

Transcendental Self-reliance and Anti-consumerism: A Comparison of H. D. Thoreau's *Walden* and J. Krakauer's *Into the Wild*

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ABSTRAKT

Tato práce se zabývá autobiografií *Walden, aneb Život v lesích*, napsanou Henry David Thoreauem a biografií Christophera McCandlesse, *Útěk do divočiny*. Práce se zpočátku zaměřuje na Transcendentalismus, který oba protagonisty výrazně ovlivnil a hraje tak klíčovou úlohu ve zkoumání a následném porovnání jejich názorů a postojů týkajících se soběstačnosti a společnosti. V závěru práce je shrnuta McCandlessova a Thoreauova představa osobní svobody ve vztahu ke konzumnímu způsobu života a konformitě. Ve světle podobností a odlišností Thoreauovy a McCandlessovy životní filozofie jsou vysvětleny důvody jejich úniku do divočiny.

Klíčová slova: Walden, Útěk do divočiny, Christopher McCandless, Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalismus, soběstačnost, konzumní způsob života, konformita, společnost, svoboda

ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with two significant books – the autobiography *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) written by American author Henry David Thoreau and the biography of Christopher McCandless, *Into the Wild* (2007), written by Jon Krakauer. The thesis firstly focuses on the Transcendentalist movement which is crucial for this research as both protagonists were influenced by this movement. In further studies and compares important attitudes and beliefs of Thoreau and McCandless regarding self-reliance and society. Ultimately, the thesis concludes the notion of personal freedom in relation to consumerism and conformism from Thoreau's and McCandless' point of view, using their journey of self-discovery and self-reliance. In light of similarities and differences between Thoreau's and McCandless' philosophy, I will explain their motives for fleeing from society to the wilderness.

Keywords: Walden, Into the Wild, Christopher McCandless, Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalism, self-reliance, consumerism, conformism, society, freedom

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INTRODUCTION

“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.”¹

The year is 2015 and the way of life has become faster and more and more hurried. The world is developing. New scientific disciplines and technologies are being invented. People chase after wealth and power. They are eager to have a successful career and to secure their lives. These are the elements which most of us may deem to be the most important, but in fact we have forgotten an important truth and that is that the most important element in life is freedom. Not freedom in the common sense of word, but rather personal freedom. To be what we truly want to be. To do what we wish to do. Who or what prevents us from doing so? We do.

This personal freedom is connected to the human spirit. When we watch a little child we find a free human. They do everything they want to do. These humans are absolutely wild and if we observe them, we discover that they are truly happy most of the time. They are not afraid to explore, to risk and to express what they feel. They worry only when their basic needs are not met. They live in the present moment and they do not fear the future or the past.²

This thesis explores and deals with two significant books – the autobiography *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) written by American author Henry David Thoreau and the biography of Christopher McCandless, *Into the Wild* (2007), written by Jon Krakauer. The study of the Transcendentalist movement is necessary for this thesis, because both protagonists were deeply influenced by its philosophy. This influence is connected to Transcendentalists’ perception of nature and their strong belief in the power of an individual. This thesis will seek to unveil the notion of personal freedom in relation to

¹ George Gordon Byron, “Childe Harold,” Allpoetry, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://allpoetry.com/There-Is-Pleasure-In-The-Pathless-Woods>.

²See Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* (San Rafael: Amber-Allen Publishing, 1997), 95-100.

consumerism and conformism from Thoreau's and McCandless' point of view, using their journey of self-discovery and self-reliance as a potential way to acquire this kind of freedom. In light of similarities and differences between Thoreau's and McCandless' philosophy, I would like to hypothesize upon what were their motives to flee from society to the wilderness. During my research I would like to confirm the hypothesis which says that from the McCandless' and Thoreau's point of view, consumerism decreases personal freedom.

1 THE AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALIST MOVEMENT

“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.”³

Transcendentalism can be described as a philosophical, literary and religious movement that flourished from 1836 to 1860 and can be considered as an outgrowth of Romanticism. Transcendentalism came during a major shift in thought in American life. “The Calvinism of the Puritan past was replaced by less fearful, more humanized religious practices; empirical philosophy was challenged by the role of intuition.”⁴ New writers expressed their beliefs in distinct literary forms. There was a sense of newness in the air, and the Transcendentalists were often called the New School. The greatest concern and emphasis was put on the individual and the individual's role in democratic society.⁵

1.1 Social and literary context

The year 1836 was the *annus mirabili* of the movement, during which Emerson published perhaps his most famous work *Nature*, which is known as the “gospel” of Transcendentalism. In the same year, the Transcendental Club, also known as the Hedge Club, met for the first time in the Boston home of George Ripley, a Unitarian minister. Gathered with him were Frederick Henry Hedge, Amos Bronson Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller and others. It was remarkably progressive to include women at that time. Alcott describes the club as “a company of earnest persons enjoying conversations on high themes and having much in common.” It was the first American movement, which influenced generations of American intellectuals. The members of the club founded a journal called *The Dial* which disseminated Transcendentalist thoughts and opinions for 4 years from 1840 to 1844.⁶

The nineteenth century was a progressive period and many reforms occurred. Some of Transcendentalists were reformers by nature. They simply could not be satisfied with the situation at that time. Slavery was wrong for Transcendentalists as it stood in the way of

³Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Self-Reliance*. (New York: The Domino Project, 2011), 2.

⁴Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxvii.

⁵See *Ibid.*, xxvii.

⁶Jay Parini, ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature, Vol. 4* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 199.

the spiritual evolution of the slaves. Some of Transcendentalists played a significant role in the abolition of slavery. Henry David Thoreau himself declared that it is a duty of every man to take an action against the state where they feel it is morally wrong. Another important reform which can be traced back to the Transcendental philosophy is the women's rights movement. Margaret Fuller alleged: "What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellectual to discern, as a soul to live freely."⁷ What Fuller emphasized was that everybody should have a chance to develop the full capacity of their nature. This is the character of transcendental thought and feeling on this subject. One argues that the Transcendentalists' idea of woman is regarded more for its essential capacities and possibilities and respect for the ideal than for the actual woman.⁸

1.2 Philosophical and religious context

In order to better understand the ideology and beliefs of Henry David Thoreau and Christopher McCandless, it is necessary to first focus on the Transcendentalist stream and its philosophy. Transcendentalism arose as a counterweight to Unitarianism. There were many people who identified themselves as Transcendentalists and were involved with Unitarianism. They felt that "Unitarianism had not lived up to its pledge to remove theological chains, and that the restrictive structure of Puritanism had been replaced by an equally restrictive (though superficially open) order."⁹ 'Corpse-cold Unitarianism' as Emerson was to call it.¹⁰ Transcendentalists considered institutions, politics and organized religion as corrupting the purity of an individual. According to them, only self-reliant individuals can constitute true society.

