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The Man with Three Names: Development and Acceptance of a Queer Identity in *Moonlight*

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1. Introduction

Moonlight (2016) was the first feature film that Barry Jenkins directed after a hiatus of eight years, from 2008 to 2016. The coming-of-age drama is a co-production between Jenkins and Tarell Alvin McCraney, author of the play which inspired the film, titled *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* (written in 2003, according to Sherlock, 2020). McCraney created a semi-autobiography getting inspired by the playwright's turbulent relationship with his addict mother and his struggle because of being homosexual. The connection between the two authors that led to their cooperation in the co-writing of *Moonlight* is their hometown, Liberty City, Miami, which was one of the most affected areas by the Crack Epidemic that ravaged the United States in the 1980s.

The film explores the struggles experienced by Chiron, an African American who lives in Liberty City, Miami, in three different moments of his life: childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. The main cast is formed by three actors who play the role of Chiron throughout his life (Alex Hibbert as child Chiron, Ashton Sanders as teenage Chiron, and Trevante Rhodes as adult Chiron), as well as his mother Paula (played by Naomi Harris), his best friend and beloved Kevin (Jaden Piner as a child, Jharrel Jerome as a teenager, and André Holland as an adult), and Juan (Mahershala Ali) and Teresa (Janelle Monáe) a drug dealer and his girlfriend, respectively, who act as Chiron's adult support.

Moonlight was nominated to many awards, winning the Academy Award for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay at the 89th Academy Awards, 2016. Therefore, its huge success and repercussion are not only worth mentioning, but also incredibly gratifying because films with explicit LGBT+ representation –especially with an all-Black cast– tend not to be the spotlight of mainstream media. LGBT+ culture should be part of mainstream culture just as much as heteronormative content, so a film bringing overshadowed topics such as Black masculinity, intersectionality, homophobia, and queerness to the popular eye marked a landmark in the history of cinema. Furthermore, the film succeeds at showing how society instills heteronormative gender roles which entail the perpetuation of hatred discourses against the LGBT+ community, a minoritized group.

The aim of this BA dissertation is to prove that in *Moonlight* heteronormativity influences the main characters' identity development their whole life, and that only when they manage to defy gender roles and toxic masculinity are they able to accept their

queerness. As regards the structure of the dissertation, I should point out that in the second chapter I will explain the theoretical framework which will be the base for my analysis; besides, in that same section I contextualize the film within the situation of the American LGBT+ community and of African Americans. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 will each focus on one of the three parts which form the film. In the third chapter, “Childhood,” Chiron’s relationships with his classmates and his family will be analysed focusing on sexual orientation, drug addiction, and bullying; in chapter four, “Adolescence,” I will explore Chiron’s experiences with the same issues as a teenager and how they transform Chiron’s personality; in the fifth chapter, “Adulthood,” the outcomes of Chiron’s suffering and his final steps towards queerness acceptance will be studied. Ultimately, a chapter dedicated to the conclusions extracted from my analysis will close the dissertation.

This analysis will be developed by supporting my arguments with conclusions and ideas extracted from studies relevant to the matter. First, as bullying is one of the core topics of the dissertation, the article “Consequences of Bullying in Schools” written by Ken Rigby (2003) and published in *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* is particularly relevant as it helps to comprehend the behaviour of the bullies and the victims in the film. Second, to support my analysis on the main character’s relationship with his drug-addict mother I will use “Attachment Theory and Maternal Drug Addiction: The Contribution to Parenting Interventions,” article written by Micol Parolin and Alessandra Simonelli (2016), which studies the impact that drug-addict mothers have on their children. Finally, “A Survey of LGBT Americans” by the Pew Research Center (2013) was crucial to observe the experiences of LGBT+ Americans and how *Moonlight* makes them visible.

Before beginning the main content of this dissertation, I would like to highlight the importance of academic studies analyzing LGBT+ content. It is important to study films not only because they are part of humanity’s artistic culture, but also because they have an impact on society; they influence masses and social roles. Therefore, studying how minoritized groups are portrayed in films is crucial to comprehend how they are seen in society. If films portray hatred discourses being legitimized, these will be allowed in social relationships; but if films show tolerance and denounce injustices, social relationships might be positively influenced by them. Films and LGBT+ content are part of human’s culture, so they can be studied.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will briefly write about the figure of Bayard Rustin, a Black gay activist whose role in the history of American Civil rights was crucial for Black people and the LGBT+ community. His figure is an excellent case study, as it justifies the need to examine how race and sexual orientation intermingle in real life. This dual relation is present in Chiron, the main character of *Moonlight*, the film which is the main object of study of this dissertation, since he is Black and queer. However, before commencing the analysis, I will explain three major concepts which will be essential in the dissertation: Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Intersectionality.

2.1. Bayard Rustin: The Importance of Queer Role Models

Fundamental Human Rights are the core and foundation of social activism, which might comprise a large number of activities, like participating in the abolitionist movement back in the nineteenth century, fighting against racism, providing equal laws for women, or denouncing any discrimination in the apparently egalitarian present. Precisely, the history of the USA has always been characterized by the constant resurgence of political movements trying to eradicate discrimination of any kind.

The United States was built upon the existence of slavery. With the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment on December 6, 1865, slavery was abolished throughout the country. However, black people would suffer from an already established racist social mindset which would develop into infinite hate crimes, demonstrations, and riots throughout history. Despite the insistent, indefatigable attempts to guarantee an equal legislation for every human being from the USA, today Black people are still discriminated against in many different ways.

Like other minoritized groups, the LGBT+ community has also suffered marginalization. One of the worst sources of intolerance the community faced in the past was the mental institution. In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association (“Bullying,” 2021) diagnosed homosexuality as “a sociopathic personality disturbance” (“LGBTQ Rights Timeline in American History,” n.d.) which supposedly could be treated and cured, just as any other pathology could. Furthermore, that same year, the Immigration Act was ratified under the presidency of Harry S. Truman. The Immigration Act stipulated that one of its goals was to exclude “homosexuals and sex perverts” from American society.

Further proof of the country's homophobia was that same-gender marriage would not be legal in the US until 2015.

Considering how long it takes for civil right laws to be actually implemented in society –the Civil Partnership Act allowed same-gender marriage back in 2004, but it would not be until June 26, 2015, that the Supreme Court would legalize it in all fifty states (“LGBTQ Rights Timeline in American History,” n.d.)– and that intolerant conservative groups have typically risen whenever minoritized groups gained more rights, it is essential to look back and analyse history to better understand American's fight for human rights. That information will hopefully encourage present generations to show resistance against intolerable attitudes, and it will also shed light on a rather obscure and uncertain future. The figure of Bayard Rustin can help one discern the importance of expanding one's historical knowledge. Rustin is a landmark in the history of both Black and gay rights. He therefore is a relevant figure for this thesis because, despite being the inspiration behind Martin Luther King's non-violent approach to the fight for civil rights for African Americans, Rustin has been made invisible in history due to his sexual orientation. He is an example not only for activists due to his effective role in defending black rights, but also for the LGBT+ community, as he was overshadowed because of being homosexual. In fact, Rustin openly spoke about homophobia within the Black community, as he said, “It was later when the gay clubs came, and gay men and lesbians wanted to come out of the closet, that I think the black community became quite as intolerant as the white community” (Carbado & Weiss, 2003, p. 282), declaring that the Black community was reluctant to accept queerness due to their existent struggle within social discrimination.

