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Nomadland and The Journey to Find The Underlying Idea of "Home"

"Home, is it just a word, or is it something that you carry within you?" A nomad doing a seasonal job at an Amazon Fulfillment Centre reads out one of her tattoos to fellow workers in the movie *Nomadland* (2020). Chloe Zhao's western documentary drama seeks the answer to this question by offering a candid look at a growing subculture in America, in which a considerable portion of the 2008 Great Recession victims become nomads after struggling to find their footing. In the film, the nomadic milieu is thoroughly examined through the lens of Fern, a widow who travels from place to place, picking up odd, seasonal jobs while carrying the grief of losing her husband and hometown. As she assimilates into the tight-knit community of van dwellers and goes through tedious life events, she eventually finds a sense of belonging for the first time, learning to live for the day given rather than the day to be. **Contrary to the American dream ideals, and the perception of home merely as a physical place one resides, *Nomadland* challenges the idea of people going in debt or spending their entire life savings just to afford traditional housing and shows a unique perspective that home is the emotional attachment with whom we meet along the way. Through blending poetry and realism while exploring the rawest aspects of human nature, the film portrays the downsides of the market economy and the resilience of those who decide to commit to the nomadic lifestyle.**

Set in 2012, amidst the aftereffects of the 2008 economic downturn, the straightforward plot of *Nomadland* shows viewers the ground reality of a failed industrialized capitalist

structured society. The film begins with an intertitle explaining that US Gypsum closes its gypsum plant in Empire, Nevada, eliminating the whole postal code 89405. The entire town's economy is decimated after the primary source of income for the townsfolk closes its shutters for good. The plot exposition is when Fern, the protagonist, a middle-aged woman who has lost everything after the shutdown, brokenheartedly sells some of her possessions and crams her sentimental clutter into a beat-up RV which she names "Vanguard" and embarks on her van-dwelling journey. Life initially feels bleak for Fern, but she shows no sign of hopelessness or surrender, not even when she has to urinate on the side of the icy road. Her life revolves around doing a monotonous job in an Amazon Fulfillment Center and sleeping inside her van in an RV Park. The scene where Linda, Fern's friend, and colleague invites Fern to visit an annual desert winter nomad gathering in Arizona organized by Bob Wells, a YouTuber who provides a community and support system for fellow nomads, serves as an inciting incident of the plot. Fern declines the offer, and the conflict occurs when she fails to make life in Nevada work after her temporary employment at Amazon ends. In the rising action, the protagonist changes her mind about Linda's invitation and ends up in Quartzsite to join the Rubber Tramp Rendezvous. There, she meets fellow nomads whom all refuse to submit to, as Bob Wells puts it, "the tyranny of the dollar," along with being equipped essential survival and self-sufficiency skills to adjust to life on the road. Fern establishes a sense of belonging in the community amongst the like-minded nomads that welcome her home. The rising action continues as the film navigates Fern through bittersweet adventures of adapting to life in the desert alone: shifting from one job to another, getting a flat tire in the middle of nowhere, taking care of a friend who is having cancer, even finding a love interest, Dave. Just as Fern starts to find hope and enjoyment in the unorthodox nomadic lifestyle, the story reaches its crisis as she cannot afford the repair fee after Vanguard stops functioning. The first emotional climax occurs when Fern bursts out of anger as the mechanics tell

her that the van is not worth fixing and when her sister initially declines to lend her money before confronting Fern about her way of living. After a while, Fern visits Dave at his house for Thanksgiving and learns he has decided to settle with his son under one roof. Leaving Dave's affection for her unreciprocated, Fern chooses the nomadic life over the domestic one and makes a silent departure. In the falling action, Bob Wells helps Fern let go of her emotional baggage and grief of her husband's death by telling her that no matter what, they would meet the departed later in life. The final scene where Fern returns to her former home in Empire one last time before leaving it behind for good, mirrors the opening scene and serves as the film's second emotional climax and resolution. The movie flows around in a circle, almost like rhythm in music, as Fern constantly moves and befriends new van-dwellers whom she meets along the way in the pursuit of finding her inner peace and purpose in life.

