***Moonlight* (2016)**

**Film background:**

*Moonlight* is a 2016 film written and directed by Barry Jenkins, based on a play titled *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* by Tarell Alvin McCraney, who also worked on the development of the film as a story writer and executive producer. *Moonlight* was Jenkins' second film, and it garnered critical acclaim for Jenkins. Following its success, he went on to direct *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) and *The Underground Railroad* (2020). Both Jenkins and McCraney grew up in Liberty City, Miami, which is the setting for *Moonlight,* and both men were raised by mothers who struggled with drug addiction. McCraney identifies as gay, and Jenkins identifies as straight. *Moonlight* won many awards, including the Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Supporting Actor (Mahershala Ali).

**Plot summary:**

*Moonlight* has a three-act structure. "Act I: Little" follows a young Chiron (Alex Hibbert), who is also known as Little. He lives in Liberty City, Miami, with his mother, Paula (Naomie Harris). While being chased by bullies, Chiron meets Juan (Mahershala Ali), a drug dealer who takes him out to eat and tries to coax Chiron into telling him where he lives. When Chiron resists, Juan takes him home, where Chiron meets Teresa (Janelle Monáe), Juan's girlfriend. They feed him and he spends the night, before Juan takes Chiron home to Paula. Juan continues spending time with Chiron and mentoring him, which Paula does not approve of. Chiron also connects with Kevin, (Jaden Piner), who tries to teach him how to fight to avoid bullies. One night, Juan finds Paula using drugs, and they have a confrontation about Chiron's well-being. Later, Chiron confronts Juan, asking him if his mother does drugs and if Juan sells drugs, apparently connecting the dots between his challenges at home and Juan's career. In "Act II: Chiron," Chiron (Ashton Sanders) is in high school. His mother's drug addiction has worsened, and he splits his time between his home and Teresa's home. Juan has been killed at some time between Act I and and Act II. One night, Chiron runs into Kevin (Jharrel Jerome) on a beach, and the two have a sexual encounter. Soon after, at school, a bully named Terrel convinces Kevin to beat up Chiron. Kevin is reluctant, but goes through with it. The following day, Chiron attacks Terrel in school and is apprehended by police, who apparently take him to juvenile detention. In "Act III: Black," Chiron (Trevante Rhodes) is an adult drug dealer living in Atlanta. Paula, who is in recovery, calls him and asks him to visit her. They share a heated reconciliation. After receiving a phone call from Kevin (André Holland), Chiron drives to Miami to visit Kevin at the diner where he works as a cook. Kevin cooks dinner for Chiron, and they discuss their pasts. Kevin brings Chiron back to his home, and Chiron admits that he has never been touched the way Kevin touched him when they were teenagers. The two hug, and the film ends with them sharing an intimate embrace.

**Content warnings:**

\*Moonlight\* includes two scenes of non-explicit sexuality, one scene involving a violent fight, and drug abuse.

**Running Time:** 1 h, 51 m

**Materials for this week:**

* Screening quiz
* Secondary texts:
  + Day 2: Stallings, L. H. "Am I A Faggot?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2019, pp. 342-351.
  + Day 3: Johnson, E. Patrick. "In the Quare Light of the Moon: Poverty, Sexuality, and Makeshift Masculinity in *Moonlight.”*  *The Western Journal of Black Studies* vol. 43, no. 3 & 4, 2019, pp. 70-80.

**Lesson 1 – Close Reading Key Scenes – Act I:**

1. (6 min) Screening quiz.
2. (10-15 min) Student-led scene close-reading and analysis (you may want to require students to select a scene from Act I to narrow the scope of today’s discussion).
3. (6 min) Teacher-selected close-reading. Prologue (approx. 0:00-5:44). You may want to discuss with students that the word “faggot” comes up in several scenes throughout this film, as well as being a critical component of one of the scholarly articles we will read tomorrow.
4. (4 min) Discussion prep. Students should take notes on the following question. If time, have students share their responses with a partner before whole-class discussion begins.
   1. Consider elements such as Jenkins’ use of framing, lighting, cinematography, camera movements, dialogue, blocking, and sound. How does Jenkins introduce Juan, Chiron, and the tensions and themes of this film in its opening scene?

