradox – he wants a space, but by projecting his hopes of finding

and proving himself on the empty space he creates a place, meaningful just for him. As in the 20th century vast emptiness is rather scarce, Chris decides to get rid of his map instead, making the territory unknown for him at least (IW: 173). It might be suggested that along with his map, McCandless symbolically relieves himself of the cultural notions related to nature, at least to a certain extent and hopes to create his own meaning, as customary for those who aim for the frontier. This is what makes McCandless's nature so appealing and ever so dangerous – there is so much at stake as he identifies himself with his journey through nature, pinning his hopes and dreams of self-actualization on the outcome of the journey.

The motif of a redemptive journey into nature is repeated in *Into the Wild* in all the stories recounted by Krakauer. Leo Marx (2005: 71) wrote that the symbolic action of leaving behind the society passes through three stages: "It begins in a corrupt city, passes through a raw wilderness, and then, finally, leads back toward the city", but now there is also hope that the lessons learnt in the wilderness can be applied to the city or in other words, the person has hopefully experienced the "epiphany and renewal" that was pointed out by Garrard as an essential part of this type of narrative, be it fiction or non-fiction. In the case of McCandless's Alaskan odyssey, the beginning point was his conflict with his family and his contempt for the money-oriented world. He aimed to cure his disappointment and anger over the two years he spent on the road and [possibly] finish with the Alaskan experience.

After spending two months in the Alaskan wilderness, McCandless made the decision of returning to civilization, appearing to be content with what he had learned over the time (IW: 167). His road back to the city, however, would never be complete as nature threw an obstacle onto his way. The small creek that he had crossed so easily two months before, had become "a full flood, swollen with rain and snowmelt from glaciers high in the

Alaska Range, running cold and fast" (IW: 169). This abrupt and unexpected show of the force of nature, in addition to McCandless's fear of water, led him to his decision of waiting for the river to lower, eventually leading to his death and disrupting his personal narrative of redemption. Thus, it can be stated that the enlightenment hoped to be gained from the wilderness experience only is useful when the whole cycle is completed: the rejection of the society, the immersion into wilderness and the return to the society. This can be viewed as parallel with the transcendentalism's view on the necessary balance of nature and society in the life of a human being. However, it is also confirmed by Krakauer's stories that wilderness narratives, at least the ones that depict unruly nature, tend to be incomplete in terms of the cycle – most of the people seeking enlightenment from nature do not make it back to the society.

As was mentioned above (p. 19), in the context of American culture, three main types of people are associated with the frontier: farmers on the agricultural frontier, the "Western hunter and guide" or a pioneer in the wilderness and thirdly, the transcendentalist. The first two are generally quite strictly associated with the frontier, the third simply requires closeness with nature. All of the three share closer bonds with nature than most people but their relationships with nature are different. When attempting to evaluate McCandless' relationship with nature and place him into one of the three categories, it is clear that McCandless is either a Western hunter-pioneer or a transcendentalist and not a farmer as he never sought to cultivate any land and settle down in one location, seeking only to use the land for survival. It can be claimed that despite the fact that McCandless wanted to master the Alaskan experience in wilderness, it did not make him a pure pioneer. He sought to live in nature because he saw it is a place free of the corruption of the society while also getting everything physically necessary from nature, thus being self-sufficient in every manner: "And then he invented a new life for



himself, taking up residence at the ragged margin of our society, wandering across North America in search of raw, transcendent experience" (Krakauer 1996: ix).

