Research Review
Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin
Vol. 5, No. 1, Mei 2026 ISSN: 29622743

Anti-Modernism as Reflected in the Main Character of Movie Into the Wild

(Cerminan Anti-Modernisme dalam Karakter Utama Film Into the Wild)

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Article Info

Article history:

Received: 30 April 2026
Revised: 19 Mei 2026
Accepted: 20 Mei 2026

Keywords:

Anti-Modernism
Sociology of Literature
Film Analysis

Kata Kunci:
Anti-Modernisme
Sosiologi Sastra
Analisis Film

Abstract

This study aims to examine how Into the Wild represents anti-modernism through the character of Christopher McCandless. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method using the sociology of literature approach to analyze how social conditions, family background, and personal experiences influence the main character's rejection of modern values. The data were collected from the film's script, scenes, and dialogues, supported by relevant academic sources. The findings indicate that anti-modernism is represented through Christopher McCandless's rejection of material success, career ambition, institutional identity, and rational planning. His perspective develops gradually as a result of emotional conflict, family instability, and dissatisfaction with modern social structures. The contrast between Annandale as a structured suburban environment and Alaska as a natural and isolated setting highlights the tension between modern institutional life and the search for authenticity. The study also identifies key anti-modernist elements, including criticism of modern society, pessimism toward material values, appreciation of nature, resistance to institutions, and rejection of rational control. The study concludes that anti-modernism in the film functions both as a critique of modern life and as a reflection of its consequences, showing that complete withdrawal from society may lead to isolation and vulnerability.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana Into the Wild merepresentasikan anti-modernisme melalui karakter Christopher McCandless. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan sosiologi sastra untuk menganalisis bagaimana kondisi sosial, latar belakang keluarga, dan pengalaman pribadi memengaruhi penolakan tokoh utama terhadap nilai-nilai modern. Data dikumpulkan dari naskah film, adegan, dan dialog, serta didukung oleh sumber-sumber akademik yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa anti-modernisme direpresentasikan melalui penolakan Christopher McCandless terhadap keberhasilan material, ambisi karier, identitas institusional, dan perencanaan rasional. Pandangan ini berkembang secara bertahap sebagai akibat dari konflik emosional, ketidakstabilan keluarga, dan ketidakpuasan terhadap struktur sosial modern. Perbedaan antara Annandale sebagai lingkungan suburban yang terstruktur dan Alaska sebagai lingkungan alam yang terisolasi menunjukkan adanya ketegangan antara kehidupan modern yang institusional dan pencarian keaslian. Penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi elemen anti-modernisme seperti kritik terhadap masyarakat modern, pesimisme terhadap nilai material, penghargaan terhadap alam, penolakan

terhadap institusi, dan penolakan terhadap rasionalitas. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa anti-modernisme dalam film tersebut berfungsi sebagai kritik terhadap kehidupan modern sekaligus menunjukkan konsekuensi dari penolakan total terhadapnya, seperti isolasi dan kerentanan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Literature represents human life and social experience through creative expression, enabling individuals to understand and interpret the world around them (Moputi & Husain, 2018). As one of its most accessible forms, film functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium that communicates cultural values, social issues, and ideological tensions through visual and auditory narratives (Erlidawati & Rahmah, 2022; Putri et al., 2019). Through character development, setting, and conflict, films are able to present social realities in a concrete and observable manner, making them particularly relevant for examining how abstract ideas are represented in everyday contexts. One of the central ideological tensions frequently reflected in literary and cultural works is the relationship between modernism and anti-modernism. Modernism is commonly associated with progress, rationality, technological development, and institutional achievement as indicators of human advancement (Azizi & EshaqZai, 2022). It promotes the belief that structured systems, education, and innovation can improve human life. However, anti-modernism emerges as a critical response to these values, questioning the consequences of modernization, including alienation, loss of authenticity, and the weakening of human relationships (Antohi & Trencsényi, 2014; Bunout, 2021). Rather than existing outside modernity, anti-modernism develops within it as a form of internal critique, highlighting the limitations and contradictions of modern life.

This tension becomes increasingly significant in contemporary society, where modern systems offer material comfort and efficiency but do not necessarily guarantee personal fulfillment. In many cases, individuals experience dissatisfaction with institutional expectations such as career success, social status, and economic achievement. As a result, some choose to reject these structures in search of alternative ways of living. This phenomenon raises important questions about how anti-modernist ideas are constructed and represented, particularly within cultural texts that reflect social experience. The film Into the Wild (2007), directed by Sean Penn and adapted from Jon Krakauer's nonfiction work, provides a compelling representation of this phenomenon. It narrates the story of Christopher McCandless, a young man from an upper-middle-class background who rejects material wealth, institutional life, and social expectations after graduating from college. His decision to abandon his possessions and travel toward Alaska reflects a deliberate rejection of modern values such as consumerism, career ambition, and social identity. Through its visual narrative, the film portrays anti-modernism not merely as individual rebellion, but as a response shaped by family conflict, class background, and broader social conditions. Compared to written texts, film offers a more direct representation of these elements through observable interactions, settings, and character expressions.

Previous studies on anti-modernism have largely focused on literary texts, particularly novels. Rulo (2016) examines anti-modernist tendencies within modernist writers using a theoretical framework, while Jayeoba (2020) analyzes anti-modernist criticism in modernist novels through comparative literary analysis. Although these studies contribute to understanding anti-modernism as a critical perspective, they remain limited to written literature and do not explore film as a narrative medium. Furthermore, they do not apply a sociology of literature approach that explicitly connects fictional representation with real social conditions. In addition, studies on Into the Wild tend to emphasize themes such as adventure, individualism, and self-discovery, with limited attention to anti-modernism as a socially constructed response influenced by class and family environment. Consequently, there is still a gap in explaining how anti-modernism is represented through the interaction between character development and social setting, and how these representations reflect broader social realities.

