Discrimination and the American Dream in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun

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The scholar Joseph Wilson argued that “The history of the Afro-American people is a mosaic woven into the fabric of the history of labor in America” (vii). *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) validates this observation and helps us understand the challenges that confronted African-American workers in Chicago from the 1920s to the 1950s. The play discusses the impact of labor and housing discrimination on the American dreams of these black populations through the experiences of two generations of the Younger family. First, *Raisin* suggests the distinct impact of job discrimination in the life of Big Walter Lee, who is Mama’s deceased husband. Second, the play reveals the frustrations that complicate the Younger family’s dreams for success and admissibility into mainstream American society of the 1950s. Although a few members of the Younger family finally achieve a part of their dreams, they do so while remembering the trials and tribulations that have led them to such a well-deserved victory.

When *Raisin* was first produced in 1959 the critical reaction was ambivalent. As Steven Carter points out, the early honors bestowed on Hansberry brought about some controversy in the white intellectual community:
When the New York Drama Critics Circle gave *A Raisin* their 1959 award for Best Play of The Year over such fine contenders as Eugene O’Neill’s *A Touch of The Poet*, Tennessee Williams’s *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and Archibald MacLeish’s *J.B.*, several critics expressed dismay, claiming that the choice of such a young black playwright’s work could only be based on liberal bias. (19)

In the same vein, Harold Cruse, a prominent black critic, claimed that:

*A Raisin in The Sun* demonstrated that the Negro playwright has lost the intellectual and, therefore, technical and creative, ability to deal with his own special ethnic group materials in dramatic form. The most glaring manifestation of this conceptual weakness is the constant slurring over, the blurring, and evasion of the internal facts of Negro ethnic life in terms of class and social caste divisions, institutional and psychological variations, political divisions, acculturation variables, clique variations, religious divisions, and so forth. (281)

Such negative commentary from a leading black scholar created doubt and frustration about the way black people in general received the play. As Loften Mitchell observed in 1967, “There were Negroes who became angry because critics said the play really said nothing about the Negro plight” (182).

Since the 1980s, however, *Raisin* has generally been highly praised. In his review of a 1986 revival of the play, David Richards of the *Washington Post* acknowledged that *Raisin* is “a milestone—the first play by a black woman ever to be produced on Broadway” (D1). He continues, “What is important is that Lorraine Hansberry gave us a work that miraculously continues to speak to the American experience” (D1). Amiri Baraka echoed this optimism when he declared, also in 1986, that *Raisin* is “the quintessential civil rights play” and “probably the most widely appreciated black play (particularly by Afro-Americans)” (F1; 3). In a similar vein, Nicole King described *Raisin* as one of the black literary representations that “saw and promoted group solidarity against the diverse manifestations of white
racism and discrimination as important, viable, and as cemented by a working class rather than a middle-class ideology” (214).

The above comments acknowledge the radical and subversive nature of *Raisin*’s struggle against racism. But they do not address the important role that the African-American dream of admissibility and equality has in this struggle. Regardless of whether they praised or condemned *Raisin*, the early commentators on the play had one thing in common: they tended to be more concerned with the racial background of the dramatist than with the complex work she created. When a film of *Raisin* appeared in 1961, it immediately drew attention away from the text version of the play. On the other hand, it is probable that very little would have been said about *Raisin* if the play had never been staged on Broadway. If one values what the critics say about the play more than what the text itself discloses, *Raisin* loses its authenticity. One way to balance the critical comments on *Raisin* and the play’s serious purpose is to explore the work through its political, social, and cultural messages.

In the early twentieth century, in response to increasing levels of violence and political and economic oppression in the South, thousands of African Americans, eager to find jobs that would create a better life for themselves and their families, moved to northern industrial cities such as Chicago, New York, Saint Louis, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. Yet hostile white populations frequently discriminated against the black migrants searching for homes. As Leonard Dinnerstein notes: “The worst housing in the cities was reserved for the black migrants coming from the South. Owners preferred to rent to white immigrants rather than to blacks, and the black families sometimes encountered violence when they tried to move outside their growing ghettos” (162). In Chicago, Carl Hansberry, Lorraine Hansberry’s father, encountered an infamous case of housing segregation that impelled him to stand up for his rights. According to Steven R. Carter, “In 1938, when Lorraine was eight, her father risked jail to challenge Chicago’s real estate covenants, which legally enforced housing discrimination, by moving his family into an all-white neighborhood near the University of Chicago” (9). These actual historical events show that *Raisin* is far more than an abstract comment on black life in mid-twentieth-century America. The play is based on actual events that affected Hansberry’s own
family, as well as many blacks in Chicago and in other northern cities of the 1940s and 1950s. Philip Johnson, a former Lutheran minister in Salem parish on the South Side of Chicago, relates a similar case:

On Wednesday, July 27, 1949 rioting broke out in the 7200 block of South St. Lawrence Avenue. Arthur Jordan, a Ph.D. candidate had moved into the block, the first Negro to venture south of Seventy-first street in the quiet respectable neighborhood of Park Manor. For days the rioting went on. Women cursed, children jeered, teen-agers hurled bricks and bottles, and men snarled angrily, “Burn the b- b- out” (2).

