

Thematic Structure of *A Raisin In The Sun*

The underlying theme of Hansberry's *Raisin* is in the question posed by Langston Hughes' poem "Montage of a Dream Deferred," when he asks, "What happens to a dream deferred?" and then goes on to list the various things that might happen to a person if his dreams are put "on hold," emphasizing that whatever happens to a postponed dream is *never* good. More simply, the question Hansberry poses in her play is, "What happens to a person whose dreams grow more and more passionate — while his hopes of ever achieving those dreams grow dimmer each day?" Even the Bible concerns itself with this problem; in Proverbs 13:12, we read: "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick; but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life." We see clearly what happens to Walter as his dream continues to be postponed by too many circumstances that are beyond his control.

Several other motifs are also successfully intertwined into this drama. Hansberry's avant-garde concerns, her prophetic political vision, and her ability to perceive the future importance of events that few people in 1959 were even aware of are used as lesser motifs or minor themes throughout the play.

The issue of feminism is one such example. Three generations of women reside in the Younger household, each possessing a different political perspective of herself as a woman. Mama (Lena Younger), in her early sixties, speaks "matter-of-factly" about her husband's prior womanizing. Ruth, about thirty, is more vocal about her feelings to her own husband than Mama was; still, Ruth is not as enlightened about a woman's "place" as is Beneatha, who is about twenty and pursuing a career that, in 1959, was largely a male-dominated profession.

Much of the conflict between Beneatha and Walter revolves around Walter's chauvinistic view of Beneatha. When Walter complains that Beneatha's medical schooling will cost more than the family can afford, he bases his argument on the fact that since Beneatha is a woman, she should not even want to become a doctor. Walter's resentment and anger erupts in Act I, Scene 1: "Who in the hell told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy 'bout messing 'round with sick people — then go be a nurse like other women — or just get married and be quiet."

Beneatha's defiance toward Walter is symbolic of her defiance toward all barriers of stereotype. She never yields to Walter and, in some cases, even goads him into a confrontation. Ruth's advice to Beneatha is that she should just "be nice" sometimes and not argue over every one of Walter's insensitive remarks. This advice is, of course, totally unacceptable to a character like Beneatha, to whom feistiness is a virtue and docility a "sin." Whereas Ruth tries to change herself in order to please everyone in her life, most especially to please her husband, Beneatha insists that others accept her as she is. She makes it clear, early on, that she has no use for George Murchison because of his shallow beliefs. She makes it clear to Ruth that she doesn't understand how anyone could have married someone like Walter. And she

defies her mother on religious points; in fact, Mama has to slap Beneatha before she will back down. However, after Mama has left the room, Beneatha still says to Ruth that there is no God.

Mama is the "head of her household" only by default. She had to take charge after the death of Big Walter, whose name suggests that he was in charge of his family prior to his death. Mama appears to be always ready to hand over the reins to her son and let him be "head of the household" for one reason: He is a man. She entrusts Walter with the remaining insurance money because she feels that she has robbed him of his "manhood" by having done with the money what she thought was best. Mama is the type of woman who believes that the man should be in charge. Ruth apparently agrees, but Beneatha does not. Hansberry skillfully introduces issues of feminism that were not addressed as a political issue until a decade after the play's Broadway opening.

Along with feminism, the theme of fecundity (fertility; being fruitfully prolific) is threaded throughout this play. Three generations of Youngers live in the same household; in addition, both Ruth's possible pregnancy and her contemplation of abortion become focal points of the drama, and Mama's reference to the child that she lost is emphasized. She does not merely mention Baby Claude in conversation; rather she dwells upon her loss dramatically.

At the beginning of the play, Ruth serves eggs — but not without getting into an argument with Walter over the eggs — which again accentuates the importance of this symbol of fertility to the play. In addition, toward the end of the play, we learn that Mama's maiden name was Lena Eggleston, a name that underscores the theme of fecundity as much as the argument over eggs at the beginning of the play.

A related motif is the subject of abortion, which was taboo and illegal in 1959. Ruth considers an abortion in order to save her "living family" from further economic distress. The slightest reference to the word, however, sends the other family members into an emotional tailspin. Conflicts erupt between Mama and Walter, between Mama and Ruth, and between Ruth and Walter. Even Beneatha's inadvertently callous response to Ruth's pregnancy is "Where is it going to sleep? On the roof?" Other remarks are also proof that Beneatha's views on unplanned pregnancy differ sharply from her mother's. Mama says in exasperation: "We [are] a people who give children life, not who destroys them"; she would never agree to Ruth's having an abortion.

Ruth is trapped both by poverty and by the knowledge that her relationship with Walter Lee is rapidly deteriorating. Walter, although surprised to learn that she is contemplating an abortion, is still too caught up with his "get-rich-quick" scheme to offer her emotional support. Ruth contemplates an abortion because she believes this decision would be in the best interest of her family. Whether or not Ruth will actually decide on an abortion is debatable, for Ruth says to Mama in Act I, "Ain't no

thin' can tear at you like losin' your baby." Ruth says this as Mama is recounting the pain of having lost her own baby, Claude. At this point in the play, Ruth's pregnancy has not yet been verified, but the dialogue spawned by the abortion controversy in this drama is as relevant today as it was in 1959, when the play opened.