This research addresses this gap by analyzing Into the Wild through a sociology of literature perspective, which views literary works as reflections of social conditions (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972).

By focusing on character behavior, dialogue, and setting, this study examines how anti-modernist ideas emerge from social experience, particularly in relation to class background, family structure, and cultural expectations. Therefore, the objective of this research is to identify and interpret the representation of anti-modernism portrayed through the main character in Into the Wild, while also demonstrating how film can function as a medium that reflects and critiques modern social structures.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative research method to interpret the representation of anti-modernism in the film Into the Wild. Qualitative research is appropriate for literary and film analysis because it focuses on understanding meanings, values, and social phenomena rather than measuring them numerically (Apriani & Hayati, 2020). In this study, the researcher acts as the primary instrument who observes, selects, and interprets the data. This role enables an in-depth examination of dialogue, character actions, and narrative structure to uncover how anti-modernist ideas are constructed within the film. The research design is descriptive-interpretative, aiming to explain the relationship between character behavior and broader social values reflected in the narrative. The study applies the sociology of literature approach as its analytical framework. This approach views literary works, including films, as social products that reflect and respond to real social conditions (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1972). In this research, the analysis focuses on the representation of society within the film and its relation to real-life social contexts, particularly in terms of class background, family structure, and cultural expectations. The author's biography and production process are not examined, as film is a collaborative medium involving multiple creators. Instead, the study emphasizes how characters, settings, and social interactions function as representations of modern and anti-modern values.

The primary data source of this research is the script and visual narrative of the 2007 film Into the Wild, directed by Sean Penn and adapted from Jon Krakauer's nonfiction work. These sources provide the main data in the form of dialogue, scenes, character interactions, and settings. Secondary data are obtained from books, journal articles, and other academic sources related to modernism, anti-modernism, and sociology of literature. Additional references are also used to support the analysis of real social conditions associated with the settings depicted in the film, such as suburban and wilderness environments. Data collection was conducted through several stages. First, the researcher watched the film and read its script comprehensively to gain an overall understanding of the narrative and thematic structure. Second, the film was reviewed repeatedly with a focused approach to identify scenes and dialogues that reflect modernist and anti-modernist values, particularly those related to materialism, institutional life, and social expectations. Third, relevant data were selected and documented, including contextual information such as character roles, setting, and narrative situations. Finally, supporting data from external sources were collected to provide sociological context and strengthen the interpretation of the film.

The data analysis follows the sociology of literature framework by interpreting the film as a reflection of social conditions. The analysis begins by identifying the social environments surrounding the main character, including family background, social class, and cultural expectations. It then examines the character of Christopher McCandless in terms of his beliefs, attitudes, and responses to these social conditions. Furthermore, the analysis relates these representations to real-life social issues, such as materialism, social pressure, and alienation in modern society. Finally, the study integrates the concepts of modernism and anti-modernism to interpret how the character's actions represent a critique of modern values. To ensure the validity of the findings, the research applies theoretical triangulation by using multiple relevant theories, including modernism, anti-modernism, and sociology of literature. In addition, data are selected and interpreted consistently based on their relevance to the research focus, ensuring that the analysis remains systematic and credible. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a reliable interpretation of how anti-modernism is represented in the film.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Social Situation in Into the Wild Film

The social situation presented in Into the Wild functions as a central framework for understanding the representation of anti-modernism in the film. Rather than depicting a single social environment, the narrative constructs multiple interconnected settings that reflect different class structures, lifestyles, and value systems within modern society. These include an upper-middle-class, career-oriented family, rural working-class communities, counter-cultural drifter groups, and a modest, disciplined individual lifestyle. Through these environments, the film presents a spectrum of social realities that not only contextualize the main character's actions but also actively shape his ideological rejection of modern life. From the perspective of the sociology of literature, as proposed by Laurenson and Swingewood, these settings can be interpreted as representations of real social conditions. The film positions Christopher McCandless within different social

contexts, allowing the audience to observe how modern values are constructed, experienced, and ultimately questioned. Each environment contributes to the formation of his anti-modernist worldview by exposing both the promises and contradictions of modern society.

The upper-middle-class family environment in Annandale, Virginia represents the dominant structure of modern life, characterized by financial success, career achievement, and social status. This setting reflects modernist ideals as described by Antohi and Trencsényi, particularly the emphasis on progress, rational planning, and institutional success. However, the film simultaneously reveals the instability underlying this structure. Despite material comfort, the family is marked by emotional conflict, deception, and broken relationships. This contradiction highlights a key critique of modernism: that economic success and social prestige do not necessarily lead to emotional fulfillment or moral coherence. For Christopher, this gap between outward success and internal dysfunction becomes the foundation of his rejection of modern values, as he begins to perceive "careerism and money" as symbols of hypocrisy rather than achievement. In contrast, the rural working-class communities that Christopher encounters offer an alternative social model grounded in labor, simplicity, and interpersonal connection. This environment is characterized by physical work, informal relationships, and mutual support, presenting a more direct and less institutionalized form of social life. Unlike the structured and status-driven nature of his family background, this setting emphasizes functionality and cooperation over prestige. However, the film does not idealize this community; elements such as instability, alcohol use, and informal economic practices indicate that this social structure also contains limitations. Analytically, this environment serves as a transitional space in Christopher's journey, where he experiences a sense of belonging but ultimately chooses to move on. This suggests that his anti-modernism is not limited to rejecting upper-class values but extends to a broader critique of social systems as a whole.

