

The Eternity of Classics: The Resonance of John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" in Chloe Zhao's 2020 Film "Nomadland"

Afnan Khalid, English literature undergraduate ID: 2024025699

Abstract:

Reading classics serves as an open window to past centuries. Moreover, by considering modern dilemmas and day to day lifestyle, one realises the likeness between the two. As in the study of politics and world history, it is known that understanding contemporary situations cannot be acquired except by reading the past to reflect it on today's world state. Classical literature is the form of literature that stands still with the passing of time, conveying universal ideas which readers appeal to regardless of geography or time period. However, the analysis of classical novels as timeless pieces is minor compared to the examination of their historical and political background. In accordance, the analysis of "The Grapes of Wrath" (1939) by John Steinbeck aims to evoke the remnant of American classical novels, through the consideration of historical and political context in which the novel was influenced by, and highlights the significance of classics in providing comprehension on contemporary circumstances. By taking the example of modern film "Nomadland" directed by Chloe Zhao. In both works politics plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative of the two stories, in which capitalism is the opposing force that manipulates the protagonists. Moreover, economic decay functions as the core critique in both, as Steinbeck and Zhao use their art as a tool to critique American corrupt economic structure. Depicting the Great Depression in "The Grapes of Wrath" and the Great Recession in "Nomadland" to elaborate on the fallacy of the American Dream ideal. In a road journey to dream land, the two structure the narrative of the main characters' quest to reach stability and mobility. This review paper functions as a comparative analysis to emphasize the importance of classical novels in understanding

contemporary conditions, highlighting the relevance of classics to modern readers. Proving that human lives do not really change as time passes.

Keywords:

the American dream , the Great Recession, the Great Depression, classics remnant, classics influence, comparative literature

Introduction:

The paper examines the lasting impact of American classical novels on the filmmaking industry. Studying the example of the thematic parallel between John Steinbeck's novel "The Grapes of Wrath" (1939) and Chloe Zhao's (2020) film "Nomadland". The paper is an analysis of the themes conveyed in the two mentioned works, revealing the similarities of today's conflict and social struggles with those of the past. The paper studies the common themes between "The Grapes of Wrath" and "Nomadland" such as, themes like capitalism, community support, individualism and the shatter of the American Dream. Furthermore, analyzing the historical and socio-political background in which both works highlight. Depicting the reasons and circumstances of economic changes in the 20th and 21st century. This paper proves that classical novels are timeless literary works that contribute to influencing modern readers with relevant fictional worlds.

Literary review:

Literature works as an archive for human lives across ages. From the oldest known epic to the most recent novel. In parallel, classical novels remain relevant in their characters, conflicts and triumphs to those of the modern time. American culture is filled with various historical conflicts and political disturbances. Which are convenient in the classical novels produced at distinct historical and socio-political circumstances. As

such, the paper takes the example of one of the most resonant American classics “The Grapes of Wrath” by John Steinbeck to confirm the timelessness of classics. This concept is supported by examining the historical and socio-political likeness between Steinbeck’s novel and modern film “Nomadland”(2020) by Chloe Zhao.

The illustration of classic remnants conducted through literary comparison of historical, socio-political and thematic. As well as, structural analysis identified in both works.

Comparative literature:

According to Sahin (2015) comparative literature is the study of literature produced in different cultures. This study acquaints scholars with the critical investigation on literary phenomena occurring in distinct literary productions. However, Sahin (2015) objects that “ Scholar examines only one nation's literature, literary works or writers; this will not be a comparative study.”Although some contemporary studies differ and extend in defining comparative literature to the study of literary production within a single or multiple cultures. As such, the comparison between “Nomadland”(2020) and “The Grapes of Wrath” follows a temporal comparative analysis. In which the mentioned works are produced within American culture; however, the time period differs. This distinct analysis proves the remnant of classics across centuries. Telling the history of its time, “The Grapes of Wrath” records historical truths passed to generations. Salloom (2024, p.19) confirms that “The novel aims to reinterpret the American history from that period.” She adds to that, by indicating Steinbeck as a live witness to the brutal consequences of the Great Depression, as he used to frequently visit migrant camps in California. Mishra (2025) supports Salloom’s by stressing that “ His (Steinbeck) direct observations infused The Grapes of Wrath with an authenticity that made it an immediate and controversial sensation.” Making it a timeless legacy in spotting the light on global struggles and universal sense of humanity and dignity (Mishra, 2025). Hasyim (2014, p.18) concludes that “ Steinbeck used the novel to reflect on the

