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## **THE NARRATIVES OF BLACK BOYHOOD IN COMING-OF-AGE MOVIES *MOONLIGHT* AND *THE BLIND SIDE***

**Abstract:** The article discusses the topic of Black boyhood in the United States and the stereotypes that these boys face. It also focuses on the changes which may occur in the interpersonal relationships that African American boys live in, as well as demonstrating stereotypical images of Black families. The purpose of the article is to emphasize the fact of how the stereotypes that African American boys struggle with affect their lives and personalities. Another important aspect is that the life of a Black boy does not always have to conform to stereotypes, as shown in the coming-of-age movies *Moonlight* and *The Blind Side*. This article also outlines the current situation of African American boys, which is demonstrated by the activities of the Black Lives Matter movement.

**Keywords:** Black boyhood, stereotypes, racial profiling, coming-of-age movies, interpersonal relationships, Black Lives Matter movement.

**Streszczenie:** Niniejszy artykuł porusza temat czarnego chłopięctwa w Stanach Zjednoczonych oraz stereotypów, z jakimi się mierzą. Koncentruje się także na zmianach, jakie mogą zajść w relacjach międzyludzkich, w których żyją afroamerykańscy chłopcy, a także na ukazaniu stereotypowych wizerunków czarnoskórych rodzin. Celem artykułu jest podkreślenie faktu, jak stereotypy, z którymi zmagają się afroamerykańscy chłopcy, oddziałują na ich życia i osobowość. Kolejnym ważnym aspektem jest to, że życie czarnoskórego chłopca nie zawsze musi podążać za stereotypami, co ukazują filmy o dojrzewaniu *Moonlight* oraz *The Blind Side*. W niniejszym artykule została także przedstawiona obecna sytuacja afroamerykańskich chłopców, którą ukazują działania ruchu Black Lives Matter.

**Keywords:** Black boyhood, stereotypes, racial profiling, coming-of-age movies, interpersonal relationships, Black Lives Matter movement.

## Introduction

Black boyhood and its accompanying problems are important social issues in the United States.<sup>1</sup> What African American boys struggle with, due to the consequences of the stereotypes they face on a daily basis, is one of the most pressing concerns in contemporary American community. As many scholars observe, the situation in which these boys are currently living is a direct result of the institution of slavery as well as the racial segregation system, which shaped the interracial relationships. Black boys seem to be the victims who suffer the most. Racial prejudice now appears in the form of discrimination, racial profiling, racial stereotyping, and police brutality, among others. African American boys are exposed to great danger. They have never been respected either by the police or the society. Some police officers, who seemingly should be helping all the people, regardless of their ethnicity or gender, and being role models, very often mistreat Black boys, forget their rights, and disrespect them. Rarely does a change occur in the lives of African American boys that steers their lives in a better direction.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. maintains in his book, *A Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, the first Black people were brought to the United States of America in 1619, a year after the Pilgrim Fathers, the founding fathers of America, arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> However, what is important is that they were taken there from Africa against their will, as slaves, unlike the Pilgrims. During the time of slavery, they were treated in discriminatory ways. According to DeNeen L. Brown, children were taken from their parents.<sup>3</sup> They were all sold to the highest bidder. As Brown explains further in her article, even if families were not separated, “Enslaved mothers and fathers lived with the constant fear that they or their children might be sold away.”<sup>4</sup> African American families were isolated, every day was filled with fear, children were left without their parents and had to work hard on the plantations. Since then, Black boys have had to fight for their rights, dignity, and liberty.

Although their past is very difficult and disturbing, Black boys have contributed to the history of African Americans. Many of them had to protest and stand up for themselves at a very young age, due to discrimination, racial segregation, and the consequences that followed. They demanded better treatment in protests such as sit-in movements. As David J. Garrow argues in his book, four young Black male students

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, the terms “African American” and “Black” are used interchangeably. “Black” is capitalized since it refers to one of the minority groups in the U.S.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, *A Testament of Hope: the Essential writings and speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 5.