A more explicit form of resistance to modern society is represented through the counter-cultural drifter communities at Orick Beach and The Slabs. These groups exist outside mainstream institutions and are characterized by mobility, informality, and rejection of conventional structures such as permanent employment and state regulation. This environment reflects a lived form of anti-modernism, where individuals actively disengage from institutional systems and adopt alternative lifestyles based on freedom and minimalism. For Christopher, this community provides acceptance and reinforces his belief that meaningful life exists beyond social expectations. However, the film complicates this representation by showing that these communities are also marked by instability, past trauma, and economic insecurity. This indicates that alternative social systems, while offering freedom, do not fully resolve the challenges associated with modern life. Christopher's decision to leave this environment further demonstrates that his anti-modernism is not satisfied by collective alternatives but is oriented toward complete independence. The social perspective of Ron Franz introduces another dimension of modern life, representing a modest and disciplined lifestyle grounded in routine, responsibility, and personal resilience. Unlike the upper-class environment, this form of modernity is not defined by wealth or competition but by stability and moral commitment. Ron's character complicates the critique of modernism by showing that structured life can coexist with empathy and ethical behavior. His expectation that Christopher should pursue education, work, and stability reflects widely accepted social norms. However, Christopher's rejection of even this moderate and humane form of modern life indicates that his anti-modernism is systemic rather than selective. He does not only oppose extreme forms of modernity but also questions its underlying assumptions about success, purpose, and social integration.

Taken together, these social environments function as a comprehensive representation of modern society and its alternatives. Each setting exposes different dimensions of social life, including material success, labor-based community, counter-cultural resistance, and disciplined individual living. In line with Laurenson and Swingewood's framework, these environments operate as social representations that shape character development and ideological positioning. Christopher's movement across these settings illustrates a process of continuous evaluation, where each social experience contributes to his growing disillusionment with modern structures. Ultimately, the film suggests that anti-modernism emerges not from a single negative experience but from sustained interaction with multiple social realities. By revealing both the contradictions within modern systems and the limitations of alternative lifestyles, Into the Wild presents anti-modernism as a complex and evolving response to modern society rather than a simple or absolute rejection of it.

3.2 The Character of Christopher McCandless

The representation of anti-modernism in Into the Wild is most explicitly constructed through the character of Christopher McCandless, whose personal experiences, moral orientation, and behavioral choices reflect a sustained critique of modern values. Rather than portraying anti-modernism as an abstract ideology, the film embodies it through Chris's psychological development and interaction with the social environments discussed previously. In line with the sociology of literature proposed by Laurenson and Swingewood, Chris can be interpreted as a character shaped by social conditions, whose attitudes represent broader

dissatisfaction with modern structures rather than purely individual rebellion. From the beginning of the film, Chris is presented as a reflective and morally sensitive individual who does not accept social success at face value. This is clearly illustrated in the graduation scene, where a moment typically associated with achievement and progress is contrasted with his internal critique. Through his voice-over, Chris imagines warning his parents about the consequences of their decisions, revealing his awareness of moral failure beneath the surface of a seemingly successful life. This moment establishes a key aspect of his character: he evaluates life based on moral consequence rather than social recognition. His imagined intervention, combined with the metaphor of "striking sparks" between his parents, suggests a desire to expose hidden truth and confront emotional dishonesty.

This early characterization aligns with anti-modernist thought as described by Bunout, particularly the tendency to critique modern society as morally empty despite its external achievements. Chris's perception of modern life as a "mask" reflects an anti-modernist suspicion toward systems that prioritize appearance, status, and progress over authenticity. His moral rigidity, emotional sensitivity, and intellectual awareness position him as a character who cannot reconcile himself with the contradictions of modern life. This perspective becomes more concrete in the restaurant scene, where Chris openly rejects his parents' offer to buy him a new car. While the gesture is presented by his parents as an expression of care, Chris interprets it as a symbol of materialism and social pressure. His reaction, questioning the need for a "fancy" car and criticizing concern for "what the neighbors might think", reveals his rejection of consumerist values and performative social identity. Importantly, this rejection is not impulsive but grounded in a consistent moral stance. He refuses to equate material possession with personal worth, thereby challenging one of the core assumptions of modern capitalist society.

However, Chris's anti-modernist position cannot be understood solely through his rejection of materialism. The film gradually reveals that his worldview is deeply rooted in personal trauma, particularly the discovery of his father's deception and the instability within his family. Through Carine's narration, the audience learns that Chris's childhood was shaped by conflict, secrecy, and emotional tension. The revelation that his father maintained a hidden relationship and that the family structure was built on dishonesty fundamentally alters his perception of reality. His statement that his "entire childhood seemed like a fiction" reflects a profound loss of trust not only in his family but also in the social values they represent. This moment is crucial in understanding the psychological foundation of his anti-modernism. The association between material success and moral corruption becomes internalized, leading Chris to view modern life as inherently deceptive. In this sense, his rejection of modernity can be interpreted as a form of moral response rather than simple rebellion. His desire to "slay the beast" symbolizes an attempt to purify himself from a system he perceives as fundamentally flawed. This aligns with anti-modernist tendencies to reject dominant values in search of authenticity and moral clarity.

Chris's character is further defined by his tendency toward emotional withdrawal and self-reliance. As Carine notes, he often keeps his feelings to himself, revealing a pattern of internalizing conflict rather than confronting it directly. This silence reflects both strength and vulnerability. On one hand, it demonstrates emotional control and independence; on the other, it indicates isolation and difficulty in forming trusting relationships. His adherence to what is described as an "impossibly rigorous code" highlights his commitment to moral integrity but also suggests an inflexibility that distances him from others. From a sociological perspective, this aspect of his character represents a broader phenomenon in modern society, where individuals respond to disillusionment by withdrawing from social systems. Chris's journey into isolation can therefore be interpreted as an extreme form of disengagement, where the search for authenticity leads to separation rather than connection. This reinforces the idea that anti-modernism, while critical of modern structures, may also produce unintended consequences such as loneliness and detachment.

