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African American Literature

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America Can't Handle the Truth

The Watered-Down Consequences of Prevailing Racism

Lorraine Hansberry sets herself apart as an American writer through her ability to bring the individual struggles of African Americans against segregation, ghettoization, and capitalist exploitation to the national stage with *A Raisin in the Sun*. While Hansberry is widely praised as the first woman of color to ever have a play produced on Broadway, critiques and analyzations of her work oftentimes fail to properly shed light on the allusions and elements which bring into focus underlining white supremacist ideologies American history is undeniably drenched in. Hansberry's choice regarding the rejection of a central character to make room instead for completely equal depictions of four distinct characters justifies her skill of accurately representing and understanding the actual, desensitized realities surrounding lower class African American families during the Great Migration. Although the turn of the 20th century marked over three decades since slavery's end, it paved the way for a new era in the North which claimed equality yet showcased several setbacks faced solely by African Americans. Hansberry's thought-provoking portrayals of Walter Lee, Ruth, Mama, and Beneatha create a platform on which she can reveal the immensely negative consequences resulting from such racist ideals at play forcing African Americans into vicious, never ending cycles of poverty… but only if

literary critics and casual readers alike finally become altogether more willing to break out the super-sized analytical shovels and start digging deeper than ever before.

A clear knowledge of the intimate details surrounding America's history leading up to the time period in which *The Raisin in the Sun* takes place is crucial in understanding the play as Hansberry most intended. While a large majority of past and present critiques tend to derail and pinpoint integrational interpretations, Hansberry herself "argued that the play evokes the complex and historically grounded experiences particular to Black Americans that emerge at the intersection of slavery, reconstruction, industrialization, and northern racism" (Lipari, 123). As a result of The Great Migration the populations of African Americans residing in thriving Northern cities, such as Chicago, began to rapidly rise from 1900 through 1950, some populous numbers increasing up to 14 times their initial amount within this half-century period (Lipari, 124-125). However, this substantial step toward integration combined with post World War I tensions created a racially toxic environment which lead to such explosive incidents as The Race Riots and regularly practiced movements that were legally allowed to generate restrictive housing covenants. The impacts of both ultimately lead to not only three fourths of all residential property in Chicago being restricted, but also to monumental socio-economic and moral decay within the African American community. Each adult member of the Younger family gives Hansberry's audience a front row seat to witness several specific perspectives of what happens behind the curtain, hiding on the unseen, or rather, ignored side of watered-down white terrorism.

The "American Dream" serves as a basis in which critics oftentimes imply more all-encompassing themes surrounding the struggles many face to achieve it. But these expositions, especially in overwhelming amounts, help to dilute necessary truths about the negative

consequences of privilege within a hegemonic society. The relationship between Walter Lee and Ruth opens serious discussion on the unique dynamics of African American households crumbling under the daily weight of oppression. Ruth embodies the belief that hard work and persistence will lead to success, though her awareness of her place in the world as a woman of color keeps her grounded and subservient to a lack of hope for any considerable change. Walter Lee pictures success from a view shared by several of his peers in the post-war African American population: he consciously equates obtaining an extensive amount of wealth and status as the only ticket to acceptance and fitting into "white" society. However, Walter simultaneously drains all of his self-determination into get rich quick schemes as a result of the realization that working hard is not enough to make it in America as a black man. In her article "The Politics of Home," Kristin Matthews explains that Willy Harris, the man who eventually tricks Walter out of the remainder of Mama's money entrusted to him, is "representative of the system that conned many Walter Lee Youngers into believing in the myth of upward mobility as a fact" (560). Instead of fully recognizing and attempting to challenge the white supremacist system holding him back, Walter is left to obsess over disassociating himself with his own background and embracing a different one that will never truly return the favor. The opposing combination of Ruth's gloomy pragmatism and Walter's naïve idealism produces turmoil within their marriage that is evident from the very beginning scene of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Following Ruth's many requests against hearing Walter's never ending typical dialogue of unattainable aspirations, he mistakes her negative response as her being an unsupportive wife when he states "That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world… Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something… We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds" (Hansberry, 479). Many critics are quick to

