

English 100: College Writing

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Study Questions for *Into the Wild*: Character Profile, Themes, and Motifs

1. Create a **character profile** of Chris McCandless based on your reading so far. Try to illustrate your description of his personality with a brief quotation and a parenthetical note () containing the page you are citing. (*Follow the example below.*)
 - a. Stubborn (ch. 1, page 7, par.7;)
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
 - e.
 - f.
 - g.

2. What **themes** do you notice that Krakauer is trying to develop in chapters you have read so far? Create a list below for your notes and refer back to these as you progress through the book. See whether these themes persist or change.
 - a. Independence/freedom
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
 - e.
 - f.
 - g.

3. What **motifs** (recurring pattern of images, gestures, comments, behaviors) can you identify about Chris McCandless?
 - a. Hunger
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
 - e.
 - f.
 - g.

1. Notice that Krakauer begins his book with the last person McCandless meets before he goes into the wild and dies. What is the effect of starting the book this way?
2. Within the first couple chapters, even on the book cover, we know what has happened to Chris McCandless. If this book is supposed to be a biography of McCandless, why do you suppose Krakauer gives away the ending of the book?
3. What are your impressions of McCandless after reading the first 5 chapters of the book?
4. In what ways do McCandless's ideals echo the philosophy of Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience" or even "Life Without Principle"?
5. In chapter 5 we read about McCandless's stay in Bullhead City, Arizona, a "haphazard sprawl of subdivisions and strip malls" (39). How do you explain that apparent contradiction between his existence here versus elsewhere? Are there other incidents described in the book where McCandless acts in ways that seem to contradict his ideals? Describe them.

1. Analyze and comment upon the relationship between McCandless and Ronald Franz, who “renounced the Lord” (60) when he found out that McCandless was dead.
2. On pages 65-66, Krakauer notes McCandless’s apparent lack of sexual activity as a teenager and as a young adult. Why do you think Krakauer points this out to us? What more does this tell us about who McCandless was?
3. Throughout the first 7 chapters, Krakauer often makes reference to the writers and thinkers McCandless admired—Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, Jack London. What do you think this tells us about McCandless?
4. In Chapters 8 and 9, why does Krakauer tell us about the events of four other ill-fated adventurers and idealists? (Gene Rosellini, John Waterman, Carl McCunn, and Everett Ruess) What is Krakauer’s purpose in including their stories in this book about McCandless?

1. In Chapter 10 (101), a detective from Fairfax County, Alaska tracks down one of McCandless's W-4 forms in Westerberg's files. For his name McCandless writes "Iris Fucyu. Address: 'None of your damn business.' Social Security number: 'I forget.'" Make some inferences about what you think McCandless's relationship was with the US government.
2. Discuss the impact of McCandless's discovery that his father, Walt, had led a double life several years earlier in California.

3. At the end of Chapter 13, Krakauer eloquently writes about Billie, Chris's mother:

[S]he breaks down from time to time, weeping as only a mother who has outlived a child can weep, betraying a sense of loss so huge and irreparable that the mind balks at taking its measure. Such bereavement, witnessed at close range, makes even the most eloquent apologia for high-risk activities ring fatuous and hollow. (132)

Discuss what Krakauer is trying to say about the relationship between parents and children. Consider the actual case of McCandless **contrasted** with the ideal relationship.

4. Krakauer begins in Chapter 14 to tell us of an early mountain climbing venture he fulfilled at the age of 23. Discuss what he is trying to accomplish by telling us about his life when this book is supposed to be about the life of Chris McCandless.
5. On page 142 when Krakauer is describing his ascent up Devils Thumb, he begins to write in the second person (using "you"). Discuss why he does this and what you think he gains from doing so.

1. Towards the end of Chapter 18, Krakauer writes:

Some people who have been brought back from the far edge of starvation, though, report that near the end of the hunger vanishes, the terrible pain dissolves and the suffering is replaced by sublime euphoria, a sense of calm accompanied by transcendent mental clarity. It would be nice to think McCandless experienced a similar rapture. (198)

Comment on Krakauer's attitude toward Chris in this passage.

2. What do you suppose McCandless thought about his last days of life? Discuss your thoughts in your small group.

3. Comment on the overall development of these themes that Krakauer addresses in his book, *Into the Wild*:

- Identity—denial and reinvention of the self (rebirth/starting over)
- isolation/self-exile
- conflict of (hu)man Vs. nature
- conflict of (hu)man Vs. (hu)man
- food/hunger (notice Krakauer's references to food, eating, how much, when, etc.)
- rebellion against various forms of authority
- non-materialism