A Raisin in the Sun Revisited

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It seems incredible that A Raisin in the Sun, which opened on Broadway in 1959, has reached the ripe old age of twenty-nine and even more incredible that its creator, Lorraine Hansberry, who died in 1965 at the age of thirty-four, has already been gone twenty-three years, for she is still spoken of with passion and reverence by a younger generation of writers and critics whom she encouraged and influenced. (Some of these are Julian Mayfield, Douglas Turner Ward, and Margaret B. Wilkerson, whose collective voices are heard in the Winter 1979 issue of Freedomways devoted entirely to Hansberry's life and art.) What has inspired them is not only the quality of her art, but also her courage and commitment. Hansberry was fearless and brash enough to declare that art does have a purpose, and that purpose is to change things (To Be Young xiv). She was not afraid to write a play about social problems because she understood that "there are no plays which are not social and no plays that do not have a thesis" (To Be Young 133).

In the eyes of some critics, however, A Raisin in the Sun was passé almost before it closed, because they saw it only as a protest play or social drama about a Black family's struggle to buy a house in a white neighborhood. In Confrontation and Commitment, C. W. E. Bigsby reflects this critical point of view: "For all its sympathy, humour and humanity, ... [A Raisin in the Sun] remains disappointing. ... Its weakness is essentially that of much Broadway naturalism. It is an unhappy crossbreed of social protest and re-assuring resolution" (156, emphasis added). Even more damaging and unsound is the evaluation of critic Harold Cruse who, in The

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Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, observes that the play is "the most cleverly written piece of glorified soap opera" he has ever seen (278). ¹

On the other hand, more perceptive critics, such as Julius Lester in his introduction to Les Blancs, early on recognized the play for what it really is: a work of art that contains universal and universally American themes that make it a significant contribution to American dramatic literature. In her recent biography of Hansberry, Ann Cheney writes that "...the simple eloquence of the characters elevates the play into a universal presentation of all people's hopes, fears, and dreams" (55).

For Hansberry, there was never a conflict between the play's specific social value and its universal literary value because the latter was inextricably bound to and grew logically out of the former: "I believe that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific. Universality, I think, emerges from the truthful identity of what is" (To Be Young 128). Regarding Raisin, Hansberry observed that, while

...there are no waving flags and marching songs at the barricades as Walter marches out with his little battalion, it is not because the battle lacks nobility. On the contrary, he has picked up in his way, still imperfect and wobbly in his small view of human destiny, what I believe Arthur Miller once called "the golden thread of history." He becomes, in spite of those who are too intrigued with despair and hatred of man to see it, King Oedipus refusing to tear out his eyes, but attacking the Oracle instead. He is that last Jewish patriot manning his rifle in the burning ghetto at Warsaw; he is that young girl who swam into sharks to save a friend a few weeks ago; he is Anne Frank, still believing in people; he is the nine small heroes of Little Rock; he is Michelangelo creating David, and Beethoven bursting forth with the Ninth Symphony. He is all those things because he has finally reached out in his tiny moment and caught that sweet essence which is human dignity, and it shines like the old star-touched dream that is in his eyes. ("Willie Loman" 7)

The dignity of Walter's character is present long before the end of the play, "when he marches out with his little battalion." However, the fact that Walter's dignity is somewhat obscured from view has led many readers, critics, and viewing audiences to misunderstand him and his true intentions. I agree with Douglas Turner Ward that "it is not Walter Lee's action at the end of the play, as meaningful as it is to his development and inspiring to the audience, but his central presence and thrust throughout the play" that should be emphasized (224-25). The overpowering personality of Lena Younger, particularly her moral rectitude and selfless
nature, tends to overshadow Walter, and this accounts in part for
the tendency of many readers and audiences to focus their attention
almost entirely on her. Unfortunately, this violates the equal balance
or proportionate share of the spotlight which each deserves and
which the structure of the play calls for.

