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An Analysis on *The Florida Project*

By

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Thesis Advisor

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## **Abstract**

*The Florida Project* is a contemporary movie filmed by independent director Sean Baker. This movie tackles different social and institutional issues across America, specifically the outdated welfare system and the rise of homelessness among young children. This paper is determined to analyze the different social and ethical concerns filmed throughout the movie and offer my personal interpretation of the film. Digging deeper into artistic pieces is essential as hidden messages are portrayed in every way. Censorship and display through art have been a form of individual expression since the beginning. This thesis will present a discussion of how the filmmaker filmed and showcased the scenes of the movie. Expectations of sex work, childhood-related trauma, delayed development, and the neoliberal housing system are all studied in this paper. There are no concrete results, as this analysis is one of liberal art, not science or math. This paper is structured to open the discussion of all of the forgotten or pushed away topics that are so prominent in American societies today and that more awareness and reputability are spread due to this paper.

## **Introduction**

Economic scarcity in America has skyrocketed in the last decade, forcing more and more people to move into the streets, overcrowded shelters, and budget motels. Politicians have used the homeless crisis as a prop for votes, homeless shelters have been working day and night, and even the police have interfered with the overcrowding of houseless persons on the streets. One approach to encapture homelessness and financial scarcity is through film. *The Florida Project*, a 2017 Sean Baker cinematography project, follows a young mother and her six-year-old daughter Moonee through their lives. They reside in a motel across the street from Disney World, Florida. Although this movie is fictional, it uses real families living in the motels as extra characters. His

film criticized America's welfare program and the neoliberal iteration of public housing and highlighted the realities of families in crisis. I will analyze this film and dig deeper into the social commentary and criticism through the two-hour movie. Homelessness and families living in crisis are closely related to the economic and capitalistic system the United States has in place. With this film as an example of how families are dealing with this economic scarcity, I will examine how this film encapsulates the issues that come with economic scarcity in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, in addition to the outcomes of childhood-related trauma. In other words, the question I am researching is: How does the movie, *The Florida Project*, reflect the economic scarcity crisis in America and the experience of childhood poverty?

The rise of neoliberal capitalism has, in conjunction, raised the rate of homelessness across America. Neoliberalism is "a political approach that favors free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending." (Machan et al., 2021). This ideology is great for profit, as private enterprises take control over once-public buildings and regulate the buildings they now own to their desire. Many of these buildings are hotels, which low-income individuals rent to avoid ending up on the streets. Often, these owners feel no social responsibility for the ones who once benefited from these housing plans. Private developers purchase land, leaving cities having to find new ways to create tax revenue and raise property taxes. In addition to the rise of neoliberalism, recent legislation has made it so that people in financial need have a more challenging time accessing government money. The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), introduced in 1996, is a program that denies government money assistance to those who cannot find a job. Families "living in deep poverty has doubled since welfare reform became law in 1996 to 2011" (Dickinson,2020).

## **Methodology**

There is no correct answer or linear solution for the causes of poverty and homelessness. Intertwined in a complicated system, the circumstances take time to answer confidently. Community outreach and word of mouth are methods that I will use for research. Qualitative data, as well as quantitative data, is vital for a fuller understanding. Discussing ways of getting money in order to survive is a topic I would yearn to explore. In the movie, sex work is brought up, and the controversial job ends with a mother losing custody of her child. Is sex work only seen as unfavorable because the person doing it is poor? Or is it an empowering, feminist approach to making money? Sex work is now a standard tool to make money, but different outcomes depend on whether sex work is used from a place of privilege or desperation. I will analyze this in my thesis project as well.

Reading articles from child psychologists will help me understand the risk factors of childhood poverty and how one's childhood ultimately guides one into their adult development and future. Focusing on a youth's brain development determines how people in these situations struggle to escape the cycle. Using the Census Bureau's Demographic Analysis, these numbers will statistically prove that the homelessness line has been above its previous years and that getting money from the government is becoming more and more difficult. It would have been crucial for my thesis to travel to Orlando, Florida, and interview those who live in the hotels that were filmed in the movie. Realistically, traveling there with the funds would be easier, so calling and interviewing hotel owners/receptionists over the phone would be another way to get information. I was unable to travel to Florida, but I did do some in-depth research on the locations of the film. In addition, reading and listening to the director's interviews will give me a better understanding of his motive behind filming this movie.