American social condition and his sympathy by transforming the reality into fiction.”

In parallel, Zhao's film “Nomadland”(2020) illustrates American society's condition during the 20th century. Rieser (2023, p.222) declares that “Nomadland effectively addresses critical facets of poverty...primarily...the challenge of housing security.” In his research, Rieser indicates the economic forces highlighted in the film through the main character Fern, who moves in a small van from state to state looking for low paid jobs, in activating the film as a social critique to the financial and housing instability; while depicting individual resilience in a failing economy. On the other hand, Nurramadhany et al., (2026) analyse the social stigma illustrated in the film. By conducting a thematic analysis, their study elaborates on the five keys of social stigma represented in the film, which are placed on nomadic lifestyles, and how these instruments work as a social force to control nomadic individuals. “They say people like us are lazy, unwilling to settle down and get a real job. But this is survival” (Nomadland, 2020).

The paper aims to elaborate on the timelessness of classical novels in revealing universal themes and dilemmas. Through the thematic and structural comparison between the leading American novel “The Grapes of Wrath” by John Steinbeck and Chloe Zhao 2020 film “Nomadland”. The comparative study proves the remnant of American Classics in discussing timeless historical and socio-political issues occurring in the United States. While existing research papers investigate “Nomadland” (2020) film through various political, historical and social lenses. The study fills the gap by interpreting the film as a continuation of classical influence on capturing historical and socio-political conditions occurring in American society.

Discussion:

The paper conducts a detailed research on the thematic, historical and structure parallel in “The Grapes of Wrath” by Steinbeck and Zhao's 2020 film “Nomadland”. Aiming

to provoke the timeless influence of classical literary pieces in the development and production of modern arts. Literature is considered as a tool for individuals to express their core beliefs; as well as, to reflect upon the socio-political situations they witness. Making it a historical chronicle that treasures human lives and sustains them for centuries to come. The look on the works mentioned will provide a glimpse on the historical and contemporary socio-political atmosphere in the United States, exploring not only the literary production but also how brutal politics. Especially, capitalism, pressures and destroys individuals lives rather than aiming for prosperity and just role.

- **The Great Depression and the Great Recession: A historical background**

The Great Depression was the most serious downturn in world economies, severely affecting the industries of the United States making it one of the hardest disasters America had experienced since the civil war. The global downfall of industries began in 1929 and lasted until 1939. In the aftermath of World War I, the industries and factories in the United States flourished due to military soldiers returning home filling institutional jobs along with opening work opportunities for females. This massive job retention resulted in the increase of salaries. The American citizens owned the needed money to purchase products and services, and to take loans from banks to invest it in the stock market. which was the beginning of a severe inflation in the market. The massive sales of stock in the black Tuesday October 1929 resulted in the downfall of the market prices as the value of the dollar decreased causing an increase in the value of products. The American banks were included in the stock investments hub; however, these banks used to take secret loans from individuals' accounts. By the downturn, banks were not able to return the money as there was no money to turn back. This resulted in closing numerous banks around the states. Which was followed by institutions releasing works due to the lack of money. By that time the rates of poverty increased as unemployment reached over 24% of the American population.

