
UNIT 12: LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* AS A MARXIST PLAY

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12.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- recognize what is meant by the term 'Marxism' and its basics
- understand the meaning of the terms 'bourgeois' and 'proletariat' and their relation to class-conflicts
- learn the literary theory associated with Marxism and the application of Marxist theory in literary texts
- realize the important role of Lorraine Hansberry in recording the social life of African-Americans and the various issues relating to this
- comprehend *A Raisin in the Sun* as a compendium of social struggles and economic diversities

12.1 INTRODUCTION

12.1.1 What is Marxism?

Marxism is a method of socio-economic analysis that analyses class relations and societal conflict using a materialist interpretation of historical development and a dialectical view of social transformation. It originated from the mid-to-late nineteenth century works of German philosopher

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, a German sociologist, who were the joint founders of this school of thought.

The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. Marxism is a materialist philosophy, that is, it tries to explain things without assuming the existence of a world, or of forces, beyond the natural world around us, and the society we live in. It looks for concrete, scientific, logical explanations of the world of observable fact. [Its opposite is *idealist* philosophy, which does believe in the existence of a spiritual world elsewhere and would offer religious explanations of life and conduct.] But whereas other philosophies merely seek to understand the world, Marxism seeks to change it.

12.1.2 Basics of Marxism

Marxist methodology originally used a method of economic and socio-political inquiry known as “historical materialism” to analyze and critique the development of capitalism and the role of class struggle in systematic economic change. According to Marxist perspective, class conflict within capitalism arises due to intensifying contradictions between the highly productive mechanized and socialized production performed by the proletariat, and the private ownership and appropriation of the surplus product [profit] by a small minority of the population who are private owners called the bourgeois. As the contradiction becomes apparent to the proletariat through the alienation of labour, social unrest between the two antagonistic classes will intensify, until it culminates in social revolution. The eventual long-term outcome of this revolution would be the establishment of socialism – a socio-economic system based on social ownership of the means of production, distribution based on one’s contribution, and production organized directly for use. As the productive forces and technology continued to advance, Marx hypothesized that socialism would eventually give way to a communist stage of social development, which would be a classless, stateless, humane society erected on common ownership and the principle of “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.

The simplest Marxist model of society sees it as constituted by the “base” [the material means of production, distribution, and exchange] and a “superstructure,” which is the ‘cultural’ world of ideas, art, religion, law, and so on. The essential Marxist view is that the latter things are not ‘innocent’, but are ‘determined’ by the nature of the economic base. Marx argues that these cultural systems are set by the ruling class in accordance with their need to maintain or increase class conflict in order to remain in power. This belief about culture, known as “economic determinism,” is a central part of traditional Marxist thinking.

There were various influences on early Marxist thinking in addition to that of the political experiences of its founders, including the work of the eighteenth-century German philosopher Hegel, especially his idea of the “dialectic”, whereby opposing forces or ideas bring about new situations or ideas. Marxism also built upon the socialist thinking which was produced in France at the time of the French Revolution, and it inverted some of

the ideas of early economic theory, especially the view that the pursuit of individual economic self-interest would bring economic and social benefits to the whole of society.

Cuban revolutionary and Marxist-Leninist politician Fidel Castro on discovering Marxism, states:

Marxism taught me what society was. I was like a blindfolded man in a forest, who doesn't even know where north or south is. If you don't eventually come to truly understand the history of the class struggle, or at least have a clear idea that society is divided between the rich and the poor, and that some people subjugate and exploit other people, you're lost in a forest, not knowing anything. (100)

Marxism greatly influenced many Western writers, in addition to being the guiding principle behind most literary works in communist and socialist Russia. Richard Wright, Claude McKay, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Bertolt Brecht were deeply influenced by Marxist and socialist theories of the day, and much of this type of reflection is evident in their writings of the time.

