



Epigraph-allacy: Using Epigraphs to Elicit Student Interpretations

Curriculum Unit 13.02.09, published September 2013

by Leilani JP Esguerra

Content Objectives

Rationale

When I think about what I will bring back to my classroom from this seminar, my school's Expected School-Wide Learning Results (ESLRs) jump out glaringly at me. Our ESLRs state that:

1. Every student will be a critical thinker.
2. Every student will demonstrate personal responsibility.
3. Every student will be an effective communicator.
4. Every student will be an informed and involved community member.

Not that one ESLR supersedes another, but ESLR 1 and ESLR 3 are particularly close to this seminar's emphasis. My school is student-centered and aims at the development of each individual student so that they contribute to a productive, just society. Our educational system works to expose students to varied perspectives about personal, local, and global issues. As teachers, we create opportunities that aim at both experiential and participatory learning. ¹ Education also aims for students, on their own volition, to apply what they have learned about those perspectives and to shape their own interpretation of the elements required of a good, successful life for themselves. As a teacher, I envision that each of my students will discover and make strides to fulfill their own meaning in life. I am excited that this seminar focuses on finding meaning and significance in the texts my students read, and I hope from there to expand and apply those meanings to create students' own personal interpretations of joy and success. My curriculum unit brings together higher order thinking skills through the analysis of author or narrator reliability, the evaluation of evidence, and in particular the dissection of epigraphs, all of which lead to student interpretations.

Student Demographics ²

Independence High School has an ethnically diverse student population. There has been a steady decrease in the Caucasian population and an increase in the Vietnamese and Filipino populations; the Hispanic population has remained stable. It draws students from the affluent foothills of East Side San Jose as well as students from the low-income apartments and working class neighborhoods. The total enrollment in 2012-2013 was 3,163. Currently the student population is 35% Hispanic, 37% Asian, 19% Filipino, 3% White, and 3.5% African

American, with yet smaller populations of Native American, Alaskan Natives and Pacific Islanders. The number of those qualifying for free or reduced lunch has steadily increased and is now approximately 41% of our population, while 53% of our students are categorized as Socioeconomically Disadvantaged. Nevertheless, in spite of increasing poverty and decreasing budgets, our test scores in all subgroups continue to rise. This includes CST, Advanced Placement, and CAHSEE tests. Independence High School, as with other East Side Union High School District schools, draws a large minority and immigrant population.

The students in our community, mostly from low income, limited English, immigrant families, are taught by their parents that they must take advantage of their educational opportunities by performing well in high school, then attending college, and ultimately landing a well paying job that would provide them all the necessities of a "good life." These parents go so far as to tell the student the type of degree or occupation they should pursue to attain this good life, even if the student has no enthusiasm for that field. Filipino students are told to become nurses, Vietnamese students are told to pursue Pharmacy, East Indian students are guided into the field of technology. Why are money and material possessions the only evidence of happy lives? Instead of allowing the student to walk their own path, to find their own meaning in life, and instead of allowing the student to develop their own interpretation of a good life, this form of parental "guidance" negates the educational exploration and discoveries of the student.

Expository Reading and Writing Course

This nonfiction unit falls under the Expository Reading and Writing Course (ERWC) implemented by my school district in 2012. The lessons and activities from the ERWC curriculum are geared towards the demands of college level writing with the California State University system. The curriculum is aligned with the Common Core State Standards and college-level reading and writing demands. The curriculum is divided into modules that utilize the same rhetorical reading process through Pre-Reading (activation of prior knowledge, vocabulary and concept building), During Reading (reading with the grain, application of rhetorical appeals, point of view), and Post-Reading (summarizing, reading against the grain, responding, analyzing prompts, taking a stance, thesis and essay development) activities. "Students learn to read rhetorically by not only focusing on what the text is saying, but also on the purpose it serves, the intentions of the author, and the effects on the audience." ³ The ERWC's focus on rhetoric helps students understand and apply principles of effective and ethical communication. ⁴ The *Into the Wild* module, in addition to the four letters from the Christopher McCandless Info website, offers a platform for students to respond respectfully to divergent views and to listen both supportively and critically. ⁵

Into the Wild

Christopher (Alex) McCandless, the central character, is perceived as an extremist. From one point of view, he can be regarded as a brilliant, intelligent, jack of all trades, who graduated with honors from Emory University, grew up without financial struggles, and donated to the hungry. On the other end, he can be considered a recluse, a reckless idiot, an inconsiderate son and brother who severed ties with his family, and abandoned modern society to venture into uninhabited Alaskan territory. Regardless of the different perceptions students may have of him, McCandless maintained "truth" as his life's mantra. He stayed true to himself and used his own experiences, observations, and knowledge to live his own interpretation of a happy life.