As mentioned, McCandless was influenced by the writings of Thoreau. From him he adopted the concept of civil disobedience which he took as a gospel (IW: 28). This led him to some run-ins with the law enforcement. For example, he professed that he did not own a hunting license, saying "Hell no. How I feed myself is none of the government's business. Fuck their stupid rules" (Krakauer 1996: 6). His contempt for the society and the inability to fit in, combined with his longing for spirituality make him a combination of a pioneer and a transcendentalist. Drenthen finds that "At first sight, McCandless' story merely mirrors that of Thoreau, who sought to sustain his livelihood by living with and from the land, and in doing so find spiritual and moral redemption" (Drenthen 2009: 7). However, it could be added to that that McCandless also consciously sought dangers and adventures to a certain extent because he wanted to face nature at its fullest and took nature as an equal, which is why he took so little provisions with him. This sets McCandless apart from a transcendentalist such as Thoreau who did not seek excitement and adventures, but rather contemplation in nature and gives McCandless the characteristics of a pioneer, thus creating a combination of two of the characters associated with the frontier.

### **2.3 Sean Penn's film adaptation of *Into the Wild***

As outlined in the Introduction, Jon Krakauer's book was brought to the wider public's attention with Sean Penn's 2007 film, making the book even more popular and creating a renewed interest in McCandless' story. As Novikov pointed out (p. 5), though following the book in general terms, the film differs from it in some respects quite noticeably. The screen adaptation of *Into the Wild* sprawls across two and a half hours,

which is more than could be expected from a 200-page book. It is even more surprising when we take into account the fact that the film focuses solely on McCandless's story, leaving out Krakauer's vivid accounts of the experiences of others fascinated with wilderness, including Krakauer's own mountaineering adventures.

Opening with a quote from Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*,

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.

The film *Into the Wild* distinguishes itself early on as one in which nature has potentially an important role to play. Using the given quote at the very beginning of the film guides the viewer to think about nature and solitude found in it. The quote could also be seen functioning as a connector between physical nature on the one hand and nature as a non-physical concept, a "society" on the other, giving the viewer an indication of the link between nature and transcendentalist spirituality found in it present in the film.

The portrayal of nature in Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* has previously been investigated by Drenthen. In his study of three contemporary films focusing on close encounters with nature, Drenthen discusses *Gerry*, *Grizzly Man* and *Into the Wild*. All of the films deal with problems connected with idealization of nature and all of the films end with the death of the protagonist in wilderness (Drenthen 2009: 1), but are different in their moods. *Gerry* and *Grizzly Man* are more serious and experimental while *Into the Wild* seems to be somewhat more hopeful and oriented towards a wider audience. In his article, Drenthen summarises the fundamental differences between the film and the book of *Into the Wild*:

Both movie and the book retrace McCandless' quest for truth and self-knowledge that ultimately led to his death, and try to understand his drives and desires. The movie differs from the book in some respects. For one, the film is structured as a road movie – ecstatic music score included – and frames

Chris' quest for truth as a coming-to-age story. It shows wild nature mostly as scenery: deserts, canyons and forests are extraordinarily beautiful, joyful places, where one can hike and canoe in sheer bliss, without the responsibilities and hassle, while reading Tolstoy, Thoreau, Muir and London. In contrast, the book is more reflexive and focuses on the ambiguous meaning of McCandless' call from the wild. (Drenthen 2009: 6)

As this statement outlines the most underlying differences between the film and the book, it can be used as a basis for the following discussion, which will first study the depiction of nature in the film and then elaborate on the portrayal human relationships. The following section also aims to investigate whether nature or human relationships are more important in the film than the human-nature relationship and what might be the reasons behind that.

### **2.3.1 Representation of nature in *Into the Wild* the film**

It was concluded in the analysis of the book that the nature depicted in Krakauer's book was the result of interwoven pastoral and wilderness tropes. For McCandless, nature represented spiritual values and his pilgrimage into nature is characteristic of the frontier-oriented American culture. Krakauer's presentation of nature focused mostly on the human-nature relationship. By telling the stories of multiple people and integrating literary quotes as well as excerpts from scholars, he created a basis for explaining the appeal of nature.

Monaco (1977) found that written narratives can be effectively translated into film narratives because the two are rather similar. Whether this translation of the written text into a film narrative remains close to the source, depends on the director's vision of the original text. The first important means of presenting narrative in a film is the visual aspect. In terms of visual devices, Drenthen considered nature in Penn's screen adaptation to be depicted mostly as scenery, suggesting that the meaning potential of nature has not

been realised to the fullest when compared to similar films that Drenthen discusses (e.g. *Gerry*). Drenthen sees nature as being depicted mainly as a backdrop for the road movie *Into the Wild* appears to be. Nature is indeed shown as a sequence of beautiful nature shots, which fill the background while McCandless hops from one person's life into another's. This is especially true for the first half of the film in which the scenery mostly can be described as a pastoral landscape, tame and suitable for relaxing. McCandless is featured camping on a beach with his new-found companions discussing the importance of relationships as well as the vitality of trusting oneself, or as McCandless puts it, "I read somewhere... how important it is in life not necessarily to be strong... but to feel strong." McCandless is also shown as appreciating the small joys of nature, such as delighting in an especially tasty apple and walking among fields while hitchhiking his way across the country.

The mood changes over the course of the film as McCandless nears Alaska and the calm landscape becomes more hostile. The first sign of the changing mood is the change in weather as it grows colder the further north McCandless moves during his journey. With the cold, McCandless is shown as becoming less active because his previous entertaining activities of rafting and hiking are replaced with desperate efforts to find food. As he is left alone in the Alaskan wilderness, his food supplies become scarce but game is not easy to come by. Even when he manages to shoot a moose, it goes to waste with maggots shown crawling on it because McCandless does not know how to keep it from spoiling. Realising that he has taken a life and not gained anything from it, McCandless is shown as being extremely angry with himself, cursing and writing in his notes: "Wish I'd never shot the moose". He is also depicted contemplating and reading more often, trying to find affirmation from his beloved authors, such as Leo Tolstoy. As McCandless grows weaker due to starvation and learns of the harsher and uncaring side of nature, the viewer sees him

becoming thinner and thinner and losing his peace of mind, causing him to empty his gun into the air and shout "I'm fucking hungry".

Film critic Peter Bradshaw brings forward the notions of "landscape and moodscape", referring to the connection between nature and human emotions:

"The resulting film is a richly, spaciouly rendered account of landscape and moodscape: long, wordless scenes flow into each other, as McCandless heads off in search of American freedom, hitch-hiking or riding the boxcars, taking transient jobs. "

It was suggested earlier in the study of the book that Krakauer effectively managed to relate the surrounding nature to the state of mind of the human and so, according to Bradshaw, this is also expressed in the film. McCandless's slow languishing is in accordance with nature seeming harsher and more indifferent to the viewer, thus backing up Bradshaw's claim of the relationship between the portrayal of nature and human emotions. McCandless is shown as growing weaker and tired after his food supply runs out and he does not manage to find enough food from nature. At the same time, there is truth to Drenthen's opinion as well when he saw nature merely as background scenery in most instances. The film employs breathtakingly beautiful shots of American wilderness, which fail to participate in the narrative in a meaningful manner, not serving as plot advancement devices as they did in Krakauer's book. Bradshaw, however, also observes the portrayal of nature and, somewhat conversely to Drenthen, finds that nature has been presented properly by letting it simply be:

"Nature in the raw is rarely shown in the movies to exist on its own account without an overt dramatic function. It exists in horror films and thrillers as the amoral or deceptively sweet-looking habitat of supernatural beasts or malevolent hillbillies. Solitude, likewise, is loaded with assumptions: the solitary character is a loser, a loner, a creep or a serial killer. But this picture lets nature simply be; it lets nothing happen, and does not insist on a dramatic storyline of depression or anger leading to McCandless's death. This is an event that just happens, and is desperately sad, but does not have a narrative inevitability that you might expect in another sort of movie."

