

Student Sample

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Chris McCandless: Conqueror of the Wild, Foil of the Modern Day

"Death's a fierce meadowlark: but to die having made Something more equal to the centuries Than muscle and bone, is mostly to shed weakness..." (qtd. in Krakauer 199). Death brings with it the end of an opportunity, so each person needs to work to discover his own happiness and fulfillment, before it is too late. Chris McCandless trekked into the abandoned Alaskan wasteland to discover his own identity; years later, the world learned about Chris McCandless's life and death in Jon Krakauer's best-selling book *Into the Wild*. Many revere McCandless for his bravery, his philosophies, and his spirit; Krakauer idolizes him as a hero of the current day in his book. Behind all of the sugar-coated stories about this boy, though, the truth holds a very different perspective on McCandless and his persona. Those who admire McCandless should only do so because of the lessons he taught the world through the mistakes he illustrated, some of which proved fatal. Still, supporters of the boy continue to glorify him, while there is substantial evidence to prove that he was a selfish and careless individual. Chris McCandless was not a hero; in fact, his selfishness, self-absorbance, and reckless behavior made him a poor role model and an unhealthy influence on those who admire him.

Throughout the part of his life that *Into the Wild* covered, Chris McCandless selfishly showed utter disregard for the feelings and well-being of other people. Yes, it is true that after graduating college, McCandless donated the rest of his college funds to a charity that fights

world hunger; however, his \$25,000 donation to Oxfam was his only "commendable act" (Medred). After this last act of kindness, McCandless began to break the hearts of just about every person he encountered, beginning with his sister. When Chris left on his final journey, he left his sister Carine, with whom he was very close, behind. It is rather shocking that he left her to deal with abusive parents while he traveled the country alone; he left her at risk of being beaten by their highly abusive father Walt or being forced to watch their parents fight and hurt each other (McCandless). A role model, a true hero would certainly never abandon a loved one in need; instead, he would take the necessary steps to protect the people he loves. What kind of message does that send to the innocent, the impressionable if the world celebrates a person like Chris: that it is acceptable to desert a person in need no matter the consequences? Chris, however, did not embrace the role of protector and did not even get in touch with his grieving sister or provide any reassurance that he was alive and well, leading Carine to assume the worst about his condition. His disregard for her feelings and his insensitive actions caused Carine to be scarred by the loss of her brother: she claims that even now, she "can't seem to get through a day without crying" (qtd. in Krakauer 129). Leaving his sibling alone with a ruthless and vicious family and causing her lasting emotional trauma for his own good was extremely selfish and shows that he paid little attention to other people's feelings, behavior the world certainly should not perpetuate.

Chris McCandless showed his self-absorption by caring only about himself and his own well-being. A primary example of Chris acting for his own interests was his disobedience to the law and hatred of government. When asked if he had a hunting license, McCandless responded by claiming that "how [he] feed[s] [him]self is none of the government's business" (qtd. in

Krakauer 6). McCandless assumed that since the law didn't personally affect his life, it was insignificant and irrelevant; however, each law serves a purpose and although he refused to understand it, having a hunting license is mandatory to keep healthy populations of animals alive. In addition, he illegally crossed the border into Mexico by canoeing through the floodgates of a dam. His utter disregard for government rules and regulations in order to pursue his own interests in Mexico made him a terrible role model and a disrespectful citizen. Although his moral code and ideas on materialism may have been valuable and understandable, his disrespect for authority and national law made him a disgraceful citizen. Despite believing that he was superior to animal conservation laws, he further showed his self-absorbency when he killed a large moose without a hunting license or proper knowledge of how to salvage the meat. He "toiled" (Krakauer 166) to save the majority of the meat so that he could eat it, but he did not succeed; most of the meat was eaten by animals or went to waste. The killing was "insignificant and unnecessary" (Krakauer 167) in Chris's mind, but Craig Medred claims that there are things McCandless could have done to make the meat last and the kill worthwhile. He points out that maggots can easily be removed from a piece of raw meat, and that smoking isn't entirely necessary for its preservation (Medred). Medred claims that Chris may not have been very concerned at the time because he knew he had an almost infinite range of game, but Krakauer concludes, through Chris's journal entries, that McCandless was deeply upset about the loss of the moose (Krakauer 168). Despite his entries, the moose incident was definitely a waste of precious meat-- a waste that he should have anticipated and a situation he could have avoided if he had stopped caring about his own interests and focused on something other than himself. Through his utter lack of respect for authority and the nature and life around him, Chris McCandless carried out a legacy