History repeated itself with the Great Recession (2007-2009), according to the federal reserve history the crisis began with a fall in housing markets after a huge peak in 2006. markets and institutions experienced financial downfalls, repeating the same situations of “the Great Depression” with massive loss of jobs and houses across America as unemployment rates reached 23%. In the film “nomadland”. Fern, the protagonist, resembles millions of unemployed citizens who had lost their jobs, homes and normal lives during that period. Similarly, “The Grapes of Wrath” discusses the issue of “the Great Depression” in the 1930s. Depicting the world economic crisis in America through the journey of the Joad family to California in hope to find decent living and restore their life after losing their home to banks and wealthy landowners.

- **Relevant concepts:**

“The Grapes of Wrath” and “Nomadland” share a massive number of themes that contribute to delivering their core message and concept of the open road toward a better place. The parallel themes highlight the socio-economic and political struggles as relevant even in modern and civilized nations.

- 1. The critique of capitalism:**

“The Grapes of Wrath” by John Steinbeck and “Nomadland” film highlight a society ruled by capitalism and corrupt systems. In the Regenerative Economics Textbook, capitalism is defined as an economic system adapted by several countries around the world where private individuals or businesses own the means of production (assets) to generate more income. In other words, in a capital economy the assets are privately owned by individuals who employ laborers to do most of the work in exchange for wages. This form of economy is driven by one single motive, which is to increase the profit regardless of what legal or even illegal process is required. These remarks in history were not hidden from authors. As such, John Steinbeck writings are ones that parallel societal

economic and issues facing the American society, as his works are not only read for entertainment but rather a critical lens to depict the reality of American society during the past century, represented through true figures who face cruel reality with sympathy and fairness (Hasyim, 2014). He resembles capitalism's savagery and immoral behaviour toward the poor, and criticizes a system that allows greed to take over the poor's needs and marginalize them. As a whole, the novel is a critique of a savage unfair social system that provides the space only for those with money and wealth to grow richer while the weak grow poorer.

In the novel's first chapter, Tom Joad is released from prison. Going back home, he sees bank trackers had occupied the land and his family was moved out by force. In this particular event, capitalism is depicted as a cruel system that does not consider poor people's lives as a real matter. Focusing on the dehumanization of laborers during the Great Depression through the journey of the Joad family from Oklahoma to California on 'Road 66.' one of the farmers whose farm was taken, reflects his dissatisfaction by stating that "The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it" (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 45). The metaphor of the monster elaborates on the cruelty of capitalism in destroying the lives of lower classes in order to feed itself. Hasyim (2014) declared that "the critique is an attempt to critique the behaviors which only consist in satisfying one's financial desires" (p.19). As banks' only concern is peaking the profit even when it comes to taking away the homes of farmers or modest workers. Steinbeck specifies the economic hardship forced on the working class to do more effort in order to receive simple wages, but these efforts are met with exploitation of rights.

In parallel to Steinbeck's portrayal of American society, Chloe Zhao captures the hollow promises of capitalism in her 2020 film "Nomadland". The film addresses the failure of capitalism through the tale of Fern, the protagonist who has lost her house and job in a metal factory after the massive shut down during the recession in 2008. Fern

decides to choose a van lifestyle as an attempt to seek better situations away from capitalist economy; she reflects herself as a “houseless” and not a “homeless”. Rankanduwa (2021) debates that as Fern is a fictional character made up by Zhao, however she is a passing bridge to the lives of millions of Americans who lived a van lifestyle during the Great Recession chasing jobs from state to state. For Fern and her fellows nomads, capitalism had failed in ensuring a secure financial and domestic life. As they ended up living a modern nomadic life in a way to escape the unjust systems after losing their jobs. Causing severe social and financial instability for those people, their social status was reduced and criticized because of the life they chose (Listiyani et al., 2025). As such, the film is elaborated on as a critique to the capitalism structure that lies about being the foundation of a stable financial and social lifestyle.

