

Chapter One

Introduction

What happened 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—

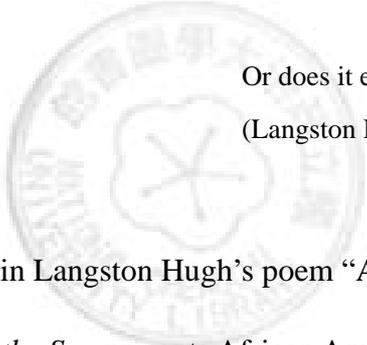
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

(Langston Hugh, “A Dream Deferred,” 1951)



Titled from a line in Langston Hugh’s poem “A Dream Deferred,” Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* presents African Americans’ deferred dream and social plight through telling the struggling story of the Younger family. As the author depicts the characters and the social phenomenon in depth in the realistic writing style, this play not only reflects black Americans’ life in the 1950s but also brings up a variety of issues at that time, including the infamous segregation laws, the relationships among Africans and African Americans, and the roles of men and women in a family. Premiered in 1959, this is the first play by a black woman to be produced in a Broadway theater, introducing the identity issues and attracting the audience’s attention to black drama. For its innovation, popularity, and persistence, this play is definitely significant as an American classic. It is always Hansberry’s

belief that “in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific” (*Young* 114). Through revealing the life of Younger family as an example, the author expresses her ideas and concern about her people, showing that they are a group who simply “refused to give up” (“Willie Loman” 8). No matter how hard the situation is, she emphasizes that “human dignity” shines and leads all of the people to face an “American responsibility” (“Willie Loman” 8). This is very important for the new generations of African Americans because they come across problems of social and cultural identification and have to search for their own identities. Black identity has always been a major and focal issue in American drama, and it is still a complex topic worthy of discussion now. This paper offers a new reading of *A Raisin in the Sun* from the theory of Bakhtin’s chronotope, and it particularly scrutinizes the issue on the white-black relationship with regards to its social, economical, historical, and political factors.

The Dramatist: Lorraine Hansberry

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930 in southern Chicago, the black section of the city. She was the youngest of the four children in a middle class family. Her father, Karl Hansberry, was a successful real estate agent. Her mother was a community leader and ward committeewoman. When Hansberry was eight, her father bought a house in a predominantly white community which she described as a “very hostile neighborhood” (Cheney 4). His attempt created much tension because of the legal segregation in Chicago. When Hansberry recalled her childhood memory, she still remembered that facing the mob gathering around their house, her desperate

and courageous mother “patrolled [their] house all night with a loaded German luger, doggedly guarding her four children” (*Young* 21). And once a brick came through the window narrowly missed eight-year-old Lorraine when she just went inside the living room (White 34). Her father instituted a civil rights suit in order to stay in their house and finally Illinois Supreme Court declared the local covenants illegal. Thus, her father’s battle against segregation made Hansberry have a consciousness of the need to struggle for civil rights from a very young age. From her parents, she learned to always have pride in the family and in the race.

The Hansberry family had distinguished visitors including famous characters like the civil rights great thinker, W. E. B. Du bois, the talented poet, Langston Hughes, and the artistic activist, Paul Robeson¹ by whom Hansberry was influenced in forming her attitudes toward life. Her uncle, William Leo Hansberry, a professor of African studies at Howard University, had a great reputation as a black thinker and also had important effects on her. While Lorraine Hansberry was growing up, she was frequently exposed to perspectives of the great thinkers at the time. She gradually formed her own attitude toward the social situation which constituted her ideas in the later works and plays.

She entered the University of Wisconsin² to study art, English, and stage design. There she became acquainted with theater. A production of Sean O’Casey’s

¹ For more information about the three great contemporary characters’ influence on Lorraine Hansberry’s thoughts and beliefs, please see chapter three “The Talented Tenth and Long-headed Jazzers” in Anne Cheney’s *Lorraine Hansberry*.

² She only spent two years there because of feeling restricted by the many requirements of the school for a black student.