12.1.3 Features of Marxism:

According to Karl Korsch, a German Marxist theoretician, there are few important features of Marxism:

- All the tenets of Marxism are particular and not general. It has not built up any general theory which is applicable in all places. Marx's concept of "base" and "superstructure" is a real concept, but its application differs from place to place. The only statements that are valid are particular descriptions of particular phenomena at a given stage of history.
- Marxism is not science or philosophy. It is simply a critical and practical analysis of existing society. Marxism is based on exact and verifiable knowledge. It can be empirically tested or verified. Hence it is an empirical doctrine.
- The central subject of Marxism is capitalist society. Marx scanned almost all the important aspects of capitalist society by applying dialectical materialism.
- Its chief aim is not simply to analyse the capitalist society, but to change it. Marx has said that the philosophers have interpreted the world, but the real task is to change the world or society.

12.2 MARXIST THEORY OF LITERATURE

12.2.1 Marxist Literary Criticism

According to Marxists, literature reflects those social institutions out of which it emerges and is itself a social institution with a particular ideological function. Literature reflects class struggle and materialism. So Marxists generally view literature "not as works created in accordance with timeless artistic criteria, but as 'products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams 149).

Marxist literary criticism maintains that a writer's social class, and its prevailing 'ideology' – outlook, values, tacit assumptions, and the like – have a major bearing on what is written by a member of that class. So instead of seeing authors as primarily autonomous 'inspired' individuals whose genius and creative imagination enables them to bring forth original and timeless works of art, the Marxist sees them as constantly formed by their social contexts in ways which they themselves would usually not admit.

Definition

The English literary critic and cultural theorist, Terry Eagleton, defines Marxist criticism this way:

Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and, meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history. (3)

12.2.2 Emergence of Marxist Literary Criticism

Karl Marx's studies have provided a basis for much in socialist theory and research. Marxism aims to revolutionize the concept of work through creating a classless society built on control and ownership of the means of production. Marx believed that Economic Determinism, Dialectical Materialism and Class Struggle were the three principles that explained his theories. The Bourgeois [Dominant class who control and own the means of production] and Proletariat [Subordinate class: Do not own and control the means of production] were the only two classes who engaged in hostile interaction to achieve class consciousness. Marx believed that all past history is a struggle between hostile and competing economic classes.

It is through the theories of class struggle, politics and economics that Marxist literary criticism emerged. The thought behind Marxist Criticism is that works of literature are mere products of history that can be analyzed by looking at the social and material conditions in which they were constructed. Marx's *Capital* states that "the mode of production of material life determines altogether the social, political, and intellectual life process. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness." In simple words, the social situation of the author determines the types of characters that will develop, the political ideas displayed and the economical statements developed in the text.

The simplest goals of Marxist literary criticism can include an assessment of the political 'tendency' of a literary work, determining whether its social content or its literary form are 'progressive'. It also includes analyzing the class constructs demonstrated in literature. Aesthetic and artistic elements are less important in Marxist literary criticism. The historical, social and political meanings are considered more important.

12.2.3 What Marxist critics do?

Literary text interpretation based on Marxist literary theory, directly or indirectly, focuses on certain societal issues like class, culture, power and

the likes in the literary text. Some of the methods of Marxist literary analysis are as follows:

- Marxist critics make a division between the “overt” [manifest or surface] and “covert” [latent or hidden] content of a literary work and then relate the covert subject matter of the literary work to basic Marxist themes, such as class struggle or the progression of society through various historical stages, such as the transition from feudalism to industrial capitalism.
- Another method used by Marxist critics is to relate the context of a work to the social-class status of the author.
- A third Marxist method is to explain the nature of a whole literary genre in terms of the social period which produced it.
- A fourth Marxist practice is to relate the literary work to the social assumptions of the time in which it is ‘consumed’, a strategy which is used particularly in the later variant of Marxist criticism known as cultural materialism.
- A fifth Marxist practice is the ‘politicisation of literary form,’ that is, the claim that literary forms are themselves determined by political circumstance.

12.3 LORRAINE HANSBERRY’S EARLY LIFE

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, the youngest of four children. Her parents were well-educated, successful black citizens who publicly fought discrimination against black people. When Hansberry was a child, she and her family lived in a black neighbourhood on Chicago’s South side. During this era, segregation - the enforced separation of whites and blacks - was still legal and widespread throughout the South. Northern States, including Hansberry’s own Illinois, had no official policy of segregation, but they were generally self-segregated along racial and economic lines. Chicago was a striking example of a city carved strictly divided black and white neighbourhood. Hansberry’s family become one of the first to move into a white neighbourhood, but Hansberry still attended a segregated public school for blacks. When neighbours struck at them with threats of violence and legal action, the Hansberrys defended themselves. Hansberry’s father successfully fought his case all the way to the Supreme Court. He died in 1946, when Lorraine was fifteen years old; “American racism helped kill him,” she later said (Anderson 263).