Rustin, self-proclaimed pacifist and civil rights activist, was arrested in 1953 because of his sexual relationship with another man; thus, he was registered as a sex offender after spending 50 days in prison. Because of this case of homophobia sanctioned by the law, his public image was negatively affected, forcing him to quit his spokesperson role and to work behind the scenes. Nevertheless, Rustin began advising Martin Luther King in his campaign for the Civil Rights Movement in 1963. In fact, Rustin was the chief architect of the famous massive demonstration held in August 1963, the March of Washington, which advocated for the civil and economic rights of African Americans and ended with the historic speech “I Have a Dream” (“Bayard Rustin,” 2022).

Rustin fought endlessly for the actual liberation of black and gay people while he suffered oppression even within the Movement, as he was discriminated against by fellow

activists. Nonetheless, he never stopped fighting fiercely against the *status quo* and became an advocate for the LGBT+ movement in the 1970s. Even if his role in history was not generally appreciated while alive, Rustin was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2013. Now that the western world is advancing towards the most egalitarian society it has ever been, Bayard Rustin's historical figure is being valued as key in the Black and gay liberation movement. Rustin is an inspiration for the Black-homosexual community, which needs to be respected and made visible.

2.2. Queer Theory

The case of Bayard Rustin's overshadowing in history is undeniable, but the situation in Academia is also deplorable when it comes to studying LGBT+ issues. The establishment of a theoretical framework has been a key factor in the construction of arguments to support minoritized groups and to allow the rise of awareness. Only when LGBT+ issues and rights are considered as deserving of intellectual inquiry, will they be granted the legitimacy required to become a matter that needs to be researched, taught, and learnt. For that goal to be achieved, queer activists must be listened to. They have traditionally experienced many difficulties when publishing, which has too often contributed to their invisibility within Academia. Despite the barriers LGBT+ scholars have faced, they managed to develop a coherent theoretical approach, so-called Queer Theory, which I will be using in this dissertation to guide and back up my analysis.

Queer theory is an intersectional multidisciplinary field of study developed in the 1990s, mainly in the United States, defended by activists, philosophers, and theorists – such as Teresa de Lauretis, who coined the homonym term in *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* (1991)– in the pursuit of sexual liberation and the deconstruction of gender binarism. This theory states that no one should be forced to abide by the binary norm and supports that gender is a non-fixed spectrum. As Simone de Beauvoir, the feminist philosopher who inspired many of these authors wrote in *The Second Sex*, “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (1989, p. 14). Gender is a construct, and as queer activists defend, it is urgent to deconstruct it.

Being highly influenced by feminist theorists, Queer Theory has unsurprisingly been developed and written by feminists such as the well-known Judith Butler, most prominent author of the theory. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (1999), Butler theorizes that “gender is the cultural transformation

of a biological polysexuality into a culturally mandated heterosexuality” and that “heterosexuality deploys discrete and hierarchized gender identities to accomplish its aim” (p. 75). This is crucial to understand the analysis that will be made in other texts by queer experts. It is likewise important to comprehend the term heteronormativity, which describes how society has a preferable sexual orientation (heterosexuality) and how society tries to absorb any queer sexuality into heterosexuality, thus establishing heterosexuality as the norm to follow. Heteronormativity means that patriarchal society imposes heterosexuality: everyone is heterosexual unless they admit the opposite; everyone is heterosexual unless they are read as queer just because people are educated in what is acceptable and “normal” (heterosexuality), and what is not (queerness). Every individual within a society is exposed to these ideas since they are born, so being able to deconstruct received notions of what is normal and what is not is very complicated.

On the other hand, not only does heteronormativity contribute to the misunderstanding of the LGBT+ community by cis heterosexual people, but it also affects queer people in the sense that they develop themselves without having the freedom to show their real self. Being forced to act and behave in a specific way, and not letting queer features develop freely, results in the appearance of identity issues. No wonder many queer people feel they have been robbed of their true identity and even their life. For example, Elliot Page, internationally recognized actor mainly for his roles in the coming-of-age and comedy-drama film *Juno* (2007) and the Netflix series *The Umbrella Academy* (2019), has recently come out as trans after keeping his identity crisis a secret because of transphobia. He mentioned his struggle in an interview for *Time* magazine (Steinmetz, 2021), where he said, “I just never recognized myself. For a long time, I could not even look at a photo of myself.” Had it not been for the heteronorm, he could have been able to come out earlier and better comprehend that nothing wrong was happening to him.

Other terms apart from heteronormativity require some explanation. For starters, queer itself must be defined. In a leaflet anonymously published as *Queers Read This* and distributed at the Pride march in New York, 1990, *queer* was described in these terms:

Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. It means everyday fighting oppression, homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred. (“Queers Read This,” 1990)

Despite being originally used as a pejorative term meaning “strange” that was applied to gay people, it has been reappropriated by the LGBT+ community as an umbrella term used to describe what is not cis heterosexual. It includes identity and sexual dissidences, but it also refers to the fact of living a public life different from what is heteronormative. Amidst the AIDS crisis in the 1980s-90s, which was devastating for the queer community, the term queer was used by homo-haters “to wipe us off the face of the earth” (“Queers Read This,” 1990); for that reason, deciding to be queer was a sort of declaration, a way of rebellion against an oppressive *status quo*, and a brave and honorable form of activism.

In addition to queer, which is often used as a general term, the term LGBT+ will be used in this text to include Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans, but also other dissidences from the cis heterosexual canon. The plus symbol is used to indicate that queerness must be open to plurality, so the goal is to be as inclusive as possible. Therefore, members of the LGBT+ community can be referred to as LGBT+, queer, or the specific name of their identity, if there is one. In this essay I will apply bisexual and homosexual when referring to those sexual conditions in particular, while applying queer when referring to them without contextualizing.

Taking into account that a homosexual character is the object of study of this dissertation, it is also necessary to describe what masculinity is within a queer context. As Butler describes in *Gender Trouble*, masculinity is what human beings learn as the performance of male gender behavior, which is imposed upon them through heteronormativity (1999, p. 177). Therefore, masculinity entails a set of features which are stereotypically proper of heterosexual men, such as being straightforward, dominant, callous, or strong. Consequently, queer men who do not perform such aspects will suffer discrimination; thus, deconstructing masculinity and understanding gender-performance plurality is essential to erase homophobia.

2.3. Critical Race Theory

Apart from Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory is also going to be used as the theoretical framework for this dissertation. Critical Race Theory (henceforth CRT) has been explained as a movement that comprises

a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same

issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up, but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, context, group- and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 2-3)

This theory, which emerged during the 1970s due to the stagnation, and even regression, of the Civil Rights Movement, tackles racism more intensively “to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground” at the end of the twentieth century (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 4). Thanks to this wider theoretical approach, more Black voices can be heard and understood, and hopefully this approach may facilitate the actual end of racism in every social environment. CRT shows from its inception an interest in intersectionality, which is essential for the analysis that will be carried out in this dissertation.