*Juno and the Paycock*³ she saw there inspired her love for theatre as she wrote: “it entered my consciousness and stayed there” (Young 65). She was so particularly taken with O’Casey’s ability to express the complex and transcendent nature of humans that she considered him the greatest twentieth-century playwright because of his use of “the human personality in its totality” (Young 68) and his belief that the genuine heroism “must naturally emerge when you tell the truth about people” (Young 68-69). Due to this influence from O’Casey, Hansberry’s writing is not only for the ordinary people, but it also presents the truest fact about life from their individuality. It is her belief that no matter how plain or trivial they are, there are always heart-touching stories to tell because each personality is full of multi-layered conflicts and struggles.

Hansberry moved to New York in 1950 and tried a series of different jobs to earn her living in the next few years. In 1951, she became a staff writer of *Freedom*, Paul Robeson’s monthly magazine. Within a year, she was promoted to be an associate editor. From the editor, Louis Burnham, she learned that everything is ultimately political. Her articles dealt with her fresh insights about the women’s rights, the arts, African history and politics, and social issues of New York during the five years there. She got married in 1953 with Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish musician and a writer. Even though they were divorced⁴ in 1964, Nemiroff had been the literary executor of her estate, edited and submitted some of her works like *Les Blancs* and *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. She died of cancer in New York on January 12, 1965.⁵

³ Its humane treatment of the Irish rebellion against British oppression reminded Hansberry the situation of African Americans. She decided to write her own version of people’s struggle with her memory and knowledge.

⁴ Their divorce had not been revealed to the public for ten months until after Hansberry’s death.

⁵ For a detailed introduction and assessment of Lorraine Hansberry’s whole life, see Anne Cheney’s

In her short thirty-four-year life, she had written several plays including *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*,⁶ *Les Blancs*, *The Drinking Gourd*, *What Use Are Flowers*, and the autobiographical work, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*. There were also sixty magazine and newspaper articles, plays, poems, and speeches. Her importance lies not only in her productivity but also her “incisive, articulate, and sensitive exposure of the dynamic, troubled American culture” (Wilkerson, “Sighted Eyes” 8). She expresses her deepest care for humankind by dealing with both brightness and darkness in society.

A Raisin in the Sun has always been the most important and well-known work of Lorraine Hansberry.⁷ The title of the play comes from Langston Hugh's famous poem “A Dream Deferred.” Hansberry originally named the play *The Crystal Stair*, which is a line in “The Crystal Star,” also a poem by Langston Hugh. Coupled with plenty of breakthrough, this play enhances the visibility of the black theatre. First of all, it brings into the theater the black audience who used to be excluded from the field of art appreciation. After the first production in Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York, on March 11, 1959, it became a rapid success and reached popularity among not only white but also black audience who had always been ignored by American theater. As a reviewer recalled the memory of that night when *A Raisin in the Sun* was first

Lorraine Hansberry.

⁶ In her life, Hansberry only has two plays put on the stage. One is *A Raisin in the Sun* and the other is *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. The second play received mixed reviews and didn't achieve popularity as *Raisin*. But a large number of people, deeply respectful of both the author and the work, contributed time and money to keep it running for 101 performances. The play stayed as Hansberry bravely fought with the torture of cancer in the hospital until her death. Robert Nemiroff honored the play in his comment, “The 101 ‘Final’ Performances of Sidney Brustein.”

⁷ The play has several versions of adaptation. In 1961, the film was released, starring Sidney Poiter and Claudia McNeil. Hansberry won a special award at the Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for a Screen Writers Guild award for her screenplay. In 1973, there was a musical adaptation which was readapted by Robert Nemiroff, and it won a Tony Award as the best musical of the year in 1974.

put on stage, he expressed the lasting impression that “I had never in my life seen so many black people in the theater” (Baldwin xviii). Besides encouraging more black audience to join in artistic performances, this prize-winning play also benefits the black artists by highlighting their great achievement. At the age of twenty-nine, Hansberry was the first black writer and the youngest one to win the New York Critics’ Circle Award, and her director, Lloyd Richard, was the first black man to direct a play for the Broadway stage. The play’s 530 performances in nine months helped bring the recognition of black drama by Broadway producers and audience.

A Raisin in the Sun has the third breakthrough in black theater: it reflects the real lives of the black U.S. minority more accurately than any other works before it. The realistic depiction is significant because the play’s broad popularity and “enduring passion” continue to influence works of later generations to speak for the black people (Baraka 9). Hansberry proved theater to be “a persuasive and visible art form” to communicate with people and to share her vision of human potential (Wilkerson, “Excavating” 80-81). Its main ideas of human dignity would continuously be inspiring to the black suffering from discrimination and unjust treatment. This also accounts for the fact that *Raisin* has been ranked with Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Tennessee William’s *Glass Menagerie*, and Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* as a classic in American Theater.

