

THE FORGIVING BLUE

Lynn Fong

I nterspersed in the gentle lapping of ocean waves, a few tense notes of a violin crescendo as Chiron, the protagonist of Barry Jenkins's film *Moonlight*, learns to swim. The water is a soft turquoise. The camera bobs along with it, pulled up and down and sometimes partially obscured by the waves. We, the audience, are right there with little Chiron as he experiences the waters of Miami for the first time. Juan, Chiron's newfound, unlikely mentor, is holding up Chiron's small head while he teaches him to float. "You're in the middle of the world," Juan tells Chiron. The two are framed only by the turquoise water and a light blue sky. Juan demonstrates arm movements: "Go like this," he instructs, "more athletic." Chiron mimics him as he learns to paddle. Finally, Juan releases Chiron so he can swim on his own. "Go," Juan says, and Chiron begins paddling by himself. Then, Chiron is alone. The music slows and fades away. He is indeed in the middle of the world as he swims, unaccompanied, unafraid, and free.

Moonlight, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2017, is a coming-of-age story. More specifically, it documents three stages in the life of Chiron, a young, gay black man growing up in an impoverished area of Miami. Even more specifically, the film offers an empathetic lens into the most intimate, defining moments of Chiron's life: learning how to swim, putting a blanket on his drugged-out mother, reuniting with someone he's loved after years of estrangement. The movie is split into three parts, each titled a name that Chiron has been called, showing Chiron as he grows up. The first, "i. Little," shows Chiron as a boy. He isn't popular, but befriends one boy named Kevin, who, like Chiron's other peers, calls him "Little." We see Chiron cross paths with Juan, a drug dealer, as he is chased by bullies into a drug den. Juan becomes a sort of mentor and caretaker for Chiron, allowing him to stay with him and his girlfriend Teresa at his house whenever Chiron needs an escape from his turbulent home life with his crack-addicted mother, Paula.

In the second part of the film, “ii. Chiron,” we see Chiron as a teenager. He continues to be a scrawny, quiet kid, constantly targeted by bullies. He also continues to be friends with Kevin, who now calls him “Black” and seems cooler and more popular than Chiron. Chiron and Kevin kiss on a beach, but later, when Chiron’s bullies tell Kevin to punch him, Kevin complies. We see Chiron get arrested for retaliating the next day. Finally, “iii. Black” shows us Chiron as a man. He looks tough, and has begun selling drugs. Yet after he receives a phone call from Kevin, whom he hasn’t spoken to in years, he begins to make amends. He visits his mother and accepts her apology. He then drives to see Kevin.

Chiron’s story is left untold after he and Kevin reunite. In the last we see of Chiron, he is sitting in Kevin’s embrace, accepting Kevin’s comfort. That is not the last shot of the film. The final shot of *Moonlight* brings us back to Juan teaching Chiron to swim. We see Chiron once again as a boy, standing before the ocean at night. He stands with his back facing the camera for a while, and we hear the soft lapping of waves that we have been hearing throughout the movie. Then, he turns his head toward us, staring at something we cannot see. We are overwhelmed by the color blue. *Moonlight* uses this blue to explore the complicated process of forgiveness.

Moonlight is a film of paradoxes. It portrays Chiron’s impoverished neighborhood and unstable home life brightly and colorfully. It demonstrates how someone can both love you and cause you pain. One of the most striking moments of the film—though the entire film is made up of striking moments—is when Chiron’s mother yells at him from a blue-green corridor. We see it all from little Chiron’s perspective. There is no speech in the scene; all we hear is that same crescendo of string instruments. Although we don’t hear her yell, her contorted, angry face says enough. She is bathed in a hot pink light coming from her room. As she enters her room, into the pink light, she looks almost ethereal. She stares coldly into the camera and shuts the door, cutting off the warmth and transforming the brilliantly pink and purple scene into a deep blue. In any other film, this story would be told in grays—ugly and chaotic. This scene, however, is haunting because it is confusingly beautiful. The unexpected beauty and color in these painful scenes is surprising, but ultimately not out of place.

Even though Chiron's mother abuses him, he still loves her and sees her as beautiful. It is what makes their relationship so difficult to watch at times. Chiron's home has never been the stable, loving place he deserved to have, but he cannot help but be loyal to it. The colorful palette forces the viewer to view *Moonlight's* setting and characters in a multidimensional light.

