“All around me was magnificence” (Tracks)
Compare what these two texts say about the importance of the natural world.

Davidson’s Tracks and Penn’s Into the Wild feature protagonists who retreat from society and venture into the natural world in an attempt to find peace and grow. Both McCandless and Davidson remove themselves from fiercely biased and superficial societies in a way that closely resembles transcendentalism. Both protagonists cherish and relish their time in the wild, which also allows them to gain wisdom as well as insight about themselves and others. However, it is important to also recognise that while both Penn and Davidson portray the natural world as ‘beautiful’, ultimately both protagonists experience tragic losses as a result of their time in nature, which is reflective of nature’s unpredictability and ‘magnificence’.

Throughout his film, Penn explores the ‘toxic’ influence that Chris’s parents have had on his life. In the scene with Walt and Billie arguing, Penn deliberately employs a shaky hand-held camera technique. As viewers, we recognise that this is reflective of the chaos and psychological distress that Chris’s parents have inflicted upon him. Interestingly, as Penn cross dissolves back into the natural world, the angry voices of Walt and Billie are still heard in the background, which seems to suggest that Chris’s emotional scars have still not healed but linger in the present moment. Indeed, McCandless carries this personal animosity towards his parents with him as he escapes their influence, but uses the natural world as a time of healing to remove this burden and pain from his life. However, away from the anger and strife of these hypocritical antagonists, McCandless is seen only a few moments later on the top of a snowy Alaskan mountain with his hands outstretched and his head cocked back looking to the sky. The wide panoramic shots covey a sense of limitless freedom and release, which from his facial expressions and the tears in his eyes, appears lasting and meaningful – ‘a gentle catharsis’. The heartfelt lyrics in the background ‘I am, I am… king’ also suggests that McCandless has managed to gain control over his own life in the isolation and peace that the natural environment offers. For McCandless, the goodness and ‘purity’ of the Alaskan wilderness facilitates this healing process, as opposed to the adverse influences and mindsets of his family and other institutions in America, which appear busy and convoluted. Clearly, McCandless appears quite poised and comfortable in nature, as this allows him to reflect and find inner courage and strength.

While McCandless does appear to embrace and relish his time in the wild, Davidson in contrast, utilises her time in the Australian outback as more of a learning experience rather than solely seeking freedom. That is, she farewells her family in an affectionate way and leaves on good terms, as opposed to McCandless who leaves boldly and brusquely. In the desert however, Davidson undergoes significant transformation, with Mr Eddie and the incredible outback setting catalysing this process. Throughout her trip, Robyn recognises a conflict with her rigid rationality and routine as opposed to her ‘calm’ and liberal surroundings where even the concept of time ‘melts’. Furthermore, it is only through her encounters with Mr Eddie, that she learns more about ‘flow’ and the importance of connecting with the land in a way that Aboriginal people do so gracefully. In contrast to her ‘negative…unhappy and weakened’ state after leaving Docker, she becomes more aware of the natural environment around her and this leaves her feeling ‘whole’ with a sense of ‘rootedness’. Interestingly, in her depressed state Davidson only notices the drab and hostility of the outback. Yet as her eyes begin to ‘peel’, her descriptions become increasingly vivid and engaging - ‘an infinitely extended bowl of pastel blue haze, and writhing hills and floating crescents…and fire coloured dunes… magical violet mountains’. The technique of layering and building this sentence with ‘ands’ has a breathless and emotive impact. It is almost as if Davidson is struggling to convey the grandeur of her beautiful surroundings and the profound impact that this has had on her life. Indeed, once made aware of this Davidson rapidly shifts from her

‘negativity’. As readers, we can almost see the land as another character. It is like a friend to Davidson, helping and guiding her from her mental disintegration and depression. Robyn learns to ‘submit’ to it, and she thrives and develops a newfound confidence.

The natural world can be as unpredictable and unexpected as it is refreshing. In McCandless’ journey, despite successfully living off the wild for almost 100 days, he is unable to re-enter civilization and perishes. We see that the ice melting is an unpredictable scenario which leaves McCandless ‘trapped, lonely, scared’. Similarly, Davidson loses her cherished dog ‘Diggity’ to ‘poison baits’. This is perhaps equally as devastating as McCandless’ death, as this loss also comes just after experiencing a flurry of joy and soaring to heights of happiness and self-awareness. Both Penn and Davidson remind us that regardless of intentions or endeavours, nature is as powerful as it is damaging.

Clearly, for both McCandless and Davidson, the natural world offers an opportunity for them to release themselves from the clutches of society. While both relish their time in the natural setting, Davidson utilises her time to grow and become less rigid and routine, whereas McCandless’ journey is a time of release and healing from the pain of the past. While there are clearly disadvantages in living in the natural world, it is undeniable that both receive invaluable insight from their surroundings about themselves and relationships with others.