
Generational Disparity in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

The African-American experience of growing up in America changed dramatically throughout the course of the twentieth century, thus leading to differing views between the older and younger generations. In Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the character of Mama was raised during a point in time when racial prejudice was prevalent and blacks had virtually no opportunity to live out their dreams. On the other hand, her children, Walter and Beneatha, and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, grow up in a world where slavery exists only in history books, and although they still face financial hardship and racial discrimination, it is possible for blacks to become successful business men or even doctors. The younger generation's concept of the American dream reflects the changing times and the new opportunities that are now available for African-Americans. As a result of this generation gap, Mama and her children view the issues of religion, career choice, and abortion from extremely different angles, leading to much tension and anger in their relationship.

By viewing the dreams of Mama in comparison to the dreams of her children, one can clearly see the generation gap that exists between them. As a result of the changing times, Mama's dreams differ extremely from those of her children. She grew up in a time of much oppression and hardship - a time when she was unable to live out the simplest of dreams. All Mama ever wanted was a house with "a little garden in the back" (1209). After all, back then it was the most an African-American could hope for. During the 1960s however, it is much more common for an African-American to own a house, and since Walter grows up with this possibility, owning a house is not a high goal to set for himself. Instead, he sets his sights on a much more elaborate dream than his mother, in particular, being a successful businessman able to "pull a car up on the driveway" where his "gardener will be clipping away at the hedges" (1239-1240).

Mama disapproves of Walter's dream, for she believes that they are not "business people," but rather "just plain working folks" (1208). She does not realize that nowadays African-Americans have more opportunities than she had growing up, and that, according to Walter, "colored people [are not] going to start getting ahead until they start gambling on some different kinds of things in the world, [such as] investments" (1208). Normally it would not be a problem for a grown man to make an investment that his mother does not approve of. However, Mama has the ten thousand dollars from her husband's insurance money that Walter needs in order to start his business. Because Mama does not agree with her son's choice to become a businessman, more specifically an owner of a liquor store, she refuses to give him the money. After Walter finds out that his mother spent the money on a down-payment for a house, thus fulfilling her own dream, he becomes enraged. When Mama wishes for Walter to tell her that he believes she did the right thing, he insults her:

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What you need me to say you done right for? . . . It was your money and you did what you wanted with it. So you butchered up a dream of mine - you - who always talking 'bout your children's dreams . . . (1233).

Thus, because of their differing views on how the money should be spent, Walter and Mama are constantly at odds with one another.

Mama's disapproval does not stop with Walter's decision to invest in a liquor store, but continues with Ruth's decision to have an abortion. Mama has lived in poverty for her entire life, and it is because of this poverty that she lost her baby, "little Claude" (1209). She believes that they are people who give children life, not destroy it (1223). Ruth, however, has had the opportunity to raise a healthy son, and since she has never known any other way, she takes this for granted. Ruth does not view her unborn child as part of the family, and thus when determining what is in her family's best interest, she fails to think of the baby. Ruth comes to the conclusion that bringing another child into their already crowded apartment would be unfair to her family. Mama, on the other hand, is grateful for being able to have the opportunity to give birth to a healthy baby, since she knows that at the time many African-American babies were dying from poverty, and just a short time before, from slavery. It is because of this that she strongly disagrees with Ruth's decision to have an abortion. Mama does not understand how a woman who has the opportunity to give birth to a child would even think "about getting rid of it" (1223). When she informs Walter of Ruth's decision, he is unable to say anything to his wife and leaves the room. Mama angrily yells after him, "If you a son of mine, tell her[not to have the abortion! You are a disgrace to your father's memory" (1223). By reading this quote, one can see that more tension arises in Walter and Mama's relationship as a result of her strong stance on the issue of abortion.

Mama also disapproves with the fact that Beneatha no longer believes in God. Beneatha constantly takes for granted the life that she is living, and when good fortune comes her way, such as the opportunity to become a doctor, she believes that it is commonplace, and therefore nothing to be thankful for. Mama, on the other hand, grew up in a time when good fortune was hard to come by. Whenever she is having a rough time, she places her faith in God and prays that everything will turn out all right. For example, when Walter loses the money for his sister's schooling, Mama asks God to "Look down here and show her the strength" (1250). The issue of religion causes many arguments to occur between Beneatha and Mama, due to their different views. Beneatha, despite knowing that her mother is a religious woman, insists that "there simply is no blasted God - there is only man and it is he who makes miracles" (1212). Mama, deeply offended and disappointed in her daughter, is unable to control her anger. She slaps Beneatha across the face and insists she repeat the phrase "In my mother's house there is still God" (1212). In addition to this, Beneatha often uses the Lord's name in vain, thus further upsetting her mother. This constant conflict eventually takes its toll on their relationship, leaving

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them to feel bitterness and discomfort toward one another.

Throughout the course of the twentieth century, the concept of the American dream changed dramatically, as displayed in Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Through reading the play, one can tell that a generation gap exists between Mama and her children, for they view the world from extremely different angles. Their clashing views on the issues of religion, career choice, and abortion lead to many arguments between them, and as a result, their relationship is characterized by resentment and tension.

Works Cited

1. Hansberry, Lorraine. "A Raisin in the Sun." *Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*. Compact ed. Ed. Robert DiYanni. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000. 1198-1260

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