
Through Hunger to the Meaning of Life

Into the Wild by Jon Krakauer is an interpretation of one devoted man's unwavering hunger for meaning in the world. In 1990, 24-year-old Emory graduate Christopher McCandless leaves society to venture into the wilderness with a goal of reaching Alaska and living on only his surroundings and sparse material resources. Hitchhiking and wandering his way there, he encounters a plethora of unique characters, some fueling but others attempting to dissuade his radical intentions. Once he reaches Alaska, McCandless finds intense struggles and obstacles in the environment in which he yearned to prosper, and he eventually perishes from starvation, ending his lengthy, two-year journey. The author Jon Krakauer restates and emphasizes the words "hunger" and "hungry" as a central motif in his interpretation. Krakauer contrasts physical and emotional hunger to display actions fueled by a belief in Romanticism as a mentally misguided quest for self actualization.

Christopher McCandless' hunger for meaning pushes him to reject all facets of modern society. Before his adventure, McCandless was simply a wealthy young man living in a world led by and concentrated with wealthy people. As his college friends began to get involved in stereotypical youth activities such as fraternities and parties, McCandless' interests were focused in the exploration of social truth and justice. "More and more of the classes he took addressed such pressing social issues as racism and world hunger and inequities in the distribution of wealth" (Krakauer 123). McCandless' eyes were opened to new ideas and principles, seemingly causing him to re-evaluate his direction in life. This awakening is seen as the earliest spark of the fire that was Christopher McCandless' great adventure. "Chris didn't understand how people could possibly be allowed to go hungry, especially in this country,' says Billie. 'He would rave about that kind of thing for hours'" (113). In his classes, it is revealed to Christopher that the civilizations that surrounds him is corrupted. As his knowledge of the nature of society develops, Christopher responds negatively, angered by injustices of the world. In his mind, he no longer sees himself as a part of this society where so many people have to endure maltreatment and inequity.

After removing himself mentally from the society which he finds so corrupted, the conclusion McCandless arrives at is that he needs to also physically remove himself from civilization. "He was hungry to learn about things. Unlike most of us, he was the sort of person who insisted on living out his beliefs"(76). This quote can be very easily misinterpreted as a heroic, selfless belief system being utilized by the protagonist, but the his true belief system is one exemplifying self-involvement. Christopher chooses to abandon the civilization that he so strongly believes to be wrong instead of using his ideas and talents to make the world the kind of place he believes is morally justifiable. Krakauer includes a passage highlighted by McCandless in *Walden, or Life*

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in the Woods on page 117. *“Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine were in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from in hospitable board.”* Readers can easily assume that the reason McCandless related to this quote is because it was his true environment before his adventure. While he was still part of society, he yearned for a deeper meaning to life, something or somewhere that showed him his role in the world past the son in a wealthy family, polite and upstanding. Christopher strives to find this role on his journey outside of society instead of making his role within society one of worldly improvement. More than all else, emotional hunger for self-definition and self-validation were strong forces in McCandless' life, encouraging his quest. His strong beliefs in the power of natural living as a healing process for those questioning their existence drove him to dedicate himself fully to his journey. “We [Jan Burres, Christopher McCandless] got to talking. He was a nice kid.... And he was big-time hungry. Hungry, hungry, hungry. But real happy.... Said he was tramping around the country, having a big old adventure” (Krakauer 30). Use and repetition of the keyword “hungry” draws the reader's attention to the metaphorical sense of the word in the text. McCandless' “big old adventure” made him happy; it fueled him. It fed his desire for a simple way of life, without distractions but also without motivation for communal compassion with no one around to help or interact with. In a way, the adventurer romanticized Romanticism, even though it was redundant to do so. When people he meets speak to him, McCandless constantly mentions his yearning for the wide open west in Alaska and how he will live off the land without being dependent on anything or anyone. Once this imagined scenario becomes a reality, he realizes that the problems he had with society were replaced with the very physical, harsh problems found in the wilderness including lack of shelter and lack of nutrition.

The struggles Christopher McCandless encounters in the wilderness can be explained by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a highly believed system of ranking human necessities. The foundation of human needs is physical, including oxygen, food, and water. McCandless ventured into the wild without securing his access to these elements. “I figured he'd be OK, [...] I thought he'd probably get hungry pretty quick and just walk out to the highway. That's what any normal person would do” (Krakauer 7). Self-actualization is the very top of the hierarchy of needs, and it is believed that if a human must fill all basic needs from the foundation upwards. In each category under self-actualization, McCandless ignored large parts. Internally, every human knows the role of every need in relation to their actions and can choose how to pursue their most extreme wants. McCandless' venture towards this goal of solving his questions of morality caused him to overlook his real needs including not only bodily necessities but also the security of employment, love, and friendship, contributing to the fatal end to his journey.

As Krakauer begins his slow demise, his thoughts become unclouded by his judgement of society and instead mentally clear. “Some people who have been brought back from the far edge of starvation, though, report that near the end the hunger vanishes, the terrible pain

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dissolves, and the suffering is replaced by a sense of sublime euphoria, a sense of calm accompanied by transcendent mental clarity” (Krakauer 198). McCandless' death is a real-life example of literary irony. It isn't until he is literally, physically starving to death that his metaphorical hunger for worldly meaning subsides. Some readers can see his death as a disappointment or a failure, but the real notion it brings is that death is one form of success for a person with the ideas Christopher has. Although he doesn't die purposefully, his journey is concluded when it's clear that the journey was not just physical but also emotional, mental, and metaphorical. Through physical starvation Christopher McCandless' hunger for personal truth and discovery is fed.

Christopher McCandless' adventure is a display of the human idea of finding the meaning of life. His personal discovery of truth is found not in the environment he placed himself in but in his own mind, exhibiting the uselessness of a physical quest when a mental journey satisfies self-discovery. Krakauer's use of “hunger” as physical, emotional and metaphorical in a person's life highlights the contrast between human needs and wants.

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