

*Research Article*

## The Tragedy of Freedom: A Hypothesis of Existentialism in Jon Krakauer's "Into the Wild"

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Article Info	Abstract
Article History Received Mar 31, 2023 Revised Jun 16, 2023 Accepted Jun 20, 2023	This paper examines the tragedy of freedom in "Into the Wild" by Jon Krakauer through an existentialist viewpoint. In the protagonist's pursuit of personal liberation, the study examines the concepts of autonomy, accountability, and the search for meaning through an understanding of existentialism. A qualitative case study method analyses the novel and investigates existentialist concepts. A summary of the literature work, close reading, theme analysis, and literary interpretation are all provided within the framework. This study aims to enhance our comprehension of the tragedy of freedom and its implications for human existence by casting light on the intricate interplay between individual liberty and societal norms. By exploring the existentialist perspective, the research contributes to the larger discourse on freedom, responsibility, and the pursuit of meaning in literature and human experience.
<b>Keywords</b> Existentialism Freedom Individual freedom Societal norms	



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### 1. Introduction

Pursuing freedom is fundamental to the human experience, and it has been the driving force behind many of history's greatest victories and worst catastrophes. Chris McCandless, the protagonist of Jon Krakauer's "Into the Wild," is the tragic embodiment of freedom, as his quest for self-awareness and independence leads to his death in the Alaskan wilderness. In this dreadful tale, we can examine the repercussions of desiring independence without first appreciating the risks and limitations of such a pursuit. This study examines the novel "Into the Wild" and its central theme, the tragedy of freedom, from an existentialist viewpoint. The objective is to comprehend how Jon Krakauer's 'Into the Wild' depicts the tragedy of freedom from an existentialist perspective. This paper seeks to (1) identify the themes and motifs associated with the tragedy of freedom in the book, (2) evaluate these themes and motifs from an existentialist perspective, and (3) provide insights into the significance of the tragedy of freedom for individuals and society.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The study employs a qualitative case study methodology which permits an in-depth examination of a single instance (in this case, the book and its themes). The book, critical reviews, and scholarly papers will be used as data sources. The data analysis will employ literary techniques, including close reading, theme analysis, text interpretation, and classification and categorization. The findings of this study facilitate comprehension of the tragedy of freedom and its effects on individuals and society. This study will intrigue anyone interested in pursuing freedom and its consequences, not just academics in literature, philosophy, and psychology.

Paperwork analysis of the novel and secondary sources, such as academic articles and reviews, will be used to compile data for the study; close reading, thematic analysis, and textual interpretation are employed to analyze the data and identify patterns and pertinent themes. The research findings will be presented in a written report or paper that provides a detailed and nuanced analysis of the novel's themes and motifs related to the tragedy of freedom from an existentialist perspective. Overall, a qualitative case study design is appropriate for this study because it permits a thorough investigation and interpretation of the novel's themes and literary elements, particularly useful for literary analysis. Understanding and interpreting the data takes precedence over generalizing or quantifying it.

## 3. Results and Discussions

A psychological investigation of the existentialist idea of the tragedy of freedom "Into the Wild" by Jon Krakauer is told from Christopher McCandless' point of view. It is told in the form of a story. Christopher McCandless's journey might be seen as a desire for authenticity, independence, and the fullest possible expression of one's freedom. However, his goal of complete autonomy leads to risks that were not expected as much as what happened by the end of the story, as well as devastating consequences. The existentialist worldview is deeply ingrained in McCandless's longing for freedom. He does not adhere to societal conventions, places little value on worldly belongings, and rebels against the constraints of a typical existence. McCandless wants to eliminate the inauthenticity of modern civilization and arrive at a truer sense of who he is, so he embarks on a journey to live a simpler existence in the wilderness. This is similar to the philosophy of existentialists, who emphasize the autonomy and responsibility of the individual, as well as the quest for personal meaning.

For several weeks, he lived on the streets with bums, tramps, and winos. Vegas would not be the end of the story, however. On May 10, itchy feet returned, and Alex left his job in Vegas, retrieved his backpack, and hit the road again, though he found that if you are stupid enough to bury a camera underground, you won't be taking many pictures with it afterwards. Thus, the story has no picture book for the period May 10, 1991-January 7, 1992. But this is not important. It is the experiences, the memories, the great triumphant joy of living to the fullest extent in which real meaning is found. God it's great to be alive! Thank you. Thank you. (p.34)

Moreover, consider the larger context in which the character's actions and decisions occur. Here, the protagonist of this novel, Alex (Christopher McCandless), matches the concept of a nomad since he avoids society and is always on the go since he is pursuing a nomadic lifestyle at the expense of steady work and relationships in order to maintain his independence by analyzing how Alex's goal of independence has impacted the situation. Be mindful of the subsequent challenges and unfavourable results, despite the initial joy and feeling of autonomy that he experiences. For instance, the loss of tangible goods and the absence of recorded memories highlight the possible consequences of emphasizing one's independence above all other considerations. This is also highlighting the part when the protagonist is predicted to have death coming his way. It is a representation and brings the realization of lack of preparation, seclusion, and exposure to the severe Alaskan environment ultimately led to his demise, despite his pursuit of independence and desire to live independently in the wilderness that caused his death. His mortality can be viewed as the lamentable result of his dogged pursuit of independence.

On the other hand, investigating the character's emotional development would give a better understanding of his psychology. Being mindful that the protagonist's enthusiasm for experiencing life to its fullest may not last forever, despite others expressing their joy and gratitude for doing so. The utterance of "thank you" twice may be understood as a quest for meaning and purpose, maybe implying a yearning for something more substantial than simple liberty, which is the consequence and result of the tragedy he now expects. Moreover, establishes a connection between these elements and existentialist concepts and discusses how the quest for perfect freedom may lead to feelings of isolation, the loss of one's identity, and the absence of meaningful interpersonal relationships. Think about the conflict that arises between the need for social relationships and duties and the individual right to freedom. The tragedy lies in the possibility of

estrangement and unmet ambitions that arise from placing a higher priority on personal freedom without considering the larger ramifications of such a decision.

In addition, the storyline depicts several themes of tragedy because of the freedom he has tried to attain by going into the woods, which are failed rescue attempts, negatively impacting friends and family. A second catastrophic event occurs when McCandless realizes his voyage has become life-threatening and endeavours to return to civilization. Unfortunately, he cannot traverse the swollen river and reach the protection of the trailhead. This thwarted rescue attempt is a tragic turning point in the narrative, highlighting the fragility and limitations of individual freedom in the face of the forces of nature. Tragic elements also include the consequences McCandless' actions had on his family and loved ones. His parents, particularly his mother, are devastated by his disappearance and demise. Their sorrow and the lingering concerns surrounding McCandless's motivations and decisions add a tragic dimension to the story, illustrating the repercussions of individual pursuits of freedom on those left behind, which is not seen as a part of success.

Furthermore, tragic elements include the consequences McCandless' actions had on his family and loved ones, as said earlier. His parents, particularly his mother, are devastated by his disappearance and ensuing demise. Their sorrow and the lingering concerns surrounding McCandless's motivations and decisions add a tragic dimension to the story, illustrating the repercussions of individual pursuits of freedom on those left behind. In addition to reflections from Others, Krakauer includes the perspectives and experiences of other individuals who have undertaken comparable journeys or pursued unconventional lifestyles throughout the book. Their narratives frequently contain tragic elements, such as unsuccessful attempts to find happiness or fulfilment in isolation and the enduring emotional wounds resulting from their decisions. Another interesting element that adds to understanding the concept of tragedy and existentialism is the repeating relation of nature and the character with his ongoing experience while hunting.

