

THE IMPACT OF DREAMS ON THE LIVES OF THE CHARACTERS (Can dreams be destructive? A substitute for Action? OR is it essential to keep dreams alive?)

This discussion on the impact of dreams on the lives of the characters in Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* will firstly, examine the importance of dreams in the context of America itself. It will then briefly note the relevance of dreams to the whole African-American experience of the 1950's and 60's. The epigraph and the link to the characters will then be explicated. Furthermore the significance of dreams will be highlighted, suggesting that the plot and the conflicts therein are determined by the desire and struggle of each character to fulfil his/her dream. Finally this discussion will look at each character and demonstrate the particular impact of his/her dream on his/her own life and the lives of others. It will be suggested that the particular dreams have both or either positive or negative effects and can be destructive or liberating. Furthermore the importance & relevance of each character's gender (& the stereotype associated with them); their stage in life (old/young/single/married) & their value system will be explained.

Firstly, 'The American Dream' to which all its citizens aspire implies that through hard work, all Americans can achieve success. However in the 1950's and at the time of the writing and production of *A Raisin in the Sun*, social inequalities and racial tensions were smouldering in a segregated United States. The play to a certain extent provided a warning of the civil unrest which followed. The inequalities between Black and White reached a climax in what became known as the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's. Black people, now referred to as African-American engaged in non-violent protest & civil disobedience to bring about change. This turbulent period saw the introduction of Voting Rights Act of 1965 & Civil Rights Act of 1964. It was during this period that Martin Luther King became prominent & delivered his now famous "I have a dream" speech. Despite the gains

made by African-American people, racial discrimination & prejudice remained in American society.

The epigraph to the play from Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" emphasizes the notion of dreams that are not fulfilled. Each image (metaphor) suggests a possible result of a dream frustrated/unfulfilled. It can 'dry up like a raisin in the sun'; 'stink like rotten meat'; become a sickly 'syrupy sweet'; or 'sag' or 'explode'. The characters in the play have dreams/hopes/aspirations & the recurring metaphor of a dream symbolises their individual hopes. Hansberry shows how a particular result in the poem is linked to a specific character. She suggests that dreams can have the potential to drive us forward to fulfil ambitions & to improve ourselves. If however, as the poem suggests, they do not reach fruition then they can damage our sense of worth. They have the potential therefore to be a means of liberation or a means of destruction.

The plot centres on the Youngers, an Africa-American working-class family & focuses on their dreams and aspirations. However it also shows the struggles that racial prejudice presented & how this affected their hopes/dreams. Mama's dream is to fulfil the hope she had with her late husband, namely to buy a house to accommodate the whole family. Walter aspires to owning a business in order to support his family. Beneatha dreams of studying medicine & becoming a doctor. Ruth, like Mama wishes for a comfortable home which can accommodate all. Despite the different dreams the real source of conflict between the members of the family is the ten thousand dollar cheque insurance money due to be paid to Mama following the death of her husband. Each character directly or indirectly sees the money as a means to fulfil/assist/support , his/her individual dream. As such the dreams become an underlying source of conflict & tension in the Younger family.

The IMPACT of the dreams of each character is determined not only by the nature of the dream but also by factors such as the individual's value

system, gender and stage in life (young & single, married family man; older generation).

Walter's dream ultimately 'explodes'. As a married man in his 30's he is unable to provide a home & comfortable living space for his wife & son. At the outset (Act 1 Sci) he is disgruntled as inwardly he is fighting against poverty & his status as a Black working-class man. He is dissatisfied with his job as a chauffeur (p19) & can only tell his son (who sleeps in the living room) stories of how rich white people live (18). He resents the fact that the whole family has to suffer as Beneatha is studying & not working. (21) (Quote). This affects his communication with her. He is obsessed with the expected arrival of Mama's ten thousand dollar cheque. He sees money as 'life' (53). He is constantly restless, as his dream of owning a liquor store, is deferred. He confides in Mama that 'things are driving him crazy' (52). He yearns for a better life & identity that the fulfilment of his dream would bring. However when Mama refuses to finance a liquor store he loses perspective & his lofty idea to seek a better life for his wife & son is replaced by his feverish (almost destructive) aspirations for wealth. He virtually ignores the revelation of his wife's pregnancy & her desperate recourse out of poverty by seeking an abortion. His mother desperately pleads with him to be 'his father's son. 'Be the man he was'. She urges him to talk to his wife, Ruth, as they are 'people who give children life, not who destroys them' (54) & he is a 'disgrace to his father's memory'. His dream at this point is impacting negatively on his decent (noble) aspiration to improve life for his family. He has lost his sense of morality; his very manhood is at stake as he ignores Mama's pleas to be a man & dissuade his wife from her destructive decision. When George arrives at the house, the extent of his bitterness at the deferment of his dream is poignantly illustrated in his insult of George's middle-class standards (to which he actually aspires) and his college education (62). George then aptly tells him that he is 'a bitter man' (62) He is consumed by his bitterness & hence he 'explodes'.

In this destructive mood, when Ruth tries to placate him, he cruelly says 'who cares about you'. His inability to interact rationally with anyone sees him then shouting at Mama that she has 'done something with that insurance, something crazy' (67) when she reveals that she has bought a house.

Walter's view of reality is distorted by his irrational, desperate drive to acquire wealth & hence power. The values he once treasured have now been eroded. He continues on a path of destruction; drinking excessively & missing work. His desperate desire for middle-class status is highlighted in his musings with Travis about Chryslers, Cadillac's etc. However he is hell-bent on destruction & against Ruth's warning he loses all the money (\$6500) entrusted to him by Mama, (which includes money to be invested for Beneatha's education.) He had accused Mama of 'butchering' (71) his dream when she purchased a house. His almost careless, ruthless decisions have impacted negatively on him & the entire family.