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework of analysis which states that several aspects of identity participate in the process of discrimination; there is no specific identity aspect that will be a motive for oppression in isolation. This means that, for instance, a Black, homosexual woman might be discriminated against because of racism, homophobia, and sexism at the same time. The term was coined by the civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), a leading scholar of Critical Race Theory.

2.4. *Moonlight* and Intersectionality

Approaching social relationships from Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory is essential to eradicate oppression and create role models for minoritized individuals. Nowadays, media is key to raise awareness because media products offer the fastest, easiest, and most popular type of content people consume. An example of this is the recently Oscar-awarded film *Moonlight* (2016), which managed to create its own place within the film industry and win wide recognition despite telling the story of a Black gay man living in a Black neighborhood of Miami, Florida.

The film tells the story of a Black boy called Chiron. It explores Chiron’s life divided into three sections: childhood, adolescence, and adult life. As he grows up, Chiron will face a great deal of difficulties, such as bullying, issues related to drug addiction, racism, and a sexual arousal dissident from the heteronorm. The relation of race and sexual orientation can be appreciated throughout his life; the film shows how essential it is to consider intersectionality when analyzing social relations.

Due to the positive reaction from the audience and critics, the movie undoubtedly reached minoritized individuals who do not often see themselves reflected in fiction characters because of the problem of under-representation in Hollywood productions. This is extremely important because media tends to be heteronormative and address a certain type of public, and minoritized groups need to feel that they are not left behind, that their stories are not systematically marginalized, and their plight is always absent from mainstream representations. Otherwise, they might get the sense that they do not belong in the society portrayed in media products. Even more, the film served as a precedent to encourage other film directors to create stories focused on queer, racialized lives, and ultimately change the heteronormative Hollywood industry.

3. Childhood

Moonlight succeeds in depicting severe social issues. A group of bullies chasing a frightened child: that is the first image of the protagonist that the audience is given. He is a child who goes by the name of *Little*, although he never chose that nickname for himself and is actually called Chiron. From the beginning, the main character faces obstacles in his attempt to find his identity, his innermost self. The initial hurdle is bullying, which is “a form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort” (“Bullying,” 2021). It occurs usually in a school environment, as in this case, and it is seriously detrimental for the child’s personal growth, as he could potentially develop “low psychological well-being,” “poor social adjustment,” and “psychological distress” (“Bullying,” 2021).

Queer students are a major target of bullying because of LGBT+ phobia and discrimination. Although victims might not be conscious of their sexual orientation or gender identity, attitudes which differ from what traditional gender roles imply are the only excuse needed for the bullies to harass them. Under a heteronormative environment, children who are raised with homophobic prejudices will identify attitudes which defy gender roles as queer—that is, whether something is masculine or feminine. According to a study developed by psychologists from Canadian universities, “the developmental experience of emerging sexuality often parallels the contextual risks of physical and verbal harassment for sexual-minority adolescents” (Williams, et al, 2003, p. 48).

Furthermore, bullying and its consequences are disastrous for the development of queer identities. On the one hand, if queer individuals are forced to hide and suppress queer attitudes and personality aspects, they could grow up self-blaming themselves for not being heteronormative and fitting in. This could cause the suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder even in adulthood when fear of struggling with bullying in work environments springs (Artz, 2019). On the other hand, non-queer victims of homophobic bullying might develop queer rejection, thus perpetuating the creation of homophobic-thinking generations.

The young protagonist, a clear victim of bullying, will throughout the film suffer the consequences of this problem. Not only as a child, but also as an adolescent and as an adult will he struggle to find his innermost self, his queer self. *Moonlight* depicts a non-straight man who needs to fake being straight—or hide his queerness—to fit in a

heteronormative environment, leaving behind his non-masculine stereotypical traits to build an external façade which abides by homophobic gender roles.

In the first part of the film, Chiron shows the consequences of bullying when he struggles to even say a word, which reinforces his shy and introvert personality. Some minutes later, around 15'50', the child can be seen playing in the park with other children, but he does not seem to blend in the group. The only person to whom he talks and does not appear to be an outcast is his only friend, Kevin. After a conversation in which Kevin encourages him to speak up and confront the bullies, they end up in a friendly fight which seems to relieve Chiron; it is the only moment when the audience watches the protagonist being free, liberated, and capable of forgetting his sorrow. The figure of Kevin and these first contacts will be important later for the development of the main character and his sexual awakening.

The second difficulty present in Chiron's infancy is his parental situation. Living in a single-parent family and with his mother being absent due to her job, he is let alone most of the time. Even worse, his mother is shown to be a drug addict, which causes a situation of abuse towards her son. It is important to mention that Liberty City, where the film takes place, was Miami's epicenter of the Crack Epidemic that ravaged the US in the 1980s. The crisis was critically devastating for the African American community due to its marginalization from the rest of society and the fact that drug dealing is an easy way of making money in a job insecurity situation caused by racism and segregation.

The Crack Epidemic began to damage isolated communities under Ronald Reagan's presidency (20 January 1981-20 January 1989). One of the worst outcomes of the crisis was the increase in crime, as "federal prison admission for drug offenses soared, and murder and nonnegligent manslaughter rates increased significantly. There were also marked increases in robbery and aggravated assault" (Turner, 2017). *Moonlight* portrays one of these horrible realities when the main character's mother, Paula, begins to show crack-addiction symptoms. She is a victim of her own hell; raising a child on her own while coping with psychological stress and the ease to get drugs in Liberty City at the time might have been the reason why she failed both to herself and to her son.

Despite lacking a father role model, Chiron meets someone crucial at the beginning of his journey towards his true self. While he is escaping from the group of bullies when the film starts, he is rescued by Juan, a man who will take care of him, especially once he realizes the child's situation at home. Later, in a beach scene, Juan teaches Chiron how to float and swim in the sea. The child can be seen relaxed and enjoying the time spent

with a father figure, stereotypically responsible for teaching physical activities to their children. Chiron's father's absence is a blank space Juan might feel the need to fill.

It is in that beach scene that viewers get a first reflection on what identity is about. Juan recalls how an elder woman from Cuba, his country of origin, told him that "in moonlight, black boys look blue. You blue. That's what I'm gonna call you." After telling Chiron this story, Juan encourages him to find who he wants to be and not let anyone decide it but himself. Minoritized groups tend to build a common identity and sense of belonging as a response to discrimination and marginalization. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in her essay "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991) describes how individual experiences of discrimination, once recognized publicly, become a shared political demand. Despite discussing the plight of women of color, Crenshaw states that that analysis can be applied to other minoritized groups as well:

This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others. For all these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development. (1991, pp. 1241-1242)

Thus, Chiron learns from a young age that there are people like him in every corner of the world and a sense of community and belonging begins to be built. His Black identity is originated both from the existence of racism –how White people consider Black people as "the other", a different subject from themselves– and the existence of other Black people, as African Americans put up with similar or almost identical circumstances regardless of their origin. In conclusion, Chiron's Black side of his identity emerges the moment he realizes not only that he is different to some, but also similar to others.