Some months subsequent to the play's opening, Hansberry
regarded the lack of a central character as a flaw in Raisin ("Willie
Loman" 7). "I am not certain," writes Douglas Turner Ward, "that,
in creating Walter Lee, Lorraine was even fully cognizant of the
extent of her accomplishment. Indeed, I think a close reading of
the play reveals her ambiguity" (225). There is room for
disagreement here, with both the author and with Ward's
concluding statement. There is no ambiguity in the writing itself,
except for the play's ending where the author intentionally shifts
focus from Raisin's primary to its secondary meaning in order to
satisfy the needs of her Black audience. Rather, misunderstandings
and misinterpretations tend to involve the inappropriate moral
standards used to measure Walter's character. Our literary
judgments, to a large extent, are determined by our own moral
standards, by our adherence to the rules society deems
appropriate. Generally, these standards differ according to the sex
of the individual: A good man, for instance, is strong, aggressive—
masculine—, whereas a good woman is sweet, gentle—feminine.
It is a grievous error to assess Walter's character by a set of moral
standards somewhat more applicable to his mother, whose actions
rarely receive censure even though they are far less than ideal. The
consequence is a diminution of Walter's strength and dignity, which
are in every respect equally as great as, if not greater than, his
mother's. Compounding this mistake is the common failure to
distinguish between appearance and reality. Judging Walter on his
surface actions, as opposed to his deeper, underlying motives and
traits of character, one misses his real significance, which Ward has
correctly identified: "Lorraine's real triumph . . . is the depiction
of Walter Lee as a complex, autonomous character who thinks and
acts not as an author's marionette, but as a harbinger of all the
qualities of character that would soon explode into American reality
and consciousness" (224). To fail to see this complexity is to fail to
see the essence of the play and, hence, its aesthetic value; for, as
Ward also observes, Walter is both structurally and thematically the
play's dramatic focal point: "It is Walter Lee, the bearer of aims and
goals that have been conditioned by the prevailing values of the
society, who is, dramatically, most representative. It is Walter Lee
. . . who emerges as the most unique creation for his time and ours.
It is his behavior throughout the play . . . which gives the play prophetic significance . . ." (225).

If one is able to discern this "prophetic significance," even though Lena overshadows Walter, the lack of a central character is of little consequence. In fact, the dual protagonists and the conflict centered on their differing ways of looking at the world are what give the play dramatic tension as well as intellectual and emotional appeal. In addition, this duality provides a structure that points to the primary meaning of the play—the tragedy of Walter's reach for the American Dream. The intent of this essay is to restore the proper balance between Lena and Walter by focusing on him and his mode of thinking, as well as on the American and Afro-American values which formed his character. "As Lorraine Hansberry always emphasized," but some critics are wont to ignore, "A Raisin in the Sun was not just a human document . . ., but a play of ideas: a political and philosophical statement" (Nemiroff 4).

Ironically, the positive qualities of character which should lend dignity to Walter's character, such as his iron will, his high expectations of himself, and his determination to succeed, are those which often reduce him to the role of villain when he is compared to his mother. Hers may be a more positive image, but this is due to the fact that she must rely on, and fight with, Walter using the only tools available to her—patience, understanding, selflessness, and love—even though these may be, indeed are, genuine expressions of her character. Moreover, though it appears that she relinquishes her role as head of the household out of concern for Walter's welfare, she is no doubt quite happy to lay that burden down. Significantly, this occurs after she has taken a step toward the realization of her own dream by purchasing the house, an act which would seem to nullify Walter's dream. However, no real enmity exists between Walter and his mother, for though opposites in their ways of looking at the world and in their responses to it, they are character types united by love for each other and for their family; both seek to improve the conditions affecting their lives.