While such events surely influenced Hansberry to write Raisin, the title of the play comes from a famous poem by Langston Hughes, “Harlem” (89-90). Written in 1951, and included in Hughes’s Montage of a Dream Deferred, “Harlem” explores the destiny of the African-American dream:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? (426)

Hughes’s poem raises serious questions about the fulfillment of the American ideal of justice and equality that continues to be postponed by racist actualities against African Americans. He asks whether the ideal will “dry up” and not become realized, or “fester” like an old and painful wound, or “explode” into a nightmare of violence. In asking these questions, Hughes represents the African-American dream of
success, equality, and freedom as an ambiguous process. On the one hand, this dream seems to be feasible and full of possibilities—like the hopeful image of an exploding raisin with “crust and sugar over.” Yet, as suggested in the image of a drying raisin that could “fester like an old sore and run,” this dream is hard to attain when forces of segregation, racism, intolerance, and violence defer it. In making the American Dream be an faint reality, Hughes captures the essence of the American Dream of African Americans that critic David Jarraway eloquently describes as “the willed mystery, the uncertainty, the indeterminacy” or “the deferred Otherness” of “black experience” (823).

In *Raisin*, the dim reality of the American dream of African Americans is apparent in the harsh working conditions of Chicago blacks of the 1920s. These conditions are represented through the experience of Big Walter Lee, which is told through Mama’s voice. First Mama depicts Big Walter as a courageous man who fought all his life to secure a happy future for his family. She states: “That man worked hisself [himself] to death like he done. Like he was fighting his own war with this here world . . . .”(45). Big Walter’s life was a constant struggle against a personal sorrow and a hostile economic and social world that discriminated against him. Mama emphatically insists that the money she receives from Big Walter’s death is not worth the value of the man.

 *(She holds the check away from her, still looking at it. Slowly her face sobers into a mask of unhappiness) Ten thousand dollars. *(She hands it to RUTH) Put it away somewhere, Ruth. *(She does not look at RUTH; her eyes seem to be seeing something somewhere very far off) Ten thousand dollars they give you. Ten thousand dollars.* (69)

Mama’s frustration suggests that she is disappointed by the way Big Walter’s life and American dream have been unjustly valued at a mere ten thousand dollars. In the 1950s, ten thousand dollars was quite a lot of money. Still, this amount of money cannot replace the worth that Big Walter had in Mama’s life and in society. Besides, as the estimated worth of lifelong work and struggle, the insurance money reflects the low professional status that Big Walter and other Chicago blacks had in the 1920s. In *The Negro Family in The United*
States, Frazier notes: “In the North the black worker was confined to domestic and personal service” (334). Hansberry does not tell us what kind of job Big Walter had, but the situation in which the Youngers live makes it obvious that Big Walter was not rich. Moreover, Mama emphasizes that her husband hated domestic jobs:

My husband always said being any kind of a servant wasn’t a fit thing for a man to have to be. He always said a man’s hands was made to make things, or to turn the earth with—not to drive nobody’s car for ‘em—or—(she looks at her own hands) carry them slop jars. (103)

Farming and rural life or the idea of being a skilled craftsman appealed to Big Walter. His ideal of work reflects an idealized nostalgia for a lost tradition of American agrarian pastoralism. Like Thomas Jefferson, Big Walter acknowledges the humanizing virtue of agriculture. According to Lawrence Levine, Jefferson had “assured his country of its destined power and influence at the same time that he urged it to retain its purity and simplicity by remaining a nation of agrarians”(191). We can see in Mama’s appearance and hear in her critique of degrading domestic work that she had been forced to spend a lifetime supporting Big Walter’s urban struggle for decent work and dignity by carrying “slop jars.” Although both of them are industrious and ambitious, Mama and Walter have been relegated to the demeaning roles of servants, dependents, and unskilled workers. Mama’s contribution to family support through menial jobs continues even after Big Walter’s death. She plans to take a new job: “I could maybe take on a little day work again, few days a week”(44). Mama’s support exemplifies her dogged determination to take care of the Younger family, which remains heavily dependent on her. She takes low-paying jobs, plays a domestic role in the house and hopes for the day when her children will be able to achieve more in life than she did.