Emerson's generation was frustrated when it realized that not-yet-asked questions were going to be responded with already-prepared answers. The conservative Unitarians saw miracles as evidence of God's relationship with the world. They were persuaded that to doubt an existence of the miracles of the New Testament was to doubt God. "Meanwhile,

⁷ Octavius Brooks Frothingham. *Transcendentalism in New England, a History*. (Boston: American Unitarian association, 1903), 178.

⁸ See *Ibid.*, 176 – 180.

⁹ Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxviii.

¹⁰ See *Ibid.*

German biblical scholars had developed a so-called Higher Criticism that argued that the Bible, like all inspired texts, was written by humans, and therefore in its reporting of events it contained illustrative examples more than it did detailed, accurate histories.”¹¹ The younger Unitarians saw Higher Criticism as a new way of interpretation; on the other hand the older ministers saw that as a move against their teachings and religion. When both sides’ opinions diverged and no other discussion was possible, they became detached from each other.¹²

Transcendentalism is not simple to define. It includes complex philosophical ideas and opinions. Myerson says that “Defining Transcendentalism is a lot like grasping mercury: both are fluid and hard to pin down.”¹³ As one gets to know more about Transcendentalism, one realizes that the looser and vaguer the definition is, the more accurate it becomes.¹⁴

The explanations and definitions uttered by its supporters were rarely in complete agreement. Their perspective and personal intuition affected which elements of the Transcendentalist movement and philosophy were the most cogent and important for them. Transcendentalists were influenced by many streams of thought.¹⁵ They were connected to each other only loosely. They did not follow any formal doctrine. They were individuals who shared only some basic principles about man’s place in the universe. The Transcendentalists were syncretic, they borrowed and used thoughts of other philosophies, religions and literatures; whatever was fitting to their developing ideology.¹⁶ They expanded these opinions and conclusions and formed them into a new system. We can say that they were eclectic.

American Transcendentalism is more a state of mind than a religion in the traditional sense. It is a pragmatic philosophy and a form of spirituality. From the philosophical point of view it was influenced by Kantian and Idealistic philosophy, from the literary point of view there was influence from Romanticism and Individualism, and its religious

¹¹ Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxviii.

¹² See Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., xxv.

¹⁴ See Ibid

¹⁵ See Pennell, Melissa McFarland. *Masterpieces of American Romantic Literature* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 33 – 34.

¹⁶ See Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxv.

spirituality followed the concept of free thinking and post-Unitarian thoughts.¹⁷ Plato was the first person who proposed the concept of Transcendentalism. Plato claimed that there are perfect forms existing in an absolute reality. He believed “in the ability of man to know the mere being in itself.”¹⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson based his idea that “the world is an expression of spirit to improve the theory of correspondence”¹⁹ on Plato’s theory.

Transcendental principles can not be described with brief explanations. H. D. Thoreau himself stressed the problem of defining Transcendentalism. In his journal entry he says that he was requested once by the secretary of the Association for the Advancement of Science to explain this field of science in the most comprehensive sense possible. However Thoreau thought that he would have made himself the laughing-stock of the scientific community to describe or attempt to describe to them that branch of science in which he was interested in,

“as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. So I was obliged to speak to their condition and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand. The fact is I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot. Now I think of it, I should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist. That would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations.”²⁰

R. W. Emerson himself in his writings intentionally refused any argumentation. His method is based on an instinctive sense of truth. The conscious work of a philosopher is just the forming of a correct expression for an already discovered truth. This is the reason why it is difficult, if not impossible, to express his philosophy with abstract formulations without colorful language and affection, which are typical for Emerson’s works.²¹

As previously mentioned, the foundation stone of Transcendentalism was not purely laid in the New England. Transcendentalists draw inspiration from English and mainly

¹⁷ See "Chapter 4: Early Nineteenth Century - American Transcendentalism: A Brief Introduction." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide. <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/4intro.html>.

¹⁸ Alireza Manzari, “Contextual American Transcendentalism,” *Theory and Practise in Language Studies* 2 (2012): 1797.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Laurence Stapleton. *H. D. Thoreau, a Writer’s Journal*. New York: Dover Publications, 2013, 95.

²¹ See Karel Vorovka, *Americká filosofie*. (Prague: Sfinx, 1929), 52.

from German Romanticism; especially the philosophy of Goethe and Kant.²² However Emerson was not influenced directly, but vicariously through English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He rendered spiritualism colored by the German post-Kantian idealism.²³

Transcendentalists disregarded each other.²⁴ Nevertheless there were some points of general agreement. First of all they believed that “an individual is the spiritual center of the universe – and in an individual can be found the clue to nature, history and, ultimately, the cosmos itself. It is not a rejection of the existence of God, but a preference to explain an individual and the world in terms of an individual.”²⁵ The second central tenet of their faith was: “The structure of the universe literally duplicates the structure of the individual self – all knowledge, therefore, begins with self-knowledge. This is similar to Aristotle’s dictum know thyself.”²⁶ In Thoreau’s *Walden* we especially can see that “Transcendentalists accepted the neo-Platonic conception of nature as a living mystery, full of signs – nature is symbolic.”²⁷ Their strong individualism is reflected in

“the Belief that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization – this depends upon the reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies: firstly, the expansive or self-transcending tendency – a desire to embrace the whole world – to know and become one with the world and secondly, the contracting or self-asserting tendency – the desire to withdraw, remain unique and separate – an egotistical existence.”²⁸

1.2.1 The Over-Soul

Transcendentalists opposed the triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. According to them Jesus was the son of God who was sent to help and save the humankind. They replaced this “anthropomorphic God with a non-anthropomorphic force of spirit, one that was present in all things, and one that could be learned about by studying not just God but people and nature as well.”²⁹ They saw a human soul as a higher part of the whole called

²² Ian Frederick Finseth. “Liquid Fire Within Me: Language, Self and Society in Transcendentalism and early Evangelicalism, 1820-1860.” (M.A. Thesis, University of Virginia, 1995).