## Sex Work

Throughout the middle of the movie, the protagonist, Hayley, decides to engage in sex work. She enters the capitalistic mentality that she was not once part of. In a scene, she asks her daughter to take provocative photos of her in a swimsuit, which she then posts online to publicize herself. She is selling an image of herself in order to receive financial satisfaction. It is seen that then, a series of men come to her motel room to receive this work in exchange for money. After this continues, Hayley starts paying her rent on time, spending more money on her daughter Moonee, and is shown to be happier due to her financial freedom. Her motel manager starts to wonder how Hayley is paying her rent when he knows that she doesn't have to leave the premises. He actually confronts her and then proceeds to investigate himself. He finds her ads online and monitors the security cameras. It is revealed that a plethora of men have entered her hotel room in a short period, revealing that she has prostituted herself for a living. The Child Protected Services are called, resulting in Moonee being taken from her mom. This is the only time in the movie when Moonee is upset and crying, and she runs away from CPS to her friend's house. Haylee and Moonee are being punished for Haylee's contribution to sex work, and her daughter, the only person she has in this world, is taken from her.

Sex work has always been a profession, and its acceptability has jumped back and forth through society's eyes. Some historians believe that prostitution has been around since 2400 BC (Wiersma, 2021). It was then criminalized in the late 500s in Spain, and the Mann Act was passed in 1910 in the United States. This Act prohibited and criminally indicted prostitution and sex work. Some parts of the world allow prostitution, like the Netherlands and parts of the state of Nevada, while others still hold a stigma on this particular occupation. One of the main arguments against the ability to legally prostitute is the 'scale effect' economic theory. This theory

states that prostitution will result in rapid economic growth, resulting in a successive spike in demand (Platt,2018). Many sex workers now rely on the black market and personal advertisements to receive attention for their roles.

Interestingly enough, sex work has become more and more widespread through online services such as OnlyFans and other subscription-based applications. These apps allow individuals to post naked pictures/videos of themselves, and their subscribers must pay a rate to view these graphic images. It has become so popular that people have made a successful living off just this occupation. Nevertheless, traditional prostitution is still illegal and villainized. When people come from a place of desperation, such as Hayley, there is a negative connotation, and she is punished. Oppositely, when sex work comes from a place of privilege, there seems to be some feminist, empowering connotation to that particular way of living. Individuals thrive off using their bodies to sell an image of themselves and to reclaim their sexual power and voice. Once Hayley became part of the capitalistic mentality, she lost another part of herself.

### **Cycle of Poverty**

There is much ambiguity surrounding Haylee's upbringing. Was she also raised in a motel? Did she also only have a young single mother? Why doesn't she rely more on her parents? Perhaps the directors intentionally left that part out so the viewers could imagine and make up their own story for her. Perhaps she came from a wealthy family in Orlando, and her troubled self drove her out. Perhaps she did not know her parents and was raised in a broken foster care system. We do not know Moonee's father either. Does he know he has a six-year-old daughter that lives in a motel with her mother? We know that Haylee and Moonee are left alone to conquer the difficulties that surround them. They have no familial support, and the government does everything possible to make it harder for them to receive assistance.

At the movie's end, Moonee is taken away from her sole parental figure and placed into the foster care system. She escapes the social workers and runs off to Disney World, "the happiest place on earth." We do not know what happens if she is reunited with her mother or taken from her forever. Another unknown is that we do not know how Moonee will end up. Will she miraculously get out of the poverty cycle? Will she find a rich husband and move to Miami? Unfortunately, the chances are low as the cycle of poverty is challenging to escape. According to economic theories, impoverished families stay in the same cycle for at least three generations (Wagmiller, 2009). While we know that Haylee is poor, Moonee's chance of being poor is equally high.

### **Childhood Experiences**

The movie *The Florida Project* highlights the realities of childhood poverty, specifically in Orlando, Florida. They are not the only permanent residents of this motel. Other families with young children also take advantage of this run-down motel as they cannot afford anything else. Moonee has her neighbor friends; with them, they explore the mysteries of the world around them with limited guidance and supervision. Haylee allows Moonee to roam freely while she enjoys the motel's amenities.

As much as this movie portrays the joys of childhood freedom and privileged curiosities, it does not shy away from the harsh realities of what these families go through day to day. In one scene of the movie, Hayley and Moonee are eating pizza. Moonee complains about the flavor of the pizza, and her mother frustratingly reminds her that she cannot afford the desired pizza flavor. Moonee then asks her mother where her iPad went, to which her mother responds that she had to sell it.



