

Chapter Two

The Chronotope

A Raisin in the Sun tells the story of the Youngers, the African American family in the black ghetto, who seek a better life by moving into a new house which happens to be located in the white community. It introduces the segregation system as a social problem in America of the 1950s, which legally separated the people living in the same country into superior white and inferior colored according to their skin color. As the blacks' freedom was confined, they could not choose where to live, where to sit on, and where to go freely. The limited space carried a symbolic meaning of their class as well as identity in American society, suggesting the continual oppression even long after the era of slave liberation in 1886. Several decades before the play was written, the modern theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, pointed out the crucial meaning carried by space and he also drew our attention to the concept of chronotope when we interpret literary works. This chapter intends to examine *A Raisin in the Sun* from the perspective of Bakhtin's chronotope. As Bakhtin notes that literary texts represent history, *A Raisin in the Sun* truthfully reflects the contemporary society in 1959, a society where blacks either fall assimilated to the American white world or feel passive about their future under the white hegemony.

I. Chronotope of the 1950s

Bakhtin's chronotope is a way of understanding the play's related historical and social experiences. According to Bakhtin, time and space are not separate ideas but interconnected to each other; every chronotope is a "fused" sense of time and space

(Morson 368). As a way of understanding related historical, social, and biographical experiences, a chronotope plays as the role to help expose the nature of events and actions in literary works and explicate how texts relate to their social and political context. Bakhtin expresses his belief that a text represents history: “Out of the actual chronotopes of our world merge the reflected and created chronotopes of the world represented in the work” (Bakhtin 253). The author creates the works based on the image of the real world and responding to the historical and social events. Through this Bakhtinian perspective, we can see that *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first African American Broadway play, reveals not only the black people’s real life in the 1950s but also their self-negating slave mentality in face of the white hegemonic culture.

Slavery had existed long before the United States of America was established. After Columbus discovered the great land of America, Africans were unceasingly captured and sold as slaves to the South of the country to labor for cultivating the cotton and farming business. Even though America was one of the earliest white countries to prohibit importing black slaves and its Civil War ended in 1865 with the liberation of black slavery, American Negroes continued to suffer from unfair physical and psychological abuses in the aftermath because most people in the countries did not change their attitude toward the blacks, treating them as inferior creatures more similar to animals than human beings. During the years of World War I and the 1920s, there was the migration of blacks moving out of their rural South to the urban North in order to get rid of such torture as lynching and to seek job opportunities with better pay. Feeling pressured and threatened by the increasing black immigrants, the North made the modern racial ghetto a reality. The blacks faced discrimination both in

public spaces and in employment. Even though the free market in big cities allowed some chances for them to improve their economical condition and a few of them moved even upward to the middle classes, the jobs they could find were mostly of lower social status such as porters, waiters, or janitors for black men and cooks, domestics, and washerwomen for black women.

The mass migration continued during World War II and the postwar period, dramatically changing the demographic, economic, and political world of black America. Though free from the racism of the southern style, they were confined to northern ghettos and forced to encounter the laws which in every field prevented them from having equal rights with their white counterparts. In 1940, Jim Crow Laws further enforced strict separation of the races—in waiting rooms, movie theaters, restaurants, beaches, restrooms, and even drinking fountains. Schools, of course, were segregated. In the 1950s, the situation became tenser when Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, due to the atmosphere full of public fear during the Cold War, came to his autocratic reign and exposed America's hysterical anticommunism to scorn any kind of civilized revolution. In the McCarthy era, the Supreme Court even made it a crime to advocate revolution. However, the Civil Rights Movement began with dotted rebellions around the country and thrived in the 1960s to strive for more legally equal rights among all the Americans regardless of their ethnic background.¹

¹ Segregation shows discrimination not only to the black but also to other ethnic groups like the Jews, Asian Americans, and other colored people. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry only deals with the suffering of the African American family. Actually, the author also cares about the inhumanity toward the oppressed around the world with her passion to speak for justice. These themes can be found in other literary works by her such as *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, in which a Jewish intellectual questions his ability to bring about constructive change, and *What Use Are Flowers?*, in which a former English professor teaches nine savage children something about civilized life in the

A Raisin in the Sun, written in the 1950s and staged in 1959, reflects the turbulent time of segregation oppression and the Civil Rights movements.² Many of the episodes in the play model after the real historical events, and the racist institutionalization categorized into housing, living space, education, and employment will be separately discussed as follows.

A. Housing

First of all, the housing problem clearly reveals the discriminations. These African Americans were deprived of the right to choose and buy their own houses because of the law of segregation, and their safety might even be threatened by violent attack if they tried to challenge the white authority. For example, in the historical time of 1957, a black family bought a house from a white owner in Levittown, Pennsylvania, an area prohibiting from opening its development to Negroes (Patterson 358). Their action aroused local residents' rage and the mobs gathered around the house, throwing rocks and breaking windows. Two months later, the governor finally stopped the violence by expressing that he would never tolerate such harassment. Not until three years later did the tribunal charge the discrimination in the sales of houses unconstitutional.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry provides a similar situation of the real historical event. In the play, the whites' boycott also happens to the Younger family, who are going to be the first black family moving in the Clybourne Park where no

post-bomb era.

² For more detailed information about segregation and Civil Rights movement, please see *America in the Twentieth Century: A History* by James T. Patterson and *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* by Robert Weisbrot.

colored people live. Lena does not have many choices but this house located in the white community because the houses for colored people are more expensive than others. As Lena complains, “they put up for the colored in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other houses” (*Raisin* 93). These blacks always need to pay a lot more efforts to achieve the equal treatment to the whites, or they may only choose to accept the reality of their inferiority and stay in where they are supposed to feel satisfied with, the poor ghetto. In addition, Walter reads from the morning newspaper that there is another bomb attack in the neighborhood (*Raisin* 26), indicating that the area they are going to move to can never be expected friendly. These events in the play all indicate the hostility toward blacks in the historical background.