Krakauer's *Into the Wild* is also interesting and useful in that its epigraphs can be interpreted on different levels (e.g., narrator's perspective, main character's perspective, and student perspective). I have selected specific epigraphs comprised of excerpts from various literary texts and four letters written by McCandless'

siblings. The reasons why Krakauer handpicked certain quotes is known only to him. Did the author choose these quotes as the epigraphs because they were somehow related to his own adventure to Alaska's Devil Thumb? Did the author see a reflection of himself in McCandless? Does Krakauer display [self-congratulation] in sharing McCandless' story? How much objectivity did Krakauer intend on maintaining regarding McCandless? There are other aspects of McCandless's life that are brought to the surface in the letters by his siblings. Because Krakauer left out details about McCandless's family history, students can approach the epigraphs from different perspectives, thus leading to the building of different interpretations.

McCandless is the controversial character of my chosen unit who, through his experiences and knowledge, created his own path. Students will use two main sources for this unit: Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild* and four personal letters written by McCandless'[s] siblings from the Christopher McCandless Info website (<http://www.christophermccandless.info/>). Particular emphasis will be placed on the role of the epigraphs for selected chapters. Both sources offer varying perspectives of McCandless. Krakauer claims to be an "impartial narrator" during each account of McCandless's journey. Students are not wholly sure whether they should believe Krakauer because McCandless' siblings, as expressed in their letters, hold varied perspectives. The struggles faced by McCandless, as narrated by Krakauer, vary from the accounts of McCandless's own family members. It is these varied perspectives that leave room for rich interpretation on whether McCandless lived what he interpreted to be a truly good and full life. As students read the text and the four letters, they will first gain an understanding of characters, conflict, plot, and narrator – reading with the grain to understand the text. Secondly, by drawing comparisons between the author-narrator and McCandless, the students will evaluate the reliability of the narrator. Ultimately, students will focus on selected epigraphs to draw interpretations regarding the themes in the text. To pave a pathway towards their interpretations, guided and collaborative reading and discussion approaches will be used.

Krakauer's integration of epigraphs is valuable in that not only does each epigraph relate directly to McCandless' character and conflicts, but it also appeals to seniors in high school who, as they approach graduation day, are at a similar crossroads to that of McCandless. The answer to "*What's next?*" is hard to find amidst all the emotion that comes with transitioning from the life that they have known to one that has yet to begin, life after high school. My reason for assigning this unit is two-fold: First, I would like my students to learn and apply in life the lesson that a single perspective is not always adequate for arriving at conclusions. I want these young adults to be critical about information that is presented to them (information about API scores, health and life insurance, Supreme Court rulings, investments, etc.). I want them to know that they must evaluate, investigate, and possess some degree of skepticism so that their interpretive conclusions line up with their truths, beliefs, and values. It is a fact of life that individuals progress and mature through different phases; thus my second aim for this unit is for my students to develop their own truth mantras and their own philosophy for life. As they approach graduation day, my goal is for the students at the senior level to develop their own truth mantras through knowledge and discovery so that they may indeed live happy, meaningful lives according to their own interpretations.

Background Research

"A Pleasure Skipped"

In the introduction to her new compendium on "the art of the epigraph," Rosemary Ahern notes that she is

always surprised when someone claims not to read epigraphs: to her, this is "an offering refused, a pleasure skipped." ⁶ When I taught Krakauer's text for the very first time, my students skipped, or rather avoided, the epigraphs. This was the foremost issue that prevented the students from establishing a solid perception of the narrator and main character. The inner literature geek in me fell into shock upon discovering this during a whole class discussion. How could they gain perspectives if they don't read the epigraphs? Epigraphs force readers to pause and notice the transition from the world to the work, from life to the novel. They slow readers down—which is why they often skip them. ⁷ How would they be able to find text to self or text to world value if they skip sections of any literary text? Why did my students skip them altogether? My students were not able to grasp the fact that the epigraphs were purposely and craftily selected by the author to suit the purposes of the text. My students failed to realize, largely owing to my not having laid enough emphasis on the epigraphs, that "the epigraph may illuminate a text, and is itself designed to form an integral part of the effect of the poem." ⁸ This illuminative purpose allows students to look at the different angles from which they can come to their interpretive conclusions. They whined and complained that they were burdened by having to analyze the epigraphs, claiming that the epigraphs had little to do with the plot, main character or narrator. Simply put - they found no significance. My students viewed the text as a story that could never happen in our urban city of East San Jose, and thought it far removed from real life. It hit me: I didn't want them to just know about the text, I wanted them to live the text. Literature provides a living through, not simply knowledge about. ⁹ I wanted them to grasp McCandless's delight and sense of joy in pushing the boundaries set by his parents and society. Furthermore, I wanted them to adopt this character as a model of an individual who sought a true sense of accomplishment.