²³ See Karel Vorovka, *Americká filosofie* (Prague: Sfinx, 1929), 53.

²⁴ "Chapter 4: Early Nineteenth Century - American Transcendentalism: A Brief Introduction." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide. <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap4/4intro.html>.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxviii.

the 'Over-soul'. "It is a force of energy that pervaded all of creation."³⁰ In other words it was the purpose of the life. Some writers replaced the term Over-soul with the term God in their writings. Jesus had a piece of God in himself. He was as divine as everyone else, but he lived a transcendental life on the highest level, we can even say it was an exemplary life. He made the best of this inner power which is in every man.³¹ Therefore, Transcendentalists believed that every human being is divine. Every man has a piece of God inside himself. As Emerson says in his essay *Nature*, "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."³²

The older generation of the Unitarians believed in John Locke's material philosophy of the world in which everything has to be confirmed by the senses. According to Locke, the mind was a 'tabula rasa' or a blank tablet on which is inscribed all of one's experiences. He rejected the theory of innateness of moral law. On the other hand, the younger generation Transcendentalists accepted the philosophy of Kant which says that we are already endowed at birth with certain universally acknowledged truths. They were determined to hold a more idealistic view of the human mind and qualities, which would allow an essential understanding of morality, God and themselves.³³ "The only way for the people to learn about the physical world is through another power called *reason* by which they meant *insight*. The reason is the intuitive and independent ability to distinguish the *absolute truth*."³⁴ In Emerson's words, "Reason is the highest faculty of the soul – what we mean often by the soul itself; it never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives, it is vision. The Understanding toils all the time, compares, contrives, adds, argues, near sighted but strong-sighted, dwelling in the present the expedient the customary."³⁵ Transcendentalism encourages individuals to find a deeper meaning within themselves, to use their Over-soul

³⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, Accessed 20 November 2013, http://www.rwe.org/?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=42.

³¹ See Pennell, Melissa McFarland. *Masterpieces of American Romantic Literature* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 34.

³² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, http://www.rwe.org/?option=com_content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=42, Accessed 20 November 2013.

³³ Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xix.

³⁴ Alireza Manzari, "Contextual American Transcendentalism," *Theory and Practise in Language Studies 2* (2012): 1793.

³⁵ Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xix.

at full capacity instead of waiting for a different source of guidance. This relying on intuition and belief in divinity of the soul prepared the stage for Emerson's *Self-reliance*.

1.2.2 Microcosm and Macrocosm

Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essays and Henry David Thoreau in his book *Walden* expressed the basic ideas which underlie Transcendentalism. They refer to nature not only as an infinite beauty, but as a representation of divinity; literally the face of God. There is a direct relationship with God and with nature. It can be understood through terms "Macrocosm" which represents the universe and "Microcosm" which stands for the individual. Macrocosm and Microcosm are in direct connection with each other. They both take care of all animate and inanimate objects as well as God.³⁶

Frothingham declares that Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) opened a new era in metaphysical thought. The term Transcendent is defined as "qualities that lie outside of all experience that cannot be brought within the recognized formularies of thought, cannot be reached either by observation or reflection, or explained as the consequences of any discoverable antecedents."³⁷ The transcendental philosophy is built on these universal principles and these primary laws of mind, which are basic elements of absolute truth. "I term all cognition transcendental which concerns itself not so much with objects so far as this may be possible á priori. A system of such conceptions would be called Transcendental Philosophy."³⁸ People can develop their capacity and uncover the natural laws by observation of the natural world, because there is beauty and truth which can only be experienced through intuition.³⁹

³⁶ Alireza Manzari, "Contextual American Transcendentalism," *Theory and Practise in Language Studies* 2 (2012): 1794.

³⁷ Octavius Brooks Frothingham. *Transcendentalism in New England, a history*. (Boston: American Unitarian association, 1903), 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

³⁹ Alireza Manzari, "Contextual American Transcendentalism," *Theory and Practise in Language Studies* 2 (2012): 1793.

2 HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Henry David Thoreau was American author, poet, essayist, philosopher, naturalist and historian. Charles A. Madison in his essay presents Thoreau as a man who concerned himself so consciously and so effectively, like anybody else, with the ever pressing problem of how one might earn a living and remain free. This is understandable: “poverty had abetted principle in accentuating his keen yearning for the full life.”⁴⁰ He was a son of a pencil maker. He did not come from a rich family so he found out early in life that men have to sacrifice a part of their “freedom” in order to satisfy their daily needs.

Thoreau joined the Transcendental club in 1837 and soon became an intimate friend of Emerson. He readily accepted and was influenced by the ideals of Transcendentalism, which had become current during his studies at Harvard where he went through a spiritual revolution after reading Emerson’s essay *Nature*. As a source of knowledge he combined nature observation and natural scientific books. The desire for writing about what he saw, what he experienced and what he was thinking about proceeded from classical literature.⁴¹ Emerson in his journal mentioned:

“Thoreau was a speaker and actor of the truth. No truer American existed than Thoreau. ... He was bred to no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he ate no flash, he drank no wine; and, though a naturalist, he used neither trap nor gun. He chose, for himself, to be the bachelor of thought and Nature.”⁴²

During his studies he was deeply interested in ancient Greek and ancient Roman authors and thinkers such as Plato, Homer and Confucius. He studied Greek, Latin, French and German languages. He was able to read all of these authors in the language in which they were written. The Greek epic made a huge expression on him as an expression of heroic potential in life. He venerated Homer’s *The Iliad*. Afterwards, a few years later, he kept a copy of *The Iliad* on his desk at Walden Pond so it would remind him of that potential. However it was just one of many books from his eclectic reading list.⁴³ Thoreau expressed his opinion on his readings in *Walden*. He believed that it is worth spending some time to learn an ancient language, even a few words, which raises you from the triviality of the

⁴⁰ A. Charles Madison, “Henry David Thoreau: Transcendental Individualist,” *The University of Chicago Press* 54 (1944): 110.

⁴¹ See *Ibid.*, 110 – 112.

⁴² Walter Harding, trans., *Thoreau As Seen by His Contemporaries* (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), 18.