In two different centuries the struggle of the Working Class remains the same if not worsened. Through glimpsing at classical novels such as “The Grapes of Wrath”, we can depict the similarities in global economic disaster as holders remain with their growing greed and unjust attitude toward the weak. In modern times the concept of “the rich gets richer and the poor gets poorer” is a real life situation in regions like Africa and Asia, where individuals work in farms and factories for long hours doing hard and dangerous labor but in return the payment they get is not enough for a decent meal. In turn, the discussion of working class issues in “The Grapes of Wrath” and “Nomadland” is relevant to many around the world.

2. The American dream vs. The loss of home and dignity:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This passage taken from the Declaration of Independence book highlights the main principles of the American dream. The American Dream concept first occurred in the book “The Epic of America” by the American

businessman James Truslow Adams. However its ideas were rooted since the first migrations of Europeans as an escape from oppressed authorities, religion and policies to the new lands in the early 1600s. According to Britannica (n.d.), the core concept of the American dream lies in the United States being the land of possible dreams, and equal rights allowing all people to pursue financial security and freedom as long as they conduct hard labor.

John Steinbeck takes the concept of the American dream as the core theme of his novel. He illustrates the journey of farmers to the promised land after being forced to leave their land due to the capitalist economic structure. American industries claim to have an economy that allows individuals to flourish and prosper. Sene (2021) suggests that capitalism is a propaganda used by the U.S during the Cold War, thus Steinbeck describes the injustice system of capitalism through the passages of one of the farmers stating that “The bank, the monster has to have profits all the time, it can’t wait, it’ll die, no, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies, it can’t stay one size” (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 48). Influenced by the journey of Moses, Steinbeck highlights the determination of the Joads for a promised and better future in California, as they take a journey on a track from Oklahoma to Californian on Road 66, believing that a better life awaits them in the west coast. Using California as a metaphor of the promised land, Steinbeck mocks the illusion of the American dream created by capitalists and believed by simple individuals. The Joads journey serves as an exploration of the fallacy of the American dream, they arrive in California to witness more savagery along with an exploited work environment. Meeting other immigrants who came for the quest of the land of possible dreams, working hard in cotton farms and factories and in difficult climates did not make the Joads reach prosperity or richness. Instead, they suffered from the exploitation of owners and food was merely provided, they met death, starvation and the dark side of humanity rather than freedom or success. According to Rautela (2025) Steinbeck used his novel to reject the idea of the American dream by illustrating the

removal of low class individuals from pursuing wealth. Manikumar (2016) examines the grapes of wrath as a resemblance to classics such as the Odyssey and Pilgrim's Progress. The novel functions as a destroyer of the American dream myth. The Joad family profoundly followed the American formula of success, they migrated to the west where opportunities are. However, instead of wealth and financial security, the Joads encountered more poverty, even death started to chase them the minute they arrived in California. At last the Joads come to realise that they were running after an illusion and were manipulated by upper landowners to work in their factories to increase the profit, while they grow in hardship. They lost their home and with it they lost the essence of belonging. As such living in tents with other immigrants made them in need to ask for food as well as the permission to the facilities provided. Creating a sense of lost indignity that came with leaving their home behind in sake of a new life, "How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past?" (Steinbeck, 1939, p. 52).

"The Grapes of Wrath depicted the impossibility of the American Dream and defined the harsh reality of the dirty, corrupted, and greedy nightmare that it truly was" (Manikumar, 2016). Reality never changes, even with the advancement in technologies and sciences. People's sufferings throughout history seem to be the same, it is either an oppressed ruler or unfair system. Zhao, the director of "nomadland" (2020) proves the statement of history repeats itself, she depicts the crisis of "the Great Recession" in 2007, mirroring the "Great Depression" from the past century. Moreover, the film proves the timelessness of classical works in the themes it delivers, conveying the idea that the American Dream is only a myth. Through the highlights on Fern's life, the protagonist, who loses her job and house in Empire, Nevada due to the huge peak in the housing market. She decides afterward to live in a van as an attempt to escape capitalist structure as well as to mourn her dead husband. "I'm not homeless, I'm just houseless. It's not the same thing." Fern would say to those who encounter her. Living in a van she named "Vanguard", moving from camp to camp and from city to city in the west. Fern is not alone