Another hurdle that stood in the way of my students understanding of the epigraphs is the initial abstractness of the meaning underlying the epigraph. They did not have a plan of attack. The fictive and poetic signals in addition to the critical reading skills required to derive meaning from the epigraphs are so multi-faceted that the reading task becomes daunting. It was considered tedious to read, re-read, and then read again to look at the underlying, symbolic, or interpretative meaning. It is a common enough experience for a person to say that on their second reading he noticed things he had missed when he read the book for the first time. ¹⁰ Each new attempt at the dissection of the epigraph provides newer and newer insight, building on or rejecting each previous attempt. This is precisely my reason for focusing on the epigraphs for this unit. Epigraphs can be obscure, and it is not always easy for a reader to grasp the relationship between the epigraph and the text. ¹¹ My persisting thought was that they did not have enough background information to understand the epigraph.

By the end of the text, the students placed their trust in the narrator. They swallowed the details he presented about McCandless's parents, his secretive departure, and the seeming depiction of an Alaskan adventure rather than considering the psychology of McCandless's desire to attain peace for himself. It was not until they read the letters written by McCandless's siblings that they realized that they should not believe everything they read and that they should never just accept one person's perspective, especially where life decisions are at stake. This unit will serve as a tool for me and other teachers to demonstrate the reliability of varying viewpoints in order for students to develop their own interpretations.

Epigraphs

Epigraphs (or "mottos" as they are still often called) first became popular in Europe during the early eighteenth century, accompanying the growing phenomenon of middle-class reading. ¹² At the time, being cultured meant that one was familiar with classical texts. These classical texts stood on their own, without reference or allusions to other writers or texts. Writers didn't need epigraphs to tether themselves to other

writers. ¹³ But as the middle-class reading public materialized in the middle of the eighteenth century, almost no self-respecting publication could do without an epigraph. Emerging readers knew the English but not necessarily the classical tradition; they needed a path, a map of literary culture. Epigraphs stuck like burrs to the title pages of books and poetry. In this way, epigraphs allowed an author to rightly place (and justify) their work as a piece of the ever-growing literary conversation. As the century wore on, the epigraph spread to the novel. ¹⁴

An epigraph is what my students pinpoint as the "quote at the beginning of the chapter." Epigraphs serve to summarize a chapter or lead into the core of the chapter. Epigraphs also serve to connect the reader's experiences to the text. But because Krakauer craftily selects these epigraphs, we may decide that he uses them to lead his readers into accepting his own viewpoint. For the purposes of this unit, the epigraphs in question are the quotes or excerpts pulled from various literary sources that Krakauer selected and planted at the beginning of each chapter in his text. More specifically, these epigraphs are comprised of quotes or excerpts from literary sources that advocate justice and morality. Interestingly, other epigraphs came from McCandless's own hand. Books were found next to McCandless's body upon his death. McCandless annotated sections these texts by responding to them, asking questions and making notes. These annotations reflect McCandless's desire for happiness and change. In his annotations, McCandless presents his own text to self and text to world connections. Krakauer uses some of these notes as epigraphs as well.

The more than twenty epigraphs address themes such as the attainment of happiness through the serene calming effect found in the solitude of nature, the materialistic selfishness of man, and the ways in which society sets prescribed expectations. The meaning within these epigraphs relates to the themes in Krakauer's text. These epigraphs serve as the building of background information from one context while connecting to another. Metaphorically, the epigraph is a scaffold on one end of a bridge and the chapter is the scaffold on the other end. The students' interpretations are what serve as the bridge.

The students who felt that the epigraphs were insignificant in comparison to the totality of the text hit a wall. Why was so much decoding necessary? What did the epigraphs signify, if anything? Is there a common thread that connected the epigraph to the chapter? The use of an epigraph is always a mute gesture whose interpretation is left up to the reader. ¹⁵ The students felt that there was only one acceptable way to interpret the epigraph. They relied heavily on the narrator and they did not take into account their own knowledge, experience, or plans for the future. Epigraphs offer a place for the reader to interpret the text of the author and correlate it to society. ¹⁶ By comparing the viewpoints of the author and McCandless' siblings, the students can begin to develop their own views, while additionally evaluating the reliability of the narrator. The students make the decision to side with one view or the other, or even create their own interpretation.

