
A Raisin in the Sun Revised: Examining Petrie's Film Adaptation

The American Dream varies for individuals, but for most it includes providing a stable home for their children and ensuring future generations will have more opportunities to become successful. In the play, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, she carefully develops the characters to allow readers to understand their struggles and attempts to rise above oppression. Director Daniel Petrie adapted Hansberry's play into a film and while the original theme of oppression is still conveyed, the delivery of the message is altered and displays the Youngers' struggle differently. The film adaptation does not entirely present the Youngers' as utterly impoverished African Americans as Hansberry does, but rather paints the family to be as respectable as possible without making them white. Director Petrie, although he attempts to embody the theme of the obligation of society to fight racial discrimination, he takes a far more passive approach than Lorraine Hansberry.

In the play, Beneatha is presented as hope against the oppression she is suppressed by which reinforces her central theme. However, Petrie minimizes her role in establishing the central theme. Beneatha embraces her ethnicity in the play, however Petrie removes this aspect in his film. Daniel Petrie's directorial decisions in the movie adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun* portrays Hansberry's central message of oppression however he fails to reinforce society's responsibilities for this oppression. In the film Petrie alters the setting of the Youngers' living room thus revising Hansberry's intent to present the family as impoverished. Hansberry conveys the message of oppression through the symbolic use of the setting being limited to the Younger's living room. The play begins with a physical description of the Younger's living conditions, making specific references to the poor condition of the furniture. The original furniture that took all Mr. and Mrs. Younger's savings to purchase is still standing and showing its wear, "Now the once loved pattern of the couch upholstery has to fight to show itself from under acres of crocheted doilies and couch covers which have themselves finally come to be more important than the upholstery" (Hansberry, 1.1). Hansberry successfully creates an image of poverty as well as creating a symbol of lost hope. The furniture is worn, past its prime and in need of being replaced but the Youngers do not have the financial means of replacing it. Hansberry allows the readers to view the living room as a symbol of the Youngers' poverty level. What was once purchased as a sign of hope has changed, "Weariness has in fact won in this room. Everything has been polished, washed, sat on, used, scrubbed too often. All pretenses but the living room itself have long since vanished from the atmosphere of this room" (Hansberry, 1.1). The living room becomes symbolic of the Younger's plight, they are tired and worn out from trying to advance their position in life. Their chances of acquiring the American

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Dream has begun to fade. Petrie takes a different approach with the living room setting. Although the furniture is slightly dated, the room looks well maintained and is recognizable as furniture belonging to the middle class. The accessories such as the rug and the doilies do not appear to be hiding any imperfections but rather act as decorations. Petrie succumbs to constraints of society and alludes to their oppression but doesn't make it the central theme. By portraying the Youngers as close to middle class, the audience is able to continue to support the Youngers' in their quest for a better life without having to admit there is inequality based solely on the color of the Younger's skin. This directorial decision in regards to the setting of the living room somewhat reinforces the concept of oppression but revises the role society has in being part of the solution.

Hansberry portrays Beneatha as hope that the future will rise above the oppression; however, Petrie presents her with less conviction diminishing Hansberry's central theme. Through the conversation Beneatha has with her family in regards to her choice of men, her character is revealed. Beneatha is involved with two men: George who is wealthy and Joseph Asagai who is a mysterious man from Nigeria. Her family expects her to marry George as he will provide her with financial security, but Beneatha rejects this idea. Beneatha explains her intention, "Oh, I just mean I couldn't ever really be serious about George. He's - he's so shallow" (Hansberry, 1.2). Hansberry's stage direction for this statement is precluded with the stage direction that Beneatha is speaking wearily. The inclusion of this tone reinforces Beneatha's frustration with societal expectations that she will marry any man who can provide her with financial stability. As an African American woman, she is on the bottom of the social hierarchy and not expected to rebel against her status. However, Beneatha refuses to submit to society's expectation that her potential husband should be based on wealth rather than character. Hansberry portrays Beneatha exhausted with societal constraints, conveying the theme of society's responsibility in suppressing the dreams of African Americans. Although in this scene Petrie uses Hansberry's exact dialogue, he ignores that critical stage direction that Beneatha would speak wearily. His directorial decision revises the intended tone and shifts her frustration from society onto her family. She seems annoyed with her family for not respecting her analysis of George. She doesn't appear independent nor as a catalyst for change but rather as immature. She has lost her credibility as hope for change. By removing a single stage direction, Petrie minimizes the impact that Hansberry intends for Beneatha and lessens society's responsibility for oppression.

Hansberry presents Asagai as a protagonist who encourages Beneatha to refuse to accept white society's constraints, however Petrie reduces the significance of Asagai by his directorial decisions. In the play, Joseph Asagai challenges Beneatha to learn more about herself, and her culture. Asagai's significance in the play is portrayed when he arrives at the Youngers' apartment. He presents Beneatha with authentic African robes and helps her to drape them properly, he says "You wear it well....very well... mutilated hair and all" (Hansberry 1.2). Joseph catches Beneatha off guard, she does not understand what is wrong with her hair. She makes

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the claim that she straightens her hair not because she sees it as “ugly” (Hansberry, 1.2), but because it is hard to manage. Joseph pushes Beneatha to recognize that in manipulating her natural hair she is trying to blend into the white society, rather than embrace her roots. Joseph encourages Beneatha to accept her heritage and rise above oppressive white society. It's her interactions with Joseph that lead Beneatha to a drastic show of rebellion as she cuts off her hair into a closely cropped, ethnic style. This is Beneatha's way of embracing her ethnicity and making a statement to society that African Americans shouldn't have to change their appearance to be accepted. Hansberry reveals her theme that white society oppresses African Americans by pushing them into assimilating into white society rather than encouraging them to embrace their roots. Petrie not only revises Hansberry's central theme of society responsibility for oppression by deleting the reveal of haircut scene but also the influence of Asagai. Deleting this scene removes both her assimilation into white society and her defiance of those constraints. Petrie's decision to make Asagai a minor character fails to reinforce Hansberry's central theme of the responsibility society plays in the oppression of African Americans.

Daniel Petrie makes changes in his film version of *A Raisin in the Sun*, thus affecting Hansberry's central theme of society's responsibility of oppression. Petrie revises Hansberry's play by making slight changes to the setting, character development and interactions. He alters the setting by the presentation of the Youngers furniture to give the appearance that they are less impoverished. Petrie presents Beneatha's character as foolish and immature rather than Hansberry's version being an African American woman embracing her heritage and rebelling against societal constraints. In the play Joseph Asagai plays a pivotal role in encouraging Beneatha to break through society's oppression by pushing her to embrace her roots. Petrie, however, downplays Joseph's influence and in fact removes the very action that demonstrates Beneatha's defiance of society's oppression. Hansberry leads the reader to support the characters and their determination to rise above oppression. Petrie however, presents and develops the characters in a manner which leads the audience to conclude that although this family has been oppressed they are partially responsible. Words are more open for interpretation if they are just in print form. On the other hand, when the words come to life through interactions the tone and attitudes are less open to interpretation.

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