

**Dreams, Aspirations, and Humanism in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun***

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses the main idea of humanism, which focuses on human dignity, personal agency, and growth, even in difficult circumstances. Many writers, black as well as white, have shown through their works that individuals have the potential for self-improvement and success, despite racism and inequality. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry presents various characters who struggle for self-worth and dignity in a society that marginalizes them. Their efforts highlight the humanist belief in the power of imagination and the importance of personal empowerment.

**Keywords:** Difficult, Circumstances, Society, Marginalizes

Humanism, at its core, emphasizes the value of human dignity, personal agency, and the potential for growth, often in the face of adversity. Humanists believe that human beings can control and modify their destiny. In a way, they believe in the human capacity to solve individual and social problems and to make progress. Humanism lends due importance to the creative imagination as a power in promoting good life as humanists believe that the 'good life' can be achieved on earth through by doing good actions, sharing ideas, positive thinking and enlightened self-interest. They believe that human needs, interest and dignity are fundamental. For humanist, particularly, it is the creative imagination that provides hope to alleviate suffering and to make world a better place one must first imagination. The "map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us" (2) avers, Robin Kelly in the work *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002). In the United States, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Ernest Hemingway and Mark Twain convey their humanistic leanings through their works. In the Afro-American literature Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, W.E.B Du Bois, Philip Randolph, Richard Wright, and many others contributed their efforts to present ordinary people with the notion that human beings have endless possibilities. These figures, through their works, sought to present Black people not as victims of their circumstances, but as individuals with endless possibilities for growth, self-realization, and social contribution. These Afro-American writers and activists believed that Black people, like all people, have infinite possibilities for self-actualization and fulfillment. By confronting the societal forces of racism, segregation, and economic inequality, they sought to give voice to the struggles and aspirations of ordinary Black people, offering them hope and affirmation of their inherent worth. Their humanism focuses on the empowerment of Black people and the affirmation of their humanity against the backdrop of a society that often sought to deny them that recognition.

In *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), Lorraine Hansberry incorporates the principles of humanism into the lives of the Younger family, whose members not only dare to dream but also struggle with

issues of self-worth, aspiration, and social justice. Throughout the play, characters such as Walter Lee Younger and Beneatha Younger wrestle with their own identities and ambitions. Walter's desire to achieve financial success reflects a broader yearning for self-respect and the ability to provide for his family, which is fundamental to his sense of dignity. Beneatha's rejection of traditional roles and her search for a purpose beyond what society expects of her reflect humanist ideals of individual autonomy and self-realization. The value of personal dignity in *A Raisin in the Sun* contributes to the theme that speaks of the characters' struggles to maintain their self-worth, pride, and humanity in the face of external challenges, particularly racism, poverty, and societal expectations. Personal dignity, in this context, is not only about self-respect but also the respect one seeks from others, especially within a society that often marginalizes and dehumanizes Black people.

Walter Lee Younger's pursuit of personal dignity is most evident in his desire to invest the life insurance money into a liquor store. For Walter, the liquor store represents financial independence and the opportunity to prove himself as a man capable of providing for his family in a way that gives him pride. Throughout the play, he expresses frustration with the lack of opportunities and his feeling that his dreams and potential are being stifled by his current job as a chauffeur. He feels emasculated by his inability to provide for his family in the way he envisions, and this drives him to seek a way to assert his dignity through business success. In Act 1, Scene 2, Walter argues with his wife, Ruth, saying, "I'm a man, damn it! I'm a man!" (23). This outburst demonstrates his deep frustration over feeling powerless and diminished in a society that doesn't allow him to fulfill his potential. Walter believes that achieving financial success would restore his dignity, and he is willing to take risks to achieve that, even if it means betting on an uncertain business venture.

Mama, the matriarch of the Younger family, is a figure of resilience and integrity. For her, dignity is tied to the preservation of her family's well-being and legacy. When she receives the life insurance check after her husband's death, she is determined to use it to uplift the family and provide them with the dignity that they've been denied by poverty and racism. She wants to give her children the opportunity to live in a better environment, where they can feel proud of themselves and their circumstances. Mama's decision to buy a house in a predominantly white neighborhood is a testament to her belief in the value of personal dignity. She wants her family to experience the pride and self-respect that comes from having a home of their own, something they can't afford in their current situation. Despite the societal barriers and racism they will face, Mama sees this as an opportunity to reclaim their dignity in a world that frequently strips them of it. She says, "There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing" (96).