By revisiting the epigraphs and homing in on key details such as tone, diction, and symbols, students will first build a base regarding meaning. This base will support the development of their interpretations and further support their understanding of the text. The epigraph transitions what the reader knows and has experienced and the application of that knowledge elsewhere ¹⁷

Making Meaning

Students, most especially weaker readers, struggle with decoding the epigraph as a text in itself. They find it strenuous to come across ideas or vocabulary words, look up dictionary or idiomatic meanings, and then apply the meaning to the text, to self, and to the world. In his essay, Perrine suggests that readers look carefully at diction (i.e. singular vs. plural forms, matching actions and verbs with subjects,) and to also pay attention to

the differences between metaphors and symbols.¹⁸ Additionally, Perrine contends that readers should look at connotations and denotations of the text, the tone, and the interrelatedness of chosen words.¹⁹ This practice or strategy applied to seemingly small details will help these students arrive at an understanding of the text. My students swallowed the verbal meaning of the epigraphs eventually, but did not progress into textual meaning. Every detail presented by Krakauer was taken at face value: "The epigraph says exactly what the epigraph says," they supposed, without taking into account the intentions of the author or the contradictions offered by McCandless' siblings. To address this one-sided perception, students should observe as carefully as possible the elements that are planted within a text. When students reread the epigraphs, keeping in mind any patterns, they can discover a connection with the text and the author. Students must be able to understand individual parts of a text (e.g., vocabulary, chapters, characters, epigraphs) so that they can piece them together to formulate their own interpretation of a text. Students should be able to come to the understanding that some of the epigraphs correspond to the text, while other epigraphs [do not fully corroborate it], thus highlighting the subjectivity of the narrator.

The student is integral in the interpretation process. The individual possesses knowledge and experience, and therefore each individual is unique thereby leading to unique interpretations.²⁰ In order to develop interpretive knowledge, students must know how to decipher meaning within a text and be able to apply or synthesize any knowledge, life experience, or observations to the text. Regarding meaning, Hirsch distinguishes between "verbal" and "textual" meaning: *Meaning* refers to the whole verbal meaning of a text and *significance* to the textual meaning in relation to a larger context (i.e. a wider subject matter, a system of values, another era). *Significance* is textual meaning as related to some context.²¹ For students, the verbal meaning of the epigraphs comes from the very words found in the text. Some of these words may have double meanings or contain some level of symbolism. By pausing and allowing students to dissect the small details in the epigraph, I can enable them to understand surface level or underlying meaning. With that accomplished, we can then discuss how the textual meaning relates to self or the world. Ideally, upon reading the epigraph before reading the chapter, students would ideally break apart the smaller elements in the epigraph to look for themes or symbols or tone and then match those elements to the chapter or compare it with the letters written by McCandless's siblings. I would like the students to differentiate between the verbal and the textual meaning from the epigraphs in order to demonstrate whether the epigraph remains consistent with [the relevant] chapter of the text. It is this differentiation that will make room for their interpretations.

For one of the epigraphs from chapter twelve of the text, Krakauer borrows from G.K. Chesterton,

For children are innocent and love justice, while most of us are wicked and naturally prefer mercy.

The background information that readers are given about Krakauer is that he disappointed his father by not fulfilling the plans for the future that his father laid out for him. Krakauer's father is portrayed as a man with the perfect plan for success. In this chapter, Krakauer reveals to the audience that McCandless discovered details about his father's infidelity to his wife. Most of chapter twelve portrays a resentful, brooding, and private McCandless. Krakauer states, "Children can be harsh judges when it comes to their parents, disinclined to grant clemency, and this was especially true in Chris's case." Throughout this chapter, McCandless overlooked the shortcomings and flaws of friends, artists, and novelists. He lived by what Krakauer labels a "rigorous moral code" of his own devising. Ironically, however, McCandless did not apply the same code to his own father. Does this quote reflect Krakauer's own views about the relationship between children and their parents? Or is it an accurate reflection of the McCandless family? In past discussions, students viewed McCandless as the "wicked" one, in that he did not show "mercy" toward his own father. Students are likely

also to point out that the McCandless family craved a sense of "mercy" and forgiveness as a relief from the relentlessness of McCandless's temperamental disposition. To elicit student interpretations, the teacher must be prepared to ask students critical thinking questions: Who is the *we* referring to? How can readers build interpretations of this quote without first analyzing elements such as subject or tone? What does this wickedness entail? Where is the line between innocence and wickedness drawn? Explain the irony concerning the wicked who "prefer mercy." Is Krakauer leading us to believe that he or McCandless experienced some kind of childhood trauma? When the students engage in conversations about these types of questions, they will be able to decide whether the epigraph ties in closely with McCandless's life or if the epigraph was taken out of context by the author. Readers need background information regarding the context. "Concepts of meaning and significance are essential concepts for comprehending how meaning could be determined, and hence how interpretative knowledge is possible."²² Students will gain a fuller understanding of the verbal and textual meaning of the text simply by pausing and discussing such questions. By adopting this pause, connect, and go structure, students will be more prepared to interpret.