At the same time, Chris's character reflects a consistent pursuit of authenticity. His rejection of wealth, career, and institutional life is not merely negative but is driven by a positive desire to live truthfully and independently. His preference for nature, simplicity, and direct experience indicates a shift away from socially constructed values toward what he perceives as a more genuine form of existence. This aligns with the anti-modernist emphasis on authenticity and resistance to artificial systems. Nevertheless, the film does not present Chris as a flawless embodiment of anti-modernism. His moral clarity is accompanied by emotional rigidity, and his independence is intertwined with isolation. His inability to reconcile his ideals with the need for human connection becomes a central tension in his character. This complexity reinforces the interpretation that anti-modernism, as represented through Chris, is not a stable or complete solution but an ongoing process shaped by both conviction and limitation.

In conclusion, the character of Christopher McCandless serves as a representation of anti-modernism that is deeply rooted in social experience and psychological development. His moral sensitivity, rejection of materialism, and distrust of institutional life reflect broader critiques of modern society, while his emotional withdrawal and eventual isolation reveal the limitations of this stance. In line with Laurenson and

Swingewood's framework, his character demonstrates how individual identity can be shaped by social conditions, ultimately presenting anti-modernism as both a critique of modernity and a response to its contradictions.

3.3 Chris's Rejection of Modern Society

Christopher McCandless's rejection of modern society in Into the Wild is not portrayed as a sudden or irrational act, but as a gradual and deeply structured response shaped by emotional experience, moral judgment, and social observation. His decision to abandon wealth, identity, and institutional life emerges from sustained exposure to what he perceives as hypocrisy, deception, and emotional emptiness within modern social structures. In this sense, his rejection is not merely a personal preference, but an ideological stance rooted in lived experience. At its foundation, Chris's anti-modernist orientation is shaped by the contradiction between external success and internal dysfunction within his family. Although he grows up in a wealthy, upper-middle-class environment, this material comfort is consistently undermined by emotional instability, secrecy, and moral inconsistency. As revealed through Carine's narration, the family's financial success coincides with increasing dishonesty and unresolved conflict, particularly surrounding his father's hidden relationship and the fragility of the parents' marriage. This contradiction becomes central to Chris's worldview: modern structures such as career success, financial achievement, and social respectability are no longer perceived as indicators of truth, but as mechanisms that conceal deeper moral failure.

This realization transforms Chris's perspective on modern society. His statement that his childhood "seemed like a fiction" and that "the truth had been dying every day" reflects a profound loss of trust, not only in his family but also in the values they represent. From an anti-modernist perspective, as articulated by Antohi and Trencsényi, such disillusionment reflects a critique of modernity as a system that prioritizes appearance, progress, and rational structure while neglecting authenticity and moral integrity. For Chris, modern life becomes synonymous with an illusion organized system that demands conformity while suppressing truth. This psychological and moral conflict is translated into concrete action in one of the film's most significant turning points: Chris's deliberate severing of his ties to modern systems. His donation of $24,000 to charity, the destruction of his identification documents, and his decision to live without money represent a symbolic and practical rejection of both economic and bureaucratic structures. These actions go beyond symbolic protest; they demonstrate a complete withdrawal from the institutional frameworks that define modern citizenship. In terms of anti-modernism, this moment reflects what Bunout describes as vituperation, a direct and uncompromising rejection of modern systems and values.

Importantly, this rejection is not purely ideological but is reinforced by Chris's early psychological development. Carine's narration emphasizes that Chris was accustomed to solitude from a young age, capable of being alone without feeling isolated. This characteristic, initially a form of emotional adaptation to family instability, later becomes a key factor enabling his radical departure from society. His independence is therefore both a personal strength and a consequence of emotional withdrawal, illustrating how anti-modernism in this context is shaped by both internal disposition and external experience. Chris's rejection of modern society is further expressed through his resistance to authority and regulation. This is clearly illustrated in the scene where he encounters a sign restricting camping to designated areas. His mocking response and physical destruction of the sign demonstrate his rejection of institutional control, even within natural environments. This act reflects a belief that modern systems extend unnecessarily into spaces that should remain free and unregulated. In anti-modernist terms, this aligns with anti-enlightenment tendencies, which challenge the dominance of rational order and bureaucratic control over human experience.

At the same time, Chris's rejection is deeply tied to his interpretation of moral failure within modern institutions. The discovery of his father's deception functions as a pivotal moment that transforms his philosophical dissatisfaction into a personal moral crisis. Rather than viewing this as an isolated family issue, Chris generalizes the experience, interpreting it as evidence of a broader cultural problem. Modern structures such as marriage, career, and social reputation are seen not as sources of stability, but as systems that encourage concealment, compromise, and emotional dishonesty. This generalization is significant because it expands his rejection from the personal to the societal level. His desire to "slay the beast" symbolizes this broader rejection. The "beast" can be understood not only as his family environment but as the entire system of modern life that he associates with moral corruption. His journey into the wilderness thus becomes an attempt at purification, a search for a life unmediated by social expectation, material value, or institutional control. In this sense, his anti-modernism reflects both a rejection of modernity and a pursuit of authenticity.

However, the film also complicates this rejection by suggesting its limitations. While Chris seeks freedom from social systems, his actions lead to increasing isolation and disconnection from human relationships. His withdrawal from society, although initially empowering, ultimately reveals the difficulty of sustaining a life entirely outside social structure. This aligns with the idea that anti-modernism, while offering critique, does not necessarily provide a stable alternative to modern life. From a sociological perspective, Chris's rejection can be interpreted as a representation of broader social responses to modernity.