Beneatha, Walter's sister, also seeks dignity, though her journey is more about rejecting societal constraints and asserting her individuality. She is determined to become a doctor, despite the traditional expectations for Black women at the time. Beneatha's pursuit of education and independence is a direct challenge to the limited roles available to women, especially Black women, in a segregated society. Her desire to become a doctor is a rejection of the idea that women, especially Black women, should conform to traditional roles like being

a wife and mother. She refuses to marry George Murchison, even though he is wealthy, because he represents the oppressive expectations of societal norms, saying, “I’m not going to marry you, because I don’t love you” (120). Beneatha’s pursuit of her dreams is an assertion of her dignity, and through this, she is claiming the right to define herself and her future.

Ruth, Walter’s wife, exemplifies a quieter, more subdued form of dignity, which is reflected in her determination to maintain a sense of self-respect despite the challenges of her daily life. Ruth endures the hardships of marriage, motherhood, and financial struggles without complaining. While she may not have the same outspoken ambitions as Walter or Beneatha, Ruth’s dignity is rooted in her resilience and her desire to maintain a sense of normalcy and care for her family. When Ruth collapses from exhaustion, it is a wake-up call for the family. She has been silently bearing the weight of her responsibilities, trying to uphold her family’s dignity without drawing attention to her own suffering. Ruth’s dignity is found in her sacrifice and her willingness to put her family’s needs above her own.

The play also shows how external forces, like racism, attempt to strip the Younger family of their dignity. The offer from the white neighborhood association to buy the house from them is an example of how systemic racism works to deny Black families their right to live with dignity in a community of their choosing. This challenge forces the family to confront the intersection of personal dignity and the societal forces that seek to undermine it.

When Mr. Lindner from the neighborhood association offers to buy the house to avoid integrating the neighborhood, he undermines the Younger family’s dignity by offering money as a way to ‘keep things as they are.’ This is a direct affront to their right to assert their humanity and their right to live where they choose. The family’s rejection of his offer in the final scene is a triumph of personal dignity over oppressive forces.

The pursuit of dreams remains one of the central themes in *A Raisin in the Sun*, reflecting the characters’ hopes, aspirations, and struggles to achieve a better life despite the systemic challenges they face. Dreams in the play represent not just personal success, but also the desire for dignity, identity, and self-fulfillment. Each character’s dream is shaped by his circumstances and is a response to the limitations imposed on them by racism, poverty, and social expectations. Hansberry presents the importance of dreams as part of humanistic thinking—human beings should be able to aspire and strive toward their goals, despite obstacles. The title of the play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, is drawn from Langston Hughes’s poem, “Harlem,” and speaks to the crushing of dreams, which is a direct humanist concern: the denial of opportunity can stifle the potential of individuals, especially marginalized ones. Each member of the Younger family has dreams, whether it’s Walter’s business aspirations or Beneatha’s desire to become a doctor, and these dreams reflect a universal human desire for purpose and self-actualization.

Walter Lee Younger’s dream is to achieve financial independence and provide a better life for his family, which he believes can be attained through a business venture. He wants to invest in a liquor store, seeing it as a way to break free from the limitations of his current job as a chauffeur. Walter’s dream represents his desire for recognition, respect, and the ability to

provide more than what he currently can. His aspirations are fueled by a need for self-empowerment and the hope that financial success will allow him to regain his sense of dignity.

In Act 1, Scene 2, Walter passionately explains to his wife Ruth why he wants to invest in the liquor store: “I want so many things that I just can’t never seem to get them, and they just keep on taking them from me” (18). Walter’s dream is not just about money, but about achieving a sense of self-worth. Throughout the play, his obsession with this dream creates conflict within the family, as they have different ideas of what their collective dream should be. His dream also reflects a broader theme of African American striving for upward mobility and the hope of transcending racial and economic barriers.

