

Materialism vs spirituality in a raisin in the sun by lorraine hansberry

[Literature](#), [Play](#)



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A Raisin in the Sun, written by Lorraine Hansberry in the 1950's, is a play that is based on the life of an African-American family known as the Youngers, who live in the South Side of Chicago and are waiting to receive a life insurance check for ten thousand dollars. The play highlights the dreams of each family member and their plans on how they intend to use the money from the death of Mr. Younger, Mama's husband.

Mama, or Lena, wishes to use the money to purchase a new home for the benefit of the family in which her daughter-in-law Ruth agrees. Beneatha or Bennie, her daughter, wants the money to pay for her medical school tuition, while Walter Lee or Walter, Mama's son has a great interest in using the money to open a liquor shop. These dreams result in conflict between the family and pose a question of whether Walter Lee and Beneatha's intent for the use of the money is more important than the unity of the family. The play, A Raisin in the Sun, encompasses a poem, Harlem (A Dream Deferred), which is written by Langston Hughes and compares the family's dreams to a raisin being in the sun. The poem presents how dreams are either substantial and benefit everyone or unbeneficial with no concern of others. Hansberry's play portrays greed and traces the level of importance each family member holds their dreams which presents to the theme of materialism. In the long run, materialism breaks a person mentally, spiritually and emotionally and is present in Walter Lee and Beneatha- at a lesser extent. However, through the love of a devoted Christian mother their materialistic trait can be forgiven and restored, as Mama represents a type of Christ throughout the play.

In the beginning of the play, Walter Lee's self-centered and money craving attributes are portrayed during his conversation with his wife Ruth:

WALTER: A man needs for a woman to back him up

RUTH: Walter

WALTER: Mama would listen to you. You know she listen to you more than she do me and Bennie. She think more of you. All you have to do is just sit down with her when you drinking your coffee one morning and talking 'bout things like you do and" [He sits down beside her and demonstrates graphically what he thinks her method and tone should be.] " you just sip your coffee, see, and say easy like that you been thinking 'bout that deal Walter Lee is so interested in, 'bout the store and all. (278; 1. 1)

The reason behind Walter Lee encouraging his wife to tell his dream to Mama is because of the strong relationship Ruth and Mama has throughout the play. Their relationship is like that of Naomi and Ruth in the Bible; Ruth 1: 3-5 in the amplified Bible says:

Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left [a widow] with her two sons. They took wives from the Moabite women; the name of the one was Orpah, and the name of the other was Ruth. They lived there about ten years; 5 and then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so the woman [Naomi] was left without her two sons and her husband.

Just as Mama's husband dies, so does Ruth's husband's spirituality; this is true because, instead of Walter Lee being concerned with the human spirit or

soul, he is focused on material and physical things. Also 1 Timothy 6: 10-11 says:

For the love of money [that is, the greedy desire for it and the willingness to gain it unethically] is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves [through and through] with many sorrows. But as for you, O man of God, flee from these things; aim at and pursue righteousness [true goodness, moral conformity to the character of God], godliness [the fear of God], faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness.

Also, in Luke 12 of the amplified, it says, watch out and guard yourselves against every form of greed, for not even when one has an overflowing abundance does his life consists of nor is it derived from his possessions. These scriptures highlight Walter Lee's excessive greed for money and the sorrows he faces when his friend Willy Harris runs off with his share of money from the insurance check. The scriptures also shed light on how a great desire for wealth with the limited presence of God leads to ones' destruction and immoral actions.

The lack of spiritual respect is a result of one's materialistic trait and this is represented through Bennie when she blatantly called on the Lord's name in vain. After Bennie was scolded by Mama, Ruth made a statement Just fresh as salt, this girl! Bennie responded in an ironically humorous way saying, Well- if the salt loses its savor. Mama then replied, now that will do. I just ain't going to have you 'round here reciting scriptures in vain (288; 1. 1). The

scripture Bennie quoted, Matthew 5: 13 states, you are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste (purpose), how can it be made salty? It is no longer good for anything, but to be thrown out and walked on by people.

