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"We don't want to make no trouble for nobody:" A Sociosemiotic Analysis of *A Raisin in the Sun*

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Abstract

Relying sociosemiotic analysis, ethnocentric studies of "whiteness," and reception theory, this essay attempts to understand how readers have decided that A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry is "universal" in its appeal despite being a "black play" about black characters by a black playwright. It surmises that for many white Americans those happy endings correspond to a white ideology and identity that many fail to recognize as a "race," or what some sociologists interested in white studies label "whiteness as the invisible norm." Focusing on three main characters that seem to transform, it explores stereotypes of black Americans and white reading of those characters.

Over the twenty years that I have taught *A Raisin in the Sun* in upper-level drama courses and seminars, nearly all off my students have concluded that Hansberry's play is "inspiring," "hopeful," and "positive;" many have described it the best example of a play that embodies the American Dream. Little wonder that in their essays and in our classroom discussion, the students argue that unlike our other reading selections *A Raisin in the Sun* has an unambiguous, definite happy ending. They are quick to discount my attempts to suggest how challenging and complicated if not difficult moving to a white neighborhood will be for the Younger family. My students remain confident that the Youngers have earned their happy ending. In trying to understand why my overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and politically liberal students argue that the play has a happy ending, I became interested in why they continuously supported their argument by emphasizing that the characters *earn* happy endings.

A Raisin in the Sun has had a critical reception unlike any other because of Hansberry's age, gender, and especially race. Most reviewers still begin any discussion of

the play by pointing out that the play was the first drama by an American black woman to appear on Broadway.[i] Many scholarly studies of the play focus on Hansberry's gender and race as the scholars attempt to understand what they label the "universality" of the play. In short, as others have argued, the issue of universality arises from the assumption that a "black play" by a black author, about black people, for black audiences somehow still appeals to white audiences.[ii] As I read these essays, scholars seem to me to decide that the play is universal because white audiences relate to the black characters.

In the earliest and in some ways still the most severe criticism of the play, Harold Cruse explains that universality by attacking the "middle-class" playwright for writing a play that appeals to white audiences by mouthing middle-class ideology (280). From what my students have said, I have to agree with Cruse that the essential crux of the play arises from various versions of ideologies known as the American Dream, still prevalent fifty years later. I tried approaching the play not by trying to understand how the play appeals to white Americans but instead how some whites might view the characters and the play as "American." I surmise that ethnocentrism induces many white spectators to construe the outcomes as "happy endings" because the black characters do not do what most whites believe most black people do. Instead the characters do what whites label "American," and thus right by embracing the ubiquitous version of the American dream for middle-class whites: working hard to buy a house for one's children. If as Toni Morrison argues "deep within the word 'American' is its association with race. . .American means white" (47), then perhaps for many whites who admire the play, celebrate it, and love it, calling *A Raisin in the Sun* universal is judging the play by whiteness.

Focusing on Lena, Walter Lee and Beneatha, I adapt the theories that Jean Alter sets forth in *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre*, the ideas that Jim Cullen explores in *The American Dream*, and theories of white ethnocentrism from "white studies." Calling to mind "interpellation" that Louis Althusser connects to ideology, Alter suggests that works that seem to confirm and promote "the prevailing view of the world" appeal to social groups that accept, embrace, and celebrate that ideology (226). Theatre audiences decide any play that confirms and promotes their ideologies has a happy ending—with outcomes assuring that "these are the ways things should be." For many white Americans those happy endings correspond to a white ideology and identity that many fail to recognize as a "race," or what some sociologists interested in white studies label "whiteness as the invisible norm." For over twenty years, scholars who study white racial attitudes and identities theorize that few white Americans consider themselves "old-fashioned" racists, who hate and/or fear African Americans. Yet many whites fail to acknowledge and understand how the perceptions of African Americans and themselves and the society they share arise from their race. Two theories of emergent white racial beliefs are key for my analysis, "aversive racism" and "symbolic racism." John F. Dovidio and Samuel L. Gaertner maintain that "aversive racism represents a particular type of ambivalence in which the conflict is between feelings and