⁴³ Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau’s Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with Bibliographical Catalogue* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), 6-8.

street. He continues that the adventurous students will always study classics as they are the noblest recorded thoughts of men. In these classics we can find answers to the most modern inquiries.⁴⁴ “To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit. ... Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written”⁴⁵ This excerpt shows us one of many aspects which were, from the Thoreau’s point of view, important for self-improvement which leads to the awareness of the life and self-reliance itself.

2.1 Self-reliance and anti-consumerism - the substances of H. D.

Thoreau’s belief

When Thoreau graduated in 1937, he became a teacher at the Concord public school. However, he decided to resign rather than to use corporeal punishment instead of moral guidance. He started to work for his father as a pencil maker. Thoreau loathed the smug materialism and he was adapting with difficulty. Later he and his brother organized a private school based on advanced pedagogical principles. However, their attempt failed after 3 years as a consequence of Thoreau’s brother’s death. In his *Journal* he asked himself “How Shall I help myself?” His answer was, “By withdrawing into a garret, and associating with spiders and mice, determining to meet myself face to face sooner or later.”⁴⁶ The thoughts recorded in his journal became stepping stones to a philosophy of life. Thoreau’s initial idea of leaving into woods and to live in solitude emerged from the essay on “Self-Reliance” written by Ralph Waldo Emerson.⁴⁷

The most important and the most basic belief of Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* (1841) is that the ultimate source of truth is in ourselves. You have to believe in it. There is no empirical evidence. The idea of belief in oneself proceeds from the fact that every person has a piece of God within, the Over-soul. You have to attain the knowledge or experience it through nature or books and then you will be able to access it. Emerson claims: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,-- that is genius.”⁴⁸ He urges us to talk about our concealed conviction. We should express

⁴⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 64.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ A. Charles Madison, “Henry David Thoreau: Transcendental Individualist,” *The University of Chicago Press* 54 (1944): 110.

⁴⁷ See Ibid., 110 – 113.

⁴⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, Accessed 22 November 2013, <http://www.rwe.org/complete-works/ii---essays-i/ii-self-reliance>.

our thoughts because if we do not, it will be rendered back to us “by the trumpets of the Last Judgment.”⁴⁹ It is important to trust yourself. In solitude we hear voices which disappear as we enter into public. These voices might be called our own thoughts, opinions and wishes. “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. Whose would be a man, must be a nonconformist.”⁵⁰ Note that Emerson calls us to trust our instincts, to be independent as much as possible. This essay is Emerson’s declaration of independence. A feature rooted deeply in American culture. He strictly condemns conformism as it is in contradiction to the idea of self-reliance.

Thoreau also rejected conformist and materialistic way of living. It is closely connected to Thoreau’s idea of self-reliance. It was reflected on his writings and actions. In his essay “Walking” he wrote that “in Wildness is the preservation of the world.”⁵¹ In the name of higher consciousness he refused to pay taxes as a protest against the government which waged the war in Mexico and also because the government supported spreading slavery in the South. He was jailed and after this experience he wrote his “Civil Disobedience”, 1849. Idea that human consciousness is the institution which stands above all the laws or government decisions was the main idea of Thoreau’s morally motivated non-conformism. Thoreau’s visions of nonviolent, but a categorical protest justified by moral senses which means that it is higher than political motives. He notes in his essay *Civil Disobedience*:

“If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth--certainly the machine will wear out... but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.”⁵²

⁴⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, Accessed 22 November 2013, <http://www.rwe.org/complete-works/ii--essays-i/ii-self-reliance>.

⁵⁰ See Ibid.

⁵¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* (New York: HarperOne, 1994), 19.

⁵² Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Civil Disobedience*, Accessed 20 November 2013, <http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil1.html>.

This attitude influenced giants, who considered themselves as Thoreau's followers, such as Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi who said "My life is my message"⁵³ and so was Thoreau's work directed for next generations. Thoreau would probably never identify himself with connection between him and them. His strong individualism and unwillingness to distinguish the difference between the government and society would have prevented him from doing that. According to Thoreau, society is something of corrupting influence. This is the reason why he urged readers to think about existence in solitude. "We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking."⁵⁴ Thoreau emphasizes the importance of the 'Self' and his intention for inner growing. The first person should be the central concern of us.

⁵³ See Anima Bose, "A Gandhian Perspective on Peace," *Journal of Peace Research* 18 (1981): 159 - 160.

⁵⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 1.

3 BOOKS – BUT RATHER TESTIMONIES

Walden was written more than 150 years ago and still it raises many issues of current fast-moving world. The issue of personal freedom which is bounded by material needs. Thoreau encouraged people to live deliberately. Nowadays, when consumerism is at its peak, Christopher McCandless rebelled against consumer and conformist society and answered Thoreau's call.

3.1 Walden; or, Life in the Woods

Walden is regarded as Thoreau's masterpiece; his *magnum opus*. It is Thoreau's autobiographical account of the two years during which he retreated to nature in pursuit of spiritual and individual salvation. The book acts as a manual for self-reliance as well as a testimony of his voyage of spiritual discovery. It shows us the concept of Thoreau's complex philosophical system. At the beginning of the book Thoreau informs us that he lived two years and two months at the Walden Pond without support of any kind. The book is compressed into one year and is separated into chapters that each occupies with specific themes such as Economy, Where I lived, and What I Lived for, Reading, Solitude, Higher Laws, etc. Thoreau explained the reason why he had left to the wilderness. He declared:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life."⁵⁵

He did not wish to live what was no life to him. Thoreau did not want to waste his precious time, because he realized we live only once. He desired to make the best of life and then he could speak from experience and shared his vision with others so they can improve their lives as well.⁵⁶

Thoreau discovered "what to live for" and transmitted a "true account of it." Sherman Paul described it as "an experience of the microcosmic and cosmic travels of the self."⁵⁷ In

⁵⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 59.

⁵⁶ See Ibid

⁵⁷ Philip Abbott, "Henry David Thoreau, the State of Nature, and the Redemption of Liberalism," *The Journal of Politics* 47 (1985): 72.

other words, Henry David Thoreau showed us that it is possible for men, a transcendentalist, to reach a true conversion. When he tells us in the last lines of *Walden* that “The sun is but a morning star”⁵⁸ he leaves a message to future generations. It says that individual salvation is possible and that they, one by one, can be happy.⁵⁹ In Thoreau’s words: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.”⁶⁰ There was certainly one reader of *Walden* who considered the book as the impulse to a path of spiritual and intellectual enrichment – Christopher McCandless.