The earlier version of the ending of the play, though deleted in the later ones, also reflects some reality in history. The version most audiences watch now ends in a hopeful atmosphere; that is, the family finally decide to insist on their dream and leave the shabby living room happily. However, in the earlier version of the script, Hansberry wrote a more somber ending to describe the life after they move into their new house: The family sit in a darkened living room, armed, and wait for an attack by their white neighbors (Wilkerson, “Anniversary” 452). Even though this scene is not staged in the formal version, the version of the gloomy ending still shows some untold reality after the family’s jubilant moving. In the conservative society full of malice toward black people, violent attacks seem to be an inevitable challenge for the blacks who seek to push the society forwardly.

B. Living Space

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the space design of the stage also carries the ideological meaning that can be connected with its contemporary society the author intends to express. With the form of drama performances, this play provides the space of the stage to give forth meanings. Theatre would be a unique way to represent the temporal and spatial ambiguity because “all performance create a here which is not ‘here,’ [and] a now which is not ‘now,’ restlessly slicing time and space into layers of ‘difference’” (D. George, qtd in Gilbert 139). The design of the stage setting adds significant possibilities to the interpretations of the text because the setting of the play, the Youngers’ living room, manifests itself as a microcosm of the social context in which black people’s living space is confined and deprived. It provides the atmosphere that reflects the economical and social barriers the African Americans encounter.

To begin with, the stage direction of the setting in the first scene clearly shows the poverty and weariness of the Younger family:

The Younger living room would be a comfortable and well-ordered room if it were not for a number of indestructible contradictions to this state of being. Its furnishings are typical and undistinguished and their primary feature now is that they have clearly had to accommodate the living of too many people for too many years—and they are tired. (*Raisin* 23)

The furnishings of the room, which used to be selected with care, love, and hope, have now become shabby, symbolizing the dull and motionless life and deferred dreams. “Crocheted doilies” meant to protect the old couch come to be more important than the upholstery itself; chairs and tables have been moved to “disguise

the worn places in the carpet” which, however, “has fought back by showing its weariness, with depressing uniformity” (*Raisin* 23). The space is too small and narrow for a family with three generations. Travis, Walter’s son, has to sleep on the “make-down bed” in the living room while others have to share insufficient space in the small bedrooms (*Raisin* 24). In addition, they even do not have their own bathroom and have to share it with neighbors. The old apartment represents “the waste of Big Walter’s life” (Washington 117). Big Walter, the father, coming from the South with a big dream, finds this apartment to be a temporary home for him and his wife and a shelter for them to work on their ambitions. However, as many years have passed, he gets old and the house gets shabby. Even after he eventually dies of over-working, his big dream is not fulfilled at all.

The image of rats in the play also makes the description of the ghetto life concrete. Ruth compares their house to a “rat trap” because they have paid as much rent as four houses but still cannot find any better chance to move out (*Raisin* 44). Travis and other kids in the neighborhood chase a rat as a game, enjoying the bloody scene of killing the rat. He reports to his mother:

Mama, you should of seen the rat . . . Big as a cat, honest! That rat was really cuttin’ and Bubber caught him with his heel and the janitor, Mr. Barnett, got him with a stick—and then they got him in a corner and –BAM! BAM! BAM!—and he was still jumping around and bleeding like everything too—there’s rat blood all over the street—
(*Raisin* 59)

This not only reveals that these African American children live in a dirty and poor

environment, but it also suggests that African Americans, like the rats, are trapped in this ill environment. Even though the parents feel painful to see and hear the children's brutal game on rats and worry about the possible negative influence on the formation of future personality, all they can do is verbally dissuade the kids from joining the killing. They can actually do nothing practical to improve the whole living surroundings because they can hardly make their ends meet.

In the last scene, the image of rat appears again when Walter considers selling himself and his family out by agreeing with Lindner's proposal. Beneatha compares her brother to "a toothless rat" and attacks his behavior which is not supposed to be what a man should do (*Raisin* 144). As long as Walter gives up his dignity as a man and as an African American, he actually takes his inferiority in society as a rat, a label that he will never get rid of in the rest of his life. If these people confine themselves to the value judgment the outer white world imposes on them, they can never walk out of the mouse trap.

The implicative language of the stage direction indicates the dry hope of the whole ghetto blacks. The family can only enjoy the sole natural light in the course of the day through the single little window located in the kitchen area, suggesting that the blacks under the segregation laws can barely bear hope for the future. The whole play only takes place in one setting, the living room, giving forth the idea that the Younger family, like all the blacks in American society, are stuck and confined in the limited space. Without a chance to move freely, they live in a small, dirty, and trapped space in the ghetto and gradually lose self-esteem to voice out for their own.

C. Education

Beneatha, as a black woman, may be lucky enough to get the access to entering college and even dream of becoming a doctor; however, in the real situation, it might not be so normal to see such freedom of black schooling because most African Americans were denied equal sources in education as their white counterparts. Early in 1955, the Supreme Court passed *Brown v. Board of Education*³ to rule that “separate but equal” doctrine regarding school segregation was unconstitutional. It pointed out that segregation on schools deprived the black children of equal learning opportunities and conflicted with the spirits of the Fourteenth Amendment⁴ that guaranteed the equal protection. However, *Brown v. Board Education* did not abolish the segregation in other public areas such as restaurants or restrooms, and neither did it demand the public schools to set a specific time for desegregation. Years later, some regional governments and schools still ignored the laws and continued to enforce segregation as the white parents’ or the white community’s wills in order not to let the black contaminate the white purity. In 1962, James Meredith became the first black man to enroll as a student at the all-white University of Mississippi. He was challenged by racist white politicians and by angry white crowds that caused a violent protest on campus (Patterson 379). These cases show that in the educational institutions, black students still had a long way to go before actually receiving equal distribution of learning resources.