Beneatha Younger’s dream is to become a doctor, a goal that defies traditional expectations for Black women in the 1950s. Her pursuit of this dream challenges societal norms and represents a desire for self-actualization and intellectual fulfillment. Beneatha dreams of a life that goes beyond the limited roles prescribed to her, like marriage or domesticity. She views education and professional success as key to defining her identity and achieving her personal and social aspirations.

Beneatha's refusal to settle for marriage with George Murchison, despite his wealth, shows her prioritization of intellectual and personal growth over traditional goals. She says, “I’m not going to marry you because I don’t love you,” signifying that her dream of becoming a doctor and fulfilling her intellectual potential is more important than the material security George can offer. Beneatha’s dream reflects a desire to break free from societal constraints, particularly the limiting expectations placed on Black women.

Mama’s dream centers around creating a better life for her children, especially in terms of having a home that provides comfort, safety, and a sense of belonging. After the death of her husband, she uses the life insurance check to purchase a house in a predominantly white neighborhood, hoping that this will provide her family with the opportunities and dignity they deserve. For Mama, the dream is not about personal ambition, but about ensuring her family’s security and well-being, and fulfilling her late husband’s wish for a better future for their children.

Mama’s dream of buying a house is expressed in her desire to use the money to “give them a chance,” meaning the opportunity for her children to live a life with more possibilities. She believes that owning a home will restore her family's dignity and provide them with a foundation for future growth. Her dream is grounded in love for her family and a belief in the power of hope and perseverance. When she says, “There is always something left to love,” she signifies that her dreams are tied to the future of her children and the family's legacy.

Ruth Younger, though less outspoken about her dreams, shares a deep yearning for stability, peace, and a better life for her family. Ruth’s dream is more modest compared to the others, but it is just as significant. She dreams of a harmonious home where her family can live without constant tension or financial strain. Her desire to see her family succeed is tied to the everyday realities of raising children and maintaining a stable household. Her collapse in Act 1, Scene 2, is a moment where her exhaustion from the demands of work and family life becomes visible. This moment highlights her unspoken dream of a life where she doesn’t have to struggle so

hard. Ruth's dream, while not as outwardly ambitious as Walter's or Beneatha's, is grounded in the wish for normalcy and peace. She dreams of a future where her family can live in comfort and unity without the constant stress of financial and personal difficulties.

While each character has a personal dream, there is a shared dream within the Younger family to rise above the racial injustices they face. The systemic barriers imposed by racism are significant obstacles to the realization of their dreams, but they continually push back against these constraints. The purchase of the house in a white neighborhood is the family's way of asserting their right to dignity and opportunity.

In the final act, when the family faces Mr. Lindner's offer to buy them out of the house to prevent integration, they are confronted with the reality of racial discrimination. However, they refuse the offer, choosing instead to move forward with their dream of a better life. Mama's decision to move into the house symbolizes not just personal achievement, but a collective defiance of the oppressive systems that seek to keep them in their place. The family's dream transcends individual desires and becomes a collective vision of empowerment, autonomy, and social justice.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the pursuit of dreams is more than just a personal ambition; it is tied to each character's sense of identity, dignity, and the desire for a better life. Walter dreams of financial success, Beneatha dreams of intellectual and professional fulfillment, Mama dreams of a better future for her children, and Ruth dreams of peace and stability. Despite the obstacles they face—racism, poverty, and societal expectations—they continue to pursue their dreams, which ultimately define their sense of self and their fight for a better future. The play powerfully demonstrates that dreams, even when seemingly impossible, are essential to human resilience and the quest for a better life. In the Humanist tradition this play truly explores the value of personal dignity through the aspirations, struggles, and sacrifices of each character. Whether it is Walter's desire to provide for his family, Mama's hope for a better life for her children, Beneatha's fight for autonomy, or Ruth's quiet endurance, the play demonstrates how dignity is integral to the human spirit and how it can be challenged or uplifted by both personal and societal forces. Through this literary effort, Hansberry provided not only a critique of social injustice but also a powerful message of hope and empowerment, encouraging individuals to envision and pursue lives of dignity, fulfillment, and agency.

#### **Work cited**

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