

Themes of identity and parental relationships in moonlight and boyhood

[Family](#), [Parents](#)



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The semi-autobiographical bildungsroman films *Moonlight* and *Boyhood*, directed by Barry Jenkins and Richard Linklater, explore comparable themes through the use of cinematic and narrative techniques. Both Jenkins and Linklater depict the contrasting lives of Chiron (Trevante Rhoades) and Mason (Ellar Coltrane) and their differing journeys and experiences from adolescence to manhood. Through their settings, both films reveal a different and contrasting view of their respective communities, and thereby show the segregation inherent in modern day America. While Jenkins illustrates the impoverished neighbourhood ghetto of Liberty City, Miami, Linklater sets his film in the middle-class suburbia of Texas. Jenkins in particular uses motifs and symbolism to portray the struggle with identity as well as the impact of parental figures, whereas Linklater employs nostalgia to discuss individuality, as achieved through the exploration of the protagonist.

Through differing techniques including low shots, perspective, colour, flashbacks and motifs, both Jenkins and Linklater explore the roles and relationships and the significant impact of parental figures on the protagonists. In both *Moonlight* and *Boyhood*, Mason and Chiron come from broken families with single parents, and their lives are beset by conflict and chaos. Mason's mother's terrible judgment of men places Mason in an environment with a "parade of drunken assholes" and similarly, Chiron has at times zero and three parents in his drug addicted mother Paula (Naomie Harris), and his surrogate parents Juan (Mahershala Ali) and Teresa (Janelle Monáe). Once Paula descends into the frenzy of crack addiction, she frequently becomes more of an antagonist to Chiron rather than a mother, screaming at him and accusing him of stealing money so she is able to

supply her crack addiction. Jenkins utilises imagery to capture Chiron's complicated and broken relationship with his mother, as well as his abnormal perception of parents. Low shots and colour are employed as Jenkins shows Chiron's vulnerability to his crack addicted mother. This is achieved through a flashback in which Jenkins frames Paula high in the shot as she screams at him whilst illuminated by surreal pink and red light. The conflicted motherly love is embodied by the mixed signals between Paula's fury and the intensity of the colours red and pink, standing for passion and maternal affection. This encapsulates Paula's frail, but dysfunctional love for her son "you're my only, and I'm your only" demonstrating how she uses that love to essentially hold Chiron emotionally hostage. Similarly, Linklater's usage of perspective from the point of view of his protagonist reveals the isolated moments of Mason's boyhood and communicates the impact of the long-suffering, unstable lifestyle of Mason's mother. Significant events in Boyhood such as moving home and going off to college are seen from Mason's perspective, which is invariably different to that of his parents. Mason's mother lives in a cramped apartment and considers moving the family to a larger and improved space. Whilst Mason's mother sees this as a positive decision, for Mason, this is very difficult as the prospect of leaving his familiar surroundings and routine is distressing.

Mason's point of view is also seen when talking to his mother before leaving for college. Although Mason is happy and eager to be heading off to college, his mother on the other hand struggles "this is the worst day of my life" and revealing she just "...thought there would be more". Jenkins use of

perspective connects with the audience's personal experiences, as he portrays how emotionally difficult it is for a mother to see their child leave them for college. Whilst Linklater implements an unobtrusive film style to juxtapose the differences between respectable and depraved father figures in Mason's life, Jenkins employs motifs to demonstrate how Chiron's surrogate parents offer him the guidance that his mother is unable to provide. Despite being what society would define as an "irresponsible" man, Mason Sr. proves himself to be a worthy father in contrast to opposing father figures in Mason's life. He is present in the divorce and wants to know Mason for who he truly is, engaging in conversation, visiting frequently and broaching the uncomfortable questions of sex, whilst teaching him valuable life lessons along the way. Linklater utilises standard two shots to draw emphasis to the conversations between Mason and his father, showing how the relationship with his father creates a sense of stability and trust. Similarly, Jenkins uses the motif of food which serves as a means of bonding between Chiron and his surrogate parents. Chiron struggles to connect both verbally and emotionally, and Teresa and Juan use food as an enticement for Chiron to share his story with them. They are able to gain his trust and offer him the support he craves from his mother as he tries to discover who he truly is.

Jenkins and Linklater mutually explore themes of identity through film techniques, including dialogue, narrative structure, music and symbols. Jenkins structures *Moonlight* into three different stages, "Little", "Chiron" and "Black" revealing Chiron's drastic change from "Little" into "Black".