Hansberry graduated from Betsy Ross Elementary in 1944 and from Englewood High School in 1948. She attended the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where she immediately became politically active and integrated a dormitory. Hansberry’s classmate Bob Teague remembered her as “. . . the only girl I knew who could whip together a fresh picket sign with her own hands, at a moment’s notice, for any cause or occasion” (Anderson 263).

12.3.1 Hansberry’s later life and writing career

Hansberry broke her family’s tradition of enrolling in Southern black colleges and instead attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

While at school, she changed her major from painting to writing, and after two years decided to drop out and move to New York City. In New York, Hansberry attended the New School for Social Research and then worked for Paul Robeson's progressive black newspaper, *Freedom*, as a writer and associate editor from 1950 to 1953. She also worked part-time as a waitress and cashier, and wrote in her spare time. By 1956, Hansberry quit her jobs and committed her time to writing. In 1957, she joined the Daughters of Bilitis and contributed letters to their magazine, *The Ladder*, about feminism and homophobia. Her lesbian identity was exposed in the articles, but she wrote under her initials, L.H., for fear of discrimination.

During this time, Hansberry wrote *The Crystal Stair*, a play about a struggling black family in Chicago, which was later, renamed *A Raisin in the Sun*, a line from a Langston Hughes poem. The play opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, and was a great success, having a run of 530 performances. It was the first play produced on Broadway by an African-American woman, and Hansberry was the first black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Drama Critics' Circle award for Best Play of the year. She used her new fame to help bring attention to the American civil rights movement as well as African struggles for independence from colonialism.

In 1963, Hansberry became active in the Civil Rights Movement. Along with other influential people, including Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne and James Baldwin, Hansberry met with the then attorney general Robert Kennedy to test his position on civil rights. According to historian Fanon Che Wilkins, "Hansberry believed that gaining civil rights in the United States and obtaining independence in colonial Africa were two sides of the same coin that presented similar challenges for Africans on both sides of the Atlantic" (199). In 1963, her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened on Broadway to unenthusiastic reception. Hansberry wrote that she always felt the inclination to record her experiences. However, her promising writing career was cut short when she died from cancer in 1965, at the age of thirty-four.

Hansberry's untimely death at the age of thirty-four on January 12, 1965, left a void in American theatre and in the circle of black writers. Jean Carey Bond, in an article in *Freedomways* magazine, says of Hansberry:

[Her] brief sojourn was, in one of its dimensions, a study in pure style. Born into material comfort, yet baptized in social responsibility; intensely individual in her attitudes and behavior, yet sensitive to the wills and aspirations of a whole people; a lover of life, yet stalked by death – she deliberately fashioned out of these elements an articulate existence of artistic and political commitment, seasoned with that missionary devotion which often intensifies the labors of the mortally ill.

Hansberry left behind three unfinished plays and an unfinished semi-autobiographical novel.

12.3.2 Plot of *A Raisin in the Sun*

A Raisin in the Sun portrays a few weeks in the life of the Youngers, an African-American family living on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s.

When the play opens, the Youngers are about to receive an insurance cheque for \$10,000. This money comes from the deceased Mr. Younger's life insurance policy. Each of the adult members of the family has an idea as to what he or she would like to do with this money. The matriarch of the family, Mama, wants to buy a house to fulfill a dream she shared with her husband. Mama's son, Walter Lee, would rather use the money to invest in a liquor store with his friends. He believes that the investment will solve the family's financial problems forever. Walter's wife, Ruth, agrees with Mama, however, and hopes that she and Walter can provide more space and opportunity for their son, Travis. Finally, Beneatha, Walter's sister and Mama's daughter, wants to use the money for her medical school tuition. She also wishes that her family members were not so interested in joining the white world. Beneatha instead tries to find her identity by looking back to the past and to Africa.

