

Unnatural Nature

“There is pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep sea and the music in its roar;
I love not man the less, but Nature more.”

-Lord Byron

The realist movement reflects society's ability to overwhelm the individual, molding him into the exact form of his peers. With spreading consumerism and materialism – the true degeneration of the human spirit – it is logical to think that some people ran away from society to avoid its spreading, poisonous pandemic. This constant tension between complete integration and total isolation from a harmful hegemony caused confusion and devastation for many people. A harmonious balance between loving man and loving nature, or favoring one while respecting the other, is crucial to obtaining a healthy quality of life. In the film [Into the Wild](#), the protagonist's departure from society, his rebirth in nature, and his lonely death collectively convey that neither integrating one's self into a consumerist existence nor abandoning community completely is a proper solution to the stifling nature of society; rather, it is a balance between the two extremes which proves most effective.

First, Chris McCandless's removal from common, middle class culture elucidates that society's false morals and materialistic values fail to govern life realistically. Chris is instantly illustrated as very different from the community in which he exists. Through the use of contrast in his college graduation scene, it is clearly displayed that Chris rejects societal norms. Whereas his classmates monotonously receive their diplomas one after the other, this cultural deviant runs on stage when his name is called, vigorously throwing his hands in the air. This is directly followed by a powerful montage which solidifies Chris's differences from his peers. The montage features slow-motion images alternating between Chris's college graduation and that of his parents. The shots of Chris's graduation are colorful and vibrant, yet his parents are in black and white. The McCandless couple are smiling and laughing at their

graduation, but these happy gestures are countered by a dull voice recounting the everyday, plain details of the surroundings: the red tiles, the iron gate, the light books at their hips, and the fact that they are getting married because they are *supposed* to. This minutia makes their lives seem uneventful and calculated, as if the storyteller is criticizing the falseness of their existence and their conformity. Together, the pairing of these scenes conveys the overall message that society is stifling and that Chris is overwhelmed by the shallowness it creates. The everyday details bore him, and he does not want to become like his parents, who are consumed by middle-class values. The flashing of the events is so overpowering that the viewer can feel Chris's disillusionment, as if a panic attack might occur at any second. Additionally, Chris's graduation celebration dinner with his family uses *mise en scene* to support this fact. As he pulls up to the restaurant, he parks his beat-up jalopy between a myriad of gaudy, shiny, and perfectly groomed vehicles. Chris's parents wish to give him a new car as a graduation present, but he rejects it because he views the gift as excess. Cars are typically seen as a symbol of status, and Mr. and Mrs. McCandless are embarrassed by Chris's piece of junk. Conversely, Chris embraces it and proudly stands beside his car with all of the other status symbols glimmering by his side. Status does not matter to Chris and the thought of conforming disgusts him.

Chris's broken past, additionally, motivates him to reject society, confirming his sense of disenchantment with the material world. The viewers learn that Chris's father was previously married, and rejected the son of his first wife, marrying his mom who was pregnant with Chris. This shocking information, which Chris discovered through a family member later in life, combined with his parent's constant arguing, both depressed and abhorred him. This is blatantly demonstrated with the use of crosscutting between Chris on the beach at the onset of his journey and a scene in which his dad beats his mom while him and his sister cry on the side. At home, Chris witnessed the darkness of reality. His parents married because society told them this was the right thing to do, yet relationships based upon societal rules rather than love often result in violence or extreme unhappiness. On the beach, Chris is

free from the burdens of society. The crosscutting shows how his parents' false relationship motivates his journey, enabling him to forget his past. It also conveys that in nature he is free and happy, as the wind blows through his hair and a smile overtakes his face. On the other hand, Chris felt imprisoned at home, as tears strolled down his eyes and his seemingly perfect reality fell apart because of the false values society instills. Similarly, the song "Society" accompanies the middle-class scenes and explains this theme. The song refers to society as a "crazy breed." The word choice of breed denotes savagery, as if humanity consists of brutal animals. Chris views society as an inferior existence, and the music supports this belief. Chris sees society as ruthless and he is unable to integrate himself into it.

Replacing shallow morals, Chris's transcendental, spiritual views and emphasis on nature's beauty outline the therapeutic ability of life's simple pleasures, reinforcing the significance of both nature and relaxation in a world which has become too fast-paced. Chris leaves his community to journey on his own and embrace the wilderness. First, it is imperative to note both Chris's rebirth and his ability to go down his own path. Strongly symbolized when he swims in the ocean despite his fear, spiritual rebirth allows this fed-up visionary to rejuvenate before the true journey begins. Jumping into the water cleanses him of the past. One should be hesitant to call it a Baptism, for Chris abandons organized religion, yet the water has a similar, purifying effect. Moreover, we learn of Chris's need to journey within the first scene that he is in Alaska. It proves that the journey is one of an untraveled path, one in which Chris is marking up a new territory. This is communicated through the use of contrast and color, for all is shiny white, seen from a distance above. The white is abruptly interrupted by Chris's bright red hat, which he places on a tree before continuing his trek. The red pops out from the sea of white to express that Chris has intruded upon the wilderness and made the unexplored terrain his own. Chris has begun his quest, a search for true happiness and meaning in life.