Linklater however, shows the development of a 6-year old boy over 12 years, evoking a sprawling sense of realism and passage of time. Although Jenkins uses the titles of Little, Chiron and Black to show separate stages of the same man's life, his use of this chapter structure gestures at the notion that Little, Chiron, and Black, could be considered as separate characters instead of the same man, due to the protagonist's immense change and development throughout the story. Through this idea, the audience is able to recognize that Chiron's efforts to discover his true identity reveals his journey through life as broken, both literally and figuratively. In *Moonlight* water is used as a symbol, representing acceptance of identity. Jenkins shows how water is intimate and present during vulnerable moments, such as when Chiron bathes or ices his face and when he enjoys his first sexual experience with Kevin. During these moments of vulnerability, Jenkins use of water directly symbolises and correlates with Chiron accepting his true self, rather than concealing it. Both *Moonlight* and *Boyhood* use dialogue in differing ways to discuss the identity and development of the protagonists, immersing the audience in the film through creating a sense of realism and familiarity, allowing them to become a part of the storytelling process. Linklater utilises dialogue and music to create a uniquely expressive and real experience with the audience as he employs a traditional medium of 35mm film to chronicle the life of Mason. Linklater is able to create a sense of nostalgia as if the story is filtered through a memory as Mason's boyhood passes before the audience's eyes.

Linklater further creates the feeling of nostalgia through the use of music as a signifier of Mason's stage of life. When Mason goes to vandalise an underpass, hard rock is played to highlight his youth and remind the audience of the feeling of being a lively, riotous child, whereas when he is older, a family sing along on a summer's night promotes a feeling of unity, ultimately displaying Mason's emotional development throughout the film. In *Moonlight*, Jenkins consistently leaves out key components of dialogue between the 3 stages of Chiron's life and in turn, continually poses the question of whether Chiron actually has control over his identity or rather inherits his identity from those who have a significant influence in his life. Jenkins conveys this idea through Chiron's most dramatic transformation and development into a character that echoes his surrogate father, Juan. Whilst Kevin pokes holes in this transformation, asking Chiron, 'Who is you?' and whether he's 'hard now', from the way he dresses to the crown ornament on his car, Chiron seems to be the embodiment of his surrogate father. This is a conscious choice made by Jenkins, raising questions about Chiron's tragedy of self-denial, leaving them wondering if he truly chose this life or merely grew into an identity that was fated for him from the start. Similarly, toward the end of *Boyhood*, Mason's mother mentions a "series of milestones" to Mason, including "the time we thought you were dyslexic" and "the time we taught you how to ride a bike". This dialogue is intentional to demonstrate how it is these unseen scenarios that Linklater bypasses which resonate with the audience and encourage them to look back upon their own memories of childhood.

Through setting, foreshadowing, symbolism and establishing shots, Jenkins and Linklater explore a contrasting view of the communities, Liberty City and middle-class suburbia, Texas, revealing the segregation inherent in modern day America. Mason and Chiron's story could not be more different. Both Jenkins and Linklater's use of setting shows the differing lifestyles of Chiron and Mason, as Chiron lives in the impoverished ghetto of Miami during the crack cocaine epidemic and Mason lives the life of the average white American boy in the middle-class suburbia of Texas. Despite this, both *Moonlight* and *Boyhood* share the similarity in that both protagonists are from broken families and when their stories are taken together, they represent the two different sides of America and all that segregates it. From the first moments of the films, *Moonlight* and *Boyhood* portray two completely different Americas as both Jenkins and Linklater use establishing shots to foreshadow how Chiron and Mason's lives are almost defined as a result of cultural norms. The opening scene of *Moonlight* opens with a car pulling up in a rough looking residential neighbourhood as a drug deal unfolds. Jenkins uses a circling camera shot throughout the scene symbolising the claustrophobic trap of the Liberty city ghetto and establishing the power it holds over the characters in *Moonlight*, particularly Chiron. It was a conscious choice made by Jenkins to open the scene not with Chiron, but with the tough environment he struggles in, as it is an immense part of his eventual development into "Black".

Similarly, Linklater's use of Coldplay's upbeat song "yellow" in the opening scene of *Boyhood* accompanies vibrant colours, depicting the nonchalant

casual life of Mason as he looks into the sky seeming as if he almost has no worries. To Mason, Chiron's world in the ghetto of Liberty City is essentially unknown. Mason is from the suburban areas of Texas and he has the luxury of possibilities in that he is able to choose what he wants to do with his life, what college he wants to attend and who he wants to be. He is surrounded by friends who celebrate his identity and individuality, not having to face the dangers of being a gay black man like Chiron. For Chiron in Liberty City there really are no possibilities, as he is confined by his society's expectations of him to hide his true identity and fit in with the role of hardened black maleness. His choice of role models consist of his drug dealing surrogate father and his crack addicted mother and whilst his fate is not as defined as Mason's, it is clear from the start that whatever Chiron chooses to do will likely result in him being the victim or aggressor of crime.

Both Barry Jenkins in *Moonlight* and Richard Linklater in *Boyhood* were able to effectively portray the differing journeys of Mason and Chiron, from adolescence to manhood. Through cinematic techniques including dialogue, nostalgia, motifs, colour and narrative structure, both directors were able to explore comparable themes of parental impact, identity and the inherent segregation in modern day America. With Jenkins particularly employing motifs, narrative structure and symbols to discuss these themes, Linklater largely implemented dialogue to discuss the chronical of Mason's life and give a sense of nostalgia, resonating with the audience.