blame Walter Lee for being an oppressor within the Younger family because of his seemingly selfish attitude in regards to wanting to use the sum of his deceased father's life insurance money for a precarious business opportunity rather than having it go towards his sister's education or a better place of residency. These same critics fail to bring up the fact that Walter himself has been shaped by a dominating racist culture to think his only shot at providing a comfortable life for his family will have to involve a miracle in the form of taking monumental risks to even begin rising out of poverty as an African American. Walter's skewed ambition causes him to falsely conclude that his wife's lack of faith in his ideas means she does not care, that all women of color are incapable of thinking outside the box, when in reality Ruth's character is similarly shaped by a set of racist ideals that "literally and symbolically suggest a resigned acceptance of her position of disempowerment within both the socio-economic system and the structure of her family" (Matthews, 561). In this way a powerful disconnect between husband and wife is able to grow and fester into a certain type of disheartening resentment toward each other that partners living the privileged lifestyle can never experience.

Perhaps the most upsetting illustration of the inequalities faced solely by African Americans is exemplified through Hansberry's exposure of the problematic connotations automatically attached to Mama's religious beliefs, another basic right that is harmed as a result of white supremacy in full reign. Mama's choice of an upgrade in the form of moving the Youngers into an all-white neighborhood is rooted in her flawed hope that the residents of Clybourne Park will come to a change of heart identical to the "born again" philosophy seen within Christianity. After the initial conversation revealing her purchase, she argues her idea of an ultimate solution to breaking out of the family's backwards rut stating, "…When it gets like that in life—you just got to do something different, push on out and do something bigger,"

(Hansberry, 506). However, Mama fails to realize how her faith in restorative powers to transcend racism, poverty, and discord "is misplaced because it fails to confront the violent, present, material realities as it looks to a new or 'next' life," (Matthews, 566). The family's first visit with Mr. Linder, a man from the "Clybourne Park Improvement Association," is saturated with evidence of the white racist violence that no doubt is happening off-stage at the time in which Hansberry's setting takes place. Lisbeth Lipari's piece, "Hansberry's Hidden Transcript," explains the instrumental importance of taking a deeper look between the lines of Act II Scene III. Lipari argues that Mr. Linder's extremely anxious behavior throughout the encounter purposefully generates a sort of humor that makes white racism appear less threatening and more like bad manners which "masks the menacing threat that underlies his purpose," (134). Although *A Raisin in the Sun* transpires during what should have been the elimination of restrictive housing covenants, Mr. Linder takes it upon himself to disguise the same hateful agenda as trying to help the family out with a better deal that is magically better for all parties involved. As Mr. Linder begins to spell out the association's proposal of buying back the house with surplus, suddenly the atmosphere within the Younger family rises to an unquestioned unity against him for making an offer which indirectly and ironically implies African Americans do not deserve a real choice on where to live. Hansberry hints to the immense ignorance behind these Jim Crow-like practices and supporters in Mr. Linder's last significant dialogue of the scene when he states, "Well—I don't understand why you people are reacting this way. What do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighborhood where you just aren't wanted and where some elements—well—people can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they've ever worked for is threatened," (515). In the same breath that Mr. Linder is asking why the Youngers would be reacting negatively to a threat against everything the

family has gone through just to finally have a decent home he then proceeds to slyly reference white violence as a conventional reaction to black families simply existing being a threat to white communities. Hansberry's use of Mr. Linder therefor serves a dual "hot and cold" purpose of first exposing the unjust flaws in the common reliance purely on spirituality for progress against racist societal norms and second creating a stronger unity against division on the basis of a group coming together in order to stand up against such far ingrained backwards ideologies. Mama's personality is crucial in analyzing Hansberry's ability to capture the kind of genuine realism that "renders human beings s active agents—in their own liberation as well as in the oppression of others—and opens a cultural space in which to imagine alternatives to a truthfully represented repressive social reality," (Gordon, 122). The Youngers choice to ignore Mr. Linder's offer and request that he immediately leave makes known the possibility of positive growth toward a more equal society through attempting to overcome adversity together rather than individually.