In the 1920s, most Chicago blacks were domestic workers. Moreover, as Franklin Frazier remarks in The Negro Family in the United States, that in 1920, New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia were cities where “a fifth of employed Negro men were in semi-skilled industrial occupations, while nearly 30 per cent were
engaged in similar occupations in Detroit” (336). Indeed, in the 1920s Chicago blacks were often unemployed. Harold M. Baron explains: “There was a slackening of the demand for black labor when post-war demobilization caused heavy unemployment. In Chicago, where as many as 10,000 black laborers were out of work, the local Association of Commerce wired to Southern chambers of commerce: ‘Are you in need of Negro labor’” (196).

Furthermore, in the period following the Great Migration of the 1920s, blacks like Big Walter rarely received respect or decent jobs in urban settings because white Americans commonly denied blacks their humanity, dignity, and value. As Thomas F. Gossett points out, “American thought of the period 1880-1920 generally lacks any perception of the Negro as a human being with potentialities for improvement” (286). Big Walter’s predicament was a direct effect of the educational, economic, and social discrimination that confronted African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. This discrimination was an insurmountable barrier to the development of a strong African American community. Barry Bluestone writes:

Denied the educational resources and the physical infrastructure necessary to develop technical skills and provide an efficient means of production, while at the same time denied access to the corporate sector through discriminatory practices in housing, in the schools, on the job, and in the capital market, the ghetto has been forced to rely upon its one remaining resource: cheap labor. (231)

Job and housing discrimination were interrelated consequences of educational and economic discrimination against African Americans in Chicago. The result of such discrimination in Big Walter’s life is exhaustion, poverty, anger, and despair. These feelings are perceptible in Mama’s words:

I seen . . . him . . . night after night . . . come in . . . and look at that rug . . . and then look at me . . . the red showing in his eyes . . . the veins moving in his head . . . I seen him grow thin and old before he was forty . . . working and working and working like somebody’s old horse . . . killing himself. (129)
The repetitions and the ellipses in Mama’s assertion suggest that Big Walter’s work was a dreary cycle of hardships and self-sacrifice. These hardships were present in both his family life and his workplace, where violence against blacks was very common. In an essay exploring the challenges that confronted black workers in Chicago in the early twentieth century, the critic William M. Tuttle states:

As racial friction mounted with the heat in the spring and summer of 1919, whites and blacks battled on the city’s streetcars and in its parks and schools. Several Negroes were murdered in mob assaults, and both blacks and whites armed themselves for the riot that numerous Chicagoans feared would erupt at any moment . . . . This riot was also the result of longstanding discord between white and black job competitors in the Chicago labor market. (87)

The intensity of violence shattered the vision of a peaceful and economically secure life that black Southern migrants such as the Youngers had hoped to have as they fled from oppression in the South to seek jobs and justice in the North. Mama tells Walter: “In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too” (74). However, Mama’s American dream for peace in the North is compromised by the rampant segregation that her family faces in being compelled not to buy a house from the white neighborhood of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. Shortly after Mama arranges to buy the house, she receives the visit from Mr. Karl Lindner, the white spokesperson of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. As Lindner explains, the purpose of his visit is to convince the Youngers not to move to Clybourne Park: “It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly, as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities” (118). Lindner acts like a judge who gives a last sentence after having heard the arguments of every interested party. He assumes that he and the rest of the Clybourne Park people know what is best for the Youngers. He presumes that a black person moving into a white neighborhood cannot be happy. When he finds that his
segregationist strategy has not altered the Youngers’ determination to move, Mr. Lindner attempts to arrange a financial settlement: “Our association is prepared, through the collective effort of our people, to buy the house from you at a financial gain to your family”(118). This proposal shows that the C.P.I.A. as an organization is prepared to use its economic power to maintain its racist policies. Such racist behavior was not uncommon in reality. The practice of buying out the houses of prospective black residents was pervasive in American society during the 1950s.