3.2 Into The Wild

Into the Wild is a non-fiction biography written by American writer and mountaineer Jon Krakauer. It depicts a story of Christopher McCandless, a twenty-two-year-old talented college graduate from the well-to-do family, who suddenly and significantly changed his way of living. He left his family, friends and all the comforts of civilization in pursuit of happiness, ultimate freedom and raw, transcendent experience. After graduating with distinction in 1990 from Emory University he donated all his savings and belongings to the charity, destroyed his identity card, adopted the moniker ‘Alexander Supertramp’ and started his hitchhiking journey across the United States and into the Alaskan Wilderness.

After two years, On September 6, 1992, was found Christopher McCandless’ body inside a secluded Fairbanks City bus, converted into a shelter along the Stampede Trail in Alaska. McCandless survived in Alaska four months foraging for fruits and eatable rootlets. He was hunting and killing small game such as squirrels and geese. Nevertheless he killed a moose once, but he was not able to process raw meat and shortly after McCandless assailed. In his journal entry he described this act as “One of the greatest tragedies of my life.”⁶¹ In this episode is McCandless depicted as emphatic and high principled as he was devastated by wasting a life of an innocent creature. Shortly before he died he had tried to leave, unfortunately he had found the route back to civilization blocked by a swollen river. The journal entry later that month reads: “EXTREMELY WEAK.

⁵⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 216.

⁵⁹ Philip Abbott, “Henry David Thoreau, the State of Nature, and the Redemption of Liberalism,” *The Journal of Politics* 47 (1985): 193.

⁶⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 55.

⁶¹ Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 221.

FAULT OF POISONOUS SEED.”⁶² Based on this entry, Krakauer hypothesized that McCandless due to the lack of food was forced to eat also the seeds which showed to be poisonous. Krakauer suggests that the poison caused digestion problems which aided McCandless’ starvation. He became too weak therefore he was not able to get out of a bed and starved to death.

Jon Krakauer interprets Christopher McCandless’ ascetic personality based on his journal entries, photographs, highlighted passages from his books and testimonies of people who met McCandless during his travel. Krakauer suggests that McCandless was deeply influenced by Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. This is proved by many highlighted extracts in *Walden* itself. Krakauer also compares McCandless’ behavior and ideology towards Thoreau’s philosophy. The book is both an adventure story as well as a study in character.

McCandless had a rare attitude to money and property. He believed that wealth is fundamental evil, which corrupts individuals.⁶³ It reflects Thoreau’s attitude to consumerism in relation to self-discovery. Thoreau argues: “None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty.”⁶⁴ The resemblance in opinions between Thoreau and McCandless is undeniable. Krakauer claims that McCandless did not read *Walden* until he reached his provisional dwelling in Alaska. From this we can deduce that he was not directly influenced by Thoreau.⁶⁵ For all that he wrote a letter in which he advises his eighty-years-old friend who had gave him a lift. In the letter McCandless mentions disadvantages of a settled life and urged him to sell majority of his property, move out of his apartment and live out his life on the road. McCandless pointed out that he should start pursuing his dreamed-of ideas because so many people live in unhappy circumstances, yet they do not intend to change that for they have grown accustomed to conformist, secured and conservative way of life. According to him, the fundamental substance of courageous individual’s spirit is desire for adventure and nothing is worse than the secure future. All we have to do is to rebel against our routine life. To do so, we do not need anyone else, but yourself. Chris was applying a

⁶² Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 251.

⁶³ See *Ibid.*, 150-154.

⁶⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 9.

⁶⁵ See Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 221 - 223.

spiritual approach when he wanted to achieve something. He believed that all that matters is how hard you try to achieve your goal. It is a matter of mental energy and ability.⁶⁶ McCandless approach is strictly individualistic. He tried to be fully self-reliant as it was in his point of view the way how to reach freedom and happiness.

⁶⁶ See Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 75 - 83.

4 BROTHERHOOD IN A STATE OF NATURE

Unfortunately we do not have any firsthand account of McCandless' journey unlike Thoreau's case. Therefore we have to draw some assumptions based on Krakauer's findings and investigation. Krakauer also interprets, besides evidences mentioned above, McCandless' personality and motivation through young men whose stories are closely related to the story of McCandless. He mentions individuals such as Everett Ruess and Gene Rosellini who underwent similar pilgrimage and vanished into the wilderness. Rosellini was a great student with the highest grades. He became deeply absorbed in study of philosophy, history, anthropology, and linguistics. He acquired hundreds of credits without finishing his studies. He believed that there is no need to do so. Knowledge he acquired during his studies was the goal he wanted to reach, this was his reward. He did not need a degree or any certificate. After leaving the university, he settled down in the woods and devoted his life to an anthropological experiment. He stated: "I wanted to know if it is possible not to be dependent on modern technologies."⁶⁷ He asked himself if it is feasible to live as our ancestors, to be absolutely self-reliant. Have we changed so much that we are not able to live and survive without civilizational inventions? Rosellini removed from his life all instruments except for those which he created on his own account. Debra McKinney claims that Gene Rosellini was convinced that humankind has got to the state of increasing reliance on other people and devices,⁶⁸ and so he tried to return to the status *quo ante*, to the state of nature. His experiment lasted more than ten years. Afterwards he felt that the question had been answered. In a letter to his friend he confided:

"Began my adult life with the hypothesis that it would be possible to become a Stone Age native. For over thirty years, I programmed and conditioned myself to this end. In the last ten of it, I would say I realistically experienced the physical, mental, and emotional reality of the Stone Age. But to borrow a Buddhist phrase, eventually came a setting face-to-face with pure reality. I learned that it is not possible for human beings as we know them to live off the land."⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 105.

⁶⁸ See *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

He also mentioned that he is planning to go around the world. It seemed that he came to terms with his failed attempt. Nevertheless, shortly after writing the letter, he committed suicide. He was found with a knife in the heart.⁷⁰

Both McCandless and Rosellini were considered brilliant students and came from well-to-do families. They both changed their names and left the conveniences of the modern world behind. The major difference is in their motive for flight from society. McCandless left in order to discover himself from the spiritual point of view whereas Rosellini only wanted to find out if it is possible to live a primitive lifestyle without modern inventions.