As the play progresses, the Youngers clash over their competing dreams. Ruth discovers that she is pregnant but fears that if she has the child, she will put more financial pressure on her family members. When Walter says nothing to Ruth's admission that she is considering abortion, Mama puts a down payment on a house for the whole family. She believes that a bigger, brighter dwelling will help them all. This house is in Clybourne Park, an entirely white neighbourhood. When the Youngers' future neighbours find out that the Youngers are moving in, they send Mr. Lindner, from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, to offer the Youngers money in return for staying away. The Youngers refuse the deal, even after Walter loses the rest of the money (\$6,500) to his friend Willy Harris, who persuades Walter to invest in the liquor store and then runs off with his cash.

In the meantime, Beneatha rejects her suitor, George Murchison, whom she believes to be shallow and blind to the problems of race. Subsequently, she receives a marriage proposal from her Nigerian boyfriend, Joseph Asagai, who wants Beneatha to get a medical degree and move to Africa with him [Beneatha does not make her choice before the end of the play]. The Youngers eventually move out of the apartment, fulfilling the family's long-held dream. Their future seems uncertain and slightly dangerous, but they are optimistic and determined to live a better life. They believe that they can succeed if they stick together as a family and resolve to defer their dreams no longer.

12.3.3 List of Characters

Walter Lee Younger – Walter Lee Younger is the protagonist of the play. Walter is a dreamer. He wants to be rich and devises plans to acquire wealth with his friends, particularly Willy Harris. When the play opens, he wants to invest his father's insurance money in a new liquor store venture. He spends the rest of the play endlessly preoccupied with discovering a quick solution to his family's various problems.

Beneatha Younger – Beneatha Younger is Mama's daughter and Walter's sister. Beneatha is an intellectual. Twenty years old, she attends college and is better educated than the rest of the Younger family. Some of her personal beliefs and views have distanced her from conservative Mama. She dreams

of being a doctor and struggles to determine her identity as a well-educated black woman.

Lena Younger – Lena Younger is Walter and Beneatha's mother. Lena Younger, referred to simply as "Mama" throughout the play, is the beneficiary of the \$10,000 insurance cheque. The matriarch of the family, Mama is religious, moral, and maternal. She wants to use her husband's insurance money as a down payment on a house with a backyard to fulfill her dream for her family to move up in the world.

Ruth Younger – Ruth Younger is Walter's wife and Travis's mother. Ruth takes care of the Youngers' small apartment. Her marriage to Walter has problems, but she hopes to rekindle their love. Ruth is quite passive, taking Walter's abuse and working silently and tirelessly to help provide for them. Constantly fighting poverty and domestic troubles, she continues to be an emotionally strong woman.

Travis Younger – Travis Younger is Walter and Ruth's sheltered young son. Travis earns some money by carrying grocery bags and likes to play outside with other neighbourhood children, but he has no bedroom and sleeps on the living-room sofa.

Joseph Asagai – Joseph Asagai is a Nigerian student in love with Beneatha. Asagai, as he is often called, is very proud of his African heritage, and Beneatha hopes to learn about her African heritage from him. He eventually proposes marriage to Beneatha and hopes she will return to Nigeria with him.

George Murchison – George Murchison is a wealthy, African-American man who courts Beneatha. The Youngers approve of George, but Beneatha dislikes his willingness to submit to white culture and forget his African heritage. He challenges the thoughts and feelings of other black people through his arrogance and flair for intellectual competition.

Mr. Karl Lindner – Karl Lindner is the only white character in the play. Mr. Lindner arrives at the Youngers' apartment from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. Lindner is the spokesman for the white community into which the Youngers plan to move. He offers the Youngers a deal to reconsider moving into his all-white neighbourhood.

Bobo – Bobo is one of Walter's partners in the liquor store plan. Bobo appears to be as mentally slow as his name indicates.

Willy Harris – Willy Harris is a friend of Walter and coordinator of the liquor store plan. Willy never appears onstage, and is the one who absconds with all the money for the prospective business venture.

Mrs. Johnson -- Mrs. Johnson is the Youngers' neighbour. Mrs. Johnson takes advantage of the Youngers' hospitality and warns them about moving into a predominantly white neighbourhood.

