

Isolation and the Search For Self

Paula Simonson, Wasatch Range Writing Project

Summary:

In this lesson, students will read, discuss and conduct an informal analysis of an article entitled, “Death of an Innocent: How Christopher McCandless Lost His Way in the Wilds,” written by Jon Krakauer.

Students will have the opportunity to read, consider and discuss one young man’s isolated journey for truth, self, and independence. Students will also analyze how McCandless' story tragically shifted to loss.

This article does make references to suicide and accidental death. Please consider the students and the subject matter as you prepare.

Objectives:

- After reading, analyzing and discussing “Death of an Innocent: How Christopher McCandless Lost His Way in the Wilds,” students will be able to develop a plausible theory behind McCandless’ decision to take on the wilds of Alaska.
- Students will understand how some embrace extended isolation as an important part of growth, while others fear isolation.
- Students will understand how youth and lack of preparedness can sometimes lead to unintended outcomes.

Context:

This lesson can be used with 9th, 10th 11th, and 12th grade ELA students.

Materials:

- Classroom copies of “Death of an Innocent: How Christopher McCandless Lost His Way in the Wilds” by Jon Krakauer.

Time Frame:

- This lesson can be taught in as few as three class periods or may be extended for deeper level activities and/or discussion.

Procedures:

1. Begin the lesson by giving students time to do some research on Denali State Park. Ask them to create a list of at least ten surprising things they learn about the park. Then ask them to draw one or more comparisons with state parks from Utah.
2. Offer students the opportunity to share with the class or in small groups.
3. Distribute or digitally share copies of “Death of an Innocent: How Christopher McCandless lost his way in the wilds.” Encourage students to annotate text while reading - focusing on parts that are personally relatable, surprising or confusing.
4. This is a longer piece of text. Consider having members of the class take turns in reading, while others follow and annotate. Take time to stop periodically to discuss questions along the way.

Task:

- Do a quick ten to fifteen-minute Google search and develop a strong two to three paragraph explanation for Krakauer's Jack London allusion (Krakauer 1).
- Krakauer also refers to Leo Tolstoy, a celebrated author. Do another quick search and develop a short list of Tolstoy traits that may have had an impact on McCandless (Krakauer 2).
- The article contains a number of theories from different people as to McCandless' motivations. Have students develop their own theory, using textual evidence for support.
- Students will end the lesson by writing an argumentative essay, explaining McCandless' motivations, and outcome. Students will need to include a counterclaim, also based on textual evidence or the lack of evidence to support an opposing theory.

Discussion Questions:

1. What possible conclusions can the reader draw from McCandless decision to leave his personal belongings behind when entering the park?
2. Some point to McCandless' last letter to his friend, Wayne Westerberg as support for his intentions to end his life. After reading the entire article, do you support this point of view? Explain.
3. The author draws some similarities between himself and McCandless. However, Krakauer is relying on his ability to reflect from the perspective of age and wisdom. What role do you suppose McCandless' youth and passion played in his outcome? Explain.
4. How does McCandless' behavior as captain of the cross-country team reflect the same drive that took him into the wild? Does this piece of information shed a new sense of understanding and compassion for McCandless? Explain.
5. People who yearn for solitude and isolation are often misunderstood. In his article, why do you suppose Krakauer included information about the Irish papar monks who yearned for solitude?
6. What is the author's overall tone and purpose? What do you believe he wants the reader to take away from this article?

Rationale:

This lesson will help students to understand the time, place and need for solitude and self-imposed isolation. Students will also have the opportunity to reflect on healthy choices when embarking into new and unknown territory in their lives.

Resources:

Krakauer, Jon. "Death of an Innocent: How Christopher McCandless lost his way in the wilds." *Outside Online*, 15 Jan, 1993,
<https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbXiaHNzZW5pb3JzZW1pbmFyfGd4OjUyM2ZIMzM4YzgzNWU1NGE>. Accessed 29 June 2020.