

Seeing "Moonlight" in China
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I saw this movie yesterday in the context of a course on psychodynamic psychotherapy held in Wuhan, China in April, 2017. I had assigned it because I thought it could bring up the issue of cultural differences in psychotherapy since the Chinese attitude toward homosexuality is quite different from current attitudes in the West.

David, my translator, came into the teachers' lounge to tell me that we can discuss the film after showing it. He said he sees it as having to do with child abuse and how that causes homosexuality. I do not see any child abuse in it. I tell him so. We negotiate the tension by laughing together.

And we go on to see and discuss the movie "Moonlight." I am a bit hesitant but I introduce it as a tender love story. I explain that it is about love between two boys who grow into two adolescent and finally as men. I hope this will help the participants to see it not as scandal, but as a way to understand their homosexual patients as human beings doing the best they can with the life they are given. I am moved all over again when I see the movie now for the third time.

What strikes me in it for the first time is the names of the characters. The hero is Chiron, the Greek guardian of the river Styx that leads the dead to hell. His beloved is Kevin, a WASP name that no black child in Miami would have. And the father figure is Juan, a Cuban black man in a Miami community where all the Cubans are white. The mother is Paula, another white person name. The nurturing and empathic mother figure is Teresa, as in Mother Teresa, the Catholic saint of Calcutta. The names are a code for the universality of the theme. This is not just a movie about a black neighborhood in Miami. It is a movie about people anywhere.

In the first section of the movie we see the hero Chiron as a delicate child. In its opening shot the movie contrasts the harshness of the big cars, the decrepit houses and squalid dope cribs with the lush palm trees, clean sand beach, warm night sky and brilliant flowers of the Florida natural setting. It contrasts the harsh exterior and relentless pursuit of money in the drug trade with the kindness of the drug king-pin asking after the mother of a street dealer who works for him. It depicts the lonely childhood of a black boy cared for by a single mother, at first too busy working, and later too wasted on drugs to provide for her son, Chiron. When the large, dark, gold chain wearing, do-wop-rag hatted Juan rescues the frightened child from a gang of boys who are tormenting him, the child cannot trust him even to speak his name or address. Juan takes him to a diner where he feeds him, but this boy cannot use words to express his feelings at all. He is touched when Juan's girlfriend Teresa gives him a meal, but only gains the power to speak when Teresa tells him that it is okay for him not to speak until he is ready. This is a nice point for psychoanalysts to note.

Sometimes the asking cure works best when the analysts does not insist on the patient's expressing himself in words, but invites the patient to take his time in beginning to speak. Once Juan takes him home to his mother, she expresses her anger that the man is trying to take her child away from her. As she will tell Chiron later, he is all she has. He is her one possession. She treats him as a treasured possession, not as a person, let alone a child. Chiron returns to Teresa's home to eat a meal with her. Juan shows him how to choose a seat at the table facing the door so that he is not vulnerable to attack from an intruder. Juan takes him to the beach where he teaches him how to swim. Juan tells him that when he was a little boy an old lady told him that in the moonlight black men are blue. He says she called him blue. This is the color of melancholy and of the black music called "the blues" Juan tells him that he rejected the name Blue because you cannot let anyone else define you. You have to define yourself.

Similarly in a very moving scene Juan answers Chiron's question "What is a faggot?" by saying that it is a word some people use to are people feel bad about being gay. When Chiron asks about whether he is gay, Juan tells him that he will know that about himself when it is time, but he

does not need to know yet. Theresa says he will know when he is ready.

Later we will see Chiron's mother Paula treating him as an annoyance when she is entertaining a man. She will condemn him to a solitary meal and expel him from her home for the night so she can have her drug infused encounter with that man.

I talk about how his mother sees him as the target for the other boys because of his girlish walk. She regards him as gay. Possibly this is the source of her rejection of him. They never quarrel; he never challenges her.

In the second section of the movie, he is an adolescent. He still lives with his steadily deteriorating crack addict mother. When she sends him out for the night he goes to the beach where he meets the friend who has tried to teach him to defend himself against the bullies by wrestling with him: Kevin. They smoke marijuana together, kiss and Kevin gives him a hand job. Kevin says "This is your first time?" Chiron nods. Kevin drives him home where they exchange casual "See you around" farewells.

When the now adolescent bully from their childhood challenges Kevin to knock Chiron down to prove he is a man, Kevin complies. Chiron stands up. Kevin knocks him down again, but begs him to stay down so he will not have to continue to hit him. Chiron goes home, puts his face in a sinkful of ice water, and turns hard. When the principal of his school asks him the next day to tell who hurt him, he refuses. He will not betray Kevin despite the beating; Kevin is the boy he loves. Instead he goes into the classroom, picks up a chair and splinters it over the bully's head twice. The police are called. He goes off in handcuffs.

In the third section of the movie Chiron is a heavily muscled black man with diamond earrings and gold chains doing push-ups. His mother calls, begs him to visit her, his friend Kevin calls to ask how he is doing and invite him back to visit Miami. He visits his mother in a rehabilitation facility. She apologizes for not giving him the love he needed when he was young. She tells him that she loves him now. He responds by crying. When he leaves her, he goes to Miami, finds Kevin who is now a cook in a Cuban diner, like the one Juan took him to long before when he was a little boy. Kevin feeds him. They talk about Kevin's unsuccessful marriage, his love for his own son and his disapproval of Chiron's making all that money by "trapping". At the end Chiron tells him that no one else has touched him in all the years since they were together. The movie ends with a shot of their two heads resting on each other.

The discussion was on the nature of love. Chiron loves Kevin in what Freud called narcissistic object choice. Kevin was what he wanted to be when they both were boys. He is also the person who first made love with him. In that way he was a choice based on an early object, the mother who gave him the breast. But he was also the boy who was most like him and as such a narcissistic object and the boy he had been before his mother became a crack addict. While Freud distinguished each of these forms of object choice from the others, this film seems to be showing how, when they all coalesce in one person, the love is irrevocable. Even if the person hurts, disappoints and betrays the lover, he is still and forever the beloved.

As a meditation on the nature of love, as a description of fatal attraction, as a defense of homosexual love, and as a faithful description of the course of one human's development, this is a movie worth seeing. Even this anti-gay Chinese audience is half convinced by the end of the evening.