

***Nothing is One Thing in Moonlight,
a film by Barry Jenkins***

Thoughts on identity formation

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When I first saw the film, *Moonlight*, I knew this could be a wonderful film to present, though on an instinctual level I suspected it would present a challenge figuring out what to say. This film is very rich with themes that can be investigated from a psychoanalytic perspective, and our series theme this year, Growing Up, Growing Old, could hope to provide some direction. While my past presentations have also often started as a challenge, often something reveals itself in the analysis of the film around which I can be somewhat definitive and eventually offer some conclusions in the examination I have presented. However, my experience of *Moonlight* has not offered the same type of revelations as my previous experiences and the struggle to be able to say something cogent has been greater. This struggle of mine, I believe, speaks to the brilliance and beauty of this work of art.

I will also admit to a new anxiety coming out of a cultural shift in which sensitivity to the the individual experience has become very political. Some groups, like Black Lives Matter, have rightly insisted upon recognition on their terms, though sometimes with a militancy that is intimidating. And a backlash to this demand has inflamed new waves of bigotry, both subtle and very outright, some of which has risen to the highest levels of our governments. The paranoid position has a strong hold on our society. So what might I, a privileged, financially secure, heterosexual, white man, say about Chiron, a societally and economically marginalized, black homosexual man? The project of psychoanalysis does hope to understand those aspects of the mind that are common to all of us and, further, to try and appreciate how the individual experience has combined with those commonalities. Director Barry Jenkins in an interview discussed his own struggle with whether he had the right to tell this story. His co-writer for the film, Tarell Alvin McCraney (who wrote the original story and cowrote the script) said to Jenkins, “F--- that shit. You wanna tell the story, you tell the story. Just make sure you tell it right.” So I aspire to this statement and the project of psychoanalysis, to honour this film, hoping my analysis is both sensitive and thoughtful.

I have titled this paper Nothing Is One Thing, in part because of another quote by Jenkins in the same interview. He states, “*Moonlight* isn't an issue film. It's not about addiction, it's not about sexuality, it's not about identity. It's about all these different layers, because they are all part of the character.” I am reminded of a common occurrence in sessions with analysands where, in reflecting on formative aspects of their experience, they will ask, “am I x, or y?”, unconsciously pitting one idea against the other and inferring that there is a single truth, and as a consequence the other thought must be invalid. An insistence on a binary perspective: right vs.

wrong, good vs. bad – the paranoid position. When the moment has been appropriate my response has been “Why cannot both be true, and maybe even more that we are missing right now?”, which can have the effect of opening the space of therapy, allowing things to be complicated instead of forced simplicity, and hopefully allowing deeper understanding. I will focus more on identity, but not as a final explanation of the film, but as one perspective of many that are reflected in the character of Chiron.

Moonlight is not one thing. It is not a single film, rather it is three acts whose totality is a film. Each act is a moment in time in the life of Chiron, the protagonist in this story, but while brief, the episode marks a defining event in his life. Very significant is that each chapter shows us something about Chiron's identity, the events describing who he is at that time, though not in a static and immutable manner, rather the ongoing change influenced by his immediate circumstance. The evolution of Chiron's identity seen through these moments in his life highlights how profoundly a person changes throughout their life, with noticeable differences from one stage to the next. This is very marked in the film as each act is titled by a different name associated with Chiron: “Little” is his nickname in childhood, “Chiron” is primary during his adolescence, and “Black” represents him as a young adult, when he reconnects with Kevin who had christened him with that moniker. In each act the character is played by a different actor, respectively Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, and Trevante Rhodes. However, despite these changes and differences over time, the film's storytelling, the direction, and the acting work together leaving the impression of continuity. We might be a little startled at some of the changes, but at no point are we thrown into disbelief as to who, and who's story, we are witnessing. Chiron the boy, the teen, and the man are all the same person. And for most of us this reflects the experience of our own identity, for however much we may evolve over time, we recognize the people we were as ourselves.

Childhood is a developmental phase of identity formation, caught between the aspects we are born with, and the many people and events that influence us during this very shaping stage. How others view and treat us has tremendous importance. Even in the healthiest of situations, as the parents look at their newborn they bring with their gaze their hopes, wishes, and fears for their baby. Children will seek approval from their parents and other adults. In latency, the longing to belong to your group of peers makes you vulnerable to their words and actions. But the healthy situation also offers safety and containment, which affords the child an inner space to balance the outside pressures, to both take in or reject the external influences as their identity takes shape.