Interpreting Texts

Are there limits to interpretation? From an English teacher's perspective, the answer is yes. In all my years of teaching, my students have come to understand that their interpretations are correct only when they are able to provide thoughtful, genuine evidence from the text and/or background knowledge. Laurence Perrine states that there exists a level of truth when determining meaning and that logical patterns are found within the diction of the text. The context of diction limits the meaning, which leads to a correct interpretation. Perrine states, words in poetry carry more meaning, "richer meaning" than other works, therefore require more in-depth reading. This stance can be applied to epigraphs as well. Perrine further asserts, "there are correct and incorrect readings" and "there is a process for the correctness of a reading."²³ Perrine poses two criteria:

1. each detail in the text must be accounted for without any of the details countering each other. These details include any fictive or poetic elements.
2. The best interpretation of a text is the simplest, most economical, least [a]ssumption-based interpretation.

Our task in interpreting is to isolate and describe the two levels of experience connected through the writer's language.²⁴ Using Perrine's criteria, I know that in my role I must provide the scaffolding, background information, and guiding questions to help students understand the details.

In every line or phrase a writer is conveying some sense of experience, and we

as readers are registering it.²⁵ When we make a full interpretation of a poem, we see the most complete coalescence of drama, metaphors, and rhythm.²⁶ This can also be applied to the poetic and fictive elements of an epigraph.

Krakauer inserts an excerpt from Theodore Roszak's "In Search of the Miraculous" in the eighth chapter of the text:

It may, after all, be the bad habit of creative talents to invest themselves in pathological extremes that yield remarkable insights but no durable way of life for those who cannot translate their psychic wounds into significant art or thought.

In later chapters of the text Krakauer shares details of his own climbing adventure in Alaska. The discussion

with students regarding this epigraph will direct student focus to whether this epigraph (and others) corresponds to the text. In using this particular excerpt, Krakauer could be seen as foreshadowing his own adventure, rather than remaining objective concerning his main character. The chapter is devoted to the different perspectives audiences held regarding McCandless's death in Alaska. McCandless was labeled as a "dreamy half-cocked greenhorn who went into the country expecting to find answers to all his problems and instead found only mosquitoes and a lonely death." ²⁷ Ideally, the class discussion that ensues should point in the direction of Krakauer being a subjective, therefore unreliable, narrator. The discussion could also perhaps point in the direction of McCandless as a character who sought peace and acceptance, but also perhaps the chance for rebellion against societal expectations. Was Krakauer's choosing of this particular excerpt representative of McCandless or was it a precursor to other chapters devoted to his own experiences at Devil's Thumb? Was this epigraph directly related to McCandless or to Krakauer himself? With these discussion questions, students are able to delineate whether the epigraph inclines in favor of the author or the main character. In interacting with the epigraph, the chapter, and the evaluation of Krakauer's reliability, the student will be using their own experiences (textual and personal) to develop interpretations.

Students apply the texts to themselves first, then to others, and then can agree or disagree as they wish. "Every act of interpretation involves . . . at least two perspectives, that of the author and that of the interpreter... When we speak or interpret speech, we are never merely listeners or merely speakers, we are both at once." ²⁸ Evidence resides in the first hand experiences and observations of the students. Some students will find their interpretations threatened by the presence of other possibilities of interpretation. ²⁹ The goal of the unit is not to come to one interpretation, but to see the possibility of various interpretations as they reinforce or contradict the level of reliability of the narrator. "In reading and discussing texts we will have to rely not on the talisman of authorial certainty but on our own ability to find what meaning we can by connecting the text to whatever we know, our savvy in framing arguments that persuade us and others of the perspicacity of our reading, even our ability to change and maybe grow in our reading as we hear others' interpretations." ³⁰ It is we ourselves who establish the levels of interpretation and switch from one to another as we conduct our balancing operation, we ourselves who impart to the text the dynamic lifelikeness which, in turn, enables us to absorb an unfamiliar experience into our personal world. ³¹