Chris replaces consumerist society with nature, for that is where he finds truth, tranquility, and freedom. Nature does not judge, does not fight with, and does not stifle Chris. Chris eventually hitchhikes to the California Trail, a vast expanse of forest, after his car breaks down. There is an intense scene utilizing crosscutting between Chris and a deer, with the sun's rays penetrating the foliage. Chris appears animalistic, sweating and crouching. Pairing this with the image of the deer makes Chris appear to be an animal too, but not in a savage manner. The beautiful nature and harmonious deer portray the wilderness as beautiful and, consequently, Chris as both fair and serene. Imagery of animals and nature permeate the film, which become Chris's new so-called religion. Yet, as the movie progresses that these ideals turn dark. For example, when he starts to run out of food in Alaska he kills a gigantic moose, proceeding to gut and cook it. Unfortunately, the enormity of the kill makes it difficult to finish the job before bugs infest it. The scene in which Chris first notices the entire moose has gone to waste is amplified by blurriness and a spinning motion, blazoning that transcendentalism can be dark and disappointing. He is overwhelmed by the fact that he wasted the moose. Also, this only perpetuates his hunger, and he even eventually dies of starvation. Chris's new values, ones that could be referred to as the laws of nature, begin to fail him.

Finally, Chris's lonely death highlights the need for equilibrium between too much participation in and too much escapism from society. Chris is alone in the end and leaves many people behind: his family, his friends, and those who guided him along his journey. His disappearance negatively impacted many, whether he meant it to or not. The movie begins in the future, with Chris's mother's frantic voice screaming out, thinking she hears her son's voice; she is on the verge of going insane without him. Also, there is a montage at the closing of the movie where there are flashing pictures of some of the people that Chris had affected. They are pained by this loss. It is obvious that Chris's life had a positive impact on them, and that coping without him is unbearable. The music in the background of the pictures sounds more like something Mozart composed, whereas the rest of the movie utilizes rock music. Rock

music hints at movement, but this music conveys sadness and struggle, the backlashes of leaving society. The overall montage expresses that although society can be depressing and humans can be hurtful, leaving others behind solves nothing in the end, as pain persists for everyone.

Further developing this theme is that in the end Chris is completely alone in the wilderness, realizing too late that loneliness, no matter how at peace one feels, proves unfulfilling. Chris had changed his name to Alexander Supertramp during his journey, but reverted back to his birth name in the final scene. This symbolizes that Chris feels as if one cannot escape his true identity. Running away from one's past solves nothing because no matter how far one runs, he is his history. Furthermore, Chris's last words before he dies stay bold, whereas throughout the movie the other quotes and headings slowly dissipate away. Therefore, the viewer is left with the message that "happiness is only real if shared," glowing boldly from the screen. Ironically, Chris realizes too late that what he runs from, other people, is what he needs to survive. Without other people, nothing feels true because there is no one to talk, recollect, or experience life with. Lastly, the final image of Chris expresses the disheartened condition of dying alone. The camera slowly zooms out, away from Chris's dead body in the magic bus, surrounded by nothing but white tundra for miles and miles. Chris is left in the wilderness alone. This conveys that if one does not surround himself with others, he is nothing in the end, unable to spread his message. Chris's disappointment with society would have been better utilized within society, where he could work to change the world which he is frustrated with. Short ventures away from society are better than permanent ones. Chris's story fortunately reaches viewers through his writings and the film: it is imperative to never lose faith in our fellow human beings. One can live in society and still avoid falling prey to it.

Finding equilibrium between complete escapism and total integration into a doomed existence is necessary. Nature is unnatural in that happiness is amplified when it is shared and that survival

depends upon others. Alone, one dissipates into nothing, yet conforming continues the vicious cycle. It is important to “love not man the less, but Nature more,” staying true to humanity while loving nature too. It is not necessary to choose between two extremes, for it is possible to have the best of both worlds, although it can be very difficult. Psychology proves that it is easier to be fooled into conforming, as with Nazi Germany, than it is to refuse the overall hegemony. Without a group of people on your side, is it plausible for the average person to completely resist society *alone* and remain in it too?

Works Consulted

Into the Wild. Dir. Sean Penn. Prod. David Blocker, Frank Hildebrand and John J. Kelly. Perf.

Emile Hirsch and Marcia Gay Harden. DVD. 2007.