



Deferred Dreams: A Desideratum Study Of Abeyance Of Dreams In Hansberry's A Raisin In The Sun

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Abstract: Lorraine Hansberry opens the floodgates of the stage for black writers, being the first black woman playwright and representing African-American families in her realistic play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the play, Hansberry brilliantly paints the portrait of a working-class family depicted by the Younger family, which in itself becomes a microcosm of Afro-American family conditions of living in the ghetto and blatant racism that prevailed even after the abolition of slavery. This paper attempts to explore the theme of deferred dreams of the characters in the play in context to the question of What happens to a dream deferred? in Hughes's poem *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

Keywords: American Dream, Dreams, Illusion, Racial Segregation, Deferred Dreams, African-American.

"There are those who will say that the liberation of humanity, the freedom of man and mind, is nothing but a dream. They are right. It is the American Dream."

~Archibald MacLeish

"Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but a dream."

-Big Walter Lee, A Raisin in the Sun, Hansberry

The play has been praised for its stirring portrayal of the prevalent and authentic representation of the struggle of Afro-Americans in the late 1950s. The epigraph at the beginning of the play serves as a gateway into the text, mirroring one of the major themes and settings of the play. It also delves into the famous '*American Dream*,' shedding light on its prejudices, racism, and the segregation of the black community from the American Dream. The Younger family's struggle is a stark reminder of the harsh realities many African-American families faced during the time.

In the ideal sense, the American Dream offers "*equality of opportunity is available to any American allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved*" (Oxford et al.) Regardless, its promise of equality and liberty to anyone born anywhere or in any class can be achieved where upward mobility is offered to individuals to fulfill their dreams. However, the play represents equality but with separation of the working-class black community living a poverty-stricken life under the struggle and frustrations of their *deferred dreams*.

The American Dream, in reality, is more of an American Myth, failing to bridge the gaps and discontinuities that exclude the black community based on race and class. As influential critic **Lloyd W. Brown** points out, blacks are marginalized for being black and poor, highlighting that *“their deprivations expose the gap between the American dream and the Black American reality.”* The Younger family's struggle is a reminder of the harsh realities many African-American families face, underscoring the injustice of the situation.

Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* begins with an epigraph from **Langston Hughes's** *“Montage of a Dream Deferred.”* This epigraph, which also serves as the origin of the play's title, sets the tone for the narrative and introduces the central theme of deferred dreams, a momentous and pervasive theme that resonates throughout the play.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

and then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load

Or does it just explode?

(Langston Hughes, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*)

The poem explores the fate of the deferred dreams, arguing whether they are destroyed by the burden of circumstances or withheld in the hope of one day *‘exploding.’* The use of various similes reconnoitering the fate of dreams, whether to wither or sustain. In the text, Hansberry inarguably positions all the main characters, each with a dream through which the author attempts to scrutinize the American dream on one side and the reality of the black community whose dreams have been deferred on the other. All four main characters in the play have a dream, hoping to elevate their situation and lifestyle.

The play's central conflict is the insurance money left behind by Big Walter Lee for his wife, Lena Younger, and the conflict regarding how to spend the money as, naturally, individuals desire to fulfill their dreams. All their dreams are deferred due to poverty and racial segregation, offering much less opportunity to improve their status and lifestyle. Big Walter Younger, who is present in the play through his absence, claims that it *“Seems like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but a dream,”* but he did work hard to *“give his children to make them dreams seem worthwhile.”* as the play deals with the struggle for achieving these worthwhile dreams. Walter Younger has been described as *“an intense young man in his middle thirties, inclined to quick, nervous movements, erratic speech,”* frustrated with his life and demeaning job as a chauffeur to a wealthy white family. Much of his frustration stems from his failure to provide his family with a better life, i.e., luxury and comfort. Inevitably, being the male head of the house, he attempts and plans to reach the top through shortcuts to achieve his dream of opening a liquor store.

However, he feels that his wife, Ruth, does not support and share his dream of being wealthy and successful, and the family's situation is improved. Walter's frustration is due to a lack of support from his wife and mother, as he states, *“That’s it. There you are. Man says to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman says: Eat your eggs. Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work. Man say: I got to change my life; I’m choking to death, baby! And his woman says – Your eggs is getting cold!”*

Nevertheless, he believes that pursuing and finally attaining the American Dream will add meaning to his life and bring him and his family happiness, failing to understand the restricted access of the American Dream to the Black Community. Walter’s obsession peaks, and tension between him and Ruth arises from his deferred dream and his desperate desire to attain it.