Plot Summary of *A Raisin in the Sun*

Set in Chicago’s Southside and sometime between “World War II and the

present” (*Raisin* 22),⁸ *A Raisin in the Sun* tells the story of a black family. Walter Lee Younger works as a chauffeur for a white master, dreaming about owning his own business and bringing his family better lives. His wife, Ruth, has devoted her life to the family and become weary with poverty. She is pregnant with a new baby, which represents new hope as well as an added burden to the family. Their ten-year-old son, Travis, does not have his own room and has to sleep on the couch in the living room. Walter’s mother Lena, a faithful Christian, holds most of the controlling power in the family and wants to keep the basic comfort for her children. His sister Beneatha, a college student, is interested in becoming a doctor and eager to find her own identity from the African heritage. She has two suitors from different backgrounds: George Murchison, a college boy from a wealthy family, and Asagai, a Nigerian student studying in America.

At the beginning of the play, the Younger family want to escape poverty and improve their lives with the ten-thousand-dollar insurance money paid on the death of the father, Big Walter. Every family member has his or her own dream and they have conflicts with each other on how to use the money: Walter wants to invest on a liquor store and be a boss himself; Beneatha needs the money for medical education in order to fulfill her future ambition; Lena decides to buy a new house for her family, but the only decent one she can afford for the down payment is located in Clybourne Park, an all-white neighborhood. After seeing her son’s desperation, Lena compromises by giving him thirty-five hundred for his business and three thousand to be placed in the

⁸ Hereafter, *A Raisin in the Sun* will be shortened as “*Raisin*” in all parenthetical documentation.

bank for Beneatha's education. When the family are bathed in the joy of moving, Karl Lindner, the only white character in the play and the representative of the white community they are going to move into, comes and tries to buy back their new house because residents in Clybourne Park believe "Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities" (*Raisin* 118). He also mentions the violent incidents happening in the cities when colored people tend to move into white districts. However, the family refuses his request with dignity.

Later the family members find that Walter did not actually put his sister's part in the bank; instead, he gave the sum to his business partner who swindled him and ran away with the money. His failure shatters the family's dream. When Beneatha loses her hope for future, Asagai shares with her an idealistic view that every little step can contribute to the whole advancement and suggests she go to Africa with him. To make up for his mistake, Walter intends to accept Lindner's offer. But when Lindner arrives, Walter, inspired by his mother, changes his mind and decides to move into the house, because his father "earned it for [them] brick by brick" (*Raisin* 148). Finally, the family honors Walter for regaining his "manhood" and family pride inherited from Big Walter with the courage to face the struggle awaiting them (*Raisin* 151).

The Historical Background of *A Raisin in the Sun*

The socio-political context of Lorraine Hansberry's time has exerted a profound influence on her writings. In a 1959 speech to young writers, Hansberry explained the impact of social and political events on her world view:

I was born on the South Side of Chicago. I was born black and female. I was born in a depression after one world war, and came into my adolescence during another. While I was still in my teens the first atom bombs were dropped on human beings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and by the time I was twenty-three years old my government and that of the Soviet Union had entered actively into the worst conflict of nerves in human history—the Cold War. (“Negro Writer” 11)

She was born and grew up in the unrest and unstable war time and its aftermath.

When she came to her twenties in the 1950s and 1960s, there were more momentous historical events which critically affected her views of the world: the beginning of a Cold War between the U.S. and Russian superpower, a rising demand by blacks for civil rights, and a growing resistance of the colonized people throughout the world (Wilkerson, “The Sighted Eyes” 8). On many post-war occasions, she had seen “man’s very real inhumanity to man” and people’s sufferings in the post-war social problems like drug addiction, alcoholism, and mental illness (Hansberry, “Negro Writer” 5-6). The destruction of wars is devastating, but the coldness and indifference hurt even more. Besides the external threats in the crisis of the world, she and her people, as African Americans, had to face more hostility and isolation in society. The law did not protect their rights or promise the freedom they deserved.