Unfortunately, Chiron experiences disappointment too soon in his life when he discovers that Juan, his role model, has always been the drug dealer of the area; therefore, the origin of his mother's crack addiction. In one of the last scenes of part one, around minute 34'03", Chiron asks Juan if he sells drugs. Juan admits that he is a drug dealer; after this, Chiron learns that his mother is doing drugs and that Juan is the person responsible for his family situation. The audience watches Chiron leaving Juan behind while he cries of sorrow, a meaningful scene which closes Chiron's childhood and clears the way for Chiron's adolescence.

After determining how bullying and a problematic family situation affected the construction of Chiron's identity as a child, this dissertation will analyze the first traces of Chiron's sexual awakening. After bullying and toxic home environment, homophobia is the third obstacle to the proper character development of the protagonist. Throughout his infancy, Chiron faces men who introduce him to the reality of masculinity and heteronormativity. According to Butler, "the acquisition of such [masculine] attributes and the accomplishment of a heterosexual or homosexual orientation are produced through the resolution of conflicts that have as their aim the suppression of anxiety" (1999, p. 51). Chiron's acceptance of his sexual orientation will be accomplished under the hostility of his social environment towards non-heterosexual features.

In a scene in minute 24', Chiron arrives at the place where his classmates are. In the room, boys were showing and comparing their reproductive organs to one another. This competition is typical in preadolescence when children start to develop their sexuality and they begin to participate in the social construct of what masculinity must be; the one with the biggest penis is the most masculine one. When Chiron enters the room, he must imitate their classmates; he is influenced by others and must blend in. Ironically, it is Chiron, who will come out as homosexual –thus rejecting what heteronormative masculinity entails– the one who is admired by the rest of the boys because he wins the competition by showing the biggest masculine feature. These kinds of situations contribute to the development of toxic masculinity and obstruct a healthy development of identity because anything outside the heteronorm is wrong.

Many feminist authors discuss the figure of the phallus in social relationships and unconscious behavior. Basing their thoughts on the study of psychoanalysts' work, such as Michael Foucault and Jacques Lacan, Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* about how phallogocentric society and how much importance is given to the phallus; so much so, in fact, that the point of absurdity is often reached. Phallogocentrism is a term which was coined by Ernest Jones in an interview reminiscing about his studies with Freud in 1958 (Sawbridge Burton, 2015), a prominent psychoanalyst who devoted himself to the analysis of Freudian theories. Later, second-wave feminism would discuss the Phallus (the term used to describe both the masculine sexual organ and the concept of masculinity) and how male-oriented thinking could perpetuate the issues caused by phallogocentrism. Some works from second-wave feminism involved in discussions about the Phallus are *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (1953) and *Sexual Politics* by Kate Millet (1978).

Another example of how masculinity works can be appreciated around minute 32', before Chiron discovers his mother's drug addiction. Chiron asks Juan what a faggot is. He has heard that term addressed to him, which shows that Chiron, a shy and introverted boy, is being bullied because he is read as queer. From the very first moment a boy is exposed to society, he is judged by his appearance and attitude. If he does not abide by the unspoken rules of masculinity, he will be discriminated against regardless of his sexual condition. In fact, at a young age the boy does not even understand what that insult means and needs to ask an adult if he is a faggot himself. After explaining that faggot is a word used to "make gay people feel bad," Juan gives Chiron a lesson on identity and self-respect: "No, you can be gay, but you *gotta* let nobody call you no faggot. You'll know when you know. You ain't *gotta* know right now. Not yet." (34'03"). Juan succeeds in giving Chiron the support he needs because queer youth strongly strive for acceptance from their social environments, especially in vulnerable cases such as his.

Recently, more and more LGBT+ people disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity earlier due to an increase in support from the educational institutions (Leung, 2021). Experiences from LGBT+ people of color demonstrate that a supportive figure is crucial not only for the proper development of sexual identity, but also for the wellbeing of LGBT+ individuals. Therefore, despite living a painful infancy, Chiron finds in Juan the first spark which will stoke his sexual awakening and, along that, his self-acceptance.

Considering Chiron's childhood experiences, marked by bullying and homophobia, as well as his mother's drug addiction, the absence of a father, and the social construct of masculinity (Butler, 1991), the racialized queer child will commence adolescence, which is the human period when usually identity and sexuality features begin to be constructed. Unfortunately, he will do so with the predisposition to develop self-hatred and self-repulsion. Furthermore, he will hide his suppressed identity to satisfy heteronormative stereotypes because traumatic experiences during infancy are more likely to impact psychological development (Rigby, 2003). In the next section, I will analyze the development of Chiron's identity during adolescence and the consequences of his first steps as part of society.

4. Adolescence

In the previous chapter, I analyzed Chiron's experiences with bullying, sexual identity confusion and his family situation –as shown in the first part of the film– and I explained how they could potentially affect his personality and the development of his identity. In the second part of *Moonlight*, titled *ii. Chiron*, the boy has become a teenager, and those aspects that influenced him in the past are still relevant and present in his daily life. In this section I will analyze the same three issues of Chiron's life which I have analyzed before: first, I will tackle the main character's family relationships; second, I will analyze Chiron's sexual awakening; and finally, I will deal with the issue of bullying during adolescence. The first one which I will deal with is his situation at home and the relationship with his mother and Teresa, Juan's partner, and how those relationships keep influencing Chiron's personality.

As previously said, the analysis will begin by looking into Chiron's family relationships. Around minute 40', Chiron is forced to spend the night out of his home because his mother orders him so. The reason is that she has company, presumed to be her male partner. The scene shows not only how she continues mistreating her son, but also how far she can go, until the point of expelling him at night. Luckily, in the middle of such discomfort, Chiron has found throughout the years another home in Teresa's place. He is invited to stay there whenever he wants. Teresa demonstrates how much she cares for him by telling him to lift his head and never head down, "all love and all pride in my house." She acts as a true, supportive surrogate mother, something necessary for Chiron considering that Juan has died at some point between the first and the second part of the film. He lost the father figure he had gained, but at least he has a mother figure to fill the gap left by his biological mother.

Nevertheless, such peaceful environment is limited by the boundaries of Teresa's house, because it all returns to arguments when he arrives home. His mother asks Chiron to give her money –given to him by Teresa–, which she needs to buy something to kill/lessen her pain, but he knows for a fact that she only wants to buy more crack. After refusing to give her money despite her aggressive attitude, he has no option but to surrender. Then, she reminds him that she is her only mother and Teresa is not, a typical maternal reaction towards children in drug-abusive cases, where "a tendency to isolate and refuse external influences, associated with intrusiveness and acceleration in the child's autonomy" is prominent (Parolin & Simonelli, 2016). Furthermore, it could be

argued that, on realizing that she is not acting like a proper mother, she projects her frustration onto Teresa, which would be an unconscious way of getting rid of her feeling of guilt.

Although Chiron's mother mistreats her son, especially when she is suffering from withdrawal symptoms, she still has lucidity moments when she can speak with Chiron without being hostile. However, even if she does, her fragile mental state does not allow her to have a proper conversation and she keeps hurting her son. This can be seen in minute 57'30'', when Chiron arrives home after a crucial moment for his development (which will be analyzed later) and finds her sleeping on the sofa. He tucks her in with a blanket and she wakes up telling him: "You don't love me no more. You are my only. I'm your only," an outburst that shows how affected by her mental issues she is and reflects her trust issues and at the same time her feeling of loneliness. These problems were probably triggered when she was left alone with Chiron, –although the audience never knows the details of that backstory– and were likely aggravated after she began to take drugs.