* *Framing: First shot: The first thing we notice about Juan is his blue 1973 Chevrolet Impala, which takes up most of the frame. The crown on the dashboard is also notable – a symbol that reappears in Act III.*
* *Camera movement: This entire scene is one shot – we follow Juan at some distance to meet with Terrence; from there the camera starts circling as the Terrence and the addict converse; the circling shot heightens the tension. Juan is some distance away, smoking a cigarette – he’s removed from the intensity of this moment, above it all. Although Juan is friendly to the addict, he does not intervene. When we cut to Chiron being chased by the boys, the camera follows him in a shaky, handheld camera shot. While the circling shot made Juan appear in control, this shot highlights how little control Chiron has.*
* *Character: Throughout this scene, Juan stands facing the street, his eyes on it. He does not look away; he is conscious of what could appear if he took his eyes off the road. He stands more still than Terrence, who is somewhat shifty on his feet; Juan is firmer, more confident. Suddenly, a boy runs by with a pack of boys chasing him. Juan looks on with interest and perhaps concern, tracking the boys’ movements.*
* *Dialogue: The boys following Chiron yell, “get his faggot ass!” It’s clear that Chiron is already experiencing threats due to his perceived homosexuality and/or femininity.*
* *Sound: Once inside the abandoned building, the sound of the boys chasing Chiron is loud and echoes throughout the room; it seems we are inside Chiron’s head and experiencing his fear. We also hear broken glass rolling and crunching under his feet, reminding the viewer of the presence of drugs and perhaps the precarity of his circumstances.*
* *Lighting: Chiron holds up a crack pipe to the light, and it is for a moment the only thing clearly visible in the shot due to the dark shadows that fill the room. It suggests the significance of this object and perhaps his unfamiliarity with it, despite its influence on his life. Suddenly, Chiron’s face is in high, front lighting as Juan pulls off the boarded up window – bright light floods the room. When Juan pulls the board off the window, he is framed within the window with bright lighting behind him. This is clearly a significant moment, as Juan metaphorically breaks into the darkness in Chiron’s life.*
* *Blocking: Juan crawls through the window – entering the darkness of Chiron’s experience, trying to understand it; he walks out the door, inviting Chiron to step out of the darkness because “it can’t be no worse out here.”*
* *Color: the color blue carries significance throughout this scene – Juan’s car, Chiron’s backpack, and the door that Juan encourages Chiron to follow him through are all different shades of blue, perhaps a symbol of their connection. (Blue also appears to connect Kevin and Chiron later in the film.)*
* *Message: This scene highlights Juan’s power and confidence and Chiron’s fear and isolation, and also highlights Juan’s potential ability to lead Chiron into a brighter future.*

1. (10 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. Consider elements such as Jenkins’ use of framing, lighting, cinematography, camera movements, dialogue, blocking, and sound. How does Jenkins introduce Juan, Chiron, and the tensions and themes of this film in its opening scene?
      1. Additional questions, if necessary. What stands out about the cinematography during Juan’s interactions with Terrence?
      2. When Chiron is being chased, what do you notice about the camera movements? How does the camera move differently than in Juan’s interaction with Terrence, and why?
      3. Consider the moments Chiron spends alone in the abandoned building. How does Jenkins use sound and light to convey his experience?
      4. How does the lighting change when Juan arrives? What is Jenkins conveying through the change in lighting?
2. (5 min) Teacher-led close reading, if time permits. Given the relevance of this scene to Stallings’ text, this could also be moved to Day 2. Rewatch the last scene of Act I. (Approx. 30:48-35:46).
3. (4 min) Discussion prep. Students take notes on the following question.
   1. How does Jenkins use sound, framing, dialogue and blocking to convey meaning in the last scene of Act I? What contrasts do you notice between this scene and the first scene of the film, and why?