12.3.4 *A Raisin in the Sun* as a Marxist Play

A Raisin in the Sun is a skillful portrayal of racial issues, which is also intertwined with the American dream that most people of the middle and lower class were pursuing. The play shows the economic struggle the family is going through and how they were looked down by society.

Furthermore, it shows that almost all African-American families at this time face economic difficulties. The play also demonstrates the gulf that exists between the whites and the blacks by introducing the notion of social class into the interpretations of the play. It further manifests something of the state of mind that is characteristic of each class.

The main social force portrayed in *A Raisin in the Sun* is racial prejudice. The story takes place in Chicago between World War II and the present, a time period in which African Americans were fighting for their Civil Rights. Hansberry herself experienced racial conflict very similar to the type seen in her play. The dream the Younger family has of moving into a house is crushed by the white community's inability to accept a black family. Mr. Lindner, who represents the bourgeois, offers the family compensation to encourage them not to move into Clybourne Park because the white residents do not feel comfortable accepting them. "I don't understand why you people are reacting this way. What do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighbourhood where you just aren't wanted and where some elements – well – people can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they've ever worked for is threatened." The family's main dream together finally becomes a reality when Mama puts the down payment on the house, but racism drives their dream down.

Throughout the play, the presence of racism and racial judgments affect the characters. In the political economic sense, Walter is affected by racism in his yearning for money: "Mama – sometimes when I'm downtown and I pass them cool-quiet-looking restaurants where them white boys are sitting back and talking 'bout things ... sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars ... sometimes I see guys don't look much older than me." Walter says this to show his anger about how young white men have so many more economic opportunities than he does simply because of their race, and this fuels Walter's want for a better job and a better life for his family. He hates his work as a chauffeur because he feels like a slave working for another man, a belief that Walter shares with his late father.

Beneatha's exploration of her African heritage through her new hairstyle is symbolic of her anti-assimilationist beliefs as well as her desire to shape her identity by looking back to her roots in Africa. When Beneatha takes off her Nigerian headdress and reveals that she has cut her hair and is no longer straightening it, even her own family is taken aback and upset with her. Beneatha's cutting of her hair is a very powerful social statement and it represents her embracing of her heritage. The African American community during the time period of the play is one that is not really even sure about embracing their African roots and a lot of its members, especially Mrs. Johnson simply think that the circumstances are not going to change. "The Youngers' is too much for me! You sure one proud-acting bunch of colored folks. Well – I always thinks like Booker T. Washington said that time – 'Education has spoiled many a good plow hand.'" This quote from Mrs. Johnson shows the acceptance of the situation that holds down the Younger family's dreams. She believes that black people should not bother reaching for something higher, but the Younger's choose to fight Mr. Lindner and move on with their dreams.

The next social force portrayed in the play is gender roles. Gender oppression is closely related to class oppression and the relationship between men and women in society is similar to the relations between proletariat and bourgeois. On this account women's subordination is a function of class oppression, maintained like racism because it serves the interests of capital and the ruling class. It divides men against women, privileges working class men relatively within the capitalist system in order to secure their support; and legitimates the capitalist class's refusal to pay for the domestic labour assigned, unpaid, to women.

Gender roles in the play are emphasized by the power relations that exist between Walter and Beneatha, Ruth and Walter, and Mama and the other characters of the play. It is obvious that between Walter and Beneatha, the relationship is one of rivalry and anger. Walter resents the fact that Mama has to decide how to split the money between him and Beneatha when he would prefer to take the money for himself, feeling that investing the money in his liquor store would be more worth it than investing it in Beneatha becoming a doctor. He looks down on Beneatha's goal of being a doctor, stating to her, "Ain't many girls decide to be a doctor," or "Who the hell told you to be a doctor? 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 . . ." Although Walter does not hate Beneatha or completely feels that she cannot succeed as a doctor, he does not want to have the problem of having Mama decide who to give money to. He also feels underestimated many times throughout the story about being a true man, feeling like he cannot provide for his family. Hence he looks down on other women to make sure he still has the sense of superiority as a man of the family.

