

Family's effect on identity: the bean trees and a raisin in the sun

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What describes family is not the people who are blood related or someone who has an obligation. Family is loving someone unconditionally and mutually; family is those who greet the worst self of someone without judgement and still stick around after; family is the people who support each other through arduous times; and throughout all this, they help each other find who they really are. Family is the people who play the largest role in shaping identity. Now, that identity can take the form of a number of characteristics in relation to family. No matter how adoring a family might be, with their newfound identity, it is not always in the best interest of the individual to stay close to home. Other times, that recently developed identity may actually be found in a home. Whether it be attracting an individual to family life, like Taylor in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, or repulsing them, like Beneatha in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, they will always help the individual find their true identity.

Taylor Greer from Pittman County, Kentucky is an ideal example of how family life will attract an individual and they will find their identity in the home. In Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, Taylor had always valued being independent. In the beginning of the book, she clearly did not believe she needed to rely on anybody, and set out into the world all by herself with just her car and the desire to go far away from home. Taylor takes her pride in being an individual too far and becomes angry when someone just tries to help her, such as when her roommate Lou Anne tries to help out with Turtle. Finally, something changes in Taylor after Turtle buries her dolly, " You know there's no such thing as promises. But I'll try as hard as I can to stay with you." (211) In this pivotal moment, Taylor realizes the gravity of Turtle's

abandonment and that she must be the most stable force in Turtle's life. Yet she also comes to term with the fact that some things are out of her control, like the evil in other people or death. Taylor finally registers that she should stop running away from the promise of family, because her true self is being a mother. Before, it was very clear she believed that by staying away from family, she would find herself. Taylor thought she would find her identity through solitude, only relying on herself. Rather than pushing her away, family turned out to be the element that brought her in and encouraged her to find her identity as a mother.

Family life is not suited for everyone though, especially not for Beneatha Younger. Every so often, family can repulse an individual and they will find their true selves far away from home. The character Beneatha from Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, is a prime example of this. Beneatha had trouble discovering her own identity so she tried out a number of hobbies and activities. She even went through quite a few suitors as well. Throughout all of this, the only steady thing in Bennie's life was her family and she relied on them heavily. By sticking close to her family and not venturing out as an individual, Beneatha could not answer the questions about the world she held close to her heart. Her boyfriend, Asagai, notices that she is struggling to find herself in her situation and gives her a nickname, Alaiyo, BENEATHA You didn't tell us what Alaiyo means... for all I know it could mean Little Idiot or something..... ASAGAI No- really it is difficult... (Thinking) It means... it means One for Whom Bread- Food- Is Not Enough. (He looks at her) Is that alright? BENEATHA (Understanding, softly) Thank you. (Hansberry 65) Finally

Beneatha understands. Asagai makes her realize that the situation she's in with her family, is not good enough for her. It is most advantageous for Beneatha to separate from her family and become an individual. She will not find her true self if she stays with her family. That is why when Asagai later asks her to move back to Africa with him and become a doctor, Beneatha really considers it. Before, Beneatha relied on her family and because of this, she was unsure about herself. Finally, she steps out and becomes an individual. By becoming a lone doctor with Asagai in Africa, Bennie gets the stepping stone to discovering herself that she never would have received if she stayed with her family.

Though Beneatha steps away from her family and Taylor creates one to find their true selves, both the Youngers and the Ruizs will always support the newfound identity of their loved one. For instance, both families at the end on *The Bean Trees* and *A Raisin in the Sun* support Taylor and Beneatha's decision. Taylor discovers this support when Lou Ann says, "Somebody and work said, 'Do you have a family at home?' And I said 'Sure,' without thinking. I meant you all. Mainly I guess because we've been through hell and high water together. We know each other's good and bad sides, stuff nobody else knows." (Kingsolver 231) In reaction to this, Taylor becomes unable to speak for she is too emotional. After years of running away from family and avoiding becoming a mother, Taylor gives in. She realizes that she has found her truest and happiest self as a mother to Turtle in a home with Lou Ann. In addition to this, Taylor finally understands that she has gained support for this identity. In this phone call with Lou Ann, Taylor

realizes that since she and Lou Ann have already been through some tough times together and supported each other then, they will definitely continue to encourage each other in the future. As for Bennie, she cannot be pushed by her family to make decisions, such as dating George Murchison just because he has a lot of money. She tries to do her own thing. Thus support goes hand in hand with understanding. Therefore, when Mama supports the decision to dump George, it means a lot to Beneatha, BENEATHA Mama, George is a fool- honest. (She rises)... MAMA Well- I guess you better not waste your time with no fools. (BENEATHA looks at her mother, watching her put groceries in the refrigerator. Finally she gathers up her things and starts into the bedroom. At the door she stops and looks back at her mother) BENEATHA Mama- MAMA Yes baby-BENEATHA Thank you. MAMA For what? BENEATHA For understanding me this time (Hansberry 98) The reader can infer that the Youngers will let Beneatha go to Africa, if she chooses to do so, with a blessing.

After Taylor and Beneatha find themselves, their families will both do anything to help their loved one's new identities thrive. Families like the Ruiz' or the Youngers will always help their struggling loved ones find their true identity as they did with Taylor and Beneatha. Regardless if a life revolving family ends up being enticing, like it did for Taylor in Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees*, or family life drives them away, as with Beneatha in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. The characters can now build their lives and their home the way they want these aspects of their existences to be,

because they have a strong foundation: themselves. Those closest to one's heart will always help the individual find a true self.