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### Cooking, Compassion, and Communication in *Moonlight*

The film *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016) explores the life of Chiron, an African American boy, and his struggles coming to terms with his sexuality and masculinity. Near the end of the film, a pivotal scene is included which depicts Chiron reuniting with Kevin, a significant figure from his distant past [1:25:38-1:31:15]. Chiron visits Kevin at the restaurant where he works, and Kevin offers to cook a special meal for him—his “chef’s special.” This gesture becomes a powerful symbol of Kevin’s care and compassion for Chiron, emphasized through the subsequent shots that capture Kevin’s culinary process. In a following montage sequence, Kevin meticulously prepares Chiron’s food, serving as a symbolic representation of the care he extends to Chiron. Furthermore, Chiron reciprocates this love through his intense appreciation of the dish, which is conveyed through his actions and dialogue. Additionally, when Kevin tells Chiron that he must speak in exchange for his food, a parallel is drawn to the beginning scenes where Juan feeds young Chiron in an attempt to get him to talk to him. This highlights the role of food as a means of fostering trust and conversation between the film’s characters. As *Moonlight*’s “chef’s special” scene unfolds, Kevin’s meticulous preparation of Chiron’s food is a symbolic representation of the affection he still holds for Chiron after many years have passed. The food brings the two characters together as they reunite, emphasizing the film’s underlying motif of food being a powerful force with the ability to drive meaningful communication, bring people together, and spark emotional intimacy.

The scene begins when Kevin asks Chiron what he would like to eat. The two characters are separated, with Kevin standing behind the bar and Chiron standing in front of it. The camera cuts to Chiron looking at Kevin as he contemplates his offer, and then it cuts back to Kevin [1:25:40-1:26:00]. This shot/reverse-shot technique helps emphasize the initial separation between the characters as the camera moves back and forth between both sides of the bar. When Chiron does not answer his question, Kevin walks to the kitchen, telling Chiron “One chef’s special... Coming right up.” The phrase “chef’s special” is notable because it inherently conveys the thought and care put into the dish. Chiron places his trust in Kevin’s professional judgment, giving him complete freedom to express himself and his compassion for Chiron through his cooking.

Next, the shot where Kevin walks away [1:26:00-1:26:10] is taken from Chiron’s point of view. This is particularly notable because Kevin is looking directly at the camera as he walks back. Actors typically avoid this practice when possible, so its deliberate inclusion emphasizes the connection between Kevin and Chiron. The shot, by putting the viewer in Chiron’s perspective, allows the audience to recognize the eye contact between the two characters, something that would be missed if viewed from a different perspective. Furthermore, as Kevin continues to walk back to the kitchen, he points directly at Chiron as seen from his perspective. Again, this serves to emphasize the connection between Kevin and Chiron. It also demonstrates the fact that Kevin’s attention is explicitly and solely focused on Chiron in this scene.

Additionally, this shot’s setting, a quiet and nearly empty restaurant, further contributes to the intimate portrayal of the two characters by creating a close atmosphere; the audience can focus on their personal connection without the distractions of a busy, bustling restaurant. The quietness of the restaurant amplifies the significance of the moment, highlighting Kevin’s

undivided attention towards Chiron. The scene's carefully chosen setting heightens its impact, preparing the viewer for the emotionally charged interactions between the two characters.

After this, the film contains a montage of Kevin as he works on Chiron's meal. During this sequence, delicate and passionate orchestral music plays, underscoring the emotional undertones of the scene. This choice of music helps convey the fact that Kevin is not just cooking a meal for another customer; this is an intense, meaningful process and a labor of love. In a slow, flowing shot, we see Kevin tasting the food as he ensures that it will be okay for Chiron [1:26:24-1:26:28]. This shot emphasizes Kevin's attention to detail and the effort he puts into the dish, as well as his genuine concern for Chiron's satisfaction. Afterwards, he gingerly grabs limes and squeezes them onto the food. Kevin is then seen scooping out rice into a container with great care. Each of these small, deliberate actions serve the purpose of demonstrating Kevin's personal investment in the meal. The camera then pans to Kevin's face as he looks down on the rice, reinforcing his personal connection to the meal. The following shots [1:26:42-1:26:56] depict him carefully and deliberately plating the food, interspersed with more cuts to his face. These lingering shots of Kevin's facial expressions transform the simple process of preparing a meal into an intimate demonstration of his care and compassion for Chiron. Through the montage's inclusion of emotional music and frequent shots of Kevin's face, the film highlights the strong emotions involved in the preparation of Chiron's meal.

Next, the camera cuts to Chiron as he waits for his food. He turns around as Kevin announces his "chef's special." Kevin can be seen smiling as he holds Chiron's plate, and he then looks at it with a caring expression, almost as if it were a baby. The emotions on Kevin's face, combined with the way he lovingly looks at Chiron's plate, further highlights Chiron's meal as a symbol of Kevin's love. Notably, this scene contains no music in stark contrast to the

previous inclusion of a passionate orchestral piece. The absence of music emphasizes the dialogue between the two characters, highlighting their personal connection. After the two characters sit down face-to-face, Chiron begins to eat. While he takes his first bite, one of the black beans falls off his plate onto the table. Chiron, without hesitation, picks it up and eats it, demonstrating his appreciation for the meal.