beliefs associated with a sincerely egalitarian value system and unacknowledged negative feelings and beliefs about blacks" (62). Symbolic racism deemphasizes "biological racism;" David R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders argue it "is preoccupied with matters of moral characters, informed by the virtues associated with the traditions of individualism. At its center are the contentions that blacks do not try hard enough to overcome the difficulties they face and that they take what they have not earned" (106). As I hope to suggest, the resolutions of *A Raisin in the Sun* may ease those conflicts that arise for many whites holding aversive and symbolic racial views. Lena, Walter Lee, and Beneatha seemingly appear to embody stereotypes for much of the play only to change in ways that allow some whites to concretize the ending as a happy one, that is, a version of the American dream many hold.

Despite Hansberry's effort to render Lena Younger as something other than a black matriarch, white audiences, especially those who know little of black theatre, focus on signs that seem to them to establish Lena just that way. In her descriptions of Lena in Act I, Hansberry writes:

> [Lena] is a strong woman in her early sixties, full-bodied and strong. She is one of those women of a certain grace and beauty who wear it so unobtrusively that it takes a while to notice. Her dark-brown face is surrounded by the total whiteness of her hair, and, being a woman who has adjusted to many things in life and overcome many more, her face is full of strength. (39).

As Trudier Harris suggests in "Before the Strength, the Pain," Lena Younger is anything but the "decrepit old black women" prominent in earlier plays by African American female playwrights. Harris argues that these early stereotypical characters have "physical infirmities [that] seem to suggest the general powerlessness of the situations in which they find themselves" after being "undone by racism and menial work" (33). In fact much of the conflict in the first scenes of the play arises from Lena's determined strength dealing with her children: for example, her arguments with Beneatha about God and with Walter about the insurance money. Trying to ease the tension, Ruth points out to her mother-in-law, "You just got strong-willed children and it takes a strong woman like you to keep 'em in hand" (52). While Hansberry wants to counter earlier black mothers by offering Lena as strong, that strength reinforces a prominent stereotype of underclass black families. As Joe R. Feagin demonstrates in *Racist America*, many whites accept the view that most black families are matriarchies (112). Cruse attacks the play for presenting middle-class black characters being to afford insurance policies and a child in college (280), yet while the Youngers are not on welfare, the family as working class, suffering through what Beneatha labels "acute ghetto-it is" (60), such as sharing a bathroom with the neighbors.

The first three scenes (Act I, scene one and scene, Act II, scene one) end with Lena establishing her deliberate control: when she admonishes Beneatha, making her daughter repeat "in my mother's house there is still God" (51), when she refuses to consider Walter Lee's proposal to buy a liquor store, stating "I don't 'low no yellin' in this house" and "you still in my house and my presence" (70-71) and when she explains to him her decision to use the insurance money to buy a house, arguing "I just seen my family falling apart today" (95). By the end of Act II, scene one, Lena can come forth as a clear matriarchal figure. She affirms her control of what she calls her house, and by doing so, she exemplifies the stereotype that how black women fail, in Patricia Hill Collins' view, "to conform to the cult of true womanhood" by not being "submissive, dependent, 'feminine' women" (77-78).

Enduring racial and gender stereotypes view black matriarchy as the true source of the poverty of black families. The consequence of this control is first to emasculate black men to the point that they have no choice but to leave the home and the family, relinquishing all ties to the family and ironically allowing the matriarch complete control. By deciding to dismiss Walter Lee's proposal to invest his father's insurance money, Lena signals that she is the head of the family. Consequently, the defeated if not emasculated Walter Lee appears to break ties with his family. Trying to save her family, Lena instead appears to white audiences as the force that will condemn her son: he has missed three days of work, and his employer phones with threats of dismissal, and when he does return home, he has been drinking and admits to driving aimlessly and spending much of one day in a bar listening to music.