<sup>3</sup> DeNeen L. Brown, “‘Barbaric’: America’s cruel history of separating children from their parents,” *The Washington Post*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/05/31/barbaric-americas-cruel-history-of-separating-children-from-their-parents/> (accessed October 1, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

at Northern California A & T College, on February 1, 1960, entered the Greensboro F. W. Woolworth's store lunch counter, took their seats and when they were refused service and told to leave the canteen, they objected.<sup>5</sup> Such spontaneous ventures gave rise to the "sit-ins." The protests quickly spread across the country. Black students were entering whites-only public places, for instance, libraries and restaurants, taking their seats and they were sitting as a form of protest and waiting until they were served. It never ended that way, though. The police were called to the scene, Black boys were arrested and often severely beaten. During protests such as sit-ins, African Americans did not use violence. However, it was white people and the police who used this violence against them. Black boys did not give up even after such brutal treatment.

There are numerous definitions and terms which demonstrate the unique situation of African American boys. Interestingly, these concepts are different from the general idea of boyhood, usually defined without references to race and ethnicity. Boyhood is associated with the lack of any problems and living a carefree life, as well as with impunity, happiness, lack of stress, and sometimes even the best time of a man's life. It also brings up associations connected with innocence. However, according to Robin Bernstein, only white children are permitted to be innocent.<sup>6</sup> Black boyhood is usually marked with negative connotations. According to Michael J. Dumas and Joseph Derrick Nelson, the phrase "Black boyhood" is compared to a social experience "in which Black boys possess their own agential subjectivity and impact the world even as they remain vulnerable to the material effects of racism, [...] and the hegemonic notion that their lives as children only matter because of who others want them to be (or fear they may become) in adulthood."<sup>7</sup>

In her article, "Media Representations of Black Boys and the Response of Contemporary African American Children's Authors and Illustrators," Ewa Klęczaj-Siara maintains that "Black boyhood is not treated as a childhood phase."<sup>8</sup> Unlike white children, who are mostly perceived as innocent and worthy of being protected, Black boys are deprived of those "privileges" that should be natural, especially toward children. This happens due to a number of factors that include, for instance, the place of origin of these children, the economic and legal status of their

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<sup>5</sup> David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2004), 127.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Bernstein, "Let Black Kids Just Be Kids," *The New York Times - Breaking News, US News, World News and Videos*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/opinion/black-kids-discrimination.html> (accessed October 9, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Dumas and Joseph Derrick Nelson, "(Re)Imagining Black Boyhood: Toward a Critical Framework for Educational Research," *Harvard Educational Review*, no. 1 (March 1, 2016): 28, <https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.86.1.27> (accessed October 11, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Ewa Klęczaj-Siara, "Media Representations of Black Boys and the Response of Contemporary African American Children's Authors and Illustrators," *Res Rhetorica*, 7 (2) 2020, <https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2020.2.3> (accessed December 18, 2022).

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families, systemic racism in government, and most importantly, the various stereotypes associated with being Black in the United States.

### **Black boyhood stereotypes**

In psychology and other social sciences, stereotypes symbolize a comprehensive and universal topic. As Akeela Careem, Lee Jussim, and Rachel Rubinstein argue in their article, “Stereotypes are usually defined as beliefs about groups, prejudice as evaluation of or attitude toward a group, and discrimination as behavior that systematically advantages or disadvantages a group.”<sup>9</sup> Stereotypes and stereotyping, which is the process of using prejudice and associating some characteristics with a group or individual, is a topic addressed by both psychologists and the public. Not only do these themes seem to have been ingrained in society for a very long time, but they also result in numerous disquieting effects.

Stereotypes that African Americans face on a daily basis have a large impact on their lives. One of them is a common belief that Black boys do worse in school than white males and also finish their education earlier. Consequently, the lack of education reflects on their future. This aspect has certainly remained unaltered for a very long time in many American schools. This is evidenced by an excerpt from a book by John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. who write that even “For the first half of the twentieth century the bulk of African-American children in school at all attended impoverished, small, short-term schools with pronounced inadequacies in every phase of the educational program.”<sup>10</sup> Frequently, when Black children show willingness, interest, and ambition, this is taken away from them and prevented through the incompetence of the school. Similarly, Pedro A. Noguera writes in his book, *The Trouble with Black Boys: ...And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*, “there are often strong assumptions made in schools that if you’re White, you’ll do better in school than if you’re Black [...]. These kinds of stereotypes affect both teachers’ expectations of students and students’ expectations of themselves.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast to advanced classes, which are attended exclusively by white students, places in remedial classes are disproportionately occupied by Black students. Because of this, they may think that they are unable to succeed academically. As a result, their expectations increase, while their willingness decreases.