in her quest, nomad camps are set along the west roads, all escaping the same lie of a fortunate future made by liberals and business owners. The nomads community is formed to support each member and create a collective supporting environment for those who had suffered or hurt from the capitalist system. Moving with seasonal job options Fern works in varied jobs depending on her location and what is available. The fall of market prices forced Fern to leave her house after losing a factory job. Choosing a nomadic lifestyle instead of conforming to capitalist talk. "Nomadland" the Oscar winner film exploring the fragility of the American Dream ideology through the illustration of self independence Fern reaches while living a nomadic life (Behrooz, 2021). This aspect presented in the film, and supported by numerous critics, contradicts with the original ideal of America as the land of limitless opportunities. As well as, it highlights the negation in capitalist concepts that only benefits labor owners. As a resemblance to the classical novel "The Grapes of Wrath" by Steinbeck, "Nomadland" (2020) is a proof of the unchanged economic polities of the United States in over a century, although millions of citizens were affected by the cruel unjust capitalist structure. The paper emphasises the hardship poor individuals faced due to inconsideration of power holders that is manifested in modern societies.

- **Classics remnant influence:**

Reading classics does not present a glimpse of the past, but serves as a method to understand contemporary conflicts. The paper examines classical novels' remaining influence on modern times, through the analysis of historical and socio-political context provided in both John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" and modern film "Nomadland" (2020) by Chloe Zhao.

As parallel with Steinbeck's classical novel, Zhao's film is structured on the journey toward the end of a road where the protagonist Fern continues on the road to an unrevealed destination. In the novel it is Road 66 while in "Nomadland" it is an open road somewhere in west America. "66 is the path of a people in flight"(Steinbeck, 1939, p. 125).

The road journey the Joads take emphasis on the actual sufferings encountered by immigrants who travel down that road to achieve prosperity but receive discrimination and marginalization instead (Buckner, 2023). The myth of finding goodness and wealth at the end of the road is highlighted in both works, although the two may be illustrated differently. The Joads, for example, arrive at the end of the road to realize the contradiction of what they had in mind and what they witnessed. Correspondingly, Fern in "Nomadland" carried on her journey on the road as the film ends. In the history of mankind, the concept of a good future awaits at the end of the road is relevant to all cultures. This universal ideal is highlighted by Zhao in her film as well as by Steinbeck in the novel. The illustration of road journey reflects the journey of life as a whole, from hardship resilience is learnt, and self-independence is obtained. The classical works tell the stories of actual people's lives but through fictional narratives, as it is in modern arts that employs imagination in order to reflect real-life situations. Through the exposure to classical writing, one is equipped with a functional tool to navigate modern societies. "All books are divisible into two classes, the books of the hour, and the books of all time" (Ruskin, 1865).

Conclusion:

The paper discusses the permanent influence of classical novels on the creation of modern arts. Highlighting the essence of classics in depicting real-life situations that concern all people, by the deliberation on the universality of themes as well as concepts encountered since centuries ago. The analysis of themes included in the mentioned works, by examining political and social influences that carried the creation of the novels and the film. Capitalism is deliberately criticized in the two works. Furthermore. The analysis encountered the actual depiction of American economic struggles faced by citizens. The critic of the American Dream myth and the real suffering of people because of these lies that continued for centuries. "The Grapes of Wrath" by John Steinbeck

mirrors contemporary accounts as they reflect the core ideas delivered by Chloe Zhao in her 2020 film “nomadland”. The analysis of historical and socio-political climate along with narrative structures proves the timelessness of classical American novels. In turn the analysis demonstrates the idea that history never changes, and that the hardships encountered by past societies endures in modern times.