So who is Chiron? In the first act, he is Little. Certainly the name speaks to real aspects given his smaller size relative to his peers. The name also alludes to his demeanor; he is shy and quiet, not a big personality. And given the narrative, it is easy to imagine that he is frightened, that he instinctively tries not to be seen, to stay hidden from the world with its many threats. “Little” is a name imposed rather than chosen, a name that insists he is “soft” in a culture that demands he should be “hard”, implying an environment that has not provided him the containment for all his struggles internal and external, that has not provided him the safety to be ok with who he is.

Of course one must address Chiron's sexuality. In terms of Freud's theories of psychosexual development, in the first act Chiron is in the latent phase, the period after the Oedipal drama of infantile sexuality. During latency, sexuality recedes into the background and other areas of the ego develop, but sexuality is not absent. By this time the innate bisexuality of the infant has already narrowed to one part of the spectrum between hetero- and homosexuality; there is already a rudimentary sexual identity, even if it is not manifest. Others instinctively sense this identity, so it remains subject to societal myths and attitudes, imposed rules about who one should be or become, and imposed consequences if you do not fit the the expectations demanded by these beliefs. One can say that this is an unhealthy cultural ego ideal, which does not allow room for the individual to be anything different. Everyone is aware that Chiron does not fit a particular idea of masculinity which is conflated with the notion that he is “soft”, declared an undesirable quality for a man deserving of punishment – the bullying to which he is subjected. This cultural ego ideal denies that Chiron is in fact traumatized – a victim of the culture, rather than the perpetrator he is made out to be. I quote Tarell McCraney from an interview in *The Guardian*, from October 2016:

“I know that there's homophobia that is essentially misogyny masked as homophobia in all of American culture... and it's people who feel like there's a way to be masculine and that masculinity means a kind of superiority which is just misogyny.”

Having seen the film, we can rightly hypothesize that Chiron was traumatized long before the narrative of the film starts. But initially the hints are very subtle, with his extreme introversion and the statement to Juan and Teresa that he does not want to go home. When we are first introduced to Paula, his mother, she seems caring in expressing worry about where he's been all night, protective in wanting to distance him from Juan, the drug dealer. She is dressed as a nurse or personal support worker and we may imagine she works hard to provide for her son. He is given a sensible consequence for not coming home in having his television

privileges revoked. However, later we learn more of the reality when Chiron returns to a strange man in the home and a scene in which his mother may be prostituting herself. Soon after he returns home and the television is gone, probably pawned; does he experience this as punishment for who he is? We learn that Paula is an addict, in her encounter with Juan one evening, where she also reveals loathing for Chiron because of the way he walks and for why other boys beat him – because he is gay. Paula, herself suffering in this culture in which she is stuck, represents that same homophobic and misogynistic culture that would punish Chiron for who he is.

Paula is not a safe and containing mother. While she is not without genuine love and concern, she cannot provide safety for Chiron, not only from the bullies at school and from the poverty that burdens them, but also she is neither able to contain her addiction, nor her anger and hate for her son. The most disturbing scene is where Paula screams at Chiron, then turning away from him and entering her room, and he too turns away in dejection. Only music is playing during the scene, the content of what is being shouted withheld from us, the viewer. This scene could be considered a screen memory, the silence representing Chiron's need to repress his experience of her hate, containing that hate and his devastation the only way he can. But the experience stays with him, reoccurring as his nightmare when he is a man later in the film – played in reverse – but where we hear the words that were screamed, “Don't look at me!”. Paula is not able to offer her loving gaze to Chiron, something he desperately needs and longs for, because in his returned gaze she sees reflected all her perceived failure, and all the hate and anger she is unable to contain.

Juan and Teresa are figures of hope, potential good objects for Chiron as he develops. One of the primary events in the first act is Chiron meeting them. In fact, the first person we meet in the film is Juan, a mid-level drug dealer in the Liberty City area of Miami, as he meets with one of his street dealers. Juan is not portrayed as the stereotype of the ruthless and violent gangster even though we know this would be part of his person. Instead, Juan is shown to be instinctively thoughtful, caring and sensitive, which are traits essential to connecting with Chiron when they first meet. Chiron has escaped some bullies from school and is hiding out in an abandoned building used by addicts. While Juan has broken into the room in which Chiron is hiding, he does ask permission to use the front door when he leaves. He invites Chiron to join him for something to eat. At the restaurant he teases Chiron by pulling away the plate of food, but when the boy looks away, dejected, Juan immediately apologizes. While Juan would like information from Chiron, he allows him to stay silent.

