

Essay on lorraine hansberry's play a raisin

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A Raisin in the Sun - Lorraine Hansberry

Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* was first performed in 1959 and was an immediate critical and commercial success. It is justly celebrated for these reasons. Ray and Kundu (31) describe it as

... a milestone in women's drama. It was the first play to be written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway, and the first play by a black woman to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

The play is based on Hansberry's own experience as Adams (9) makes clear:

"She was raised in a neighborhood made up mostly of people of European ancestry. She was often discriminated against, and her family was attacked by neighbours." Hansberry's achievement in getting a play successfully produced on Broadway is impressive in itself, but there is a tendency among critics to under-rate the complexity and profundity of the play. Ray and Kundu (31 - 32) describe *A Raisin in the Sun* thus:

Written in the political and cultural ambience of the Integrationist Movement it is a social protest play intended to persuade white people that black people are not only good at heart but sufficiently like whites in their values and cultural practices for whites to allow blacks to be their neighbours.

There is an element of truth in this description, but this paper will argue that a full and careful consideration of the play itself and the context in which it was written, reveal the play to be much more radical than Ray and Kundu suggest and demonstrate that Hansberry had an almost prophetic sense of developments that were to come in black consciousness and culture.

The fact that the play was first performed in 1959 is absolutely crucial. The 1950s in the United States of America are often characterized as prosperous

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and peaceful time, but for African-Americans it was a period of stasis that would change as the 1960s brought movements like the Civil Rights movement, and pride in black power as conflicting ideologies to the prevailing Integrationist mood of the 1950s. Hansberry also includes an element of feminism in the play and, because of the presence of Asagai as Beneatha's would-be Nigerian husband, the play touches on the break up of the European empires in Africa which was underway in the 1950s and 1960s - with all the implied problems and opportunities that the newly liberated former colonies faced. Therefore, the quotation above from Ray and Kundu is inadequate: this is not simply a play about social protest and the racism that white society inflicts on African-Americans; it is also a play about tensions within the African-American community itself and about how to exist as an African American in a society that is hostile to you by virtue of your skin color.

Injustice, however, is at the heart of the play. In the 1950s the southern states pursued an openly segregationist policy; in the northern states this was not official policy but a sort of de facto segregation did exist which the Younger family break. Segregation in the north was not just physical - black families being discouraged from moving into white neighborhoods, as the Youngers do, but also economic and professional. Asagai's presence links the predicament of the Younger family with the drive to self-determination in formerly imperial Africa. As Cody (1116) writes

A Raisin in the Sun is first and foremost a play about the impact of social justice and inequality on a black family's relations, and it ties a black family's struggles to African liberation through the character Asagai.

Asagai is an important character within the text: he allows Beneatha to break free from her boyfriend, George; he teaches her how to do her hair and how to dress in traditional African ways; and at the end of the play, with his offer of marriage and a role for her in Africa, transforming that continent with the medical skills he encourages her to gain, he gives Beneatha true purpose in life. Asagai represents another way of being an African-American in the play.

The audience is not allowed by Hansberry to forget the importance of the past: Mama's words to Walter recall a past of oppression and violence:

So now it's life. Money is life. You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not being lynched... You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done. I mean that you had a home; that we kept you out of trouble until you was grown; that you don't have to ride to work on the back of nobody's streetcar - You my children - but how different we done become. (Hansberry, 2001, 97)

Mama has a dream of living in a proper house with a yard that she can garden in and watch Travis play in, but here she clearly rejects the material success that Walter craves as an end in itself. We see his financial aspirations in his long speech to Travis telling about how the future will be once he has invested his money in a liquor store: " You wouldn't understand yet, son, but your daddy's gonna make a transaction ... a business transaction that will change our lives." (Hansberry, 2001, 82). But Hansberry, in the play, does not endorse this vision of success within the white, capitalist system: Willy Harris runs off with the money and Walter is almost broken psychologically by the experience. His fantasy of a rich and affluent future will not come true because African-Americans suffer economic

discrimination in this society. But the aspirations the Youngers have are all part of the legacy of slavery, as Cody writes (1116): “ The play exposes the bitterness wrought by centuries of deferred dreams, while stressing the celebration of black family unity based on a long tradition of resistance and endurance.”