* *Sound: In a reversal from the first scene of Act I, Chiron is now the one knocking loudly on Juan’s door with confidence.*
* *Framing: Juan approaches the door tentatively, and we primarily see the gun in his hand, conscious that whoever may be knocking could pose a threat. The dynamics of their relationship have shifted from the start of the film in terms of who feels confident and who feels fear.*
* *Blocking: Chiron sits at the head of the table – he has the power in his conversation with Juan. He rarely looks at him, though Juan looks carefully at Chiron. Chiron seems to be denying him access to his thoughts by not speaking and looking at him.*
* *Dialogue/character: Juan explains that a faggot is a “word used to make gay people feel bad” – he does not insult Chiron by claiming that this is a real identity, and instead discredits the word itself. Juan and Teresa support Chiron by telling him that “you’ll know when you know” but that he doesn’t “have to know right now”*
* *Symbol:* *Juan’s beeper sits between them, an indicator of Juan’s role in the drug trade and the conflict it raises between him and Chiron.*
* *Character/Framing/Sound: Juan expresses great pain in answering Chiron’s questions – the conflict is heightened in this scene until its conclusion, when Chiron abandons Juan and leaves him downcast at the table; his role as hero is called into question here. Notably, we also see Teresa taking Juan’s hand to comfort him. The last shot is an extended close-up shot on Juan’s face as he struggles with the truths he has just provided to Chiron. This offers us a reminder of her role within the circuit of the drug trade as well, although it is more distant from Paula than Juan. The final sound of the act is Chiron closing the door on him.*
* *Message: While Juan acts as a powerful mentor in this moment in supporting Chiron as he starts to navigate questions of sexuality and bullying, his mentorship is undercut by Chiron’s growing consciousness of his role in the drug trade and the negative impact that has on his life. In this scene, blocking, character development, framing and sound highlight a certain kind of power Chiron holds over Juan in this scene, in a reversal from the first scene of the film.*

1. (10 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. How does Jenkins use sound, framing, dialogue and blocking to convey meaning in the last scene of Act I? What contrasts do you notice between this scene and the first scene of the film, and why?
      1. Additional questions, if necessary. Consider the opening shot of this scene, especially the framing and sound. What contrasts do you notice between this shot and the first scene of the film. Why?
      2. How does the dialogue develop the complex messages of this scene?
      3. Why does Juan’s beeper sit on the table between them? What might it represent?
      4. Consider the final shot of this scene. What choices were made here to emphasize Jenkins’ message?
2. (1 min) Tell students that tonight they will be reading a critique of *Moonlight* by African-American Studies scholar, L. H. Stallings, and the following day they will be reading a somewhat opposing viewpoint by E. Patrick Johnson (who is cited throughout Stallings’ piece). Tell students that these pieces are intended to spark dialogue, and they should carefully consider whether they agree or disagree with these two authors, and why.

**Lesson 2 – Film Criticism: Act II and L. H. Stallings, “Am I A Faggot?”**

1. (5 min) Personal reflection – choose 1:
   1. Did you relate to any of the characters in this film? Explain.
   2. Did you enjoy watching this film? Why or why not?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (7 min) Re-watch today’s clip: the fight scene (approx. 58:18-1:02:18).
4. (7 min) Discussion prep.
   1. What is Stallings’ claim about *Moonlight?* Use evidence to support your response.

* *Overall: Stallings argues that “Jenkins attempt to replace Negro faggotry with Black gay masculinity happens so as to make the film accessible to a wider audience (e. g. not gay, not Black)…What remains are updated versions of hegemonic blackness and masculine hegemony…that maintain gender binaries in which the feminine and femininity continue to be violently devalued” (342). “Moonlight succeeds in recouping Black manhood, but for queer, homosexual or bi butch men” (344), engaging in “femme phobia” (344).*
* *Stallings critiques* Moonlight’s *erasure and devaluing of Black queer femininity, given the “complete absence of a ‘queen’” (343) throughout the film. Stallings suggests that “Jenkins does not know…how to depict sexuality without violence or embrace and integrate Black femininity without pathologizing it” (347).*
* *Stallings also challenges film critics who praise* Moonlight *for being groundbreaking, highlighting the prior works of Black queer cinema that have not been commercially successful or palatable to mainstream audiences, arguing that reviews of Moonlight erase “an entire genealogy of Black gay filmmaking” (343).*
* *Stallings claims that, related to* Moonlight’s *“femme phobia” that devalues Black gay femininity, the film also devalues women, providing only “one-dimensional portrayals of Black women” (344). She argues that Act III suggests Chiron’s failure is constructed as due to “the failure of Black women as mothers” (349, and argues that “in a movie that worked so hard to nuance a Black male drug dealer…the decision to reproduce the notorious stereotype [of Paula as a crack-addicted mother] enables Jenkins to maintain the conservative narratives about Black mothers and Black men” (349).*
* *Stallings suggests that Juan’s presence is a core part of the film’s devaluation of Black femininity; as a straight, masculine Black man, he “authorizes a Black gay boy worthy of Black manhood” (345). However, Stallings praises Juan’s performance for avoiding “one-dimensional masculinity” (345). She claims that in the first scene, and throughout the first act, “Black heteromasculinity visually nourishes feminine or soft Black boys hungering for hypermasculine or hard father figures” (345).*
* *Stallings also critiques the film’s final scene for avoiding kissing or sexual contact between the two protagonists, claiming that this “prioritz[es] a heteronormative audience gaze” (350). She suggests that while Act II did depict sexual contact, this scene maintains cultural expectations that “grown Black men do not kiss each other” (350).* 
  1. How might the scene we just watched, the scene we ended class with yesterday, or other scenes throughout the film support or challenge her claim?