Contrasted with these real cases in history, Beneatha’s dream to be a doctor

³ For more information on this Act initiated by NAACP, please see Chapter One of this thesis, p. 11.

⁴ The Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution is one of the post-Civil War amendments ratified in 1868. The amendment provides a broad definition of national citizenship and requires the states to provide equal protection under the law to all persons within their jurisdictions. The aim is to ensure equal protection regardless of race (Konvitz 1001).

might be regarded as a castle in the air. Even if her brother does not lose the money for her medical education, she would soon come to find that there are more obstacles for such a young African American woman to enter a medical school, not to mention becoming a doctor. By portraying such a passionate girl whose ambition may be considered too big and unpractical, Hansberry expresses pity for the talented generation because they must pay much more efforts for personal ideals and they may finally wake up to find hard work may not necessarily guarantee any rewards.

D. Employment

The low-end jobs the African Americans can only find reflect the harsh truth of racial discrimination in America in the 1950s. Most of the blacks seeking lucrative jobs in the North found that migration did not bring any change to the racial relationship in the social structure. Colored people were excluded from expanding and high-pay industries and were channeled into low-pay “Negro” jobs with little prospect for advancement. Most blacks were trapped in unskilled labor, working hard continuously with little payment and without chances to ascend and be respected. In the play, even though there are three working people in the Younger family, the total income does not promise them a sufficient life or take them out of poverty. Readers can easily find the reason through the types of jobs they do: Lena and Ruth as domestic workers for white families and Walter as a chauffeur for a white master. These characters, like other African Americans of this particular historical context, have to face plenty of confinement in employment. We also see that black workers are not well treated or respected by their white employers. For example, Ruth is called “girl” by her employer even though she is already a woman in the thirties. Seeing

Ruth feel uncomfortable, Lena suggests her to use the flu as the reason for staying at home, for “it sounds respectable to ’em” and “something white people get, too” (*Raisin* 43). This shows that the whites might not treat their black employees with humanity but exploit their labor excessively by ignoring their needs, discomfort, or illness.

II. Chronotope of Characters

According to Bakhtin, chronotope “determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature” (Bakhtin 85). Bakhtin believes every literary image is chronotopic, and each character in the literary works represents different voices in society which can be understood when put into a specific chronotope he or she belongs to (251). We can analyze the actions and responses of the characters in the play by taking into consideration the historical background and their social positions. There is a split of the chronotope between “human public” and “private existence”: the public and historical events “are shown as inescapable part of the protagonists’ personal histories and subjectivity” (Vice 203). To get the existential meaning, these two parts are dependent on each other: “social and political events gain meaning . . . only thanks to their connection with private life” (Bakhtin 109). Due to this inseparable connection between the private life and its public situation, it is necessary to look into historical and social information in order to effectively understand the characters.

Bakhtin’s theory and chronotopic reading further indicate practical ways to treat the representation of the characters in the literary work. He points out that we should

begin with language, “a treasure-house of image,” which carries significant meanings of the speaker’s thought and status (Bakhtin 251). The language is often related to the social and educational level. Standard or formal languages are often used by the better-educated while less formal ones are used by the ordinary people. Through analyzing the context of the characters’ speeches, we will grab an understanding of the speakers’ thinking and attitude out of the specific background and times.

As mentioned before, the play is like a microcosm of the author’s contemporary society. It features three main chronotopes of characters: domineering whites, passive blacks, and assimilated blacks. Facing the white domination, the blacks are apt to negate their own identities. On the one hand, the characters like Lena Younger, Ruth Younger, and Mrs. Johnson, fall into passivity and set limits for themselves. On the other hand, Walter Younger, Beneatha Younger, and George Murchison, are examples of assimilationists because of their pursuit of white culture and value. To have a comprehensive interpretation of these character’s motives, needs, and decisions, the chronotopes they represent will be dealt with respectively as follows.

A. Domineering Whites

In the play, the whites carry the dominant power no matter whether they are present or not. Karl Lindner, the representative of the Clybourne Park community, is the only white character appearing on the stage. In order to keep their community completely and purely white, he justifies himself in terms of the respect for personal freedom and the righteousness of the whites to choose their preferable neighbors.

Some other white characters such as Walter’s boss and Ruth’s employer are mentioned in the dialogues. They all have the better social and economical status,

possessing the superiority to hire the blacks to do laborious jobs for them. There are also “rich white women” who travel all the time and “don’t think nothing of packing up they suitcases and piling on one of them big steamships and swoosh” (*Raisin* 44). The extravagant life style they enjoy is totally out of the blacks’ imagination and capability. These white characters do not show up; however, as they are occasionally mentioned in the Youngers’ conversation as a sharp contrast to the blacks’ standard of living, they do have a great influence on the thinking of the blacks who have no choice but to accept the reality of their inferiority.

B. Passive Blacks

Characters like Lena, Ruth, and Mrs. Johnson are the African Americans who feel passive about their future; therefore, they limit their own potential and give up possible chances the active actions may bring.

1. Lena Younger

Lena, with limited thoughts about the new age, keeps a conservative attitude toward the future development of African Americans. As a mother facing the rapid transition in time and feeling uncertain about the new age, she cannot understand or accept the concepts in the new generation and therefore has limited thoughts about her son’s dream. A woman full of strength and nobility, she is the matriarch of the family. According to Hansberry’s screenplay written in 1960, Lena “was born some place in the border about 1890” and she “had come to Chicago during the Great Migration of the First World War with her husband” (Keppel 192). This geographical and historical background information helps us understand Lena’s way of thinking toward the world around her. Hers is very different from her children’s. Being one of the laborers of the

old generation born and raised in the South, Lena experiences various kinds of racial oppression. She lives through the passage of time and feels time is changing too fast.