Bradshaw aptly points out that the depiction of nature is in accordance with the genre of the film as a biographical nature/survival film when compared to the portrayal of nature in other film genres. Drenthen, however, who compares films of the same genre (survival films based on real-life events), finds that the depiction of nature in *Into the Wild* is less effective than in other films in his comparison. This "narrative inevitability" of a human being's death is something that Drenthen actually stresses and praises in his study of the movie *Gerry*, but fails to see it working adequately in *Into the Wild*. Thus, it could be stated that in the film *Into the Wild*, the effect of the beautiful panorama shots and the suitable music help the nature seem warmer and more welcoming than in the book – more pleasant for the viewer. On the other hand, the use of music and visually pleasing views of nature also diminishes nature's role in the narrative. Both Drenthen and Bradshaw pointed out that nature in the film is less loaded with meaning, but they meant it differently as Drenthen considered it to be a disadvantage and Bradshaw saw it as an original characteristic of the film. It could be claimed that since Drenthen's focus was on the films of the same genre, his evaluation is more accurate. When compared to *Grisly Man* and *Gerry*, *Into the Wild* is aimed at a wider audience and thus makes certain compromises to make the film more understandable and appealing to the audience.

Besides the visual aspect, films also appeal on hearing, incorporating sounds, as was noted by Jõesaar. Four separate cases of the use of sound can be brought out: dialogue, sounds from within the narrative, music from the soundtrack and complete silence. As is highlighted by Drenthen, Penn's *Into the Wild* uses music, featuring a number of music tracks in the film that play while McCandless is shown to be on the road. In general, the accompanying soundtrack is well-chosen and certainly makes the viewing more enjoyable for the audience. In opposition with the soundtrack are the moments in the film where silence and sounds of nature set the scene. For example, in the flash flood scene the music

stops for the sound of thunder and the flood rushing over the car. Additionally, scenes in the Magic Bus feature less music when compared to the scenes when he was still on the road towards Alaska, leaving only McCandless's occasional monologues.

In his review, Bradshaw embraces the wordlessness of the scenes. While the lack of dialogue comes naturally over the course of the film as in the Magic Bus Krakauer simply does not have anyone to converse with, the use of music also becomes rarer and even when it is used, it is softer and quieter than the optimistic pieces used towards the beginning of the film. However, the silence never becomes as overwhelming as it is in the other films Drenthen analyses because some form of sound is nearly always present – sounds from the narrative, background music or voiceovers of McCandless's internal

Not using music can also have great influence on the mood of the film. One of the nature films discussed by Drenthen, *Gerry*, benefits from the use of complete silence, which stresses the vastness of nature and the lack of humanity in it (Drenthen 2009: 5). As he points out, the film does not even include much dialogue and when it does, it is largely trivial, stressing how unimportant a man's fate is when faced with the indifference of nature. The lack of music and the occasional lack of dialogue enhances the feeling of remoteness from civilization and disturbances of the society, suggesting that the solitude found in wilderness is absolute. The few moments in *Into the Wild* where only sounds from the surrounding environment are present are the ones that actually help to convey the immensity of nature, such as the scene in the beginning when McCandless gets out of the car and "walks into the wild" against the background of snowy mountains and the only sounds are his feet crunching in the snow and the blowing wind.

When compared to Krakauer's book, there are many instances where scenes from the book are included in the film, but they are considerably shorter. For example, the bear-paw poppy makes it into the film, but is mentioned only in passing by McCandless's sister

Carine's voiceover as a rare flower, which people were seeking and happened to stumble upon McCandless's car. Although this scene could have been presented in the film as it was described in the book, it has been substituted with McCandless walking the open road through fields and pastures, accompanied by soft music. The river, which in the book carried more meaning with its changeable nature, is depicted as a strong torrent from the beginning and not like the calm river that is described by Krakauer in the beginning. However, the background music and McCandless's sense of adventure never make the river ominous or dangerous in the film, rather, the torrent only provides a little extra adrenaline.

On the other hand, some of the scenes, which were mentioned only in a few words in the book, have been included and set to beautiful music, such as McCandless tracking a herd of wild horses in the sunset, creating the image of ultimate joy and freedom. It can be said that maybe even the first instance during which wilderness proper is allowed in the film is when McCandless on his path back to civilization, comes across the river he had crossed with such ease a few months before. It is interesting, however, that even this crucial moment has not been granted silence, but has been set to music in addition to the nature sounds. After that scene, the wide and spacious Alaskan wilderness seems to become claustrophobic. Nothing changes in the representation of nature really, but now there is the knowledge of being stuck there. McCandless is shown as becoming hungrier and weaker, not not being able to go anywhere to find food. In the book, he writes in his notes, "I have become literally trapped in the wild". In the film, his notes are also shown to the viewer, saying "Disaster! River crossing impossible. Rained in – lonely, scared", outlining McCandless's emotions to the viewer. In the book, Krakauer's account of the gloomy atmosphere surrounding the place of McCandless's death creates a similar aura. Near the very end of the film, McCandless comes face to face with a bear. Starved and



exhausted, he is paralysed with fear. This moment represents the ultimate encounter with wilderness in the film because for a brief moment, the weak human being is completely at the mercy of a wild animal and McCandless is faced with his mortality.

One of the aspects of the representation of nature, namely its relation to American culture, cannot be analysed as efficiently in the film as in the book because the film lacks Krakauer's setting of the story in a wider cultural network with McCandless' story reinforced by the stories of other young men and reflections on his own experiences in wilderness. Krakauer's network of the American cultural background features real-life experiences as well as the opinions of scholars and writers, provided in the form of quotes. The American cultural dimension is present in the film in the form of some literary quotes from Stegner, London and Thoreau, which are presented as voiceovers by McCandless, thus reflecting his state of mind. Though McCandless's sister Carine points out to the viewer that Chris indeed loved using quotes from those authors, without the specific emphasis on the cultural background that is present in the book, the voiceover-quotes in the film do not create the same coherent structure of cultural background as they do in the book when included in the beginning of chapters by Krakauer.

Drenthen pointed out (p.41 ) *Into the Wild* functions as a road movie of a young man's search for independence, focusing on his emotions, experiences and his relationships with the people he meets on the road. Due to the fact that *Into the Wild* is not a pure survival drama, the other human characters in addition to McCandless have a larger role in the film than they do in the book and thus the portrayal of nature in the film shares its focus with human relationships. There is a shift in the focus of the film from nature towards human drama and character development when compared to the book.

### **2.3.2 On the centralisation of human relationships, character study and the narrator**

Greg Garrard noted that literary scholars preferred to study human relationships instead of the environment and due to that, the potential depth of meaning of nature is significantly reduced when compared to the meaning found to be in human relationships. In the study of the book it was stressed that McCandless intentionally never sought to create personal relationships. Even more so, throughout the book Krakauer stresses the intimacy of the relationship between nature and a human being, aiming to understand and explain the appeal of it. In the film, McCandless also avoids the burden of relationships, slipping into people's lives and doing his best to slip out of them as unnoticed as possible. He prefers to leave without saying goodbye and often leaves the people wandering about his fate as he mostly does not keep in touch with them afterwards.

While the main relationships of the book are also present in the film, there are a number of relationships, which are marginal in the book but are stressed and brought to more attention in the film. In Chapter 1 it was stated referring to Buell that it is impossible for a human being to identify themselves with nature. Films, however, aim to please the audience, who expect the opportunity to relate themselves to what is depicted in the film. Thus, it is somewhat natural that people welcome the additional focus on relationships as these can be related to. Hence, relationships, which were relatively unimportant in Krakauer's book, are brought forward and amplified in Penn's adaptation, but this change comes at the cost of depicting the human-nature relationship as more screen time is dedicated to them. One notable case of a non-important relationship being centralized is Tracy, a teenage girl whom McCandless meets while living in the free-minded community

of Oh-My-God-Hot-Springs. The book barely makes a passing mention of her by stating that she probably has a crush on McCandless for a week. In the book, McCandless does not show any interest in her, partly because she is younger than he is and because he is not seeking for relationships in the first place. Although McCandless in the film also chooses not to reciprocate, she does not give up that easily in the film, allowing the film to almost have the promise of romance. Romance, a powerful human emotion that can be thought of as being included in the film in such a manner solely for the audience as it does not make the film more faithful to the book nor does it contribute to developing the human-nature relationship or further understanding of nature but only to engage to viewers in the human drama.

