



RACISM AND THE AMERICAN DREAM IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S "A RAISIN IN THE SUN"

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of racism and the American Dream in Lorraine Hansberry's play "A Raisin in the Sun." Through the experiences of the Younger family, the play highlights systemic racial barriers that impede African Americans' pursuit of happiness and success. Key themes examined include discrimination in housing, economic challenges, and the impact of racism on personal aspirations. The family's decision to move to Clybourne Park symbolizes a defiance against racial oppression, while their unity and resilience reflect the enduring struggle for equality and justice. Hansberry's portrayal of the Youngers underscores the complexities of race, identity, and the quest for the American Dream, offering a critique of the systemic racism that perpetuates social and economic disparities. The relevance of "A Raisin in the Sun" to contemporary discussions on race is evident, as the issues of discrimination and inequality depicted in the play continue to resonate today. This paper underscores Hansberry's powerful message of hope, perseverance, and the need for ongoing advocacy for racial equality, making the play a profound commentary on the enduring fight for a fair and inclusive society.

Keywords; Racism, American Dream, Lorraine Hansberry, Housing, Discrimination, Economic Inequality, African American Families, Social Justice

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INTRODUCTION

Lorraine Hansberry was a pioneering African American playwright and writer, best known for her work "A Raisin in the Sun." Born in 1930 in Chicago, Hansberry grew up in a racially segregated environment, which significantly influenced her writings. "A Raisin in the Sun," first performed in 1959, is a groundbreaking play that depicts the struggles of a black family in Chicago striving to improve their financial and social status. The play's title comes from Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem," which questions what happens to a dream deferred. The central themes of "A Raisin in the Sun" are racism and the American Dream. Racism is a pervasive force that shapes the characters' experiences and limits their opportunities. The play vividly portrays the systemic racism that African Americans face, including discriminatory housing practices and societal prejudice. The American Dream, another key theme, represents the idea that anyone, regardless of background, can achieve success and prosperity through hard work and determination. Hansberry critically examines how this dream is often unattainable for black families due to the barriers imposed by a racially unjust society. In "A Raisin in the Sun," Lorraine Hansberry explores the intersection of racism and the American Dream, highlighting how systemic racial barriers impede African Americans' pursuit of happiness and success. The Younger family, central to the play, dreams of a better life, aspiring to move out of their cramped apartment into a house in a predominantly white neighbourhood. This aspiration represents their quest for the American Dream a desire for upward mobility and a better future. Their journey is fraught with obstacles rooted in racial discrimination.

The character of Mr. Lindner, a representative of the white neighbourhood association, explicitly offers the Younger family money to stay out of the white neighbourhood, revealing the blatant racism that seeks to maintain segregation. This encounter starkly illustrates how systemic racism functions to preserve racial boundaries and restrict African Americans' opportunities for advancement. The play delves into the personal and collective struggles of the Younger family members. Walter Lee Younger, the protagonist, embodies the frustration and disillusionment many African Americans feel when their aspirations are continually thwarted by racial barriers. His dream of investing in a liquor store represents a desire for economic independence and empowerment. His plans are jeopardized by societal prejudices and the inherent risks of trusting the wrong people, reflecting the precarious position of black entrepreneurs in a racially biased society. Beneatha Younger, Walter's sister, represents another facet of the American Dream pursuing education and professional success. Her ambition to become a doctor symbolizes a break from traditional gender and racial roles. Yet, her journey is also marked by challenges, including financial constraints and societal expectations. Hansberry's portrayal of the Younger family's struggles underscores the harsh reality that the American Dream is not equally accessible to all. The systemic racism embedded in housing, employment, and social interactions creates formidable barriers that African Americans must navigate. Through the Youngers' story, Hansberry powerfully critiques the notion of the American Dream, exposing its limitations and the deep-seated racial inequalities that undermine its promise.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1950s and 1960s in the United States were marked by significant social and political upheaval, primarily driven by the Civil Rights Movement. This movement aimed to end racial discrimination and secure equal rights for African Americans. Key figures like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and organizations such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People) played crucial roles in advocating for civil rights.

