

## Textual Analysis: The Socio-Historical Effects on *Moonlight* (2016)

Chosen Extract Running Time: 17:56 – 22:56

Barry Jenkin's Oscar winning movie, *Moonlight*, tells the coming-of-age story of, fictional character, Chiron, growing up in a poor, black, community in Miami, Florida. Jenkin's adaptation of Tarell McCraney's 2013 play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, combines autobiographical elements of both men, raised just blocks apart in the eighties. The story is told over three parts, where each version of Chiron is separate from the other. Both *Moonlight* as a whole and the chosen extract use elements such as cinematography, sound, and mise-en-scene to convey the socio-historical context which they depict. My analysis will center on these elements.

The cultural context in which *Moonlight* is made is important when analyzing the director's choices. The semi-autobiographical film depicts the Socio-Historical context in which the creators grew up and reflects the social climate it is produced within. Jenkins and McCraney were born in 1980 and 1981, respectively. The 80s, a time best described as an era of growth for the United States saw tax cuts, a growing stock market, the rise of new media, and development of new entertainment genres, it was not, however, a period of equal development, instead a time of horror as many marginalized American's faced dread in their everyday life. Looking deeper into the city of Miami, where *Moonlight* is set had what the New York Times contemporaneously estimated to be where 70 percent of the nation's cocaine, 70 percent of its marijuana and 90 percent of counterfeit Quaaludes being trafficked through its streets (Jaynes). Along with the heavy influx of drugs within Miami, the nation faced stricter sentencing as part of Nixon's 1971 war on drugs. President Reagan, in 1986, continued Nixon's legacy when the Anti-Drug Abuse Act was passed by a bipartisan majority in both the House and Senate. The legislation created mandatory minimum prison sentences for drug offenses, which would come

to be heavily criticized as having racist ramifications (“ACLU). The legislation being passed throughout the century increased incarceration rates for minorities, with devastating consequences for decades after. The Reagans’ anti-drug campaign did not just create the laughable *Just Say No* slogan but produced tangible harm to inner-city communities.

The cultural context of gay rights must also be considered when understanding *Moonlight*, given the sexual orientation of the protagonist. The 1980s although after the Stonewall Inn Riots, which began a national movement for LGBTQIA+ rights, was still an era with intense social stratifications associated with homosexuality, further catalyzed by the AIDS epidemics throughout the century, which included limited legal rights. The consequences of being gay during the period are augmented by the additionally caustic view of LGBTQ peoples in inner city black communities. One must understand what it is like to be gay, black, and poor to understand *Moonlight* and this is what Jenkins is trying to teach his audience.

Throughout the first act, the protagonist un-affectionately nicknamed “Little”, is treated as an outcast by his community. Those around him can understand who he is, although through a conspicuously distorted lens, before he learns who that is himself. This understanding of Chiron creates a disconnect between “Little” and his peers as shown throughout the extract via the cinematography. When Juan arrives home, he sees Chiron outside, in the yard. Jenkins combines multiple film elements to convey the isolation and loneliness felt by Chiron. In figure 1 Chiron is photographed with a long shot. When filming from a distance with a wide-angle lens James Laxton, *Moonlight*’s cinematographer, visually portrays Chiron’s loneliness by creating distance between Alex Hibbert and the camera, and when combined with the previous shot of Juan, affords the audience his perspective. McMillon and Sanders, *Moonlight*’s editors, juxtapose the medium shot of Juan with that of Chiron to both exhibit how wide the latter shot is and to create

distance between both Juan and Chiron along with distance between the audience and Chiron. This distance creates a disconnect between Chiron and the world.

By using an anamorphic lens, although not with a super-wide aperture, Laxton is able to blur the background palm trees with the archetypal anamorphic look. This further builds the disconnect felt by Chiron. By blurring the surroundings Chiron is left alone with nothing surrounding him in focus, creating a sense of isolation.

The framing and blocking of this shot are too significant. Laxton creates leading lines to the subject with the hedge on the left and plants on the right. This draws the viewers eyes to Chiron and away from his surroundings. By moving the audience away from the rest of the yard we are left alone with Chiron. There is nothing else to look at but him; he is alone in the world.