By giving the control of the family to Walter Lee, Lena seems to embody white views of women and of motherhood, thereby earing her happy ending. The first sign of that is allowing Walter Lee the remaining sum of money. Following three scenes which ends with Lena reaffirming her matriarchal control of the family and the money, Act Two, scene two ends when she says to Walter Lee,

> "What you ain't never understood is that I ain't got nothing, don't own nothing, ain't never really wanted nothing that wasn't for you. There ain't nothing as precious to me…. There ain't nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else—if it means—if it means it's going to destroy my boy. (106).

Choosing one's children over oneself seems to correspond to white middle-class ideology: Lena changes from the black matriarch stereotype, and significantly, she hands over the remaining money, the sign of control in this family, to her son, establishing for a correct order, in which the male is the head of the household. Doing so signs the appropriate gender role yet also seeming to break free of the stereotype of the black woman in charge, Lena appeals a "good mother."

The true measure of the characters and the new structure of the Younger family is their responses to Walter Lee losing the bulk of the insurance money. When she first learns of the loss, Lena seems to reclaim the head of the household by striking her son, relating her heart-rending memory of her husband's struggle, and pleading for strength. Further exasperated by her son's "profoundly anguished imitation of the slow-witted movie stereotype," Lena seems resigned to what will happen (144). Yet perhaps in the most striking turn of the play, when she confronts Beneatha's denial of her brother, Lena delivers the most-quoted passage from the play, a moving affirmation of familial love: "There is always something left to love" (145). By not reclaiming control, Lena lives up to her earlier vow that she places her son before all. Lena now exemplifies an appropriate role for mothers. She does not make the decision to reject Lindner's offer but instead guides her son's decision. Earlier and here at the climax, Lena invokes the memory of the their family, by reminding her son that despite being descendents of "slaves and sharecroppers" her family "never let nobody pay 'em no money that was way of telling [them they weren't] fit to walk the earth" (143) and then repeating to Walter Lee the "five generations" (147). For black mothers in particular this role may be necessary, for as St. Jean and Feagin argue in *Double Burden* in society defined by race, minority "women must develop the kind of mothering that shapes their offspring for survival and gives them special tools to counter racial oppression" (190). Lena seeks to remind Walter Lee of his family's pride, especially his father's, so her son attempts to earn the equality that they deserve. At the same time, by framing the issue as a lesson to teach Travis, Lena appears to some whites not as a black mother "Keeping alive the memory of kinship experiences" as St. Jean and Feagin write (188) but as a "good" mother persuading her son to be a good parent. She leaves no doubt about this new role in her family when she rebukes Lindner's pleas to her as a black person "older and wiser" by affirming that he is the head of the family when she states "My son said we was going to move and there ain't nothing left for me to say" (148-49).

Lena may seem to change from black matriarch to "good" mother. In this view she earns a happy ending for her willingness to let her son lead the family. As Collins notes, one of the most prevalent and enduring prejudices that many whites have about black families arise from sexist attitudes about black women as mothers; Collins writes, "Black women's failure to conform to the cult of true womanhood [is] identified as one fundamental source of Black cultural deficiency" (77). Collins goes on to say that by falling "to be submissive, dependent, 'feminine' women," black women as matriarchs seemingly emasculate black men (78). Lena therefore establishes an appropriate role for her self, especially after she will not contradict her son and head of the family in front the white man. Once she does, she wins her reward: her garden is surely a significant consequence of Walter Lee's decision, and a home remains one of the great dream of white American ideology. Yet the greatest reward the play seems to suggest is by giving up control of her household, thereby allowing her son to take

control, she sees Walter Lee "come into his manhood" (151), a realization that mother and wife share two lines from the end of the play. For many audiences it is the best reward for any good mother.