of self-absorption and egotism which led to his untimely death, and could lead to the demise of others who are cocky enough to follow a similar path.

Despite Chris McCandless's wishes to live a life full of purpose and self-discovery, he made many reckless choices that risked his own life and led to his untimely demise. Although he was considered somewhat of a free spirit, it would be reckless and stupid for someone to go on a trip with no plans or destinations in mind, especially since being prepared is an essential lesson parents teach their children; however, this is exactly what Chris planned to do that his father was rightfully concerned about. Although he was a horrible and hurtful father to Chris, Walt McCandless had a valid point when he asked that Chris be aware of his destinations and travel patterns on his cross-country trip (McCandless). If anything were to happen to Chris, nobody would have any way of knowing, and it could lead to serious injury or death; although Chris might not have understood that his father cared about him, Walt was acting on his parental instincts to protect his child from potential harm. As a matter of fact, when Chris traveled without an "itinerary" (McCandless), he ended up abandoned in the Alaskan wilderness, where he starved to death. Krakauer glorifies Chris's actions and romanticizes his journey with no set destinations, but traveling without plans and running the risk of death without any chance of discovery is a dangerous and reckless idea that nobody should execute. However, an even bigger mistake McCandless made was refusing to take a map when he went to Alaska. According to Pete Mason, "This was his flaw and ultimately led to his downfall" (Mason). If McCandless had only traveled with a map, his tragic fate may have been avoided or changed. People following McCandless's example might also perish at the hands of nature while four cabins ironically surround them within walking distance (Krakauer 165). This, however, is one of the lessons that people like Pete Mason has

learned from McCandless, and one of the things they make sure not to repeat in their own "great Alaskan odyssey[s]" (qtd. in Krakauer 45): avoiding over-confidence and being prepared are important. McCandless is not one to admire for his irrational acts of stupidity and cockiness, which he even showed in his domestic life. When his father got angry at him for his travel plans, Chris foolishly stood up against him in a way that made the abusive man very angry. Walt "slammed his fist into the center of Chris's spine" (McCandless) and could have easily broken one of his bones, or "fractured a vertebra" (McCandless) on his back, like he had done to his first wife (McCandless). Although Chris was angry, it was reckless and stupid of him to put himself in a position where he could have been seriously injured just to make his point clear. Despite his rebellious attempt being successful, it created an inappropriate message for others: that provoking abusers is the way to get them to stop. Children and young adults who admire Chris could potentially decide to do something similarly rebellious to an abusive parent or family member; they could end up being seriously ill, injured, or even killed as a result of mindlessly copying Chris's reckless behaviors.

Chris McCandless was most certainly an admirable man in some respects, but he most certainly should not be praised or worshipped by anybody. His seclusive ways, opposition to authority and his lack of concern for anybody but himself are horrible traits that nobody should aspire to copy. Instead, worshippers of McCandless should focus on the lessons that they can learn from him. By learning from McCandless's mistakes instead of aspiring to copy them, he can be accepted as both a criticized and flawed human being and as a guide for future adventurers. Instead of admiring his mistakes, people need to learn to accept that Chris McCandless was selfish, greedy, and reckless, and that is not okay. Just as Chris learned from himself and his experiences

across the country, admirers should learn from Chris and avoid his flaws to avoid his fate. The legacy of Chris McCandless should be of a boy who lived a life full of mistakes but showed the world a free spirit and imagination while serving as a warning for others.