*Fight scene:*

* *Support: One could argue that this scene supports Stallings claim because Kevin and Terell’s violence banish the spectre of “Negro faggotry,” and that Chiron works to overcome his femininity in this scene by standing up and refusing to “stay down” as assertion of power. As the circling shot that echoes one of the first shots of the film suggests, Terrel is in control here, and he acts to eliminate the threat of the femme.*
* *Challenge: One could also argue that the film is critiquing the way that femme phobia manifests in society, rather than engaging in that femme phobia itself. By including many close-up shots of Chiron and Kevin’s faces, we see Kevin’s anguish in harming Chiron and engaging in hypermasculine violence. The film also undercuts the suggestion that this act of violence is a demonstration of manhood, since immediately preceding the fight, Terrel and Kevin discuss middle school pizza Fridays while Kevin drinks grape juice out of a juice box. Rather than acting as a demonstration of masculinity, this fight is an attempt to challenge Terrel’s perception of Kevin’s potentially questionable sexuality and manhood.*

*End of Act I Scene:*

* *Support: One could argue that this is a moment in which Juan acts as an “authorizing” figure of Black heteromasculinity who bestows manhood on Chiron by telling him that being gay is acceptable.*
* *Challenge: One could argue that Chiron’s power in this scene undercuts Juan’s ability to authorize him, and is instead an illustration of a feminine child’s power over masculinity.*
  1. Do you agree or disagree with Stallings’ perspective? Why?

*Answers may vary.*

1. (20 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. What is Stallings’ claim about *Moonlight?* Use evidence to support your response.
      1. Additional questions, if needed: Review key lines listed above. What does this quote suggest Stallings is arguing?
      2. What is “femme phobia” as Stallings articulates it on 344 and throughout this piece? How does that relate to her claim?
   2. How might the scene we just watched, the scene we ended class with yesterday, or other scenes throughout the film support or challenge her claim?
      1. Consider the use of the circular shot that follows Terrel at the start of the fight. Do you think the use of that shot supports or challenges Stallings’ claim?
      2. Consider the use of the close-ups of Kevin and Chiron’s faces throughout the fight scene. Does that support or challenge her claim?
      3. Think back to the final scene of Act I that we addressed in class yesterday. Do you think that scene supports or challenges Stallings’ claims?
   3. Do you agree or disagree with Stallings’ perspective? Why?

**Lesson 3 – Film Criticism: Act III and E. Patrick Johnson, “In The Quare Light of the Moon: Poverty, Sexuality and Makeshift Masculinity in *Moonlight”***

1. (5 min) Compare/contrast reflection – Compare *Moonlight* to another film we’ve seen so far in this course. What do the two films you’re considering have in common? What makes this one different?
2. (7 min) Discuss.
3. (6 min) Rewatch today’s scenes: prologue of Act III (approx. 1:06:15-1:08:32), end of Act III (approx. 1:41:17-1:46:10).
4. (15 min) Study groups. Students will take notes on the following questions.
   1. What is Johnson’s argument?