Despite the utter unfairness of these beliefs, they have nevertheless become true to a certain extent, as according to Ashleigh Maciolek, in 2020, Black males had

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<sup>9</sup> Akeela Careem, Lee Jussim, and Rachel Rubinstein, “Stereotypes,” *obo* in Psychology, (2012), doi: 10.1093/obo/9780199828340-0086 (accessed December 18, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 8th ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 445.

<sup>11</sup> Pedro A. Noguera, *The Trouble With Black Boys: ...And Other Reflections on Race, Equity, and the Future of Public Education*, 1st ed (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 9-10, 12.

lower levels of education than, for instance, white males.<sup>12</sup> Only approximately 28% of African American males between the ages of 25-29 held a bachelor's degree or higher. In comparison, over 40% of white men held such a degree. However, given the contrasting information, it is not surprising that Black boys face obstacles on their academic path, and often give up on pursuing it. According to Matthew Lynch, African American students have fewer teachers that are certified in their fields of study.<sup>13</sup> As Lynch claims, according to a U.S. Department of Education report, in public high schools attended by at least 50% African American students, only 75% of math teachers, 59% of English teachers and 57% of science teachers were certified. By comparison, in schools attended primarily by white students, 92%, 68%, and 73% of teachers were certified in the subject area, respectively. In schools with mostly Black children, there are a lot of other problems and these problems are even worse if those children are Black boys. Taking these facts into account, it is true that African American boys do worse in school than white children. However, this is often caused by the need to change and fit into these stereotypes that are promulgated in schools in the United States. Another reason for this situation is that most often the fault of Black boys' poor academic performance is not their attitude, but the prejudice that surrounds them.

Another stereotype that Black boys in the United States face is benefiting from their sports achievements. Some schools in the United States are willing to admit students to school or push them to the next grade, primarily for the financial benefits of their athletic success as well as for the prestige and promotion of the school. As Derrick Z. Jackson argues in his article, "Universities giant and small, public and private, bring African-American men to campus at grotesque levels to earn the school millions in football and basketball revenues."<sup>14</sup> As he points out, an African American boy is 13 times more likely than a white boy to get a football or basketball scholarship in Division 1 sports and this information should be alarming enough. According to Richard Whitmire, it is understandable that the claim has been established about Black boys being only admitted to schools because of the benefits of their athletic achievements and also that they do not perform well in school as they ignore poor grades while dreaming of the chance to become a professional

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<sup>12</sup> Ashleigh Maciolek, "6 Policies to Address Social Problems Affecting Black Boys and Men," *Brookings*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2020/12/15/six-policies-to-address-social-problems-affecting-black-boys-and-men/> (accessed October 13, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Lynch, "Black Boys in Crisis: Inequality in Educational Access," *The Edvocate*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.theedvocate.org/black-boys-in-crisis-inequality-in-educational-access/> (accessed October 13, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Derrick Z. Jackson, "The height of hypocrisy in higher education," *The Boston Globe*, December 13, 2015, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/12/13/the-height-hypocrisy-higher-education/ZKAa1ThMCKHUwJPBqhUFMK/story.html> (accessed October 14, 2022).

sports team star.<sup>15</sup> However, allowing them to do it does them a great disservice because when they do not succeed in sports and they do not have the necessary school knowledge, not only will they not become a professional athlete but they will also not be able to find a job. By not being concerned about the success of African American boys, not only on the field but also in academics, they are doomed to failure.

African American boys also struggle with the stereotype of being raised in a fatherless family. It is common knowledge that a lot of Black boys come from poor families with many domestic problems. In most cases these are single-parent families, where the father is absent. In 2020 there were approximately 4.3 million Black families in the United States of America with single mothers, according to the Statista Research Department.<sup>16</sup> To make things worse, the situation is changing and there is an increase in such families, as for instance in 1990 there were about 3.4 million Black families with single mothers. Additionally, the poverty rate for Black families with a single mother has dropped sharply from 1990 to 2020.

