



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](#), directed by Barry Jenkins, follows a young boy named Chiron, who navigates his complicated identity as both a Black and gay man into adulthood. The movie is split into three parts. The first part titled “Little,” the second, “Chiron,” and the third, “Black.” These three parts represent the different stages in his identity formation. In the first part, Chiron lives a troubled childhood, living with his single mother. As a young boy, he meets Juan, a drug dealer, and Teresa, his partner, who take him in and act as parental figures. The second act is about Chiron’s struggles at school and at home, getting bullied by his peers and dealing with his drug addicted mother. In this stage he also explores his sexuality with a childhood friend named Kevin. The last stage, Chiron embodies his nickname Black. He is the epitome of masculinity and toughness. Similar to Juan, he becomes a drug dealer and chooses to share many of the same aesthetics as him. Despite his tough exterior, he reconciles with his mother and connects with Kevin again, which leads to his vulnerability and releasing of his identity.

Disrupting Expectations

One question I found myself asking was “Why does this movie feel different?” I believe that it was different on many levels. On an individual level it made me realize my own expectations of “Blackness,” and how this movie disrupted that. I recognize the idea of “Blackness” as a superficial representation that has been perpetuated by the media. According to Dr. Valerie Adams:

Blackness is defined as a superficial symbolic representations of cultural preferences, norms, expression, dress, language, mannerism and communication styles that are treated as representations of African American cultural and ethnic identities that have been defined by mainstream society and media.” (Adams, 2011)

This movie also feels different on a normative level, as movies typically don’t go against cultural stereotypes, rather, they perpetuate them. From a young age we are repeatedly shown images from the media that create this superficial image of what it is to be Black. As Tynes and Ward say in their 2009 paper, “The Role of Media Use in African Americans’ Psychosocial

Development,” the gradual exposure to stereotypes portrayed in the media causes us to take these representations and see them as reality. This is known as cultivation theory (Tynes and Ward, 2009). The implications of this for African Americans is especially dangerous as the media has chosen to portray them as one-dimensional characters reduced to either comic relief or the tough gangster, cops or robbers. This covert racism against Black people has primed viewers to have these expectations about the characterizations of Black characters.

Identity Formation and Society

Throughout the movie we see how the expectations of society for him to behave a certain way has shaped his new identity formation and created many ironies. We can use Marcia’s four identity statuses as described in Muus’s, “Marcia’s Expansion of Erikson’s Identity Formation,” to analyze Chiron’s development. Rejection by his peers reflects the societal expectations that men have to be masculine and tough, and Chiron lacking these qualities leads to his isolation. In an effort to help him, Kevin tells Chiron to, “Show them you aren’t soft,” further showing that if he follows what is expected of him, he will be safe. We see from a very young age, Chiron is already entering the third status of Marcia’s four identity statuses, *moratorium*, which involves crises and exploration brought on by the pressure of societal expectations. After getting beat up and humiliated, teenage Chiron can no longer handle it and beats his bully with a chair causing him to go to a juvenile detention center. When he takes on the identity of Black in the third part, we see him attempt to fit into this mold that society had made for him. Following the mold that society expects a young African American man to follow is shocking to the audience despite the fact that the media and society perpetuates it. It is because this movie gives African American people more than a one-dimensional personality or characterization that so many mainstream movies fail to do. It is a reminder to the audience that no one is born a criminal. They are socialized by society to do so.

As a drug dealer, he attempts to adopt a tough personality and shows aesthetic similarities to Juan such as his do-rag and crown on his car. This is ironic as Juan was always kind and showed his emotions around Chiron, contrasting the expectation of the stereotype that a drug dealer must put on a tough act with no emotions. It is also ironic because Juan was the one who told him that, “At some point, you gotta decide for yourself who you gonna be. Can’t let nobody make that decision for you.” This statement encourages Chiron to create his own identity rather than letting other people or society do that for him, yet it seems this persona he has adopted is doing just that. It is not until the very last scene in the movie that we see him achieve the fourth status of identity achievement. Once he realizes that this identity he formed is no longer expected of him, he is able to accept his sexuality and resolve his identity issues on his own terms by embracing Kevin and being held in his arms, thus, concluding the movie (Muus, 1996).

Using Expectations to Break Down Stereotypes

The reason that *Moonlight* seems different, is because it uses expectations to contradict existing stereotypes. As mentioned earlier, this movie takes our superficial idea of “Blackness” and plays on that in order to highlight how Chiron feels he must be and contrast it with who he really is. Even the physicality of Black is used to go against pre-existing stereotypes of Black people. In “Scripting the Black Masculine Body,” Jackson (2006) describes characters that were used in

early entertainment in order to dehumanize the Black body. One of these characters was the “buck.” The “buck” was characterized in the media as having dark skin, a muscular build, and insatiable often sexual desires (41).

One can see the contrast in this negative stereotype and Chiron. While superficially Chiron may share these basic physical characteristics, it is seen in his personality and character that he does not have these negative traits of insatiable desire and hypermasculinity. As he told Kevin in the last scene, he has never touched anyone since him. The last scene is not him releasing his sexual desires in an insatiable way, he instead is embracing the intimacy that he had been missing for most of his life by being held by Kevin. He is extremely sensitive and despite him trying to change his “softness,” by acting tough, he repeatedly shows that he is vulnerable and often cries throughout the movie. As the actor who played teenage Chiron said himself, “[Moonlight] is about breaking down a stereotype and understanding humanity (Sanders, IMDB).” The contrast between his physical and emotional portrayal showcase one of the themes in this movie, of how expectations put on Chiron lead him to try to develop the identity that society expects him to be, rather than choose for himself. What people should take away is the role of expectations, how they are formed, and how it impacts the formation of identity.

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

- What are some of the ways in which this movie combats stereotypes?
- Are there any characters, scenes, or themes that you believe play into stereotypes? What role/purpose do you think these stereotypes play in this movie if any?

References

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