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 . . . Now here come you and Beneatha—talking 'bout things we ain't never even thought about hardly, me and your daddy. You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done. I mean that you had a home; that you don't have to ride to work on the back of nobody's streetcar—you my children—and how different we done become. (*Raisin* 74)

In the past, Lena and her husband used to run away from slavery and lynch in the South in order to find the basic needs as a human being so that they will not be treated as tools or animals. To Lena and her husband, it is a real progress at their time since they have fought for the equality in the public spaces like streetcars and also for the rights to earn their own money through working, for they are no longer part of the whites' property. She resents not being understood or appreciated by her children who still aspire more.

Lena cannot understand the new types of freedom her son expects. Walter's dream of buying a liquor store, being the boss himself, and even improving his social status is far beyond Lena's imagination of what a black man can accomplish.

Religious Lena sighs over her children's unchristian talking about money; neither does she trust that the business of liquor would bring any fortune at all. Instead, she regards it as a risk or a ruin to avoid. She strongly protests: "I don't want that on my ledger this late in life" (*Raisin* 42). Lena supposes her son would be satisfied with

what Big Walter and she have done for their children, providing them with a home and freedom from physical torture. The business world is too risky for the blacks to enter because they can hardly bear any failure with rare chances to succeed. So, she thinks they should never expose themselves to a totally strange world out of their control. Feeling frightened and uncertain of the field she has no knowledge about, she only wants to keep what she has held in her hands. However, Lena's conservatism hinders her son from making his own decision and figuring out his own future path. At the same time, she also makes her opinions narrow on the boundary of the blacks' potential.

Lena's conservative attitude is understandable because her frustrating growing background has forced her to focus more on the basic needs in life rather than ask for the possibility of changing the whole outer environment. Lena actually used to have a great dream. She explains,

I remember just as well the day me and Big Walter moved in here. Hadn't been married but two weeks and wasn't planning on living here no more than a year. (She shakes her head at the dissolved dream) We was going to set away, little by little, don't you know, and buy a little place out in Morgan Park. We had picked out the house . . . you should know all the dream I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back—And didn't none of it happen. (*Raisin* 44-45)

For the young generation who tend to prove their potential, Lena's dream of buying a new house seems to be too restricted and short-sighted. But, even so, this dream is still so unattainable that Big Walter cannot fulfill this dream for his whole life. Were it

not for Big Walter's insurance money, the Younger family could not make the dream come true and afford to buy a new house. Viewed from this perspective, Lena's consideration for the basic needs of her children seems to be more reasonable than Walter's. Hence, her restricted thinking is understandable because she lives in the time when racial discrimination narrows her perspectives and beliefs about what a black person could reasonably expect to achieve in American society (Washington 113). She is a fighter in her own practical way of buying the house, which the young generation later recognize and find value in.

2. Ruth Younger

Although devoted and responsible, Ruth, the daughter-in-law, still feels powerless toward the relationship with her husband and feels hopeless toward the pitfalls her children may face. She devotes her life to the family as Lena does. She is practical in pursuing a better life for the family, for women are mostly charged with the responsibility of raising children and maintaining the home. However, she gets caught in the feeling of inertia because of the dull life and harsh relationship with her husband. In her mid-thirties, she has been "a settled woman" who wears disappointment in her face (*Raisin* 24). Being a colored woman, she has obvious dissatisfaction toward her life and can not even help herself to find a way out. In response to her husband, she apparently shows her indifference with irritating responses.

Walter: Something the matter with you this morning?

Ruth: No—I'm just sleepy as the devil. What kind of eggs you want?

Walter: Not scrambled. (*Ruth starts to scramble eggs.*) Paper come?

(Ruth points impatiently to the rolled up Tribune on the table, and he gets it and spreads it out and vaguely reads the front page) Set off another bomb yesterday.

Ruth: *(Maximum indifference)* Did they?

Walter: *(Looking up)* What's the matter with you?

Ruth: Ain't nothing the matter with me. And don't keep asking me that this morning. *(Raisin 26)*

In the conversation, we see the African American housewife, tired of everyday routines, is indifferent with everything her husband mentions and makes a protest to reveal her dissatisfaction.

The frustration in her relationship with Walter also makes Ruth powerless. Racial discrimination and economical exploitation not only oppress black men and women but also tense their relationship (Friedman 85). The cold and indifferent language between them breaks the possibility of communication and expresses Ruth's helplessness. Ruth is blamed by Walter for not supporting his ambition and indirectly emasculating him (*Raisin 27*). In their conversation, she is indicted by Walter that she is like the women who "don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody" (*Raisin 34-35*). In response to Walter's accusation, she can do nothing to change the status quo but can only express complaints which are "too automatic to deserve emphasis" (*Raisin 27*).

Feeling hopeless about her life, Ruth even considers about abortion when she finds herself pregnant because she is worried about the economical burden the new-born baby may bring to the family. However, abortion involves "an illegal

procedure at that time which could subject Ruth to severe criminal penalties” (Domina 8). Her determination is understood by her mother-in-law, Lena, for Lena herself lost a baby once and understands how painful the suffrage may be. It is a dilemma between whether a mother should keep the child out of the love for her own child, or abort it due to the cruel reality of the family’s poverty. Both Ruth and Lena know very clearly that “[w]hen the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family. The part that’s already living” (*Raisin* 75). African American women often fall into the dilemma between the love toward their children and the toilsome future they do not want the children to suffer.

The paradox of the mothers’ protection of their children by preventing the life to be born to the cruel world can also be found in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which reveals the psychology of the slave mother. The novel, based on a true incident, tells a story in 1873 about an escaped slave mother who would choose to sacrifice her children rather than allow them to be taken back to slavery by the catchers. Slavery denied the black mothers the right to feel maternal love and forced them to become “functional brood mares” (Demetrakopoulos 71). For the protagonist, Sethe, it is better for her children to die in the cradle than to live like puppets, wasting the whole lives for someone else’s needs. And that is why she chooses to murder her children.