According to Krakauer, McCandless' separation from society, his travelling to the harshest places and rejection of his former identity mirrors the story of Everett Ruess more than any other story. He was a twenty-year-old adventurer who took to the road in 1934, at age twenty and was never seen again. He disappeared into what is probably the most deserted part of the United States – the Canyon Country, Utah. Wallace Stegner in his book wrote:

“What Everett was after was beauty, and he conceived beauty in pretty romantic terms. We might be inclined to laugh at the extravagance of his beauty-worship if there were not something almost magnificent in his single-minded dedication to it. Esthetics as a parlor affectation is ludicrous and sometimes a little obscene; as a way of life it sometimes attains dignity.”⁷¹

Everett's letters were in comparison with McCandless' correspondence very similar. In his letters Ruess condemned civilizational stereotypes and celebrated nature and its beauty. To quote one of his letters: “I have always been unsatisfied with life as most people live it. Always I want to live more intensely and richly. Why muck and conceal one's true longings and loves, when by speaking of them one might find someone to understand them, and by acting on them one might discover oneself?”⁷² Everette Ruess agrees with Thoreau's principle of living deliberately. There is a parallel with McCandless' view of life. McCandless wrote a letter in which he declared: “I've decided I'm going to live this life for

⁷⁰ Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 106.

⁷¹ Rusho and Burges, *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*, 8.

⁷² Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 124.

some time to come. The freedom and simple beauty is just too good to pass up.”⁷³ Both McCandless and Ruess adopted a new name when started their last journey. Ruess changed his name to Nemo, which means ‘*Nobody*’ in Latin and McCandless to Alexander Supertramp. Ruess carved Nemo and the year at two different places around Davis Gulch and then disappeared. His father claimed that his nickname was inspired by a novel written by Jules Verne *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869) which depicts the main protagonist as a kind-hearted man, who fled from society and severed all his ties with the shore. “Say that I starved; that I was lost and weary: That I was burned and blinded by the desert sun; Foolsore, thirsty, sick with strange diseases; Lonely and wet and cold, but that I kept my dream!”⁷⁴ This excerpt from the poem written by Ruess expresses and characterizes his attitudes and beliefs as well as those of McCandless. He lived the life he had imagined. He gave up comfort in order to unveil beauties of personal freedom.

Krakauer acquaints us with these two men in order to explain McCandless’ complex personality. It brings us to a strong parallel between Ruess, McCandless, Thoreau and Rosellini. These resemblances should help us to understand their actions and behavior in relation to anti-consumerism, anti-conformism and self-reliance. When McCandless’ parents tried to persuade Chris that the university degree is a necessity to be successful in his future career, he answered: “I think careers are a 20th century invention and I don’t want one.”⁷⁵ With this attitude he took a stand on his future. He showed that he did not want to be another part of this automated world. He did not want to live this routine, uniform life which had been already prepared for him. He wanted to set himself free from the shackles of conformism. Thoreau declared similar attitude clearly: “I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. ... Who made them serfs of the soil? ... Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born?”⁷⁶ Thoreau calls us to live a life we wish to live. According to him there is no need to live in the preset drudgery formed by the highly consumerist society. People live by a seeming fate, commonly called necessity and that is to say accumulating possessions. They are trapped in assumption that they need more and more, that their current state is not enough.

⁷³ Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 124.

⁷⁴ Rusho and Burges, *Everett Ruess: A Vagabond for Beauty*, 124.

⁷⁵ Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 152.

The lust for money and power is never fulfilled. It is a vicious cycle that ends at the end of our life.

4.1 The less we have, the more we see

The prose writer Francis Scott Fitzgerald confided in a letter to his daughter that only after reading Thoreau's *Walden* had he realized what he had lost in his life when he had left nature out. We can assume that these words mean more than a mere grief for his hurried metropolitan way of living. He regrets how thinly he wandered in the woods; he expresses his deep disappointment regarding the scale of values by which he and his literary protagonists lived. We can only speculate what would happen if Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* came to the Thoreau's conclusion that "Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul."⁷⁷ Fitzgerald's example shows us the price which has to be paid for not opposing the conformist society driven by strong consumerism. We lose, for most of us, the most precious value and it is our inner wishes and dreams. Majority of people does not have courage and determination to get out of the rut. They take the path of least resistance and they forget that there is an option to create their own path which they walk upon air. And here the questions arise: "Does consumerism directly influence our freedom? Is the equation which says "more consumerist we are, less freedom we have" valid?

Thoreau brings the issue of voluntary slavery to our attention in following quote: "It is hard to have a southern overseer; it is worse to have a northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself."⁷⁸ The empirical evidence indicates that consumerist attitudes are associated with decreased consumer happiness. People who are more consumeristic tend to be dissatisfied with their lives, have lower ethical standard, they succumb to a depression more easily and have a tendency to compulsive spending. Tim Kasser claims that there are clear and consistent findings that people who are absorbed by consumerist values "have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic pursuits are relatively unimportant."⁷⁹ The research also says that happiness is associated with other important qualities. Happy people are less selfish, less hostile, more helpful and forgiving, creative and decisive. There appears to be a

⁷⁶ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 2.

⁷⁷ Josef Jařab, Afterword to *Walden*, by H. D. Thoreau (Prague: Paseka, 2006), 297.

⁷⁸ Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*, 4.

⁷⁹ Andrew V Abela, "Is Consumerism Harmful?," 8.

general consensus among catholic scholars congruous with the empirical research above that consumerism is seamy. “It is a threat to the freedom of the human person to live according to the higher demands of love rather than to the lower pull of material desires.”⁸⁰ Consumerism weakens human virtue and individual’s self-reliance and it encourages moral decadence of society.

It is important to perceive that Thoreau’s message was addressed to those who are said to be in ‘moderate’ circumstances. He confessed that he has little to say to the poor. The flight from society is only temporary so the bourgeois life can be cleansed.⁸¹ Thoreau points out that we live in quiet desperation and tenseness. We exaggerate importance of everything we do, but still we have done so little.⁸² “What if we became seriously ill?”⁸³ And so we sink into doubts and uncertainty refusing to change anything. He calls us to think about this anxiety. Do we care so much about feeling of security that we forget to live? Thoreau proposes: “It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them.”⁸⁴ This Thoreau’s core idea is mirrored by Christopher McCandless – or, Alexander Supertramp if you like, who reached his ultimate wilderness: a remote spot of central Alaska. Chris settled in an old bus which in the past served as a shelter for workers who tried to build a highway there. He called it the “Magic Bus.” He lived there the ‘frontier life’ for four months in complete solitude with only a small bag of rice and his own resources to satisfy ‘the gross necessities of life.’