Between Ruth and Walter, Walter tends to look down upon Ruth's dreams, not realizing the troubles that she is going through since he is too busy with his own situation. She admits to Walter as well, "Honey . . . life don't have to be like this. I mean sometimes people can do things so that things are better . . . You remember how we used to talk when Travis was born . . . about the way we were going to live . . . the kind of house . . . Well it's all starting to slip away from us . . ." In this scene, Ruth tries to tell Walter that although she loves him she cannot stand the way they are living anymore. She truly wants to move out of the house and wants Walter to understand that she too works hard for the family and she needs him to understand her and why she wants to use the money to buy a new house. Walter seems not to understand her throughout the story, frustrated with his own desires in making means to provide for the family and being that "American man" with the "American dream" or starting small and ending big.

The relations between Walter and Ruth/Beneatha truly show the cultural practices and social institutions during the time the work was written. Walter evidently does not appreciate the dreams and goals of Beneatha, putting her down consistently and telling her to "be a nurse like other women" because he thinks too highly of his own goals in being the man of the family and providing for his family. He wants to remain the man and seem like the superior figure in the household, making the money through the liquor store and providing for Ruth and Travis. He acts similarly to Ruth as well when he underestimates her desire for wanting to move houses and use Mama's

money to do so. He does not pay much attention to Ruth's feelings since he is too focused on his own problems of opening the liquor store or how to acquire more money.

These power relations show how men of the time the work was written underestimated the dreams and hopes of women since they felt that women should remain supportive of them and nothing more. Walter is not used to the new era of women acquiring more civil rights and having jobs that can be superior to the men's own jobs, such as Beneatha being a doctor. The relations show the transition of men trying to accommodate the fact that women are gaining more rights and higher ranks whereas women are trying to push past the criticism they get from men.

Beneatha is quite conscious of the social forces of the time period. Though she oftentimes is portrayed as naive and blindly following any activist movement, she refuses to comply with the restrictions that society set on her. Hansberry clearly sets up the values of Beneatha against Murchison's view, whose bourgeois values, in addition to requiring African-Americans break away from their heritage, necessitates the subjugation of women. In Act II, Scene II, as Beneatha is returning home from a date with George, and wants to have an intellectual conversation, he says,

I know [you love to talk] and I don't mind it sometimes . . . I want you to cut it out, see – The moody stuff, I mean. I don't like it. You're a nice-looking girl . . . all over. That's all you need, honey, forget the atmosphere. Guys aren't going to go for the atmosphere – they're going to go for what they see. Be glad for that. Drop the Garbo routine. It doesn't go with you. As for myself, I want a nice simple, sophisticated girl . . . not a poet – O.K.?

The italicized text actually says that he gropes her as he says this. Beneatha can see many times the way in which women are treated in society, the way everyone expects her to be a nurse rather than a doctor, and the idea that women do not need to be educated. Asagai calls her "Alaiyo" a nickname meaning "one for whom bread is not enough." She strives for something greater for her future. Beneatha is determined to raise her social standing through a doctorate. Mama, Ruth and Travis all know the effects of these social forces as well. When Mr. Lindner offers them money to stay out of the white neighbourhood, this becomes clear.

Economic diversity plays a major role in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The entire plot of the play seems to revolve around what Mama will do with the insurance cheque, and the dreams of each member of the Younger family somehow centre on how the money is dispersed. The class conflict between the "plain working folks" and the bourgeois is made obvious in the play through the economic differences that exist between the Younger family and the white people they serve as well as the neighbourhood they hope to move into.

The Younger family have the same materialistic dreams as the rest of American society. In the 1950's the stereotypical American dream was to have a house with a yard, a big car, and a happy family. The Youngers also seem to want to live this dream, though their struggle to attain any semblance of it is dramatically different from the struggle of a similar suburban family might encounter, because the Youngers are not a stereotypical middle-class

family. Rather, they live in a world in which being middle class is also a dream.