As Zenitha Prince maintains, about 75% of all white children under the age of 18 live with both of their parents, but only less than 40% of Black children are in the same situation.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, more than one-third of African American children under the age of 18 are being raised by unmarried mothers. In comparison, only 6.5% of white children can say the same. According to Jesse Washington and government statistics, about 72% of Black babies are born to unmarried mothers.<sup>18</sup> Compared to the white community, there, 29% of children are born to unmarried mothers. Washington also adds that children of unmarried mothers are more likely to have poorer grades in school, use drugs, end up in prison, be poor in adulthood, and choose to have children out of wedlock themselves. As Jerold Heiss maintains in his article, boys from single-mother families in particular are the ones with poorer grades in school and are more likely to drop out of school as well as to have behavioral

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Whitmire, "Emphasizing Sports Over Academics Sets Up Black Boys to Lose," *Education Week*, December 13, 2010, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-emphasizing-sports-over-academics-sets-up-black-boys-to-lose/2010/12> (accessed October 14, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> *Statista*, "Number of Black Families with a Single Mother in the United States from 1990 to 2020," <https://www.statista.com/statistics/205106/number-of-black-families-with-a-female-householder-in-the-us/> (accessed October 16, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Zenitha Prince, "Census Bureau: Higher Percentage of Black Children Live with Single Mothers," *Black Media Authority | AFRO American Newspapers*, December 31, 2016, <https://afro.com/census-bureau-higher-percentage-black-children-live-single-mothers/> (accessed October 16, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Jesse Washington. "Blacks Struggle with 72 Percent Unwed Mothers Rate," *NBC News*, November 7, 2010, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna39993685#.URXHo80hclk> (accessed October 18, 2022).

and disciplinary problems.<sup>19</sup> Heiss also mentions that African American boys raised in single-parent families experience difficulties in early childhood, adolescence, as well as in young adulthood. Therefore, not only is it something that rebounds on Black boys for a long time, but it also greatly affects them, thus creating changes in various spheres of their lives.

### **Black boyhood in coming-of-age movies**

The lives of Black boys and their transition from childhood to adulthood are popular themes of many coming-of-age movies. The films focus on the development of young adults and include critical elements of their lives that take place between childhood and adulthood, including graduation, first love and family issues, or moving away from home. Modern coming-of-age movies depict the maturation of characters from diverse backgrounds, not only affluent but also poor. A characteristic feature of this genre is the focus on mental, emotional, and personal change and development during the main character's coming of age.

*Moonlight* is a great example of a movie which focuses not only on the theme of Black boyhood, the lives of African American boys, the stereotypes and problems they have to face, but also on the theme of change. It is an American coming-of-age drama that was released in 2016. It was written and directed by an American Black filmmaker, Barry Jenkins, and is based on the unpublished semi-autobiographical play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* by Tarell Alvin McCraney.<sup>20</sup> The main character is Chiron, played at different stages of his life by Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, and Trevante Rhodes. *Moonlight* is divided into three parts, which are three stages in Chiron's life: childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. In the movie, through these three stages, we can observe not only the change in Chiron's age, but also the change in his attitude and personality.

*Moonlight* begins in the 1980s when Chiron is a child. This very gentle and sensitive Black boy is already struggling with a difficult situation at home, his different personality, sexuality, and also with being bullied. Chiron confirms his belief that his mother is addicted to drugs. Juan, a drug dealer from a neighborhood in Miami, replaces a father figure in Chiron's life as he grows up without him. From the second part of *Moonlight*, in which Chiron is a teenager, we learn that Juan has died. Chiron confides his sexual orientation to his schoolmate, Kevin, as he is one of the few people he trusts. However, Chiron is soon betrayed by Kevin. In the third part of the movie, Chiron is a young adult and he resembles the person who replaced him his father, Juan. Not only does Chiron become a drug dealer while living

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<sup>19</sup> Jerold Heiss, "Effects of African American Family Structure on School Attitudes and Performance," *Social Problems* 43, no. 3 (August 1996): 246-247, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3096977> (accessed October 18, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Feargal Agard, "Film Review: *Moonlight* (2016).," *Humans of Film Amsterdam*, January 15, 2019, <https://humansoffilmamsterdam.com/2019/01/15/film-review-moonlight-2016/> (accessed October 20, 2022).

in Atlanta, but he also looks very much like Juan. Chiron's mother admits she regrets that she did not give him love when he needed it the most. In this part of the movie, he also gets a phone call from Kevin a few years after they spoke to each other for the last time. Chiron slowly begins to trust him again.