That Walter seems to many to possess an inordinate degree of self-respect and to expect too much out of life for himself and for his family may have more to do with viewers' perceptions than with Walter's actions. If one has been conditioned to expect little, as many Blacks have been through racism, or to believe that Blacks deserve and are entitled to little, as some members of society have been led to believe, then the demand for any degree above this "conditioned less" will seem excessive. For such viewers Lena Younger's dream appears much more "normal." There is a logical
explanation for Lena Younger's behavior. According to the findings of Black female scholar Claudia Tate, editor of *Black Women Writers at Work*, Lena's posture reflects not only racial but gender conditioning: "The black heroine seldom elects to play the role of the alienated outsider or the lone adventurer in her quest for self-affirmation. This does not mean that she is unconcerned about her self-esteem . . ., but rather that her quest . . . has different priorities and takes place in a different landscape. . . . she is usually literally tied down to her children" (xx). Because Lena Younger's children, though fully grown, and family come first, her purchasing the house they need so badly may seem to viewers of the play a much more sensible idea than Walter's wanting to open a business.

Yet the root of the conflict between them goes deeper than this. Lena Younger's thinking is restricted by time. Hers is the thinking of a Black woman born near the turn of the century in a racist American society, and she does not understand the modern ways and thinking of her children. "Something has changed," she tells Walter. "You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we couldn't and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too . . . Now here come you and Beneatha—talking 'bout things we ain't never even thought about hardly, me and your daddy. You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done. I mean that you had a home; that we kept you out of trouble till you was grown; that you don't have to ride to work on the back of nobody's streetcar— You my children—but how different we done become" (62). As this statement makes clear, racial conditioning has had as profound an impact on her life as that of gender. Her experiences with discrimination as a young woman in the South affected her thinking. While they did not destroy her self-esteem, they did color her outlook on life, narrowing her perspective and restricting her beliefs about what a Black person could reasonably expect to achieve in American society. The only way a Black person could escape discrimination in the South of that time was to move to the North. Though it was a compromise, the action she took meant that she was a fighter who took the step that many of her generation did in order to make a meaningful change in her life. In fact, she is still a fighter, and she proves it by buying the house to bring about the change she now feels is needed for her family's welfare. As she says, "When the world gets ugly enough, a woman will do anything for her family" (62). Her belief in this change, which is her version of the American Dream, sets her at odds with her son Walter. Like her earlier move to the North, the purchase of a suburban Chicago house reflects a compromise
or acceptance of less than she deserves or is entitled to. Hers is, in short, not the true American Dream, but a second-class version of it reserved for Black Americans and other poor people. Considering all the obstacles she has had to face as a Black woman, one can hardly fault her for what she does. Nevertheless, her dream is unacceptable to Walter, who will have nothing less than the complete American Dream, since her version of it only amounts to surviving, not living in the fullest sense.

Unlike his mother, Walter has managed to escape almost completely the crippling inferiority that destroys many Blacks, men in particular. In order to help determine how he managed to acquire the strength to dream his dream, one might examine what is most American about Walter and his thinking, for it is his acceptance of American values, rather than stereotypes, myths, and untruths about Blacks, that enables him to dream and act in a typically American way. As Hansberry has stated, "... Walter Younger is an American more than he is anything else" ("Willie Loman" 8). Foremost is his belief in the value which holds that, in the land of opportunity, anyone can become anything he wants to be. While the play contains no explicit evidence to support this conjecture, the fact that this democratic ideal is the most cherished of those which form the American consciousness—indeed, is synonymous with the freedom that America stands for—means that Walter would be affected by it, as all Americans are. Believers in this myth let nothing stand in their way, as he does not. For him, this includes racism, which he barely considers until he is directly confronted with it in Act II, Scene 3, in the person of Carl Lindner, who tries to bribe the family in order to keep them out of his white neighborhood. Even then it has no real effect on his dream or his plans.

Another source of Walter's strength is the fact that he is male. As Lena Younger's world view and range of possibilities are restricted by her femaleness, Walter's are enlarged and enhanced by his maleness. Another source of strength lies in his belief in himself and in his ability to do what other successful Americans have done. He sincerely believes that he is cut out for better things. Near the end of Act II, Scene 2, he describes himself as "a giant—surrounded by ants! Ants who can't even understand what it is the giant is talking about" (76). This strong faith in himself is the basis of his typically American self-reliance and rugged individualism.