His reckless, blinkered desire for money to fulfil his dream sees him lose his pride & dignity when he is prepared to agree to the racial prejudices of Mr Linder, the representative from the white suburb of Clybourne Park. His intention was to get Linder 'to put money in (his) hand' so they will not have to live 'next to a bunch of stinking niggers' (112). His dream has lost its meaning (significance) – to be middle-class & dignified for the upliftment of his family. The impact of his dream at this juncture has turned him into a cowardly, immoral, selfish, undignified wretch who is prepared to sacrifice Mama's dream of owning her own house which will give the family the pride & dignity they aspire to.

In a climactic moment however he becomes the 'man' Mama wants him to be. He takes the lead as the head of the family. He rejects Linder's offer, establishes the pride of the family as he says 'we come from people who have a 'lot of pride'. He is able to be a positive role model for his son & his

family & through this he is liberated & in this way there is a better future for them.

Beneatha's dream, to become a doctor, challenges stereotypes about women & Black women in particular. Her struggle to find an identity (she tells this to Asagai) is manifested in her engaging in varied activities that include play-acting, horse-back riding, photography & learning guitar. She also aspires to understand her African roots- even cutting her straightened hair when Asagai calls her 'assimilationist'. 'Alaiyo', meaning 'one for whom bread is not enough' (46) is the name given to her by her Nigerian friend. The very name suggests her 'aspirations'. She does not view herself as a woman who sees the love of a man (Asagai) as sufficient nor does she subscribe to the stereotype of fulfilment in marrying a wealthy man, like George Murchison as she sharply berates Ruth's suggestion to marry George:

'Get over it? What are you talking about Ruth? Listen, I'm going to be a Doctor.....married' (32)

She is steadfast in her dream to become a doctor and feels confident that the insurance money will help her achieve this dream. However it may 'fester like a sore ... and then run" as she is unrealistic about the constraints, such as gender, race and social status, which may have an effect on the fulfilment of this dream. There is a mismatch between how she views herself & how society sees her. This is internally destructive and impacts negatively on her relationships. The prevailing ethos of the time wants to force her into believing in stereotypes that limit or erode her visions. However she refuses to see her future in limited terms. She knows education engenders respect but above all she wants to 'fix up the sick' (102). When her education funding is lost as a result of Walter's foolish gamble she faces the harsh reality of her life & becomes acutely aware that her 'idealist' (103) philosophy is 'festering like a sore' & she despairs and sees life as an endless circle. It is Asagai who helps her to

focus on a new dream- a dream in Africa where work is needed to help the illiterate & sick. However it is Walter's proud stance by refusing to accept Mr Linder's offer that renews her hopes for a new dream for the future. She too is liberated from the frustrations of a dream 'deferred' and can look forward to achieving positive goals in Africa.

Mama's dream was to buy a house for her family. She is a matriarch & as such quietly controls the members of her family. She is a different (older) generation & is more accustomed to the struggles & discrimination faced by African-American people. She insists 'in mother's house there is still God' even though Bennie calls her a 'tyrant'. She & Big Walter 'selected with care & even hope' (15) the furnishing of the apartment & hoped to have a house after a year. Ironically the means to fulfil her dream comes about through the death of her husband & hence to a certain extent her dream over the years of Big Walter's life may 'stink like rotten meat'.

In contrast to Walter the impact of her dream does not adversely affect her character. She is a God-fearing woman who maintains her high values, pride & dignity. The expected cheque does not erode her values; neither does the fact that her dream was deferred throughout Big Walter's life. She has remained steadfast & shown moral courage. She views the ownership of a house as something she can pass on to her children where their dreams can be nurtured & passed on to her grandchildren. Her dream has impacted positively on her. She makes an independent decision, puts a deposit on the house & sees that she has given her family something to be proud of even though she tells them 'it's a plain little old house.....& it will be ours'(69). She never relinquishes her values & pride which ultimately teaches her children that you can have dreams, work to fulfil them but still maintain your pride. She is bold & strong enough to give some of her money to Walter to help realize his dream & ensure the safety of B's dream. When he intends to get the money he has 'lost' from Mr Linder, (Don't Cry Mama P111) Mama feels the family pride has died & she exclaims 'ain't nobody..... (111). Although Walter's foolishness has temporarily made her dream appear to be 'stinking',

because of the loss of pride, she is ultimately the only one whose dream is fulfilled at the end of the play. The plant, (although 'struggling' to survive) represents her courage & determination to keep all dreams alive. Walter's regaining of his manhood is a result of her strength in the nurturing of her family. The house represents the stable factor that can help the family work towards the fulfilment of their dreams

Ruth's dream supports Mama's dream of the family owning a house as she sees that this would bring the desired improvement in dignity & status that each yearns for. She lives an unfulfilling life in a cramped apartment & accepts her situation without having unreasonable dreams of her own. If she has inner dreams they are 'sugared over – like a syrupy sweet.' She has to remain calm in the face of adversity – a cramped apartment; a domineering mother-in-law (who questions her actions); an often drunk, belligerent husband and an unwanted pregnancy. As a result, she resigns herself to the care of her family. When she hears of the new house she is overjoyed about the projected improvement in her life. Walter's taking of his role as head of the family renews their relationship & perhaps an unspoken dream of a better life for her.

In conclusion, the dreams & aspirations of each of the Younger family members are different. As a result of different dreams certain conflicts between the characters arise. These conflicts impact differently on each character because of factors such as gender (& the stereotype & expectations associated with them); their stage in life (age, single, married etc). The discussion has also suggested that these dreams can have a positive or negative impact and can therefore be destructive or liberating.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY