

Manhood at the End of the Rainbow: on Grief and Triumph in “A Raisin in the Sun”

In Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 masterwork "A Raisin in the Sun," Mama, a newly widowed matriarch finds herself in possession of insurance money after her husband's death and uses it to buy a new house in an all white neighborhood. Her son Walter Lee protests, preferring to use the money on his own dream, and when Mama relents and gives him the money, he entrusts it to a friend who runs off with it, leaving his family destitute and devastated. The play comes to a climax in act III when in his desperation, Walter intends to sacrifice his dignity and take a buyout from a representative of the community that doesn't want the neighborhood to integrate, but in a final twist he stands up to the man instead, and in the last moments of the play, the family moves out of their dingy apartment to greet their new home. The air of the final moment is unmistakably triumphant – but that sense of triumph is somewhat puzzling. At the end of the play, the material circumstances of the Youngers' destitute situation remain unchanged: Beneatha's tuition is lost, the family still has no way to pay for their new home, they're still unwanted in their neighborhood– and yet the tone of the play is overwhelmingly victorious. At first glance, it could appear that the ending is a simple victory of optimism over opposition, or of the family's unity against prejudice – however these interpretations fall short of the depth of Hansberry's work. I will argue that the end of the play feels celebratory because it shows Walter Lee formally assuming his father's role, which allows the family to end their grieving process.

Walter Lee continually invokes his father's name and legacy as she begins to stand up to Mr. Lindner as a way of drawing strength from Big Walter's memory. Throughout the course of the play, Walter Lee is continually compared to his father and namesake "Big Walter," and

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found wanting. The turning point of Walter Lee's big speech begins when he tells Mr. Lindner "my father almost beat a man to death once because this man called him a bad name or something, you know what I mean?" (Hansberry 553). Here, Walter Lee's statement serves as a sort of personal reminder: he's using the memory of his father's pride as a cue to defend his own. Next, he goes on to describe Big Walter's effect on the family, saying "we come from people who have a lot of pride," which takes the characteristic of Walter and applies it to the whole group, as a marker of lineage. Notably, as Walter is delivering this dialogue, his son Travis is standing beside him. So in the very moment that Walter Lee announces his father's impact on him, he's invited to consider his own impact on his son. Newly reminded of his legacy, he calls upon Big Walter once again, saying, "we have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father – my father – he earned it" (Hansberry, 553). By repeating and emphasizing the phrase "my father" in this line, Walter asserts his connection to Big Walter, and his ownership over the traits and rights he inherited from him. Additionally, Walter Lee is described as looking down at his feet at the beginning of his conversation with Mr. Lindner, which visually connects with Mama's earlier description of Big Walter in distress: speaking to Ruth she says, "honey, Big Walter would come in here some nights back then and slump down on that ouch there and just look at the rug . . . I'd know he was down then . . . really down." (Hansberry 522). However as Walter Lee becomes more and more assertive with Mr. Lindner, he "straightens up" and looks him in the eye – in doing so, Walter Lee draws on the image of his father when he was downtrodden, and takes it forward by standing up for himself. Thus, Walter Lee uses his father's memory as motivation to bolster himself into the role of head of household.

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After he makes his declaration and stands up to Mr. Lindner, the women in the family begin to defer to Walter, allowing him to assume the role of head of household. When Walter initially tells the family his plan to acquiesce to Mr. Lindner they're clearly deeply ashamed of his actions, but after he turns his course, they quickly change their tune, and the method they choose to show their approval is to step aside and immediately extol his manhood. Walter Lee's sister Beneatha is characterized throughout the play as a bold and outspoken radical, eager to fight for justice, but when Mr. Lindner looks to the rest of the family for someone to change Walter's mind, she suddenly she places herself in a starkly different role. Rather than launching into her own tirade against Mr. Lindner, as her previous actions in the play would suggest, she simply supports Walter by saying, "that's what the man said" (Hansberry 553). This both clearly affirms Walter's manhood by literally calling him a man, and also gives him as the final say on the situation, which implies that Beneatha sees him as the source of power. Next, Mr. Lindner turns to Mama, who is the rightful matriarch of the family and the owner of the apartment, and he asks her to appeal to her son. Mama replies, "I'm afraid you don't understand. My son said we was gonna move and there ain't nothing left for me to say" (Hansberry 553). In a partial show of coquettishness, in this line Mama mirrors Beneatha and declares Walter's dominance and influence, literally saying that the last word is his. In these moments, Walter's family affirms and recognizes his power in the house, and it's significant that this approval comes specifically from women who were related to Big Walter: Mama was his wife, and Beneatha is his daughter. Because they both acknowledged Walter Lee as a man, and beyond that, a man that they defer to, they symbolically grant him the power of Big Walter's position in the house.