I won’t never let her go. I’ll explain to her, even though I don’t have to.

Why I did it. How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she’ll

understand, because she understands everything already. (Morrison 200)

As a mother, she cannot bear to see her children encounter the same destiny as she has.

In a *Raisin in the Sun*, we also see the mother paradoxically considers annihilating her love for the baby and killing it since she may not be able to provide it with a comfortable future life.

3. Mrs. Johnson

The Youngers' neighbor, Mrs. Johnson, a woman who distains any aggressive movement that may bring disorder to the current situation, represents the conservative blacks' opinions. Besides deeming the Younger's decision of moving to be too aggressive, she contradicts with Lena on whether the black should be satisfied with labor jobs. A noisy neighbor "enthusiastic about EVERYTHING in life" (*Raisin* 99), Mrs. Johnson irritates the Younger family with her meddlesome and fussy attitude. In the scene of her appearance, she first brings the latest news of black people being attacked in their house:⁵

Johnson: I guess y'all seen the news what's all over the colored paper this week . . .

Mama: No—didn't get mine yet this week.

Johnson: You mean you ain't read 'bout them colored people that was bombed out their place out there? Ain't it something how bad these here white folks is getting here in Chicago! Lord, getting so you think you right down in Mississippi! . . . 'Course I thinks it's wonderful how our folks keeps on pushing out. You hear some of these Negroes round here talking 'bout how they don't go where they ain't wanted

⁵ The scene of the conversation between Mrs. Johnson and Lena Younger is edited out in the earlier version but recollected in the later ones to make the insights of the play complete.

and all that—but not me, honey! (*This is a lie*) (*Raisin* 100-101)

As conservative as she is, Mrs. Johnson prefers to stay still and preserve what she already has gotten rather than go out to encounter change and danger. She is a supporter of Booker T. Washington who proposes that “education spoiled many a good plow hand” (*Raisin* 103). Booker T. Washington, one of the great thinkers in Harlem Renaissance in 1920, argued that the African Americans should “develop the skills necessary for manual labor instead of aspiring to professions that required more academic training” (*Domina* 9). The attitude of accommodation and economic self-sufficiency limits the blacks to stay where they belong so that they have no further demand other than feeling happy about the current life quality. As Mrs. Johnson tends to prevent any possible danger or violence in the course of social movement, she also refuses the chance to upgrade her status quo and only accepts the fact that the blacks are a race for laborious jobs without any upward progression.

C. Assimilated Blacks

Whereas characters such as Lena, Ruth, and Mrs. Johnson remain passive in the social context dominated by the whites, other blacks fall victims to assimilation under the hegemony of the white culture. The value judgment of Walter, Beneatha, and George Murchison is based on the internalized white ideology that has deeply influenced them physically and mentally.

1. Walter Younger

Walter Lee, a black man born in the working class, has no power to change his status quo and cannot find his own subjectivity. Devoid of his own subjectivity, Walter succumbs to whites’ value judgment. The two best illustrations are his

denigration of his own people and his pursuit of the American dream. Like a bird trapped, he dreams of fleeing from the cage of destiny: “I want to go off somewhere and be by myself for a while” (*Raisin* 72). For Walter, domestic space is the feminine sphere, but the outside world is a masculine space to adventure, to prove his ability, and to find a new identity. However, after losing his job he just drives out of town and fools around without exploring any new chances, for he could actually find none. No matter how hard he plans, fixed in the black ghetto in poverty, he is not capable of bringing any practical change to his and his family’s plight. He expresses his dissatisfaction to his mother, “sometimes it’s like I can see the future stretched out in front of me—just plain as day” (*Raisin* 73). This sense of hopelessness is even more acutely felt after he has lost a big part of the insurance money to his partner. Walter feels desperate that any resistance is useless and the change is too little and slow to do any real progress. Considering Lindner’s suggestion and selling his dignity out, he gives up his great expectations. Walter is a typical example of black males who lack meaningful and well-paid jobs and face self-image crisis. It is easy for him to deny self-respect and hold an unrealistic prospect.

Losing confidence in his race, Walter completely agrees to whites’ value judgment and looks down upon his own people. In the society where the white life is always more well-organized and prosperous, he can not help but fall into dependence on the white models, accepting the ideology that everything related to the whites is beautiful while everything related to the blacks appears to be ugly. Walter idolizes white men; he fancies, “those white boys are sitting back and talking ’bout things . . . sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars” (Hansberry, *Raisin* 74). His

warped and fetishized image of whites is full of active stimulation which symbolizes hope, brightness and dream. However, when he talks about the image of blacks, it is a different picture. With the knowledge of his wife's pregnancy, he harshly attacks her as well as his fellow black, "we all tied up in a race of people that don't know how to do nothing but moan, pray, and have babies!" (*Raisin* 87). For Walter, his own people are ignorant without any bright prospect.

Besides the contempt for black people, the other example to illustrate Walter's assimilation is his strong belief in the American dream. Walter Younger dares to dream big as the whites. With iron will and high expectation of himself, Walter determines to prove his potential of success. He is "an American more than he is anything else" (Hansberry, "Willie Loman" 8), accepting American values, acting in a typical American way, and refusing to limit himself in "stereotypes, myths, and untruths about Blacks" (Washington 114). The self-love makes him hold a deep belief that he can do what the whites do and that there is no color difference in fulfilling the American dream.

The American dream Walter pursues provides a vision of equality and freedom for every individual. An American scholar contends, the American dream, a vision without boundaries, brings the possibility of change.

