

Moonlight, a 2018 drama film, chronicles the life of a boy named Chiron from rough Miami. Chiron's transitions from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood are riddled with challenges of his masculinity and opportunities to prove his manliness. In his younger years, he is not as successful against his hegemonically male bullies or his hegemonic neighborhood. But as he ages, he becomes better at disguising himself in hegemonically masculine armor to protect himself from predators and blend in with other men that he identifies with because of his rough home life as a child. And Chiron's sexuality is another layer that adds to his bouts of struggle when it comes to assimilation, suppression, and physical dominance among his other Black male counterparts.

Growing up Black, I have seen the ways that Black masculinity operates, and I have been affected by its performance in one way, shape, or form. I identify so much with this film because the experiences that are shown on screen, I have seen a lot of my friends go through and I have even been able to apply some of Chiron's struggles with my own life, opening my eyes to the expanding impact masculinity has. By analyzing the film *Moonlight*, I hope to show how Black masculinity is successfully achieved through and heavily reliant on three masculinity factors: assimilation, suppression, and physical dominance. Through specific scene selection, character analysis of Chiron and the other Black men he interacts with, and through critical rhetoric and sources, I hope to show how the movie's message of needing to conform in regard to Black masculinity is actually very real in real life.

Defining Conversation

To understand the challenges Black men face when dealing with their masculinity, there are key terms and concepts that would be helpful to define first. "Hegemonic masculinity" is a type of masculinity that holds a position of power given its surrounding's sense of gender roles

and relations (Connell, 2005, p. 76). In other words, what is deemed hegemonically masculine can always change given the society and culture it thrives. In *Moonlight*, we will see how hegemonic masculinity is defined in terms of Chiron's environment of a rough neighborhood in Greater Miami. According to masculinity researcher Cliff Cheng, characteristics like domination and aggression define hegemonic masculinity" (2007, p. 298). Hegemonic masculinity is always presented as a competition: what man can prove themselves as more manly, more aggressive, more in control than the next man? (Cheng, 2007, p. 298).

According to another masculinity researcher Jonita Aro., pop culture defines anything that is mass accepted or favored by people in a given society or environment (2016, p. 34). This being said, pop culture makes room for certain ideologies, or "systematic body of ideas practiced by a group of people," (Aro, 2016, p. 34) to flourish and be represented on screen. Whether that's a good or bad thing is up to the viewer but showing ideologies of Black masculinity in *Moonlight* sheds a light on how these ideologies of what men ought to be or what they should aspire to be aren't necessarily conducive or helpful ideologies to subscribe to in the real world.

Assimilation – Black Becomes a Gangster (scene)

This scene comes in the film's third act. Chiron, now grown up and nicknamed "Black," has transformed into a guy that is unrecognizable to anyone that grew up with him: he has muscles, wears gold chains and has gold teeth grills, drives a big, fancy car, and has lots of money from what we find out is selling drugs. The film itself centers around Chiron's struggle with meshing his masculinity and his sexuality in his environment that only recognizes and rewards what is hegemonically masculine. For Chiron's environment as a young kid and an adult, masculinity and the approaches to it were very normative. According to masculinity scholar Connell, normative approaches to masculinity argue that masculinity is "what men ought

to be,” (2005, p. 70). Because of strict gender role implications in the setting of the film, men Black men are pigeon held into certain stereotypes even they know that they are actually situated outside the stereotypes, because that’s the norm. Connell also argues that hegemonic masculinity can be characterized using symbols. A semiotic approach to Chiron’s masculinity shift can point to all of the materialism that comes with being hegemonically masculine in this context: gold chains, big car, etc... Semiotically, masculinity can be defined as anything that aligns with non-femininity (Connell, 2005, p. 70). Therefore, Chiron’s masculinity identifiers are inherently non-feminine, making them the desired level and form of masculinity.

Another argument behind the power behind stereotypes and symbols of Black masculinity comes from researcher Trevor Milton. He argues that adherence to stereotypes and allegiance to symbols within Black masculinity can occur for many reasons, including be related to the history of America and things like Blaxploitation (2012, p. 21). Also, hegemonic Black masculinity that lives in poorer income areas tend to rely more on this power, this sense of competition, resulting in hegemonic masculinity being perpetuated (Milton, 2012, p. 20). Given Chiron’s environment and circumstances, hegemonic masculinity was the safest bet rather than facing ostracization and ridicule. Blending in can be a means of life or death when it comes to Black masculinity.

Suppression – Boys Don’t Cry (scene)

In this scene, Chiron and his long-time friend from childhood Kevin, have an intimate conversation away from the drama of the neighborhood. They laugh, they talk about why they don’t let anyone know that they cry, they share an intense physical moment. Moments of assimilation are not the only ways to adhere to Black masculinity as showcased through the film – suppression is another ticket into Guyland.

Researcher Cliff Cheng argues that marginalized masculinities – masculinities that don't fit the mold of the hegemony – are suppressed as a result of their threat to the status quo (2007, p. 301). In this scene, Chiron admits to crying in private, to Kevin's surprise. Black men are typically stereotyped as only being angry or hot-headed, never emotional or gentle. Chiron's masculinity is outside of the norm presented and he therefore has to perform his masculinity in secret. Robert Brannon puts it best: he argues that one of the rules of masculinity is "No Sissy Stuff!" including crying because those actions are seen as "weak, effeminate, or gay," (Kimmel, 2018, p. 45). Kimmel also argues that boys learn the most about their masculinity through a dichotomy: what's girly and what's for guys? From an early age, boys are taught that they are not only not allowed to express their feelings, but they are also emasculated if they even simply feel them (Kimmel, 2018, p. 53). According to this Guy/Boy Code, Chiron and Kevin break all the rules and we see that Kevin actually relates a lot to Chiron, though he is very popular and seen as a hegemonically masculine man in his neighborhood and Chiron is seen as the exact opposite.