The most underlying human relationship in the film is that of McCandless and her sister Carine. In the book, it is stated that they shared a strong bond, but the film amplifies it even more, especially stressing how they became so close due to their parents' constant fighting. Although they do not spend nearly any time together on-screen, Carine is used as the narrator concerning McCandless' personality and the family situation. As the relationships within the family are presented through her eyes, the clash between the parents and McCandless is amplified when compared to the book. Through Carine's narration as voiceovers the relationships in the family are shown as extremely tense and stressful on all members of the family. The conflict between McCandless and between his parents, especially his father, is centralized to such an extent that at times it seems to become the only motivation for McCandless' journey, overshadowing McCandless' dissatisfaction with society in general and his literary influences, hence to a certain extent diminishing the role of nature as the source of inspiration for freedom by contributing it to spite towards the parents instead. It could be said that Penn's choice of stressing McCandless' relationship with his parents results in a shallower portrayal of nature and a

more concrete focus on McCandless's coming-of-age narrative. Kätlin Kaldmaa (2008: para. 9) reviewed the film in *Eesti Päevaleht* and found that the book is more honest than the film, because the book significantly expands Penn's vision of McCandless as an icon for rebellious young people craving for freedom, confirming that Krakauer's book and Penn's vision Krakauer's book and McCandless's journey differ when it comes to McCandless's motives behind the journey.

The fact that some interpersonal relationships receive more attention in the film than in the book and that relationships in general are more in focus in the film when compared to the book could be contributed to the differences of mediums and the narrative choices made. Monaco found that written narratives are more controlled by their authors than film narratives. This can be illustrated with a comparative example: in the book, the reader only gets Krakauer's descriptions of the bus on Stampede Trail. Possibly because Krakauer as the author is fully aware of the suffering that took place there, he recounts the place as gloomy and dark, prompting the reader to imagine it in the same manner. In the film, however, the viewer gets no voiced opinions and is able to make up their own mind whether they see Alaskan wilderness in a sinister light after McCandless's death as even the scene of McCandless's death is depicted as peaceful as he stares in the sky and sees visions of his family. There is no overt grief and the camera zooms away from the bus, it becomes clear that outside, in the nature, nothing really changed.

One the other hand, written narratives leave more room for the reader's imagination, films are explicit in that sense. Thus, what happens in this film is the problem which James Monaco (2000: 46) points out, "the persona of the narrator is so much weaker", which in the book was a very strong presence as Krakauer also depicted his own personal relationship with nature, which is not present in the film. In his book, Krakauer sought to include background information concerning McCandless's story as well as

include a number of literary quotes as well as quotes from scholars dealing with the topic of the meaning of nature. Penn's adaptation uses some of these quotes, for example the Wallace Stegner quote, either as voiceovers in the film or included them the dialogue. However, most of the quotes employed by Krakauer have been left out along with the experiences of others seeking enlightenment from nature. By choosing to focus only on the main story, McCandless's story, Penn creates a very strong character study (Rotten Tomatoes n. d: para. 1) and stresses the emotional human relationships, in the process diminishing the role of human-nature relationship. Thus, the nature depicted in Penn's screen adaptation is not as multifaceted as in Krakauer's book.

## CONCLUSION

The simplest way to define nature would be to explain it through an opposition of nature as something outside society on the one hand and culture as created by human beings on the other, yet it would not be completely accurate as for human beings the culture they create and nature are linked. Ecocritical theory stressed that culture is inspired by nature and at the same time, cultural depictions of nature influence the way nature is seen and reproduced in culture over and over again, leading to the formulation of fixed concepts concerning nature.