Americans persist in believing that ours is the greatest country in the world, that man is basically good and can be better and that he has a right to personal dignity and the opportunity to fulfill his productive capacities. The belief that America should offer equal opportunity to all men is a fundamental part of the American dream. (Werner xi)

The first settlers came to America yearning for the second chance and hoping to make better lives for themselves and their children. It was also the similar case with the blacks when they migrated from the rural South to the urban North in order to find a new life. The new space could endow them with different meanings and lead them into another stage of life. The storyline of *A Raisin in the Sun* centers on the hopeful possibilities the insurance money may bring about. Ben Keppel argues that the “enabling device” of the insurance money in the play broadly “illuminated the American dream in a few of its forms and implications” (Keppel 193). The ten-thousand-dollar check represents not only Big Walter’s torturous working for his entire wasteful life but also a hope, a precious chance for the poor family to improve their living quality.

However, Walter is destined to fail because he focuses on the material part of the dream without paying attention to the more important moral part of the dream. Lorraine Hansberry compares and contrasts Walter Younger with Willy Loman in her essay “Willie Loman, Walter Younger, and He Who Must Live” in response to Gerald Weales’s discovery that between these two characters, there is a simple line of descent to accept the values of the American culture (8). They are both “remote” from society, having “virtually no values which have not come out of their culture, and to a significant point, no view of the possible solutions to their problems which do not also come out of self-same culture” (8). For them, “the weight of the loss of the money is in fact, the weight of death” (8). They both chase after personal wealth in the prospect the American dream brings, but become slaves to money who ignore the fact that the opportunities also come up with hazards. Hansberry points out the common problem:

they forget to “question the nature of this desired ascendancy” and only “believe in the world as it has been presented” (8). Eager to succeed, Walter, like Willie Loman, ignores the pitfalls in the business world, but, with his wishful thinking, he only focuses on the sole chance he believes to be worthy of expectation. The obvious resemblance between Walter and Willie manifests a feature of the male protagonist of *A Raisin in the Sun*: Walter has been tremendously influence by whites’ ideology.

Walter’s dream based on a quite unstable ground meets frustrations from the whites’ oppression and his own lack of experience. The blacks share the same dream with the whites, but they suffer more because there is ambiguity in the American dream itself. Lloyd Brown considers that Hansberry “has ironically juxtaposed the ideal possibilities of the dream with the limitations of the American reality” (Brown 244). Poor black people in the lower status are made outsiders because American traditions do not treat them as part of the American society but wish them to be “exotic” (Hansberry, “Willie Loman” 8).⁶ The men who confidently assert that all men are created equal in the pursuit of happiness and liberty rights also permit themselves to be the owner of slaves or the subjugators of the blacks. Hence, the blacks need to face other kinds of challenges in their pursuit of the American dream, fighting against the white institution for human dignity.

Several faults of Walter in his value judgment also make his dream unattainable.

His first fault is that he underestimates the importance of education and lacks

⁶ Lorraine Hansberry explains that many critics are incapable of discussing Walter’s pure class aspiration. Instead, they interpret his case as an exotic man’s longing to deal with the white world, which he never can enter. Most audiences have been accustomed to the images and personalities of the black prototypes expressed by white authors; therefore, it is hard for them to treat the new emerged character with righteous value judgment (“Willie Loman” 8).

professional knowledge needed for business investment. Walter does not understand the power of knowledge so that he suggests that Beneatha find a good marriage and be quiet rather than dream about studying to be a doctor (*Raisin* 38). He cannot stand his sister's "acting holy" (*Raisin* 37). On the one hand, he does not have the access to higher education, so he does not know what exactly knowledge can bring; on the other hand, he is too self-centered to care about or understand her eagerness to learn and try new things. All that he shows high concern for is his own liquor business. He feels that education is a waste of time and that it does not correspond to his conception of manhood because he has disdain for the sensitive and intellectual types who pursue it (Washington 121). In his resentful speech to George Murchison, the college student, he clearly expresses his prejudice that education will be the hindrance to the expression of masculinity.

I see you all all the time—with the books tucked under your arms—going to your "clahsses." And for what! What the hell you learning over there? Filling up your heads—with the sociology and the psychology—but they teaching you how to be a man? How to take over and run the world? They teaching you how to run a rubber planatation or a steel mill? Naw—just to talk proper and read books and wear them faggoty-looking white shoes . . . (*Raisin* 84-5)

There is no cultural basis in the poor black community to indicate the crucial connection between education and business world, which makes him unable to learn the importance of business management (Washington 121). He just gambles and dreams of making money without careful analyses on how the business may work or

what risks he needs to take. One can foresee even when he does start his own business, he will find it too difficult to run well due to his lack of knowledge and experience.

Second, the liquor business which Walter wants to invest in is not a stable one but one that is full of pitfalls in the capitalistic world. In order to have his license approved, he takes graft as a necessary step and hands over the money to his partners to “spread it ’round” (*Raisin* 127). As a green hand in the business world, he is prone to interpret the way to success from his “narrow, outsider’s perspective” (Greenfield 136). Eager to make big money overnight, he believes no more that hard work brings success. However, he is only another prey devoured by the risky business field.

Most important of all, Walter’s dream is impractical and unstable in the white capitalistic world. The only scene that Walter can speak his complete dream without interruption by the other female characters in the family is when he tells his dream vision fully to his son, Travis.⁷ This scene clearly presents Walter’s value judgment, and also foreshadows Walter’s gamble with the family’s money (Wilkerson, “Anniversary” 446; Keppel 212). In his speech, what he defines as success all depends on how much money he makes. If only he became rich, he could be the boss giving orders to the subordinates, drive a black Chrysler, provide his wife with a Cadillac to go shopping in, have a big house with a gardener, and fulfill all his son’s wishes (*Raisin* 109). In his dream, all these would come after the business transaction which is going to change their lives. However, he only sees the glamorous life of the

⁷ This scene is cut down in the version of original production because of the limit of performing time. According to Hansberry’s husband, Robert Nemiroff, this scene as well as other eliminated ones do carry significant meanings because Hansberry tries to make a point (“Introduction” xi). This is why he restored them to later publications.

rich without truly perceiving the hard work, the progressive knowledge, and the experience are necessary prerequisites before one can make profits.