Beneatha uses this scripture- a biblical metaphor as it relates to the play, to justify her actions and implies if she cannot state her point of view then she is considered to have no value. Regarding lack of spiritual respect, Beneatha only repeated the scripture to show her knowledge of the Bible but behind saying it she has no connection to the religious message. In Act 1, Scene 1, Beneatha shows her true feelings towards God in the following exchange:

MAMA: [Kindly.] ' Course you going to be a doctor, honey, God willing.

BENEATHA: [Drily.] God hasn't got a thing to do with it.

MAMA: Beneath" that just wasn't necessary.

BENEATHA: Well neither is God. I get sick of hearing about God. (291; 1. 1)

On the other hand, Mama, exemplifies spirituality over materialism and stays true to her faith in God. When her daughter-in-law Ruth asks her What are you going to do with it? Mama replied, It's too early in the morning to be talking about money. It ain't Christian (284; 1. 1). Mama's mention of It's too early and It ain't Christian explicitly justifies that Mama was not all about the money and it(money) should not be the first thing that comes to ones' mind.

Mama's statement opens the path to portray her Christ-like attributes of sovereignty, forgiveness and unconditioned love towards her children. Just as Mama cares for her children she also cares or her plant, which in the play is

used as a literary symbol to represent Walter Lee and Beneatha. As Proverbs 22: 6 says, train up a child in the way he should go [teaching him to seek God's wisdom and will for his abilities and talents], even when he is old he will not depart from it.

This verse in Proverbs relates to Mama's exchange with Ruth in Act 1, Scene 2 about her concerns of Bennie and Walter Lee:

RUTH: [Soothingly, older than her years.] Now you taking it all too seriously. You just got strong-willed children and it takes a strong woman like you to keep 'em in hand.

MAMA: [Looking at her plant and sprinkling water on it.] They spirited all right, my children. Got to admit they got spirit Bennie and Walter Lee. Like this little old plant that ain't never had enough sunshine or nothing and look at it! (292; 1. 1)

Despite betrayal and inconsideration in Walter Lee's actions and Beneatha's blasphemy of God Mama's love through Christ exhibits the importance of love and unity within a family. In Matthew 26: 14 of the amplified Bible. The scripture quotes:

Then one of the twelve [disciples], who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, what are you willing to give me if I hand Jesus over to you? And they weighed out [a]thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment Judas began looking for an opportune time to betray Jesus.

Beneatha's reply to Mr. Lindner's offer to pay the family to leave Clybourne Park a predominantly white community to live in a black community alludes to the previously mentioned scripture. When the offer was presented, Beneatha replies, Thirty pieces and not a coin less! (333; 2. 3). This is a biblical allusion of when Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and the path to Jesus' crucifixion also relating to Walter Lee's downfall. Thirty pieces of silver was the price Judas was paid to hand Jesus over to Pilate's soldiers. Just like Walter Lee, Judas made an ultimate betrayal to Jesus and returned the money out of guilt after Jesus was arrested. It wasn't until he saw the consequences of his actions then he realized not that enough money in the world would justify his action to make such a betrayal.

Also, in the end, out of guilt and disappointment for losing the insurance money, Walter Lee calls Mr. Lindner to advise him that the family would like to take the offer. Based on the song I Don't Feel No Way Tired which Ruth sang in the end of Act 1, Scene 2 exemplifies the family's restoration as they leave their old house. If the family had decided to move out of Clybourne Park, the decision would disregard the family's worth of moving into a predominantly white community as a Black family; and their journey to regained unity and love for one another through Mama's forgiveness, unconditioned love, and steadfast faith in God.

Lastly, it is important to know that our plans are not God's plans and that with little involvement of Him, all dreams are compared to a raisin being in the sun and sometimes deferred. The Youngers aspired to nothing more than the crass materialistic prosperity that white Americans enjoyed, which was a

rather shallow goal (Kelly 269). Even though the play is not based off biblical concept, Hansberry's execution of the play, written in the 1950's can be related universally as it traces the importance of a unified family.