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A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry

My essay is based on the play '*A Raisin in the Sun*' (2011) written by Lorraine Hansberry. The insurance money for Mama's husband's life insurance seems to have made the Youngers aware of their poverty and the need for them to improve their situation (dreaming)' (ENG2603. 2017. Tutorial Letter: 16). Applying an analyse of the play '*A Raisin in the Sun*' by Lorraine Hansberry, I will give a brief introduction of the author, with a background on the Youngers and their living conditions, with unfulfilled dreams and their financial strain. Then I will look at the dreams of the Youngers as it is these dreams that lead to 'how each member of the Younger family wanted the money to be used' (ENG2603. 2017. Tutorial Letter: 16), as this is why they dream, to have a better life.

The contextual chronology from '*A Raisin in the Sun*' 1930', lists that Lorraine Vivian Hansberry (LVH) was born on 19 May 1930, in Chicago, Illinois. She was the fourth and youngest child of Carl A. Hansberry a banker and property investor and Nannie Perry Hansberry a university graduate (2011. vi). On 12 January in 1965, LVH died (2011. viii). In 1946-8 LVH entered the University of Wisconsin. She also attends Sean O' Casey's '*Juno and the Paycock*', which inspires '*A Raisin in the Sun*' (2011.vii). She wrote the play '*A Raisin in the Sun*', which premièred in New Haven Philadelphia, Chicago and went on to win a New Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of the Year as youngest and first black recipient. (2011. viii). In 1961-2 she also won a Cannes Film Festival Award for '*A Raisin in the Sun*' (2011. viii).

The play '*A Raisin in the Sun*' centres around the Younger family. Lena Younger (Mama), she is the 'head' (34) of the household with her adult children, her son, Walter Lee who is 'thirty-five years old' (18) and Beneatha, who is her 'twenty year old' (39) daughter. Also part of the household is Ruth, Walter's wife 'who is about thirty' (10) and their young son Travis who is about 'ten or eleven' (10).

It is Mama's late husband, Big Walter's insurance cheque of ten thousand dollars that is supposedly suppose to turn their life around for the better. The Youngers are working class people who are also poor, they all live in an apartment and share the bathroom with the

neighbours. Through the description of the furniture in the apartment, the author gives us an insight into their poverty:

*'And here a table or a chair has been moved to disguise the worn places in the carpet; but the carpet has fought back by showing its weariness,...Weariness has, in fact, won in this room. Everything has been polished, washed, sat on, used, scrubbed too often.'* (9)

We are also given an insight to their poverty levels with Beneatha's reaction to Ruth's announcement of an unexpected pregnancy:

'It is my business- where is he going to live, on the *roof?*' (39)

'Thus the element of poverty is introduced with an extra mouth to feed' (Dambe, S. *et al.* 2013: 25). Mama herself and Big Walter also lost a child 'Claude' (28) through 'poverty' (54) and it was this that pushed Big Walter to work and work 'like somebody's old horse...killing himself' (100)

The area they lived in '*Chicago Southside*' (10) was a working class neighbourhood, 'Running and racing to work' (12). The apartment was also not the most favourable of places with Ruth describing it as a 'rat trap...' (27) and infested with cockroaches with Beneatha telling Travis: 'Leave them poor little cockroaches alone...' (36). Beneatha is equally surprised when she looks out the window to see Travis 'chasing a rat!' (39) and in his excitement Travis proclaims to Mama 'Mama, you should have seen the rat....Big as a cat....' (40). You also see that they are struggling financially when Travis asks his mother for money for school and she says that she does not have: 'Well, I ain't got no fifty cents this morning' (13) and even though Walter Lee gives Travis the money for school he too finds himself short and has to ask Ruth: 'I need some money for car-fare' (22).

'You tired aren't you? Tired of everything. Me, the boy, the way we live- this beat up hole- everything. Ain't you?' (17)

Walter says this to Ruth after Travis leaves for school, seeing how unhappy she is with this lifestyle. This is clearly due to the lack of money, which is taking a toll on her happiness. (A Raisin in the Sun. 2015:

[http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015\\_11\\_08\\_archive.html](http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015_11_08_archive.html)).

It is this level of poverty and all their dreams that spurs them onto seeking a better life.

In the poem titled 'A Dream Deferred' by Langston Hughes (2011: 7), he 'creates vivid images of what happens when a dream becomes postponed, or it is lost. It dries, it rots, it festers, it sags, it explodes. The images all seem to drag the speaker down, except for that last one where the frustration potentially bubbles in an explosion' (Theatre Folk. 2011. <https://www.theatrefolk.com/spotlights/a-raisin-in-the-sun-by-lorraine-hansberry-analysis-and-activities>). There is a frustration and a sadness amongst the family members in their inability to bring their dreams to fruition.

The idea of unfulfilled dreams is a recurring theme within the play (A Raisin in the Sun. 2015. [http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015\\_11\\_08\\_archive.html](http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015_11_08_archive.html)). 'Each character in 'A Raisin in the Sun' has unfulfilled dreams, mainly involving money and the focus of the American Dream': (A Raisin in the Sun. 2015 [http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015\\_11\\_08\\_archive.html](http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015_11_08_archive.html)).

Mama always had big dreams, from the time she was young, dreams that she never gave up on:

'Lord, ever since I was a little girl, I always remembers people saying, 'Lena--Lena Eggleston, you aims too high all the time. You needs to slow down and see life a little more like it is. Just slow down some.' ....'Lord, that Lena Eggleston is a high-minded thing. She'll get her due one day!' (108).

Mama and Big Walter had dreamt of owing a house from the time they were married. The dream was never realised. So what was suppose to be a transitional period became a lifetime.

'I remember just as well the day me and Big Walter moved in here. Hadn't been married but two weeks and wasn't planning on living here no more than a year. (*She shakes her head at the dissolved dream.*)...But Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back— (*She waits and stops smiling.*) And didn't none of it happen, (*She drops her hands in a futile gesture*)'. (27)

Walter wanted to go into business. His dream was one born out of his need to provide for the family when he tells Ruth 'all I got to give him [Travis] is stories about how rich white people live.. .(18) and wanting 'so many things' that it was 'driving him crazy' (52). Walter is obsessed with money as he tells Mama that money is 'life' (53). Unfortunately his need for him and his family to live a better life consumes him at his very core 'I got to change my life. I'm chocking to death, baby!' (18) and Walter becomes destructive in his relationship with his family members wanting to 'hurt her [Mama] as deeply as he knows is possible' (71) emotionally because he felt she had betrayed him when she did not give him the money for his pursuits and instead made a down payment on the house. This in turn made him angry that he was unable to fulfil thus dreams.

'And you – ain't you bitter, man? Ain't just about had it yet? Don't you see no stars gleaming that you can't reach out and grab? You happy? – you contented son-of-bitch-you happy? You got it made? Bitter? Man, I'm a volcano. Bitter? I am a giant – surrounded by ants! Ants who can't even understand what is that the giant is talking about. (62)

He had also missed out on a previous business opportunity and this added to his bitterness.

'When he [Charlie Atkins] wanted me to go in the dry-cleaning business with him. And now —he's grossing a hundred thousand a year. A hundred thousand dollars a year! (16) Benetha's dream came about through an unfortunate childhood accident and while the incident was traumatic, the end result lead her to wanting to become a doctor.

'... and sure enough one day a kid named Rufus came down to fast and hit the sidewalk and we saw his face split open right there in front of us...But the ambulance came and they took him to the hospital and they fixed the broken bones and they sewed it all up... and the next time I saw Rufus he just had a little line down the middle of his face ... I never got over that...' (102)

Whilst her brother, Walter does not support her dream: 'Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor?...-then go be a nurse like other women-or just get married and be quiet...' (22), Mama has already promised that she will have funding for it: 'Some of it got to be put away for Beneatha and her schoolin'...' (27)

Ruth's dream was always to just live a quiet family life in a house. That dream too did not come to fruition.