*Raisin* also depicts the fundamental ways in which job discrimination affects the generation represented by Mama and Big Walter’s son Walter and his wife Ruth. Walter belongs to the black working class in Chicago of the 1950s. Early in the play, he voices his dissatisfaction with his work. He tells Mama:

> A job. *(Looks at her)* Mama, a job? I open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say, “Yes, sir; no, sir; very good, sir; shall I take the Drive, sir?” Mama, that ain’t no kind of job . . . that ain’t nothing at all. *(Very quietly)* Mama, I don’t know if I can make you understand. *(73)*

Walter minimizes the position of a car driver because to him it diminishes his manhood and his sense of individual worth. In his own view, his work as a chauffeur places him in a boring and humiliating relationship of servitude to white Americans. Walter wants a work life that is far better than that of his parents. According to Harold M. Baron, in the 1920s and 1930s, blacks used to perform vast quantities of “common labor; heavy, hot, and dirty work; pouring crucibles; work in the grinding room; and so on” (197). Compared to these occupations, the position of a car driver may be, in some ways, better. Certainly, it involves less strenuous physical labor. However, in Walter’s view, this position reflects the same demeaning, humiliating, and alienating quality that exists in any type of menial job. Walter’s problem in finding a decent job is a result of his illiteracy and his lack of business skills, but race prejudice and discrimination are crucial factors in his inability to acquire them. When combined with segregation and race prejudice, illiteracy and lack of business skills create a terrible dilemma for the black man. In 1901, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote
an article depicting the detrimental effect that a lack of skills, along with prejudice and discrimination, had on the life of the black man:

Young colored men can seldom get positions above menial grade, and the training of the older men unfits them for competitive business. Then always the uncertain but ever present factor of racial prejudice is present to hinder or at least make more difficult the advance of the colored merchant or businessman. (107)

Du Bois emphasized the importance of strong educational training to promote the development of a talented black leadership that could help develop America. In “Careers Open to College-Bred Negroes,” written in 1898, Du Bois stated that the educated black man should be a man “who, by rational methods and business sense, with a knowledge of the world market, the methods of transportation, and the possibilities of the soil, will make this land of the South to bloom and blossom” (Huggins 834).

In *Raisin*, Du Bois’s idea of an educated black leadership is challenged by Mrs. Johnson, a neighbor of the Younger family, who asserts that she always “thinks like Booker T. Washington said that time—‘Education has spoiled many a good plow hand’” (103). Here, Hansberry presents Mrs. Johnson’s essentially Southern and old-fashioned viewpoint as a source of ridicule. Her unsupported comment represents just the kind of outmoded thinking that Hansberry wanted blacks to reject in the 1950s. First, in Mrs. Johnson’s view, education is not very important for the salvation of the black man. This position is decisively rejected in *Raisin*, as evidenced from the great emphasis that the Youngers give to the education of Beneatha and Travis. Second, Mrs. Johnson’s comment centers on agricultural employment, something that is not relevant to Walter’s dream of a business career. It even appears that Mrs. Johnson misunderstands Washington, because her statement infers that Washington was totally against the education of the black man, which is not true. As Jeanne Noble has pointed out, Washington “sought to build an educational blueprint for further developing skills by founding Tuskegee Institute in Alabama” (Noble 58). Washington emphasized that black people needed marketing skills in order to be “able to perfect themselves in
While his educational strategy differed sharply from that of the Harvard-trained intellectual, like Du Bois, Washington recognized that black men needed to possess the skills that would enable them to navigate in the American economy.

Walter lacks basic business skills. Unable to handle his poverty and his frustration with the economic system, he leaves his position as a driver. Ruth complains about this: “Walter, you ain’t been to work for three days . . . . You’re going to lose your job” (105). Walter responds with a sense of futility and resignation: “That’s right . . . [He turns on the radio]” (105). His defeatism leaves him vulnerable to the charge that he is an irresponsible husband and that he actually contributes to the economic trouble of the Youngers. When Ruth chastises Walter—“Oh, Walter, and with your mother working like a dog every day” (105) —he responds with a real sadness: “That’s sad too—Everything is sad” (105). Walter’s skepticism stems from his feeling of being left out of a privileged world that requires basic skills and a solid business sense, all things that he lacks. Walter is probably literate, but he does not have the kind of experience that would really equip him for the success he imagines. Unlike Walter’s, the economic situation of many young black men in the Chicago of the 1950s was not totally desperate. In a remarkable study of civil rights activism in Chicago written in 1993, James R. Ralph pointed out that

In the 1950s the image of the city as a promised land, cultivated in the early years of the twentieth century, still retained some of its lustre among blacks. In 1957, a leading black entrepreneur could still write a booklet of a hundred pages entitled “Chicago: City of Progress and Opportunity.” By 1960 the median black family income approached $5,000, far higher than the national black average, and though the black unemployment rate tended to run roughly three times as high as the fluctuating figure for whites during the 1950s, most blacks could secure jobs. (13)

