

INSIGHT TRIAL EXAM SECTION B- TRACKS AND INTO THE WILD

‘A journey is about much more than reaching a destination’

Compare how this idea is explored in *Tracks* and *Into the Wild*.

Sean Penn’s film *Into the Wild* and Robyn Davidson’s memoir *Tracks* both explore the importance of going on a physical and metaphysical journey, away from the comforts of society, as the vital pillar for allowing a person to live a more authentic life, free from the expectations and restricting structures of society. The most important part of journeys is more about the process before reaching a destination. Both texts suggest that it is about challenging the strength of one’s identity away from the comforts of entrenched mainstream society. They both imply that human interaction is essential for completing a journey as it provides one with the ability to experience suffering to overcome hardships so that the lessons are more meaningful. Both texts further suggest that journeys are a test of the protagonists’ abilities to acknowledge their own weaknesses and a greater test of their choices made at key points of vulnerability in the process of their journey.

Both texts acknowledge that journeys are about challenging the strength of one’s core identity in an environment that is void of the burdens of security and comfort that one would find in entrenched mainstream society. For Chris, who is born into a world of hedonistic and materialistic values in the American 1980s, his motivation for going on such a journey is driven by his inability to accept his society’s values. The extent of his opposition to these consumeristic ideals/standards is highlighted through a series of close-up shots, which depict him snipping his IDs in half and donating his \$24000 college fund to Oxfam. The non-diegetic sound of Chris cutting his cards implies his ‘cutting’ or rejecting the idea of living the identity that society assigns to him. Hence by going on such a journey in self-imposed isolation, Chris is quintessentially breaking free from the comforts of ‘civilised’ social life for which he would have been very successful given the context of his society. Similarly, Davidson initially challenges the strength of her identity on this journey through being trained by Kurt in the desert. The training process forces her to become “self-protective, suspicious and defensive”, traits that are not typically associated with a woman in the 1970s. Although this may seem to be a negative quality, it is “essential” for her to “develop beyond the archetypal female creature” who is trained by her society to be “sweet, pliable...door mattish”. Therefore, despite purposely exposing herself to the “cult of misogyny” that is Alice Springs, Davidson’s ability to adapt to the new environment and reverse such stereotypes for her sex is not only testament to her values, but also to the strength of her core values. The different contexts of the memoir and film are reasons alone for the protagonists having different justifications for leaving their societies behind.

Both texts imply that human interaction is essential for completing a journey as it provides one with a better ability to overcome hardships to reach their destination. It is essential for the protagonists to realise that their shared values are what provide them with motivation to forge ahead in their respective journeys. Chris is reminded through Penn’s deliberate non-linear flashbacks to his childhood that Chris cannot venture out of the security of society and expect to leave behind his complete identity, as he will always carry with him the heavy emotional weight of the memories experienced throughout his life. One of his memories is with Jan and Rainey, the ‘rubbertramps’, who share their rejection of living in a conservative society. However, they are realistic in their preparations to survive in the wild, by being able to use a truck and having the correct equipment, whereas Chris does not. Not only does this emphasise his extreme naivety in ignoring their wisdom for understanding how to survive in the wild, it also implies that Chris must learn to temper his unlive philosophies with realism in order to survive. His immediate departure from them also reinforces his inability to form long-term relationships with others. In a similar fashion, Robyn initially follows in the tracks laid by earlier explorers alone, and appropriates their experiences by

attempting to connect with the meaning they took from the desert. However, unlike Chris, she realises very early on that she “needed people, wanted them” because they provide her with the strength to continue on her journey. She initially follows in the tracks of others, by searching for tracks laid by earlier explorers and appropriating their experiences. This aligns with her first perspective of the desert as “great emptiness...absolutely nothing”. This stems from a materialistic evaluation based on the society she originates from. However, Robyn transforms her identity once she abandons the tracks that other people took on their journeys. This parallels the way she speaks about the desert, personifying it as “walking out into that evil whispering sea” as if more connected and actively responsive to her. This, in conjunction with her leaving her clock on the stump, having “left it ticking” as an “appropriate end for that insidious little instrument” symbolically reinforces her progression as a character from being restricted from the structures of her society, to the limitless potential of surviving in the desert; for Robyn, the journey into the desert is therefore more meta-physical. Hence unlike Chris, Robyn’s journey enables her to overcome the burdens of her scheduled and tightly structured society as the most significant hardship in order to reach her final destination.

Both texts further suggest that journeys are a test of the protagonists’ abilities to acknowledge their own weaknesses. Robyn personifies Rick’s Nikons camera as a “creature” that “robbed [her trip] of its original meaning”, acknowledging that media agencies would be likely to romanticise her desert trip. Her ability to recognise her ignorance and inability to forgive Rick as a weakness of her character in itself is a strength- having “vigilance over one’s weaknesses”. This, along with her shared experiences with Eddie, allows her to realise that “the land was not wild but tame, bountiful, benign” as long as she “knew...how to be part of it”. By deliberately exposing her own vulnerability including the schedules associated with time, Robyn is truly able to connect with the nature, rather than feel threatened by it. Hence, the reader is able to truly appreciate Robyn’s transformation and fusion with the desert as a much more realistic form of radicalism in challenging societal expectations. Chris’ journey is also appealing since the audience is able to admire his values of honesty in being able to communicate his reasons for entering the wilderness. However, Chris, unlike Robyn, undergoes a transformation of identity that is much more romanticised. This is evident as Chris assumes that Ron is “wrong” to think that the “joy of life comes principally from human relationships”. He only realises the consequences of his naïve thinking in the ending scenes through his realisation that “when you forgive, you love” in relation to his father’s abusive tendencies and Chris’ distrust in his family history. The fact that he realises his weakness of failing to forgive his family close to his death emphasises that the advice obtained from human interaction is a vital pillar for developing one’s identity. There is a greater sense of pathos in Chris’ journey given that his death is preventable. In doing so, the progression and transformation of both protagonists’ identities through learning from others in a challenging environment is essential for reaching any goals. Hence, although physical journeys do end, a mental journey of challenging oneself does not, “it merely changes form” since there is always “limitless potential” to develop one’s character throughout the course of their lives, which is what Robyn’s message portrays, whereas the focus of Penn’s depiction of the film is more directed towards the consequences of romanticising and idealising a journey.