* *Johnson argues that* Moonlight *offers a narrative of “makeshift masculinity,” highlighting how “the film illuminates an alternative path to sexual self-hood that is paradoxically facilitated not by acess to material wealth or socioeconomic mobility, but rather through abject poverty” (71), addressing how Chiron’s sexuality is built through connections with Kevin and Juan.*
* *Johnson, in borrowing from his own essay on “Quare Studies,” highlights that “as with all things quare, as opposed to queer, Chiron does not make this journey alone or without heterosexuals. He does so with the help of Juan and his girlfriend, Teresa, and his childhood friend, Kevin” (72). In his essay “Quare Studies,” which we will read later in the course, Johnson highlights that while white queer culture promotes leaving one’s home community for a queer space, for many Black queer people power of staying within one’s community and building one’s queer identity alongside heterosexuals.*
* *Johnson explores three key scenes—one from each act—that illustrate the building of a makeshift masculinity. In his analysis of the end of Act III, he argues that Chiron explains that he has “created a makeshift masculinity that helps him manage the pain of what he has been through” and that “Black is mask for the vulnerable young boy that he befriended twenty years prior” (79).* 
  1. What contrasts do you see between Johnson’s claims and Stallings’ claims?
* *While Stallings critiques the way that Juan acts as an “authorizing” figure of Black heteromasculinity who bestows Black manhood on Chiron, Johnson praises this representation due to its example of a quare, “makeshift masculinity,” in which one’s queerness can emerge alongside heterosexuality.*
* *While Stallings suggests that the absence of sexual contact in the final scene is due to the “prioritizing of a heteronormative audience gaze” because in “the greater narrative of Black masculinity (in the film), grown Black men do not kiss each other” (350), Johnson describes the ending as “quare,” or disruptive of normative expectations of relations, and instead, “subtle, ambivalent, open-ended” (79). He appreciates the film’s claim that “what Black needs…is not sex; rather it’s to be held by the man who first intimately touched him” (79).*
* *While Johnson doesn’t explain this in depth; he argues that while the film “tells us about poverty, drug addiction and dealing, motherhood...” etc., it does so “in ways that avoid the stereotypical depictions of such themes” (70); in contrast, Stallings critiques the film’s reliance on the trope of the one-dimensional crack-addicted mother.*
  1. Consider the scenes we just re-watched. Do you think they provide more support to Johnson’s claims or Stallings? (You can disagree with your group members!)
* *The opening scene highlights the ways in which Chiron has remade himself in the image of Juan. He drives a similar car and has Juan’s crown on his dashboard. This could suggest support for either figure’s claim. It could also suggest that the film critiques femme phobia; Chiron has found that the only way to survive is to “build himself from the ground up” as he says in the last scene, and erase all traces of femininity.*
* *The final scene could be used to support Johnson’s claim that Chiron has built a “makeshift masculinity” that enables him to ultimately embrace his sexuality as he allows himself to be embraced by Kevin; similarly to the opening of Act I, Stallings might argue that this scene “recoup[s] Black manhood, but for queer, homosexual or bi butch men” (344), rather than effeminate Black men.*
  1. Whose perspective do you agree with more? Why? Do you have an alternative perspective? (You can disagree with your group members!)

*Answers may vary.*

1. (20 min) Whole class discussion.
   1. What is Johnson’s argument?
      1. Additional questions, if necessary: You could provide the following information: In his essay “Quare Studies,” which we will read later in the course, Johnson highlights that while white queer culture promotes leaving one’s home community for a queer space, for many Black queer people power of staying within one’s community and building one’s queer identity alongside heterosexuals. Consider Johnson’s comment that “Chiron does not make this journey alone or without heterosexuals” (72). Why is this significant to his claim?
      2. Review the other evidence listed above. What do these quotes mean? What do they suggest about Johnson’s claims?
   2. What contrasts do you see between Johnson’s claims and Stallings’ claims?
      1. Consider how these two authors see Juan. What do they disagree about in terms of his role in Chiron’s life?
      2. Consider how these two authors see motherhood (although Johnson only mentions motherhood briefly on p. 70). What do they disagree about?
      3. Consider how both authors read the final moments of the film. What do they disagree about?
   3. Consider the scenes we just rewatched. Do you think they provide more support to Johnson’s claims or Stallings? (You can disagree with your group members!)
      1. What do you think Stallings would claim about the opening of Act III? What would Johnson argue?
   4. Whose perspective do you agree with more? Why? Do you have an alternative perspective? (You can disagree with your group members!)