These are small but important actions. They show respect of Chiron as a human being, empowering him.

Teresa is at least equally warm with Chiron, and when she notes he doesn't have to talk it creates the space that he can choose to speak; his first words (close to ten minutes into the film) are, "My name is Chiron. People call me Little." to which she responds that she will use his proper name.

Juan teaches Chiron to swim, and in this act of a good father he is encouraging and patient, allowing a feeling of mastery with each step. As Chiron floats, Juan says "Feel that man? You're in the middle of the world". Juan is creating the space which would allow Chiron to be the centre of himself, enforcing the message when he says, "At some point you gotta decide for yourself who you gon' be. Can't let nobody make that decision for you". Chiron, as Little, is not yet formed; Juan is reminding him that he must have a say in who he becomes.

After the scene where Paula has yelled at Chiron, the next morning, he is again at Juan and Teresa's and they again seek to provide a nurturing atmosphere. Juan, after the confrontation with Paula the night before, seems more paternal than previous. He teaches Chiron where to sit so as to not be surprised by an attack. Chiron's first words that day are that he hates Paula; Juan does not dismiss Chiron's feelings and recalls his similar hate for his own mother, though adds that he now misses her. Then Chiron asks "What's a faggot?" and Juan, recognizing Chiron, underlines that it is a word to make gay people feel bad; it does not serve as an identity. Juan and Teresa provide Chiron an internal space, noting that he does not have to figure out his sexuality yet. But then Chiron asks Juan the most challenging question, whether he sells drugs, part of that thing that makes Chiron hate his mother. Juan is honest, which precipitates Chiron to leave. Even though this is the end of the first act, Juan and Teresa consistently provide Chiron safety, particularly in the realm of his forming identity. This is healthy containment, and this containment provides hope. And while Chiron has felt disappointment in Juan, their relationship was able to continue, which we learn in the next act.

The second act is titled "ii. Chiron", a moment of time during adolescence. During this stage of development, identity is again highly important. According to Erik Erikson it is the phase of identity vs. role confusion, where we either begin to have that sense of who we are and how we might fit into the world, or if things go poorly, we are more tied to the expectations placed on us by others, whether other individuals or the forces of society as a whole. In terms of Freud's theories of sexual development, there is a reactivation of sexuality as predominant within the individual, with the evolution from a phallic to a genital sexuality.

Biologically it is a time of great change, with a shift into adult hormonal expression leading to significant physical growth, development of adult sexuality, and many changes in the development of the brain. It is also a period of individuation, with movement away from parental influence with a concomitant turning to peers to support one's identity. No matter the theory, previous disturbances in development may impair successful negotiation of the current stage.

Who is Chiron? In the second act we first see Chiron in class, being taught about DNA, the foundation of who we are physiologically. His classmate, Terrel attacks his masculinity by using the feminine as an insult, very much the societal misogyny the writer Tarell McCraney spoke of in the quote previously noted. Terrel also attempts to infantilize Chiron by using the childhood nickname, Little. Chiron does have some sense of who he is, demanding Terrel stop calling him that, but Terrel becomes more threatening and it is the teacher who intervenes and kicks him out of class. After class Chiron avoids the group of bullies waiting for him; not much has changed since his childhood, except the threat is becoming more violent. In a later scene, again in class (this time about white blood cells, which protect the body from invasion) Terrel stares at Chiron menacingly, followed immediately by the confrontation in the street where Terrel attacks Chiron first through both of his maternal figures, Paula and Teresa, and then again at his sexuality. Chiron again attempts to stand up for himself, but must back down when the risk of violence becomes too great.

Paula at this point has descended further into her addiction, influencing her to be more narcissistic, hateful, and envious in her interactions with Chiron. She is aware of the emotional distance from her son, but she continues to maintain her grip on him when several times she manipulatively reminds him that she is his mother. Her envy is mostly directed at Teresa, which we witness in the scene where Chiron returns home and Teresa had locked herself out of the home. Once inside, her frantic efforts to find drugs being fruitless, she asks him for money, knowing Teresa is generous with him. When he states he has no money, she attacks, insisting he is lying and that any money is due her; "I'm your mama. That bitch over there ain't no kin of you. I'm your blood, remember?". Paula is angry, wanting from Chiron what Teresa has given to him; manifestly this is the money but less consciously it is the expression of envy of Teresa's maternal relationship to Chiron. Envy is destructive, and Paula would destroy her son in order to sever the connection to Teresa.

Teresa and Juan have remained a positive force in Chiron's life, though we learn Juan has recently died, the circumstances never revealed but easily imagined as tragic. The reminder of the safety and space

provided Chiron are in her words when she gently chastises him for keeping his head down, “It's all pride and love in this house”. It elicits one of the few smiles we see from Chiron. She also reminds him that he can stay with her anytime he wants, something that cannot be said of his actual home. This is all consistent with what we saw in the first chapter, an indication that Chiron has access to some healthy foundations, that there is hope.

Kevin is the centre for the defining moments at this stage in Chiron's life, in his affection allowing Chiron an expression of his sexual identity, but then followed by a betrayal which sets the course for who Chiron will become. Chiron returns to the ocean where Juan had taught him to swim, maybe seeking the love and acceptance he had previously, and Kevin then joins him. Their reflections of the breeze feeling good becomes an analogy for the societal tension in their neighbourhood, the breeze as the moment when people can step away from it and relax and reflect; “...it's like all you can hear is your own heartbeat” says Chiron, maybe rather than all those external voices telling him what he is or what he should be (or other external voices telling the community what it is and what it should be). Chiron also speaks to the sadness of that pressure which attacks any sense of safety and containment when he says, “Shit, I cry so much, sometimes I feel like Imma just turn into drops.”. He is speaking about the fear of diffusion of his identity, that his self might melt away; Kevin is empathically responsive. Further, Kevin opens a containing space in telling Chiron that his desires are allowed, which allows Chiron to express his sexuality and have it lovingly received. Even when Chiron feels guilt and apologizes, Kevin sends the message that Chiron does not have to be sorry for being himself.

Tarrel embodies those forces which seek to define what a man is and punish those who are different, and he intentionally – and sadistically - selects Kevin as the instrument to “play” the “game”, to prove his masculinity, and attack Chiron. Kevin seems unaware of who the victim will be until it is too late; Tarrel circles like a shark hunting its prey. This is a defining moment in Chiron's identity, accepting Kevin with each strike landed on him, and in getting up again making the unspoken statement that he is who he is. Chiron cannot stop the violence, but he will not cower or run as he had to when he was Little. As he is mercilessly kicked by the other boys, his future being forged in this fire, he is becoming Black. He will stay loyal to Kevin, refusing to implicate him when being asked to press charges. He will not turn to others to right the wrongs done against him – with purpose he walks to class, grabs a chair and uses it to have his revenge on Tarrel.

Who is Chiron? In this middle chapter we are given a sense of Chiron's identity in transition, as is typical in adolescence. We see the past, the remnants of his child self, Little, in his sensitivity and introversion,

that which would be labeled “soft”. We see the present, with his emerging sexuality and search for who he might be. And we see the future, the man who will not tolerate being a victim of violence and will instead use it to his own ends, who will seek to be self-reliant, to be “hard”. The tragedy, of course, is that there was not enough safety, not enough containment, and the external attacks too severe, for Chiron to choose something healthier than the violent exterior and isolating interior.

In the third act Chiron has become Black. While the moniker is not used verbally, it is his identity; one might say this is preconsciously represented by the vanity license plate of the car he drives, BLACK305 (305 is the area code for Miami). Our introduction to the adult Chiron is his nightmare which brings back the childhood scene with Paula – played in reverse – and this time without the silence, so we hear her screamed words, “Don't look at me!”, the traumatic rejection breaking through the repression. Then the adult Chiron, now awake, washes his face in a sink, just as he had a few scenes previous, as a teen, just before attacking Tarrel. The man is not dissociated from who he has been, the child and the adolescent are still part of him.

Who is Chiron? Juan's influence is undeniable as Chiron drives a similar car with a crown figure on the dash. He picks up a street dealer inferring he is now a midlevel dealer as Juan had been, though in bringing out his gun may speak to his being more threatening. When he subsequently accuses another dealer of stealing money from him, and we see the fear in that dealer's face, we know Chiron can be dangerous, outwardly “hard”. But he then lets the dealer know he was joking, possibly trying to impart lessons as Juan had for him. Black is the exterior that the world sees, is the identity Chiron projects to ensure a safety that does not depend on an other. This world also created Black; in not accepting a “soft” man, Chiron gives the world the “hard” man that is demanded, which, of course speaks to socio-cultural expectations of masculinity and race which denies the individuality of the person.