Nature and his relationship to it are a deadly-serious matter, prescribed by convention, mystery, and danger. How is this linked to existentialism and tragedy? (p.144)

This "nature philosophy" here explains the quote from "Into the Wild" which illustrates the severe and complicated nature of man's relationship with nature, which can be related to existentialism and tragedy in the following ways: convention and freedom, mystery and meaning, danger and authenticity, and tragic

element. Existentialism emphasizes individual freedom and the rejection of social norms, which the philosopher believes impose artificial constraints on real life. The word "convention" appears in the sentence, which suggests that individuals' lives might be limited and constrained by the expectations and standards of society. When seen in the context of nature, the protagonist's attempt to find personal fulfilment through his connection to the natural world might be interpreted as an existentialist response to the expectations set out by society. The search for meaning and direction in one's life is central to existentialist philosophy. The term "mystery" in the sentence gives the impression that nature includes cryptic aspects capable of provoking feelings of wonder and inquiries about the meaning of existence. One way to get more engaged with the complexities of the natural world is to investigate the most basic facts about life and to search for one's own personal significance.

Existentialism acknowledges the inherent perils and uncertainties that come with life. The term 'risk' is included in the phrase, indicating the possible dangers one may experience while engaging with nature. Accepting danger and putting oneself in the way of the existential dangers present in the natural world may be considered a road to true life, in which people face their fears and the fact that they have a finite amount of time on this earth. The interaction between man and the environment may have both stupefying and possibly lethal results. Both of these outcomes are possible. The phrase gives the impression that the inherent dangers and threats of the situation add to the seriousness of this connection. Existential tragedy may be the end consequence of the conflict between man's need for authenticity and freedom, on the one hand, and the harsh truths and perils inherent in the natural world, on the other.

According to Foley and Howard (2014), in cultures where tragedy is seen as a kind of suffering, the experience of tragedy is valued more highly than an average incident. This is because tragedy is seen as a sort of suffering. This is a perfect example of the anger that will overtake a prideful individual someday. This statement can be connected to the protagonist's existential concept: to die in honour of what he was hunting for. This discussion of freedom, meaning, authenticity, and the inherent hazards and consequences of engaging with the natural world is at the heart of the link between man's interaction with nature, existentialism, and tragic events. It reflects the existentialist ideas of individual freedom, the quest for purpose, and the acceptance of the unfortunate elements of human life.

It is nearly impossible for modern man to imagine what it is like to live by hunting. The life of a hunter is one of hard, seemingly continuous overland travel.... A life of frequent concerns that the next interception may not work, that the trap or the drive will fail, or that the herds will not appear this season. Above all, the life of a hunter carries with it the threat of deprivation and death by starvation. How is this related to tragedy? (p.146)

The passage accentuates the hardships inherent in a hunter's existence, including continuous overland travel, the unpredictability of successful exploits, and the possibility of food scarcity. This struggle for survival is the underlying cause of the catastrophe. As the hunters confront the prospect of their own mortality, the constant threats of deprivation and malnutrition create a sense of impending tragedy. Because the protagonist is searching for meaning in his life through freedom and into the wild, it only leads to hardships and difficulties as a young boy unaware of his decisions. The passage emphasizes the inherent vulnerability of hunters in their pursuit of sustenance. Any failure in capturing or hunting can have devastating consequences. Their existence is lamentable due to the inherent unpredictability and the persistent threat of scarcity and malnutrition.

Moreover, in the tragic aspect of the human predicament, the passage's description of hunter-gatherer existence highlights humans' existential dilemma. It reflects the larger human condition, characterized by the struggle for survival, the fragility of life, and the ever-present possibility of tragedy. The passage's depiction of human existence as precarious and fraught with the possibility of catastrophic consequences is consistent with existentialist ideas. By the end of the novel, Alex writes in his journal his final words by sharing a poem of Robinson Jeffer's "Wise men in their Bad Hours" which indicates a lot about what it means to own freedom and then fall into its trap of an immortal death.