Teaching Strategies

Scaffolding

At the surface level, the first strategy is reading carefully to understand both sources (text and letters). With this strategy, students will engage in Pre-Reading and During Reading activities that:

- Provide background information about the authors (Krakauer and McCandless's siblings and parents), purpose of each author, main character, setting, conflict, etc.
- Provide evidence that supports themes

Discussion Strategy: Think-Pair-Share, Small Group, and Whole Class

Students will engage in collaborative and explorative discussions about the traits and

actions of the main character and of the level of reliability of the author-narrator. Furthermore, these discussions will elicit student interpretations regarding the themes of the text: truth, materialism, and societal expectations. On some days, students will share with a partner and on other days, they will discuss in a group of three or four students. The small group discussions allow for every student in the class to voice their interpretation of the readings. This discussion gives every student an opportunity to speak and listen to someone else's views. The small group discussion always leads to a whole class discussion so that the entire class can hear how others' perceptions differed or compared with that of their own. The discussions benefit the students by allowing them to hear and realize the similarities and differences among their thoughts, especially when citing evidence to support their interpretations. The discussions bridge the text and students' understandings. Their ideas are compiled into their unit packets.

Student Packets

A 6 to 10-page packet will serve as a record of ideas and details and will be

the end product of this strategy. The packet will be filled with annotation exercises, T-charts for compare and contrast analysis, summaries that reflect their understanding, charts for textual evidence. Responses to critical thinking questions and the rough drafts of essays will also be maintained in the packet. Students will provide a date and title (in my classroom, I've come up with the term "date") for each new section in their packets representing every new activity they are tasked with.

Annotation Exercises

Students will either be asked to hand-copy epigraphs into their packets or they may be given copies. Using different colored highlighters and a combination of annotation symbols, students will mark up portions of the epigraphs to demonstrate meaning. For example, the student will draw a circle around vocabulary words that are unfamiliar to them, or draw a box around words or phrases that might reflect symbolism. The students will all use a first colored highlighter to mark details that refer to tone, a second colored highlighter will be used to mark details that refer to figurative language devices, and a third color for sensory details found in the epigraph. In using the different colors, visual or tactile learners will be better able to engage with meaning from the text.

Once the students have color-coded and applied symbols, in the margins around their paper they will write their ideas, explanations, and the meanings behind their markings. In developing these explanations, students will compare their notes with the perceptions of the author-narrator. This discussion and annotation format fosters the process of finding deeper meanings within the text. This is then the point from which their interpretive conclusions can be made.

Classroom Activities

(The Quickwrite prompt, questions 3, 4, and 5 under "with the grain" and questions 1 and 2 under "against the grain" are derived from the ERWC Curriculum Binder.)

Activity #1 (7-10 days)

"With the grain"

Students will read the entire nonfiction text using two reading strategies: "with the grain" and "against the grain." Students will read "with the grain" during their first reading. Through this strategy, students will be reading for the main ideas by understanding the story line and for the most part agreeing with the author in order to develop their own interpretation. These ideas will be recorded in their student packets. As the first entry in their packets, students will respond to a two-minute QuickWrite. This scaffold will allow students to form connections between McCandless's world in the text and their personal journey towards life after high school.

Quickwrite Prompt: Think about some alternative plans you might have to beginning college immediately after high school. What might you do? Why would you do it, and for how long could you see yourself doing that activity?

To begin with the first reading, the text will be divided into three sections:

Section 1: Chapters 1-7 - Chain of events

Section 2: Chapters 8-15 - Men who displayed similar behaviors

Section 3: Chapters 16-18 - McCandless's death, his motivations, and family reactions

Students will stop at each section and form small groups in order to discuss and address questions to guide their comprehension and understanding of the text. They will record their responses and discussion in their packet.

Comprehension and discussion questions for Section 1:

1. Explain the significance of the last sentence in chapter 3.
2. Create and label a 4-column chart:

Column 1: Characters

Column 2: Where does McCandless meet these characters?

Column 3: McCandless's impact on the characters

Column 4: Textual evidence

Comprehension and discussion questions for Section 2:

3. What was McCandless like as a child and as a teen? What was he like

as an adult? Were there indications throughout his life as to the kind of person he would become?

4. Do you think McCandless would fit into modern life – a job, a home, a mate, children? Why or why not?

Comprehension and discussion questions for Section 3:

5. Krakauer summarizes a response to his article in *Outside Magazine* by saying, "The prevailing Alaska wisdom held that McCandless was simply one more dreamy halfcocked greenhorn who went into the country expecting to find answers to all his problems and instead found only mosquitos and a lonely death" (72). Has Krakauer made the case that the prevailing Alaska wisdom is wrong? Why or why not?