4.2 The necessities of life

By the words, *necessary of life*, Thoreau means everything that man obtains by his own exertions and then everything, be it from the dawn of humans or from long use, has become so important to human life that few, if any, can do without it. With the term *necessaries of life* we understand: Food, Shelter, Clothing and Fuel. Only if we secure these necessities we are prepared to occupy with the true problems of live. Nevertheless with an excess of

⁸⁰ Andrew V Abela, “Is Consumerism Harmful?,” 8.

⁸¹ Philip Abbott, “Henry David Thoreau, the State of Nature, and the Redemption of Liberalism,” *The Journal of Politics* 47 (1985): 194.

⁸² See Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*, 7.

⁸³ Ibid.

these necessities, when ‘an external heat’ becomes greater than our own ‘internal heat,’ “may not cookery properly be said to begin?”⁸⁵ Thoreau criticizes bourgeois society for having more than they need. They are not kept comfortably warm, but unnaturally hot, “they are cooked, - of course à la mode.”⁸⁶ When a man is warmed by these several factors described above, what else does he want next? He surely does not want more of warmth. When he obtains all necessities of life there is another alternative than to obtain the superfluities and that is, to live life to the fullest. Thoreau asked two core questions: “Why do men degenerate ever? What is the nature of luxury which enervates and destroys nations?”⁸⁷ Thoreau indirectly answers both questions: most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only dispensable, but obstruct us in ennobling influence on humankind. “The ancient philosophers were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward.” We can notice the strong connection between consumerism and self-discovery. Thoreau continues: “There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers.”⁸⁸ To be a philosopher means not only to have deep thoughts nor to found a school, but to implicitly love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust. Therefore some of the mysteries of life should be solved not theoretically, but rather practically.⁸⁹

4.3 Escapism in the name of freedom

Based on what is written above we can infer that Christopher McCandless and Thoreau’s conception of a philosopher share many characteristics. These two phenomena are intimately connected. McCandless answered Thoreau’s calling others to a path of intellectual and spiritual recovery. Krakauer assumes that McCandless changed his name to Alexander Supertramp in order to express the beginning of his new life. We can speak about a rebirth. Now he was the creator of his destiny. Last four years he spent, as he saw it, performing absurd and difficult duty – to complete his studies. He wanted to break free from the stifling world of his parents and contemporaries, the world full of material

⁸⁴ Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*, 7.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 9.

securities in which he felt desperately separated from the fundamental stream of life. One of the people who McCandless met during his journey was Wein Westeberg. He described Chris as a quick-witted young man who used to think hard about various existential questions such “as why are people so cruel to each other” and he also tried to understand the meaning of life. He went to the wilderness in pursuit of virtue and his personal, apparently strongly romantically influenced, ideals of freedom acquired through raw and unfiltered experience.⁹⁰ He confided to another friend Gaylord Stuckey that he wants to spend the summer in solitude, without any sign of civilization and that he wants to prove himself he is capable of living only on his own without outside help.⁹¹

Thoreau’s reason for fleeing to the woods is sharper. His choice to leave just on the Independence Day definitely was not a coincidence. This move symbolizes the moment when Thoreau decided to liberate himself from the American society which was becoming more and more tainted by the curse of marketplace. He made a choice to prefer solitude to society. He wanted to live manly and self-reliantly. He was eager to discover a new way of living in which he will be able to control every single aspect of his life and in which he would reach his highest potential. Thoreau fancied live his life to its fullest.

Philip Cafaro in his *Thoreau’s Living Ethics* (2006) comments on Thoreau’s already mentioned key passage: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately...”⁹² Cafaro claims that the passage represents an inference to life and life’s possibilities which include “knowing truth, experiencing deeply and sharing knowledge with others.”⁹³ However these possibilities can be explored only by those who live *deliberately*. The term comprises both the ability to think about various alternatives and the ability to act.⁹⁴ According to Cafaro deliberation is:

“an act of optimism, signaling the belief that we have choices; that we can distinguish better from worse choices; that we can act on that knowledge and improve our lives. Deliberation is the key element of living well, maintaining freedom, and meeting life’s challenges. We may deny life in many ways, and we often do

⁸⁹ Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*, 9.

⁹⁰ See Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 38 - 40.

⁹¹ See Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 213.

⁹² Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*, 59.

⁹³ Phillip Cafaro, *Thoreau’s Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*, 18.

⁹⁴ See Phillip Cafaro, *Thoreau’s Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*, 18.

so. We may waste our life time on trivialities and when we come to the end of our lives, we may find out that we have not lived.”⁹⁵

Cafaro asserts that we may be contented or will be able to improve our life, as long as we live a deliberate life. Thoreau writes: “I know of no more encouraging fact, than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.”⁹⁶ His withdrawal from society to seclusion was not initiated by the assumption that he found the only way how to live purely. Rather he leaves in order to understand essentials of life.

A highlighted excerpt in Tolstoy’s *Family Happiness* which was found together with Chriss’ remains says: “I wanted movement and not a calm course of existence. I wanted excitement and danger and the chance to sacrifice myself for my love. I felt in myself a superabundance of energy which found no outlet in our quiet life.”⁹⁷ McCandless’ retreat, just as Ruess’ and Rosellini’s, can be explained further through the term ‘Escapism.’ Casey R. Schmitt compares McCandless’ journey to the ‘rite of passage.’ There is already recognized the structural pattern of this rite of passage which describes a developmental milestone of the fundamental transition of an individual from one state of being into the next. This transitional journey includes a separation from society and former self, journey into a peculiar place and return to community with new social and personal identity. It can be linked to the legends where individuals in the role of heroes encounter supernatural phenomena at magical places; ordinary objects in such stories become extraordinary and magical tools. The story of Chriss McCandless features the concept of a hero separating from society before a return with a new identity. He often comes back as a victorious warrior or a ruler. In McCandless’ case, we see a hero who failed to return from his pilgrimage. Schitt supposes that Chris was fully aware of overtones of this concept. Before he left for Alaska, he sent a letter to Wayne Westberg in which Alexander Supertramp dramatically announced his intentions, writing: “I now walk into the wild,” and after arriving he carved an intense message inside of the ‘Magic Bus’ which sums up the passionate spirit of McCandless:⁹⁸

“TWO YEARS HE WALK THE EARTH. NO PHONE. NO POOL, NO PETS, NO CIGARETTES. ULTIMATE FREEDOM. AN EXTREMIST. AN AESTEHTIC VOYAGER WHOSE HOME IS *THE ROAD*. ESCAPED FROM ATLANTA. THOUGH

⁹⁵ See Phillip Cafaro, *Throeau’s Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue*, 18.