Ironically, the influences of his own Black family and the values they believed in and lived by prepared Walter to accept mainstream American values and to strive to reach his goal; however, he was also influenced by outside forces existing in the
society at large. These delicately balanced value systems both coexist to provide a particular individual and form the basis of the biculturality which characterizes the Afro-American. At the same time, this fact of biculturality underscores the two levels of universality inherent in the Black American experience: The dreams, hopes, and fears of the Younger family are universal reflections of those shared by people of all races all over the world, and these are universally American aspirations.

These family influences are of two kinds and produce two significant results. First, the love Walter received from his parents during his childhood led to the development of his strong sense of self-esteem, enabling him fully to accept American values and giving him the confidence to pursue his dream. Second, the example of courage and dignity invested in his parents’ valiant struggle to overcome adversity, provide for their children, and teach them to be better than ordinary resulted in his love of his race and his pride in his heritage. The stronger of these influences as it relates to his self-esteem is that which came from his mother, although his father’s contribution was important as well. The similarity between Lena and her son, which ironically she fails to recognize, is clearly revealed in her words about herself: “Lord, ever since I was a little girl, I always remember people saying, ‘Lena—Lena Eggleston, you aims too high all the time. You needs to slow down and see life a little more like it is. Just slow down some.’ That’s what they always used to say down home—’Lord, that Lena Eggleston is a high-minded thing’ ” (133). Walter’s father also played a meaningful role in his life, as seen in Lena’s statement that Big Walter “sure loved his children. Always wanted them to have something—be something. That’s where Brother gets all these notions . . . ” (29).

Because he is “high-minded” and wants to “be something,” Walter readily accepts the American value which holds that owning one’s own business is the primary path to economic success and prosperity. His acceptance of this value contrasts with Lena’s belief in the efficacy of hard physical labor like that which killed her husband and which she still does. Hers is an attitude based on a kind of reverse elitism which imbues hard work with a respectability and dignity that business does not possess. It seems to spring from the kind of thinking reflected in the old adage “Money is the root of all evil,” which is at odds with the American Horatio Alger myth, as well as with the historic tendency of Protestantism to combine “an extraordinary capitalistic business sense . . . with the most intensive forms of a piety” (Weber 43). Her feelings about the moral
superiority of work and the contempt she holds towards business are made clear in her comment that "we ain't no business people, Ruth. We just plain working folks" (25). Earlier she had told her daughter-in-law, "It's too early in the morning to be talking about money. It ain't Christian" (25). Moreover, owning a liquor store is morally objectionable to her: "...liquor, honey—...Well—whether they drinks it or not ain't none of my business. But whether I go into business selling it to 'em is, and I don't want that on my ledger this late in life" (25-26). Lena appears to be willing to accept less in this life in order to assure herself of reaping more in the next.

This facet of her world view arises from her own particular Protestant religious beliefs, and it is very likely that her attitude toward hard work is a residue of the cultural conditioning Blacks received during slavery when the Bible was used to convince them to be satisfied with their lot. In fact, Lena Younger gives manual labor a kind of mythical, almost Biblical meaning: As Jesus gave his life for man, Big Walter gave his life for her and his family. In other words, work itself, as well as the sacrifice of the worker, is given a higher meaning than the financial and material rewards it was intended to bring. Of course, this reaction is in part a psychological defense mechanism. So little of a material nature remains of Big Walter's life, aside from the $10,000 check, that his sacrifice and the love it represents are all she has left and the only meaning she can find in it. This attitude has an unfortunate effect on her life. While it may make her dying more peaceful, it makes her living more difficult.

Walter, on the other hand, shares neither her attitude toward hard work nor her worry about transgressing God's laws. In fact, other than his having been taken to church "every Sunday" (36) as a child, he is not a religious person. This is not, however, to say that he is immoral. Indeed, in light of the parental influences on his life, especially those of his mother, it would be almost impossible for him to have abandoned moral values completely. The separation of moral values from religious dogma, however, is seen in his sister Beneatha's modern attitude toward God, an attitude which approximates his own and which is antithetical to his mother's: "Mama, you don't understand. It's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don't accept. It's not important. I'm not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don't believe in God. I don't even think about it. It's just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is he who makes miracles!" (36). Unknown to her, and possibly
even to him, Beneatha's faith in man is borne out in the dreams and strivings of her brother, who in his own way attempts to make his own miracle.