In contemporary contexts, similar patterns can be observed among individuals who disengage from institutional systems due to dissatisfaction with materialism, distrust of authority, or experiences of personal and familial disillusionment. In line with Laurenson and Swingewood, Chris's actions function not as isolated behavior but as a reflection of social tensions within modern society. In conclusion, Chris's rejection of modern society is a complex process shaped by emotional experience, moral judgment, and ideological critique. His actions, abandoning wealth, rejecting identity, resisting authority, and seeking isolation, represent a comprehensive form of anti-modernism that challenges the foundational values of modern life. At the same time, the film reveals that such rejection is not without consequence, highlighting the tension between the desire for authenticity and the necessity of social connection. Through this portrayal, Into the Wild presents anti-modernism as both a powerful critique of modernity and a deeply human, yet imperfect, response to its contradictions.

3.4 Reflections of Modernism

While Into the Wild strongly emphasizes anti-modernist ideas through its main character, the film simultaneously presents a clear and structured depiction of modernism itself. These representations are essential because they establish the social and ideological framework that Christopher McCandless ultimately rejects. Modernism in the film is not portrayed as a single force, but as a system embedded in family life, education, career expectations, and everyday social norms. Through these elements, the film reflects how modern values operate as dominant and often unquestioned structures within society. The most immediate representation of modernism appears in Chris's upper-middle-class family environment in Annandale, Virginia. His parents embody a lifestyle defined by professional achievement, financial stability, and social respectability. Their success, particularly the father's career as a skilled engineer and the growth of the family's consulting business, reflects what Antohi and Trencsényi describe as the core principles of modernism: progress, rational planning, and the pursuit of advancement through knowledge and economic activity. Within this framework, personal value is closely tied to productivity, achievement, and the ability to secure a stable and prosperous life.

However, the film complicates this representation by revealing the gap between material success and emotional reality. Despite their outward stability, the family is characterized by conflict, deception, and unresolved tension. The father's professional achievements and the family's financial growth do not produce harmony; instead, they coincide with broken promises and moral inconsistency. This contradiction reflects a central critique within anti-modernist discourse, namely that modern systems often prioritize external success while neglecting emotional integrity and authenticity. As a result, modernism in the film is presented not as inherently false, but as incomplete, capable of providing structure and achievement, yet unable to guarantee meaningful human relationships. Modernist values are further reinforced through the film's portrayal of education as a structured pathway toward success. Christopher McCandless is depicted as an academically capable student whose achievements align with institutional expectations. His statement about qualifying for Harvard Law represents more than personal ambition; it reflects a broader social belief that education functions as a direct route to professional advancement and upward mobility. In this context, elite institutions serve as symbols of recognition, discipline, and long-term success.

The response of Chris's parents reinforces this perspective, as they immediately frame education in terms of financial planning and investment. Their willingness to fund his future studies reflects a modern understanding of education as a calculated step within a larger life strategy. This aligns with the modernist emphasis on rational organization and forward planning, where individual life paths are structured around measurable goals and predictable outcomes. Education, therefore, is not only a means of personal development but also a mechanism for securing social status and economic stability. In addition to family and education, modernism is also reflected in broader social expectations regarding the structure of life itself. This is particularly evident in the interaction between Chris and Ron Franz, where the latter expresses a conventional view of adulthood as a sequence of education, employment, and stable progression. Ron's perspective represents what can be considered a normalized version of modernism, one that is not driven by wealth or ambition, but by responsibility, discipline, and gradual self-improvement. His expectation that Chris should "get an education," "get a job," and "make something" of his life reflects a widely accepted social model that defines success through structured achievement.

From a sociological perspective, as suggested by Laurenson and Swingewood, such dialogue functions as a representation of dominant social values. Importantly, these values are not presented as oppressive or explicitly harmful. Instead, they appear logical, ethical, and socially responsible. This subtlety is significant because it demonstrates how modernism operates not through force, but through normalization. It becomes a system of belief that is internalized and rarely questioned, shaping expectations about what constitutes a meaningful and successful life. Within this context, Chris's rejection of modern society becomes more significant. He is not rejecting an obviously flawed or oppressive system, but one that appears stable, rational, and widely accepted. This highlights the depth of his anti-modernism: it is directed not only at

extreme forms of modern life, such as wealth and status, but also at its most normalized expressions, including education, career planning, and social responsibility.

In conclusion, the film presents modernism as a comprehensive and deeply embedded system that structures individual life through family expectations, educational pathways, and social norms. While it offers stability, organization, and opportunity, it is also shown to contain limitations, particularly in its ability to address emotional and moral dimensions of human experience. By presenting modernism in this nuanced way, Into the Wild establishes a necessary contrast that allows the audience to understand the significance of Chris's rejection. Anti-modernism, therefore, emerges not in isolation, but as a response to a system that is both powerful and incomplete.

3.5 Anti-Modernism Elements in *Into the Wild*

Based on the analysis of narrative structure, dialogue, and character development in Into the Wild, the representation of anti-modernism is not expressed through a single idea but through several interconnected elements. Referring to the framework proposed by Bunout, this study identifies five major elements of anti-modernism reflected in the film: vituperation, pessimism, sublime, counter-revolution, and anti-enlightenment. These elements function collectively to articulate a critique of modern values such as materialism, rationalism, institutional control, and structured life systems. Each element reveals a different dimension of Christopher McCandless's resistance to modern society, while also reflecting broader social tensions. One of the most explicit expressions of anti-modernism in the film appears through vituperation, or strong and direct criticism toward modern society. Christopher McCandless does not merely distance himself from modern values; he actively condemns them. His statements about society being "sick," along with his criticism of "parents," "politicians," and "hypocrites," demonstrate a deep moral rejection of the social world he inhabits.