Finally, in the last moments of the play the play consistently uses the language of resurrection, which suggests that Big Walter lives on through his son and allows the family to

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stop mourning. Death features prominently in “A Raisin in the Sun,” first and foremost because the money that spurs the action of the plot is an insurance settlement from Big Walter’s death. But beyond the plot details, death enters into the way that characters describe and relate to one another. For example, when Walter Lee announces that he plans to pander to Mr. Lindner, Mama opposes him with language that equates Walter sacrificing his pride with a form of death, saying that in all the generations of her family nobody had ever allowed themselves to be paid money to be disrespected because “ [they] ain’t never been that dead inside” (Hansberry 551). Beneatha eerily responds with “well, we are dead now. . . all dead” (Hansberry 551). Later on, Beneatha calls Walter a “toothless rat,” and Mama responds “you – you mourning your brother” (Hansberry 552). This dark language conveys both the gravity of the situation, and also the underlying, preexisting anguish that the family is feeling: their first and most accessible association with any kind of loss is death. However, these descriptions take a turn after Walter stands up to Mr. Lindner. Perhaps most notably, Ruth is completely silent for the final scene, but when Mr. Lindner leaves, she suddenly re-animates and calls the group to leave and start packing and the stage direction preceding her line reads “looking around and coming to life” (Hansberry 553). This stage direction is particularly significant because, throughout the play Ruth is frequently and methodically described as looking dead, from Walter Lee commenting on her looks in the opening scene, to countless stage directions describing her as speaking ‘like a dead woman.’ Yet suddenly, after Walter stands up for the family, there’s an immediate element of rejuvenation, and the entire family springs to action along with her to pack the house in a flurry, which suggests that Walter’s rise into manhood has given new life to the entire household. That theme of resurrection is referenced once again in the penultimate line of the play when Mama says “he finally came into his manhood today, didn’t he? Kind of like a rainbow after the rain . .

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.” (Hansberry 554). An incredibly evocative line, the likeness of a rainbow after a storm suggests the birth of something wonderful out of a time of tumult and sadness. This image presents a clear parallel to Walter’s ascent to head of household: Walter Lee’s newfound manhood is the positive outcome that comes from the tragic loss of Big Walter.

In conclusion, the final moments of the play feel like a victory because they mark the end of the grieving process. Walter invokes the memory of his father to take a stand against Mr. Lindner, and in doing so he puts himself in the position of head of household. When Beneatha and Mama acknowledge and validate his defiance, they allow him to fill that role, symbolically granting him Big Walter’s power in the house. Thus Big Walter is resurrected through Walter Lee, and by extension, the entire family is rejuvenated because the process of grieving has finally yielded growth. Further, the play’s closing sense of precarious triumph also makes its own statement about another of the central themes of the play: masculinity. Just as the family is without resources and moving into a new and uncertain dynamic at Clybourne Park, Walter is similarly moving into a new and uncertain role as a patriarch. He has finally succeeded his father as the head of the household, but there’s no telling how he’ll handle his newfound responsibilities, or pick up the pieces of his own mistakes. The audience is left proud of Walter, but anxious if he’ll fall into patriarchal masculinity, or mend his relationship with Ruth and give Beneatha freedom to make her own choices. Thus, the last moment of the play, expressing a sense of victory with an undertone of uncertainty, encapsulates every part of the narrative.

Bibliography:

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