



This PDF is a continuation to a blog post "[Media & Black Adolescents Series: Moonlight Disrupts our Expectations in Ways That are Both Captivating and Breathtaking.](#)" Read about the movie "Moonlight" and two students' critiques in the original post.

## **Moonlight**

[Moonlight](#) is a 2016 coming-of-age film that follows the life of a young Black man named Chiron who grew up in Miami, Florida. The film follows three chapters of Chiron's life (Little, Chiron, and Black) that chronicles his childhood, teenage years, and adulthood. Moonlight offers a contemporary and emotional take on many realities that represent Black American life. Specifically, it shows society's stereotypical expectations of Black men and the subsequent damage that has been done to them. Chiron's story is told through breathtaking cinematography and emotionally rich score, capturing scenes that are both moody and dark, yet lit with fluorescent pastels that reflect Miami perfectly (Aguirre, 2016).

Each of the three chapters in the film brilliantly captures Chiron's daily life and its complexities. Moonlight "undoes our expectations as viewers" as it centers around Chiron who we meet as a quiet young boy and just beginning to explore his gay Black masculinity (Als, 2016). He yearns to escape his home life where his mother has fallen to a drug addiction, leaving a void in his life that of Juan, a dope dealer, and his soft-spoken partner Teresa fill. Chiron finds solace when he shares an intimate moment with his friend Kevin, taking a step into unexplored waters. This moment is pivotal and leaves a mark on him in the decade that follows until he reconnects with Kevin in his adult life. Moonlight breaks the stereotypical boundaries media has created for Black characters, especially that of a young Black man, and reintroduces humanity. Chiron is an exemplary character who demonstrates several boundary-breaking characteristics and is an outstanding character to focus this discussion around. The themes of sexual identity, masculinity, and identity development will be explored through the lens of Chiron's character.

## **Black Characters & Stereotypes**

Moonlight is a historic film because it was the first time an LGBTQ movie with an all-black cast won an Oscar, setting precedent for future filmmakers to rethink the way they cast Black characters (BFoundAPen, 2019). In *The Role of Media Use and Portrayals in African American' Psychosocial Development*, authors write that media has a priming effect that influences thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Tynes and Ward, n.d.). For so long, social learning and cultivation theory have painted Black characters in a negative light. Social learning theory

predicts that “behavior modeled on television can be learned and imitated” and cultivation theory suggests that repeated exposure to media and character behavior leads to viewers accepting these “portrayals as representations of reality” (Tynes and Ward, n.d.). Although, *Moonlight*’s historic storyline was so powerful that it took back the narrative that previously scripted Black people in stereotypical ways.

In Chiron’s case, I argue that his character from childhood to adulthood represents the drench hypothesis which emphasizes how “especially powerful portrayals” can shape a viewer’s attitude and overpower previous portrayals (Tynes and Ward, n.d.). What was historic about Chiron’s character was that he explored his gay Black masculinity and did so in different ways; from inquisitively asking what “faggot” means to sharing an intimate moment with his friend Kevin. Gay Black male viewers of all ages likely welcomed this onscreen representation and connected to it in a way they were never able to before *Moonlight*’s release.

Aside from his sexual identity, Chiron also explored his masculinity. In *Scripting the black masculine body*, Jackson writes that the body functions as a “black box” that is “peered into; information is extracted from it and disciplinary regimes are imposed on it” (Jackson, 2009). In other words, our bodies carry social meaning and face subsequent marginalization as a result of constant surveillance by others. I argue that Chiron began coping with this as a young boy when the way he acted and looked succumbed him to name-calling and bullying from his peers. For instance, in an early scene in the film, Chiron’s friend Kevin asks him why he always lets others pick on him and tells him that he needs to prove to them that he’s not soft. In this instance, Chiron’s lack of apparent masculinity is information that Kevin and others extracted from him and believed to carry important social meaning. Media representations have been proven to influence a viewer’s perception of gender roles and Jackson alludes to the hypermasculine stereotype that sets precedent for how Black males act both on and off the screen. While *Moonlight* chose to include aspects of stereotypical masculinity, it did so carefully. Chiron was scripted as a careful observer of the ways other characters represented it through their actions.

## **Identity Development**

Identity formation is central to Chiron’s character development throughout the film, specifically the stage of formation he was in. In *Marcia’s Expansion of Erikson’s Theory of Identity Formation*, Marcia reinforces Erikson’s claim that a mature identity relies on both crisis/exploration and commitment. Crisis/exploration is the period of adolescence where one examines identity issues and begins to define personal goals, values, and beliefs (Muuss, 1996). There are four identity statuses within this domain and Chiron’s character is most similar to the moratorium subject because he was actively exploring his personal identity, specifically his sexual and gender identity. The moratorium subject is in an “as-if” period where one may try “different interpersonal relationships” and Chiron does so in his sexual identity exploration (Muuss, 1996).

Further, the social ecologies that influence racial socialization are highly applicable to Chiron’s identity development, alongside the moratorium period. Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological model covers the individual and their micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). These systems are all interdependent on one another and reflect what is present in an

individual's environment. A microsystem reflects an individual's everyday interactions and I argue that Chiron's microsystem had the most pronounced impact on his identity development. His peers, mother, and Juan/Teresa were those he interacted with most closely and they impacted his existing and changing notions of what his values and beliefs were.

### **Final Thoughts**

Moonlight exceeds and upends expectations of what an LGBTQ film with an all-black cast will present viewers (BFoundAPen, 2019). This coming-of-age film provides a new take on the complexities that a Black man experiences from childhood to adulthood, all the while challenging prevailing stereotypes of Black characters in the media. From sexual identity exploration and coping with masculine expectations to identity development as a whole, viewers are taken on an intimate journey in Chiron's life. Personally, I finished the movie feeling proud that the long-awaited Black LGBTQ representation made it to the big screen.

For parents or educators who may choose to use this movie as a teaching/learning tool, here are some possible discussion questions:

- What impact, if any, does the setting of the film (mainly in Miami and briefly in Atlanta) have on the storyline? In other words, if this were set elsewhere, like a small town for example, in what ways would the movie differ?
- Would Moonlight have received the same praise and recognition for its new and daring storyline if it were released a decade or two earlier? What impact does the political climate in the United States have on conversations about this film?

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