

The Nuances of *Lady Bird* and *Moonlight*

By comparing *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Moonlight* (2016), using a narrative analysis, it's clear that individuality and The American Dream are prioritized in American culture. This essay will briefly outline narrative analysis, preview the two movies, talk about individuality and The American Dream within them, and cover the overarching concept of intersectionality in the films and American culture.

Starting with the notion of narrative analysis, from *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*, Dianna Sellnow states narrative analysis is a rhetorical method for examining ideological arguments that are conveyed through storytelling. "It identifies arguments proposed as morals through storytelling, complete with characters, plot, and actions" (p. 49-52). Through use of narrative analysis, one can see that the films *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Moonlight* (2016) challenge the idea of individuality and The American Dream in American society in similar and different ways.

Lady Bird (2017) is an American coming-of-age dramedy. This film is written and directed by Greta Gerwig, released on November 10, 2017. It performed well in the Box Office, as it received 79 million U.S. Dollars, receiving 41 major nominations in 2018, and winning 13 awards. This movie tells the story about a young, punchy, white girl named Christine "Lady Bird" McPherson. Christine is a senior at a Catholic high school in Sacramento, California and desperately tries to get out of her boring hometown in search of something more in life. The film shows her strained relationship with her mother, her rocky relationships with those around her, and her journey trying to "find herself" in a transitory time between her senior year of high school and college. This film shows about a year of Lady Bird's life, taking place in around 2002-2003. She grapples with her identity as a vibrant woman yearning to get out of her hometown.

Moonlight is an American coming-of-age drama written and directed by Barry Jenkins. It is based on Tarell Alvin McCraney's unpublished semiautobiographical play, *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*. This movie was released on September 2, 2016. It performed well in the Box Office, as it received 65.2 million U.S. Dollars, receiving 19 major nominations in 2017, winning four awards. This film shows life of Chiron, a young, gay, black man growing up in Miami, Florida. The movie shows three key chapters of Chiron's life, showing his upbringing as a child, living with his crack-addicted mom, his time as a teen, dealing with serious bullies in high school as well as understanding his sexuality, and a period of his adulthood, where he becomes a drug-dealer and remains closed off from his past. This film shows Chiron's life through childhood to adulthood. He struggles with his identity as a black gay man, experiencing trials and tribulations that define who he is and how he navigates the journey of understanding himself.

Regarding the films, it is evident that they both touch on the topic of individuality and The American Dream within American culture. With *Lady Bird* (2017), Christine really pushes for everyone around her to acknowledge her by her self-given name, "Lady Bird." She wants to be perceived to be different from everyone around her; she wants to stand out against the well-

behaved Catholic girls at school but wants to fit in with the popular and rebellious girls. In a scene where she is auditioning for the school theater performance, Lady Bird wears an eccentric dress to her audition and signs up as "Lady Bird." The school priest asks, "Why is it [the name 'Lady Bird'] in quotes?" To have her respond with "Well, I gave it to myself, it's given to me, by me" (Gerwig, 2017). Lady Bird keeps this name campaign running throughout the entirety of the movie. It isn't until the end where she moves to New York City for college where she begins to embrace her real name, Christine. Since most of the film shows her journey trying to be seen as someone as unique as the name "Lady Bird," she hopes to stand out in society. She craves individualism to find purpose in her young, formative years in her life. Another scene in which this is evident is in the beginning scene, with her mother on her way back from doing college tours, Christine states, "I wish I could live through something" (Gerwig, 2017). The idea of being something more in life lights a fire under Christine. Her character conveys what it's like to want to get out of a small hometown and what it's like to step out of the simple, lower middle-class life she has always known. From this narrative, Christine wants to be unique, and wants to achieve success outside of Sacramento, perpetuating the idea of individuality and The American Dream that is hammered into American culture.