The beauty of *Moonlight* subverts expectations because it refuses to conform to the commonly held stereotypes of its subjects. A.O. Scott's review of *Moonlight* demonstrates how the film disrupts the "clichés of African-American masculinity." Though it may be too limiting to describe *Moonlight* as simply a film about black manhood, black manhood is indeed a fundamental aspect of the film's narrative. A large part of what makes *Moonlight* so impactful, however, is the way it subverts the clichés that stories about black manhood often utilize. As an audience, we are used to the gritty, dark, hyper-masculine narratives which portray black men as tough, mean, and violent. Movies and television regularly exploit black men through stereotypical characters. One such character is played by Samuel L. Jackson in Quentin Tarantino's popular film, *Pulp Fiction*. *Pulp Fiction* is a crime movie about two hitmen, Vincent and Jules, filled with plenty of exciting action and violence. Jackson's character, Jules, is seen as a "badass" with an extremely threatening persona. He is intimidating, dangerous, and does not hesitate to pull out a gun. In the third and final chapter of *Moonlight*, Chiron—now called "Black"—evokes this cliché: as a muscular drug dealer, he appears tough and intimidating. But we know him. We have seen him grow up, and we understand him to be gentle, innocent, even fragile. In this way, *Moonlight* sets up stereotypes in order to unravel them; in this way, it is groundbreaking.

Much of the beauty and realism of *Moonlight* stems from the filmmaker's personal intimacy with the story. Rebecca Keegan's article on *Moonlight* in the *Los Angeles Times* describes how both Barry Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney, the two writers of *Moonlight*, "grew up in Miami's Liberty Square neighborhood at the same time, and both had mothers who grappled with drug addiction. Jenkins' mother survived, McCraney's did not" (Keegan). The film is not stereotypical because it is based in real life, and in real life our stories

are anything but one-dimensional. *Moonlight's* deeply personal basis touched many people, including Naomi Harris, who revealed in an interview that she planned on rejecting the role initially (Keegan). Harris, at first wary that Paula represented black women in a negative light, took the role after learning that Paula's character was not a stereotype but a representation of Barry Jenkins's own mother (Keegan). The knowledge that Paula reflects the real mothers of *Moonlight's* writers intensifies our understanding of the emotional depth of her relationship with Chiron.

When Chiron is a teenager, we see a scene in which his mother, looking disheveled in a blue tank top, screams at him, begging him for money to buy drugs. The scene is brightly lit, and Chiron's mother is bathed in cold white light as she stands facing him. It is a heartbreaking moment, reminiscent of the one from "i. Little," when Paula first displays open aggression towards Chiron. Yet this is somehow much worse, solidifying the viewer's suspicion that Paula's drug addiction has escalated over the years. As Chiron gives up the money and tries to go to his room, Paula yells at him to go to school. Her attempt to parent him is in great contrast to when she extorted him for drug money just moments earlier. Though Chiron barely betrays any emotion, the scene is absolutely heart-wrenching. We understand how confusing this relationship must be for Chiron, who, in his teens, has become his mother's caretaker. He must bring her money and check up on her when it should be the other way around. Paula nonetheless asserts her role as a mother over and over, and Chiron wants her love and care even though she continues to mistreat him. It is an extremely realistic depiction of an abusive parent-child relationship: painful and complicated, just as such relations often are in real life. Paula is not evil, and although she repeatedly hurts Chiron, their love for each other conveys the humanity of her character.

Moonlight complicates our understandings of character in significant ways. Not only does the film resist relying on overused movie tropes, but it also defies the narratives we often see perpetuated in real life. *Moonlight* begins in the 1980s, in the midst of the War on Drugs. As described by Julilly Kohler-Hausmann in her article, "The Attila the Hun Law," one of the major pushes in the War on Drugs was to speak about "addicts" as "outsiders," as criminal wrongdoers

rather than people (73, 80). This attitude continues to permeate today's public consciousness, resulting in brutal drug-related sentencing and incarceration. The War on Drugs targets black communities specifically, and it has torn apart these communities and families with disproportionate imprisonment of nonviolent criminals (Kohler-Hausmann). Today, the War on Drugs is not as rampant as it was in the 1980s, but public perception of hard drugs and addiction has not majorly shifted. Though there is undeniable evidence that treatment is much more effective than imprisonment in curbing drug issues, many people continue to believe the fantasy of punishing evil "addicts" for their disease (Kohler-Hausmann 74). *Moonlight* destroys this notion by portraying multi-dimensional characters who use, sell, and are addicted to drugs. We feel for these characters, and we want to understand their struggles. Thus, the movie encourages us to empathize with people we have been taught to demonize.

Yet *Moonlight* does not merely subvert convention for subversion's sake. In his review, Scott emphasizes that "Jenkins is far too disciplined a filmmaker to turn his characters into symbols." The film does defy cinema's expectations for what black men's stories can be, but that is not all it does. Reactions to and reviews of *Moonlight* often focus on how important, "timely," and socially conscious the film is (Lawson). *Moonlight* is indeed all those things. But its beauty, its intimacy, and its emotional mastery are also critical merits which stand largely unrelated to its societal impact, and they should not be brushed aside.