A Raisin in the Sun depicts African Americans’ plight under the repression of the white-enacted laws. Although there were several Constitutional Amendments after the Civil War, African Americans were still denied many civil rights. Ever since the 1880s, the Jim Crow laws banned interracial education, marriage, and even drinking

fountains. When Hansberry was writing *A Raisin in the Sun* in the 1950s, racial segregation was still pervasive in the United States. Hansberry recreated the reality of the black people living with segregation, a hindrance to real democracy. Her father's action of resistance still stayed in her childhood memory. However, even after Mr. Hansberry's successful legal battle, the practice of restrictive covenants continued in Chicago. Hansberry heard that blacks were still lynched and many blacks voted at great risks in the South. And, there was even the farce of "separate but equal schools" in many neighborhoods in the country (Cheney 13). The segregation would not be easily solved or removed since the malice toward African Americans did not vanish easily with the legalization of the black right.

Though this play mainly deals with the segregation on housing, the nature of segregation still functioned in many other arenas like schools, employment, and public transportation (Domina 23). Not only in the south but also in the northern cities like Chicago, the setting of the play, segregation was still statewide and its effects were broad. Where a child lived would determine which school he went to, and where a person lived would affect where he could find a job. Since most of the high-pay jobs were in the white district and there was little access to the public transportation, the residents in the black district could only find local, low-pay jobs. However diligently they worked, they hardly became wealthy. Their poverty led them into a vicious circle so that they could never get rid of the poor housing condition (Domina 24). These groups of people were destined to fail in their endeavor to improve their financial situation since America then was an economic-based society. Race was a crucial point which determined people's social statuses. And the whites dominated the higher and

rich social class.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s challenged the segregation laws. There were civil rights groups like notable National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other political organizations. In the decades of the greatest achievements, Martin Luther King, Jr. along with his non-violent protests was also a dominant force, making the United States a better place for black Americans. In 1955, the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education*⁹ in Kansas reached the United States Supreme Court to enforce a real equality in school education. Also in 1955, the city buses that forced blacks to sit in the back were boycotted. In 1958, the public schools in Arkansas were closed by the Governor in order to defy the Supreme Court's ruling. In 1959, the bus system of Georgia was integrated although riders were asked by the Governor to continue "voluntary segregation" (Galens 189). By the 1960s, much new legislation of Civil Rights became common (Galens 190). The civil right act of 1964 protected the blacks' voting right and forbade discrimination in any business open to the public such as restaurant, hotel, or theater (Domina 47). Moreover, the fair housing policy of 1968 helped circumvent some unfair real estate practices such as lying to customers of minority groups (Domina 49). In history, every single fight of the blacks, whether successful or not, would lead to a further step toward equality. Against this backdrop, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is set as one of the countless fights. It helps bring forth the making of black movement because the

⁹ In Topeka, Kansas, Linda Brown, a black third-grader had to walk one mile to get to her black elementary school, even though a white elementary school was only seven blocks away. Her father tried to enroll her in the white elementary school, but the principal refused. He asked NAACP for help and with other black parents joining Brown, the NAACP requested to forbid the segregation of public schools.

Younger family's persistence truly manifests the blacks' situation of the 1950s.

Literature Reviews

Although *A Raisin in the Sun* was quite an immediate hit when it was put on stage in 1959, it has been a controversial play and has received plenty of critical reviews. Throughout the five decades, critics have had both acclaim and denunciation and they have dealt with different topics including style, theme, plot and character analysis, and some related historical and cultural issues.

Concerning the author's use of the realistic style, the critics in the first decade after the premier of the play consider it to be old-fashioned, but after about twenty years' vacancy of this topic, critics in the 1990s argue that realism would not limit writers' imagination but truthfully presents black people's life to the audience. The early reviewers hold negative attitudes toward the realistic style. Gerald Weales remarks on the author's use of such a "determinedly naturalistic form," considering it "old fashioned" because the setting pretends to be a real room with real doors and real furniture (195). C. W. E. Bigsby also points out that naturalism is a shortcoming: For all its sympathy, humor and humanity . . . [*Raisin*] remains disappointing . . . Its weakness is essentially that of Broadway naturalism (qtd. in Ashley 151). As opposed to the negative reviewers, critics in the 1990s think the use of the realistic style illuminating. For example, Margaret Wilkerson argues that through this play, Hansberry enhances the public understanding toward blacks' progressive ideas in life ("Excavating" 81). Steven Carter also contends that realism would not be a limit for writers' imagination but truthfully presents black people's life to the audience (190).