"Against the grain"

Students will revisit and/or reread the text. With this strategy, students will now question the text and the author. Students will use the annotation strategy to highlight sections of the text where they will:

- Draw comparisons with author, McCandless, the papar, Everett Ruess using textual evidence
- Ask questions
- State disagreements
- Note points of confusion
- Compare McCandless's plans to the plans students have

In small groups and in their packets, students will discuss and record their responses to the following reading and discussion questions

1. Krakauer provides a lot of quotations from McCandless's journal in these

chapters. What is McCandless talking about? Why did Krakauer include these selections?

2. Krakauer quotes one of McCandless's friends, who said that McCandless "was born into the wrong century. He was looking for more adventure and freedom than today's society gives people" (174). Do you think this is true?

Activity #2 (2 days)

For this activity, students will focus specifically on chapters 14 and 15. At this point in the text, Krakauer transitions to his own experiences. Students may view these chapters as "interruptions" in the storyline. These two chapters provide the background information regarding Krakauer's own experience in Alaska. Students will still be reading against the grain as they evaluate the author's perception of McCandless's journey. In their packets, students will respond to the following questions:

1. Chapters 14 and 15 describe Krakauer's successful attempt when he

was 23 years old to climb the "Devil's Thumb," a mountain in Alaska. He also describes what he thinks are

parallels between McCandless and himself. Do these chapters increase his credibility for writing this book, or do they undermine his credibility by making it seem like he has his own agenda and is not objective?

2. Are these two chapters necessary? Why or why not?

To end the first reading of the text, students will be tasked with a timed essay. The ERWC curriculum requires students to produce expository essays for the culmination of each unit. The prompt below comes from the *Into the Wild* module of the ERWC curriculum binder. The assignment tasks students with applying insights gained from the reading concerning their own lives and the people around them. The students will use their analysis of multiple perspectives in order to clarify their own positions. The students will have understood that the author never met McCandless, and that he made assumptions based on interviews and discoveries as a result of following McCandless after his death. The information Krakauer gathered is relayed through a multitude of perspectives.

Essay Prompt

You will have 45 minutes to plan and write an essay on the topic assigned

below. Before you begin writing, read the passage carefully and plan what you

will say. Your essay should be as well organized and carefully written as you can

make it.

Jon Krakauer writes:

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)

What was Chris McCandless seeking in the wilderness? Do you think he found it before he died? Considering these questions and Krakauer's statement, write

an essay in which you define who Chris McCandless was and explain what he

was trying to do. Support your conclusions with evidence from your notes and

your reading of the text.

Activity #3 (1 day)

This activity will require the use of a computer lab as students will go online to the Christopher McCandless website to access the four letters by McCandless's siblings. Students will read each letter, and in their packets they will take notes on the perspective of each sibling. Students will still be reading against the grain. Students will be drawing distinctions from at least three perspectives: Krakauer's, McCandless's, and the siblings'. In drawing these distinctions, students will become competent in developing their own interpretations as they prepare to address the epigraphs.

1. What information do the siblings provide that Krakauer seems to have left out?

2. Are McCandless's siblings more credible or reliable than Krakauer? Why or why not?

Activity #4 (2-3 days)

Students will revisit a total of five epigraphs. For each epigraph, students will apply the color-coded annotations exercise. For the first epigraph, students will be given an enlarged photocopy of page 47 from the text. On this handout, students will first individually analyze the epigraph for the small details (e.g., tone, sensory details, purpose, theme) using different colored highlighters and various annotation symbols. When their annotations are complete, they will be asked to discuss their findings with a partner, and then share with the whole class. Students will respond to the focus question in their packets. During the whole class discussion, students will be given a focus question:

Does the epigraph lean more in favor or Krakauer's experiences at Devil's

Thumb or does it lean toward McCandless's journey?

For the remaining epigraphs, students will hand-copy the remaining epigraphs (one sheet of paper per epigraph) into their packets. They will repeat the annotation exercise by themselves. Once the individual work is complete, they will hold small group discussions to share their ideas. In addition to the first focus question, students will address a set of critical thinking questions:

1. Does his choice in epigraphs make Krakauer a reliable narrator?
2. Is the last paragraph of the book an effective ending to the book? Why or why not?
3. Does Krakauer have an acceptable background to speak with authority on this subject? Why or why not?

Works Cited

Brooks, Cleanth, and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding poetry; an anthology for college students*. New York: H. Holt and Co., 1938.

