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ENG415: Theories of Representing Lives

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A Theoretical Comparison of Thoreau's *Walden* and Krakauer's *Into the Wild*

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* share some obvious similarities. Both are biographical writings about men who choose to ignore the expectations and pressures of society and retreat to nature for a length of time. Krakauer even uses quotations from *Walden* that Chris McCandless had marked in his own personal copy of the book. For the most part, however, the comparisons and connections stop there. While Thoreau demonstrates a design to make an example of his preferred way of life, Krakauer shows no interest in modeling or recommending McCandless's lifestyle to anyone. In fact, Krakauer does not shy away from painting an honest and revealing portrait of McCandless that, at times, highlights his very flaws, weaknesses, and mistakes. Thoreau provides no such critical depiction of himself in *Walden*, but instead focuses on the pleasantries that await the one who—like him—chooses to exist on his own terms and in the simplicity of nature. These differences can be traced to one key element of biography: ultimately, what distinguishes these two works from each other is the extent to which each author uses (or doesn't use) theory to shape his subject's life.

“I would fain say something, not so much concerning the Chinese and Sandwich Islanders as you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England; something about your condition, especially your outward condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well

as not” (Thoreau 326). With these words, Thoreau launches into the crux of his autobiographical work, *Walden*. Just prior to addressing the reader in this section, however, Thoreau states that his book is intended to answer the “very particular inquiries” that his fellow townsmen had made regarding his way of life at Walden Pond (325), initially indicating that his principal purpose in writing *Walden* is to inform. But while the bulk of his work relays the essential (and non-essential) details of the two years that Thoreau dwelt in the woods surrounding Walden Pond, Thoreau’s vivid account of his lifestyle and natural surroundings during this time is so emphatically prefaced by his personal commentaries and observations regarding the common working man’s “misfortunate” lot in life that he betrays a deliberate idealization of his own. For this reason, *Walden* serves the purpose of not so much an autobiography, but rather an autohagiography, if you will.

Historically, according to Nigel Hamilton’s *Biography: A Brief History*, hagiography refers to “the life stories of Christian adherents and their adventures and misadventures as they sought to spread the Good News, either in defiance of an outside, unenlightened world, or in struggle with their own baser, sinful, personal selves” (47). Not long after its inception, however, hagiography had little to do with creating an honest depiction of “the sin-tested torment of the individual” and instead experienced a transition prompted by ulterior motives (54). Biographers became inclined to present “sanitized” versions of their subjects’ lives so as to produce stellar examples of adherence to the Christian faith, and therefore “ethically pure” models for the living (55). Biographers of hagiography sought not only to commemorate the lives of Christian saints but also to revere them.

Thoreau’s literary tribute to his sojourn at Walden Pond falls into the category of hagiography in at least three ways: 1) With his adamant renunciation of the common man’s

mode of life (comparable to hagiography's underlying campaign against the common man's life of sin), Thoreau admonishes his readers to change their approach to living. 2) The manner in which he presents himself and his experiences at Walden Pond exposes a design to exalt his lifestyle above all others and promote it as a model to follow. 3) Due to Thoreau's objective in writing about himself and his experiences, the commemorative instinct takes precedence over critical depiction, and therefore, as with classical hagiography, his account should not be approached as an explicit portrayal of Thoreau as a person, but rather understood as the representation of a purposefully glorified existence, documented with the intent that others should imitate it.

Walden is broken up into 18 sections, each covering a separate aspect of Thoreau's life in the woods. Two sections in particular, *Economy* and *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*, focus on matters of concern for Thoreau—matters which prompted his retreat to nature in the first place. In the largest chapter of the book, *Economy*, Thoreau takes issue with the hard lives that men lead out of their common misconception of necessity:

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. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil? (326)

Thoreau goes on to describe the difficulty of such men's labor and the futility of it. Men work, sweat, and struggle out of the so-called necessity of life, Thoreau explains, and yet they never stop to consider that which is actually necessary to live. Such men lead their lives in this manner—"lives of quiet desperation"—not by their own choosing but because they do not

realize that there is another choice in the matter (329). Thoreau, on the other hand, insists that a change in one's way of life *is* possible, and change for the better at that.

In order to prove the possibility of change and demonstrate its application, Thoreau uses himself as his prime subject and example: “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only” (325). Thus Thoreau begins *Walden*. Though what he presents in this sentence, and in the book as a whole, is a humble lifestyle—distinct from that of his fellow man—Thoreau's presentation of that lifestyle is anything but humble. In this sentence, as he haltingly lists out each detail, one by one, each punctuated with a comma, Thoreau places particular emphasis on each of the “humble” circumstances surrounding his time in the woods. In other words, the care that he takes to specify and isolate the details of his sojourn points to a sense of pride and belies the humility that he professes. It is also interesting to note the way he manages to draw particular attention to himself and his actions: “[...] in a house which I had built *myself*, [...] and earned my living by the labor of my hands *only*” (emphasis added). Thoreau obviously has something to prove in *Walden*.