One of the most apparent ways *Moonlight* demonstrates its breathtaking craftsmanship is through the use of color—especially the color blue, which remains a significant motif throughout the film. Blue reminds us of the ocean, the sky, and the early scene of Chiron learning to swim, in which he experiences a cathartic kind of freedom unseen in most other moments in his life. Throughout the film, the color blue is also associated with people and places in which Chiron finds comfort or love. For example, the first shot of Juan shows him pulling up in a blue car. Juan quickly becomes Chiron's friend and protector, and we see that Juan's house, into which Chiron often escapes, is also filled with blue objects. Sometimes, however, this visual cue is in direct contrast with the actual scene. Chiron's mother is

dressed in blue when she screams at him for refusing her drug money. Kevin wears blue as he punches Chiron on the orders of Chiron's bully. Later, both Kevin and Paula also wear blue when they reconcile with Chiron in "iii. Black." Blue thus represents the complicated emotions present in Chiron's difficult relationships. He loves his mother, and she genuinely loves him, yet she seems to prioritize her crack addiction over his well-being. Chiron loves Juan, who shows him great kindness in his childhood, yet he understands that Juan is the drug dealer feeding his mother's addiction. He loves Kevin, who has been his only friend, yet Kevin punches Chiron to preserve his own social status. Chiron and the film reach an emotional catharsis when he finally reconnects with Kevin and Paula in order to make amends. Despite the pain the two have caused him, he cannot stop loving them, which is why he chooses to forgive them at the end. After leaving behind the forces that have guided his childhood life, Chiron learns to also let go of the emotional turmoil which has followed him, unresolved, into adulthood.

In "Teaching 'Smoke Signals': Fatherhood, Forgiveness, and 'Freedom,'" Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval argues that forgiveness allows us to let go of our emotional turmoil and begin anew. There is no doubt that Chiron has been a victim of his mother's abuse and neglect. But we also see how his mother deserves Chiron's forgiveness: she is deeply remorseful, and they have both suffered tremendously. Their painful and confusing relationship has burdened Chiron throughout his life, but as time passes and Chiron leaves behind and reflects on his relationships, he is able to forgive. Armbruster-Sandoval writes about the film *Smoke Signals*, in which a Native American man grapples with forgiving his father after his father's death forces him to consider the complexity of his father as a person (124). Armbruster-Sandoval uses the film to teach his students about punitive and restorative justice in the United States, suggesting that the protagonist's struggle with forgiving his father parallels the country's obsession with punitive rather than restorative justice (126). In a world devastated by the 'corrective' War on Drugs, the restorative act of forgiveness is an important, even radical one. Armbruster-Sandoval maintains that forgiveness, on both a personal and a national level, is important to create new beginnings. *Moonlight* subscribes to this

belief about forgiveness, and the end of the film, in which Chiron's forgiveness brings him back to the purifying act of swimming, demonstrates that forgiveness is the only way he can finally set himself free.

There are no heroes or villains in *Moonlight*. Rather, the story is centered around Chiron's complicated relationships. While society creates a backdrop of an unflinching institutionalized racism, the characters within *Moonlight* are not totally good or bad. By traversing the multifaceted relationships that Chiron struggles with from childhood to adulthood, the film shows us how love acts as a guiding force, even when it is confusing and painful. Ultimately, when we forgive those we love—even if they have hurt us—we find resolution and freedom. As a country, we likewise must recognize the complex nature of individuals and seek justice that restores rather than punishes. The film, beyond breaking many stereotypes, creates an incredibly compelling argument: we only truly grow up when we learn to forgive, make peace, and let go.

WORKS CITED

- Armbruster-Sandoval, Ralph. "Teaching 'Smoke Signals': Fatherhood, Forgiveness, and 'Freedom.'" *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2008, pp. 123-146. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30131249.
- Keegan, Rebecca. "To give birth to 'Moonlight,' writer-director Barry Jenkins dug deep into his past." *Los Angeles Times*, 21 Oct. 2016, www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-moonlight-barry-jenkins-feature-20161006-snap-story.html.
- Kohler-Hausmann, Julilly. "'The Attila the Hun Law': New York's Rockefeller Drug Laws and the Making of a Punitive State." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2010, pp. 71-95. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40802109.
- Lawson, Richard. "Moonlight Is a Heartbreaking Portrait of Often Overlooked Lives." *Vanity Fair*, 3 Sep. 2016, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/09/moonlight-review-barry-jenkins.

Moonlight. Directed by Barry Jenkins, A24, PASTEL, Plan B Productions, 2016.

Pulp Fiction. Directed by Quentin Tarantino, Miramax, 1994.

Scott, A. O. "Moonlight: Is This the Year's Best Movie?" *The New York Times*, 20 Oct. 2016,

www.nytimes.com/2016/10/21/movies/moonlight-review.html