Walter's dream of success was nurtured by a young white man whom he saw in town and sought to emulate. He has not modeled himself after his father, whose death and sacrifice assume a meaning for him which is radically different from that which his mother has given them. His image of his father matches the old stereotype of the hard-working, long-suffering Black male who literally worked himself to death. As Lena says, "I seen . . . him . . . night after night . . . come in . . . and then look at me . . . the red showing in his eyes . . . the veins moving in his head . . . I seen him grow thin and old before he was forty . . . working and working and working like somebody's old horse . . . killing himself . . ." (119). There is no way Walter could forget this image, and the check becomes the symbolic representation of the senseless waste of his father's life. Other tangible signs of it are the cramped, roach-infested apartment, the shabby furniture, and the worn out rug on the floor. No matter how much he may have loved his father, it would be unthinkable to want to replicate his father's life. For this reason, the young white men his age personify for him the true American Dream, a dream he knows he is worthy of: "Mama—sometimes when I'm downtown and 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" (61).

The stimulation that he gets downtown from seeing the young white men is quite different from that which he gets from the Black musicians at a Southside Chicago bar called the Green Hat: "You know what I like about the Green Hat? I like this little cat they got there who blows a sax . . . He blows. He talks to me. . . . And there's this older guy who plays the piano . . . and they got a sound. . . . They got the best little combo in the world in the Green Hat . . . You can just sit there and drink and listen to them three men play and you realize that don't nothing matter worth a damn, but just being there" (93). The former source of stimulation invites action, while the latter induces inactivity. The actions of the young white men stimulate him to hope, dream, think, even scheme. Black music, on the other hand, becomes for him a kind of drug or narcotic that lulls him into a state of listlessness which allows him to escape depression.

His reliance on white models does not mean that he hates himself or his blackness. Rather, it is a sign of his pragmatism and confirms
his self-love: He believes he can do what they do and that he deserves to have what they have. That he feels himself to be in their class is seen, for example, in his words to George Murchinson, Beneatha’s suitor, whose father is a rich Black businessman whom Walter has never seen or met: “Your old man is all right, man. . . . I’d like to talk to him. Listen, man, I got some plans that could turn this city upside down. I mean I think like he does. Big. . . . It’s hard to find a man on this whole Southside who understands my kind of thinking” (75). Central to Walter’s aspirations as a businessman is the color-neutral value of the American Dream, not the particular race of the individual who attains it. Mr. Murchinson’s success in business indicates that anyone of any race can attain it.

Strong, aggressive, ambitious, ruthless even, like the men he imitates, Walter reaches for the complete American Dream. It is natural that he would, for the freedom that America grants an individual holds the possibility of unlimited riches, both spiritual and economic. What Walter dreams of and aggressively pursues is the power that money brings, power being the essence of the only kind of manhood he is willing to accept. Of course, some degree of self-aggrandizement is attached to the American Dream; many of those who attain it, such as captains of industry, do become great American heroes. However, Walter’s personal stake in his dream must be balanced by the primary purpose for which he seeks it—a radical change in his family’s living conditions. This change is much wider in scope than Lena’s planned move from their cramped apartment to a larger suburban home. It means a wholly different and improved standard of living: a substantial move up the socio-economic ladder, the complete abandonment of poverty, the chance to live the kind of life most Americans dream of living. The selflessness and nobility of this dream are what give Walter’s character its dignity and spiritual dimension.