Amiri Baraka further explains that Hansberry's play has done more than a document and can be regarded as "political agitation" to deal with issues of democratic rights and equality (10-11). These critics believe that Hansberry shapes her work of art to be both powerful in aesthetics and advanced in politics by applying the realistic writing style.

There are a lot more papers focusing on the thematic issues in *Raisin*. Critics in the 1960s and 1970s show interests in the play's universalism. Hansberry's intention to pass her ideas of social reform to both blacks and other racial groups meets with negative criticism; some critics think she is assimilated by the white culture because she writes with universal themes without focusing on her own people. Harold Cruse harshly comments that *Raisin* is the "most cleverly written piece of glorified soap opera" and "a second-rate play" and that the Negro playwright has accepted the white majority's concept of art creating and lost "intellectual . . . technical, and creative ability to deal with her own special ethnic group materials in dramatic form" (278-281). In Cruse's interpretation, universalism means whiteness because white ideology has dominated the majority of culture. If the blacks choose to be Americans, they have chosen to give up their own Negro culture and heritage. C. W. E. Bigsby thinks that in order to escape the bitterness of blacks' plight and please the white audience, Hansberry "betrays herself into racial simplification and ill-defined affirmation" (qtd. in Ashley 151). Jordan Miller also states that the same situation described in the play might as well happen to other racial groups. Accordingly, the audiences tend to focus on the author's delicate treatment with humanity and ignore comparatively minor issues of racial conflicts (161).

However, there are still critics holding the optimistic opinions toward the universalism in the play. As Gerald Weales believes, Hansberry intends to write “a play about Negroes which is not simply a Negro play” (196). Richard Duprey also thinks that instead of being assimilated, Hansberry’s compassion transcends ethnic group materials to present all the people’s hopes, fears, and dreams (210). For these critics, Hansberry aims higher to impress not only black but also white audience to tell them that Negroes are people, too.

Another thematic point the critics in the 60s and 70s concentrate on is the value of human dignity over money. In his comments on why this play won the New York Drama Critics’ Award in 1959, Gerald Weales believes that its primary concern is a man’s dignity, not bank accounts (195). In the later decades, C. W. E Bigsby and Lloyd Brown further clarify that in the black struggle, money is the only access to challenging the white authority and it is easier to accept the social conception which values the power of money (156-61, 246). However, these critics all agree that while both material opportunities and social regeneration are still suspended, self-esteem is clearly the main achievement in the play.

The other thematic topic on the study of *Raisin* is the relationship between African Americans and Africans. In his studies on five writers and their African ancestors, Harold Isaacs clarifies that Hansberry’s vision of the romantic Negro American and black African is shaped by new times and new outlooks. It is “no longer a wispy literary yearning after a lost primitive,” and nor is it “a matter of going back-to-Africa as the ultimate option of despair in America” (329-30). What is really important is that the American blacks have the freedom to choose where they feel a

sense of belonging. Brenda Berrian views the theme of the intercultural marriage as a “testimony of self-affirmation, new freedoms, and a positive step towards black identity” (153). Scrutinizing the relationship between Beneatha and Asagai, the critic proposes there is a need for African Americans to reconsider about the idea of Africa. Steven Carter also expresses his attitude towards the author’s “Pan-Africanism,” assuring that the changes of African blacks could promote changes in the situation of American blacks and vice versa (47).

While a large number of critics concentrate their attention on the themes of the play, the interpretations of the ending attracted critics’ attention in the 80s and 90s. Lloyd Brown first points out that even though the Younger family finally moves into the white district, there are still problems left to be solved because there is a hostile neighborhood waiting for them (244). After Brown, Charles Washington provides an overall and objective view on the ending of the play. He concludes the ending carries both worrying and promising messages: Walter’s refusal to exchange his family’s racial pride for money does not resolve their economic plight, but the Youngers with their own new house get a chance to get rid of their miserable past (121-122). He points out that the play carries a “small but significant hope” represented by Lena’s “feeble little plant” that calls the audience’s attention to the spirit of people who will never give up fighting for what they deserve (124). Later critics also support the positive interpretation on the ending. For example, David Cooper emphasizes the Younger family has actually integrated into a white neighborhood and this will cause great change to the social condition (61). Opinions on both sides reflect the historical reality, and different opinions depend on whether the audiences hold more aggressive

or conservative attitudes toward the progression of African Americans.

Besides style, themes, and the ending, the character analysis draws some critics' attention. Some of them analyze the essence of Walter Younger's dream. They maintain that Walter accepts the American value and shares the same American dream with all the others in the land of opportunity, but actually American blacks are excluded from the equal opportunity. With a very detailed analysis on Walter, Charles Washington has a very positive approval of Walter's determination to succeed and belief in himself (114). However, Amiri Baraka prompts that American dream itself has ambiguity: It is based upon the material achievement, so it would be a tougher task for American blacks in poverty to fulfill (14-16). In this way, integration is the only means to realize the dream.

The other critics dealing with character analysis are interested in the female characters' contribution. Believing the female characters' devotion to the family is what saves Walter's dream from deterioration, they argue that no matter the dominant Lena or the more conformable Ruth, both female characters do their utmost to preserve and protect the family. Without these two female characters, Walter cannot understand what is more important than money and regains his manhood; neither can the family finally move into the house of their own. For example, Mary Louis Anderson has a comparison between Lena Younger and the image of matriarchy. She finds out that Lena mostly conforms to the typical matriarchy holding the controlling power over the other family members, but she does set a good model worthy of respect and direct a correct road for her children with understanding and love (93). Sharon Friedman declares that the tough female characters contribute to the survival

of not only their family but also the black community (85). And Anthony Barthelemy thinks Ruth, as the spiritual supporter, maintains the family ties and pinpoints the family pride (774-5).

While many critics are concerned about analysis on the play itself, other critics pay more attention to the connection between this play and its historical and social background. They believe that it is important for black artists to speak out the need and hope of their own people instead of alienating themselves from the community (Riach 180). After listing several major local and international historical events at Hansberry's contemporary times, Margaret Wilkerson concludes that "black militancy born of the anger, frustration, deferred dreams" is captured in the play. In addition, Hansberry, as a writer with sighted eyes and feeling heart, is capable to sense what to come in the future trend ("Anniversary" 444). The other critics also hail Hansberry for her social contribution as an artist (Carter 47; Washington 109). She is significant because of her efforts to make black themes visible and even popular in theatre. Black writers present black men to the world as "both artist and a subject of art" (Ashley 153). According to these critics who care about the connection between works and history, it is necessary for readers and audience to understand *Raisin's* historical background before they try to fully interpret the play because the literary world would never be independent from the real one. However, these critics only mention this importance. They do not have a deep research of the play on the connection between the text and history.

The most recent critical opinions on this play are some cultural studies done through scrutinizing several versions of *A Raisin in the Sun* and comparing what is

added and edited during the process of adaptations. Margaret Wilkerson has a detailed discussion on the significant meaning of three scenes cut out on the Broadway stage but restored to recent publications. These sections “offer important insights to the characters of Walter Lee and Mama . . . and greatly strengthen articulation of the fundamental theme” (“Anniversary” 445). Critics after 1990s try to interpret the unconscious cultural and racial messages in the new versions adapted by white producers and corporations. For instance, Lisbeth Lipari undertakes “a rhetorical analysis of a particular historically contextualized instance of the cultural production of whiteness” (81). She points out that transformed from Hansberry’s original screenplay into a film mediated by Columbia Pictures’ Hollywood production and marketing machine, this play has been joined with some information the white supervisor wants to specify. These latest criticisms place more stress on the adaptations than the dramatic text of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Purpose

Most critics discuss *Raisin* in terms of its realistic style, thematic issues, plot arrangement, character analysis, socio-historical context and cultural studies, focusing on the Youngers’ significant dream and family dignity in social plight. Some pay tributes to the connection between the play and history, but they only focus on the discussion of the play’s realistic style and seldom deal with how relevant the play and history are to each other. Hence, there is a vacancy for a research on the historical background and its specific relevancy to the play. Also, as the critics mostly approach the play with textual analysis, there is still a lack of theoretical interpretations to

reveal how African Americans face their identity crisis in the white hegemonic culture.

In this paper, I study the relationship between the literary text and its contemporary history because it is significant to reveal how the heavily autobiographical work by Hansberry reflects African Americans' frustration and struggle in the year of the 1950s. I focus on the setting of the play in terms of its spatial representation. I also deal with how African Americans search for their own identity, which has always been a major motif in black drama. Tracing clues in the pioneering play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, from different perspectives and with new theories may inspire some solutions to the problem.

Analysis in a New Perspective

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the blacks undergo a process of looking for their own identities in the 1950s of America. Identity concerns both personal and social ones and each individual figures out his or her own through the understanding of himself or herself as well as the interaction with society. An essence which can be "signified through signs of taste, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles," identity is wholly cultural, and it is not fixed but changing with different times, places and usages (Barker 166). According to the social scientist Anthony Giddens, identity is a mode of thinking about ourselves in the past and present, together with what we would be like in the future (37-8). To deal with the identity problems of African Americans in the play, I would like to find how the characters develop their own identity in the changing time and space of America by applying the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Frantz Fanon, and

Stuart Hall.

Bakhtin's theory on chronotope will serve as the main critical base of my thesis. In his "Forms of Time of the Chronotope in the Novel," Bakhtin introduces chronotope, the temporal and spatial relationships in literature. Employed in mathematics and part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity, chronotope is borrowed for literary criticism almost as a metaphor to express the "inseparability" and interconnection of space and time (Bakhtin 84). Time is concretized to carry on decisive meanings, and space responds to the movement of time, plot, and history (84). The setting of time should be regarded as a focal point in interpreting the literary images. In the literary texts, we see the representational importance of the chronotope which "makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins" and in which time becomes "palpable and visible" to carry significant meanings for understanding the experience and human actions (Bakhtin 250). From this perspective, each literary event is not only embedded with the original textual meanings but is also endowed with more abundant and extended interpretations. A chronotope is a way of understanding experience in the interrelation between human life and cultural, social, and historical contexts. Bakhtin's analysis focuses on the literary and historical narratives in which the meaning of the events and actions must be understood when put into a specific chronotope. Social and political events would provide an access to interpretations of the characters' private life. Therefore, chronotope plays an important role to understand humans' self-consciousness in a specific historical context.

With Bakhtin's theory of chronotope, I want to examine how the social

phenomenon in the real world is articulated in *A Raisin in the Sun*. My first concern, which is discussed in my chapter two, is to reveal how the play reflects American blacks' social plight. Because of the segregation laws in the 1950s, American society has clearly been separated into the white district and the black ghetto. The obvious division of space carries signifying meanings for the social positions. I also intend to set the play against its social and historical background to understand the characters' voices, actions and standpoints. Each character represents a different chronotope and their thoughts and actions correspond to the social positions they represent. To fully interpret these characters in the play, it is necessary to understand what time and space and what historical and social background they belong to. Each ideology in the characters' conversations will play as a crucial role to make the whole picture of the text as well as its background more visible and concrete.

My second concern, which is dealt with in my chapter three, is to infer from the plot and actions in the play the ways how African Americans find their own identity from the social, cultural, and family perspectives. The play shows each family members trying to hold a meaning and find a position so that they will not get lost or even drowned in the chaotic social surroundings. They try to look for self identity and position through an active fight for their own dreams. It is also easy for them to accept the social value dominated by the whites, but they still need to figure out their own racial pride by examining both their past history and current situation. The interaction among the family members serves as a channel to gradually figure out ways to self-identity. The relationship among characters involves how to face the outside hostile white world, how to respond to African origin and culture, and how to

reconcile the conflicts between family members.

Besides using Bakhtin's theory of chronotope as the main structure, I also apply Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* to interpret African Americans' mentality and Stuart Hall's theory on diaspora to clarify the issue of building new identities.

