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<div align="center">*Moonlight*: Vulnerability vs. Performativity</div>

A young Black boy stares into the ocean as shades of blue dance across the screen, his skin shining in the moonlight. This striking visual serves as the final scene in director Barry Jenkins' award-winning film *Moonlight*, inspired by Tarell Alvin McCraney's unpublished play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* (Mattia). *Moonlight* follows Chiron through three distinct episodes of his life growing up as a Black queer male in Miami. The plot centers around Chiron as an individual rather than focusing solely on the identities he holds. As stated by Professor Richard Dyer, "How one thinks and feels is at once lived as intensely personal, yet made up of matters that in themselves are not unique to one" (7). Jenkins builds a tangible sense of intimacy and vulnerability that counters the performativity of Black masculinity through utilizing elements of lighting, staging, and cinematography to represent the evolution of Chiron's life. The contrasting visual strategies emphasize this comparison and subvert the audience's expectations and stereotypes.

Moonlight immediately defines Blackness as "the norm" by presenting an all-Black cast. Society typically only applies race to non-white people, allowing white people to function as the "human norm" (Dyer 1). In contrast, Jenkin's decisions allow *Moonlight* to encompass issues of race without directly confronting them. The film intentionally draws the audience into Chiron's deeply personal experiences, which result from a complex intersection of identities where race acts as only a single dimension. *Moonlight*'s setting also serves an integral role in the story. The

film is grounded in Jenkins and McCraney's lived experiences growing up in Liberty City, a historically Black community in Miami. Similar to Chiron, both were raised in single-parent households by mothers that struggled with substance abuse (Mattia). Jenkins strived to convey his vibrant memories growing up in Miami, reflected in the presentation of Black bodies and Black skin. Typically, Black actors apply powder to prevent the light from reflecting off their skin, but *Moonlight* achieves the opposite effect by using oil to amplify the shine. Jenkins commented that he "wanted everyone's skin to have a sheen to reflect [his] memory" (Moakley). This effect creates a sense of tactility that captures viewers' attention and draws their focus to the actors' faces and expressions, which often betray their internal thoughts.

The film opens with Juan driving directly into the camera, his car filling the frame. This staging immediately frames him as confrontational and intimidating. He then converses with two men in the street, their casual dialogue filled with slang and profanity. The camera repeatedly circles them, then eventually goes still, allowing the viewer to focus on the interaction without distractions. Juan asks about the other man's mother, stating that she's "in his prayers," and in return he thanks Juan for "the opportunity." This scene initially feels very familiar and recognizable; Juan embodies a stereotypical drug dealer, and the men's speech and body language match the audience's expectations (Mattia). As the conversation unfolds, however, Jenkins incorporates subtle elements that add a layer of intimacy. The men's words reveal a clear sense of compassion and a deeper internal awareness of each other and the world around them.

As Juan walks away, a group of young children run through the frame, creating a sense of dimension and pulling the viewer into the scene. The camera remains trained on Juan, emphasizing his facial expressions, until it abruptly switches to follow Chiron running away. The sudden transition disarms viewers, and the shaky camera reflects Chiron's perspective. The

cinematography consistently reflects the characters' movement and emotions, influencing the audience to feel what the characters feel in each moment (Mattia). In this instant, for example, Chiron feels disoriented, so Jenkins manipulates the filming to disorient the audience. As Chiron runs, tree branches and buildings obstruct the shot, fully integrating the viewer into the scene. The camera feels handheld; even during static shots, it's never fully still, adding a sense of subjectivity. Chiron enters an abandoned building to escape, later identified as a dope hole, and the camera dramatically swings around, giving the sensation that the viewer is present, looking back and forth between Chiron and his pursuers. This tactic begins to break down the performativity inherent in film by incorporating the viewer into the tensions and emotions of the situation.

Chiron sits alone in the dark while the kids pound on the door and throw objects at the window. The camera haphazardly circles him, fading in and out of focus as lights flash across the screen, producing an extremely disorienting effect. This cinematography continues to conjure subjectivity, rather than creating a false display of strength and ease. Chiron's curled form appears very isolated; he sits completely centered, surrounded by empty space and bleak, desaturated colors. Suddenly, Juan knocks on the door, and when Chiron doesn't respond, Juan pulls a barricade off the window, physically lighting up the space. This action represents the way Juan breaks down Chiron's walls and brings light into his life. Previously, Chiron's life resembled an empty, dark room, and Juan was willing to join him in that space, unafraid of the darkness he might find, represented in this space by the broken glass and needles littering the floor that pose a physical danger.

When the camera focuses on Juan, viewers see the back of Chiron's head in the foreground. This frame simultaneously shows Chiron's perspective and positions the viewers

externally to the scene, actively reminding them that the film is a construct. Jenkins intentionally strives to keep the audience aware of the filmmakers and actors, a decision that differentiates *Moonlight* from many other notable films that maintain a more aloof style (Moakley). In *Moonlight*, the medium becomes a part of the story. Films are inherently performative, but this approach forces the audience to remain aware of this performative lens.