Who is Chiron? The unexpected call from Kevin allows us access to Chiron's inner world at this point in his life. Kevin wonders if Chiron remembers him. We are privileged to see Chiron's side of the call, to witness how moved he is by this experience. The hard exterior quickly falls to the wayside leaving a man full of overwhelming emotion – maybe sorrow, loneliness. Maybe also the most forbidden feeling, hope. We also see some of the inner self when Chiron visits his mother in rehab. Paula attempts some reconciliation, speaking truth of the trauma she caused when she says, “Lord knows I did not have love for you when you needed it, I knew that.”. While Chiron may not be prepared to accept this, he allows some of his sadness, and shows his

own tenderness when he wipes a tear from Paula's face. The ability to do this seems to me the influence of Juan and Teresa, who had always allowed him to be who he was.

Chiron returns to Miami, inwardly compelled to reconnect with Kevin. In the restaurant, before Kevin actually looks, Chiron is just another customer, but when their gazes meet recognition is instantaneous. Kevin has changed from when we last saw him, the insecure teenager so tragically influenced by his milieu. Kevin offers to cook for Chiron, which he does with thoughtful care, willing to nourish both practically and psychologically. In prompting Chiron to talk, Kevin invokes, "...grandma rules: your ass eat, your ass speak", echoing the care and wisdom that Teresa had provided in the past. Like Juan and Teresa, Kevin seeks to know Chiron more intimately. He does not accept Chiron being a drug dealer as defining him, calling out Chiron by saying, "Bullshit, man. That ain't what it is. That ain't you, Chiron.". Chiron by now has lived years not revealing himself to others, so he is still guarded, insisting Kevin does not know him, but the pair are able to continue beyond this brief friction.

In the final scene back at Kevin's home the two continue to rediscover each other. They acknowledge the last time they had seen each other, when Chiron had been arrested for the assault on Terrel. Chiron speaks to his response, how when he got to Atlanta he built himself up from the ground, built himself "hard". He created an exterior based on the expectations of others, hiding his individuality that could be vulnerable and subject to violent rejection; he protected the destruction of the self by hiding it and not allowing himself to rely on anyone. Kevin can empathize. While he may have had different circumstances, he also defined himself in response to what was demanded by the world around him.

"I wasn't never really worth shit. Just kept on, man. Never really did anything I actually wanted to do. It was all I could do was to do what folks thought I should be doing. I wasn't never really myself."

But Kevin was able to discover his life, himself; he has a son, a job, and while it may not seem like much, he no longer has the worries he had before. Chiron admits that Kevin is the only man that ever touched him, manifestly speaking to his sexuality. But more importantly, Chiron is in the moment allowing himself to be vulnerable, to declare how important it was for him to have Kevin's love and tenderness, the longing for which he has had to bury such that he has not loved since. No more words are spoken, but Kevin is able to be tender and affectionate, to honour Chiron both past and present, by warmly holding him. The last shot is of Chiron as a boy, in the water, looking back at us, maybe meeting the gaze of the adult he has become, allowing both to

connect, the adult with the child, “hard” with “soft”, for Chiron to be more whole.

I have spoken to the idea of containment, though it is a complex dynamic in the character of Chiron. In terms of the figures in his life, some, like Paula – and maybe the immediate milieu in which he lived – where traumatically uncontainment. Others like Juan and Teresa offered containment, the safety for Chiron to be himself, but it was not enough. Kevin provided some containment, broke this in his betrayal, then was able to genuinely return to it with the rapprochement as an adult. Chiron cannot be said to be a healthily contained man by the end of the film, yet his self is not without the positive influences he has had in his life.

Who is Chiron? Chiron is not one thing. Yes, he can be labelled as a man, as gay, as black, as a drug dealer, yet none of these characteristics define him. He is neither “soft” nor “hard”. He is not only a boy or a teenager or a young man. He is all of these. He is contradictions. He is a human being. So while Chiron's experience may be very different from what we, the audience, have lived, who he is is complex, just as all of us are. We are not one thing, and with that in mind, maybe we can see a bit of ourselves in Chiron.

Thank you.