This criticism is not superficial. It emerges from accumulated emotional experience, particularly his exposure to family hypocrisy and social pressure. His language is intense, repetitive, and emotionally charged, indicating that his rejection is rooted in personal disillusionment rather than abstract ideology. In sociological terms, this reflects what Laurenson and Swingewood describe as literature functioning as a vehicle of social protest, where characters articulate broader dissatisfaction with dominant systems. Furthermore, Chris's rejection of careers as a "twentieth-century invention" reinforces this element. His critique is not limited to individuals but extends to the entire system that defines success through productivity, employment, and routine. This positions vituperation as a foundational element of anti-modernism in the film, marking the transition from internal dissatisfaction to explicit ideological resistance.

Closely connected to vituperation is the element of pessimism, which reflects a deeper emotional and philosophical dimension of anti-modernism. While vituperation expresses anger, pessimism reveals loss of trust and hopelessness toward modern society. Christopher McCandless's pessimism develops primarily through his discovery of his father's hidden double life. This revelation transforms his understanding of family, turning what appeared to be a stable and successful household into a structure built on deception. His statement that his "entire childhood seemed like a fiction" indicates a complete collapse of trust in foundational social institutions such as family and marriage. This pessimistic outlook extends beyond family into society. Chris begins to perceive modern life as inherently dishonest, where appearances conceal moral failure. As a result, his response is withdrawal rather than confrontation. He distances himself emotionally and physically, choosing isolation as a form of protection.

This trajectory reaches its peak in his final realization that "happiness is only real when shared." This moment represents a tragic reversal of his earlier beliefs. While he initially rejects society in search of authenticity, he ultimately recognizes the necessity of human connection. This shift illustrates the paradox of anti-modernism: while it critiques modern society, complete withdrawal from it can lead to emotional emptiness. Thus, pessimism in the film operates as both motivation and consequence, it drives Chris away from society but also reveals the limitations of his anti-modernist ideals. Another central element of anti-modernism in the film is the sublime, which refers to powerful emotional experiences in nature that transcend rational understanding. In Into the Wild, nature is consistently portrayed as a space of authenticity, freedom, and emotional clarity, standing in direct contrast to the artificiality of modern society.

Chris's encounter with the Alaskan wilderness, particularly his silent awe before Denali, represents a moment of profound connection between the individual and the natural world . This experience reflects the anti-modernist belief that nature offers truths that cannot be accessed through rational systems or social institutions. However, the film does not romanticize nature entirely. Moments such as Chris's failed attempt to cross the Teklanika River and his inability to preserve the moose meat reveal the dual nature of the sublime. Nature is both beautiful and dangerous, inspiring awe but also exposing human vulnerability. This duality reinforces the complexity of anti-modernism. While nature is presented as an alternative to modern life, it is not a perfect solution. Instead, it challenges Chris's belief in complete independence, showing that freedom without preparation can lead to risk and suffering.

The element of counter-revolution is reflected in Chris's active rejection of modern institutions such as government, economy, and social identity. Unlike passive dissatisfaction, counter-revolution involves deliberate actions aimed at breaking away from established systems. This is clearly illustrated in Chris's decision to donate all his savings, destroy his identification documents, and adopt a new identity as "Alexander Supertramp". These actions symbolize a rejection of the systems that define individuals through financial status and legal identity. His defiance of authority is further shown in scenes where he violates regulations, such as kayaking across borders without documentation and destroying government signs. These acts demonstrate that his resistance is not merely ideological but behavioral. He does not attempt to reform the system; he chooses to live outside it entirely. From a sociological perspective, this reflects real-world tendencies among individuals who disengage from institutional structures due to dissatisfaction with bureaucracy and control. However, the film also highlights the risks of such rejection, including legal vulnerability and physical danger. Thus, counter-revolution in the film represents a form of personal resistance, emphasizing freedom while simultaneously exposing its consequences.

The final element identified is anti-enlightenment, which involves rejecting the Enlightenment emphasis on reason, planning, and systematic knowledge. In contrast, anti-enlightenment values prioritize intuition, experience, and emotional understanding. Chris demonstrates this through his refusal to use tools such as watches, maps, and structured planning. His statement that he does not want to know "what time it is" or "where he is" reflects a deliberate rejection of rational organization. For him, living authentically means abandoning systems that measure and control life. This perspective is further reinforced in his interactions with other characters, where he expresses confidence in learning through experience rather than preparation. He values direct engagement with the world over theoretical knowledge. However, as with other elements, the film presents this attitude critically. Chris's lack of preparation contributes to his eventual vulnerability in Alaska, suggesting that the rejection of rationality, while meaningful, can also be dangerous. In this sense, anti-enlightenment is portrayed as both a philosophical stance and a practical risk, highlighting the tension between freedom and survival.

Taken together, these five elements, vituperation, pessimism, sublime, counter-revolution, and anti-enlightenment, form a comprehensive representation of anti-modernism in Into the Wild. They demonstrate that Chris's rejection of modern society is not based on a single cause, but on a complex interaction between emotional experience, moral belief, and social critique. In line with Laurenson and Swingewood, these elements function as representations of broader social realities. Christopher McCandless is not simply an individual character, but a reflection of real-world tensions between modern systems and human needs for authenticity, freedom, and connection. Ultimately, the film presents anti-modernism as both a critique and a contradiction. While it exposes the limitations of modern life, it also reveals the challenges and consequences of rejecting it entirely. This duality is what gives the film its depth and allows it to contribute meaningfully to discussions of modernity, identity, and human experience.