Despite what boys and guys tell you, they still obviously find crying to be something that they do or need to do, they just aren't open about it. In an article that explores Black boys' thoughts about emotions, a study was done that concluded that Black boys relate to emotion management in three key ways: "inhibiting expression, cultivating control, and craving freedom (Harris et al., 2020, p. 12). Conversations about inhibiting expression revolved around Black boys feeling emasculated if they ever showed emotion around a female significant other (Harris et al., 2020, p. 12). The concept of cultivating control relates to the boys' relation to and perception of power and strength. When it comes to power and strength, it is understood that "control is at the center," (Harris et al., 2020, p. 16). This means that in order to be a real man,

you must exhibit and maintain control and this need for power, control, and strength, even through violent means, “accommodates the master narrative about aggression in the Black community,” (Harris et al., 2020, p. 16) though the boys studied lacked in their interest in violence (Harris et al., 2020, p. 16). “Craving freedom” refers to the boys’ belief that girls have it easier because they get to be honest about what they are feeling, and they get to act upon it (Harris et al., 2020, p. 16). Chiron and Kevin are, themselves, situated among these reasonings for defiance in the face of emotions and unfortunately, we not only see this lack of emotional expression among men generally, but Black men have a unique perspective on what it means to suppress and align. In *Moonlight* in particular, suppression, assimilation, and physical dominance create a cycle that simply reinforces each individual concept...and this is shown best in the fist-fighting scene.

Physical Dominance – Peer Pressure (scene)

This scene comes after the beach scene from the previous paragraph. Kevin, now putting on his act as hegemonically male for the sake of his reputation, he is encouraged by Chiron’s bullies to beat up Chiron in front of the entire school. Kevin yells at Chiron to “Stay down!” both because he had to in order to get approval from the other boys but also because he didn’t want to hurt Chiron anymore, especially after what they shared with each other on the beach just a few days before.

Connell hits on the concept of complicity, the act of remaining a bystander in a situation that obviously needs help. You stay silent and allow whatever is happening to continue to happen. In this scene and movie’s case, Kevin is not known to be violent or a bully. He is simply popular but has achieved this status by having well-off parents. So, when approached to become this bully that he wasn’t in the face of other popular boys who made their way to the top through

violence, he seemed to act as though he had no other choice. By enabling the bullying and taunting to the point where Chiron ends up laying bloody in the school parking lot, Kevin's actions perpetuate complicity.

And because hegemonic masculinity on the grandest scale typically describes straight, White, rich, educated, etc.... men, Black men tend to find themselves creating their own type of hegemonic masculinity to survive within that specific racial group. Cheng also brings up the question of whether or not people of color and LGBTQ+ people can be hegemonically masculine. Kevin is LGBTQ+ in the film yet somehow remains in power among hegemonically masculine men. Cheng says that "performing hegemonic masculinity by a marginalized person is seen as a passing behavior that distracts from his/her stigma (Cheng, 2007, p. 299). So, in Chiron's case this is what is going on but in Kevin's case, he is trying to keep eyes off of him for his association and similarity to the stigma that Chiron represents.

In regard to Black men's relation to other Black men, Black men must first realize the white model of masculinity and then curate their own based on what they can and cannot relate to when it comes to white men and their masculinity (Roberts, 1994, p. 384). Blackness has a unique perspective of the distinctiveness of manliness and femininity so when Black boys like Chiron seek to find role models that don't live within the binary and more exist in a space that is in between, struggles arise, especially in an environment like the one presented in the film.

Conclusion

What films like *Moonlight* show are unique Black experiences that intersect race, gender, and sexuality that reflect very real situations that Black people find themselves in more often than not. With the characters Chiron and Kevin, the complexities of what exactly it means to be Black, and a man are showing from childhood throughout adulthood, showing that the process for Black men never seems to stop. In comparison to Black men's white counterparts, Black masculinity is a process that requires assimilation, suppression, and spurts of physical dominance that outlives childhood and spans generations. Through assimilation, suppression, and physical dominance, Black masculinity's role in the community has a bigger toll than some people outside of the community may think. *Moonlight* opens up audiences to that new information.

\

Works Cited

- Aro, J. (2016). *Constructing Masculinity: Depiction of the Superheroes Superman and Batman* (No. 1). <https://bit.ly/3n8jPVV>
- Cheng, C. (2007). Marginalized Masculinities and Hegemonic Masculinity: An Introduction. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 7(3), 295–315. <https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.0703.295>
- Connell, R. W. (2005a). Relations among Masculinities: Hegemony, Subordination, Complicity, Marginalization. In *Masculinities* (Second ed., pp. 77–79). University of California Press.
- Connell, R. W. (2005b). The Social Organization of Masculinity. In *Masculinities* (Second ed., pp. 67–71). University of California Press.
- Harris, J., Kruger, A. C., & Scott, E. (2020). “Sometimes I Wish I Was a Girl, ’Cause They Do Shit Like Cry”: An Exploration Into Black Boys’ Thinking About Emotions. *Urban Education*, 004208592093332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920933327>
- Kimmel, M. (2018). “Bros Before Hos” : The Guy Code. In *Guyland* (Updated, Reprint ed., pp. 45–53). Harper Perennial.
- Milton, T. B. (2012). Class Status and the Construction of Black Masculinity. *Ethnicity and Race in a Changing World*, 3(1), 17–31. <https://doi.org/10.7227/erct.3.1.2>
- Roberts, G. W. (1994). Brother To Brother. *Journal of Black Studies*, 24(4), 379–390. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193479402400401>