'Honey...life don't have to be like this. I mean sometimes people can do things so that things are better...You remember how we used to talk when Travis was born...about the way we were going to live...the kind of house...(She is stroking his head.) Well, it's all starting to slip away from us...' (66)

Even Big Walter had dreams that never materialised and he 'just couldn't never catch up with his dreams, that's all' (29).

'The Younger's family dreams clash with each other as they argue and bicker over who deserves the money to fulfil a part of their dreams. Right from the start we can infer a theme: the value and purpose of dreams. Most of the individuals have dreams but whose dream is the most important'. (A Raisin in the Sun Reading.2015.

[http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015\\_11\\_08\\_archive.html](http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015_11_08_archive.html)).

'The legacy that parents pass to children is imprinted with the rupture and dispersal wrought by the enslavement system' (2011: xxxv). Mama was very aware of her roots, 'Son – I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers - ...' (111) and wanted to be able to not only pass on, but continue the Younger legacy by

investing in a house. Mama tells Travis, 'You glad about the house? It's going to be yours when you get to be a man.' (68). Mama's dream was always to own a home, Mama always wanted her 'garden' (35). Mama's need to buy a house was two fold, one was to honour Big Walter and his memory and the other was the legacy. 'Now when you say your prayers tonight, you thank God and your grandfather—'cause it was him who give you the house—in his way' (68). This was her way of honouring Big Walter and continuing the family legacy.

Ruth is very adamant that the 'money' is not for her and Walter Lee (18) and has no concrete plans for the insurance money, even though she tries to hide her excitement when Mama first tell her about her plans for a house 'anxious to encourage without seeming to' (27). She encourages Mama to spoil herself by using the money for a 'trip somewhere' (26). She is ecstatic when she realises that her dream at last will come to fruition with Mama's down payment on the house: 'So you went and did it! ... Praise God!...Oh, Walter...a home....*a home*' (68) as this has also been her dream to have a 'house' (66)

Even though Beneatha feels she has no direct claim to the money and tells Walter 'that the money belongs to Mama'....and it's for her to decide how she wants to use it' (21). She is set on becoming a doctor 'I am going to be a doctor and everybody around here better understand that!' (33). She also tells Walter that she 'never ask anyone around here to do anything for me' (21), though she enjoys living a good life while expressing herself at the expense of others 'Me and Ruth done made some sacrifices for you...' (21). She is extremely disappointed when Walter 'gave away the money' (101) and feels defeated as 'while she slept ...-they just went out and did things-and changed my world' (103) without consulting her. It is only here that you see that she was relying heavily on the money to finance her studies.

Walter's dreams all rest with Willy Harris and 'that liquor store that Willy Harris want him to invest in? (25) together with Bobo. Walter explodes when Mama tells Travis that she put a down payment on a house and feels as though Mama has 'butchered' (71) his dream. All along he was hoping that by getting his wife to speak to Mama that she would be able to

convince Mama somehow to give him the money to invest in his liquor business. He is so blinded by his needs that he still thinks that after Mama tells him that 'there ain't no investing in liquor stores' (50), that she will give him the money. When this does not materialise he becomes bitter and angry.

Money is money at the end of the day and it can either work for you to reach your dreams or destroy you, but if it takes the death of a loved one for you to build your dreams upon then maybe its not worth having.

In conclusion, whilst they all had dreams, they were all banking on the insurance money to fulfil them. It is only through Mama's leadership that even though the money nearly pulls them apart that they are able stand together.



Resources

*A Raisin in the Sun*. Blogspot. 2015. Viewed 8 September 2017 from:  
[http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015\\_11\\_08\\_archive.html](http://raisininthesunreading.blogspot.co.za/2015_11_08_archive.html)

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Hansberry, Lorraine. 2011. *A Raisin in The Sun*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing

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PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

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[http://www.unisa.ac.za/contents/colleges/col\\_grad\\_studies/docs/Policy\\_copyright\\_infringement\\_plagiarism\\_16November2005.pdf](http://www.unisa.ac.za/contents/colleges/col_grad_studies/docs/Policy_copyright_infringement_plagiarism_16November2005.pdf)

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