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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Lorraine Hansberry's

A Raisin in the Sun

from

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by

Marie Y. Smith



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General Introduction to the Work

Genre

A *RAISIN IN THE SUN* is a three-act play. In general, plays differ from novels in that there is no narration for the reader; everything must be interpreted from dialogue and the stage directions. Specifically, three-act plays have a unique structure. Act I is mainly exposition: it sets the scene and gives the background and circumstances surrounding the action. Toward the middle of act one an **inciting incident** sets the plot in motion. At the end of Act I is the **first plot point**, an event that drives the main character(s) from normal life into a conflict of some sort. Act II is an act full of **complications**. At some time during Act II, the main character(s) will seem close to fulfilling their goals, but a **reversal** will occur, and suddenly everything will (seem to) fall apart. Toward the end of Act II is **plot point two**, which sends the plot in a completely new and unexpected direction. Right at this point the main character(s) enter into a state of deep loss and depression, feeling that nothing is going right and nothing is going to go right; the characters' plans seem to be completely destroyed and there is no hope. Act III contains the **climax** of the play, in which all conflicts are resolved and a state of calm is reached.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the three-act structure is very clear. Act I opens with exposition, and immediately the reader learns about the inciting incident: the \$10,000 insurance money. At the end of Act I, the first plot point occurs when the reader sees Walter's dreams slowly getting suppressed and possibly destroyed by his family members. In Act II, the obstacles and conflicts are seemingly overcome, culminating with a very happy exchange among the characters in Act II, scene three. However, this happiness is quickly destroyed by the second plot point: the appearances of Lindner and Bobo. This creates the "black moment" for Walter. In Act III, the play is resolved when Walter finally "becomes a man" and declines Lindner's offer. This creates a sense of peace within the house, even in the midst of the commotion and potential danger of trying to move to an all-white neighborhood.

New Historicism Theory Applied to *A Raisin in the Sun*



Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any worldview. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.

Activity One

Examining the Text for Historical References

1. Divide the students into three groups (or a number of groups divisible by three and assign each group one act of the play.
2. Have each group peruse its assigned act and use the chart below to note any possible references to persons and/or events beyond the play.
3. Have each group report its findings to the class, and allow the full class to discuss any discrepancies.
4. Finally, have the class discuss whether the historical truth of these “outside allusions” makes any difference to the students’ appreciation or understanding of the play.
 - Would it have made any difference to an audience when the play was first produced?

Feminist Theory Applied to *A Raisin in the Sun*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

The feminist movement in society found its approach to literature in the 1960s. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be unintelligent (at least in part because they were generally less formally educated than men), and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating their portrayal of women and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) within pieces of literature and exposing them. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has been accepted as the norm by both men and women. Feminist critics have even dissected many words in Western languages that they believe to be rooted in masculinity. Feminists argue that since the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether they be the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to fix this image and create a balanced canon, works by females and works about females need to be added and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Evaluating the Female Characters as Stereotypical or Non-Stereotypical

1. Copy and distribute *A Raisin in the Sun* Feminist Activity One Work Sheet
2. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the primary female characters: Mama, Ruth, or Beneatha.
4. Have groups review the play and note on the Work Sheet those actions and attitudes displayed by the character that would be considered stereotypically female and those that would be considered non-stereotypical.
5. Have groups decide whether their character displays more stereotypical or non-stereotypical behavior throughout the course of the play.
6. Redistribute the groups into groups of three, each having a representative for each of the three main female characters.
 - Have each member of the new groups present his/her findings.
 - Have these new groups decide whether the play and its characters challenges or supports female stereotypes.
7. Reconvene the class and discuss the impact Hansberry's portrayal of these women might have had on her audiences.



Psychoanalytic/Freudian Theory Applied to *A Raisin in the Sun*

Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERMS “PSYCHOLOGICAL,” OR “PSYCHOANALYTICAL,” or “Freudian Theory” seem to encompass essentially two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Examining Walter's Character Growth as an Emergence from the Oedipal Complex

1. Copy and distribute Notes on Freud's Oedipal Complex and peruse with the class
2. Divide the class into groups of three or four, and have each group discuss the following:
 - List the ways in which Mama and Ruth are similar. (Cite Act and Scene for specific actions, lines of dialogue, etc.) that illustrate and support your claims.)
 - Is there sufficient evidence in the play to suggest that, from an Oedipal standpoint, in marrying Ruth, Walter has “married his mother”?
 - Count and cite the number of times Walter insists that he is a man.
 - What is the context for most of these assertions?
 - What is Mama's next-to-last line in the play? From an Oedipal standpoint, how is this significant?
3. Reconvene the class and discuss how successfully the play can be read as Walter's working through the Oedipal phase of his development.
4. As a final discussion question, given the potential Oedipal reading of this play, how significant is it that the play was written—and Walter's character was developed—by a woman?