

---

## Twentieth Century American Family Literature: a Tree Grows in Brooklyn, and a Raisin in the Sun

A melodrama is a film which appeals to the emotions of its audience, on a higher level than the simple “drama” genre. The characters of a melodrama are often stereotyped and exaggerated to indicate something about the culture of the times, making their traits illustrations of the writer’s thoughts on society. Both *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945) and *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) are family melodramas of the classical and postclassical periods, respectively. There are three main elements which were altered, or rather developed, from 1945 to 1961 which change the qualities of the melodrama genre: historical context, conventions and icons. Therefore, while the general understanding of the genre remains the same, and while the themes within the two films are very similar, the elements change according to the attitudes of the times and the development of societal issues, or indeed their progressive nature.

Before analysing and comparing the genre which links these two films, it is important to note the periods in which they were set and made, and the social constructions behind both their main themes and their characters’ actions. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* was made in 1945, the year in which the Second World War ended. However, the story is set between the years of 1900 and 1918, the last four of which would have occurred during the First World War. Bordwell and Thompson highlight features characteristic of classical Hollywood cinema. These include features such as the “narrative form”, direction of “focus” on central character, “a process of change”, motivations of a psychological nature, and finally “closure” (Bordwell and Thompson, 98). *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* clearly demonstrates all of these characteristics, as discussed later. *A Raisin in the Sun* was made sixteen years after *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, in 1961, when the classical period had ended and the post classical period was coming to an end. The post-classical era began right after the Second World War and ended, in 1962. It was characterised by its experimental and transitional nature, as its position in the film-period timeline was the next step towards the Modernist Period.

The change from classical to post-classical was a result of the progression in sophistication of both “creator and consumer” (Casper, Lecture) of the film, and the technologies used to create it. According to Casper with Edwards in *Introduction to Film Reader*, there were various types of experimentation that occurred within this period such as using “genre as a vehicle”, “nostalgia”, “topical accommodation”, amongst others (Casper with Edwards, 308). Due to the cultural differences of the times in which these films were made, it is no surprise that the ways in which the themes of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *A Raisin in the Sun* are demonstrated, and the melodrama genre which they fall into, are seemingly different. In *Reality Television*,

---

### Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

Melodrama, and the Great Recession, Susan Schuyler states that “melodrama fluidly adapt to changing public tastes, borrowing tropes and techniques from diverse dramatic genres” (Schuyler, 44). The phrase “fluidly adapted” supports the idea that melodramas focus on real issues, their characters caricatures of the men and women of the time in which they are based, a method of commenting on our ever-changing society through entertainment.

The conflicts in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *A Raisin in the Sun* lie in the aspirations of the main characters and money. The dreams that both Francie Nolan (Peggy Ann Garner) and Walter Lee Young (Sidney Poitier) have are simple dreams. However, the introduction of stronger narratives in the post-classical era changes the way in which the Family Melodrama genre is portrayed, as societal issues are enhanced through the presentations of the characters. Francie Nolan is a young girl who aspires to become a writer, and Walter Lee Young is a man who dreams of buying a house which he can be proud of. Both of these ambitions are relatable, and would be achievable if these two families did not live in poverty. However, the differences between the dreams can be explained by the cultural context which surrounds these two stories. Francie Nolan’s dream is one which must be achieved by hard work, and perseverance against all odds, such as her alcoholic father Johnny Nolan (James Dunn) who dies at the height of her motivation. Francie is not supported by her family until the very end of the film as her mother lies in bed and tells her that she regrets not reading her compositions: “I ain’t read any of your compositions. It’s on my conscience”, (*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, 1945) Francie’s situation could have been applied to young people from any culture with a similar class background.

In contrast, *A Raisin in the Sun* pushes the boundaries of the Family Melodrama genre by providing an alternate culture to the classic Hollywood family portrayal, by using an African American family. Thompson and Chappell argue that “In culturally influenced resources, the culture is not essential to the underlying message of the movie, but it has a unique effect on the message and viewers’ responses to it... African American culture uniquely influences the messages conveyed” (Thompson and Chappell, 223). The dynamic of the dreams in *A Raisin in the Sun* is different to that in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* because Francie’s ambitions are more personal, while Walter struggles with his personal dreams and dreams of his family members, and the decisions which he must make for his succeeding generation. Because the Young family are African American, and are subject to prejudice and racism, the decision that Walter ultimately makes is tied in with the unity of the family against the white people who attempt to oppress them: “And we have decided to move into our house because my father – my father – he earned it for us brick by brick” (*A Raisin in the Sun*, 1961). In this way, the Family Melodrama genre progresses as a stronger narrative is introduced. A narrative is, according to Bordwell and Thompson, “a type of filmic organization in which the parts relate to one another through a series of causally related events taking place in time and space” (Bordwell and Thompson, G-4). *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* has a clear storyline, a beginning, middle and end