Suffering from inequality and discrimination, both the members of Younger family and other black characters in the play are apt to encounter the identity crisis under the dominance of the white American culture. They either feel helpless and passive about their own life or choose to be assimilated into the mainstream culture. To discuss the wide-spread tendency, I apply Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, the first voice of post-colonial discourse published in 1952. In the introduction, he directly points out that "the black is not a man," "the black is a black man," and "there are two camps: the white and the black" (9). For the blacks, "there is only one destiny"—white (10). He does not put emphasis on the colonizers or the established hierarchical system but the psychological structure of the colonized and how they are traumatized culturally, imprisoned by the colonial culture and language (13). Fanon argues that the so-called culture and black soul are nothing but "a white man's artifact" so that the blacks who receive education under the white system are no longer understood by their race or by themselves (14). The blacks give up their mother tongue, behavior, cultural memory and personality and are totally brainwashed not only in language but also in mind according to the model image provided by the colonizers.

Fanon further points out that in front of the white civilized people, blacks are inferior people who cannot think nor express themselves, for they are categorized as "savages, brutes, illiterates" (117). That everything white means goodness compels

them to deny themselves, and they are therefore “fixed” without any potential reception however strenuously they work to prove their ability through “refined manners, knowledge of literature, or understanding of the quantum theory” (116-7). No matter how assimilated the blacks become in American society, they can not be totally accepted because of their skin color, the crucial indicator of an individual’s social status. The only meaning of these blacks’ existence is to prove the superiority of the whites, who draw the stereotypical images for the inferior blacks and make them gradually forget who they are and follow the white ideology (17). Fanon reminds his readers that black people literally fall into slavery not because of the skin color but their silent acceptance of the self-rejection and devalued mind. Or rather, the “internalization” or “epidermalization” of this inferiority complex has penetrated their thinking (11). Fanon’s theory would be helpful to clarify how the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* submit themselves to the white social system and forget their own identity and origin.

As for how African Americans can effectively build up a new identity of their own against the white value and ideology, there is one important issue they need to consider: whether they should return to their African origin or accept the American culture. Stuart Hall’s theory is helpful to interpret the condition and figure out the answer. According to Stuart Hall, identity is a “production” always “in process” (“Diaspora” 222), and it is culturally constructed through “memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth” (“Diaspora” 226). Hall suggests two different ways of thinking about cultural identity: to look at the shared culture and history and to find out what the blacks really are and have become (“Diaspora” 223, 225). The past could provide a

stable ground to stand on first, but looking forward to what to do in the future would be a more practical way. Hall borrows the word “play” to characterize the instability, but it also gives forth the possibility of subverting the white hegemonic culture which has always dominated how the blacks think and act. He believes that with the approaching step of globalization, there are no more either-or choices between sticking to the root and falling into assimilation. Westernization is not the only way to success and hybridity becomes a new trend (“Diaspora” 234-5).

My concern here is to use the concept Stuart Hall proposes to deal with African Americans’ situation described in this play. While the recognition of the African roots indeed helps develop confidence in being black, African Americans still need to find their new identity by considering both their African and American cultural roots. It is quite doubtful that going back to Africa can really help find identity. In America, the blacks receive the same educational system and cultural mode as the whites. Even though they are black in skin color, these American blacks, just like their white counterparts, also have the same dream. It is a dream that belongs to every resident that comes to the new world to find a better life and build a home in this country. Even though most of the blacks are denied from equality, they still need to fight bravely for their identity.

By using the new theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Frantz Fanon, and Stuart Hall to reread *A Raisin in the Sun*, we may realize more Hansberry’s intention on writing the play and reach new insights and inspiration. As a testimony of black civil rights movement, *A Raisin in the Sun* reflects the historical time of the 1950s and proposes that even though suffering the confinement in space, African Americans should not

fall into passivity and assimilation; instead, they should strive for the improvement of social status, embrace both African and American cultural roots, and cherish their family pride to find a new identity.

In Chapter Two, I apply Bakhtin's theory on chronotope to examine the interconnection between the socio-historical background and the play and to interpret each character's behavior and thinking. Also, Fanon's findings on the blacks' mental state provide an explanation for the black characters' passivity and assimilation. In Chapter Three, the gist of the former chapter is continued to relate the text with its contemporary historical events of civil rights movements. I focus my discussion on how African Americans find or establish their new identity separately from social, cultural, and family perspectives. Stuart Hall's theory on cultural hybridity and diaspora is employed to specifically deal with the cultural perspective. Chapter Four is the conclusion of my thesis.