Walter Lee for most of the play frightens and fails—in that he exemplifies how many whites react to black men for threatening what whites perceive as the appropriate order and yet for failing what they perceive as the appropriate manner. Walter Lee equates being a good father and good husband—and thus being a successful man—with the ability to provide material rewards; while many whites accept this measure, Walter Lee does not seem capable of achieving that success. He wants to provide for his wife and his child better lives undoubtedly. His investment in a liquor store seems a scheme to get rich quick, and Walter Lee comes forth as unsophisticated, a naïve black man of the underclass detailing his work day to Travis at the end of Act II, scene two, with its Cadillac convertible for Ruth to drive to shopping. To some his willingness to "pay somebody off" to get things done (33) reinforces the sense that he wants financial rewards quickly. In short, he wants the lifestyle of the wealthy, complete with a gardener named Jefferson, yet he wants that life style easily, without the work that it demands. Some whites decide that Walter Lee wants the rewards without the necessary effort; he wants to be rich without getting rich. As Jim Cullen details in *The American Dream*, upward mobility as goal in life is one of the most prevailing versions of the American dream, yet for most, and most likely most middle-class whites, upward mobility is the product of hard work over time—not a quick investment that leads to riches (58). Walter Lee appears unsophisticated about money, and that inexperience might seem to some audiences as feeblemindedness, quick to agree with Beneatha's assertion that her brother gave away a sizable amount of money to "a man even Travis wouldn't have trusted with his most worn-out marbles" (132).

For much of the play Walter Lee is either angry or defeated, seemingly indifferent to his family breaking apart. He allows his mother control of the family; while she tries to do something to rescue the family, he does nothing. Hurt, he comes across childish at times, but he is unwilling to do something. At the end of Act I, confronted by his mother about Ruth's plans to abort her pregnancy to "stand up and look like [his] daddy," (75), Walter Lee can say nothing and merely walks out.

Anxious that his one chance to make his family wealthy is gone, Walter Lee seems disconnected and indurate. His passivity plays into symbolic racial views that blacks in general but black men in particular are to blame for their poverty and the breakdown of their families (Feagin, et al, 204). Buying a house with the money appeals to many whites as an appropriate investment, so Walter Lee's anxiety and ambition seem misguided. He misses three days of work—and risks losing his job—to drive out of town for two days and to listen to music on the third. Twice he returns home after drinking. He grows angrier as the play

progress. He complains that Ruth and Lena fail to support him. When George reacts to his suggestions that he and George's father discuss business with boredom, Walter Less lashing out, calling himself "a volcano" and "a giant surrounded by ants!" (85). Losing his family, his job, his temper, and control, Walter Lee plays into views that black men are quick to give up and to blame others for their failures.

Once he loses the money Walter is desperate and angry, ready to belittle himself by taking the offer from the "Great White Father" and "feel fine" doing it (144). To some whites Walter Lee seems once again to want to take the easy way out. He suggests that the lesson that Willy Harris has taught him, "what counts in this world" (142) frightens and upsets his family and much of the audience. Here he echoes an earlier argument at the end of Act I when he opines that money "is life" (74). For much of the play Walter Lee's ambition for upward mobility seems instead as selfish, in that he desires money to fulfill the role of husband and father as he sees it.

By rejecting Lindner's offer, Walter Lee rejects "easy money" and pledges instead to work hard to earn his house. His decision comes about because his mother insists that his son remains in the room, yet unlike before, Walter Lee is in control of the family's future, and he makes the decisions that many white audiences consider the right one. He accepts his and his family's situation, with quiet pride and determination and without the bitterness and anger he expresses throughout the play. Moving to and living in a "white" neighborhood will not be easy, and black audiences surely have a different appreciation for that. Whites most likely see the "struggle" as financial or what Feagin, Vera, and Batur call "the gospel of the work ethic" for most whites (204). For this reason Walter Lee "earns" what whites see as his happy ending, especially now because they accept Ruth's argument from moments before that the family has to "MOVE!" and has to "get OUT OF HERE!!" even if it requires working hard (140). No longer demanding wealth without effort, Walter Lee will instead work for his family. His decision underscores that finally he is the head of the household. Lena is resigned to living out her life in "acute ghetto-itis." He finds a third option: "earning" the family house. He emerges as a character worthy of what they see as a happy ending because he accepts willingness the necessity of hard work as this outcome reinforces symbolic racial views that blacks, especially black men, must overcome financial hardships by taking responsibility for their situations.