As for *Moonlight* (2016), regarding and The American Dream, Chiron is granted independence against his own will. Narratively, this concept in the film explores individualism through a differing lens than *Lady Bird*. For example, in the beginning of the film, Chiron tells his newfound friend, Juan, that people call him "Little" when Juan asks for his name. (Jenkins, 2016) As a child, Chiron accepts this nickname not because he chose it himself like Christine did, but because it was used against him. Another instance where this happens later in the film is where one of his friends from high school, Kevin, calls him, "Black" (Jenkins, 2016). For over half of the movie, Chiron is referred to as either "Little" or "Black." These nicknames that were given to him show that through the plot's narrative, individuality in American culture is engrained into one's life whether they like it or not. As for The American Dream, Chiron grows up essentially raising himself. He is primarily reliant with himself, because of the lack of his mother's emotional presence due to drug addiction. Chiron is forced to fend for himself throughout his life. In the third act, Kevin asks Chiron, "Who is you, Chiron?" to which Chiron responds, "I'm me man. I ain't trying to be anything else....When we got to Atlanta, I built myself from the ground up. I built myself so hard" (Jenkins, 2016). From this, one can see that Chiron became successful by his own doing. Although he went through emotionally and physically harmful hardships, he worked hard to be as successful as he is now.

The perspective in *Moonlight* (2016) differs from *Lady Bird* (2017) because Christine actively seeks out independence and success, ignoring the struggles happening to the people around her. Chiron is thrown into the deep end and is forced to make ends meet on his own, hyperaware of what is going on around him.

In *Lady Bird* (2017), there is a scene where Christine's mother, Marion, brings up that Christine's father, Larry, lost his job. There is always a sense of financial worry that Marion expresses throughout the film, and Christine lacks awareness of it. She begs Larry to help pay for her east coast college applications to be sent in and continues to live life in a bubble she so carefully crafted for herself (Gerwig, 2017). Christine willingly pushes herself into the idea of sticking out from the crowd and emphasizing her goals of achievement at the expense of those around her.

In *Moonlight* (2016), the first act shows Chiron as a young child. After visiting his friend Juan and Teresa's house, he asks Juan, "Are you a drug dealer? My mama do drugs?" Juan responds yes to both questions (Jenkins, 2016). Chiron is not even ten years of age, and he is aware of his mother's crack addiction and who she gets it from. Chiron is so painfully aware of what is happening to him and the world around him. Society has pushed him to the point where he must achieve success to survive. In the third act, while Chiron catches up with Kevin, Chiron admits that he's a drug-dealer (Jenkins, 2016). Chiron goes on with his life into adulthood, but reluctantly navigates finding out who he is as a person because of his upbringing.

With this, the idea of intersectionality within American culture is brought to attention. The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, American civil rights advocate, leading scholar of critical race theory, and professor at UCLA, where she specializes in race and gender issues. Intersectionality is the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination. Intersectionality is vital to this topic of discussion because one can deduce that each coming-of-age story roots from their socioeconomic identities in American culture. Christine is a lower-middle class, cisgender, straight, white woman from the suburbs of Sacramento, California. Though her struggles of finding herself and achieving success are a result of her environment, and it's no secret that she experiences these certain struggles because of her role in society. As for Chiron, he is a low-income, cisgender, gay, black man from the projects of Liberty City in Miami, Florida. He too goes through personal struggles of identity, but there are different layers to Chiron's hardships. Chiron is forced to navigate maturity at an early age due to where his mother raised him, even tracking back to the intersections his mother upholds, being a black woman and a single mother. Chiron yearns for a better life than the one he was born into, but he goes about doing so in a way that society and those around him expect him to. As a black man, Chiron has to embrace the hypermasculine role that American culture has set for black men. Chiron pushes back on his sexuality because he wants to survive. The circumstances in which they navigate life is based on their socioeconomic roles in American culture. It is so important to realize the role intersectionality in media, especially when critically analyzing narratives and the works as wholes.

In essence, *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Moonlight* (2016) are two coming-of-age movies that show Christine and Chiron facing the pressure of growing up, navigating individuality, and pursuing The American Dream. The ways in which the two main characters go about doing so differs. Because of their stark differences in their upbringing, the people they are surrounded with, and the world that they know, Christine and Chiron face individuality and The American Dream from different lenses. Both films perpetuate individuality and The American Dream, which makes it clear that American culture values individualism and success. From this, it all goes to show the flaws in the American Dream, as it lies in the lack of acknowledgement in intersectionality, meaning that there must be more of a push for education and equity in American culture.

References

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