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Aspects of Moonlight

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There are many films that have a strong impact on the social problems we face today. These films evoke thought, display hardships, and allow us to reflect on the people around us. We see these real-life problems come to light in the film, *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016), as the main character, Chiron Harris, faces many difficulties with his socioeconomic status and his sexual identity. Director Barry Jenkins provides an honest portrayal of what it is like to grow up as a minority, and he also shows the struggles that most people face when trying to figure out who they are. Jenkins uses different visual and narrative cues to show the audience just how hard it is for Chiron, by breaking the film into 3 separate acts: *i. Little*, which follows Chiron as a young boy, *ii. Chiron*, which shows his teenage years, and *iii. Black*, where we see Chiron as an adult. When Chiron reaches adulthood, he is unable to fully accept his sexuality because of the troubled environment he was raised in as well as the people around him who pressured him into becoming someone he is not and discouraged Chiron from expressing his true self.



Chiron in Act 1, "Little"

In *Moonlight*, Chiron's primary struggle is trying to figure out his own sexuality, made more difficult because he lacks a stable support system. There are many things that contribute to Chiron's struggle but his mother, Paula, is one of the main reasons why he

became so cold and closed off. Throughout the early sequences, Chiron is desperately trying to figure out who he is while dealing with bullies at school who constantly torture him with homophobic names and physical assault, but the one thing that is "equally painful and equally

complicated” (Scott 1), is watching his broken relationship with his mother decline even further. In Act 1, Paula is unavailable and inconsiderate to young Chiron. The audience gets a glimpse of this neglect, when we hear Paula say to Juan, Chiron’s father figure in the film and Paula’s drug dealer, that she knows why the kids at school bully him, and she is aware of the fact that he might be homosexual. Although she knows this, Paula doesn’t care to talk to her son about the problems that he faces in Act 1. In Act 2, her addiction reaches its height, damaging their relationship even further.

In Act 2, *Moonlight* uses one visual technique that shows just how unconnected with reality Paula becomes, and how cruel she is to her own son. We see disjointedness in the camera and sound; the words that Paula is saying to Chiron don’t match up with the picture on the screen (ScreenPrism, 2017). In this particular

scene, Paula approaches Chiron asking him for money while clearly high. The camera focuses on her facial expressions, and we watch the madness unfold. When the camera is disjointed from the sound, it’s a way to show the type of euphoria and out of

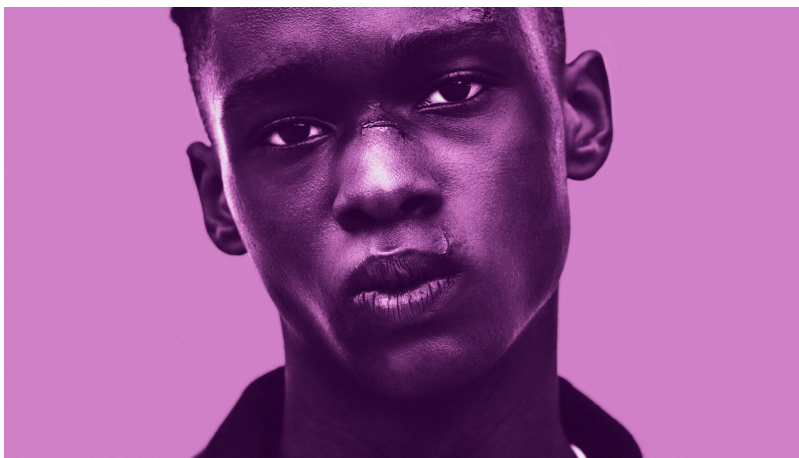


Naomie Harris as Paula

mind state that Paula is currently in. Once the sound and camera become synched again, we watch Paula’s comedown, as we see her snap back into reality in a fit of drug infused rage focused on her teenage son. This technique allows viewers to understand how heartbreaking it is for Chiron to see his own mother like this, and just how little Paula cares about him and the pain he is going through in these fragile years of his life. Since Paula is so consumed by her addiction,

she ignores the obvious signs of her son's pain and focuses her attention on her next fix. Paula's behavior only adds to Chiron's pain and deeply affects him in his future.

Throughout the film, Chiron is unable to find a way to express his own sexuality or open up to anyone about how he is feeling, which leaves him to struggle with it on his own. The main cause of this isolation is the community in which he was raised, and the shared idea of what it means to be a "man" as well as negative feelings towards homosexuality. As we watch Chiron grow into a man through the three chapters of the film, one constant is the excessive amount of bullying. In Act 1, Chiron is only a child and the kids in his community call him, "faggot" before he even knows what the word means. In this act, Chiron's external persona and his internal self interact with each other, and as a result, his own identity is basically shaped by the community that he grew up in (ScreenPrism, 2017). The constant negativity thrown at Chiron significantly



Chiron in Act 2, "Chiron"

impacts his overall perception of himself. Chiron tries "to work out the connection between the schoolyard homophobia of his peers and his own confused desires" (Scott, 1) and it only makes his journey to find himself harder. He doesn't want

to be bullied, but he doesn't want to be someone that he's not; and without anyone there to guide him or support him, Chiron's perception of himself is shaped by the bullies who torture him every day.

