Rhetorical Analysis: *Into the Wild*:

Deconstructing the Story of Christopher McCandless’s

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INTRODUCTION

Primo Levi once said, "I also know how important it is in life not necessarily to be strong, but to feel strong, to measure yourself at least once, to find yourself at least once in the most ancient of human conditions, facing the blind, deaf stone alone with nothing to help you but your hands and your own head." Christopher Johnson McCandless was an adventurer, an extremist at heart, who hiked into the Alaskan wilderness in April of 1992. McCandless broke free of civilization and began his expedition in May of the year 1990, and adopted the alias, Alexander Supertramp. His goal was simple: to live in solitude in the great state of Alaska. The audience is introduced to McCandless's extreme ideological views on the world, and his story is a powerful one that makes you question not only society, but our existence in general.

McCandless’s story inspired and touched people all around the globe. In January 1993, a man named Jon Krakauer published McCandless' story in January's issue of Outside Magazine, which is an American magazine primarily focused on the outdoors. Further inspired by McCandless’s story, Krakauer wrote and published the novel, Into the Wild in 1996. The book revolves around McCandless’s journey and travels. In 2007, the book was then adapted into a film that was directed by Sean Penn with Emilie Hirsh portraying the protagonist. Christopher/Alexander lives through an array of experiences and through the book and movie the audience is invited to be fully immersed in this incredible story.
DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

Invention

The target audience for *Into the Wild* can widely range from any age, income level, education level, regions and lifestyles. I believe that education level does have significant bearing on the intended audience, though. To really understand McCandless’s story, I think there needs to be a certain level of competence. I recently was introduced to this story, and I believe if I was introduced it any earlier, I would not have grasped it as easily. The primary goal of these rhetorical artifacts is to tell a story—Christopher McCandless’s story. There would (obviously) be no book or movie if Christopher McCandless didn’t leave his mark. Krakauer (1996) asserts, “In April 1992, a young man from a well-to-do East Coast family hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone in the wilderness north of Mt. McKinley. Four months later his decomposed body was found by a party of moose hunters” (Krakauer, 1996). This body was soon identified as Christopher McCandless, and from there a story transpired.

McCandless strategically planned his expedition, starting with completely shredding his identity. But it begs the question as to ‘why?’ Why would someone give up their whole entire existence to live in solitude? Was it laziness? Arrogance? Is he simply an unrealistic idealist? What Christopher McCandless represents is solely up for interpretation. How the audience deconstructs this story is up the individual who is either reading the book or watching the movie. Perception has huge bearing on the deconstruction process.

Arrangement

The arrangement in the novel and movie is incredible important to the story. *Into the Wild* begins with an important turning point late in McCandless's journey. The arrangement in
the book/movie begins with McCandless leaving Jim Gallien’s car, a few miles into the
Stampede Trail. The audience is able to witness his final encounter with another human before
he enters the Alaskan wilderness. Each segment of the story is then arranged in a strategic
manner so the message is conveyed effectively. For example, in the movie we are presently
with McCandless as he hikes up to the abandoned bus (no. 142) on Stampede Trail. His story is
then shown through flashbacks and the movie arranges itself in a way in which the audience
can easily follow. According to Herrick (2012), “It is commonplace to say that a story needs a
beginning, a middle, and an end”, he goes on to say that, “After you’ve done your invention and
discovered your proofs, you’ll have a mass of material that wants putting into some sort of
shape—a shape best designed to maximize the strong argument, minimize the weak ones, and
flow as if inexorably to its conclusion” (Herrick, 2012, p. 81). The shape that best fits these
artifacts is the use of flashbacks and narration as a tool for arrangement.

Style

Krakauer’s book is written in a different style which examines the life and death of
McCandless. Penn's movie is more of an enthusiastic celebration of his life. This is an important
difference, because the message is being conveyed differently. The message, however, is not
lost. There is definitely a style difference that is present when comparing written literature to a
movie production. Producing a movie increases leeway for style. There is some dry humor
throughout the movie given the way Emilie Hirsh acts. There is also the prevailing difference of
music. The soundtrack for the movie was done by Eddie Vedder. The songs that were chosen
for the movie easily connect us back to the message. For example, the song “Society” by Eddie
Vedder is used during the movie. This directly connects with the message because the message
RHETORICAL ANALYSIS: INTO THE WILD

is based around McCandless’s escape from society and civilization. The chorus goes, “Society, you’re a crazy breed, I hope you’re not lonely without me” (Hannan, 2007). This directly fits in with the message of the story. The audience clearly knows that society is the antagonist and McCandless is desperately trying to escape the confinements of society.