The Younger family is very poor. To emphasize this, the opening scene of the play depicts Walter and Ruth's son Travis asking for fifty cents for school and Ruth refusing him, saying they do not have fifty cents. Walter gives Travis more money than he needs, telling him to take a taxi to school or buy some candy. Walter thrives on the idea that he can provide for his family economically. When the cheque for the ten thousand dollars in insurance money comes in the mail for Mama, Ruth and Travis are extremely excited. Mama says that they are not the type of people who get so excited over money, but Ruth says "We ain't never had none before – OPEN IT!" Travis tells Mama that she's rich, and when Walter comes home, he simply asks if the cheque came yet. Mama scolds him for not first saying hello. Walter tells her that this money is very important to him because he wants so many things, but for Mama the ten thousand dollars seems to be a compensation payment for the loss of her husband. She realizes that no amount of money can replace things like the people you love, but Walter cannot see this. He is blinded by his want for money and being a man. Mama says, "Somebody would've thought my children done all but starved to death the way they talk about money here lately."

Mama's ability to control the materialistic desires reveals a strong contrast to Beneatha's worldliness. Mama is a very faithful and religious person, who cares a lot about her children. In Act I Scene I of the play, in a conversation with Ruth Mama says, "Now don't you start, child. It's too early in the morning to be talking about money. It ain't Christian." Mama believes strongly in God, and her conservative beliefs are shown when she feels disappointed when Ruth considers abortion, refuses to give her son money for a liquor store since she thinks drinking is sinful and winces at Beneatha's exclamations of "Christ!"

Beneatha, on the contrary, values money too much. She longs to be independent, but she cannot fund her dreams on her own and she still lives at home, relying on her mother and still very immature. She tells her mother that she's tired of hearing about God, because "God doesn't pay tuition," offending Mama, who is very religious. Mama slaps Beneatha, telling her that as long as she lives under her Mother's roof, there is a God. Beneatha's primary focus is herself and the furthering of her own dreams, and she knows money is the only way to do this. Ruth wants a bigger house because she is pregnant once again and has no room for the baby. Beneatha says, "Where's the baby going to sleep, on the roof?" Money for Ruth is a symbol of a better life for her family. Unlike Beneatha and Walter, she tries to be selfless and never outright asks Mama for the money to buy the house.

The lives of the characters are extremely influenced by these socio-economic forces. The main theme of the entire story comes out of the fact that the family is able to stand up and overcome these obstacles to move into Clybourne Park. All of the central themes, including the idea of dreams and plans in the midst of poverty are connected to and influenced by these social, political and economic forces. The characters are aware of this. Walter falls into a sort of depression over the fact that he cannot invest in

the liquor store and provide for his family without Mama's consent. Walter Lee yearns to be part of the upper class through means of a liquor store. Mama asks him why he talks so much about money, and he says "Because money is life, Mama!" Mama disagrees with this, saying that there was a time when freedom was life, but she understands how society has changed its priorities. When he has the money, he finally feels better and begins to mend his relationship with Ruth.

12.4 SUM UP

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry skillfully addresses the family's material ambitions which are juxtaposed with more spiritual ideals. She presents "the moral conflict between the spiritual promises of the dream ideal and the frank materialism of the impoverished dreamer" (Brown). The family members move under the control of their materialistic needs, their feeling and attitude which is part of their inner life "objectives," (Locke) and the outer life objectives which are "the ideals of American dream, the American institution and democracy" (Locke). For instance, the distance between Walter and his mother is caused by his acceptance of the society's materialistic ideals that identify him as a mere commodity. Walter is not just a black victim of white racism but also a victim of a materialistic American dream that can enslave men or women of any race. The knowledge that the society "not only denied non-whites property ownership but also denied non-whites their humanity and made them property to be owned," (Matthews) is one of the crueller lessons for Negro and keep him hopeless and frustrated. This is evident in Walter Lee's character who is affected by economic pressure placed upon him by racist society. It leads him to a "kind of crazy". He displays hostility towards his wife for increasing his financial burden by becoming pregnant, toward his mother for not giving him the insurance money and toward his sister for wanting some of the insurance money to help her continue to study to become a doctor. The play *A Raisin in the Sun* thus illustrates the economic as well as social difficulty of the Youngers and hence can be read as a Marxist play.

12.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (POSSIBLE QUESTIONS)

- Q1. Discuss Marxism – its various contexts.
- Q2. Discuss 'A Raisin in the Sun' as a Marxist work.
- Q3. Comment upon the art of characterization in 'A Raisin in the Sun'

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