3.6 Annandale and Alaska as Contrasting Social Realities

Within the framework of the sociology of literature, setting is not merely a physical background but a representation of social reality that shapes character behavior and meaning. In Into the Wild, the locations of Annandale and Alaska function as two contrasting social environments that embody opposing value systems. By examining these places as real-world contexts, the film can be understood not only as a narrative but also as a reflection of broader social structures that influence Christopher McCandless's anti-modernist perspective. Annandale, Virginia, represents a structured suburban society closely associated with modernist values. As part of Fairfax County near Washington, D.C., the area is characterized by professional employment, educational institutions, and stable residential life. Many residents are connected to government, corporate, or service-sector work, reflecting a social environment that prioritizes career development, financial security, and long-term planning. Within such a context, success is typically measured through academic achievement, professional status, and economic stability. The presence of established schools, community colleges, and organized neighborhoods further reinforces a system where life follows predictable and institutionally supported pathways.

In addition to its economic structure, Annandale also reflects cultural diversity and integration, particularly through its well-known Korean-American community. The development of "Koreatown" illustrates how modern suburban spaces accommodate multicultural identities while still operating within a framework of economic productivity and social organization. This combination of cultural diversity and structural stability highlights the complexity of modern suburban life: while it offers opportunity and inclusion, it remains grounded in systems of regulation, planning, and measurable success. From a sociological perspective, Annandale therefore represents a form of modern life that is organized, rational, and institutionally supported, yet also potentially restrictive in its expectations. In contrast, Alaska represents an environment that exists largely outside these structured systems. As the largest and one of the most sparsely populated states in the United States, Alaska is defined by its vast wilderness, geographical isolation, and

minimal urban development. Unlike Annandale, where life is organized around institutions and social systems, Alaska presents a setting where survival depends on direct interaction with nature. The landscape, consisting of forests, mountains, rivers, and tundra, dominates human activity rather than being shaped by it.

This environmental condition creates a fundamentally different social reality. Daily life in remote areas of Alaska requires physical endurance, practical knowledge, and adaptability to natural conditions such as extreme weather and long winters. Social interaction is less structured, and institutional support is limited compared to suburban environments. In this sense, Alaska represents not only a geographical space but also a symbolic alternative to modern society, one that is less governed by bureaucracy, economic competition, and social expectation. However, this contrast is not purely idealistic. While Alaska appears to offer freedom from the pressures of modern life, it also presents significant risks. The absence of institutional support means that individuals must rely entirely on their own abilities. This reality challenges the assumption that freedom from modern systems automatically leads to a better life. Instead, the film presents Alaska as both a space of possibility and a site of vulnerability, where independence comes at the cost of security.

When viewed together, Annandale and Alaska illustrate two opposing yet interconnected dimensions of modern society. Annandale embodies structure, stability, and institutional success, while Alaska represents freedom, isolation, and direct engagement with nature. These contrasting environments help explain Christopher McCandless's internal conflict. His rejection of Annandale is not only a rejection of place but of the values it represents, careerism, material success, and social conformity. At the same time, his movement toward Alaska reflects his desire to escape these structures and find authenticity in a less regulated environment. In line with Laurenson and Swingewood, these settings function as representations of real social conditions that shape individual responses to modernity. Christopher McCandless's journey between these two locations can therefore be understood as a movement between two social systems: one defined by institutional order and one defined by natural freedom. The tension between these environments reinforces the film's central theme, showing that anti-modernism emerges not in isolation but through interaction with the social realities it seeks to reject.

3.7 Discussion

Based on the findings, the film presents a sustained critique of modern society by exposing the emotional, social, and moral tensions experienced by its main character. Through Chris's journey, modern values such as material success, rational planning, institutional identity, and career achievement are not rejected arbitrarily, but are questioned through lived experience. At the same time, the film offers an alternative vision centered on authenticity, freedom, and closeness to nature. In line with the sociology of literature perspective of Laurenson and Swingewood, Christopher McCandless is not interpreted as an isolated individual but as a representation of broader social dissatisfaction within modern life. His character reflects the tension between institutional structures and the human desire for meaning and sincerity. The findings demonstrate that modern life in the film is constructed as outwardly stable yet internally fragile. This portrayal aligns with modernist principles that prioritize rationality, progress, and achievement (Azizi & EshaqZai, 2022; Nandu, 2019). Chris's family environment reflects these ideals through its emphasis on education, career success, and financial stability. However, the film reveals that this external success is accompanied by emotional instability, secrecy, and broken trust. The contrast between material prosperity and emotional dysfunction reflects a key critique within anti-modernist thought, who argue that modern systems often neglect deeper human needs in favor of measurable achievement (Antohi & Trencsényi, 2014). This gap is central to Chris's disillusionment, as he experiences modern success not as fulfillment but as moral inconsistency.

This interpretation is supported by research on materialism, which shows that individuals who prioritize external success often experience weaker interpersonal relationships and reduced emotional satisfaction (Allsop et al., 2020; Richins & Dawson, 1992). Similarly, Promislo et al. (2010) suggest that materialistic values can undermine relational well-being by shifting attention away from emotional connection. These findings reinforce the film's portrayal of Chris's family, where financial success coincides with emotional distance. From this perspective, anti-modernism emerges as a response to the imbalance between external achievement and internal well-being. Chris's personal development further illustrates how anti-modernism is shaped by lived experience. His childhood, marked by conflict, secrecy, and instability, contributes to his emotional distance and distrust of authority. Studies in developmental psychology indicate that individuals raised in high-conflict environments often adopt emotional withdrawal as a coping mechanism (Coplan et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2022). This helps explain why Chris does not confront his family directly but instead distances himself both emotionally and physically. His rejection of modern values is therefore not impulsive but gradual, rooted in long-term exposure to what he perceives as hypocrisy and dishonesty.