This thesis studies the role of nature in Jon Krakauer's non-fiction book *Into the Wild* and Sean Penn's screen adaptation of the same book. Telling the story of Christopher McCandless, both the book and the film explore his fascination with wilderness and the reasons behind it. Nature fulfils different roles in the book as well as the screen adaptation. Through telling the stories of different people, including his own stories of contact with nature, in his book Krakauer shows the reader different aspects of nature – what it is expected to be like when perceived through the prism of culture and literature, what it actually proves to be when people come to close contact with it and what kind of values are attributed to nature and the spirituality associated with it. Krakauer has included an account of his own personal relationship with nature as well as that of Everett Ruess's as they give a wider background to McCandless's narrative, demonstrating that McCandless's pull towards nature was not the only case and placing his narrative into a wider historical and cultural network. The American cultural dimension shows the reader that nature and concepts associate with it – the frontier, pioneer, transcendentalism – hold an important

place in American culture, serving as symbols of freedom. McCandless was influenced by the literature he read as well as the traditions of American culture. His strained relationship with his parents, especially his father, gave him the last push he needed to start his journey into nature. Nature and wilderness as they are depicted in Krakauer's book possess the qualities of both pastoral and wilderness. The main difference between the two portrayals is the way they interact with the narrative. Passages of the book containing peaceful, pastoral depictions of nature enable slower progress and human character's contemplation, thus leaving nature to be more of a backdrop, a framing device. Wilderness depictions, however, participate in the narrative more forcefully, forcing the human character to acknowledge the existence of the harsher side of nature as well. Krakauer's vision of McCandless's 'idea of nature', to use Soper's term, and the combination of literary quotes, cultural background and Krakauer's own experiences come together in a contemplative depiction of nature.

The role of nature in Penn's film is different. Monaco found that written narratives and film narratives are closely related, thus making it possible to present a written narrative also in a film narrative. He also admitted that film narratives are considerably shorter and thus need to make a choice between the details to be included from the original narrative. This choice of details may significantly influence the film narrative. Sean Penn's adaptation of Krakauer's book follows the main storyline – McCandless' – closely, but the film's focus is different when compared to the book. Novikov pointed out that Penn turns Krakauer's *Into the Wild* into a character study. Penn leaves out Krakauer's reflections of other adventurers and chooses to focus only on McCandless, letting McCandless' character carry his opinions as the director. American cultural dimension, which was present in the book, is largely lost in the film and the viewer is only able to follow McCandless's journey. Despite the fact that the film also employs quotes from Thoreau and London

voiced by McCandless, without the wider cultural background created in Krakauer's book, they do not have the same effect of creating an understanding of the role of nature in American culture.

Penn's *Into the Wild* compensates the lack of focus on American culture and the human-nature relationship by enhancing the importance of human relationships. Penn chooses to bring forward human relationships to make the film more relatable for the viewer. He chooses McCandless's sister as the narrator, presenting their family life and revealing that in the film adaptation, McCandless's problematic relationship with his father can be viewed as the main motivation behind his journey, rather than McCandless' longing for the enlightenment to be found in nature. Penn's decisions are made stemming from the medium he is working with – film narrative, not written narrative - his choices as the director change the underlying idea of Krakauer's book – to understand the relationship shared by the human and the non-human.

To conclude, it can be said that though nature has a role in Krakauer's book as well as Penn's adaptation based on it, the role differs significantly. In Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, nature acts as a plot advancement device, an important aspect of American culture and a significant influence on McCandless' life, both on the level of an inspirational ideal and the reality of nature leading to his death. In his adaptation, Penn switches the roles of human relationships and nature when compared to the book, leaving the latter on the background, stressing the impact of human relationships on McCandless' life. The multiple aspects of the term 'nature' are more thoroughly represented through the roles of nature in Krakauer's book when compared to Penn's adaptation. Thus, Krakauer's book results in a multifaceted exploration of nature as well as McCandless' life, demonstrating closeness of the human-nature relationship, which is not developed to such an extent in Penn's adaptation.



