

Plot analysis

Literature



In her ground-breaking play "A Raisin in the Sun," Lorraine Hansberry challenged widespread cultural conceptions about African Americans.

By focusing her play on stark realism, Hansberry was able to create a play which, in both theme and technical execution, offered something radically different than the portrayal of American life typically seen on Broadway stages in the mid twentieth century.

The impact of the play, both visually and textually, on American audiences was visceral and controversial. Hansberry relied on depicting vastly disparate emotional states and conditions for her characters, as well as enticing her audience to experience the world of her characters with as much empathy as possible.

The play's opening, for example, establishes that the Younger family is waiting for a ten-thousand dollar insurance check to arrive after the death of the family's father.

The fact that the family is so steeped in poverty that each of them concocts elaborate schemes and ideas of how to spend the money before it even arrives, grips the reader or alert audience member with emotion and concern. The "intrusion" of the expected money also begins the tension in the play and drives the conflicts between the play's characters, most notably between Mama and Walter Lee.

In order to engage the audience, and to cause them to identify with the Youngers, Hansberry uses the device of realism, which includes the construction of a one-room apartment set, complete with all the trappings of

poverty: cramped quarters, worn furniture and carpets, and a conspicuous lack of privacy.

Before the audience has even begun to grasp the events of the play, they are immediately aware of the family's dire financial situation.

The shock of the set at a purely visual and spatial level communicates the Youngers' distress to the audience. The ensuing emotional tension between Mama and her son is meant to show that the external attributes of poverty have corresponding emotional and psychological impacts and have extended to the relationships between the characters.

By the end of the opening scene, the reader or audience member knows that great hope and expectation has been pinned by the family on the insurance money and many readers or spectators of the play would probably intuit that the family's emotional crisis goes far beyond anything which can be repaired with money.

The idea is to advance the plot in a realistic manner so that the audience or reader not only experiences the events of the play but feels the emotional resonance which is intended to be a part of the event which are portrayed. In order to accomplish this, every aspect of the play, not only the plot, are steeped in realism.

One element of dramatic technique that enables Hansberry to successfully create a dynamic and realistic drama is her use of vernacular in the play's dialogue.

Unlike the blank-verse constructions of Shakespeare, or the witticism of Oscar Wilde, or even the dreamy musings of Tennessee Williams, Hansberry

delivers the dialogue of "A Raisin in the Sun" in colloquial language and this aspect of the play enhances the play's verisimilitude.

The realism of the play then causes the audience to more closely identify with the play's characters and plot, and each of these aspects of the play helps to communicate the important sociological and racial themes that drive "A Raisin in the Sun."

This attention to realism and detail is important to the play's plot, also, because as the events of the play unfold, the reader is drawn more deeply into an emotional connection with the characters because the characters seem for all intents and purposes to be actual people who face actual, real-life struggles.

As the plot progresses, the insurance check actually arrives and in their haste to be a controlling interest in the spending of the money, each of the Youngers manages to ignore the others' emotional needs in pursuit of personal materialistic dreams.

When Mama decides to use the money to move the family to a white neighborhood, a further sense of doom pervades the action as the Youngers fall further into emotional discord.

Throughout the progression of the plot, the play's dialogue leaves an opening for the emotional outpouring which is markedly absent from the (seemingly banal) progression of events.

Hansberry's dialogue, in fact, becomes a key driving force of the play's ultimate revelatory impact on the audience. As the play progresses and the characters become more clearly defined with motivations that the audience

can identify with (or despise) the dialect of the play begins to attain a lyrical uniqueness -- a vocal music which was unlike any other play on the Broadway stage of the time.

Lines such as " Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams....'" (29) or "' There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing....'"(135) attain the status of aphorism in the context of the play and divulge important social and racial realities that, for most Americans in the mid-twentieth century, existed, if at all, as merely side-bar newspaper articles or in some other abstract realization.

Hansberry's play, through its fierce and relentless realism, coupled with its themes of yearning and dreaming seemed to marry the " American ideal" to the " American nightmare" in a verbally original and thematically cathartic fashion, elevating the dialogue of racial issues in America to a place of cultural acceptance.

Simultaneously, the play's plot moves in an arc of excited expectation to dissolution of dreams while expressing the internal progressions of the characters with a portrayal of external events.

When Mrs. Johnson tells the Youngers about a black family that was bombed because they moved into a white neighborhood, the audience feels the dream of Mama's to live in a better neighborhood deflating.

The audience realizes that money, alone, despite the naivete with which the Youngers regard its power, will do little, perhaps nothing, to change the misery of their lives.

The Youngers have regarded money and the future hope of what it may bring with a sort of "exotic" hopefulness which, in its perceived futility during the vents of the play, should cause emotional frustration and dissonance in the reader and in the the audience.

This dissonance reflects the same dissonance which exists between the Younger's dreams and their actual position in the world.

By combining a realistic set with realistic dialogue, a kind of exoticism was reached by Hansberry, through the depiction of extreme poverty and want, which is a powerful force in granting the play unity of theme, place, and time in keeping with Aristotle's theories of dramatic construction in his Poetics.

This latter attribute helps ground the play in the traditional dramatic structure which off-sets the aforementioned "exoticism" of the play's set and characters.

Despite the reluctance for most Americans in the late 50's and early 60's to face the racially based challenges of that era, "A Raisin in the Sun" demonstrated, through creative expression, the urgency of the plight of African Americans in a racist society.

The play's climax, when it is decided that -- despite the conflicts and hardships that the money has caused -- that Mama's plan to move to a new neighborhood will go through, exerts a sense of hopefulness in the face of manifested obstacles (and potential violence) which seems to suggest that optimism, ambition, and "togetherness" can weather storms and find fulfillment despite the truth of prejudice and poverty.

However, a close reading of the play is just as likely to reveal in the reader, a sense that the Youngers are simply caught in a vicious cycle of hope and despair and that with each new breath of hope a corresponding crush of bad luck or ill-fortune will be experienced. It is not fitting to say that the play, therefore, has a " happy" ending, but simply an ending which reflects an unending cycle of hope against an equally unending series of obstacles.

Work Cited

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun*. Random House, New York. 1959