As we encounter in the text, Walter Younger, first thing in the morning, asks his wife, *“Check coming today,”* which, according to him, is his last hope in converting his dream into reality by persuading his mother to give him the money for investing in the liquor store. Walter’s desperate desire can also be interpreted as his search for manhood being a black male unable to provide for his family’s needs as his agony is evident when he states, *“I’m thirty-five years old: I have been married eleven years, and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room — and all I got to give him is stories about how rich white people live.”*

Later in the play, afraid of her son’s lost faith, she tries to cheer him up by entrusting him with the leftover money after buying a house. However, Walter makes a lousy investment and loses all the money. Later, Walter gains his own individuality and identity by denying the money offered by Linder for not moving into their neighborhood community. He argues, *“We have all thought about your offer, and we have decided to move into our house because my father - my father – he earned it ... We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes -but we will try to be good neighbours... We don't want your money.”* Ultimately, Walter emerges from the materialistic world, reinstating his newfound black individuality and dignity.

Lena Younger, the family matriarch, has always dreamed of living in a house with a yard where children can play and where she can enjoy her garden. She desires to move away from the cramped ghetto life. It has been both her and her husband's dream to own a house since they moved into the apartment they inhabit today.

The arrangement to stay in the two-bedroom apartment was supposed to be temporary as Mama recalls, *“We was going to set away, little by little, don't you know, and buy a little place out in Morgan Park. We had even picked out the house, Looks right dumpy today. But Lord, child, you should know all the dreams 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?”*

However, her deferred dream finds some hope with the insurance money she inherited after her husband's death. It is her husband's death that provides her with the opportunity to achieve her dream. The inescapable question here is, does it require one's death to realize and finally make one's dreams come true?

Lena finally buys the most affordable house in a White neighbourhood for her family, hoping to improve their situation by using the money from insurance. Here, the conflict arises when the White community tries to force them out of their neighbourhood for being black by offering them money not to move into their neighbourhood. Hansberry here highlights the enforced racial segregation laws that separate the black community from the white, giving them the status of being equal but separate.

The close symbol associated with Lena's dream is the grubby plant she cares for, providing it with water and light. The plant itself represents her deferred dream to move into a house with a garden, and her devotion to the plant can be seen as her dedication to her own dream, which, like the plant, survived without much sunshine. Ruth Younger shares Lena's dream of living in a house that will bring happiness to the family and the first step to getting out of the ghetto life they have been living. Like everyone else's dream in the play, her dream is also deferred due to a lack of money and an apartment where her son has to sleep on the sofa between the kitchen and bedroom. For her, *"life has been little that she expected, and disappointment has already begun to hang in her face."* the frustrations and struggles with the poor life have strained her and Walter's marriage, which is why she pleads with Mama to give him the money for his dream.

She pleads, *"Mama, something is happening between Walter and me. I don't know what it is – but he needs something – something I can't give him anymore. He needs this chance, Lena."* He hoped that the moving of the deferred dreams would bring back his lost spirit. Forced due to the circumstances, she even attempts to get an abortion as they cannot afford another baby living in the same overcrowded apartment. However, the news of moving to a house springs to her with enthusiasm, and she decides to have a baby and hopes the new home will be a road towards a better life.

Beneatha Younger is a young woman represented ahead of her time who dreams and aspires to become a doctor and earn her own individuate identity. Her dream is deferred alongside Walter's when he loses all the money, even the funds for her medical schooling. However, money is not the only obstacle she faces as a black woman aspiring to become a doctor. Walter himself, even though in attempts to get all the money for investing in his dream, spats at her, *"If you so crazy 'bout messing 'round with sick people — then go be a nurse like other women — or Just get married and be quiet..."* When her own brother fails to understand her dream and tries to obstruct it to accomplish his dream, he later does so when he loses all the money. Unlike Walter Lee, his sister Beneatha does not try to take shortcuts to reach the top even when she has the opportunity to marry George Murchison, for she disagrees with his chauvinistic and assimilationist ways as she feels closer to the African Heritage.

Asagai, another suitor, helps her cope with her deferred dream and provides her hope to sustain it. He argues her materialistic approach and search for happiness. He states, *"Then isn't there something wrong in a house – in a world! – where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man? I never thought to see you like this, Alaiyo."* Finally, he offers her the opportunity to practice medicine in Africa, providing new hope for her deferred dream.

In conclusion, each, in pursuit of their dream, realizes their racial pride and the text ends with their moving into a new home, symbolizing hope for all their deferred dreams. Throughout the text, Hansberry investigates the question that opens her text: *"What happens to a dream deferred?"* Under the flagrant racism and racial segregation, which represents the realities of the lack of economic opportunity, the working-class black community represented by the Younger family is away from their aspirations and dreams.

The harsh obscured reality of the American Dream and its claim of *'equality of opportunity,'* which, in fact, is different for the black people who are equal to *'white people'* but *separated*. To answer the question of what happens to a deferred dream, for the Younger family, does their dream dry or explode? Their dreams find new hope to sustain and survive, like Lena's deferred dream, which starts moving after thirty-five years of waiting.

In other words, the play is a social dramatization dramatizing the racial prejudices and inequalities that keep black Americans destitute of their dreams. In the text, the doldrums of dreams, or the deferral of dreams of the Younger family, symbolizes the deferred dreams of working-class African-American families. **The American Dream, in all senses, only remains a dream that has never been able to transpire into a solid reality, becoming an American myth of equality.**

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