Juan gently approaches and speaks to Chiron, affectionately referring to him as "lil man." Juan's patient, calming demeanor and behavior toward the young child contrast with his intimidating external presentation as a drug dealer. The camera switches between Chiron and Juan, showcasing the physical space between them. It focuses on Chiron's face and his expressions, illustrating the dynamic emotions beneath his silent exterior. Both characters look directly into the camera, demanding the viewer's attention and producing a humanizing effect. The film consistently uses Chiron's external presentation, including his actions, facial expressions, and nicknames, to indicate his internal conflicts. He clearly struggles to express himself through words, creating a palpable sense of isolation and vulnerability.

The visuals in the final scene sharply contrast Chiron's initial introduction, illustrating his character's growth. The camera lingers on a wide-angle shot of Chiron and Kevin looking at each other, allowing the viewer to fully observe the setting and their individual expressions. The angle emphasizes the physical space between them, but the environment feels vastly different than the first scene. The warmer lighting clearly signifies a home, and the background is filled with furniture, decorations, and drawings on the walls, creating a cozy, lived-in atmosphere. This shot feels like a clear window into Kevin's life and home, generally a very private realm, showing his vulnerability and exposure. The camera switches to a close up of each man, forcing the viewer to look past their bodies and presentation to focus solely on their expressions. Kevin

gives a slight smile, almost holding back a laugh, while Chiron appears afraid, visibly swallowing and constantly fidgeting. He struggles to make eye contact, revealing his internal turmoil in an extremely vulnerable moment.

The scene eventually fades, slowly transitioning to a closeup of Kevin holding Chiron, their forms finally merging. Their faces completely fill the screen, rejecting any signs of isolation. The unnaturally warm lighting creates a dream-like effect, representing the challenges of performativity Chiron overcame to fully connect with Kevin and express his most full, vulnerable self. The positioning also refers back to the swimming scene with Juan, another moment where Chiron was held by a man. In both situations, Chiron was extremely vulnerable, but felt safe and cared for. Smaller elements of the scene, such as Chiron's grill and chain, serve as reminders of traditional Black masculinity, but are staged as performative element sin comparison to Chiron's real, vulnerable moment with Kevin. This scene challenges expectations of how Black men relate to each other, and expands viewers' understanding of Black men's experiences, interactions, and motivations by showing a tender, intimate moment of connection.

Finally, *Moonlight* closes with a shot of young Chiron staring out at the ocean. The visuals match the opening scene with cool colors and a wide-angle shot of Chiron, directly centered and surrounded by empty space. He then turns back to look past the camera, physically opening himself up to the world and to the viewers. This motion signifies how, throughout the film, Chiron allows the audience to witness some of the most personal and intimate moments of his life, showing an extreme vulnerability behind his quiet, guarded exterior.

Audiences inevitably enter *Moonlight* with preconceived notions of race, gender, and sexuality. The film complicates this narrative by showing how different identities interact to impact an individual and his deeply personal experiences and relationships. Rather than directly

rejecting concepts of traditional Black masculinity, Jenkins instead frames this as a performative element, incorporating common stereotypes along with an added layer of intimacy and vulnerability. *Moonlight*'s stunning visuals and intentional filmic decisions create a deeply impactful narrative of isolation, growth, and connection, weaving in universal themes that undeniably resonate with every viewer.

Annotated Bibliography

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In his book *The Matter of Whiteness,* Richard Dyer argues that the concept of race is only

applied to non-white racial groups. He states that the imbalance in studies of white and

non-white people produces an invisibility of whiteness. Dyer also connects race to several other

major dimensions of identity, including gender, sexuality, and religion, as he explains how race is

represented in physical bodies. Dyer's ideas clearly connect to the way *Moonlight* subverts

stereotypical ideas of Black masculinity, as well as the intentional decision to include an

all-Black cast.

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In this article, writer and film critic Joanna Di Mattia analyzes how *Moonlight* represents and

challenges concepts of Black masculinity. She explains how Jenkins creates a sense of intimacy

and vulnerability by showing the complex relationships between Black men and the ways they

interact and connect with each other. Mattia includes specific examples of filmic decisions, such

as camera movement, and explains how they work together to form a narrative that ultimately

expands the audience's understanding of Black men's experiences.

Moakley, Paul. "Inside the Cinematography of Moonlight." *Time*,

time.com/behind-the-visuals-of-moonlight/.

In this article, Paul Moakley explains the background context and motivations behind the film

Moonlight. He includes quotes from director Barry Jenkins and cinematographer James Laxton

explaining their intentional decisions in several integral components of the film's content and

unique style, such as the importance of Miami as the setting. Moakley also mentions specific

photographers and writers that served as inspiration, as well as how the particular camera and

lenses impact the audience's experiences across different scenes.