Ralph’s comment is uninformed by the sense of Walter’s frustration. It suggests that, in the 1950s, there was some work, literacy, and hope available in the black community. However, Ralph fails to mention that many black men, like Walter, were left out of economic
advancement because they lacked basic business skills. Clearly, Ralph’s allusion to the “lustre” that blacks retained from the image of Chicago as a “promised land” does not reflect the sense of the Youngers’ substandard economic and work conditions. For example, when she talks about her boss, Ruth points out the precariousness of the jobs available to black workers and the humiliations that they engendered: “She’d be calling up the agency and screaming at them, “My girl didn’t come in today—send me somebody!” (42). Ruth is usually exhausted since, in addition to her outside employment, she is married and has her own domestic job. As Friedman Sharon pointed out in her 1984 study of Feminism in American drama, “The condition of women forced to work at subsistence wages and relegated to domestic labor is epitomized by Hansberry in her portrayal of the black domestic who must clean the kitchen of white women as well as her own” (85).

At the end of *Raisin*, the future labor prospects of Hansberry’s characters provide grounds for both optimism and pessimism. The future work possibilities for Ruth seem bleak. Unlike Beneatha and George, Ruth has less chance to find a decent job because she is not going to school. Indeed, in one sense, Ruth and Walter face somewhat similar problems. Due to their lack of education, neither seems a likely candidate for success in a professional career. Walter will succeed financially because he abandons his frustration and becomes more reasonable. Walter says, “Mama. You always telling me to see life like it is . . . You know it’s all divided up . . . Between the takers and the taken. [He laughs] I’ve figured it out finally” (141). This is a positive sign that suggests a new strength in Walter’s mind and understanding of life. As he insists, Walter now understands that life is not about having a dream, but doing your best in order to achieve it. He knows that his success in the American economy will depend on his strength and his ability to stand strong and take risks. Studies of work and education in the post-World War II era suggest that, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, blacks had achieved substantial economic progress. In a 1965 essay on the employment patterns of African Americans, Professor Ray Marshall pointed out that:

Significant gains were made by nonwhites in the 1955-1962 period in such professional categories as hospital, medical, and other health services, welfare and religious institutions, and
business and repair services. The relative increase of nonwhites in these occupations was 70 per cent, about twice that of whites. Nonwhites also have gained relatively faster than whites in the educational services field and in government employment. (4)

Marshall’s comment suggests that in the late 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, well-educated African Americans did find significant opportunities to move into professional occupations. As a prospective student of medicine, Beneatha will be lucky to find a job after her education; so too will be George. The positive change in work opportunities that Beneatha and George gained was, in some way, an effect of the increasing level of education among Blacks that started in the 1940s. As the critic Karl E. Taeuber pointed out in a 1972 essay on the life of blacks in American cities, between 1940 and 1950, the educational level of African Americans substantially increased (169). In 1960, one year after Raisin was published, the job market opened widely for African Americans through social welfare programs. As Nicholas Lemann pointed out in a 1991 history: “Black employment in public social welfare programs increased by 850,000 from 1960 to 1976 (a period during which the black middle class tripled in size), and many new government jobs were also created for blacks outside the social welfare sphere, for example in local transportation authorities and law enforcement agencies” (201). This remarkable change in work opportunity is, in one way, a realization of the dream of economic success and middle-class status that Hansberry fosters in Raisin. She envisioned the dream and knew that it would eventually “explode success” “like a raisin in a sun.”

Raisin discusses the labor conditions of African Americans in the 1920s and 1950s, when they confronted job discrimination and poor economic conditions. The play reflects in Big Walter’s work experience the frustration and the enduring pain that blacks suffered from poor employment and life quality in the 1920s. Like Big Walter, Walter Lee, who represents the generation of blacks of the 1950s, faces difficulties in achieving economic advancement. This predicament is caused not only by his dissatisfaction with menial jobs, but also by a lack of support from the rich middle class that George represents. Raisin transcends this hopelessness by suggesting that Walter and Beneatha will eventually achieve their dream of success. The
family moves to Clybourne Park, marking their new membership to the black middle class. At the end of the play, Hansberry clearly does suggest that the Younger family, as a whole, has legitimate grounds for hope for improvement in their employment opportunities and economic situation. Thanks to their education, George and Beneatha may succeed financially by moving into the increasing number of professional occupations that were becoming available to African Americans in the late 1950s.

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