

Drowning Their Sorrows in the Ocean: A Review of Black [Mask]ulinity, Drugs, and Water in Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight*

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“You just roll out into the water, right? Roll out into the water like all these other motherfuckers around here trying to drown they sorrows” (*Moonlight* 2016). Representations of Black queer men in media have long been distorted to portray them as feminine, hyper-sexual, messy individuals with no valid space to fully exist. Based on Tarell Alvin McCraney’s play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, Barry Jenkins’ 2016 award-winning film *Moonlight* tells the story of a Black gay youngster growing up in a poor neighborhood of Miami and allows for a marginalized voice to have a seat at the table. Separated into three different parts, *Moonlight* follows the life of Chiron and demystifies stereotypes related to hyper-masculinity, drug dealers, and sexuality in the Black community, giving audiences a peek into a life many have never thought twice about. It hones in on the meaning of love, both romantic and platonic, and the need to feel a connection through relationships and friendships. This review examines the ways toxic masculinity fuels internalized homophobia, how drugs act as a silencing tool for homosexuality, and how water is a symbol for maturation, independence, empowerment, and the overall struggle for a sense of identity.

Beginning with the song “Every Nigger is a Star” by Boris Gardiner prior to any dialogue, Jenkins levels the social playing field in the Black community, as it is a film that puts oppressed identities in the spotlight. It extends to the audience that no matter one’s identity in the Black community, they are worthy of being viewed as human and respected as such. The song sets the tone for the film and begins to deconstruct the toxic masculinity that will be shown to viewers by giving silenced groups—gay and poor, in this case—the agency to tell their story. Chiron’s father figure Juan gives meaning to the song, as he unapologetically accepts Chiron for who he is and grants him the space to create and deliver his story to the audience as he sees fit. Chiron’s story entails much heartache and turmoil, with one aspect being the toxic masculinity he endures.

In the first scene with Chiron, or Little, as he is called in part one, a group of boys are violently chasing him while shouting homophobic slurs. From “Get your gay ass right here,” to “Goin’ around with that faggot ass, bro,” to “Catch that faggot ass nigga” (*Moonlight* 2016), their slurs make it clear that Little is literally running away to save his life. Based on their language, it is clear that Little’s mob has homophobic motives for trying to capture him, which immediately places him as an “Other” in the film. Although there is no evidence of Little actually being gay, this scene grants access to the world of toxic masculinity at a young age. Little’s small physique and his reserved personality deem him gay to his peers, so their idea of masculinity is warped to believe that he is lesser than they are on the basis of emasculation. While watching a group of boys play with a paper ball, Little nearly becomes another target to be bullied, but his friend Kevin comes to his rescue. During their conversation, Kevin gives Little an explanation that is coded with toxic masculinity: “All you gotta do is show these niggas you ain’t soft” (*Moonlight* 2016). This statement raises the question of what it means to be a man, but it also expresses how many young Black boys view masculinity. Kevin, in choosing to have this conversation with Little in private, shows the construction of masculinity as something never

openly discussed but subconsciously learned; Kevin is trying to teach Little how to disguise himself with the other boys. Researchers Theresa Rajack-Talley and Derrick R. Brooms describe this phenomenon as Black “*mask-ularity*” in the context of *Moonlight*, as Black hyper-masculinity is a mask to be worn and an “equal but opposite force against the societal forces that push down and pressure Black males who might be ‘soft’” (2018, 143).

Part two of *Moonlight* entails more violent and blatant acts of toxic masculinity in the school. The opening act begins with Chiron being called out for not paying attention in class, and his childhood bully Terrel completely emasculates Chiron, saying, “Hey, yo, that nigga forgot to change his tampon. I’m sorry, Mr. Pierce. He just having woman problems today” (*Moonlight* 2016). This incident, coupled with background chuckles by his peers and Terrel’s humiliating comments, leads Chiron to suppress his sexuality and internalize the hateful denigrations thrown at him. In the following scene, this internalized homophobia can subtly be detected in the character of Kevin. As he explains to Chiron how he got detention—by getting caught having sex with a girl in a stairway—Kevin says, “That stays between us, a’ight? I know you can keep a secret, dawg” (*Moonlight* 2016). The unnecessary detail Kevin provides in his sexual story and his desire to keep it between him and Chiron shows his struggle with his own sexuality. Kevin asserting that he knows Chiron can keep a secret invites the audience to ponder what secret he could be referring to, implying that they had a sexual encounter either as younger children or as adolescents.

Following Kevin’s and Chiron’s teenage sexual experience on the beach in part two, Kevin’s internalized homophobia increasingly builds up until he acts on his sexual suppression. When Terrel is searching for a person to receive a beating and points out Chiron after lunch, Kevin adheres to his choice and punches Chiron in the face to prove himself worthy. Although Kevin and Chiron are closer than any other pair of friends in the film, Kevin compromises their friendship for the sake of reinforcing toxic masculinity. A background voice says, “Hit his faggot ass” (*Moonlight* 2016), and Kevin continues hitting him. Because this physical altercation is moments after the two boys exchanged a sexual experience, it is clear that Kevin will use violence to hide his true self, even if it means beating his lover.

In part three of the film, while it is clear that Chiron, now called Black, still has a reserved personality, he also perpetuates toxic masculinity through his internalized homophobia. For example, while riding around with another Black man, the man asks, “So where the hoes at?” (*Moonlight* 2016), with a misogynistic tone designed to objectify women. After smiling at his question to mask his discomfort with subscribing to heteronormativity, Black eventually answers, “I don’t know. You tell me” (*Moonlight* 2016). This shows that he lacks pride in his sexuality as an African American man, and that he will conform to the standard in order to comfortably exist in the closet. The scene directly correlates with C. J. Pascoe’s idea of “getting girls” in her book *Dude, You’re a Fag*. “Getting girls” refers to a game that men play to reinforce their masculinity. If a boy does not engage in the game, he loses his masculine capital (Pascoe 2007). Black, by slightly answering the guy’s question, is granted further access into the straight world, and this access remains solely because of his developed hyper-masculine identity as a drug dealer. Black’s image as a thug in part three relates to one finding on Black gay men in a 2015 study from Quinn et al. that, “Individuals with higher levels of internalized homonegativity may be more likely to attempt to be perceived by others as masculine” (221). Having served time in juvenile detention, it is clear that Black is a product of his environment and feels the need to hide his sexuality by displaying himself as a “hard” man. Throughout *Moonlight*, it is evident that the construction of masculinity poses dangers both from physical violence and internalized

homophobia, but the use of drugs in the film poses a different perspective for the conversation—or lack thereof—surrounding sexuality.

The character of Paula, Little's mother, is a critical component to analyzing sexuality discourse among families in the Black community. In one 2012 report, researchers examined the role community, religion, and family played in the experiences of Black gay men. Coupled with his fear of family rejection, stigma, and isolation, one Black man disclosed that his reason for not opening up to his family was that it would make him the "black" sheep (Balaji et al. 2012, 734). This narrative is extended in *Moonlight* when Juan confronts Paula for doing drugs that he sold her. She takes a puff of her joint and cries, "You ever see the way he walk, Juan? You gon' tell him why the other boys kick his ass all the time? Huh? You gon' tell him?" (*Moonlight* 2016). This implies that she knows her son is gay, but she is unwilling to have a conversation with him. The inhale she takes before asking Juan the aforementioned questions shows her use of drugs to avoid talking with Little about his sexuality, as she is on drugs for the majority of her and Chiron's relationship. In the following scene, while she is high, Paula screams at Little in the hallway. With the instrumental music increasing in tension, the angle and slow motion effect of the camera, and the hate emitting from her eyes, Paula's homophobia is clear-cutting as her lips form the words, "Don't look at me" (*Moonlight* 2016) and she retreats back into her room. The shame she has of her son is reflected back onto Little, as he disappointingly drops his head and exits the room.

In the second part of the film, when Little becomes a teenager and begins going by the name Chiron, he still has a reserved nature about him. One day after school, when Chiron arrives home, his mother sternly tells him, "You cannot be here tonight. I got company coming. Find somewhere for you to be" (*Moonlight* 2016). It is clear that Paula is high during this interaction, which implies that she and her company coming over will be taking drugs. Her willingness to put her son out of the house portrays drugs as being more worthy of acknowledgement, as she completely dismisses him and agitatedly climbs the stairs. Moreover, Paula not wanting Chiron in the house whatsoever suggests that she is shameful of his entire being and fears her company might potentially detect her son's homosexuality. During the final part of the film, Chiron, now Black, visits Paula, now at a rehabilitation center, on his way to Kevin's restaurant. The conversation they have highlights the importance of drugs as a silencer throughout the film, as Paula attempts to discuss her son's troubles. Her sobriety allows her to see Black as a whole person, regardless of his sexuality. This is observed when she says, "You ever thought about talking about it with somebody? Maybe not even a counselor, maybe somebody like your mama?" (*Moonlight* 2016). Black's chuckle at her questions uncovers the irony in her concern and the effect she had on him as a child, as she had never wanted to talk about anything personal with him. With her admittance that she messed up and reassurance of her love for him, Paula's drug-free status finally permits her to see Black at face value. Her use of drugs throughout the film acts as a disconnect between her and her son, and the addiction she has causes their relationship to deteriorate over time.

Water gives humans the ability to survive, and its power in the context of *Moonlight* not only empowers Chiron in certain situations, but it guides and warrants him opportunities for maturation and identity exploration. The first sign of water as a symbol for maturation is observed when Juan brings Little to the beach and teaches him how to float and swim. During their practice, Juan notes, "Feel that right there? You're in the middle of the world, man" (*Moonlight* 2016). Juan teaching Little how to swim and letting him do it on his own gives Little the space to be himself, and the water acts as a start for the exploration of his sexuality.

Immediately when they are finished swimming, a scene of Little running away from the water as it approaches his feet shows the hesitation he has throughout his journey, and the fear he holds in not knowing the unknown. In a part with Little bathing himself, water is seen as a sign of independence as Little boils his own water before pouring it in the bathtub. This scene also scrapes the surface of the intersections of growing up Black, gay, and low-income in America.

Part two includes more sexual undertones, and water again reveals Chiron's struggle for a sense of identity when he has a dream about Kevin having sex with a girl. The waves crashing in the background of Chiron's dream represent the uneasiness he feels watching Kevin have heterosexual relations, and the position in which the two have sex—commonly known as “doggy style”—could suggest to the viewer that Chiron imagines himself in the girl's place. Additionally, the sexual position suggests Chiron's perception of how Kevin views women, in that he lacks passion and intimacy when sexually involving himself with them. In one scene of the film, while Chiron is sitting on the beach, Kevin approaches him and begins a conversation. The waves in the background induce a calming sensation for the interaction as the teens begin to open up to one another. Chiron's desire to explore his sexuality is noted as he says, “I wanna do a lot of things that don't make sense” (*Moonlight* 2016). Kevin's response, “I didn't say it don't make sense” (*Moonlight* 2016), implies that he knows what Chiron is referring to, and that he is okay with reciprocating that exploration. Chiron offers a direct representation of water as a sense of struggle through the act of crying when he utters, “Shit, I cry so much, sometimes I feel like I'mma just turn into drops” (*Moonlight* 2016). After moments pass, the couple exchange a kiss and Kevin masturbates Chiron's penis, bringing him to an orgasm; the waves during this moment symbolize both men's struggle with their identity, as Chiron whimpers and apologizes for the entire interaction.

In part two, water as a sense of empowerment is noted immediately following the beating Chiron receives from Terrel and his friends, and directly preceding the revenge he seeks on Terrel. To soothe his pain, Chiron submerges his face into a sink of iced water, which acts as a form of power when he arises. With slow, droning music in the background as he looks at his reflection in the mirror, it is clear that Chiron has had enough of the bullying, and the subsequent scene emphasizes this frustration as he releases his anger onto Terrel; Chiron's defense ironically lands him in juvenile detention. One of the most significant signs of water as a symbol of maturation comes when Chiron, as Black, in part three of the film, develops into an adult.

The final part begins with Black having a nightmare of his mother yelling at him as a child, and he awakes frantically, sweating. To suppress this memory, he submerges his face into a sink of iced water that numbs his pain—now emotionally charged, unlike his physical pain as an adolescent. The water gives him a reminder of his upbringing and the struggles he faced, and the upbeat song in this scene shows the viewer that Black has grown from his past. When Black visits Kevin at his restaurant and they finish having dinner, the sound of waves can be heard in the background. Before Kevin takes some leftover dishes into the back, he disappointingly asks Black, “Why you got them damn fronts, man?” (*Moonlight* 2016). The waves in this instance represent one of the final signs of a struggle for a sense of identity, as the “fronts” Kevin refers to include not only Black's gold grills, but the front that he is putting on to portray himself as a straight man. This struggle is noticed as Black stares outside of the restaurant and listens to the waves, the sound that was with him during his first sexual experience with Kevin. Once they arrive at Kevin's place, Black looks at the beach with nostalgia and smiles, indicating his sense of growth and appreciation of the encounter he had with Kevin as a teen.

The final scene of the film comes full circle, with Little, the child, turning his head toward the camera as he stands on the beach and the waves rage in the background. The water in this scene represents the maturation, independence, empowerment, and identity exploration recognized throughout the film. It shows maturation through Little as his adult self is caressed by Kevin once more, before his younger self looks into the camera. Independence is revealed as he is standing on the beach alone, where his first encounter with a beach was learning how to swim with Juan. Empowerment appears through the look on Little's face, as he has just finished telling his story to the audience and lends that same sense of vulnerability with his lookback. Lastly, an overall struggle for a sense of identity is expressed in the picture of Little as a child, showing the journey he had to take to develop into the man he has become. He looks back at the audience to reflect on his identity and empowers each viewer to do the same. Little's lookback represents him finally coming to peace with himself and his gay identity, as the waves of the ocean bring the serenity he was searching for his entire life.

Having won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2016, *Moonlight's* vibrant colors, striking instrumentals, and silent scenes make the film well deserving of every award, but also make it a moving film to watch. The character of Chiron is represented through a heartfelt lens and delivers an intersectional framework on what it means to grow up as a Black, gay, poor man in America. It tells the story of struggle, love, acceptance, the meaning of family, friendship, and much more. *Moonlight* demands the start of an ongoing conversation of queerness in the traditional, masculine Black spaces that foster much stigma and prejudice still today. Chiron's childhood sorrows give him strength and resilience to persevere into adulthood, and his relationship with Kevin helps prevent him from turning into drops, rolling out into the water, and drowning his sorrows, as Kevin describes in the film. Giving struggling queer teens of color a face in the media and other viewers an alternative perspective on sexuality in America, *Moonlight* beautifully demonstrates the notion that Black men loving Black men is *the* revolutionary act.

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