Death's a fierce meadowlark: but to die having made something more equal to the centuries  
then muscle and bone is mostly to shed weakness. The mountains are dead stone, the people  
Admire or hate their stature, their insolent quietness. The mountains are not softened or troubled  
And a few dead men's thoughts have the same temper. (p.155)

This passage from Robinson Jeffers' poem "Death's a fierce meadowlark" encapsulates the existentialist viewpoint on death and the pursuit of meaning in one's life. It connects to the tragedy of freedom in "Into the Wild" by highlighting the fact that death might be seen as a success rather than a failure in the face of a life that has been lived to the fullest rather than regrettably cut short. The lines indicate that coming

to terms with the inevitability of one's own demise may be accomplished by achieving something of lasting importance that is not constrained by the boundaries of one's physical body. It gives the impression that the tragedy is not the act of dying itself but rather a life that was empty or had no significance.

The description of the mountains as "dead stone" and their "insolent quietness" reflects the existentialist notion that the world is indifferent and unchanging. It implies that the mountains, like mortality itself, are immune to human existence and accomplishments. However, the poem asserts that even the thoughts of a few deceased individuals possess the same tenacity and lasting impact as mountains. This implies that pursuing personal freedom and constructing something meaningful can endure physical death and contribute to the human experience. In relation to "Into the Wild," this passage echoes the protagonist's desire to leave an enduring legacy and transcend societal constraints. It emphasizes the tragedy of freedom in the face of mortality as the protagonist journeys into the wilderness to make his existence equal to centuries. According to the passage, by endeavouring to create something of lasting value and discarding the defects of mundane existence, one can confront the tragedy of mortality and leave a lasting impression on the world.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The tragedy of freedom in "Into the Wild" by Jon Krakauer is an intriguing investigation of existentialist topics and their implications for human existence. The study examines freedom as an essential element of human existence, emphasizing its capacity to provide liberation and tragedy. The paper analyses the protagonist's pursuit of personal freedom and repercussions using a qualitative case study methodology and an existentialist perspective. The study emphasized the fundamental conflict between individual freedom and its challenges, such as isolation, ambiguity, and the burden of responsibility that the protagonist endured, leading to a tragic death. By analyzing the protagonist's pursuit for personal freedom and its tragic conclusion, the study has enhanced our comprehension of the human condition and the pervasive influence of existentialist themes.

The novel shows the complexities of freedom, depicting it as both liberating and tragic. The protagonist's demise in the wilderness due to his pursuit of personal freedom illustrates the inherent dangers and consequences of the pursuit of absolute freedom. The narrative highlights the solitude that can accompany

the pursuit of liberty. Individualism is a central existentialist motif, reflected in the protagonist's decision to live apart from society. However, this isolation also contributes to his tragic fate, highlighting the significance of interpersonal relationships and the limitations of complete autonomy.

Existentialists claim that freedom is accompanied by a profound sense of responsibility for one's decisions and actions. The protagonist's pursuit of authenticity and self-discovery exemplifies the existentialist standard of living a self-examined existence. However, the consequences of his decisions highlight the need to strike a balance between personal freedom and our ethical obligations to ourselves and others. In addition, the natural environment plays a pivotal role in the narrative, catalyzing the main character's search for freedom and self-realization. Nature is portrayed as astounding and unforgiving, emphasizing the inherent dangers and difficulties accompanying embracing freedom in its purest form. The novel provokes consideration of the values and constraints of contemporary society. The protagonist's rejection of societal norms and materialistic pursuits raises concerns regarding the role of society in forming individual identity and the potential trade-offs between personal liberty and societal expectations. In conclusion, the existentialist analysis of "Into the Wild" exposes the complexities and consequences of the tragedy of freedom. It emphasizes the importance of a balanced understanding of freedom, responsibility, and the pursuit of authenticity in navigating the human experience.

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