Being ambitious, Beneatha should and does appeal to whites who view education as an appropriate means for upward mobility, what Cullen calls "transformation through education" (60). Wanting to become a medical doctor remains a goal in particular of first-generation college students, an ambition that their families accept and celebrate. For much of the play however, Beneatha seems to lack the dedication and drive to succeed in medical school. Her mother and sister-in-law question her lack of commitment, asking her to explain

why she has to "flit so from one thing to another" (47). Her reply that she wants to express herself fails to convince her family and much of the audience. Dating George Murchison suggests her immaturity. Clearly she does not respect George, and she is content to date him as he has "a beautiful car and he takes [her] to nice places" (49). Going out with a man she states is shallow surely does not contribute to her wish to understand her "identity," the reason she is attracted at first to Joseph Asagai. Beneatha's ardent desire to understand herself as a black woman plays into the "loud black girl" stereotype, a phrase that I believe connects to the "double burden" that African-American women bear as "black" and "female." Many whites are uncomfortable and defensive when confronted with racial identity, and some criticize blacks for tying race to ethnic identity, especially when being outspoken as Charles A. Gallagher explains (145-55). Here Beneatha seems selfish by wanting to understand "her" identity. This focus on the past and on the "group" goes against what many whites hold the American dream of individualism and focus on the future.[iii] Beneatha defensively asserts to both boyfriends that she is not an assimilationist. She comes across as political when she "dresses up" in the African wear that Asagai gives her, dances to African music, and wears her hair "natural," and thus appears initially to George as "eccentric." In a playful, tender moment late in the play (but before he learns that Willy Harris has stolen the insurance money) Walter Lee late admonishes his sister for calling him and Ruth "old-fashioned Negroes," by joking:

> You know, when these new Negroes have their convention—(Pointing at his sister)—that is going to be the chairman of the Committee on Unending Agitation. (He goes on dancing, the stops) Race, race, race!. . . Girl, I do believe you are the first person in the history of the entire human race to successfully brainwash yourself. . . . Damn, even the N double A C P takes a holiday sometimes! (113)

Being political Beneatha also rejects "being a good girl." What some might consider strong, independent, confident, or assured strikes others as loud, sarcastic, disrespectful, and selfish. She argues with her mother about the existence of God, cautions her mother to avoid being ignorant about Africa to Asagai, and insults her brother throughout the play. Dating George as she is sincerely interested in Asagai seems as selfish as it is shallow, and because of the racial view of black women's sexuality, promiscuous. Nearly every character in the play reprimands her in some way: her mother slaps her for her statement about God, Ruth explains that by pointing out that being so bold with one's mother is childish, George suggests that she accept being a "nice-looking girl" and drop the "atmosphere" (96) Walter criticizes her for failing to acknowledge the entire family's support of her education, and even Mrs. Johnson complains that she is quick to dismiss polite social conversation. Asagai nicknames Beneatha Alaiyo, yet he too reproves her by stating that "For a woman" romantic love "should be enough" (63).

Beneatha too has to earn her happy ending, and she can only do so by being a "good girl:" by listening to the "right" boyfriend and to her mother. Asagai refuses to allow Beneatha to give up when her brother loses the money. Instead intermixing the personal and the political, American and African ideologies, Asagai demands that Beneatha to continue the "struggle," now more important once she must earn her way, asking would had an easier path to her goals if her "father had not died?" (135). The play also seems to connect to a strong strain in American cultures about the differences between education and knowledge as the college students must learn the most important lesson from her mother, the lesson that holds that family members must accept, support, consider and "measure right." (145).

Beneatha stops being the loud black girl by growing up. She will earn her degree and marry Asagai so that she can move to Africa and become the type of doctor she wants to become, and do the "one concrete thing in the world that a human being could do" (133). She makes the "mature" choice, choosing Asagai over George, a serious relationship, with a serious partner who guides her, not a foolish boyfriend content to live a shallow life from the efforts and success of his father. Beneath rededicates herself to serious study presumably forsaking finding her identity and flitting from hobby to hobby. She is now a "good girl," working to please her family and her man.

