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Graham Dano

Illinois Wesleyan University, gdano@iwu.edu

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Abstract

In this article, Lorraine Hansberry's magnum opus book about structural racism in 1950s America, "A Raisin in the Sun", is discussed in detail, and how the book itself is a rebuke to those Americans who insist that our country is a meritocracy for all races and ethnicities. The lived experiences of the Younger Family, the African-American protagonists of the book, are filled with not only elements of structural racism, but the reactions of their neighbors and acquaintances to this racism as well.

Damn All the Eggs That Ever Was: Meritocracy and its Failures on the Younger Family

Graham Dano

Meritocracy is: “a political philosophy which holds that certain things, such as economic goods or power, should be vested in individuals on the basis of talent, effort, and achievement, rather than factors such as sexuality, race, gender, or wealth”. This has officially been the defining policy of how jobs and the economy work from the very start, if not fully implemented until the 1960s after the Civil Rights Movement righted some of the wrongs that faced black Americans after Reconstruction ended, and some forty years after the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote, along with loosening of racist immigration policies. However, slightly before the Civil and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, much was still rotten in the state of Denmark, or at least in the United States of America. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play by Lorraine Hansberry that was introduced in 1959 a few years after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Younger family doesn’t feel as if it is living in a meritocracy at all, or anything close to one. This can be seen even from the appearance of their apartment itself.

Worn out, yet well-loved sums up the look of the furniture in the Younger’s house. It has experienced the trials and tribulations of the family through the years, through sadness, through despair, happiness at family gatherings, and the wide spectrum of emotions. The furniture symbolizes strength through adversity, because even in its dilapidated state, it is held together by the family’s love (demonstrated by the doilies and couch covers). This symbol is introduced in the first scene as described by the narrator, in which the general weariness of the house is delineated. The text even states that the furniture has to fight to be noticed in the house, much like African-Americans had to fight for justice and equality in the 1950’s and 60’s in the United

States. This reveals that Lorraine Hansberry was tying in the Civil Rights movement into even the minute details of the house's décor.

Specific evidence from the text of this theme is quite plentiful. Here is a sample of that evidence from pages 40-41: "That was a long time ago. Now the once loved pattern of the 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, 1957). This quote describes how the furniture was, at one point, selected for purchase with loving care by a member of the family (most likely Mama), and is now unfortunately just as worn-down and decrepit as the rest of the Younger's house. Another supporting quote from the book is near the very end, on page 255. The family is moving out of their house, and Mama notices that one of the moving men is being overly rough with one of her chairs. "Darling, that ain't no bale of cotton, please handle it so we can sit in it again! I had that chair twenty-five years...." (Hansberry, 1957). This shows that the Youngers have beaten back the racism and prejudice they encountered (at least temporarily), and are proud of their home and furniture once more. Logically, they don't want any of it to get damaged during the move to their new home. This helps with our understanding of the characters because it helps us see that even when they are down and out, they still have that pride in their family and home that binds them together even in troubled times.

This pride in home and hearth is much needed for Walter Lee Younger Jr. as he makes his way in the world, which is one dominated by white men both then and now. It is a futile struggle for Walter Lee; even as he tries a get-rich-quick scheme with some friends of his to start his dream liquor store, he is scammed by the system of institutionalized racism vis a vis two

of his business partners, Bobo and Will Harris, and it takes Bobo's frenetic shouting for it to finally sink in for him: "What's the matter with you, Walter? When a cat take off with your money he don't leave no road maps!" (Hansberry, 1957). This goes to show that systemic racism can be propagated through an internalized fashion, as both Willie and Bobo don't believe in their abilities due to the massive discrimination and devaluing they face on a daily basis from white society. Hence, Willie runs off with the money rather than help Walter and Bobo start a business he feels that will ultimately not succeed due to white society's meddling. As Ijeoma Oluo points out in "So You Want to Talk About Race", "This implicit bias against people of color is so insidious that not even people of color are exempt from having it, which is why, yes, even police officers of color can show bias against civilians of color" (Oluo, 2018). This bias, while having changed somewhat in the alleged meritocracy of the United States in the 60 years since this show was first produced, is far from diminished entirely.

Aside from the conflicts with meritocracy the Younger's face from whites and other blacks, there is an internal conflict within the family over the role they ought to assume in regard to society as well. While Walter, Lena, George Hutchinson and Ruth are very much "assimilationist" (Hansberry, 1957) members of the community, Joseph Asagai (a Nigerian exchange student) and Beneatha are much more in touch with traditional African culture and, indeed, try to embrace it at every possible opportunity. They embody the spirit of what Oluo hints at in her book where black or African culture is concerned: "A swagger is not intent, baggy jeans are not intent, a bandana is not intent. This is culture, and any suggestion otherwise is racist." (Oluo, 2018). The ways in which Asagai and Beneatha do this most prominently are the use of traditional Yoruba clothing and dances, which help Beneatha "reconnect" to her heritage

that was erased when her family was forced to the United States as slaves back in the 19th century. She turns off some 1950s jazz music that was playing on the radio in the Younger house on a weekend morning, calling it “assimilationist junk” (Hansberry, 1957) and playing a Yoruba record that she and Walter enjoy, much to the embarrassment of Lena and George, the latter of whom is about to pay Beneatha a visit. George then goes into an internalized-racism based rant against the music and Beneatha’s attempt to embrace African cultures, and the family, mostly in agreement with him, doesn’t attempt to contradict this narrative that he shares with them: “Let’s face it, baby, your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-ass spirituals and some grass huts!” (Hansberry, 1957). Through their implicit consent, we can see that the majority of the Younger family (with the exceptions of Beneatha and possibly Travis) condone this statement. Walter only engages in the dance out of his intoxication and a need to let off some steam.

The Younger Family eventually triumphs over the society that has oppressed them for so long and difficult a time through open defiance of the representative sent by the Clybourne Park Homeowners Association, Karl Lindner, who is sent over to negotiate for them to leave their house they bought in their new, white dominated neighborhood. “But how does the furniture play into all of this?” you might ask, and for good reason, too. Compared to the other, more obvious symbolic objects in the play (such as Mama’s plant), there may seem little point in trying to find symbolism in mere furniture. Nevertheless, the furniture does play a central symbolic role in the book, since its dilapidated state at first shows how the family itself is run down and falling apart, but in the end, becomes an object of strength and defiance as it, just like the Youngers themselves, is moved to the new home that they struggled so much to acquire. That is why the furniture reveals so much about the main theme and moral of the story, and how it

adds adept commentary on the structural de jure and de facto racism that the Youngers face on a daily basis.

Works Cited

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