The bullying really reaches its heights in Chiron's teenage years. In Act 2, he struggles to find his place in the crowd while still trying to figure out his own sexual identity. Unlike the previous act, in this act, we finally see Chiron connect with someone who becomes a genuine friend. In Act 2, he becomes close with Kevin, a boy who was kind to young Chiron in Act 1 and becomes his friend in Act 2. Kevin and Chiron have an unspoken connection, and we see this when they share an intimate moment together on the beach. In this moment, Chiron finally feels like he has someone who can understand what he is going through. In this pivotal scene on the

beach, Kevin starts talking about the breeze that you feel on a beach, and he says, "sometimes along the way where we live, you can catch that same breeze. It just comes



Chiron and Kevin in Act 2

through the hood and it's like everything stops for a second, because everyone just want to feel it. Hell, shit make you want to cry, it feels so good." This breeze that Kevin describes is a symbol for the tranquility that everyone is searching for, an escape from reality, just to feel at peace with yourself. The sound of the breeze occurs in many instances in the film, but it usually occurs when Chiron is with Kevin.

The one time Chiron does not hear the breeze when he is with Kevin is when Kevin is forced to fight Chiron in Act 2, an act instigated by Tyrone, Chiron's bully in the film. When Kevin punches Chiron in the face, we don't hear the sound of the breeze that normally accompanies the two boys when they are together, instead we hear complete silence. This silence resembles death; it is so silent in the scene that it almost feels like a death has occurred. The

death in this act is the death of “Chiron” and the birth of “Black” who emerges in Act 3. The bullying tipped Chiron over the edge and he was also betrayed by Kevin, the only person he had left in the world who understood him and cared for him. Following this symbolic death, we see a completely different person in Act 3, someone who has been through a lot but has still not dealt with his identity or family problems.

The audience begins to understand how much effect the bullying and lack of support had on Chiron and his perception of himself in Act 3, when we are introduced to a very closed off version of Chiron, now called *Black*. In this act, we also see how much of an impact Juan had on Chiron. Juan was the only man in Chiron’s life that he looked up to, and although Chiron doesn’t express this through the narrative of the film, we can see many similarities between Chiron and



Chiron in Act 3, “Black”

Juan in Chiron’s adulthood. As he becomes a man, Chiron protects himself with a heavy armor vest. This armor represents his effort to pretend to be a man by imitating a man that Chiron respected and loved, Juan. Chiron physically

takes on the role of Juan; he becomes a drug dealer and he drives a car similar to one Juan drove. One of the most symbolic signs is the crown on Chiron’s dashboard, a similar crown to the one we saw in Juan’s car in the first act. He uses Juan’s manhood as a way to become “a hyper-masculine individual, a coping mechanism that helps him in his new life as a drug dealer, helped him in jail, and helps him deflect and try to compensate for the memories of his childhood”

(Raunig, 1). Chiron imitates Juan who he believed was a symbol of what it means to be a “man.” He uses this persona to close himself off from other people, a way to avoid the problems he faced in the past, as well as suppressing the desires he has within himself. The way that Chiron closes himself off in the final act is unhealthy, and this coping mechanism stemmed from the abusive and rough environment that Chiron was raised in.

The characters in *Moonlight* went through many problems like incarceration, premature death and drug addiction, and “Jenkins deals with this deftly, without being heavy-handed or dismissive, and makes the characters no less worthy of our support” (Thrasher, 1). In this film,



Chiron and Kevin in Act 3

Jenkins focuses more on the human aspects of Chiron’s life, rather than putting all the attention on the negative and, unfortunately,

common things that occur in his community. Jenkins puts more emphasis on the love Chiron feels when he is with Kevin or Juan and illustrates the beauty and importance of growing up with love and support, even if it’s a limited amount. *Moonlight* tells a story of a young gay black man as he faces the problems of growing up in a tough environment. The film’s visual and narrative cues show the impact these socioeconomic circumstances had on Chiron’s perception of himself and his sexuality. While watching the film, it’s easy to get caught up the tragedies in Chiron’s life, but in the last shot of the film, after Chiron admits his feelings to Kevin, we are greeted with

the familiar face of Little. He is standing in the moonlight and he turns around to look at us, urging the audience to join him, to be like Chiron, to face the problems that we struggle with and to make peace with the ghosts of the past.

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