## **The Effect of Childhood Development**

According to the U.S. Census of 2011, one out of four children in the United States are under the poverty line. The worldwide poverty rate for children is much higher. In 2021, child poverty fell to a record 5.2% 2021 (Burns,2022). Child poverty brings many other issues and obstacles that prevent cognitive development and mental growth. Children who live in poverty are more exposed to hardships and traumatic experiences that can impact their life and their ability to manage stress and chaos. The movie, *The Florida Project*, shows the realities of poverty with a small child in the picture. Her mother swears in front of her, discusses her financial situation with her daughter, and verbally confronts other adults inappropriately. Moonee, the six-year-old daughter, witnesses these behavioral outbursts and exhibits similar behaviors as her mother. In a few scenes of the movie, Moonee is swearing or repeating sentences she has heard from her mother. According to the Society of Research in Child Development, "low-income children have multiple self-regulatory deficits" (Blair, 2010). They have many outbursts and crave attention, whether it is positive or negative attention. In addition, it has been studied that low-income children are more suited for change. Kids forced to move or stay with someone new frequently have an easier way of adapting to continuous change. Moonee and Hayley are resilient to change as community members come in and out of the motel world, and the two are forced to find a place to stay once a month to reinforce the no-residency policy the hotel offers. Essentially, the motel where they live is not a permanent residence, and long-term customers must leave once a month to keep that rule in place. Moonee and Hayley must find a place to sleep, which can change monthly. In the movie, the two do not seem disturbed by having to find a place to sleep but are irritated that the motel forces them to leave

monthly. It reinforces the idea that this motel is not their home and that they have no home other than their quaint room.

### **Cinematic Captures**

Sean Baker, the director of *The Florida Project*, is an independent film director, editor, producer, songwriter, and cinematographer. His films have won 49 awards and 77 nominations. Many of his films are reflections of social issues, such as another one of his films, *Tangerine*, focuses on the injustices faced by the LGBTQ+ community. His style of cinematography uniquely differentiates from standard, popular films. *The Florida Project* is captured almost like a fly-on-the-wall effect. The language and narrative of the movie are more realistic, and there is no classic plot diagram. It is almost as if the viewer is not watching a film but a glimpse of an individual's life. The viewer is watching this life from an inside perspective, following the young mother and her daughter along the streets of Orlando. As much as this movie shows the harsh realities of their unfortunate situation, it also focuses on showcasing the young girl's happiness and exploring the wonders of childhood freedom. Moonee does not cry or show any signs of distress until the end of the movie, where the viewer is left on a cliffhanger.

When Moonee is taken from her mother, she runs off to her best friend at a nearby hotel. She cries, but instantly, the direction of the film is shifted. Moonee and her friend are seen running off into DisneyWorld, and the movie cuts. Encouraging and upbeat music is playing in the background, the first time a soundtrack is played in the movie. In most films, there are diegetic and non-diegetic soundtracks. Diegetic soundtracks are sounds that are heard in the universe of the movie. For example, when Hayley is listening to music with her friends at the pool, that is considered as diegetic as the people in the movie are also listening to the music. Non-Diegetic is when the people in the movie do not hear the music, and it is solely used for the

interpretation of the viewer. The ending is abrupt, and the camera quality changes from a 35 mm film to an iPhone 6s.

The sudden change to the iPhone represents reality and current time as if the scene happens. The directors purposely made that abrupt change in the film to give the idea that the girls are running off to Disney. It is done so obviously that it almost mocks traditional happy, extravagant endings in regular movies. DisneyWorld is commonly referred to as the happiest place on Earth, and Moonee and her friend running off to Disney can represent their willingness to stay together and enjoy their childhood. The movie's ending represents a child escaping their worries into a magical place filled with love, shelter, and security. As the movie's director stated, it is the only happy ending that can come out of this situation. That scene was designed to entertain the viewer's fantasy and interpretation of Moonee's situation. The reality is that Moonee will never have a magical, happy ending, as her place in society will keep her from experiencing the actual wonders and joys of childhood. Either she will go to foster care, a broken system in itself, or return to her unstable, financially limited mother. She will be around drugs, prostitution, domestic violence, and poverty. Moreover, the odds of escaping that cycle are slim.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, *The Florida Project* reflects not only one family but a considerable portion of forgotten American societies. The movie symbolizes the hardships created by American ideologies and economic systems. Haylee represents single mothers, sex workers, and people living under the poverty line with limited support from the government. Moonee is a young child, living obliviously from the struggles around her. She plays endlessly with her friends and mimics the attitude of her mother. Even though Haylee may seem chaotic, Moonee sees her as her hero, and their bond is unbreakable, even when she is taken away from her. Their bond can

be felt in many different ways, and Haylee and Moonee can be felt around society as millions of people have the same struggles as they do. As the actor who played Moonee, Brooklynn Price, once said, "There are too many Haylees and Moonees." When I first watched this movie, I did not know that it would open up many curiosities about different aspects of society. Films like *The Florida Project* allow the audience to feel these kids' independence and a sense of sadness and hopelessness. Unfortunately, the cycle and remission of homelessness are high. The children in the movie have a higher chance of ending up in the same situation as their parents due to the lack of help they receive from their respective worlds. Hopefully, this will open the conversation that no child in America should be fighting for food, shelter, and safety. From a country with all possible resources, the priority should be the youth and future generations that will one day be the country's leaders.

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