

An Introduction to Christopher McCandless' Literary Influences

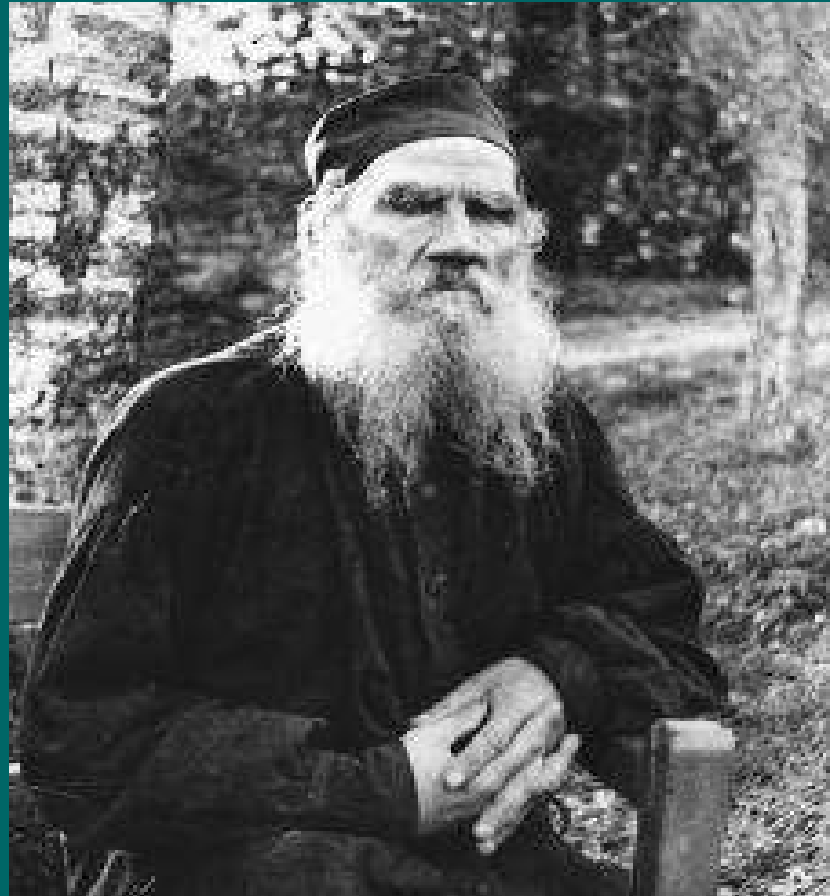


◆ Topics:

- ⑩ Leo Tolstoy and Realism
- ⑩ Jack London and Naturalism
- ⑩ Henry David Thoreau and Transcendentalism

Leo Tolstoy and Realism

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)



Tolstoy and Realism

◆ Realism:

- Broadly defined as "the faithful representation of reality"
- Character is more important than action and plot; complex ethical choices are often the subject.
- Characters appear in their real complexity of temperament and motive; they are in explicable relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past.
- Class is important; the novel has traditionally served the interests and aspirations of an insurgent middle class.

Realism Continued

- Events will usually be plausible. Realistic novels avoid the sensational, dramatic elements of naturalistic novels and romances.
- Diction is natural vernacular, not heightened or poetic; tone may be comic, satiric, or matter-of-fact.
- Objectivity in presentation becomes increasingly important: overt authorial comments or intrusions diminish as the century progresses.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)

- ◆ Russian author, essayist and moral philosopher wrote the epic novel *War and Peace* (1865-69) and *Anna Karenina* (1873 to 1877) .
- ◆ Leo Tolstoy ranks as one of the world's great writers, and his *War and Peace* has been called the greatest novel ever written.
- ◆ Tolstoy's *War and Peace* was also the peak of Tolstoy's personal life.
 - His characters represent almost everyone he had ever met, including both sides of his family.

Tolstoy Continued

◆ Personal Trials:

- In 1884 relations with his family were increasingly strained.
- The more of a saint he became in the eyes of the world, the more of a devil he seemed to his wife.
- He wanted to give his wealth away, but she would not hear of it. An unhappy compromise was reached in 1884, when Tolstoy assigned to his wife the copyright to all his works before 1881.