Jenkins also creates an uneasy feeling through framing. By not following any of the tried and tested composition methods that are inherently visually pleasing (golden ratio, symmetry, rule of thirds) the audience is left with an uncomfortable feeling. Although, one does not see the “mistake” when watching the film, it’s effects can be felt. This uneasiness adds to the viewers experience, in understanding Chiron. I felt it when I first watched the movie. Something just feels off and makes you better able to empathize with Chiron; you can feel what he feels.



Fig. 1: Chiron outside of Juan's house after the football scene.

To further create this loneliness other elements of mise-en-scene are used. By sitting at a table alone, he is already in the most practical sense lonely, this, however, is further explored by placing another chair beside him. By having an open seat next to Chiron, it is implied to the audience that someone should be there, creating an emptiness; a seat that needs to be filled. Furthermore, the yard, being enclosed by vegetation creates this isolation from the world. By planting the edges of the yard, the boundaries of Chiron's universe are created, isolating him from the outside. His world is filled with nothing but empty space.

Moonlight juxtaposes the two wide shots of Juan standing next to the seated Chiron both in the yard and at the beach to the closeup of the two sitting on a bench after the ocean scene. The change from the superficial wide shot to the intimate closeup after the climactic bonding moment, signifies how their relationship developed, allowing Chiron to open to Juan. This ties back to Jenkins' and McCraney's upbringing where they were forced into developing these deep relationships with strangers.

The disconnect Chiron is portrayed as feeling relates to the cultural context that is depicted throughout the film. Because of his sexuality, Chiron is made into an outcast, which fits

heavily with context in which both playwright McCraney and director Jenkins grew up in. The use of mise-en-scene and cinematography depicts the socio-historical context in which the film draws upon.

The scene which depicts Juan taking Chiron to the beach and teaching him how to swim, is significant in its symbolism. The scene depicts Chiron having his head held up as Juan says: “Here, let your head rest in my hand. Relax. I got you, I promise. I’m not gon’ let you go” he continues “Feel that right there? You’re in the middle of the world, man”. The dialogue in this scene portrays the same symbolism that is being shown visually. Juan in this scene is teaching Chiron how to keep his head above water, in other words, this scene represents Juan instructing Chiron how to live in the unjust world he was born into; Juan adopts the traditional patriarchal role.



Fig. 2: Juan teaching Chiron how to swim.

Jenkin’s upbringing is especially important when understanding the cultural context of the scene. As an article by the Guardian describes how his relationship connects with McCraney’s: “Jenkins’ mother was an addict, like McCraney’s, and he was eventually taken in

by a surrogate grandmother figure” (Pulver). Chiron’s lack of parental figures, from both his mother and father, do come from the experiences of the auteur. Both Jenkins and Chiron had to find a model outside of their home. It is equally important to note when evaluating this context that black fathers are less involved in their children is a myth, at least contemporaneously, as shown by a CDC National Health Statistics Report, *Fathers’ Involvement With Their Children: United States, 2006–2010*, which showed that given those surveyed, although black men on average lived separated from their children more often than other demographics, they participated in their children’s lives with the same frequency as their peers. It is this social context that is influencing Jenkin’s work, his personal experience felt by many of his peers no matter the demographic.

Finally, the music used in the extract is significant to understanding the meaning of the film. The score created by Nicholas Britell, *Little’s Theme*, in the swimming scene, compliments the elegance of the absurdist visuals of a drug dealer teaching a kid how to swim. The non-diegetic sound of the cantabile, low, adagio of the cello and the high pitch of the violin combine to create a near psychedelic mood. The allegro of the violin feels as if it would not be out of place opening on the Twilight Zone, with a clear ominous tone. This marks a colossal moment of change; the defining instant of whether Chiron would trust Juan and, ironically, be pushed off the path of his mother or slowly crawl along in her footsteps, alone. The drone of the cello has a similar effect, but by using the opposite side of the spectrum. By having the low undertone that builds up throughout the scene, disguised by the ear-grabbing violin, it is only noticed when it is left alone to resonate in the audience’s chest. This creates the suspense that will underly the rest of the film, after bringing attention to the scene.

Moonlight draws on the experiences of both Jenkins and McCraney in their similar upbringing in Miami. These social and historical influences are seen throughout the film and the chosen extract in the cinematography, sound, and mise-en-scene. Chiron's loss in a world hostile to his very existence shown through Jenkins' work reflects upon the shared recent past we share as a society.

Number of Words: 1703

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