Even though he gives up his own subjectivity and totally accepts the white value, Walter is still confronted with numerous obstacles in fulfilling his dream. This is because he does not realize the true value of the American dream, which lies in the equality and freedom, the moral aspects. Without any professional knowledge and practical attitude, Walter finds his life worthless and becomes another victim devoured by the white-dominated world.

2. Beneatha Younger

Like her brother assimilated into whites' American dream, Beneatha, receiving the college education and accepting the white ideology, thinks whites' language, education, and knowledge superior to blacks'. Beneatha shows her superiority to her mother, brother, and sister-in-law through the language she speaks. According to the stage direction, her language is "a mixture of many things; it is different from the rest of the family's since education has permeated her sense of English" (*Raisin* 35). She speaks the standard English in order to separate herself from the rest of the family.

As the only one who receives college education among the family members, Beneatha tends to regard herself superior. She shows off her white knowledge and education and despises her own black family. In her conversation with her family, she is eager to prove her intelligence to them by grabbing any opportunities to challenge their way of thinking. Disapproving of her mother's devotion to the church, Beneatha attempts to educate her mother by expressing her ideas about salvation (*Raisin* 57). She often speaks French in front of the family to show off her superiority. Her brother

cannot even understand how Beneatha teases him when she calls him “Monsieur le petit bourgeois noir” meaning Mister little black middle class in English (*Raisin* 138). When Ruth comments that Beneatha is fresh and then adds that she is “just fresh as salt,” Beneatha answers with a pedantic response that “if the salt loses its savor,” a phrase from the Bible to show off her knowledge. By using this quote, she tries to make her point clear that “she knows the Bible from an intellectual point of view but that she does not believe in its religious messages” (James 17). Beneatha’s education has been supported by Ruth’s willingness to work in the rich white people’s kitchen and sacrifice her youthful years, but the young girl does not show her appreciation at all. Her disrespect to Ruth indicates her remoteness from reality and lack of thoughtfulness.

Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* has a very insightful analysis of such behavior and mentality as Beneatha’s. Fanon believes that the phenomenon of language provides “one of the elements in the colored man’s comprehension of the dimension of the other,” for “it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other” (*Fanon* 17). In his observation of the Antilles Negroes, he discovers that the more they can master French, the white people’s language, the whiter they think they proportionately become. That is, they will “come closer to being a real human being” (*Fanon* 18). The Negro who comes back to his hometown from Paris no longer speaks his mother tongue but French. By adopting a different language, he shows his “dislocation, a separation” from the group he was born in (*Fanon* 25). “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (*Fanon* 38), so he seems to gain the power of the white world through speaking their language and neglecting his past. In school,

Negro students are forbidden to use Creole and are taught the officially spoken language. The educational system has labeled French as a civilized language, which serves as the way for the blacks to get rid of the images of barbarians and strive for respect. Fanon also declares that in addition to the Antilles, the same behavior patterns are common “in every race that has been subjected to colonization” (*Fanon* 25). By speaking French and being pedantic, Beneatha, like the Antilles Negroes, comes back home to show discrimination against her family. Beneatha’s self-elated superiority shows her unwitting subjugation by whites.

In spite of her strong denial, Beneatha is assimilated into the white culture. Beneatha wants to emphasize that she is not “an assimilationist” to Asagai when he comments that assimilation is quite popular in America (*Raisin* 63). However, her eagerness to draw a clear line between herself and other blacks clearly shows that she has adopted the white ideology to negate her own people. Lost in the cultural context, she does not think about how to help her people out of poverty and plight but picks up any fresh things that attract her attention in the popular trend. The “different forms of expression” and the identity she asserts are nothing she really understands (*Raisin* 48). It is no exaggeration when Walter declares that Beneatha has brainwashed herself because she has forgot the cultural roots and family pride as she accuses her brother and his wife of being old-fashioned (*Raisin* 113). Her value judgment is based upon the white culture so that she regards money as the only means to fulfill dreams. After knowing Walter has lost the money, she easily turns to desperation and gives up her dream of becoming a doctor. The dream built on the basis of money is too fragile for her to preserve.

3. George Murchison

Rich and educated, George Murchison has more power to control over his own life; however, he distains his own heritage and chooses to think as a white man.

Among all the black characters in the play, Beneatha's suitor, George Murchison, is a serious case of assimilation. As a middle class rich enough to "buy that big hotel on the Drive" (*Raisin* 83), he holds more control over his own life. He receives college education, gets the degree, travels freely to any place he wants, and will inherit the family business or even start his own as long as he wishes to. In his life, there are not many problems for him to worry about, which makes him self-centered and disrespectful towards his own people. He even ignores that he is black because he has a higher social status and more access to the white world. He feels ashamed of his African heritage by plainly telling Beneatha that the heritage is "nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts" (*Raisin* 81). When explaining to Ruth what "assimilationist" means, Beneatha accuses George of being a typical assimilationist, "someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case *oppressive* culture" (*Raisin* 81). George's dressing style is also the indication of assimilation. Through Walter's scrutinizing eye, we see George from head to toe: he is carefully dressed in a "casual tweed sports jacket over cashmere V-neck sweater over soft eyelet shirt and tie, and soft slacks, finished off with white buckskin shoes" (*Raisin* 83). The description of George Murchison's "college style" dressing demonstrates the white cultural influence on this black school boy (*Raisin* 83). How he dresses himself not only indicates his distinct status and position but also suggests that he identifies himself as

a well-educated intellectual as whites.