Long before he receives the money from his mother, near the end of Act I, Scene 2, Walter demonstrates the selfless nature of his dream. When Lena tells him, “There ain’t going to be no investing in no liquor stores” (57-58), Walter replies: “Well, you tell that to my boy tonight when you put him to sleep on the living-room couch . . . Yeah—and tell it to my wife, Mama, tomorrow when she has to go out of here to look after somebody else’s kids. And tell it to me, Mama, every time we need a new pair of curtains and I have to watch you go out and work in somebody’s kitchen. Yeah, you tell me then!” (58). The same selflessness characterizes the long fantasy he spins at the end of Act II, Scene 2, after Lena has given him the money, which he plans to invest in the liquor store without her
knowledge: His main concern is not for himself, but for his wife and son. Finally, his altruistic purpose is seen near the play's end, when he tries to explain the reason for the action that led to his losing the money. Unrepentant but on the defensive, he says, "Hell, yes, I want me some yachts someday! Yes, I want to hang some real pearls 'round my wife's neck. Ain't she supposed to wear no pearls? Somebody tell me—tell me, who decides which women is supposed to wear pearls in this world. I tell you I am a man—and I think my wife should wear some pearls in this world!" (137).

Because the legitimate pursuit of financial security and prosperity can so easily become the immoral acquisitiveness that leads to materialism, it should be emphasized again that Walter's goal, as seen in his fantasy, rests on a morally sound foundation. Modest by comparison to the status of many middle-class Americans, his dream of a lovely home with a gardener, two rather expensive cars, and the choice of the best schools for his son's education could not be called an example of rampant, conspicuous consumption. A further clue to its moral soundness is that in Walter's eyes he would be repaying a debt owed to his father; he would be making his father's dream come true by actualizing his prophecy: "'Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams—but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worth while'" (29). Moreover, in his own way he would be heeding his mother's admonition to "push on out and do something bigger" (87), words she had uttered when telling him why she had made a downpayment on the house. Finally, possessing wealth is not inherently wrong or immoral. The poor do not have a monopoly on morality. As Walter knows, money is not the root of evil; it is what evil people do with it that leads to immorality.

Walter realizes that it requires a great deal of money to live the kind of life his family deserves. Thus, his action is a pragmatic one based on the reality of life. At the end of Act I, Scene 2, when Lena asks him, "'Son—how come you talk so much 'bout money?'" Walter replies, "'Because it is life, Mama!'" (61). The dialogue between them which follows this exchange further illustrates their conflicting world views:

Lena: Oh—So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money. I guess the world really do change . . .
Walter: No—it was always money, Mama. We just didn't know about it. (61)

The pronoun we refers not just to the Younger family, but to Blacks in particular and to the American people in general. The more fundamental difference between the world views of Lena and
Walter, then, turns on their respective meanings of *freedom* and their efforts to attain it. The freedom that Lena seeks, the struggle for which has dominated the social and political history of Blacks in the United States, is freedom from racism and discrimination or the unfinished business of slavery. In contrast to Lena, Hansberry, whose prescience remains uncredited, pointed out through Walter in 1959 a much more important kind of freedom, economic freedom, which, with few exceptions (most notably Marcus Garvey in the 1920s), Black leaders and intellectuals only began to discuss a decade later. After years of searching in vain for a reason, now, in the 1980s, Black leaders have finally come to regard Black lack of control of economic resources as the major cause of Afro-Americans’ failure to achieve success in this country. Often treated like a mental cripple by members of his family, especially his sister Beneatha, Walter is astute enough to recognize the power of money as the source of both social and political freedom in America. He knows that money is the best remedy for the twin evils of racism/discrimination and poverty, and that only with this kind of freedom can one speak of having realized the American Dream.

While the freedom the individual enjoys in America provides for opportunities, it does not guarantee success. Walter’s dream remains only that not because of defects in the American system but because of basic flaws in his own character. His recognition of the responsibility for his own fate marks him as a tragic hero.