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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
INGLISE FILOLOOGIA OSAKOND

**Hedy Lepik**

**The role of nature in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and Sean Penn's film adaptation (Looduse roll Jon Krakaueri raamatus "Üksindusse" ja sellel põhinevas Sean Penni filmiadaptatsioonis)**

**Magistritöö**

**2014**

**Lehekülgede arv: 60**

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev töö uurib looduse rolli Jon Krakaueri tõsielul põhinevas raamatus „Üksindusse“ ja sellel põhinevas Sean Penni filmiadaptatsioonis. Töö peamine eesmärk on uurida looduse rolli kolmest aspektist: esiteks, milline on looduse roll ja funktsioon raamatu ja filmi narratiivides; teiseks, kuidas on roll narratiivides seotud Christopher McCandlessi eluga ning kolmandaks, millist rolli täidab loodus Ameerika kultuurikontekstis.

Magistritöö koosneb sissejuhatausest, kahest peatükist ja kokkuvõttest. Sissejuhatuses antakse lühiülevaade Christopher McCandlessi taustast, kelle elu on Krakaueri raamatu teemaks ning McCandlessi kirjanduslikest eeskujudest ja nende mõjust temale.

Esimeses peatükis käsitletakse looduse ja kultuuri vahelist suhet, toetudes ökokriitikale ja pastoraali ja metsiku looduse kirjanduslikele troopidele. Esimene peatükk keskendub ka looduse tähtsusele Ameerika kultuurikontekstis.

Teine peatükk keskendub looduse rolli võrdlusele raamatus ja filmis, tuginedes esimese peatüki teoreetilisele materjalile. Tähelepanu pööratakse looduse rolli erinevustele raamatus ja filmis ja püütakse leida seletusi raamatu ja filmi erinevatele fookustele.

Töö käigus selgus, et Krakaueri raamatus esindatud looduse rollid on mitmekesisemad ja täidavad erinevaid ülesandeid, funktsioneerides süžee edendamise vahendina, inspiratsiooniallikana ja ka keskse mõistena Ameerika kultuurikontekstis. Penni filmiadaptatsioonis on looduse roll olla rohkem tagaplaanil, sest Penn keskendub rohkem inimsuhete ja nende mõjude lahkamisele, seetõttu on Krakaueri raamatus paremini esindatud nii looduse erinevad küljed kui ka inimese ja looduse vahelise suhte olulisus ja lähedus.

Märksõnad: ameerika kirjandus, ökokriitika, adaptatsioon, troobid

**Lihtlitsents lõputöö reprodutseerimiseks ja lõputöö üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks**

Mina \_\_\_\_\_ Hedy Lepik \_\_\_\_\_  
 (autori nimi)  
 (sünnikuupäev: \_\_\_\_\_ 25.12.1986 \_\_\_\_\_)

1. annan Tartu Ülikoolile tasuta loa (lihtlitsentsi) enda loodud teose

\_\_\_\_\_  
 The representation and portrayal of nature in Jon Krakauer's Into the Wild and Sean Penn's film adaptation based on it  
 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (lõputöö pealkiri)

mille juhendaja on \_\_\_\_\_ Ene-Reet  
 Soovik \_\_\_\_\_,  
 (juhendaja nimi)

- 1.1. reprodutseerimiseks säilitamise ja üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemise eesmärgil, sealhulgas digitaalarhiivi DSpace-is lisamise eesmärgil kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse tähtaja lõppemiseni;
- 1.2. üldsusele kättesaadavaks tegemiseks Tartu Ülikooli veebikeskkonna kaudu, sealhulgas digitaalarhiivi DSpace'i kaudu kuni autoriõiguse kehtivuse tähtaja lõppemiseni.
2. olen teadlik, et punktis 1 nimetatud õigused jäävad alles ka autorile.
3. kinnitan, et lihtlitsentsi andmisega ei rikuta teiste isikute intellektuaalomandi ega isikuandmete kaitse seadusest tulenevaid õigusi.

Tartus/Tallinnas/Narvas/Pärnus/Viljandis, \_\_\_\_16.05.2014\_\_\_\_ (kuupäev)