George is proud of his knowledge and shows off his superiority by talking pedantically. He calls Walter “Prometheus,”⁸ a mythic character that he clearly knows Walter has no idea about (*Raisin* 86). However, going to college and acquiring knowledge is nothing valuable in his opinions. In his view, “you read books to learn facts, to get grades, to pass the course, to get a degree. That’s all. It has nothing to do with thoughts” (*Raisin* 97). George does not value the intellectual and psychological needs, and all his happiness is based on the material level.

The arrangement of George Murchison sets a contrast to the Younger family. George, rich enough to travel freely, possesses more space of change or progress than Walter, the poor and helpless chauffer whose potential is relatively confined.

Ruth: What time is the show?

George: It’s eight-thirty curtain. That’s just Chicago, though. In New York standard curtain time is eight forty.

(He is rather proud of this knowledge.)

Ruth: *(Properly appreciating it)* You get to New York a lot?

George: *(Offhand)* Few times a year.

Ruth: Oh—that’s nice. I’ve never been to New York.

Walter: New York ain’t got nothing Chicago ain’t. Just a bunch of hustling people all squeezed up together—being “eastern.”

George: Oh—you’ve been?

⁸ “Prometheus” is the Greek god who brought fire to mankind and whose punishment for that act consisted of having birds eat out his liver through eternity. In a sense this reference is apt, for Walter is being internally consumed by forces beyond him (*Domina* 9).

Walter: *Plenty* of times. (*Raisin* 82)

As Fanon mentions, George's case is similar to those who are capable of going to Paris to emphasize their difference and separateness from their hometown people (Fanon 25). The way George shows off to despise Ruth and especially Walter is the same as how the whites denigrate the blacks.

In order to probe into Murchison's thinking, we may resort to Fanon's analysis on the social phenomenon of cultural dominance. In Fanon's view, the black as well as the white children figure out their conception toward the world through the media of the story books, the nation sagas, and the magazines. All of the comic books and magazines serve as "a release of collective aggression" and "are put together by white men for little white men" (Fanon 146), creating an atmosphere that they should feel fear of the Negroes, who are the incarnation of evil and darkness. As the little black children are exposed to the same cultural forms, they develop a contradictory thinking to identify themselves with the white men.

In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white little boy, becomes an explorer, an adventure, a missionary "who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes." (Fanon 146)

The black children do not regard themselves as Negroes. In education, they also "subjectively adopt a white man's attitude" to see the world (Fanon 147). In schools, they learn that white men are the explorers, the bringer of civilization to carry "an

all-white truth” to savages (Fanon 147). That the Negro is all the time described as “a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety” creates the stereotypical image of savage, animal, devil, sin, ugliness, darkness, and immortality (Fanon 151). The black men losing the identification of their own existential meaning act only for the Other, the whites, who can alone give them worth.

Fanon further declares that people are not born with the collective unconsciousness, which is “the sum of prejudices, myths, and collective attitudes of a given group (Fanon 188). Instead, people acquire it culturally and socially (Fanon 188). Therefore, these black men not only are slaves to the white men but also enslave themselves by ignorantly accepting the white truth claiming the inferiority of blackness. George Murchison has been one of the blacks who become “the slave of this cultural imposition” (Fanon 192). He acts like a white and also silently ignores the fact that he is a Negro.

Walter, Beneatha, and George follow the white ideology and regard money as the crucial indicator of happiness. In order to survive and succeed, the blacks have to accommodate themselves to the white world. For them, money is the source of both social and political freedom in America (Washington 120). It is the social and economic realities the blacks recognize in the alienation from society (Fanon 10-11). Facing the double process of economic depression and “epidermalization” of the inferiority (Fanon 11), they need to handle self-hatred caused by not only poverty but also indignity.

The chronotopic aspects of backgrounds, settings, and characters in the play reflect the historical time of the 1950s and present that African Americans, under the

white dominance, either choose to hold a pessimistic attitude towards their status quo or fall assimilated to the white hegemonic culture. The lack of control over their own lives is the major cause of African-American's failure to achieve success in the country. In society, characters' action can be understood as each character represents different chronotopes. The passive blacks give up their dream before they can make it come true because they have their consideration and limitations. The assimilated blacks forget who they are and even betray their own people because of the social status they belong to. Besides the two groups mentioned in this chapter, Asagai, the student from Africa, provides the play with another different voice from African blacks, which will be further discussed in the following chapter.

In fact, acceptance of the white ideology and pursuit of money cannot help African Americans find true identity or solve their plight. The play shows that there will be tough problems for African Americans if they can not find their true identity and a new recognition of themselves. In the play, there are still unresolved problems left for the Younger family. First, they still need to pay the rest of mortgage, 125 dollars each month, for the house. Besides, there is one more mouth to feed since Ruth is expecting a new baby. Walter has lost his job for his absence of work during depression, and it would be difficult to find a new one in a short time. Beneatha, who has lost the money to support her medical education, needs to reconsider her future plan and may join the work field. Moreover, the pregnant Ruth has to work even harder, for she believes that they must move into the house regardless of any hindrance. "I'll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago . . . I'll strap my baby on my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America and wash all the

sheets in America if I have to—but we got to MOVE!” (*Raisin* 140). Her words show strong wills, but they also reveal the future full of sadness when the image of the woman scrubbing the floors with her new-born child on her back is depicted. And still, the major problem they are going to face is that there is a hostile neighborhood waiting for them. Their life does not end with the fall of the curtain on the stage but will go on with many financial and social difficulties in reality. African Americans as well as the Younger family will neither find self-identity nor gain happiness as long as they still focus their attention on winning recognition through striving for money in the white capitalistic society. Before everything else, they have to have a different understanding about life and themselves; they must have a new born identity.