As regards the analysis of Chiron's family relationships, it can be concluded that Chiron's identity has been strongly influenced by the constantly hostile and unstable home situation he endures. Due to the trust issues he began to have at a young age—which reinforced his introspective personality--and the perpetuation of such behavior in his adolescence, Chiron is not allowed to develop in a healthy environment. This is detrimental for the proper development of an identity, and it is crucial considering that he is a non-heterosexual man who has always lacked a safety space to come out, at least until now.

As previously mentioned, the second major aspect about Chiron's identity pictured in the film is his sexuality, a core topic in this dissertation, so now I will analyze his sexual identity during adolescence. In general, "cognitive markers of sexual desire emerge during early puberty, including identifiable sexual thoughts and sexual attractions" (Larsson & Svedin, 2002). If we compare this with the results of research that argue that "the vast majority of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals say they were in their teens or younger when they first started to feel they might not be straight" ("A Survey of LGBT Americans," 2013, p. 44), it is clear that non-heteronormative sexualities bloom at the same time as heterosexuality, the only difference between the two groups being that the former are socially rejected while the latter are accepted. In this part of *Moonlight*, Chiron is a full grown-up adolescent, so sexual awakening will take a huge role in the

development of his queer identity. Before deepening in the topic, I would like to highlight the figure of Kevin, Chiron's only friend and the person with whom he could be seen happy and relieved from his harmful environment. Kevin will be the key factor in the depiction of Chiron's sexuality.

As mentioned above, due to homophobia and the heteronorm –the social set of prejudices which force heterosexuality on individuals– American LGBT+ people tend to experience confusing and restricted sexual awakenings due to low or non-absolute acceptance (“A Survey of LGBT Americans,” 2013, p. 31). Some of the consequences of this problems that queer people endure are being forced to date different-gender people or to stay silent about their reality. In the film, both outcomes are depicted. Although the audience does not see Chiron having any attraction for women –whether fake or real– Kevin is a different, and crucially worth-mentioning example. Precisely, in 43’20”, Chiron hesitates about leaving school because bullies are waiting outside for him. Then, he meets Kevin because he is in detention for being caught having sexual relationships with his girlfriend. In an oddly uncomfortable scene, Kevin describes in detail to Chiron how he did it, triggering discomfort in the protagonist. Kevin is an example of forced heterosexuality, although this does not mean he is necessarily uncomfortable dating women. He might be bisexual, but the problem is that he cannot show public attraction towards men, and that might be the reason why he gives so many details to Chiron, that is, to relieve his frustration talking with his male interest about having sexual relationships.

Chiron's reaction is of much importance too. It could be read in two different but not incompatible ways: on the one hand, his discomfort might be a sign of repulsion towards sexual intercourse because of the unacceptance he has always experienced or his uncertainty about his sexual orientation; on the other hand, he might be jealous because he is sexually interested in his friend, considering how comfortable he has always been by his side. When he was a child, Chiron could only feel safe and comfortable with another child, Kevin. The reason for that might well be that it was with Kevin that he could be himself freely, he could release his queer identity. Evidence of that is that after that conversation with Kevin, Chiron dreamt of Kevin having sexual intercourse with his girlfriend, which is what Kevin had told Chiron so descriptively. Whether it was related to just his homosexual impulse or to the fact that he liked his only friend is not relevant; what matters here is that he has finally found someone he can come out to. In fact, research proves that the vast majority of LGBT+ adults admit having come out for the first time with a close friend (“A Survey of LGBT Americans,” 2013, pp. 47-48),

someone they could rely on. For Chiron, that close friend is Kevin; thus, his figure plays a huge role in the proper development of Chiron's identity.

Both Chiron and Kevin are realistic examples of queer characters trying to escape heteronormativity. The peak of the liberation of their repressed feelings and sexual impulse takes place from minute 50' to minute 57', when Chiron runs away to the beach after an encounter with the bullies. There, he comes across Kevin, and both have a deep conversation while smoking together. Chiron accepts the invitation to share a blunt with Kevin without any doubt; his comfort doing so is a consequence of his growth in a drug-affected home due to his mother's situation. Despite being triggered by the inhibition produced by the blunt, Chiron manages to speak openly about feelings for the first time since the beginning of the film. The boys reflect on whether they usually cry and while Kevin says he does not cry, Chiron confesses crying so much sometimes he feels like he is going to turn into drops. Kevin's attitude represents the gender roles of the heteronorm which do not allow men to cry or show emotions, while Chiron's attitude transcends them; indeed, by admitting that he cried often, he is indirectly defying heteronormativity. In real life, many queer people suffer from repression due to social hostility. Considering that "the continued antihomosexual attitude creates a climate of denial that can develop into rage and hostility by those who experience psychic pain" (Lemelle, A. & Battle, J., 2004, p. 47), it comes as no surprise that Chiron breaks into tears so often.

In the middle of that heart-felt conversation, the boys begin to ambiguously talk about "wanting to do secret things," and they end up having a sexual relationship. *Moonlight* portrays a believable image of queer teenagers who find in intimacy a moment of liberation that leaves room for their repressed identity features to escape. Moreover, that moment coincides with the age at which most LGBT+ people admit realizing their non-normative sexuality or identity ("A Survey of LGBT Americans," 2013, p. 47). At this stage, Chiron has gone a step forward towards the development of his queer identity despite the obstacles present not only in a heteronormative society, but also in a territory where drug addiction is dominant and, as a consequence of lack of resources, there is no room for social awareness.

Something symbolically crucial of this intimate scene is that, for the first time, Kevin calls Chiron by his name. Although he never referred to him as Little, like bullies did, he called him Black, a nickname which was not chosen by Chiron himself. As Juan had told him, Chiron must choose who he is without other people's imposition. Interestingly, he is called by his actual name only when he is finally letting his innermost

self out. Kevin has evolved from being Chiron's safe space when they were children to becoming his role model, precisely because it is Kevin who starts the sexual act. Chiron needed someone like him, a queer example to experience something out of the oppressive boundaries of the heteronorm.

The path towards egalitarianism is achieved through the exposure to diversity. In this sense, *Moonlight* depicts how queer people, too, need others. Butler has argued that the social rules that govern identity "are partially structured along matrices of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality" which "operate through repetition" (1999, p. 145). Therefore, we can interpret that the heteronorm perpetuates traditional gender roles to determine what is acceptable and what is not, thus building an oppressive discourse against queer people because they defy what is acceptable according to gender roles. This repetition must be stopped to guarantee that queer identities are provided with adequate environments in which they can grow and develop, which is precisely what occurs in *Moonlight*, when Kevin shows Chiron something different from heteronormative relationships.

Chiron's sexual awakening finally blooms when meeting another non-normative sexual identity. Nevertheless, the third problem the main character must overcome during his early life will be detrimental for his character development, as much as it is for queer identities in real life. That is one of the reasons why *Moonlight* succeeds in portraying a queer development, because individuals will never be safe unless effective diversity-inclusive measures are implemented in schools. A wide proportion of LGBT+ Americans argue that LGBT+ environments are needed because being queer often implies undergoing oppression; moreover, they add that inclusiveness is key to achieve social acceptance ("A Survey of LGBT Americans," 2013, pp. 88-89). For Chiron, the worst problem of all the challenges he faces in pursuing his identity is bullying.