Memory

McCandless’s story is extremely memorable and both Krakauer and Penn use different techniques to aid in the canon of memory. According to Brett and Kate McKay (2011), “For our communication to be truly persuasive and effective, we need to ensure that our audience remembers what we've communicated to them” (McKay, 2011). The fact that Christopher McCandless’s story is extraordinary is memorable enough, but it gives Krakauer and Penn the opportunity to expand on this canon further through their own stylistic voice. For instance, Krakauer uses a lot of quotes within the book and it is designed in a way that the reader can keep up with McCandless’ journey through annotated maps within the book.

In the movie, Penn attempts to evoke emotion. This emotional appeal can aid in the memory process. For example, in the beginning of the movie there is a scene that shows McCandless’s first few hours after finding the abandoned bus and being completely on his own. The music done by Michael Brooks in this scene contributes to the overall essence of what this story is about. Also, there is a quote that is narrarated in this scene. McCandless is carving it into a slab of wood while saying aloud, “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” (MOVIECLIPS, 2011).

Delivery
Jon Krakauer’s, *Into the Wild*, is a New York Times best seller. Penn’s adaptation of the book was a success and the film earned strong reviews. The fact that this story was widely distributed aids in its success. If Krakauer never wrote this book, McCandless’s story may have never been told, thus, no movie would have been produced. The book was published through the company, First Anchor Books and the movie was distributed through Paramount Vantage, a specialty film division of Paramount Pictures. This is important while discussing delivery, because these were the avenues taken for distribution. This story exists; McCandless did what he did, regardless of any means of distribution. However, the general public would have never discovered the story without the means of distribution.

**Method**

Through the film and the book, this story is articulated and told in an effective way. To really understand the story and the effectiveness it can have on somebody, it’s useful to look at these rhetorical artifacts through the lens of Jacques Derrida. Derrida, a French philosopher, and his “controversial method of reading texts, known as ‘deconstruction,’ have greatly influenced literary and philosophical studies” (Herrick, 2013, p. 235). Derrida assigned three goals in developing the deconstructive approach to written discourse. Among them are, “(1) to reveal the hidden mechanisms at work influencing meaning, (2) to demonstrate the concealed power of symbols to shape thinking, and (3) to underline the fact that no one escapes these elusive qualities of language” (Herrick, 2013, p. 235). Language is a huge aspect that Derrida focuses on in his theory.

Derrida’s goal is clear within the theory. According to Herrick (2013), “If rhetoric teaches us the power of structured discourse, Derrida wants to teach us that no author in complete,
intentional, conscious control of the meanings of any written text” (Herrick, 2013, p. 236). The text within Into the Wild is up for interpretation and the meaning that this story carries relies heavily on the person. Our frame of references vast between each person, so meanings will vary as well. Deconstruction is an effective form of analysis which allows the reader of the text to constantly question traditional assumptions concerning language and meaning.

According to Tacey (2012), Derrida claims that “deconstruction has always been affirmative and has always delivered a yes to life. Deconstruction, according to the late Derrida, is a way of doing truth, of keeping things authentic and open to the possibility of transcendence. He wanted to unravel and deconstruct, not to arrive at nothing, but to affirm a sacred reality that he sensed was undeconstructible” (Tacey, 2012). Derrida has placed great meaning in deconstruction and defines it as a process of reading. He also discusses this concept of erasures. Erasures leave traces, one may try to erase communication but it will always alter something. These erasures are important to consider while looking through Jacques Derrida’s lenses of deconstruction.

**Analysis**

Christopher McCandless’s story can offer us all a little something. What that *something* is depends upon each individual either watching the film or reading the book. According to Haddad (2006), “Derrida argued at great length early on in his career that texts live on in the absence of their author. The question remains, however, of precisely how this survival takes place” (Haddad, 2006). This is where Derrida’s concept of erasures plays in. Krakauer has already written the book and the movie has already been produced. Essentially, no one can take back what McCandless did, or more specifically cannot take away the book out of every
bookstore, or destroy the movie—they can’t take away the story because it’s already out there. Krakauer may have highlighted and documented the life of McCandless, but it was McCandless alone who contributed to these works. Jon Krakauer asserts, “McCandless’s personality was puzzling in its complexity. He was intensely private but could be convivial and gregarious in the extreme” (Krakauer, 1996, p. 115). Understanding the protagonist of the film and movie leads to a better understanding of the deconstruction process. While reading about McCandless life and watching it in a film, one can almost argue that McCandless purposely did what he did in order for his story to be told. He purposely left this “erasures” in hope that one day someone will find them. However, it is argued that McCandless had no intention of dying in that bus. We will never know what his plan was after leaving Alaska—if, in fact, he ever even planned to leave Alaska.