Trying to clarify his decision to reject the offer, Walter Lee explains that the Youngers "come from people who had a lot of pride," and signaling to his sister and to his son, that they will move into the house "because my father—my father—he earned it for us brick by brick" (148). Buying the house signifies his family's pride and his father's sacrifice and hard work. Walter Lee seems to acknowledge his willingness to sacrifice and work hard—all for *his* family's benefit. He will live up to the legacy of the four generations before him by assuring the stability for the sixth. He rejects the lessons of Willy Harris, and the women in his family pledge to join him. By doing so, the Youngers appear to embody what St. Jean and Feagin call "the key dimensions of black family life—the extended family; closeness and interpersonal honesty; the collective memory; persisting values of love, respect, and discipline; the solid foundation of family support; concern for and property accumulation for future generations; and individual development within the collective whole" (169). Settling into a white neighbor will be a struggle, yet at least Walter Lee can at last give his children something more than "stories about how rich white people live:" he can teach the lessons he learned from his father and his mother (34).

I speculate that some white audience members construe the ending of the play not as a black family staying together despite all. Early in the play, the neighbor Mrs. Johnson criticizes the Youngers as "one proud-acting bunch of colored folks" (103). By play's end, however, with his son watching, Walter Lee promises Lindner, "We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes, and we will try to be good neighbors." Many of my students have read this transition as the Younger family being humbled. Once they are, the

Youngers commit to "earning" their house through diligence and persistence. Walter Lee particularly does the right thing by realizing a different dream, a simpler dream without wealth and power, yet one that affords him self-respect and pride. Summarizing a great deal of sociopsychologoical research, Joe R. Feagin concludes that "a common way that whites respond to the actions of black Americans" is "to view negative actions by black Americans as tied to the group, to its biology or culture, while positive achievements are frequently linked to individual or situational aspects of the case at hand—and not to the values of black families and communities" (111). For my students and perhaps many white audience members unaware of their aversive and symbolic racial views the Youngers are the exceptions to the norm. The family remains together; the man is in charge, Walter Lee and Ruth renew their marriage, she does not abort her pregnancy, and Beneatha rediscovers her purpose for going to college.

Jean Alter argues that the happy endings associated with "popular theatre come about when the resolutions confirm and promote a "prevailing view of the world" for audiences, for "the audience feels uplifted when it restructures in its own image, without much thinking" (226). As such many whites see the Youngers moving up and out of the ghetto--that is, a "black" and thus "bad" neighborhood—through hard work for one's children. For whites, especially those unaware of their ethnocentric views, the new dreams of the Youngers comprise the American dream, "the rainbow after a rain" (151). If the dream of the Youngers is the "American" dream, then *A Raisin in the Sun* is "universal." In her overview of whiteness studies, Margaret L. Andersen writes that most "whiteness scholars assert that 'white' has been the unexamined norm, implicitly standing for all that is presumed to be right and normal. Whiteness is the location from which others are defined and judged, since it is white people who hold the power to do so" (24). If my analysis is valid, the celebration of the play as universal or as American is not that white spectators relate to the experiences, values, and heroism of the black characters but for many white readers and spectators that black characters appear to transition to individuals who adhere to a set of ideologies that whites appropriate as "American."

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Endnotes

[i] One finds scores of examples; consider the April 26, 2004 review: "Though perhaps the prototypical black family drama, Hansberry's almost perfect blend of comedy and tragedy, combined with the story's universality, makes the play still seem relevant and readily accessible." Matthew Murray, "Broadway Reviews,"*Talkin' Broadway.* http://www.talkinbroadway.com/world/RaisinSun.html (accessed January 18, 2011).

[ii] See Sandra Seaton's "A Raisin In The Sun: A Study in Afro-American Culture," *Midwestern Miscellany* XX: 40-49 and Robin Bernstein's "Inventing a Fishbowl: White Supremacy and the Critical Reception of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Modern Drama* 42 (1999): 16-27 as both examples and overviews.