*The Blind Side* is another example of a movie which concentrates on the themes of Black boyhood and big changes. It is an American sports biographical drama movie which was released in 2009. It was written and directed by John Lee Hancock. The movie is based on the true story of Michael Oher, a National Football League player, as well as on the book *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*, which was written by Michael Lewis and published in 2006. The movie is set in the early first decade of the 21st century, in Memphis, Tennessee. It tells the story of a Black teenager, Michael Oher, who has no loved ones and no roof over his head. Suddenly, his life changes completely thanks to a wonderful opportunity given to him by a white family. Mike's biological mother is a drug addict and his father left them when Michael was a newborn, so he lives with different foster and neighborhood families. The Black family he is currently living with introduces Michael to the football coach at a private Catholic school, Wingate Christian High School. Thanks to the coach, Mike is accepted into school, despite being constantly pushed to the next grade in the past with very poor academic performance. One cold evening, while walking toward the school to spend the night there, he is noticed by a wealthy white family. Leigh Anne takes him home without hesitation. From that moment on, Michael's life changes. His grades get better and better and Mike joins the high school's American football team. During his athletic journey, the entire Tuohy family strongly support him.

### **The absence of the father**

Taking into account the changes that occur in these two movies, *Moonlight* and *The Blind Side*, the most crucial aspect is the fact how the personalities, attitudes, and lives of the main characters, Chiron and Michael, evolve through different interpersonal relationships with their families. The first, and at the same time very important to the changes occurring in these movies, is the image of the father, who is absent in both Chiron's and Michael's lives. The presence of a father in a child's life is indispensable, especially for boys who need this male figure to be a role model for them. However, boys who grow up without a father have more problems than children who come from a full and happy family. This affects their self-esteem, emotions, school performance, and most importantly, these negative effects stay with them for years, not only in their childhood but also in adulthood. They also change their personalities and lives in general.

In *Moonlight* we learn that Chiron has been raised without his father when he is in the house of Juan and his girlfriend, Teresa, for the first time. The moment Teresa asks Chiron "You live with your mama?", Chiron responds that he does, but then Teresa asks "What about your daddy?" and Chiron lowers his head and remains



silent.<sup>21</sup> One can infer that Chiron's father has been absent in his life for a long time and that this is a difficult topic for him to talk about. Being raised without a father figure, Chiron is introverted, shy, and insecure. In this way, it changed his life and affected his personality.

In *The Blind Side*, on the other hand, the issue of Michael growing up without a father appears in a scene when Leigh Anne goes to Michael's biological mother, Denise Oher, to inform her of the decision to be the legal guardian of her son. Denise tells Leigh Anne that his father left them a week after Michael was born. Even earlier in the movie, however, Mike learns from the school principal, who has received a call from the police department, that his father is dead. Although Michael, as he tells the principal, does not even know when he last saw him and that they were not close, he takes the news with sadness, stares at one point, and says nothing for a while. What is more, as Leigh Anne once says to a coach, "He doesn't trust men. In his experience, they pretend to care about you till they disappear."<sup>22</sup> We can infer that the fact that the boy's father abandoned him has made Michael a very private and uncommunicative boy who hides his emotions and feelings from others, especially from men. As one can observe, this is a negative change in the boy's life.