⁹⁶ Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*, 90.

⁹⁷ Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 33.

⁹⁸ See Schmitt, “20 Years Later: Thoughts on the Folk Appeal of Christopher McCandless,” 38 – 40.

SHALT NOT RETURN, CAUSE THE WEST IS THE BEST. AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS HE COMES TO 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*.

- ALEXANDER SUPETRAMP⁹⁹

In the essay “The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception”, Longeway defines escapism as “the attempt to avoid awareness of aversive beliefs.”¹⁰⁰ McCandless did not enter Alaska and its wilderness with a plan to stay there for the rest of his life separated from others, neither did he want to die, as many may think. Wilderness attracted not only those who were bored or disgusted by the people and their inventions. It did not offer only the escape from society, but for the romantically-minded individuals it was the perfect way how to fulfil their dreams and perceive their ‘inner animal’. Therefore the solitude and absolute freedom of wilderness were the goal McCandless was looking for.¹⁰¹ And there he wanted to “kill the false beast within”¹⁰² and to stand the test. He wanted to test himself in every aspect he considered important. He was extremely ambitious in his spiritual aspirations. After reading *Walden*, strongly individualistic McCandless chasing state of self-reliance proclaims:

“I am reborn. This is my dawn. Real life has just begun. Deliberate Living: Conscious attention to the basics of life, and a constant attention to your immediate environment and its concerns, example - > A job, a task, a book; anything requiring efficient concentration (Circumstance has no value. It is how one relates to a situation that has value. All true meaning resides in the personal relationship to a phenomenon, what it means to you.”¹⁰³

According to the moral absolutism which is a distinctive trait of McCandless’ inner conviction, an obstacle that will be certainly defeated is no obstacle at all. However, not only young men such as McCandless seek danger of the rough wilderness. In fact Thoreau himself visited and climbed Mt. Katahdin. He was scared and shocked by his ascent but at the same time he retained a deep respect for that. This uneasiness inspired him to write some significant work and what is more he deepened his understanding of a harsh

⁹⁹ Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 236.

¹⁰⁰ Krehan, “Trust me - it's paradise” *The escapist motif in Into the Wild, The Beach and Are You Experienced?*. 1.

¹⁰¹ See Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 207 - 211.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁰³ Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 222.

wilderness.¹⁰⁴ In contrast to a more practical Thoreau, McCandless did not walk off to the wilderness to meditate on Nature, rather he encountered the nature to explore his 'inner world'. As he has stated in one of his records: "NATURE/PURITY"¹⁰⁵ One might say that he was looking for the path to the Over-soul. However in the end McCandless came to the conclusion which Thoreau already discovered and it is that you cannot live for a time in the nature without feeling the effects. The nature cultivates emotional understanding and this power directs you back to society.¹⁰⁶

McCandless scribbled down a short note right next to the passage from the book *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) written by Boris Pasternak. This extract says: "And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness...And this was most vexing of all."¹⁰⁷ McCandless' note says: "HAPPINESS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED."¹⁰⁸ This entry is considered by many, including Krakauer, as a proof that this long sojourn in solitude changed him, and that he was ready to abandon his tramp's life and return to the society.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Josef Jařab, Afterword to *Walden*, by H. D. Thoreau (Prague: Paseka, 2006), 297.

¹⁰⁵ Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 249.

¹⁰⁶ See Krakauer. *Into the Wild*, 237 - 240.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ See *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined and compared the core beliefs of Henry David Thoreau and Christopher McCandless, their similar attitudes toward life and important aspects of McCandless' pilgrimage and Thoreau's sojourn. This research unveiled what were their motives for fleeing from society into the wilderness and it was proven that there is a significant parallel between Thoreau and McCandless regarding their efforts to be self-reliant and their view on conformist and consumerist society. Hypothesis which says that from the McCandless' and Thoreau's point of view, consumerism decreases personal freedom determined at the beginning of the thesis was proven to be true.

Both H. D. Thoreau and Christopher McCandless were influenced by Transcendentalist philosophy. They were strongly individualistic and saw nature as a place where one can be cleansed from the impact of the consumer society. Thoreau urges members of society to live purely and modestly because if we devote all our time to labor in order to obtain more possession we lose our personal freedom. McCandless also adopted this attitude as he declared that wealth is a fundamental evil which corrupts individuals. Nevertheless there is a difference between McCandless' and Thoreau's motive for retreating from society. McCandless decided to leave his former life and completely change his way of experiencing it. He was convinced that personal relationships are obstacles on his spiritual journey during which he wanted to cleanse himself and acquire the true freedom. McCandless abandoned society and condemned any efforts to change its members. On the other hand Thoreau's retreat did not mean rejection of society. His retreat was temporary. This statement is substantiated by *Walden* itself as he wanted to stimulate the members of society to improve themselves and brighten up their lives. He wanted to show them that there are other ways of spending their lives as well as deepen his understanding of himself through the purity of nature and to reveal what life can offer him. After all, McCandless came to the state of individual awakening and reached social transformation which meant he was ready to return to society and perhaps integrate as one of its members.

The notion of self-reliance is represented in *Walden* as a complex system of social and economic principles. Thoreau considered financial and social independence highly valuable. He demonstrated that he is able to support his needs only through his own occasional labor and he still produced more than he consumed and what is more he had time left for self-culture. From the social point of view he reveled in the company of

solitude. By this he could deepen his spiritual understanding of himself. McCandless' self-reliant effort resembles Thoreau's principles. It is reflected in his solitary sojourn in the wilderness where he freed himself from the impact of society and its materialism in order to follow his thoughts and dreams. It was his quest for pursuing personal happiness. He became fully self-reliant as he saw it as the only way to live according his own convictions.

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