At this part of the scene, the dialogue emphasizes the importance of this seemingly insignificant moment. Kevin says: “I saw that. I saw that. You don’t wanna waste none of that, do you? It tastes good.” Kevin is acknowledging Chiron’s intense appreciation of the dish, bringing it to the attention of the audience. As Kevin gets up to wait on the remaining customers and gives a smile to Chiron across the room, the camera lingers on a close shot of Chiron as he looks longingly at Kevin and eats in silence [1:29:29-1:28:36]. Chiron’s expression of both contentment and longing captures the unspoken yet clearly demonstrated connection between the two characters. The expressive performance of Kevin’s actor, the deliberate absence of music that contrasts with the previous orchestral piece, the attention drawn to Chiron’s refusal to waste any of his food, and the looks the two characters give each other from across the restaurant all contribute to the scene’s sense of intimacy during this section. This sequence showcases the depth of Kevin and Chiron’s relationship and reinforces the theme of food as a means of expressing love and care.

Following this, Kevin begins to open up about his own life as Chiron silently eats his meal. He tells Chiron about Samantha and the child he had with her. After this, Kevin presses Chiron for details about his current situation in life. As Chiron picks at his food, Kevin directly asks: “What you doin’? Who you doin’?” When Chiron doesn’t answer him, Kevin begins to feel frustrated, evident in his remarks about the effort he put into Chiron’s meal. He retorts: “Man,

come on now. I've been back there in that kitchen, man, and cooked for your ass and everything, man." In this line of dialogue, Kevin is directly acknowledging the care and effort involved in his preparation of the dish. This demonstrates the emotional significance of the dish to Kevin—he feels almost slighted that Chiron will accept the food, an obvious symbol of Kevin's care for him, without desiring to reciprocate with any sort of meaningful conversation. Kevin elaborates on this further: "Hey, these grandma rules, man. You know the deal. Your ass eat, your ass speak." The final phrase is particularly meaningful, as it implies that in exchange for Kevin's cooking, Chiron is expected to divulge the details of his current circumstances. This is essentially framing Kevin's cooking as of equal value to Chiron's life story, further hinting at the dish's emotional significance. Through the dialogue near the scene's conclusion, it can be inferred that Kevin feels strongly about the effort he put into Chiron's meal, symbolizing the care he has for him.

Furthermore, food serves as a motif throughout the film beyond this scene as a recurring symbol of communication, trust, and intimacy. This final part of the "chef's special" scene parallels an earlier scene near the start of the film where Juan provides food for young Chiron. He takes Chiron to a diner and asks him about his name and address as he eats, eventually telling Chiron "I'm just trying to get you to say something" [6:44]. Juan's desire for connection with Chiron mirrors Kevin's, and both characters attempt to use food to bridge this gap. Later, in a scene where Chiron eats dinner with Juan and Teresa, Juan jokingly remarks: "You don't talk much, but you damn sure can eat" [9:10]. Both of these scenes parallel the scene where Kevin cooks for Chiron, emphasizing the value of food as a means for opening communication and nourishing relationships. Throughout the film, Kevin, Juan, and Teresa all attempt to provide Chiron with food in order to foster a caring environment where he feels comfortable talking to

them. This also speaks to the motif of food as a symbolic representation of the care extended to Chiron by the other characters. The “chef’s special” scene at the end of the film brings this idea full circle, emphasizing Kevin’s care for Chiron.

Overall, the scene near the end of *Moonlight* where Kevin prepares a special meal for Chiron as they reunite highlights the power of food to express love and promote communication. When Kevin offers to cook for Chiron, the calm setting of the restaurant and the use of point-of-view shots establishes an intimate tone that highlights the connection between the two characters. In the following montage sequence that depicts Kevin carefully cooking Chiron’s food, the inclusion of dramatic and emotional orchestral music, along with frequent cuts to shots of Kevin’s face, emphasizes the passion Kevin puts into his dish. After Kevin serves the food to Chiron and sits down with him, the music stops suddenly to make room for their dialogue. When Kevin remarks on the fact that Chiron ate a small piece of food he dropped onto the table, the dialogue is drawing attention to Chiron’s enjoyment and appreciation of Kevin’s cooking. Additionally, Kevin’s loving glances at the dish, along with the longing glances the two characters give each other across the restaurant, further hint at the food’s emotional significance. Finally, in the scene’s conclusion, Kevin tells Chiron that he must speak to him in exchange for his food, implying that Kevin’s expression through his cooking is equivalent to Chiron’s expression through his words. This moment is a clear parallel to two earlier scenes in the film where Juan and his girlfriend Teresa give young Chiron food in an attempt to get him to open up to them, reinforcing the motif that food is a way to spark trust and communication between people. The meal that Kevin prepares for Chiron is a symbol of his care and affection, and it brings the two characters together again after a long period of separation.