However, both boys find someone to replace the father figure in their lives. Juan appears and plays an extremely important role in Chiron's life. Juan is a Black man who was born in Cuba but has lived in Miami for a long time. There, he deals drugs. The boy meets Juan when he runs away from peers who bully him, thus practically saving his own life. The man certainly plays a very important role in Chiron's childhood, he gives him valuable advice and life values that his absent father did not give him. Juan builds his personality so that he would always be able to handle everything on his own, in this hard life that Chiron has. Never before has the boy had a person who would give him attention and prepare him for what life has in store for him. Although Juan dies, the adult Chiron resembles him very much. He becomes a drug dealer but also changes his appearance and becomes very similar to Juan. In Michael's case, the Tuohy family become his legal guardians, and although it is the adoptive mother, Leigh Anne Tuohy, who plays the most important role here, the adoptive father, Sean Tuohy, former basketball star at Ole Miss and current owner of eighty-five fast food restaurants, also supports Mike. Sean gives Michael support, love, interest, and a great chance for a better future. This perfectly shows that a Black boy's life does not always have to conform to stereotypes, such as Chiron's, who becomes a drug dealer after getting out of prison. There can be a change in the

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<sup>21</sup> *Moonlight*, directed by Barry Jenkins (A24 / Plan B Entertainment / Upload Films, 2016). *123Movies*, <https://ww6.0123movie.net/movie/moonlight-18821.html> (accessed October 29, 2022)

<sup>22</sup> *The Blind Side*, directed by John Lee Hancock (Alcon Entertainment, 2009). *HBO Max*, <https://play.hbomax.com/page/urn:hbo:page:GWykuVw3A54xamAEAAABW:type:feature> (accessed October 30, 2022).

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life of a Black boy, such as in the case of Michael, who is adopted by a white family, and, as a result, his life improves almost immediately.

### **The significance of the mother**

The figure of the mother is an important aspect that also changes and influences these boys' lives. Michael's biological mother is addicted to drugs. Because of this, Michael has lived with various foster and neighboring families since childhood. However, when he is adopted by the white Tuohy family, it is Leigh Anne who begins to play the main role of mother in Mike's life. The woman gives him something he has not experienced before, and something he finds difficult to open up to at first - immediate and selfless help. From the beginning, many of the qualities of a good mother are noticeable in her relationship with Michael - empathy, interest, care, and resoluteness in her actions. Due to the fact that Leigh Anne and her husband decide to become Mike's legal guardians, his life, fate, and also personality change diametrically. The Tuohy family give him love but also a great chance to succeed in life. Michael joins the high school American football team and his grades begin to improve significantly, allowing the boy to get a Division I scholarship. This opens up many opportunities in his future athletic career. However, the most important change in the boy's life is that he finally has a family to belong to. This is how the life of a poor boy changes, a boy who did not even have his own roof over his head, let alone anyone who cared about him.

The figure of the mother also plays an important role in Chiron's life, but here the changes brought about by this relationship are not as apparent. Paula, Chiron's biological mother, is a drug addict, as in Michael's case. This overrides the role of being a good parent. She is not able to provide Chiron with good living conditions, love, care, interest, or sometimes even a simple roof over his head. Once, after a hard day at school for Chiron, where he was again bullied by his peers for being different, instead of asking how his day was, if he needs anything or if she can help him with anything, she tells him "You cannot be here tonight. I got company coming. Find somewhere for you to be."<sup>23</sup> She chooses drugs and a stranger man over her own son, without even considering whether Chiron will have a place to sleep. Moreover, she is ashamed of him, and does not want her company to see him. This is not something a loving and caring mother would do. Fortunately, the boy finds shelter and care in Teresa's house.

However, despite this, it is still Paula who plays the main role of mother in Chiron's life. Teresa is just an escape from his constant problems, a huge support for Chiron, and her home is a refuge for him, a place where he can feel safe, loved, and accepted. Nevertheless, there is no denying that Teresa changes the boy's life for the better. Not only does she support him financially, as much as she can afford after Juan's death, but above all she provides him with genuine interest, care,

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<sup>23</sup> *Moonlight*.

and concern. So her presence is really important, in the miserable life of a boy that Chiron leads.

The home in *Moonlight* is the stereotypical household of a poor African American family – poverty, a single mother, a child raised without a father, and as a result, a mother addicted to drugs. Chiron is raised in a very unpleasant environment for a child, which reflects on his future. Following the stereotype of the Black boy, Chiron ends up in prison. As an adult male, he becomes a drug dealer. Through most of his life, he is alone and has to fend for himself. His only family is his mother, who is ashamed of her own son. This is exactly how Mike’s life could have gone off. He also grows up without a father, his mother is addicted to drugs and does not take care of him. However, here that stereotype is broken by a white wealthy family who not only adopts him and helps him financially, but gives him a lot of love, care, and attention. As a result, Mike’s life, in contrast to Chiron’s, heads toward great achievements and success.