References:

- Classic Literature Quotes* (250 quotes). (n.d.).
<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/classic-literature>
- Great Recession: What it was and what caused it.* (2025, December 23). Investopedia.
<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/great-recession.asp>
- Hasyim, F. (2014). THE SEAMY SIDE OF AMERICAN CAPITALISM IN JOHN STEINBECK'S THE GRAPES OF WRATH. *Rubikon Journal of Transnational American Studies*, 1(2), 16. <https://doi.org/10.22146/rubikon.v1i2.34214>
- Listiyani, D., Anggraeni, D., & K, D. F. (2025). SOCIAL ISSUES AND ITS IMPACT PRESENTED IN NOMADLAND (2022): A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE. *Loquēla (Journal of Linguistics Literature and Education)*, 3(1), 26–43.
<https://doi.org/10.61276/loquela.v3i1.55>
- Lombardi, E. (2019, August 10). *Selected uotes from The Grapes of Wrath*. ThoughtCo.
<https://www.thoughtco.com/grapes-of-wrath-quotes-739933>
- Mishra. (2025). Historical Context and Enduring Legacy of the Grapes of Wrath written by John Steinbeck. In *International Journal of Education and Science Research Review*.
<https://ijesrr.org/publication/106/291.%202025%20feb%20ijesrr.pdf>
- Nomadland and the American Myth - The Skinny.* (n.d.).
<https://www.theskinny.co.uk/film/opinion/nomadland-and-the-american-myth>
- Nomadland subverts the American Dream. (2021, May 21). *Luxembourg Times*.
<https://www.luxtimes.lu/culture/nomadland-subverts-the-american-dream/1332339.html>

- Nurramadhany, A., Manalu, I., Musthafa, M., Rafiuddin, M., & Taufiq, F. (2026). Analysis of Social Stigma in Film *Nomadland* (2020). *Ruang Kata: Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 6, 115–120.
- Rankaduwa, S. (2021, March 15). “Minari” and “Nomadland” confront the elusive American dream. *BuzzFeed News*.
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/sandirankaduwa/minari-nomadland-oscar-nominations-capitalism>
- Rautela, S. (2025). THE THEME OF AMERICAN DREAM IN JOHN STEINBECK’S “THE GRAPES OF WRATH.” *In International Journal of Innovations & Research Analysis (IJIRA)*. <https://inspirajournals.com/uploads/Issues/223690864.pdf>
- Rieser, K. (2023). Genre, space, and social critique in Chloé Zhao’s *Nomadland* (2020). *SHILAP Revista De Lepidopterología*. <https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v5i2.186>
- Romer, C. D. (2025, October). *Great Depression| Definition, History, Dates, Causes, effects. & facts*. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Depression>
- Sahin, E. (2016). On comparative literature. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, 4(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijla.s.2016040101.12>
- Salloom. (2024). John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*: A Literary Portrayal of Historical Truth. *ESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND CULTURAL STUDIES*, 19. <https://doi.org/10.56201/rjhcs.v10.no3.2024.pg18.30>
- Sene, B. (2021). The Fallacy of the American Dream in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1938) by John Steinbeck. *Himalayan Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 02(01), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.47310/hjhcs.2021.v02i01.007>
- The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck | History | Research Starters | EBSCO Research*. (n.d.). EBSCO. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/grapes-wrath-john-steinbeck>
- Wage Theft and Worker Exploitation | Jesuit Social Research Institute*. (n.d.). <https://jsri.loyno.edu/wage-theft-and-worker->

exploitation#:~:text=Her%20newest%20book%20is%20entitled,Not%20paying%20employees%20at%20all!

Weinberg, J. (n.d.). *The Great Recession and its aftermath*. Federal Reserve History.

<https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/great-recession-and-its-aftermath>

Zeid, M. G. A., Khedr, M. A., Rayan, H. N., Mostafa, B., & El-Ashry, A. M. (2024). The relationship between organizational dehumanization and work engagement: the mediating effect of nurses' work stress. *BMC Nursing*, 23(1), 193. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-024-01841-z>