



*Manchester by the Sea* is a movie about grief. I have not seen a cinematic depiction of grief as real and raw as this since Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode, "The Body" (S5: E16).

As with "The Body," the empty stillness that epitomizes profound grief permeates every frame, and the story unfolds at an almost surreally laborious pace.

That's not to say it's "too slow," at least not in my opinion (I think some of the others in the auditorium when I saw it felt differently). I honestly think there is no other pace for main character Lee Chandler, masterfully played by Casey Affleck, to navigate the complex waters into which he's thrust when his brother dies and he's tasked with looking after his teenaged nephew (I'm not giving anything away that wasn't shown in the preview).

Writer-director Kenneth Lonergan, who has more writing credits than directing credits to his name, isn't afraid of long takes or of silence. In less skillful hands, such a strategy might result in a movie that feels three times as long as it really is. Fortunately, in this case, the calculated risk pays off.

None of the work that went into making *Manchester by the Sea* is deficient in any way. The writing, directing, and other elements of the production are all excellent, in that they are invisible. No aspect of what happened behind the scenes called attention to itself or pulled me out of the story (and that's high praise!).

The story structure, which jumps back and forth between the present and the past, is well balanced. I often gripe about movies that use flashbacks when it is unnecessary; in this case, the narrative structure is appropriate and well crafted.

The performances by Affleck, Michelle Williams, and Lucas Hedges (as Chandler's newly orphaned nephew) are all deserving of acting awards, although of the three, Williams' turn as Chandler's ex-wife is the most Oscar-worthy.

So, the question – now that I've lauded all that can be lauded about the film – is: Did I like it?

One of the reasons I love movies is that there are multiple factors in play, and – at least from my perspective – they should all be turned up to 11 for a movie to meet the qualifications for Best Picture (or the #1 spot on my Top 10 list).

A movie can be brilliantly written but poorly directed. Or it can be directed well but miscast. Or a movie might have incredible performances but fall apart in the third act due to poor writing. And in some cases, a movie is perfectly crafted from pre- to post-production but simply fails to work for me.

Obviously we each go to the movies with our own backstories informing our responses to the entertainment value of a narrative. So, for example, a movie that I find engaging could completely bore my companion. And a movie she finds hilarious might get only a few chuckles out of me.

So. What about *Manchester by the Sea*? As is probably clear by now, I'm putting off answering the question.

It's true that I was sucked in from the beginning and never lost focus.

I enjoyed the humorous moments and felt emotionally connected to the characters.

I felt impressed as the end credits began to roll.

But I also felt drained. I felt like I needed to build a fire in the fireplace, curl up under a dryer blanket with my cats, and eat a pint of ice cream.

Grief is pain. Grief is isolation. Grief is an emotion that ultimately cannot be shared, no matter how much outside support is offered.

*Manchester by the Sea* is a movie about grief.

It is 100% successful in being that.

Final Grade: A