### **Black boys today**

The problems that African American boys have faced since the days of slavery, were left unaddressed for many years. The difficulties of innocent children have only multiplied, turning into many stereotypes that Black boys have to face, at the same time losing their safety, rights, and often even their lives. Despite individual attempts to solve the problems of African Americans, there were no positive or significant results. At some point, however, people’s emotions reached a boiling point and a huge number of them began to take to the streets and protest loudly against this brutal treatment.

In 2012, Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager, was shot to death in Sanford, Florida. The shooter was charged with the boy’s murder, however he was acquitted and found not guilty. This left people devastated, furious and forced them to take action on the Black community. As Hedreich Nichols and Kelisa Wing write in their book, *What Is the Black Lives Matter Movement? (Racial Justice in America)*, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi wanted justice for Trayvon, and when calling for equity they used the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>24</sup> The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was initiated the following year and began to play a huge and significant role in the current situation of African American boys.

In 2014, another African American teenager, Michael Brown, who was also unarmed, was killed. He was shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Black Lives Matter reacted immediately, evolving from an organization into a mainstream as a movement. As the definition indicates, BLM is a movement that, through protests organized in many different forms, “[...] supports communities in their fight against anti-Black racism.”<sup>25</sup> As Nichols and Wing point out, using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter

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<sup>24</sup> Hedreich Nichols and Kelisa Wing, *What Is the Black Lives Matter Movement? (Racial Justice in America)* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Cherry Lake Publishing, 2021), 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

and this slogan during protests is another way of saying that the lives and rights of African American people are just as important as those of other racial and ethnic groups.

As we can read on the official website of Black Lives Matter, July 13, 2021 was the eighth anniversary of the movement's founding.<sup>26</sup> As the authors of the article write, eight years after events such as protests using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter not only on social media, but also during protests on the streets that quickly spread around the world, this movement has become a global community that fights for the rights of African Americans. The movement has also developed into the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, which is the philanthropic arm of the movement that is investing in long-term activities resulting in the development and recovery of the entire African American population.

### **Final remarks**

As has been proven through many studies and confirmed by many scholars, the situation of Black boys in the United States is still critical and disturbing. African American boys struggle with many stereotypes and problems, which in turn negatively impact many aspects of their lives such as education, interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and most importantly, their health and safety. The racial prejudice of white people against Black boys leads to their racial discrimination, racially motivated hate crimes, racial inequality, racial profiling, or police brutality, all of which endanger the lives of African American boys.

This reality that Black boys face is shown and publicized through coming-of-age movies such as *Moonlight* and *The Blind Side*. Not only do both of these movies brilliantly portray the lives of African American boys and the many stereotypes they face on a daily basis, but also how the fortunes of Black boys can change and what influences it. The adulthood that both main characters, Chiron and Michael, have entered is very different, much more positive in *The Blind Side*. Chiron is a boy who has to rely on himself and fend for himself. Being rejected and abandoned by the people most important to him prevents him from achieving happiness. In Michael's life, hope appears in the form of a loving and supportive family, and this transforms his life for the better. It demonstrates that the future of Black boys does not always have to be affected by their difficult childhood and that there are ways to positively impact the future lives of Black boys.

*Moonlight* and *The Blind Side* are counternarratives to the existing media images of Black boyhood, marked with brutality and violence. The movies present African American youngsters as victims of popular stereotypes rather than criminals who destroy public safety as well as their own well-being. The stories of Chiron and Michael are a call to action. They remind viewers that Black boys need help and support, otherwise they will fail in many areas of life. Coming-of-age movies

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<sup>26</sup> *Black Lives Matter*, "8 Years Strong," July 13, 2021, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/8-years-strong/> (accessed December 12, 2022).

prove that change is possible as long as these young men are perceived as innocent human beings who deserve equal treatment beyond the limitations of race and ethnicity.

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