Though in Act III he indulges in self-pity after he has lost the money, railing about the “takers and the ‘tooken’” (135) as he tries to escape the blame for his failure, Walter had indicated earlier, in Act II, Scene 3, that he was aware of the danger his plan entailed. Speaking of his plan to George Murchinson, Walter remarks, “Invest big, gamble big, hell, lose big if you have to . . .” (75). He knows that the possibility of failure is also a vital part of the American success story. Though as viewers of the play we know this too, we are nevertheless deeply affected by his failure because of the nobility of his dream and the vigor and intensity with which he pursues it. We have sympathy for him in spite of the fact that he bullies his wife, ridicules his sister’s dream, deceives his mother, and attempts to bribe state officials in Springfield in order to get a liquor license for the business. Even more serious than these defects in his character as they affect his dream, and hence the welfare of his family, is his flaw in judgment; he considers Willy Harris a successful businessman when he is really an untrustworthy con man. In regard to the likelihood of Walter’s success in business, an even greater flaw would be his lack of knowledge of how a
business is run. This is not to say that he requires a Harvard M.B.A., for another vital part of the American success story is the great number of individuals lacking formal education who with raw talent, intelligence, drive, and luck have succeeded in establishing and running their own businesses. At the same time, Walter fails to see the potential value of education. This attitude is evident in his disparaging remarks about his sister’s plans to become a doctor, although they also reflect stereotypical male chauvinism regarding the careers women should or should not pursue. More clear cut is his insulting remark to George Murchinson about “colored college boys”: “I see you all the time—with books tucked under your arms—going to your ‘clahsses.’ And for what! What the hell you learning over there? Filling up your heads—with the sociology and the psychology—but they teaching you how to be a man? How to take over and run the world? They teaching you how to run a rubber plantation or a steel mill? Naw—just to talk proper and read books and wear white shoes . . .” (76). Walter has disdain for education not only because he feels it is a waste of time, but also because the sensitive, intellectual types who pursue it do not correspond to his conception of manhood. For him, the only “real” men are the powerful ones who manage America’s businesses. His mistake lies not only in his false conception of manhood but also in his failure to see that some kind of education, formal or otherwise, is a necessary requirement for his goal, particularly as there is in his community no cultural basis of business ownership comparable to that in mainstream American communities through which he could learn what he needs to know about business management. Finally, while his initial contact with young white males was positive, inasmuch as they supplied him with the inspiration for his desperate attempt to escape poverty, his casual contact with them could not provide him with the hands-on experience he needed to attain his goal. Even if he had been able to acquire the business, his chances of success would have been affected by both his lack of knowledge and his lack of experience. While Walter himself is largely responsible for his negative attitude toward education, his lack of experience, over which he has no control, points out the need for positive business contacts or role models in his own Black community.

Although the end of the play supplies conclusive proof of the soundness of Walter’s character as he comes to appreciate a concept of manhood based on love rather than power and accepts the consequences of his actions by refusing to exchange his family’s racial pride and dignity for money, it does not resolve the family’s
economic plight. They remain in the same depressed economic condition. Before discussing this idea, however, I must comment on the specific nature of the change Walter undergoes, for it has often been misunderstood, leading to a distortion of his character and of the primary meaning of the play. As I have attempted to show, the play’s meaning is a tragic one, as Walter reaches for the American Dream but fails to achieve it. Grafted onto this meaning and running parallel to it is a secondary meaning. Realistic in form, it lies in Walter’s symbolic representation of Black people’s struggles and triumphs, and it is this secondary meaning and its resolution in transcendence that elicit tremendous emotional responses from audience members, especially Black ones, who view the play.