So what is the lifestyle that Thoreau chose for himself during this time and wished to promote under the pretence of biography? At the beginning of his chapter *Sounds*, Thoreau paints an especially utopian picture:

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west

window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. (411)

This description could easily be placed in a travel magazine today for its aura of romantic tranquility. Replete with birds singing and a view of the setting sun, Thoreau passes the time, "rapt in a reverie." While it doesn't necessarily follow that Thoreau's aptitude for writing thoughtful narrative prose suggests fabrication on his part, it is his preceding criticisms and commentaries on common life in *Economy* and *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For* which give the reader pause to consider dreamlike descriptions such as this. As Thoreau declares that "[those seasons] were far better than any work of the hands would have been," there appears to be a finger pointing back to his previous allegations that the hard labor of man (in pursuit of a higher material standard of living) is ultimately fruitless, unnecessary, and undesirable. It's as if he were saying, "*This* is what living should look like. Don't you want your life to look like this, too?"

Thoreau "markets" his lifestyle in yet another way in the chapter *Solitude*. Here, Thoreau brags openly and even shamelessly about his chosen path: "Sometimes, when I compare myself with other men, it seems as if I were more favored by the gods than they, beyond any deserts that I am conscious of; as if I had a warrant and surety at their hands which my fellows have not, and were especially guided and guarded. I do not flatter myself, but if it be possible they flatter me" (427). Whereas in *Sounds* he uses a picturesque moment of his life in the woods to subtly entice his reader into following his example, in *Solitude* Thoreau paradoxically makes his idealized life seem unattainable to his fellow man. Thoreau describes his life as a privileged existence, as if comparable to the exclusive society of the rich. He further intimates that he has something—an

anointing or gift of some sort—which other men do not, thereby denying his reader the capacity to enjoy the kind of superior life that he himself does. Thoreau’s tactic here appears nothing short of psychological: for what can be more desirable to a man than something that appears inaccessible to him?

Though *Walden* is hagiographic in its theme and overall tone, there is no reason to doubt the integrity of its content; there is no reason to dispute the encounters that Thoreau claims to have had or the tasks he records having performed. But in consideration of *Walden* as a work of literature, it is something more than a mere relation of events during a two-year period in Thoreau’s life: *Walden* is Thoreau’s personal sermon *on* life. In *Biography: A Brief History*, Nigel Hamilton writes, “By continually extolling and romanticizing the official, idealized biography of Jesus and the Saints, the Christian church thus encouraged ethically pure biography and religious belief, in a search for orthodoxy of veneration” (55). Similarly, one might say that by “extolling and romanticizing” his time spent in nature, Thoreau thus encouraged an enlightened perspective on life, in a search for (perhaps) the chance to make a difference in a world where “the possibility of change” is all too often denied (Thoreau 331).

More than 140 years after *Walden* was published, Jon Krakauer produced *Into the Wild*, a book which documents the unorthodox journey that took Chris McCandless across country and concluded with his untimely death in the Alaskan wilderness. Unlike Thoreau’s objective with *Walden*, however, Krakauer does not seek to endorse his subject’s chosen path nor promote it as a model for the reader to follow. For that matter, Krakauer’s aim isn’t to critique McCandless’s choices either. Krakauer simply lays bare the facts about McCandless, both good and bad, and ultimately allows the reader to make up his or her own mind. Though he *does* have something to say with *Into the Wild*, Krakauer avoids using the kind of theory that dominates Thoreau’s work.

Instead, he maintains an anti-hagiographic distance from McCandless, and simply presents a point of view that is based on the evidence available to him.

According to Ray Monk in his article, *Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding*, the biographical term “point of view” was coined by Lytton Strachey in his argument that a historian should have “a capacity for absorbing facts, a capacity for stating them, and a point of view” (538). Though Strachey never elaborated on what he meant exactly by “point of view,” Monk assesses that Strachey emphasized the need for a point of view in biography so as to “enable the reader to make sense of the material and thus to understand the biographical subject” (539). Monk takes care to clarify that “The ‘point of view’ required of a good biographer is a *way of understanding* the facts, a *way of seeing* the biographical subject. It is not a theory[...].” (540). Understanding this distinction between point of view and theory is key in identifying what it is that puts *Into the Wild* into a different category of biography than *Walden*.

For the majority of his book, Krakauer systematically walks the reader through the information that he has gathered in researching McCandless’s life and death. Relying on McCandless’s own journal entries and photographs, quotes that he highlighted in his books, and the personal testimonies of those who knew McCandless or came in contact with him along his journey, Krakauer retraces McCandless’s expedition through North America and simultaneously shapes the reader’s understanding of who McCandless was as an individual. The reader quickly discovers that there is no room for fabrication in *Into the Wild*, as Krakauer consistently bases his narration and explication on the evidence available to him, and he is extremely careful in presenting speculation when it comes to gray areas about McCandless’s story. One example of this can be found in the chapter entitled *Bullhead City*:

When his camera was ruined and McCandless stopped taking photographs, he also stopped keeping a journal[...]. Not a great deal is known, therefore, about where he traveled after departing Las Vegas in May 1991. From a letter McCandless sent to Jan Burres, we know he spent July and August on the Oregon coast, probably in the vicinity of Astoria, where he complained that “the fog and rain was often intolerable.” (38-39)

Even though Krakauer could have used the lack of documentation during this time period as an opportunity to add his opinions or “suggest” some details that would perhaps enhance his point of view, he doesn’t. Although he supposes that McCandless spent time in Astoria, he is clear in presenting this detail as speculation, and even then he reveals his reasoning behind it.