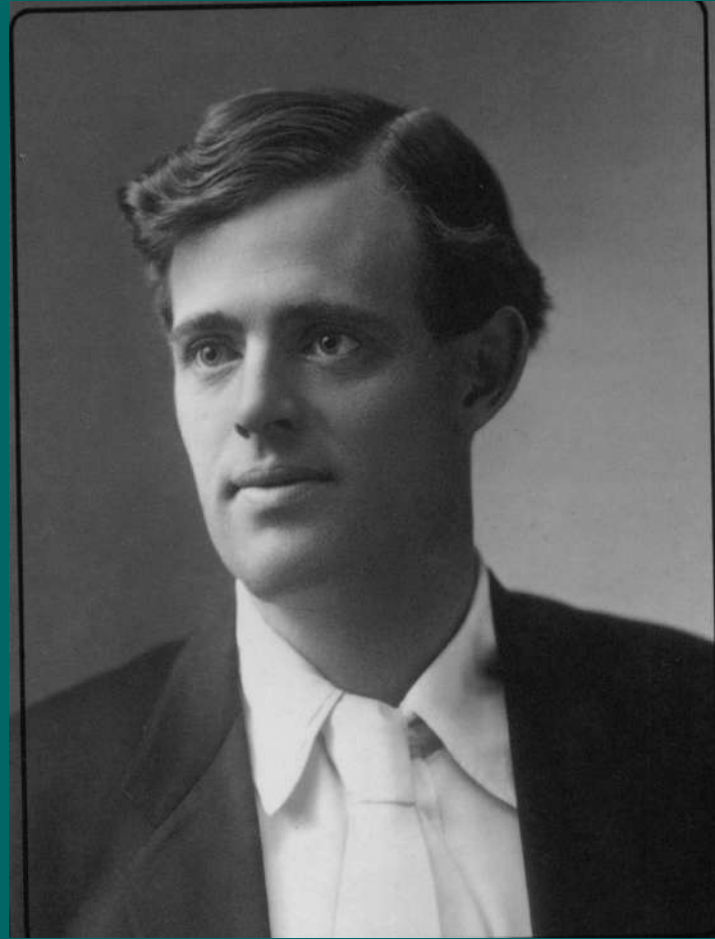
Tolstoy Continued

◆ His Final Years:

- Filled with worldwide acclaim and great unhappiness, as he was caught in the strife between his beliefs, his followers, and his family.
- Church leaders excommunicated him in 1901.
- Unable to deal with the family quarrels, in 1910 he set out on his last pilgrimage accompanied by his youngest daughter and his doctor.
- The trip proved too much, and he died in Astapovo, Russia, on November 9, 1910.

Jack London and Naturalism

Jack London (1876-1916)




Jack London and Naturalism

◆ Naturalism:

- a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings.
- Unlike realism, naturalism implies a philosophical position; characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings.

Naturalism Continued

- ◆ Naturalistic writers studied human beings governed by their instincts and passions as well as the forces of heredity and environment.
 - ◆ Characters are frequently but not invariably ill-educated or lower-class characters whose lives are governed by the forces of heredity, instinct, and passion.
 - ◆ Their attempts at exercising free will or choice are powerless by forces beyond their control; social Darwinism and other theories help to explain their fates to the reader
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Jack London(1876-1916)

- ◆ Novel *The Call of the Wild* believed to have been the biggest impact on McCandless
- ◆ *The Call of the Wild*:
 - London intended to write about a dog who merely reverts to the wild
 - He states that he unconsciously wrote “the human allegory in the dog's life-and-death struggle to adapt himself to a hostile environment.”
- ◆ Born in San Francisco
- ◆ He was raised through infancy by an ex-slave, Virginia Prentiss, who would remain a major maternal figure while the boy grew up.

London Continued

- ◆ As an adolescent, London worked at various hard labor jobs, pirated for oysters on San Francisco Bay, served on a fish patrol to capture poachers, sailed the Pacific on a sealing ship, joined Kelly's Army of unemployed working men, hoboed around the country, and returned to attend high school at age 19.
- ◆ Always a prolific reader, he consciously chose to become a writer as an escape from the horrific prospects of a life as a factory worker.
- ◆ London was among the most publicized figures of his day, and he used this pulpit to endorse his support of socialism, women's suffrage, and eventually, prohibition

London Continued

◆ Complicated figure:

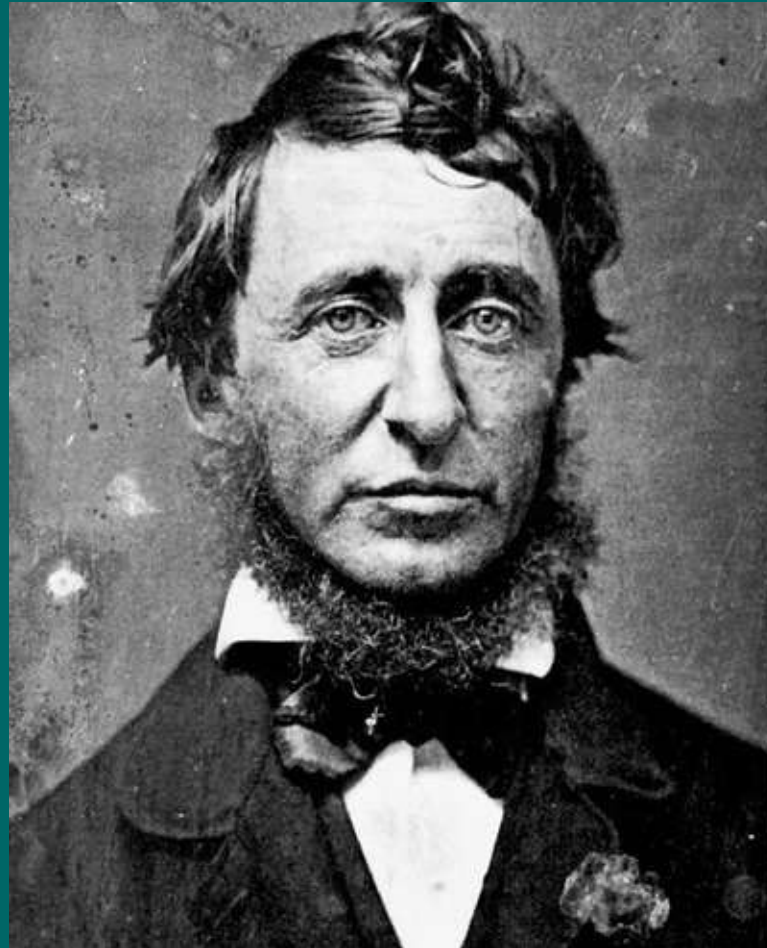
- Clearly accepted the Social Darwinism and scientific racism prevalent at this time
- Yet troubled that the "inevitable white man" would destroy the rich cultures of various native groups he had encountered.
- Supported women's suffrage and created some of the most independent and strong female characters in American fiction,
- Yet he was patriarchal toward his two wives and daughters.

London continued

- ◆ Complicated figure continued:
 - His socialism was fervent.
 - But countered by his strong drive toward individualism and capitalist success.

Thoreau and Transcendentalism

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)



Transcendentalists and historical context:

- ◆ The Transcendentalists were a generation of well-educated people who lived around the time of the Civil War—a time of division.
- ◆ Mainly New Englanders who wanted to create a uniquely American body of literature.
- ◆ Set out to create writing that was clearly different from any European nation.
- ◆ The Transcendentalists can be understood in one sense by their context -- by what they were rebelling against, what they saw as the current situation and therefore as what they were trying to be different from.

Transcendentalists and spiritual context:

- ◆ New Biblical Criticism due to literary analysis led to
 - New questions about the old assumptions of religion
 - Age of Enlightenment, based on experimentation and logical thinking, had come to new rational conclusions of the natural world
- ◆ These new rational conclusions were not enough

Transcendentalists and social issues

- ◆ Most were involved in social reform movements: anti-slavery and civil rights
- ◆ At the level of the human soul, ALL people had access to divine inspiration and sought and loved freedom and knowledge and truth.

Henry David Thoreau

- ◆ The second son and third child of John Thoreau, whose father Jean had emigrated to America from the Isle of Jersey about the time of the American Revolution.
- ◆ Grew up in Concord, Massachusetts, home to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ralph Waldo Emerson,
- ◆ Attended Harvard College in nearby from 1833 to 1837

Thoreau Continued

- ◆ For the remainder of his life he spent in his home community, whose flora and fauna he explored with a microscopic eye, recording his observations
- ◆ Early interpreters of Thoreau thought of him as a naturalist, due to his observations of botanical phenomena and the amount of time roaming the environs of Concord with spyglass, notebook, and pencil, recording the seasonal changes and life cycles of hundreds of plants.

Emerson's Influence on Thoreau

- ◆ Emerson had counseled his generation to look *through* the transparency of nature in order to grasp the essential spirituality of the universe
- ◆ Thoreau, of all Emerson's followers, acted upon Emerson's teachings most consistently.

Thoreau and *Walden*

- ◆ *Walden*- one of the most influential books of the nineteenth century
- ◆ Thoreau retired for two years, two months, and two days in 1845, 1846, and 1847 to Walden Pond:
 - he built a hut and studied nature to discover what she had to teach of moral and spiritual truth

Thoreau's Response to Transcendental premises

- ◆ led him to take a negative view of the dominant values of pre-Civil-War America.
- ◆ He wrote disparagingly of the destruction of the natural environment, of which human beings were an integral part.
- ◆ He deplored the implications of the rise of industrialism, with its emphasis upon materialistic values.
- ◆ He condemned the institution of black slavery and the government which fostered and perpetuated the institution.