Brower, Reuben Arthur. *The fields of light; an experiment in critical reading*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1951.

Burma, Rachel Sagner. "Rachel Sagner Buurma Reviews Rosemary Ahern's "The Art of the Epigraph: How Great Books Begin " | New Republic." New Republic. <http://www.newrepublic.com/book/review/art-epigraph-how-great-books-begin-rosemary-ahern#> (accessed June 11, 2013).

Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Hicks, David. "A Rationale for Global Education." UNESCO | Building peace in the minds of men and women. http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_c/popups/mod18t05s02.html (accessed July 10, 2013).

Hirsch, E. D.. *The aims of interpretation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

CSU. "Into the Wild Module." CSU Expository Reading and Writing Online Community.
writing.csusuccess.org/uploads/PQ/He/PQHeEV6u75pK1rMw3t3g4g/MOD6_Into_the_Wild_TV.pdf (accessed April 18, 2013).

Iser, Wolfgang . *The Implied Reader*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Krakauer, Jon. *Into the wild*. New York: Anchor Books, 1997.

Maynard, John. *Literary interpretation, literary intention, and readers*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2009. Print.

Perrine, Laurence. "The Nature of Proof in the Interpretation of Poetry." University of Texas at Austin English Department Website Redirect. <http://www.en.utexas.edu/Classes/Bremen/e316k/316kprivate/scans/perrine.html> (accessed June 13, 2013).

Read, Adam . "Chris McCandless aka Alexander Supertramp." Chris McCandless .
<http://www.christophermccandless.info/carinemccandless.html> (accessed May 29, 2013).

Rosenblatt, Louise. "Making Meaning with Texts." heinemann.com.
www.heinemann.com/shared/onlineresources/E00768/chapter5.pdf (accessed May 29, 2013).

Wimsatt, William K., and Monroe C. Beardsley. *The intentional fallacy*. S.l.: s.n., 1946.

Worthington, Jane . "The Epigraphs of T.S. Eliot." *American Literature* 21 (1949): 1-17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2921214> (accessed May 29, 2013).

Resources for Teachers

1. Bibliography for teachers

a. Walt and Billie McCandless's note <http://www.christophermccandless.info/backtothewild.html>

b. Christopher McCandless website

<http://www.christophermccandless.info/>

2. Reading list for students

a. Krakauer, Jon. *Into the wild*. New York: Anchor Books, 1997.

b. Jon Krakauer. "Death of an Innocent – How Christopher McCandless lost his way in the wild." *Outside Magazine* January 1993.

c. Letters written by Carine, Shelly, Stacy, and Shawna McCandless as posted on the Christopher McCandless website.
<http://www.christophermccandless.info/carinemccandless.html>

3. Materials for the classroom

a. Chart/student handout of the five epigraphs which includes page and chapter numbers

Appendix: Implementing Common Core Standards

The classroom activities in this unit tie in my school's Expected Schoolwide Learning Results (ESLR's) regarding critical thinkers and effective communicators. The following Common Core Standards are addressed in this curricular unit:

CCSS ELA-Literacy.L.11-12.4 - Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and

multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grades 11-12 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

CCSS ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1 - Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3 - Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters/archetypes are introduced and developed).

CCSS ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4 - Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

CCSS ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.7 - Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text.

Notes

1. David Hicks, "A Rationale for Global Education."
2. Independence High School - WASC Report 2012-2013
3. CSU ERWC *Into the Wild* Module
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Rachel Sagner Buurma, "Do Epigraphs Matter?"
7. Ibid.
8. Jane Worthington, ed., *The Poems of TS Eliot*, p. 1
9. Louise Rosenblatt, "Making Meaning"
10. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* p. 281
11. Worthington, *The Poems of TS Eliot*, p. 1

12. Rachel Sager Buurma, "Do Epigraphs Matter?"
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Laurence Perrine, "The Nature of Proof in the Interpretation of Poetry"
19. Ibid., 18
20. John Maynard, *Literary Intention, Literary Interpretation, and Readers*
21. E.D. Hirsch, Jr. *The Aims of Interpretation* p. 2
22. Ibid., 2
23. Perrine "The Nature of Proof in the Interpretation of Poetry"
24. Reuben Brower, *The Fields of Light; an Experiment in Critical Reading* p. 43
25. Ibid., 32
26. Ibid., 76
27. Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* p. 72
28. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* p. 49
- 29.. Iser, *The Implied Reader* p. 287
30. Maynard, *Literary Interpretation, Literary Intention, and Readers*
31. Iser, *The Implied Reader* p. 288

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use