In the film's second part, the audience can appreciate how little has changed in relation to bullying since the protagonist was a child, as well as the unfortunate outcome of such terrible situation. A vast majority of the cases of bullying in educational institutions conclude with an aggressive destructive reaction by the victim, generally against their abusers (Artz, 2019). This is precisely what *Moonlight* depicts: the build-up of a case of bullying together with the consequences and price Chiron must pay.

Throughout most of his adolescence Chiron is still a shy, introverted teenager who is alone. Around minute 36', Chiron is being bullied by two classmates in the middle of the class without the intervention of any compassionate peers. The two bullies, who are

presumably the same ones from the past, make sexist and homophobic comments which are aimed not only at hurting Chiron, but also at provoking the laugh in others. This is a kind of typical bully behavior which is used, whether consciously or unconsciously, to reinforce their sense of superiority. By receiving the approval of the mob, an abuser feels safe and legitimated to perpetuate their crime, as “[bullies] may get others to join in (laugh, tease, hit, spread rumours) as bystanders or even as henchmen (bully/victims)” (Wolke & Lereva, 2015).

The sexist and homophobic jokes made by the bullies reflect the misogynistic and homophobic discourse present in society; a discourse deeply ingrained in individuals since they are exposed to social groups. The problem with this kind of jokes is that they are nothing but prejudice and hatred against minoritized groups. Chiron’s bullies are seeking approval, because “essentially, if you joke about women and get the laughs you are vying for, those who are already hostile to women will see this as a social green light for their views” (Prasad, 2019). This can also be applied to jokes about homosexuals or any other minoritized group. This rotten sense of humor is a tool that feeds back heteronormativity and does not allow the existence of queer identities. Immersed in an environment where that sense of humor prevails, Chiron is being discriminated against because his classmates presume he is gay, despite his not having come out yet.

As expected in the majority of cases of bullying, the victim ends up suffering physical abuse. The main problem is that the one hitting Chiron is Kevin, who is a victim of bullying pressure himself and participates in the attack because of that. In minute 60’, the bullies dare Kevin to smack Chiron in the middle of a crowd of students encouraging him to do so. In an uncomfortable scene, Kevin punches Chiron and orders him to give up as to end the altercation. However, Chiron faces up the situation and keeps standing up, despite knowing that the consequences will be worse. Victims of bullying and intimidation can potentially rebel against their aggressors and defend their pride. That is what is depicted in the film when Chiron proves being brave enough to show courage against bullying. Moreover, the fact that the aggressor is Kevin, the one Chiron loves and who helped him accept his innermost self, is not only disappointing for the protagonist, but also infuriating, causing Chiron to experience frustration and rage.

The headmistress of the high school encourages Chiron to file charges against the bullies in order to end the bullying. Despite failing to detect bullying or condemn the crime –even though teachers were present during the assault–, the headmistress is a positive representation of how adults should react against abuse. Not only does she

encourage him to stand up for himself, but she also tells him, “I’m not going to disrespect your struggle,” thus presenting herself as an example of how supportive, respectful, and tactful adults should be when facing bullying. However, it is too late for Chiron to be rational at this point. So, the next day, Chiron arrives at the classroom just to brutally hit his bully with a chair, leaving him unconscious on the floor. The last scene from Chiron’s adolescence shows viewers how he is being arrested by the police while Kevin stares at him. Chiron must pay for the malfunctioning of a failed, unsuccessful system which allows hate crimes to take place and leaves victims alone to take justice into their own hands. *Moonlight* shows how turbulent queer adolescence is and that LGBT+ people have no truce when it comes to dealing with discrimination.

5. Adulthood

In the previous sections, I analyzed Chiron's identity development throughout his childhood and adolescence regarding three different aspects: his relationship with a drug-addicted mother, his suffering as a victim of school bullying, and his queer-sexuality awakening in a heteronormative society. This fourth chapter corresponds to *Moonlight's* final part, titled *iii. Black*, and will be focused on Chiron's life as an adult, the outcomes of his life experiences, and the conclusion to an oppressed queer identity given by the film. As I have been doing throughout the dissertation, here too I will delve into the three major aspects of Chiron's life: first, I will analyze the conclusions of Chiron's unhealthy relationship with his mother; secondly, I will study his personality transformation after suffering from bullying; and finally, I will consider whether Chiron manages to come out and release his queer sexuality from the repressive chains of the heteronorm.

Throughout parts one (*Little*) and two (*Chiron*) *Moonlight* depicts the devastating effects of drug-abuse in family environments. Amidst the Crack Epidemic that ravaged Miami between 1984 and 1990, Chiron must grow up in a single-parent family with a mother who suffers from crack addiction. In the previous chapters I analyzed how drug is a dangerous "homewrecker" which damages the addict's mental health, thus corrupting their behavior and relationship with their relatives. Not only does Chiron's mother mistreat her son and neglect her responsibilities and duties as a mother, but also stops him from building healthy relationships with others: she manipulates him by saying she is the only one for him, she is jealous and destructive towards Chiron's relationship with Teresa, his surrogate mother figure since childhood, and she forces him to grow up in an unsafe environment surrounded by drugs.

After the second ellipsis from the moment Chiron gets arrested to the first scene as an adult, the film shows Chiron waking up to a nightmare. In it, Chiron dreams of his mother begging him not to look at her, which could be interpreted as a visual representation of the trauma provoked by her. Children of parents who present mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression, are more likely to develop similar issues themselves. In fact, research proves that "other risk factors for children's depression identified in the study included being female, their mother taking antidepressants and having no stable man in the household" (PLOS, 2021). Although Chiron's case coincides only with the last risk factor mentioned, his situation is worsened by different crucial factors. The first one is the fact that Chiron is queer, and oppressed queer identities often

tend to develop mental health problems (“Mental Health Statistics: LGBTIQ+ People,” 2021). The second factor is the abusive environment in which he is raised, surrounded by drugs. The final factor is bullying, whose effects have been already analyzed in previous chapters. Taking into account these factors, Chiron’s nightmare is evidence of the trauma caused by his mother.

Despite their turbulent past transformation, Chiron’s relationship with his mother Paula reaches a turning point in the last part. After waking up to the nightmare, Chiron receives a call from his mother persuading him to visit her because it seems he does not do it very often. Consequently, he visits her in the rehabilitation facility where she is staying, but she is nothing like the image in Chiron’s nightmare. She is the opposite of what she used to be like in the previous parts, too. Now, Paula realizes her addiction and how poorly she behaved towards her son, showing signs of recovery and improvement thanks to rehab. In fact, she demonstrates how much she has improved because she is worried about her son selling drugs instead of projecting her jealousy and envy on him as she used to do. Furthermore, she apologizes for all the sorrow she caused him and says, “I messed up, but your heart ain’t gotta be black like mine, baby,” which triggers Chiron’s tears. Although he has buried his feelings under a façade of appearances, he sheds tears once that painful chapter of his life is closed. Now he begins to be free from the trauma caused by his mother. The journey towards accepting his identity commences.

