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Sec 303

Exercise 2.3

Does our view on the beauty of wilderness come from our immersion in it, or our romanticism of it from afar? In the case of Christopher McCandless, who perished in Alaska after spending time living freely amongst the wilderness and existing as simply as possible the answer is not so clear. If he had decided to remain in his normal life and not escaped into the wild, he would probably still be alive today. McCandless left his potentially successful life in the suburbs in order to fully experience what is known to many people as the “wilderness” This begs the question, was the reward of living in this wilderness worth giving up his own safety? Is immersion in the wilderness that much greater than simply observing what the media portrays nature to be, or experiencing nature to a lesser degree?

Thoreau would have agreed with McCandless’s decision to immerse himself, as he was quoted in “Walking”, saying “I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild. Approached from this side, the best poetry is tame. I do not know where to find in any literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that Nature with which even I am acquainted” (Thoreau 14). Here, Thoreau means to say that no form of nature other than being fully immersed in it, to the degree that McCandless experienced, can quench the thirst he held for the wilderness, or “wildness” as he often stated. For Thoreau, the thought of being fully immersed in Nature being thought of as a bad thing would be heresy, and even though it resulted in McCandless’s death. Cronon, on the other hand, had a very different view relating to a person’s immersion in nature. Where Thoreau believes it is an honorable and humbling experience, Cohen would disagree with the idea that McCandless needed to leave home and everything he had in order to find the “modern” idea of wilderness, which is actually a construct of the human mind. Cronon would have considered McCandless’s need “sublime” and inspired by the “romanticism of the frontier” (CITE) rather than a pure act of expression. Cronon would also argue that McCandless’s view of nature throughout his journey was shaped by religious views of nature, such as the ones put forward by Thoreau. From both of these views, the reader is confused over which interpretation is superior, especially in the case of Chris McCandless. On one hand he would have remained safe and probably alive if he had followed Cronon’s advice. Why leave your life to experience the “wilderness”, when you can appreciate the tree in the backyard and the nature that exists as a part of our lives already. But, at the same time, McCandless was truly happy when he was experiencing the wild as Thoreau intended it, in a direct and uncivilized way. By viewing nature as wonderful and full of proof of God, Thoreau shaped the idea that the wilderness is separate from everyday life and something that humans need to go out and find. As Cronon states in “the Trouble with Wilderness” , “the belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living” (Cronon 13). This belief created McCandless’s need, and supports the side of the argument that nature needs to be experienced in full, and not simply read about or seen from afar.

Another person who comes equipped with a fresh definition of wilderness is Aldo Leopold, an advocate for proper ethics of the wild, and human’s involvement in it. Where Cronon believes humans experience the wilderness everyday and are a part of it, refuting the need to search for our own sterile definition of it, and Thoreau believes that humans have a need to be in the wilderness, Leopold believes that “wilderness is the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization” (Leopold 241). According to him, humans strictly use nature for economic gain, and would have no reason for conservation otherwise. If not for economic persuasion, those who profit from land would care only about the economic short term and would have no incentive to care for the future of their land. This view of our relationship with the wilderness is totally different from that of Thoreau and Cronon. In this view, our economic minded thinking is inspired from the fact that we are constantly separated from nature by countless “middlemen” who desensitize us of the ethics required to care about nature and conservation. For this reason, Leopold would have applauded McCandless’s efforts, and used him as a shining example to show others how to develop a more environmentally ethical way of thinking for the future.

In today’s world, conservation is becoming a major subject. Whether you are a democrat or a republican, it cannot be denied that this topic will be a major point of discussion moving forward. This is why these views are becoming increasingly important, and why McCandless’s efforts to become more in tune with the wilderness could be scrutinized.