Having established “a capacity for absorbing facts” and “a capacity for stating them” in the first half of the book, Krakauer thereafter proceeds to shape the information about McCandless with the last component required by Strachey: “a point of view” (Monk 538). Krakauer’s point of view isn’t one of commendation, to give a positive spin on McCandless and his life, nor is it one of condemnation, to put McCandless and others like him in a bad light. Rather, it is to clarify and correct the misrepresentations or misunderstandings regarding McCandless and his behavior. One of the main ways that Krakauer does this is by juxtaposing McCandless with examples of other “marginal characters” that also suffered premature deaths resulting from similarly ambitious adventures in nature. After describing each individual and the particulars surrounding his situation, Krakauer answers some of the accusations that were leveled at McCandless after his body was discovered:

McCandless didn’t conform particularly well to the bush-casualty stereotype.

Although he was rash, untutored in the ways of the backcountry, and incautious to

the point of foolhardiness, he wasn't incompetent—he wouldn't have lasted 113 days if he were. And he wasn't a nutcase, he wasn't a sociopath, he wasn't an outcast. McCandless was something else—although precisely what is hard to say. A pilgrim, perhaps. (85)

In this quote, Krakauer freely admits McCandless's shortcomings and doesn't attempt to defend his mistakes. But he also doesn't accept the generalization that McCandless "was simply one more dreamy half-cocked greenhorn" (72). Krakauer instead portrays a young man who was both intelligent and foolhardy, both passionate and reckless, both independent and naïve. In short, McCandless was a complex individual. Krakauer doesn't attempt to categorize him like other people did. He proffers "A pilgrim, perhaps," but even then he expresses uncertainty. Krakauer's bottom line is that there are no easy answers when it comes to Chris McCandless.

And yet, with the comparisons he makes between McCandless and the other adventurers and between McCandless and himself, Krakauer also demonstrates that Chris McCandless was not entirely unique. Krakauer states,

It is hardly unusual for a young man to be drawn to a pursuit considered reckless by his elders; engaging in risky behavior is a rite of passage in our culture no less than in most others. Danger has always held a certain allure. [...] It can be argued that youthful derringdo is in fact evolutionarily adaptive, a behavior encoded in our genes. McCandless, in his fashion, merely took risk-taking to its logical extreme. (182)

Krakauer indicates that there is *something* in people that hungers for something deeper than what lies at the surface of life. If the first part of Krakauer's point of view is that McCandless cannot be stereotyped, then the other component is that McCandless is one example out of many men

who felt a certain undeniable drive—a drive to explore, to test oneself, to experience nature, to conquer nature, to find Truth, “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life” (Thoreau 394). Just as Krakauer rejects the generalizations and oversimplifications made regarding Chris McCandless, he also denies any attempt to extract a message from his book that can be reduced to a neat and cohesive assessment.

In *Life without Theory*, Monk delineates the history of biographical scholarship and criticism and examines the relationship between biography and theory. According to Monk’s article, a problem for many critics has been the tendency among biographers to allow theory or message to overshadow the documentation of their subjects’ lives. Monk refers to Sidney Lee’s *Principles of Biography*, in which Lee argues for what Monk describes as “the *autonomy* of biography.” According to Lee, as per Monk, “Its purpose is not to use the lives of individuals to teach moral lessons, nor to place individuals in history, nor again to collect evidence for scientific theories [...]; its purpose is, as [Lee] puts it, ‘the truthful transmission of personality’” (535). Similarly, Harold Nicolson would later make the distinction between “pure” and “impure” biography by characterizing the latter as: “(1) a desire to celebrate the dead, (2) ‘the desire to compose the life of an individual as an illustration of some extraneous theory or conception’ [...], and (3) ‘undue subjectivity in the writer’” (543).

In light of these comments, it would appear that Thoreau’s *Walden* fails the standards of “good” biography. Held up against both Lee’s and Nicolson’s criteria, *Walden* falls short for several reasons: First, Thoreau uses his life to “teach” a superior morality of living. Second, if there is a transmission of Thoreau’s personality, it is overshadowed by Thoreau’s hagiographic presentation of himself and his life. Third, Thoreau exhibits subjectivity again and again in his writing as he promotes his chosen lifestyle both explicitly and inexplicitly. By contrast,

Krakauer's *Into the Wild* seems to pass every test. Krakauer doesn't "teach" anything, he doesn't try to use McCandless to push a theory or morality, he doesn't make it a point to "celebrate" McCandless, nor does he even endorse McCandless's lifestyle. Krakauer contents himself with giving the reader a well-informed, clearly supported idea of who McCandless was, how he chose to live, why he chose to live the way he did, and how he died. His relation of the facts concerning McCandless is definitely shaped by a point of view, but that point of view isn't compromised by an agenda to use McCandless's life for any purpose other than understanding.

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