Once it is understood that adult Chiron has changed partially because of his family dynamics improving, we should focus on the other major problem in Chiron’s past: bullying. He used to be a shy, introvert, and slim child who avoided conflicts, but now, adult Chiron is a brawny grown-up man who exercises, transmitting an image of confidence. Moreover, now he wears golden accessories just as the other African Americans do, particularly those who used to bully him. By means of this mimic, Chiron fits in the social group he is expected to be part of because the so-called “jewelry drip” (the level of expensive jewelry you show) is something typical in African American communities, mainly in African American ghettos, probably because “in hip-hop land, rappers especially evoke chain competition and the bling ownership to one up the other and compete in a who’s who type of competition” (Asmerom, 2011). This is a way in which the heteronorm works within Black communities, establishing social behaviors that determine how masculine a man should be. Besides, it is an example of the intersectionality depicted in *Moonlight*, as Chiron is affected not only by being queer, but also by being Black; last but not least, he is also affected by his low social class, as he

lives in a ghetto. Thus, race, sexual orientation, and social class intermingle to contribute to Chiron's oppression, they do not function in isolation.

All these features add to Chiron's dominant and strong image, opposite to how he used to be. However, in addition to the obvious physical changes, Chiron has also adopted certain habits which are a sign of his adaptation to the environment. There is a more significant change which is essential to understand how growing up in a drug-dealing environment and experiencing bullying affect identity development. Chiron has moved to Atlanta and is a drug dealer himself. In fact, the scene at the beginning of part three can be likened to the beginning of *Moonlight*, when Juan was shown inspecting the neighborhood and collecting the money from his associated drug pushers. Despite knowing the consequences drugs have not only on dealers, but also on consumers, Chiron has been forced to change and adapt to the masculine gender roles of the heteronorm: he has become a dominant male who intimidates others to keep their respect (which is nothing but fear in disguise), abandoning his sensitive personality and creating a façade of masculine stereotypes to protect himself. He is forced to assimilate himself into society because queer individuals do not fit in the prototypical heteronormative society.

Many queer people who are discriminated against try to "be comfortable" within their social environment. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Sarah Ahmed, a British-Australian writer and scholar who focuses her research on intersectionality, feminism, queer theory, and critical race theory, discusses the issue of comfort, among others, in the context of heteronormativity. Ahmed explains the concept of comfort as "an encounter between more than one body" (p. 148), understanding bodies as the different individuals that form a society, and comfort as the act of bending in a group. In the book, Ahmed considers as different bodies those of heterosexuals and those of queer people because they are socially seen as different. As she states, heteronormativity is a form of comforting because "queer subjects, when faced by the 'comforts' of heterosexuality may feel uncomfortable" (p. 148). Heteronormativity functions through a set of beliefs, ideas and characteristics that determine what is appropriate and what is not, so queer people, when confronting those ideals, feel "the sense of out-of-place-ness and estrangement" (p. 148). Furthermore, queer people tend to be forced by heterosexuals to quit their queer features because they (heterosexuals) feel "uncomfortable" with queer aspects within the boundaries of heteronormativity. This is precisely what Chiron had to experience throughout his life, being obliged to adapt to

heteronormativity, not only to comfort others, but to give himself a fake sense of comfort which ultimately seeks survival.

Moonlight provides an aggressive but realistic depiction of how heteronormative comfort works when Chiron must adapt himself to the environment after the bullies forced Kevin, the only queer person close to him, to participate in the bullying too. First, Chiron feels ready to come out to Kevin, a queer man. Second, the bullies force Kevin to assimilate their dynamics –comfort heteronormativity– and beat Chiron. Therefore, Chiron locks himself back in the closet, but more traumatized than before. This trauma caused by experiencing violence not from the bullies, but from the queer man who symbolized his hope is the final barrier Chiron must overcome to accept his true identity. To solve this, the film places Kevin back in Chiron’s fake life. Kevin calls Chiron years after the last time they saw each other because Kevin was reminded of Chiron by a song played on the jukebox at the restaurant where he works. Kevin apologizes for what he did to Chiron and invites him to pass by. Chiron drives to the restaurant after reconciling with his mother. The first interesting fact is that before entering the restaurant, Chiron dresses up and even combs himself despite his extremely short hairstyle, showing how worried he is about making a good impression on Kevin. Years have passed in which Chiron has faked a personality, but his secret identity begins to come to the surface when he is about to meet his beloved Kevin.

Once in the restaurant, the first thing Kevin notices is that Chiron has not changed a bit, even though it is obvious that he has become different. Kevin is able to read Chiron’s identity behind the mask he has built: all those stereotypes of heteronormativity that Chiron has managed to create for himself are just mere components of a façade that Kevin, the only person who has ever met the true Chiron, is able to see through. Chiron’s queer grief is familiar to Kevin, another queer man who has suppressed his queer side throughout most of his life. Following Ahmed’s analysis of queer bodies and discomfort in *The Politics of Emotion*, it can be argued that both characters have adapted their external image because “compulsory heterosexuality shapes bodies by the assumption that a body ‘must’ orient itself towards some objects and not others” (2004, p. 145). If we take this statement literally, heteronormativity is the agent which transforms queer bodies searching for comfort. Nevertheless, this does not mean that queer bodies have no agency because, although they live within an oppressive community which rejects their queer features, they have the ability to deny assimilation and stand for their identity. Therefore, despite transforming their surface because “compulsory heterosexuality shapes which

bodies one ‘can’ legitimately approach as would-be lovers and which one cannot” (p. 145) –that is, Kevin dating only women or Chiron confessing not having any physical or emotional interpersonal relationship with anyone after Kevin– both will now find themselves capable of choosing acceptance and exposing their queerness.

This process of sexuality acceptance begins when Chiron enters the restaurant (minute 82’). One essential symbol in the film is Chiron’s golden dental crown. Before eating the dinner prepared by Kevin, Chiron has to take off his golden dental crown, that is, he has to leave behind all those masculine aspects he had to assimilate and to take off his heteronormative mask before speaking with Kevin. When he is with Kevin, he is the actual Chiron, exactly like when they were children and teenagers. In fact, when Chiron explains what he does now for a living and that he has been drug-dealing since he was arrested that day back in high school, Kevin does not recognize him. By saying “that ain’t you,” Kevin underlines the dualism in Chiron’s life. Kevin first thought that Chiron had not changed at all, but now, on second thoughts, he sees some transformation in his friend. Indeed, Kevin is detecting two Chirons: one is fake, a product of heteronormative oppression; the other one is true, the queer, emotional, and sensitive Chiron he used to know. Chiron cannot lie anymore because Kevin is the only person who has ever met his true identity. That is why Kevin is the person who will help Chiron escape the repression of the heteronorm.

