

# *Moonlight*: How much can a person be reduced?

Glenn Mulwray  
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*Written and directed by Barry Jenkins; based on a play by Tarell Alvin McCraney*

*Moonlight*—based on a play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, by Miami playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney—is the second feature written and directed by Barry Jenkins (*Medicine for Melancholy*, 2008).

The film takes place for the most part in Liberty City, Miami, home to one of the highest concentrations of black families in Greater Metropolitan South Florida and the neighborhood where Jenkins grew up. It is to the locale and the director's commitment that the strongest aspect of *Moonlight*, its social authenticity, is presumably attributable. This concern with everyday, working-class life—at a time when such a concern is rare—helps in part explain the film's appeal. And there is no reason to doubt the sincerity of this concern.

Jenkins's depiction of Liberty City succeeds in immersing the audience in the sweaty nights and sun-blasted days of the poverty-stricken South Florida neighborhood. The story is told in three sections, each depicting a few days in the life of Chiron, a black youth and son to Paula (Naomie Harris), a single mother. The parts are entitled "Little," with Chiron (played by Alex Hibbert) of middle school age; "Chiron," by which time the character (Ashton Sanders) is in high school; and "Black," when he (Trevante Rhodes) is an adult in his late 20s/early 30s.

The film opens to Chiron being chased by other boys through the alleys, overgrown backyards and vacant lots of Liberty City. He hides in an empty apartment in what looks like an abandoned complex. The floor is littered with crack pipes, one of which Chiron picks up and inspects. He is found there by local drug dealer Juan, expertly played by veteran actor Mahershala Ali, best known for his role as Remy Danton in *House of Cards*. Juan and his girlfriend, Theresa (Janelle

Monáe), become Chiron's surrogate family, particularly after Paula descends into drug abuse almost immediately after she is introduced.

These relationships in the setting of Liberty City form what the audience would imagine is the personal and social context most directly responsible for Chiron's development. But is the impact of these circumstances reflected in Chiron's thinking and behavior as *Moonlight* progresses? Largely, it is not. Despite the authentic world that Jenkins has created around his protagonist, the former seems to make little impact on the young man.

Although Chiron is played by different actors in the three sections, with the sections—clearly meant to depict critical episodes in his young life—separated by a period of years, each performance is characterized by an almost complete inability to speak, much less display emotion. The emotional paralysis matches the generally static character of the work.

What can account for such a marked lack of development? How the filmmaker sees the problem of social and psychological development, or, rather, how he fails to do the hard work of locating and orienting the protagonist within the given reality, is what determines *Moonlight's* overall direction.

It is suggested in *Moonlight's* opening scenes that Chiron is gay. How does the audience know this? Because the people around him say so, certainly not because Chiron asserts it as some sort of essential part of his personality.

From this moment onward, the core of his struggle lies in coming to terms with what being gay means and how it informs who he is as a person. This insistence that sexuality is at the heart of our development as individuals is why he remains relatively unchanged throughout the film and also, inadvertently, serves to

undermine the logic of identity politics.

Chiron grows up in a world rich with the contradictions that shape us. His mother clearly loves him and shows warmth and concern for him in one scene, but in other scenes, consumed by the need to get high, neglects him and verbally abuses him. Juan protects him, feeds him and teaches him lessons about life, but he is precisely the person responsible for selling his mother crack cocaine.

The fundamental flaw of Jenkins's film is the flaw in his social-artistic idea, which is typical of our present cultural moment. Because the filmmaker accepts the notion that sexual (and racial) identity is central to whom we are, he is left insufficiently attached and attentive to decisive social realities. He thus finds himself unable to anticipate how his protagonist would react and change in the face of the real pressures and contradictions Chiron confronts—and in relation to many other broader social issues the film does not care to discuss.

One feels a certain sympathy for the three actors depicting Chiron. They are thrust into roles trapped in an ideological bubble that serves to isolate them from the world they have to travel in, but are otherwise not allowed to seriously interact with.

Likewise, one feels sympathy for the supporting actors who put in fine performances around Chiron. It is in large part due to the efforts of Ali, Harris and Monáe that the film is imbued with a degree of life and truth. Ali turns in a complex and charismatic performance as Juan, which makes it all the more distressing when Juan disappears without a mention or a trace after the film's first section.

One has to assume Juan made an impact on Chiron, as he has taken on virtually every one of Juan's external trappings, from his clothes to his car, in the film's final section. But it does not seem that he also adopts Juan's honest concern and empathy for the people around him, a trait all the more striking because Juan's role as a drug dealer, a parasite on the working-class, contradicts it. Chiron remains primarily absorbed with questions of his sexuality.

Liberty City in Jenkins's film suggests the social decay that accompanied the intensification of the assault on the living standards of the working-class throughout the 1990s. But social facts like joblessness, drug use and violence to a large extent remain hints or

ornaments in *Moonlight*. They do not drive the action.

In general, the film suffers from a certain dramatic evasiveness. Each section ends with Chiron on the verge of coming to grips—or not—with a painful aspect of his life. The next section begins without the audience being allowed to see the outcome of these experiences upon Chiron.

Eventually, Chiron's childhood friend Kevin (as an adult, played by André Holland)—the only person by film's end with whom Chiron has had an intimate sexual and, one must conclude, personal encounter—has the audacity to ask the question at the forefront of the viewer's mind, "Who are you, Chiron?" Chiron, predictably, has no answer. How could he? He has spent his entire life to that point changing very little. How does one understand oneself other than through reflection on how one has changed over time?

Is the answer to Kevin's question that Chiron is gay and that is all anyone needs to know? And, more generally, that everyone is an extrapolation of his or her sexuality? On the contrary, the most significant takeaway from *Moonlight* is that sexuality must be a very subordinate feature because the sum-total of Chiron is little more than a suggestive sliver of a character.

The cinematography in *Moonlight* is ambitious and unconventional, but the net result seems a bit unfocused and random. Indeed many shots strangely spend a lot of time literally out of focus. The film is shot mostly in tight, constantly moving objective shots that serve to leave the audience disoriented and without a firm understanding of where their perspective resides.

Despite the director's skill in drawing intimate performances from a number of actors, *Moonlight* leaves the audience far more unaffected than it should be and even impatient for the film to end. It is finally trying on one's patience to spend the entire length of a feature film in the company of such a relative blank slate.



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