Beneatha confirms the wide and overtly ignored gap standing between African Americans and the true freedom of equality that unrecognized privilege perverts. In response to a "crisis produced by ghetto economics and dehumanizing living conditions, restricted educational access, and explosive encounters along urban color lines," Hansberry fashions her third female character comparatively different from the previous attempting to exemplify the forced internal struggle of denying one's heritage in an attempt to separate from negative connotations purposefully bestowed upon the oppressed within a racist society (Gordon, 123). Beneatha is viewed as harmfully obsessive for trying different means of self-expression rather than supported for the effort of her putting self-determination into action the only way she personally sees fit. Her balance of scenes with Joseph and George present both a mostly genuine rooted

subconscious in Pan-Africanism and a simultaneous understandably blatant disregard for black separatism resulting from various unavoidable influences that are more easily observed with a closer look at Beneatha's reactions to making the best out of the circumstances she finds herself trapped within. Her continuance of a "relationship" with the wealthy, black George Murchison seems to only be in existence as a choice which appeases her family yet allows Beneatha to see firsthand the effects of a political movement seeking to separate African Americans through the propaganda of assimilation. She herself even argues against Mama and Ruth's disdain in regards to her never wanting to actually marry George because, "—The Murchisons are honest to-to-God-real-*live*-rich colored people, and the only people in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich colored people. I thought everybody knew that," (Hansberry, 486). Beneatha acknowledges the skewed superiority complex found within many of the African Americans who are fortunate enough to obtain at the very most the wealth equal to their white counterparts. Here Hansberry allows for the realization that *A Raisin in the Sun* is a warning "that discord and factionalism within the movement [for equality] can be as dangerous to the end-goal of full enfranchisement as can the physical and ideological thoughts from without," (Matthews, 557-558). Beneatha's spot as somewhat of an outsider when compared to the rest of her family stresses the peculiar union which requires individuals to express themselves while somehow concurrently remaining in a willful position to join the larger community in order to positively change oppressive social systems.

The significance of proper interpretation when analyzing cultural phenomena such as *A Raisin in the Sun* has perhaps risen to a status of necessity in its use to make sense of the uniquely African American setbacks still undoubtedly present in modern day society. In a recent article entitled "Black and White in Shades of Gray," Reihan Salam shares a few surprising

statistics the average American probably is not aware of. Salam introduces his piece with a notable survey released in August of 2015 which states that the percentage of both whites and blacks satisfied with how blacks are treated in the United States identically dropped nearly 15% since 2013 (29). This drop can be attributed directly to white supremacist ideologies given a colossal lifespan through two outlets:

> First, racially motivated local land-use regulations, inequitable federal housing subsidies, and selective intimidation helped to create hyper-segregated urban neighborhoods, and second, a combination of overzealous policing and a racist criminal-justice system have traumatized such heavily black neighborhoods and contributed to family breakdown (Salam, 30).

However, an analysis of 2012 census data by African American sociologist William Julius Wilson brings to light a newer, more complicated double-edged sword. He argues "that the economic and social opportunities created by desegregation led upwardly mobile black families rich in cultural and social capital to depart majority-black communities, leaving these communities in a much-diminished state" (Salam, 30). So while the number of black Americans living in "hyper-segregated ghetto neighborhoods" has fallen from 80% in 1960 to 20% in 2010, those remaining within such negatively viewed communities find conditions going from bad to worse with no real explanation as to why other than their undeniable isolation. A study on "Regional Differences in Affluent Black and Affluent White Residential Outcomes" by Ron Malega also exposed the major racial inequalities as a result of white supremacy after the use of data from the 1990 and 2000 censuses and pooled data from the 2005 to 2009 American Community Survey. Malega's study confirmed that "affluent black households are highly segregated from their white economic peers [and] live in neighborhoods of lower average quality

compared to affluent white households," in addition he also found that "middle-class blacks tended to live in lower-quality neighborhoods compared to middle-class whites, including having fewer college graduates and more poverty" (75). It is because of this continuance of the evidence surrounding the struggle of possessing a solid home foundation faced by African Americans that Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* deserves a more distinguished spot in proper early analytical literary studies. The plot's remaining widespread prevalence brings into question what more communities can do on a local and national scale to change oppressive systemic institutions and perspectives.

Works Cited

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