The last minutes of the film, since minute 99’, show Chiron and Kevin together after driving to Kevin’s place. Chiron is invited to spend the night with Kevin because he has driven from Atlanta to Miami (there are about 1,000 km between both places). It is worth mentioning that Chiron asked Kevin while in the restaurant if he was still going out with Samantha, Kevin’s girlfriend in high school. Although they have a son together, Kevin confesses being single. This might be interpreted as an open door for both men to resume their story together. That story continues after arriving at Kevin’s home, when Chiron begins to reconcile with his past as he stares at the beach nearby, the same beach where his one and only sexual intercourse took place. He starts remembering the Chiron who has been hidden for years. Once inside the apartment, Kevin keeps asking Chiron who he is, pointing out all those superficial changes, like the car or his physical appearance, but Chiron claims he is himself even though he has become “hard” now, in Kevin’s words. Then, Kevin focuses on his life and recounts his story and how he had never been himself, his true self. Even though Kevin is not completely the person he would like to be, at least he has managed to earn a living and take care of his son. This

shows another view on queer struggle: a bisexual man can openly date a woman, have biological children, and avoid conflict only if he hides his queer self. Homosexuality and bisexuality experience similar forms of hatred, but these work differently as “[sexual] orientations affect what it is that bodies can do” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 145). Kevin, a bisexual man, could find happiness with a woman and fake comfort within heteronormativity, which Chiron, a homosexual, cannot do.

The end of *Moonlight* and the conclusion of Chiron’s journey towards queerness acceptance is shown from minute 104’ until the end. Chiron suddenly uses words to express himself, something he rarely did throughout the film; indeed, the three Chirons represented by the three actors had in common their introvert and quiet personality. For example, the audience may see Chiron say “you [are] the only man that has ever touched me. You are the only one. I haven’t really touched anyone since.” This is actually the first time Chiron comes out of the closet. Never since the beginning of *Moonlight* had he talked about his feelings towards men. In the first part of the film, titled *Little*, he was referred to as “Little,” a moniker that emphasized a side of his identity chosen by others because he did not know who he was. In the second part, titled *Chiron*, he became “Chiron” when he began to experiment and learn to know himself, but he was exposed to the hatred of a heteronormative society, thus forced to become “Black,” which is the title of the last part as well as the name he goes by as a drug dealer. After these three stages in his life, Chiron finds a safe place to be himself, accept his queer identity, and defy heteronormative comfort. After confessing to Kevin, they are shown sharing a moment of intimacy while Chiron leans his head on Kevin’s shoulder, and they smile in serenity. Finally, the last scene of the film shows little Chiron standing in front of a calm sea and looking back to the camera. He has finally found inner peace, which has become possible after accepting his homosexuality and rejecting the heteronorm.

6. Conclusions

Through the last three sections, I have analysed and explored *Moonlight*'s depiction of heteronormativity and how its rigid vision of gender roles oppresses and alters Chiron's actions, attitudes, and personality. In this final chapter, I will collect the conclusions extracted from each different part of this dissertation as well as the overall conclusion.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I have studied the protagonist's turbulent story as a child, portrayed in the first part of the film. This part is titled *Little*, the nickname used by the bullies to refer to Chiron. The nickname functions as a symbol of how the main character's identity was stolen since the very beginning as the other children did not accept him for who he actually was. Based on the works of experts and the life experiences of other queer people, I have explained how the heteronorm rejects queer features, thus discriminating against individuals who show such aspects, regardless of whether their queerness is known or not. Chiron could have had a more healthy and joyful life if it had not been for the homophobic and hostile environment he endured at school. Bullying is a serious issue connected to discrimination against minoritized groups, the LGBT+ community in this case, which affected Chiron's perception of himself as compared to the rest of the world. Unless the gender roles established by the heteronorm disappear, no queer person will be able to grow up under the same conditions of cis heterosexuals and develop their identities without threats to their life. Finally, I also studied the consequences that drug dealing has on African American neighbourhoods and how the lack of resources and economic growth damage adults' health. Their children, too, will suffer from the consequences of abuse, as shown in the film, where said problems influenced Chiron's personality and impeded his identity acceptance.

In the fourth chapter, I continued analysing the life of Chiron and his struggle towards finding his identity during adolescence, which is the focus of the second part of the film. The title of this part of the film is *Chiron* because even though bullying and drug abuse keep complicating his life, he manages to encounter his queerness for the first time. Chiron's abusive home environment stripped him of a safe space which he could escape from the bullying. In his teenage years, not only do the bullies harass him in and out of high school, but his mother, too, mistreats him at home. Both circumstances represent an obstacle to Chiron's healthy development. I also studied how the constant exposure to abuse and the lack of involvement from the educational institutions can lead the victim of bullying to react violently against the bullies and unfairly face the consequences which

the culprits should have previously been charged with. Lastly, Chiron's adolescence is marked by the fleeting, yet significant, sexual intercourse he has with Kevin, which marks the beginning of the protagonist's sexual orientation realization. Analyzing this scene, from a queer perspective, I should argue that the relevance of the intercourse between two queer characters in the middle of a hostile heteronormative social environment was key to demonstrate that the LGBT+ community demands visibility because they need referents and role models to relate to and communicate with. Queer people are neither awkward nor rare. One of their greatest problems is that they are too often made invisible, which makes their lives appear as alienated from social normativity.

In chapter five, I analyzed how adult Chiron sheltered himself under a shield of heteronormative features in order to become a dominant man instead of the vulnerable, emotional one he had always been. The title of this part is symbolic because *Black* is the name he goes by while being a drug dealer. Now, as an outcome of humiliations and mistreatments, he has left behind his queerness. I studied the reconciliation of Chiron with his mother once she had overcome her addiction to crack –what stopped her from behaving as a responsible, healthy mother– and how that, together with his reunion with his beloved Kevin, the only queer man he has ever met, was crucial for Chiron to overcome his traumas and accept himself. Only when a queer person is exposed to queer realities and is able to live without fear to oppression can they fully accept themselves.

Ultimately, I analyzed *Moonlight* as an LGBT+ coming-of-age film from an intersectional perspective with a focus on the development of a queer identity within heteronormativity. The division of the film into three parts, each entitled with one of the names Chiron was referred to, represents the journey which queer people must go through until they find acceptance. At the beginning, Chiron suffered from homophobia not because he was homosexual –as he did not know about his sexual orientation yet– but because he showed certain attitudes and personality traits which the heteronorm does not associate with males. As he grew up, the hate crimes he dealt with proved two key facts: society tends to tolerate discrimination, though it tends not to tolerate diversity. Consequently, I analyzed how Chiron got rid of his queerness and adapted to the comfort of heteronormativity to blend in, something many queer people must do to survive. However, despite being a heartrending motion picture, *Moonlight* leaves the audience with a beam of hope with a finale in which Chiron has conquered his fears and traumas to accept himself. The LGBT+ community needs queer representation as much as Chiron

needed queer peers, and *Moonlight* sheds light on the obscure reality many Black queers are forced to experience.

This dissertation contributes to Queer Studies with the analysis of an LGBT+ film which faithfully depicts a non-normative queer experience –that is, the portrayal of a Black gay man instead of a white gay man, which is usually more common. Analyzing queer content and how it represents different queer realities is important to spread awareness about social oppression among groups of people who are not familiar with queer lives. *Moonlight* is a film that teaches viewers how queer African Americans struggle to live freely without repression. Moreover, studying the identity evolution of Chiron in *Moonlight* can be helpful for queer individuals who need support and courage to proudly express who they are.

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