

Dreams in a raisin in the sun by lorraine hansberry research paper sample

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Fiction and drama often deals with how characters deal with their dreams and aspirations; often, characters sabotage themselves and prevent themselves from achieving their dreams, while other times the world they live in keeps them from having what they want. The American Dream means many things for different people, but its common conception is the idea that people can achieve social mobility and prosperity no matter what they start with, if they work hard enough and seize opportunities (Cullen 191). For African-Americans in the 20th century, the American Dream itself was much harder to achieve than for whites - segregation was still in heavy use, divisions between black and white were even wider than today, and Jim Crow laws set very specific guidelines for what blacks and whites were entitled to; this unilaterally meant keeping blacks in a permanent state of inferiority when compared to whites' rights (Gordon 127). In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the trials and tribulations of the Younger family, a black family living on the south side of Chicago, reveal the flawed and unfair nature of the American Dream. Walter, Mama and Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun* are shown having varying definitions of the American Dream, finding themselves being forced to change and redefine these ideas in the face of pernicious racism and the discriminatory attitude of 20th-century Jim Crow-era America.

Walter Younger's dream of achieving the American ideal of happiness is shown to be flawed and unattainable, but he manages to redeem himself by the end. Walter's dream involves using the insurance check from his father's death to open up a liquor store, using it to start a small business - the hallmark of the American Dream's idea of seizing opportunities and finding

prosperity through them. Walter completely buys into the idea that money is everything in America, tying the American Dream directly to financial success: When Mama remarks that “ Once upon a time, freedom used to be life – now it’s money,” Walter replies with “ No-It was always money, Mama. We just didn’t know about it” (Hansberry 74). With this admission, Walter cements his worldview firmly in the capitalist ideals of America, attempting to integrate into society and advance his position through economic means. As a character, Walter is the perfect symbol for the impotence of black manhood – cultural and social ideas of masculine responsibility for his family clash with the racism and segregation African-Americans experienced during the Jim Crow era (Gordon 123). He feels tremendous pressure to care for his family and to make himself into someone whites can respect, which is nearly impossible in this difficult age of discrimination. Walter “ gives voice to African Americans’ bitterness through Walter” by making him the most righteously angry about his disenfranchisement out of any of the characters (Gordon 126). His dreams, in essence, “ have dried up” (Brown 240). This makes his search for happiness even more desperate and aggressive, leading to Walter’s status as a revolutionary character within the play. Eventually, while Walter’s dream of economic prosperity is abandoned, it is done for higher ideals of family and loyalty, Walter changing his dream for a greater good. When he refuses the Clybourne Park Improvement Association’s offer to purchase the Youngers’ house, this signals Walter’s change in motivation from money to family: “ 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 good neighbors. And that's all we got to say about that. We don't want your money" (Hansberry 148). With this move, "the family strikes out for Chicago's embattled racial frontier," drawing a firm line in the sand and refusing to allow white influence to affect their decisions (Gordon 130). This is a highly revolutionary move on his part, to bring him some semblance of agency and authority over the decisions of his family. To that end, while Walter does not achieve the dream he had at the beginning, he changes his priorities in order to find a bit of satisfaction by the end of the play.

Mama Younger also seeks out the American Dream, hoping for a house with a yard and garden; however, she manages to make herself happy with what she has. Mama is one of the most nurturing characters of the play, constantly giving and providing for her children. Naturally, her dream is to give them the best world she possibly can: "You just name it son and I hand you the world!" (Hansberry 109). Her sense of peace and happiness is tied directly to the home, which is why her dream is so centered on safety and security: "It's dangerous, son when a man goes outside his home to look for peace" (Hansberry 60). Her purchase of the home in the white Clybourne Park neighborhood is an extension of that desire, in spite of the disapproval and hostility they would experience as blacks in a white neighborhood. In fact, it can be argued that "if housing integration is praiseworthy on the ideal principles of the American dream, then it is difficult to accept the Younger venture into a determined and hostile neighborhood as a complete fulfillment of the dream ideal" (Brown 243). The Youngers would still experience hostility and struggle; however, their willingness to do that just to prove their neighbors wrong is a revolutionary step.

Mama's optimism is couched greatly in her Christian beliefs, and takes a very moral, conventional stance to fighting for what she believes in, unlike the more revolutionary tactics of Beneatha and Walter. In fact, her perspective can be seen as somewhat limiting, as the racism she experienced "did color her outlook on life, narrowing her perspective and restricting her beliefs about what a Black person could reasonably expect to achieve in American society" (Washington 113). She disapproves of Walter's idea for the liquor store, despite its possibilities for economic success, because it would be un-Christian to take part in such an unsavory trade as alcohol, and she takes umbrage to Beneatha's feminist progressiveness. Instead, she favors a nurturing and patient attitude toward their dreams, highly respecting Walter's decision to turn down the Clybourne Park Association offer: "He finally come into his manhood today, didn't he? Kind of like a rainbow after the rain" (Hansberry 130). This signals her approval of Walter's refocusing of his priorities on family, and the alignment of his dreams with hers.

Beneatha Younger's dreams of feminist independence and social justice make her the biggest target for disappointment in that play, in terms of what she looks for. Because of her college education and her status as part of the younger counterculture generation, she has a revolutionary spirit and a great deal of ambition. She responds with hostility to those who do not follow her dreams of egalitarian revolution, as she says of Walter at one point, "He's no brother of mine" (Hansberry 145). Her dream is to find a way to achieve social justice for blacks, making her priorities explicitly political and intellectual. Instead of Walter's and Mama's implicit beliefs that they can

elevate themselves to 'white' status through economic and housing progression, Beneatha wants to take radical action to change the system from the inside out. At one point in the play, she says that the "only" way they get rid of the roaches and rodents in their apartment is to "set fire to the building" (Hansberry 43). This is allegorical to her attitude toward race relations; she thinks deep systemic change is the only way to achieve her dreams.

Much of her conflict regarding which dream to go after is represented by her romances with two different men - the radical native African Asagai and the rich African-American George. These two men have different priorities (Asagai with identifying with his African ancestry and George with assimilating into American white culture), and thus her choice would determine which path Beneatha wants to take. Her sense of independence is challenged particularly by Asagai, who represents both a separation from oppressive white culture and a recognition of regressive native African culture - he wants her to marry him and tone down her ambitions, which she is unwilling to do. Because of this, she begins to understand more readily the modest desires of her family, and starts to find a place for herself in America.

The dreams of the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* are often not fulfilled, at least in the way they expect. By compromising, changing their dreams and priorities and learning to find smaller ways in which they can rebel, the Younger family is able to assert their individuality and agency while becoming more closely knit as a unit. This furthers the idea that "A Raisin in the Sun" insists on local and global black revolution, contests the

underpinnings of US segregation, and asserts that civil disobedience, armed struggle, and ideological and economic transformation are imperatives for achieving social justice" (Gordon 122) . Even through this changing of dreams and their discovery of ways to assert success and individuality in spite of white oppression and Jim Crow segregation, the Younger family become domestic black revolutionaries.

Works Cited

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