Realism and human relationships are at the center of *Nomadland*, showing the failure of capitalism and the kindness that runs through the margins of society. Filmed in actual landscapes, the cast, which features real-life modern-day vagabonds playing themselves (except for Frances McDormand and David Strathairn), adds to the sober tone of the movie. Almost every scene involving a character is shot in an eye-level close-up. As most characters are non-actors, those shots go alongside the realistic and documentary-like atmosphere the film emits. At the same time, it also emphasizes the character's inner state, which creates a sense of empathy and an emotional connection needed to enhance the film's intended tone. What is impressive about the movie is that it is not prescriptive and does not romanticize the modern pneumatic lifestyle, but looks closely into each character's story and recreates the rituals of nomad life in the rawest way possible. It is empathetic toward people and their reasons for turning their back on society, whether it be due to medical issues, financial troubles, grief, or loss. Be it Bob Wells, a nomad guru who does not allow the monetary

pressure to weigh him down. Be it Linda May, a grandmother on the verge of suicide after the Great Recession, who decides to commit to this lifestyle after realizing she has worked her whole life just for a measly social security benefit. Be it Swankie, a woman in her 70s who travels to Alaska after learning she has less than a year to live due to terminal cancer. They all profoundly impact Fern's journey, and their relationships thrive in rootlessness. The nomads learn to make the most of what they have, celebrate life while exploring nature, and follow the principle: less is more. This questions the viewers regarding the rat race and the insatiable desire to own more and more. The theme is especially relevant to the current time, with the pandemic shaking the core of the economic structure and millions of people losing their sources of income around the globe.

Furthermore, *Nomadland* is filled with verbal, musical, and visual poetry, adding a romantic touch to the film and contrasting with the hardness of life on the road. In almost every wide shot scene, Fern is central-framed, highlighting her surroundings as if the film's most compelling stories are told not from the protagonist, but through the spaces surrounding her. At times, we see Fern dwarfed by the enormity of nature-vast forests, towering trees, snow-covered plains, sunsets, and thundering seas crashing against rocks. The stark beauty of the wide shots, with the light caressing the creases on Fern's face, the endless desert pressing on Fern's lone figure and the natural sounds representing the wind in rural Nevada alongside Ludovico Einaudi's soothing music, every cinematography element works perfectly to evoke emotion in the audience. Initially, everything seems dull and uneventful; every aspect of nature falls under a unifying color scheme, just like Fern, who lacks confidence in her life path. Nevertheless, as Fern opens to the world and the people around her, the adjacent spaces display more unique characteristics with tunnels, animals, rivers, and a vivid set of colors that distinguish them from the previous image. The tranquility of the setting sun reflects Fern's determination to move past her pain and start anew, and the echoing image of the dawn signals

a new chapter in her life. The objective spaces, therefore, portray Fern's subjective expressions, remodeling the surroundings into something unique to her and inviting the audience to watch and assimilate this melancholic silhouette of life.

Despite being character-driven, the symbolism in *Nomadland* enhances and supplements the plot by adding depth and sophistication to the narrative. Through Fern's job at Amazon, where she packs goods to ship to customers, and scenes where van dwellers give away or trade what they no longer need, we can see the comparison between materialistic and non-materialistic lifestyles. Moreover, from the scene where Fern recites Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, we recall the quote at the beginning of the film, when Fern meets a young girl she once tutored about the soliloquy from Macbeth: a story of how life is painfully short, exhausting, and meaningless. The future holds no aspirations, and the present no joy. However, as the speech implies, life is still full of action and events, no matter how bleak and empty. The bittersweet ending is a metaphor for the toll the Great Recession took on the Americans' lives, representing the nation's crippling economy. The plot's resolution is the very last scene, where Fern decides to bid farewell to her past life and hits the open road – her notion of home.

The uniqueness of *Nomadland* derives from how it creates a structured reality from the stories of real-life vagabonds and shows a caring portrait of an American culture that is often overlooked. The open style of filmmaking that flows with the surrounding landscapes and the strong narrative structure instill in the audience a sense of empathy for the hardships of Fern's cyclic journey. *Nomadland* is a beautifully raw portrait of people who broke the chains of capitalism once it devastated them and took control of their lives instead of aimlessly chasing the average American dream. The film is an exhortation to live freely, appreciate more, cherish the present, and an embodiment of the saying: Home is where the heart is.

Works Cited

Nomadland. Directed by Chloé Zhao, performances by Frances McDormand, David Strathairn, Bob Wells, Linda May, Searchlight Pictures, Highwayman Films, Hear/Say Productions, Cordium Productions, 2020.



Image: Nomadland (2020)