The deconstruction process begins either on page one of the novel or scene one of the film and continues throughout the rest of the story. The themes, motifs, and symbols used in these works have a huge bearing on the whole process because the themes, motifs, and symbols can vary between readers. Whether it is money, freedom, the magic bus, McCandless’ beloved Datsun, or the wild itself, symbols take on meanings of their own. What a symbol represents, however, it up for interpretation. To someone, money can represent ‘greed’ and ‘war.’ Money, to someone else, may mean ‘necessity’ and ‘power.’ This, in turn, plays a huge role in the deconstruction process.

There are also a lot of themes present within the movie and book. For instance, materialism and its negative impacts on society are examined through McCandless’s journey. Dangers of materialism and conformity, as well as this idea of ultimate freedom are some other
themes pulled from both the novel and movie. A lot of people have their own idea as to which theme is the most prevalent and important to the text. For instance, I believe the most important theme is this idea of ultimate freedom. This, in turn, will make my deconstruction process different from say someone who values a different theme. Someone who thinks the most important theme is the dangers of materialism will have different symbols that have different meanings. These symbols are meant to shape meaning and this will directly affect the process of deconstruction.

There are some “blind spots” (as Derrida refers to them as) within any given text and its argument. These result from “rigid, unexamined meanings attributed to terms” (Herrick, 2013, p. 236). For example, there are thousands of themes and symbols that can be plausible through Krakauer’s and Penn’s work. Blind spots, however, can be avoided through double reading. Critchley (2005), asserts, “many of his double readings turn around such blind spots in order to explode from within our understanding of that author. The key thing is that the explosion has to come from within and not be imposed from without” (Critchley, 2005). Blind spots can hinder the deconstruction process if they aren’t addressed.

Using Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, one can examine the text of Into the Wild and come out with a better understanding of story. Taylor (2004), states, “Initially formulated to define a strategy for interpreting sophisticated written and visual works, deconstruction has entered everyday language” (Taylor, 2004). People are constantly engaging in deconstruction, and they may not even be aware of it. It is almost an innate ability to deconstruct texts. By simply discovering themes and symbols throughout the text is, in fact, deconstructing it—attaching meaning to it. It’s quite clear that this film and book have been open for
deconstruction. The way the symbols and themes are presented depends on the avenue through which it goes through. A theme from the novel may only be discovered through the novel, through the writing of Krakauer. A theme from the movie may only be discovered through the way Penn directed it. All of these aspects directly relates back through the use of Cicero’s five canons.
CONCLUSION

Stories can have profound effects on people. I have visited both the world of Sean Penn and Jon Krakauer. Each platform (book/movie) offers something different and unique. Krakauer invites us to relive the story of McCandless through his written work, and Penn invites us to celebrate his life on screen. The story of McCandless is over two decades old, but that doesn’t mean that it has gone away. Through the use of erasures, McCandless has left us with a story of extremism and, more importantly, discernment. His story is out there, it can’t be unseen or unheard. Through the use of deconstruction, we can come out with a better understanding of his story.

Being aware of themes and symbols is extremely important. In the deconstruction process, it’s absolutely imperative. Without an open mind, we simply cannot see past or own perceptions. Although some may argue that deconstruction can be harmful, I don’t see how that can be possible if we engage in the process appropriately. Derrida has been referred to as the ‘anti-Habermas.’ Jurgen Habermas strived for a rational society, while Derrida constantly challenged us to seek the meaning of text a little deeper. I believe Derrida wants us to stretch ourselves beyond our limits. He wants us to learn things that, maybe, we didn’t even think we could possibly learn. Or adopt values we never knew existed.

We can take any textual artifact and put it under the Derrida microscope. Into the Wild gives readers, and watchers, the opportunity to deconstruct Christopher McCandless’s story. McCandless story is unique and different, a story unlike any other story. Putting this particular story underneath the lenses has proved to be an extremely revealing process for me personally. Not only does the book and movie mean a lot to me, but looking at it in a different way has
opened my eyes to new interpretations. I’ve been able to see what others interpret McCandless’s story as, and it’s brought new light to the story through Derrida’s theory of deconstruction.
References


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