The movement saw monumental events like the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956), the March on Washington (1963), and the passage of landmark legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These efforts sought to dismantle systemic racism and promote social justice and equality. During this era, segregation and discrimination were legally sanctioned and culturally ingrained in many parts of the United States, especially in the South. The doctrine of "separate but equal," established by the 1896 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, allowed for racial segregation in public facilities, leading to widespread discrimination in schools, housing, employment, and public accommodations. African Americans were often relegated to substandard living conditions and inferior educational institutions. The struggle against these injustices was a central focus of the Civil Rights Movement, as activists sought to challenge and overturn segregationist policies through protests, legal challenges, and civil disobedience. The pervasive racism of the 1950s and 1960s had profound and far-reaching impacts on African American families. Discriminatory practices in housing, such as redlining and racially restrictive covenants, confined black families to segregated neighbourhoods with limited access to quality education and employment opportunities. These practices perpetuated a cycle of poverty and limited social mobility.

In "A Raisin in the Sun," Lorraine Hansberry captures these struggles through the experiences of the Younger family. The play highlights the economic hardships and societal barriers faced by African American families. For instance, the Younger family lives in a cramped, dilapidated apartment, symbolizing the limited housing options available to black families. The character of Walter Lee Younger epitomizes the frustration and despair many African Americans felt as they confronted systemic obstacles in their pursuit of the American Dream. African American families faced discrimination in the labour market, where they were often relegated to low-paying, unstable jobs with little chance for advancement. This economic marginalization contributed to a sense of disenfranchisement and hindered their ability to accumulate wealth and improve their living conditions. The emotional toll of this persistent inequality is evident in the tensions and conflicts within the Younger family, as they navigate the challenges of maintaining hope and dignity in the face of systemic oppression. Lorraine Hansberry's personal experiences and activism deeply influenced her writing, particularly in "A Raisin in the Sun." Born into a politically active family, Hansberry's parents were prominent figures in the fight against racial discrimination. Her father, Carl Augustus Hansberry, was involved in a landmark legal battle against restrictive covenants in Chicago, which sought to prevent black families from buying homes in white neighbourhoods. This personal history is mirrored in "A Raisin in the Sun," where the Younger family's aspirations to move into a better neighbourhood are met with resistance from white residents.

Hansberry herself was an active participant in the Civil Rights Movement. She was involved in various activist organizations and used her platform as a writer to advocate for racial equality and social justice. Her play "A Raisin in the Sun" is not only a reflection of her own experiences but also a broader commentary on the racial dynamics of the time. The character of Beneatha Younger, who aspires to become a doctor and defy traditional gender roles, reflects Hansberry's own progressive views on race and gender. Hansberry's activism extended beyond the realm of racial issues. She was also vocal about women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights, making her a multifaceted advocate for social change. Her intersectional approach to activism is evident in the diverse range of issues addressed in her works. In "A Raisin in the Sun," Hansberry's nuanced portrayal of the Younger family's struggles serves as a powerful critique of the multiple layers of oppression faced by African Americans. Hansberry's untimely death at the age of 34 did not diminish the impact of her work. "A Raisin in the Sun" remains a seminal piece in American theatre, continually resonating with audiences for its poignant exploration of race, identity, and the pursuit of the American Dream.

The play's enduring relevance is a testament to Hansberry's keen insight into the social and political issues of her time, as well as her profound empathy for the human condition.