There is a feminist element to the play: Ruth considers an abortion because she does not want another child to grow up in the narrow confines of the apartment they live in: abortion was illegal in 1959, so this is a controversial topic to bring up. Beneatha rejects the superficial, materialistic charms of George Murchison and is wholly committed to becoming a doctor. Yet some feminist critics have questioned Hansberry's portrayal of men and women: in particular, they question why Walter is given this speech at the end of the play to Mr Lindner who has been sent by the residents of the neighborhood they are moving to with an offer of money not to move:

We have decided to move into our house because my father - my father - he earned it for us brick by brick. We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes, and we will try to be god neighbors. And that's all we got to say about that. We don't want your money. (Hansberry, 2001, 102)

This speech, Taumann (51) argues, could have been delivered by Mama or Beneatha in order to give women in the play a more powerful voice. In addition, it requires an enormous change in Walter's priorities to put family before money, so Taumann argues that it is not convincing psychologically. Walter, prior to the speech to Mr Lindner, had been portrayed as obsessed with money and business success; then, defeated and broken after the loss of the money, he had shown no remorse, no sense of self-awareness, so it

could be argued convincingly that this speech would be more natural coming from Mama (who has such a strong sense of family) or Beneatha (who is showing signs of becoming an independent, autonomous woman). Guy-Sheffhall (126) says of all the women in Hansberry's plays:

At the same time, these women are ill at ease with or rebel against their circumscribed roles, although their resistance is not the central focus of the works; they are ultimately instrumental in the male protagonists' self-realization.

Ruth rebels against her definition as a mother by considering an abortion, and Beneatha rebels against the idea of integration, re-discovering her African roots at Asagai's encouragement, and aspiring to become a doctor. Mama, however, seems rather fixed in her matriarchal role, for example, when she attempts to excuse Walter's loss of the money to Beneatha by saying, "There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing." (Hansberry, 2001, 85). Mama also seems to be a repository of traditional attitudes: she clearly disapproves of Ruth's talk of an abortion and she also disapproves of Walter's scheme to make money through the liquor store - because liquor is tainted by being associated with vice and wastefulness - Mama would prefer Walter to have a more respectable source of income. It takes Asagai to point out to Beneatha that this is a family dominated by men - in particular Walter and Beneatha's dead father: "Isn't there something wrong in a house - in a world - where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man?" (Hansberry, 2001, 42).

I have left the most fascinating part of the play's context until the very end. The title of the play is taken from a poem by Langston Hughes, published in 1951 and called 'Harlem: A Dream Deferred'. Hughes had been a leading light in what is known as the Harlem Renaissance, an explosion of interest and activity in African-American cultural circles - which, in retrospect was savagely halted and interrupted by the Great Depression, the Second World War and the McCarthyism of the 1950s Cold War. Here are the first five lines of the poem:

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore -

And then run? (Hughes 178)

The dream of equality for African-Americans that seemed a little closer in the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance has been deferred and Hughes is asking what will happen to a dream that is constantly unfulfilled, In the play the Youngers fulfil their dream, but the poem clearly suggest that for many African-Americans the constant deferral of dreams will " fester like a sore." The end of Hughes' poem is even more incendiary (and Hansberry would have been fully aware of how the poem ends), envisaging social revolution as the end result of " a dream deferred":

May b e it [the dream] just sags

Like a heavy load

Or does it explode?

Does it explode? This seems strangely prophetic of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and, when the play was written, how to exist as an African-American in a hostile society was a pertinent one: do you try to integrate with a society that despises you? Do you peacefully protest on civil rights marches as advocated by Martin Luther King? Do you take more violent direct action as advocated by Malcolm X? Or do you simply run away as Beneatha seems to be planning to do with Asagai? It seems appropriate at this point to mention that Asagai is not a usual African name; it is a word that means 'long spear' – suggestive of violent resistance.

Hansberry died tragically early, so we do not know how she would have responded to the shifting tectonic plates of American society and culture in the 1960s and 70s. However, I would suggest that we should see *A Raisin in the Sun* as slightly more radical than it is sometimes perceived as. Writing about Hansberry's political affiliations, Baum (249) writes

Whether she was a card-carrying communist or not, Hansberry was very interested in the experiments with socialist theory underway at that time in Cuba and elsewhere in the developing world.

We can see hints of these political beliefs in the play: Walter's total failure in business and Asagai and Beneatha's desire to help create a 'new' Africa after the withdrawal of the imperial powers. In her posthumously published memoir Hansberry (1995, 72) wrote:

What I am saying is that whether we like it or not, the condition of our people dictates what can only be called revolutionary attitudes. It is no longer

acceptable to allow racists to define Negro manhood – and it will have to come to pass that they can no longer define his weaponry.

These revolutionary attitudes are present in the play in Asagai's name and in the allusion to the poem by Langston Hughes – and they represent another way of behaving for African-Americans. In conclusion, it can be seen that *A Raisin in the Sun* is the optimistic story of an African-American family who fulfil their dream, but in the context of its time and in the context of other African-American art and culture, the play is more radical than it appears to be and foreshadows many of the conflicts and clashes of the 1960s.

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