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

which all contribute to the Bildungsroman nature of its plot. However, the stronger narrative occurs in *A Raisin in the Sun*, as the Melodrama acquires its drama through events which are linked by the moral question of the house that Walter wants to move into. In this way, through the symbol of the house, *A Raisin in the Sun* comments more on society, and is less focused on the individual characters, but instead uses them as a vehicle to enhance its melodramatic qualities.

Conventional film form, techniques and patterns changed from the 1940s to the 1960s, as presented in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. The classical era was one which is known for its studio system, which relied on big studios such as 20th Century Fox Studios for its shooting locations. As seen in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the settings of the classical era Hollywood films were elaborate and costly. It is easy to see that this film was shot in a professional studio, due to the visible camera angles and lighting used in its scenes. For example, the shots of the staircase in many of the scenes would have needed mounted cameras in order to show the height of the space. This is indicative of the focus of family in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. The inclusion of the different floors and levels in the house helps to capture the focus on the Nolan family as a whole. The three point lighting used creates beautiful portraits of all the characters, highlighting the importance of individual character development in the plot. In *Behind the Silver Screen Series: Cinematography*, Keating and Cagle argue that in the classical period, lighting was used to “primarily to suggest three-dimensionality, to differentiate stars, and to provide glamour” (Keating and Cagle, 40) Three point lighting includes back-light, fill light, and key light which shines directly on the subject - to “to achieve the desired portraiture” (Keating and Cagle, 40). The surrounding lights allowed for the visual prioritisation of the most important subjects. Keating and Cagle argue that “Paired with an encouraging director and an appropriate script, cinematographers pushed the classical envelope and experimented with convention” (Keating and Cagle, 61). This progression and experimentation was driven by economic and social change. After the economic boom which occurred after World War II in the 1940s, “1947 initiated a sharp financial decline for the motion picture industry”, and “the studios slashed their overhead” (Keating and Cagle, 60). This lack of money is evident in the way that *A Raisin in the Sun* was filmed. The majority of the film occurs in the small apartment of the Young family, venturing away from this location occasionally for plot-related purposes. The more simple set of this film helps the audience to focus more on the historical and social context of its story.

Without the elaborate settings, and the beautiful portraiture that is displayed in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *A Raisin in the Sun* relies more heavily on the importance of the construction of society at the time in which it was set. According to Keating and Cagle, in the post-classical period, “cinematographers began to mix the visual markers of newsreel authenticity with different stylistic choices that also connoted realism, many of which deemphasized glamour” (Keating and Cagle, 65). This heightened sense of realism can be seen in *A Raisin in*

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

**GET HELP**

---

the Sun as the simplified setting contributes to the realistic nature of the plot. It focuses on the truthful problem of racism in America in the 1950s, and the struggle of immigrants to progress in society, and their strive to challenge the seemingly insurmountable immobility of the class system. Because it does not concentrate as heavily on the development of the individual character, as done in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *A Raisin in the Sun* shows the development of the family melodrama genre as it becomes a “bourgeois tragedy, dependent upon an awareness of the existence of society” (Keith Grant, 73). The conflict that the Young family faces highlights their culture being introduced into Hollywood film, and the unified response of African Americans towards feelings of white supremacy. The decision Walter has to make between pride and money, involves his entire family. The Youngs appear to be a representation, and an inspirational symbol for African American families in 1950s America as Walter chooses to stand up against social normalities and oppression. In this way, the iconography of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *A Raisin in the Sun* differ in that *A Raisin in the Sun* strives to create icons out of its characters, for the purpose of discussing the racism aforementioned, while the symbolism in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is less obvious, as it is more standardised and can be widely understood without the need for background historical knowledge. It is, as put by Judith E. Smith, “a plotless story, in the way that life itself never seems to offer much in the standard notions of plot” (Smith, 42).

Family melodrama is an ever-evolving genre as it is subject to changes that occur within society. Therefore, the alterations to this genre are difficult to anticipate, but in the future are interesting to study with the advantage of historical hindsight. Cultural changes and societal issues manifest and present themselves in the comparison of films such as *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the words of Barry Keith Grant, “The case of melodrama is significant because of its centrality and extreme adaptability in the history of cinema” (Keith Grant, 232).

---

## Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)