Afrocentrism, or the expression of pride in one's African heritage, so popular among the black youth of the 1990s, was, in 1959, a little-known phenomenon. But Lorraine Hansberry's affinity for all things African resulted from the people of greatness that she was acquainted with through her family. Langston Hughes, for example, was a friend of her father's and often came to the Hansberry home for dinner. Lorraine's uncle, Leo Hansberry, a noted historian and professor, was the teacher of Kwame Nkrumah while he was a student at Howard University. (Kwame Nkrumah was the leader of the fight for freedom of the Gold Coast from British rule and became its first president in 1957. The British name "Gold Coast" was changed to the Republic of Ghana in honor of that ancient kingdom.) Hansberry's knowledge and pride in her African heritage was a result of her family and her family's associations, something of which few other blacks could boast.

In this play, Beneatha expresses Hansberry's knowledge of and pride in her African heritage. Beneatha's Afrocentric spirit is nurtured by her relationship with the African, Asagai. Not only is Beneatha's dialogue peppered with a knowledge of 1959 African politics, but her dialogue also shows a knowledge of the ancient kingdoms of Africa, something few historians spoke of and even fewer people knew about.

In Act II, Scene 1, when Beneatha defines an "assimilationist Negro" as being "someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant . . . oppressive culture," George Murchison responds immediately with, "Here we go! A lecture on the African past! On our Great West African Heritage! In one second we will hear all about the great Ashanti empires; the great Songhay civilizations and the great sculpture of Benin and then some poetry in the Bantu. . . . Let's face it, baby, your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts."

In response to George's self-deprecating sarcasm about the historical achievements of black people, Beneatha screams at him from another room: "the Ashanti were performing surgical operations when the English — were still tattooing themselves with blue dragons." It is clear that whatever George knows about Africa's past great civilizations has been learned through his association with Beneatha.

Note that when Beneatha's African suitor, Asagai, is on his way to the Younger apartment, Beneatha gives her mother a hasty briefmg on African history, coaching her mother in conversational protocol. She tells Mama that Asagai is from Nigeria, which Mama immediately confuses with Liberia. After correcting her, Beneatha begs Mama not to make stereotypical comments about Africans and tells her that the only thing that most people seem to know about Africa has been learned from Tarzan

movies. Beneatha berates those missionaries who, like Mama, are more concerned with changing the African's religion than in overthrowing colonial rule.

After Asagai arrives, Mama's attempt to impress him with her new knowledge of Africa is almost pathetic as she parrots what Beneatha has just told her, echoing Beneatha's previous dialogue almost verbatim. When *Raisin* opened in 1959, most people's knowledge of Africa was as limited as Mama's. Although a more enlightened modern audience might be chagrined by the political misconceptions of the late 50s, Lorraine Hansberry's prophetic vision is accurate and important, as though she envisioned the day that the true history of Africa would be widely known and that the shackles of colonialism would be broken. In 1959, when *Raisin* opened on Broadway, most African countries were under European rule. The following year, 1960, fifteen African countries gained their independence, and in eight more years, thirteen more had become independent.

In Act III, Beneatha and Asagai address the possibility of the African countries' replacing oppressive colonial rule with corrupt African leaders. Beneatha asks, "Independence and *then what?* What about the crooks and thieves and just plain idiots who will come into power and steal and plunder the same as before — only now they will be black and do it in the name of the new Independence." Kwame Nkrumah received worldwide praise for his role in leading Ghana into independence in 1960.

However, immediately after taking office, Nkrumah began to spend the country's money with reckless abandon and embraced the Communist Party. The people rebelled against all of his dealings, staged a successful coup d'etat, and he was overthrown in 1966. In retrospect, Hansberry's prophetic accuracy is once again evident, for Nkrumah, in particular, was one of the leaders most admired by Hansberry in 1959, when *Raisin* opened. Other African nations also experienced political instability after their post-1959 independence.

Closely related to the theme of Afrocentrism in this play is Beneatha's decision to change her hairstyle. Although the dialogue concerning Beneatha's decision to change her hairstyle was omitted from the original stage presentation and from the original screenplay, this dialogue is in the complete, original version of the play and was used in the 1989 American Playhouse TV presentation.

In Act I, Scene 2, Asagai's off-hand remark about Beneatha's straightened hair is the catalyst for her dramatic change in Act II, Scene 1 (ironically, for her date with George Murchison and not for a date with Asagai). In Act I, Scene 2, when Asagai presents Beneatha with Nigerian tribal robes, he says, "You wear it well . . . mutilated hair and all." His meaning is clear, although Beneatha's sensitivity does not permit her to immediately grasp his meaning. So Asagai explains by asking, "Were you born with it [your hair] like that?"

In Act II, Scene 1, Beneatha was supposed to have come out for her date with a natural (unstraightened) hairstyle; this scene, however, was omitted at the last

minute from the original stage presentation because the actress, Diana Sands, in the role of Beneatha, received an imperfect haircut. Since this would have given a negative impression of the natural look, both Hansberry and Sands decided to omit the hairstyle change from the Broadway opening. It is interesting to note that in 1959, Beneatha's new hairstyle would have sent some shock waves throughout the audience, whereas ten years later, the same style had become so popular nationwide that it was promoted by Madison Avenue as the "Afro." Once again, Hansberry's prophetic vision was accurate and on target.

Throughout *Raisin*, Hansberry expresses her own desire to see blacks in entrepreneurial ventures. So few blacks were in business in 1959 that sociologists of that day addressed this concern in academic publications. Mama says, in response to Ruth's echoing Walter's dream of owning his own business, "We ain't no business people, Ruth. We just plain working folks," and Ruth answers with: "Ain't nobody business people till they go into business. Walter Lee says colored people ain't never going to start getting ahead till they start gambling on some different kinds of things in the world — investments and things." Because the percentage of black people who own their own businesses has increased dramatically since 1959, one might conclude that, here once again, Hansberry had an accurate view of the future.

