

# moonlight:

an experience  
TRANSCENDING  
"slice-of-life"

★★★★★ | cambrie laymance | @cambrie.dl



Love, loss, fear, hatred—universal to the human condition. When a film touches on these, it's difficult to find a balance between relatable and original. It's especially important for slice-of-life movies, as the focus is the human condition. Many fall flat in their attempt, but director Berry Jenkins achieves a golden middle-ground in *Moonlight* (2016).

*Moonlight* is a refreshing, almost uncomfortable, close-up of Chiron—a black gay boy from a poor Miami neighborhood. He must deal with added tribulations of his identity and environment on top of familiar growing pains. In the style of renowned directors, like Quentin Tarantino and Wes Anderson, three chapters create an overall narrative of self-discovery in adversity. Each chapter explores a defining moment from his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood—accordingly titled “Little,” “Chiron,” and “Black.”

Its most basic premise isn't unique, per se. It came in a barrage of slice-of-life films—notably *Ladybird* (2017), *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016). What sets it apart, then? Well, everything else. *Moonlight* is nothing short of revolutionary: It's one of few major feature films to include an all-black cast; explorations of homosexuality, hypermasculinity, blackness, and poverty—themes not often intersected in media; and Mahershela Ali as the first Muslim to win Best Supporting Actor. Also impressive is its ability to transcend the genre through intensely personal narrative, cinematography, and acting. This isn't just a generalized representation of what it means to be black, or gay, or impoverished; it's an experience.

It's easy to assume the title “Little” only refers to a young Chiron

(Alex R. Hibbert). However, it's quickly revealed to be derogatory as a shaky camera trails him being chased by a group of noticeably larger boys. Most know what it's like to be the odd-one-out, and the first chapter plays on that while still centering Chiron. Long, isolating, closing shots pit him against his peers in places like dance class or the boys' bathroom, where it's highlighted how out of place he looks. Fluttering camera movements reflect anxieties of challenged masculinity, such as sports games and fights. A lost sense of belonging is subtly recreated, while immersing the audience in Chiron's own experience.

**"this is not just a generalized representation of what it means to be black, or gay, or impoverished; it is an experience."**

That feeling is replicated with his mother (Naomie Harris). There's a sense something's off when Chiron returns home, met with wide eyes, panicked speech, and dizzily jumpy close-shots. A slow descent into addiction unfolds as possessions disappear, interactions with his mother become yelling and stealing, looks deteriorate, and he's often left alone or with strangers. No one has to tell Chiron, or the audience, what's happening. Everyone knows because it's inferred through intelligent writing and Harris' performance. She manages to walk a fine line of portraying addiction—empathizing her character as a single mother doing her best, but not forgetting the havoc it wreaks on bystanders.



**"[naomie harris] manages to walk that fine line of portraying addiction-bringing empathy to her character as a single mother doing her best...but not forgetting the havoc it wreaks on its bystanders."**

Don't fret, there's some happy moments in this painfully raw story. However, Jenkins keeps it human by not omitting flaws. Chiron has a complicated relationship with childhood friend Kevin. However, he proves to be the needed break in Chiron's spiral—especially in the second and third chapters. While these chapters aren't as engaging, they're crucial in their growth. Calming shades of blues filling an intimate beach moment contrast with excited camera-work during a school confrontation, presenting two difficult explorations of identity as teens. Milder backdrops and compositions for late-night diner conversations reflect an earned maturity, yet a lingering air of hesitance in facing their past.

Both characters' teen and adult actors beautifully bring meaning to the limited atmospheres of the later chapters. Ashton Sanders and Jharrel Jerome, playing adolescent Chiron and Kevin respectively, emphasize their childhood personalities while maintaining space for change. Chiron is even more quiet, and Kevin more rambunctious. However, they share moments where desires are expressed to be more like each other. Their adult

actors, Trevante Rhodes and Andre Holland, show how much they endured while sneaking hints of past selves. It's difficult for multiple actors to achieve a consistent, yet dynamic development for the same character; but, all of Chiron and Kevin's actors exceeded this.

Without reliable parents, Chiron gravitates towards Juan (Mahershela Ali) and his girlfriend Teresa (Janelle Monae). Juan provides an especially pivotal role, offering Chiron valuable life lessons and needed resources. Like his mother, Juan isn't perfect. He enables the environment that endangered Chiron in the first place. Ali excels in his performance with wordless displays of guilt through tense expressions, making the audience feel that same guilt for championing him. His fatherly presence still shines through in moments where he's teaching Chiron to swim, putting him in the passenger seat, and moral conversations. He doesn't make it easy to accept the reality of who Juan is, for good and bad.

**"[mahershela ali]'s wordless display of guilt through tense expressions makes the audience feel guilty for rooting for him."**

While *Moonlight* will certainly be remembered for its success and boundary-breaking achievements in representation, it displays an artistry that's hard for other films like it to compete with—gaining a high amount of respect for years to come.