An African-American Experience Essay, Research Paper

August Wilson s The Piano Lesson and Lorraine Hansberry s A Raisin in the Sun seek to dramatize the various issues that two African-American families face. Although the dramas take place in two distinct time periods, there exists a comparative and contrastive view of the various issues that arise in these two dramas. The struggle to rise from economic adversity is present in the two protagonists in these dramas, who both have dreams of achieving economic success, a central issue in these two dramas. In The Piano Lesson, the character Boy Willie seeks to obtain the family s treasured heirloom, a piano, for which he wants to sell for money. In return he wants to use the money to buy land from the Sutter family, former slave-owners of his family, the Charles s. Boy Willie intends to grow cotton and/or tobacco on this land and even hire some workers so that he can achieve his dream of economic success. On the other hand, there lies the character Walter Younger in A Raisin in the Sun. His dream is to open a liquor store and reap from the profits. However, this can t be accomplished unless his Mama gives him the money from a $10,000 insurance check she receives from her husband s death. The struggle for these characters to achieve economic success is one that all blacks, even today, can relate to, according to Thomas P. Adler, since the economic havoc wreaked on the American Negro takes some ten to fifteen years off the life expectancy of African-American folks (1794). The characters of Boy Willie and Walter Younger seek to rise above the oppression they have faced as blacks and instead try to transform themselves into a dream, the dream of economic stability.

This gives rise to the moral issues that are evident by these two characters to achieve their dream. Boy Willie constantly nags and harasses his sister Berniece to sell the

piano to him, even telling her that you can t do nothing with that piano sitting up here in the house, that s just like if I let them watermelons sit out there and rot, I d be a fool (Wilson 1988). She constantly says that she wants it kept in the family, but Boy Willie

won t accept no for an answer. He and his friend Lymon even try to lift the piano from the house. The behavior displayed by Boy Willie is one of greed, selfishness, and discontent toward his sister Berniece, including his family. The character of Walter Younger is filled with joy when he hears that the insurance check has arrived, but switches to disappointment when Mama tells him that he isn t going to invest in a liquor store. He looks her straight in the eyes and tells her you ain t even looked at it and you have decided-well, you tell that to my boy tonight when you put him to sleep on the living-room couch… (Hansberry 1753). This is even more evident when viewed on screen, as you can see in the intensity of Walter s eyes as he looks at Mama (A Raisin). This displays in Walter a low moral conduct, which even decreases lesser when he comes home drunk in the next act. Even though these characters display improper conduct, it can be viewed as being understandable, since they are both striving to achieve a dream, something which no one or anything should stand in the way of.

Although in A Raisin in the Sun Walter Younger has a dream for himself, other characters have dreams also, dreams that deal with achieving freedom for oneself and in some instances for others as well. For a while now the Younger family has been living in a worn-out house where Walter s son Travis sleeps on the couch in the living room. With the insurance money that she has in handy, Mama s dream is to uplift her family from the ghetto life of Southside Chicago to its urban life. She does just that by buying a house in a

white neighborhood. It is a house that she has always dreamed of having for her family with its three bedrooms, a yard with a little patch of dirt and a nice big basement (Hansberry 1764). She achieves this dream of self-fulfillment, of moving her family from the ghetto life to the urban life from a tenant to a homeowner. Mama has achieved personal freedom for not only herself, but for her family as well.

Although Mama achieves her dream, Boy Willie and Walter encounter the issue of having their dreams put on hold. Boy Willie tries and tries to get possession of the piano, but he never does due to the ghost of Mr. Sutter, who scares him greatly and who appears every time he tries to life the piano from the house. Walter s Mama finally gives in to his antics and gives him the money left over from the down payment on the house. He invests it into the liquor store, only to find out that his so-called friend Willy, who was in charge of obtaining the liquor license will never return to Chicago and that the money is gone for good (Hansberry 1781-2).

The issue of family heritage plays an essential part in both of these dramas. In The Piano Lesson Berniece doesn t want to sell the piano because Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years, she rubbed on it till her hands bled (Wilson 1988). Berniece has a legitimate argument for not wanting to sell the piano, which is that it reminds her of her mother. In A Raisin in the Sun Walter cries uncontrollably due to the bad investment he made with Willy and proclaims that money is made out of my father s flesh (Hansberry 1782). The money invested in the liquor store holds the same family and/or sentimental value that the piano does for Berniece, both which greatly affect family heritage.

Religion also serves as an issue in these two dramas. In The Piano Lesson Berniece s boyfriend, Avery looks toward God as a spiritual guide in overcoming the conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie, which is evident since he s a preacher. In A

Raisin in the Sun Mama thanks God for virtually everything in her life and is a very religious person. On the other hand, Beneatha doesn t believe in God and thinks there is only man and it is He who makes miracles (Hansberry 1745).

The characters of Walter and Berneice also bring into account a racial issue. Walter has a job as a chauffeur who drives a limousine and caters to the white race, an example of blacks working for whites around the late 1950 s. The character Berniece in The Piano Lesson cleaned homes for white folks. They are in fact minorities and somewhat may think of themselves as outcasts in a male dominated white society. The Younger family even encounters a more serious racial issue, that of racism when Mr. Lindner tells them that the neighbors in the white neighborhood where they plan to live don t want blacks invading their territory. They offer them money for the house, but nevertheless they turn it down and decide to occupy the resident that Mama has dreamed of for years.

The struggles that the Charles and Younger families go through bring various issues to light. Issues that are economic, social, religious, racial, etc. are displayed in these two poignant dramas. Through the lives of these two courageous families one can have an understanding for not only the struggle for African-American families, but for all family struggles. This was a goal of Lorraine Hansberry who affirmed the responsibility of the writer to speak for those without public voice who share in one or another aspect of her

[self] -biological, racial, socio-cultural-and face oppression because of it (Adler 1793). All families can somehow, someway relate to one or more issues that are present in one or in both of these dramas because all families encounter all sorts of issues.

Works Cited

Adler, Thomas P. The Political Basis of Lorraine Hansberry s Art. American Drama, 1940-1960: A Critical History 1994. Meyer 1793-4.

Hansberry, Lorraine. A Raisin in the Sun. Meyer 1730-92.

Meyer, Michael, ed. The Bedford Introduction to Literature. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin s, 1999.

A Raisin in the Sun. Dir. Daniel Petrie. Perf. Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee. 1959. Videocassette. Columbia Pictures, 1961.

Wilson, August. The Piano Lesson. Meyer 1962-2017.