Rather than relying solely on the cathartic resolution the play’s tragic meaning was capable of producing—an option available to her—, Hansberry vitiated the power of her main theme by making allowance for a more traditional “happy ending” that Black audiences could readily identify with and appreciate. To her credit, the stage business she added to accomplish her goal fits logically within the context of both the primary and secondary meanings of the play. Walter’s final action does not represent a renunciation of American values or of his belief in the rightness of his dream of opening a business. That would have required a specious deus ex machina or illogical outcome of what the play had consistently shown throughout about Walter and his thinking. On the contrary, his final action represents a strong and unqualified repudiation of American racist “values,” and of his own threatened immoral conduct—he had planned to accept Lindner’s bribe as a desperate means of recouping the loss of his money. While Walter never admits explicitly his own responsibility for the loss, this frantic effort to recover it must be taken as his acceptance and recognition of his culpability. This act of an Uncle Tom, which he has rehearsed for his mother, complete with grotesque dialect and gestures, and which instills fear in the audience and primes them for his change, would have meant debasing his own and his family’s honor, pride, and dignity. This is not just implied; it is explicitly stated and therefore clear to the audience. In attempting to dissuade him, Lena says, “... ain’t nobody in my family never let nobody pay ‘em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth” (137). It is natural, then, that his refusal to play the Tom would cause Black audience members whose lives are characterized by the same kinds of struggles to be swept away in a tremendous outpouring of emotions and that, as an unfortunate result, his heroic
reach for the American Dream and his tragic fall—the primary meaning of the play—might tend to be ignored.

Another factor contributing to this view might be wishful thinking on the part of some members of the Black audience. Those who believe that Walter’s goal is purely materialistic and therefore immoral are content to see his supposed renunciation of American values as an expression of the moral superiority they believe Blacks possess. Finally, Lena’s comment to Ruth that “he finally come into his manhood today . . .” (145) compounds the problem. True, Walter is forced to re-accept this concept of manhood, which he already knew well because he had learned it from his father; however, his reversion to it does not necessarily mean that he believes any less in the American concept of manhood as money or power—an understanding he prefers. Because Walter is the product of two cultures whose character is shaped by the permanent possession of two different sets of values, his tenacious adherence to the mainstream American values that he believes are morally sound is no less surprising than the seemingly sudden and unexpected resurgence of the Black values his parents had instilled in him. While the overwhelming majority of the audience applauds him for this victory, which was not his alone because “it drew on the strength of an incredible people . . .” (“Willie Loman” 8), very few have appreciated his heroic reach for the American Dream, which required even greater strength, precisely because he had to do it alone, unaided by a similar kind of inner cultural resource.

Viewers of A Raisin in the Sun can be moved by a tragic hero who is elevated by his growth from ignorance to knowledge, and deeply affected by a realistic hero whose transcendence involves a tremendous sacrifice—at the play’s end, Walter and his family are as poor and powerless as they were before. The new house provides a “pinch of dignity” that allows them a bit more breathing and living space, but their lives are essentially unchanged. Without the greater financial rewards the business could have produced, they must all continue working at the same menial jobs in order to survive and pay for the house. In fact, they may be even worse off, since the birth of Ruth’s second child will mean an extra mouth to feed. Walter and Ruth have made no substantive economic progress; their current life is a modern version of the life of Lena and Big Walter. The principal hope that Ruth and Walter have is the one Lena and Big Walter had and which people everywhere have always had—that some day in the future their children will be able to make their parents’ dreams come true.
Considering that this sobering reality should provide a cause for despair would involve a serious misunderstanding of the author’s intention and a grievous contradiction of her faith in the perfectibility of humanity based on her conviction that humankind will “do what the apes never will—impose the reason for life on life” (To Be Young xxi). Moreover, this small but significant hope, as well as the characters who embody it, offers perhaps the best example of the universal materials the play abounds in, giving Hansberry’s art its distinguishing mark and enduring value. Illustrating her ability to see synthesis where others could only see dichotomy, Hansberry discovered the basis of this universal hope, indeed of her faith in humanity, in the Black experience: “. . . if blackness brought pain, it was also a source of strength, renewal and inspiration, a window on the potentials of the human race. For if Negroes could survive America, then there was hope for the human race indeed” (To Be Young xx-xxi).

Note

1Even if the views expressed by such critics had been the final word, however, the play would still be of value because the racism in housing which it describes is still very much a part of American society. Recent examples, reported in the 4 January and 12 June 1986 issues of the Washington Post (A4, A8), have occurred in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Cleveland, Ohio.

Works Cited

———. To Be Young, Gifted and Black. New York: NAL, 1969.