This process becomes more explicit in his actions, particularly when he donates his savings, destroys his identification documents, and abandons institutional life. These acts reflect what Bunout defines

as vituperation, a strong rejection of systems perceived as morally corrupt. Chris's behavior demonstrates a loss of faith in financial, legal, and social structures, indicating that his anti-modernism operates not only as a belief but as a lived practice. In addition, his continued movement toward isolation reflects the element of pessimism, where modern society is viewed as incapable of providing genuine fulfillment. Even when he encounters supportive individuals, he does not remain, suggesting that his dissatisfaction extends beyond specific relationships to the structure of society itself. These findings are consistent with previous studies by Rulo (2016) and Jayeoba (2020), which show that anti-modernist characters often perceive modern society as morally insufficient and seek meaning outside conventional systems. However, this study extends previous research by demonstrating how such rejection is not only ideological but also socially grounded. Through the sociology of literature approach, the film is connected to real social environments, particularly Annandale and Alaska, which function as contrasting representations of modern and non-modern life.

Annandale, as reflected in both the film and real-world data, represents a structured suburban society that emphasizes education, career success, and social stability. Its proximity to Washington, D.C., and its connection to professional sectors reinforce its role as a center of institutional life. These characteristics align with broader research on suburban communities, where success is often measured through academic and economic achievement Niche (2025). In this context, Chris's upbringing reflects real social expectations, confirming Laurenson and Swingewood argument that literary works mirror the social conditions of their time. In contrast, Alaska represents a fundamentally different environment shaped by nature rather than institutions. Its geographical isolation, extreme climate, and reliance on survival skills create a social reality where independence and self-reliance are essential. It is described that wilderness is a space related to freedom from modern systems, which aligns with Chris's perception of Alaska. However, the findings show that this environment is not purely liberating. The challenges Chris faces, including food scarcity and physical vulnerability, demonstrate that complete separation from modern systems carries significant risks.

This duality is further reinforced through the concept of the sublime, as described by Bunout (2021), where nature is both inspiring and overwhelming. Chris initially views nature as a source of clarity and truth, but his experiences reveal its unpredictability and danger. Similarly, his rejection of institutional systems reflects the element of counter-revolution, where modern structures such as bureaucracy and regulation are resisted. While this resistance provides a sense of freedom, it also removes the protection that such systems offer. His refusal to follow regulations and his rejection of legal identity illustrate this tension between autonomy and vulnerability. The film also engages with anti-enlightenment ideas by questioning the assumption that rational planning guarantees a meaningful life. Chris's rejection of maps, schedules, and systematic knowledge reflects his preference for direct experience over structured reasoning. However, his eventual failure to survive highlights the limitations of this perspective. As argued by Antohi and Trencsényi, the rejection of rationality can lead to unintended consequences, suggesting that modern knowledge, while limited, remains necessary.

Overall, the discussion shows that Into the Wild presents anti-modernism as a complex and multifaceted response to modern society. The film critiques materialism, institutional pressure, and emotional dishonesty, but it also reveals the difficulties of complete withdrawal from these systems. By connecting fictional representation with real social conditions, this study demonstrates that anti-modernism is not simply an abstract idea but a reflection of real tensions within modern life. Christopher McCandless's journey therefore represents both critique and consequence. His rejection of modern society exposes its limitations, yet his isolation reveals the risks of abandoning it entirely. Through the lens of the sociology of literature, the film ultimately portrays anti-modernism as a response shaped by social experience, confirming that the search for authenticity in modern society is both necessary and inherently complex.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

This research aimed to examine how Into the Wild represents anti-modernism through the character of Christopher McCandless using the sociology of literature approach. Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that anti-modernism in the film is portrayed as a response to modern life shaped by social conditions, family background, and personal experience. First, the film demonstrates that modern life, characterized by material success, career achievement, and social stability, does not necessarily lead to emotional well-being. Christopher McCandless's family represents a successful upper-middle-class environment; however, it is marked by conflict, dishonesty, and emotional instability. This reveals a gap between external success and internal reality, which becomes a central reason for Chris's dissatisfaction with modern values. Second, Chris's anti-modernist perspective develops gradually rather than appearing as a sudden or irrational rejection. His childhood experiences, including family conflict and deception, shaped his distrust toward authority, materialism, and institutional life. As a result, his rejection of modern values reflects a process of moral evaluation rather than impulsive rebellion.

Third, the contrast between Annandale and Alaska illustrates two different social realities. Annandale represents a structured suburban society that emphasizes education, career success, and economic stability, while Alaska represents a natural environment that offers freedom from institutional control. Chris's movement between these two environments reflects his search for authenticity outside modern social structures. Fourth, the film does not present anti-modernism as a perfect solution. While nature provides freedom and emotional clarity, it also involves risk, isolation, and vulnerability. Chris's final realization that "happiness is only real when shared" highlights that complete separation from society cannot fully satisfy human needs. In conclusion, Into the Wild represents anti-modernism as a complex phenomenon that functions both as a critique of modern values and as a reflection of the consequences of rejecting them. The film shows that while modern society may contain emotional and moral limitations, complete withdrawal from it also leads to significant challenges.

4.2 Suggestions/Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations are proposed. First, future researchers are encouraged to examine Into the Wild using alternative or combined approaches. A psychological perspective, such as psychoanalysis or trauma studies, may provide deeper insight into Christopher McCandless's emotional condition, personality development, and decision-making process, which are not fully explored in this study. Second, further studies may focus on audience reception to understand how viewers interpret Chris's actions. Such research could explore whether audiences perceive him as a symbol of freedom, a victim of modern society, or a warning against extreme rejection of social systems. Third, for educators and lecturers, Into the Wild can be used as an effective teaching material in literature, film studies, sociology, and cultural studies. By applying the sociology of literature approach, students can be guided to analyze how characters, settings, and narratives reflect real social conditions and ideological tensions. Finally, for students, this research encourages a more critical perspective when engaging with films. Rather than viewing films solely as entertainment, students are expected to analyze them as cultural texts that reflect social realities, values, and conflicts within modern society. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how films can represent anti-modernism and reflect broader social tensions, while also opening opportunities for further interdisciplinary studies.

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