THE YOUNGER FAMILY'S DREAM

In "A Raisin in the Sun," Lorraine Hansberry introduces the Younger family, a tight-knit African American household living in a cramped apartment on the South Side of Chicago. The family consists of Lena Younger (Mama), her son Walter Lee, her daughter Beneatha, Walter's wife Ruth, and their young son Travis. Each member of the family harbours personal dreams and aspirations, reflecting their desires for a better future and embodying different facets of the American Dream. Lena Younger, affectionately known as Mama, is the matriarch of the Younger family. Her dream is to buy a house, a long-held aspiration that symbolizes stability, security, and a sense of accomplishment. Having worked tirelessly as a domestic worker, Mama wishes to use the \$10,000 insurance check from her deceased husband's policy to purchase a home in a better neighbourhood. This dream is not just about acquiring property; it represents her desire to provide a nurturing and safe environment for her family. Mama's vision is deeply rooted in the values of family unity and togetherness. She believes that owning a home will bring the family closer and offer them a solid foundation upon which to build their future.

Walter Lee Younger, Mama's son, has his own distinct dream centred around economic success and entrepreneurship. He works as a chauffeur but feels trapped in his low-paying job, yearning for a chance to improve his financial standing and assert his independence. Walter dreams of investing in a liquor store, seeing it as a lucrative business opportunity that will elevate his family's socio-economic status. His ambition is driven by a desire to provide a better life for his wife Ruth and their son Travis. Walter's dream reflects his struggle against the limitations imposed by systemic racism and his intense desire to achieve financial success and gain respect within society. His vision often conflicts with the more traditional and cautious approach of his mother, leading to tension within the family. Beneatha Younger, Walter's sister, represents a different aspect of the American Dream through her pursuit of education and personal fulfilment. She is an ambitious and intelligent young woman who aspires to become a doctor. Beneatha's dream is not only about professional achievement but also about breaking free from the constraints of race and gender roles that society imposes on her. She seeks to assert her identity and independence, exploring various cultural and intellectual pursuits along the way. Beneatha's aspirations challenge traditional expectations and reflect the changing attitudes of younger generations towards career and self-actualization. Her journey is marked by her quest for meaning and her desire to make a difference in the world.

The \$10,000 insurance check that the Younger family receives following the death of Mama's husband serves as a powerful symbol in "A Raisin in the Sun." It represents hope, opportunity, and the potential realization of each family member's dreams. For Mama, the check is the key to buying a house, fulfilling her dream of homeownership and providing a stable future for her family. For Walter Lee, it is a means to invest in his business venture, representing his aspiration for economic success and independence. For Beneatha, the money could support her education, enabling her to pursue her goal of becoming a doctor. The check embodies the family's collective aspirations for a better life and their belief in the possibility of achieving the American Dream despite the obstacles they face. The check also brings to light the different priorities and conflicts within the family. Mama's decision to initially withhold the money from Walter reflects her protective nature and her fear of financial instability, while Walter's desperation to control the funds highlights his frustration and sense of urgency to change his circumstances. The symbolism of the check is further underscored by the challenges the family encounters as they try to use it to achieve their dreams.

The neighbourhood's resistance to the Youngers' moves and Walter's business venture both illustrate the societal barriers that persist despite their financial windfall. The insurance check, therefore, serves as a double-edged sword offering hope and potential, but also exposing the harsh realities of systemic racism and the fragile nature of the American Dream for African Americans.

RACISM AS A BARRIER TO THE AMERICAN DREAM

In "A Raisin in the Sun," the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, represented by Mr. Lindner, epitomizes the racial discrimination African Americans faced in housing during the 1950s. When the Younger family plans to move into a predominantly white neighbourhood, Mr. Lindner visits them with a proposal. He offers them money to stay out of Clybourne Park, under the guise of preserving community harmony. This blatant act of racism underscores the systemic barriers that African Americans confronted when trying to access better living conditions. Mr. Lindner's offer is a stark reminder of the social and economic exclusion imposed by white communities to maintain segregation, highlighting how deeply ingrained racism was in housing policies and practices. Beyond individual acts of racism, systemic practices like redlining and restrictive covenants played significant roles in maintaining racial segregation in housing. Redlining, a discriminatory practice by banks and insurance companies, involved denying services or charging higher rates to residents in certain areas based on racial composition. This practice confined African Americans to under-resourced neighbourhoods, limiting their access to quality housing, education, and employment opportunities.

Restrictive covenants were agreements embedded in property deeds that prohibited the sale of property to non-white individuals. These legal tools ensured that African American families could not move into white neighbourhoods, perpetuating racial segregation and economic disparity. In "A Raisin in the Sun," the Younger family's struggle to move to Clybourne Park symbolizes the broader fight against these discriminatory housing practices. The play sheds light on the systemic racism that barred African Americans from achieving upward mobility through homeownership, a cornerstone of the American Dream. Walter Lee Younger's experiences in "A Raisin in the Sun" highlight the economic challenges and job discrimination faced by African Americans. As a chauffeur, Walter is stuck in a low-paying job with limited prospects for advancement, reflecting the broader employment discrimination that kept many black workers in menial positions regardless of their abilities or ambitions. Walter's dream of owning a liquor store represents his desire to break free from these constraints and achieve financial independence. His struggle to secure funding and the eventual betrayal by his business partner illustrate the precariousness of entrepreneurial endeavours for African Americans. These challenges underscore the systemic barriers that hindered economic success for black individuals, making it difficult for them to achieve their dreams. The limited economic opportunities available to African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s were a direct result of institutionalized racism. Discriminatory hiring practices, wage gaps, and lack of access to professional training and education kept many African Americans in poverty. Despite their skills and aspirations, black individuals were often excluded from higher-paying jobs and business opportunities. In "A Raisin in the Sun," Walter Lee's frustrations with his job and his desperate attempt to invest in a business reflect these broader economic disparities. The play highlights how systemic economic discrimination restricted the upward mobility of African American families, undermining their pursuit of the American Dream.

Beneatha Younger's aspirations to become a doctor in "A Raisin in the Sun" represent her desire to break free from traditional gender roles and racial limitations. Her journey is fraught with challenges. As an African American woman, Beneatha faces societal prejudices that question her capabilities and ambition.

Financial constraints also pose significant hurdles, as medical education is expensive and the Younger family's resources are limited. Beneatha's struggle reflects the broader barriers that black women faced in pursuing higher education and professional careers. Despite her determination and intelligence, the systemic obstacles she encounters highlight the deep-rooted inequalities that hindered African Americans' personal and professional aspirations. The Younger family's collective experience in "A Raisin in the Sun" underscores their resilience in the face of systemic racism. Despite the numerous barriers they encounter, they strive to maintain their dignity and pursue their dreams. Mama's unwavering faith in the value of homeownership, Walter Lee's determination to succeed economically, and Beneatha's ambition to become a doctor all reflect their enduring hope and resilience. The family's internal conflicts and external challenges reveal the psychological toll of racism, yet they also demonstrate the strength and perseverance required to confront and overcome these obstacles. The Younger family's journey embodies the struggle of many African American families to achieve the American Dream, despite the pervasive barriers of racial discrimination.

RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

The decision of the Younger family to move to Clybourne Park in "A Raisin in the Sun" is a powerful symbolic act of defiance against racial oppression. By choosing to move into a predominantly white neighbourhood, the Youngers challenge the entrenched norms of segregation and discrimination. This decision is made despite the explicit attempt by Mr. Lindner and the Clybourne Park Improvement Association to prevent them from doing so through a financial bribe. The family's refusal to accept Mr. Lindner's offer represents their rejection of the systemic racism that seeks to confine them to inferior living conditions. This act of defiance is a statement of their right to pursue the American Dream and live wherever they choose, regardless of societal barriers. The move to Clybourne Park is also a direct challenge to the idea that African Americans should be content with lesser opportunities and marginalized spaces. By asserting their right to live in a better neighbourhood, the Youngers not only seek improved living conditions but also demand recognition of their equal status as citizens. This bold decision underscores their resilience and determination to break free from the limitations imposed by a racially prejudiced society. Mama's determination to move to Clybourne Park is driven by her deep-seated desire to secure a better future for her family. Throughout "A Raisin in the Sun," Mama is portrayed as the moral and emotional anchor of the family, whose dreams are rooted in providing a stable and nurturing environment for her children and grandson. The new house represents more than just a physical space; it embodies her hopes for a brighter, more secure future where her family can thrive. Mama's commitment to purchasing the house, even in the face of opposition, reflects her unwavering belief in the importance of homeownership and its role in fostering family unity and pride. Her determination is a testament to her resilience and her willingness to confront and overcome the barriers posed by systemic racism. By insisting on moving forward with the purchase, Mama ensures that her family takes a significant step towards realizing their collective aspirations and asserting their dignity.

Walter Lee Younger's journey in "A Raisin in the Sun" is marked by significant personal growth and an eventual assertion of dignity. Initially, Walter is consumed by frustration and a sense of inadequacy due to his economic struggles and thwarted ambitions. His dream of owning a business represents his desire for financial independence and respect. After losing the insurance money, Walter hits a low point, contemplating accepting Mr. Lindner's offer to regain some of the lost money. In a pivotal moment of the play, Walter decides against taking Mr. Lindner's money, thereby rejecting the notion of selling his dignity and integrity. This decision marks a crucial turning point in Walter's character development.

By standing up to Mr. Lindner, Walter reclaims his self-respect and demonstrates a profound sense of responsibility towards his family. His growth signifies a reaffirmation of hope and perseverance, highlighting the importance of maintaining one's principles in the face of adversity. The Younger family's unity and strength are central themes in "A Raisin in the Sun," illustrating their collective resilience in facing adversity. Despite the internal conflicts and differing dreams within the family, their shared experiences and love for one another ultimately bind them together. This unity is particularly evident in their decision to move to Clybourne Park, a choice that requires collective resolve and mutual support. Throughout the play, the family's interactions reveal a deep-seated sense of loyalty and solidarity. Mama's nurturing presence, Walter's evolving sense of responsibility, Ruth's steadfast support, and Beneatha's ambitious spirit all contribute to the family's collective strength. Their ability to overcome their differences and unite in pursuit of a common goal is a powerful testament to their resilience. The family's journey underscores the theme of hope amidst hardship. Their decision to move forward, despite the significant challenges they face, embodies their enduring belief in the possibility of a better future. This perseverance is not just a matter of personal determination but also a communal effort to uplift each other and strive towards their shared dreams.

CONCLUSION

In "A Raisin in the Sun," Lorraine Hansberry vividly explores the intersection of racism and the American Dream through the experiences of the Younger family. The play illuminates how systemic racial barriers hinder African Americans' pursuit of happiness and success. Key themes include discrimination in housing, economic challenges, and the impact of racism on personal aspirations. The Younger family's journey reflects the harsh realities faced by many African American families striving for a better life amidst racial prejudice and economic inequality. Through "A Raisin in the Sun," Hansberry delivers a powerful message on the enduring struggle for equality and justice. She critiques the systemic racism that perpetuates social and economic disparities, emphasizing the importance of challenging injustice and advocating for change. The play underscores the resilience and dignity of African Americans in the face of adversity, highlighting the ongoing fight for racial equality and the pursuit of the American Dream. Hansberry's work remains highly relevant to contemporary discussions on race and the American Dream. The systemic barriers depicted in the play still resonate today, as racial disparities persist in housing, employment, and education. The Younger family's experiences mirror the challenges faced by many marginalized communities striving for upward mobility and social justice. "A Raisin in the Sun" serves as a powerful reminder of the continued struggle for racial equality and the importance of addressing systemic racism to create a more just and inclusive society. "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry is a timeless exploration of the complexities of race, identity, and the pursuit of the American Dream. Hansberry's message of resilience, dignity, and the ongoing struggle for equality resonates strongly, making the play a profound reflection on the human condition and the quest for a fair and just society.

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