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Race, Class and Dream in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	I
Dedication	II
Contents	III
Abstract	IV
I. Introduction	01
Review of the Literature	02
Issue and Working Hypothesis	07
Methodological Outline	07
II. Method and Materials	9
1. Method: Kimberlé Crenshaw's Critical Race Theory	9
2. Materials: Biographies of the authors	15
Summaries of the two works	18
a. <i>Native Son</i>	18
b. <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>	19
III: Results	21
IV: Discussion	23
Chapter One: Race, Class and Dream in <i>Native Son</i>	24
Chapter Two: Race, Class and Dream in <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>	41
V: General Conclusion	53
VI: Bibliography	55

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the issue of Race, Class and Dream in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). By comparing the two works, it highlights how Afro-Americans responded differently to the socio-economic conditions of each Historical period. To achieve our purpose, we relied on the theoretical guidelines of Kimberlé Crenshaw's Critical Race Theory (CRT), particularly her concept of Intersectionality. The study revealed what both works portray how race and class intersect to shape the lives and limit the dreams of Black individuals. While Wright's novel presents a pessimistic depiction of racial oppression and its psychological toll, Hansberry's play offers a more hopeful view rooted in family strength and resilience. Both texts expose how institutionalized racism affects housing, employment, education and personal agency, ultimately challenging the myth of American Dream for African Americans.

Key words:

Race, Class, Intersectionality, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Systemic Racism, Social Inequality, The American Dream.

Introduction

This dissertation studies how race, class, and dream are shown in African American literature. Many Black writers have written about the struggles of their community and the search for a better life. Richard Wright and Lorraine Hansberry are two important authors who deal with these themes. Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) both show how African Americans face racism and try to reach their dreams. This work compares the two texts to understand how each writer presents the experience of being Black in mid-twentieth-century America.

Through a comparative analysis of the characters' experience in the two works, this study examines their varied responses to their racial and socio-economic crises, and aims to demonstrate how each author uses his/her respective text to comment on the broader significance of race relations in the United States. Furthermore, this comparison will demonstrate how different sociopolitical contexts shape the author's perspective on resistance, identity and community. In fact, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Native Son* not only illuminate the African American experience but are also foundational texts of the historical and cultural record of race, class and social aspiration in America.

Native Son (1940) was published at a time when there was widespread racial segregation under Jim Crow laws deprived Black Americans of their basic rights. African Americans at that time were struggling with the pains of the Great Depression, which made their daily life increasingly difficult. Within this racial segregation and economic deprivation, Black writers and artists began to raise their voice against racism under the movement of the Harlem Renaissance. Richard Wright was a member of the Chicago Renaissance, a movement of Black writers and artists in the 1930s and the 1940s that explored themes of racial injustice and urban life. He wrote *Native Son* to demonstrate how racism and poverty impacted the lives of Black people.

Nearly twenty years later, in 1959, Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* was published. Originally written as a play. The Civil Rights Movement was going strong at the time, with people actively protesting against segregation. Hansberry's work tells the story of a Black family struggling to get ahead of their circumstances despite the consequences of racism. While *Native Son* is centered around anger and despair, *A Raisin in the Sun* is centered around hope, which emphasizes the aspirations and determination of African Americans, and their desire to obtain a prosperous life despite discrimination.

Both works were written during critical times in history and reflect the struggles and hopes of Black Americans. Wright's novel demonstrates the effects of oppression on mankind, while Hansberry's play, analyzed here in its narrative form, demonstrates a struggle of a family against economic and racial adversity. Both together delve in-depth into African American life in the 20th century, balancing adversity with dreams of a more equal society. One of them is pessimistic and the other is optimistic. One represents the failure of the American Dream and the other represents its success. This demonstrates that there is progress in African American struggle through time from despair to hope.

Review of the Literature

This section examines critical perspectives on Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. It explores how various scholars have analyzed the portrayal of racism and societal struggles in both literary works. Notable critics like James Baldwin, Irving Howe, David Bradley, and Harold Bloom offer critical perspectives highlighting the strength and weaknesses of each author's depiction of race, class and the African American experience.

Wright's protest literature approach refers to his use of fiction to expose racial injustice, social inequality, and the harsh realities faced by African Americans in American society. In his 1949 essay in *The Partisan Review*, Baldwin argues that Bigger Thomas as a

character is a failure because Wright subordinates political message to human complexity. Baldwin contends that protest novels like *Native Son* fail when they prioritize social commentary over authentic human portrayal. Baldwin says: "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (Baldwin, 1949, p. 583). According to Baldwin, this approach reduces characters to mere symbols of oppression rather than fully realized individuals. For Baldwin, Wright's characterization turns Bigger into a symbol of racial oppression rather than a flesh-and-blood human being with psychological depth. Baldwin argues that by focusing primarily on Bigger's victimhood and rage as products of racism, Wright denies him the complexity, contradictions, and interior life that make characters truly human. He also contends that Wright's focus on racial injustice has the ironic consequence of supporting stereotypes.

Baldwin explains that by making Bigger's violence and despair the inevitable result of racism, Wright inadvertently reinforces racist stereotypes about Black men being dangerous and threatening: "Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry... but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life" (Baldwin, 1949, p. 584). In Baldwin's view, Wright has trapped Bigger within the very categories and limitations that racism imposes, rather than showing him transcending or resisting these dehumanizing labels.

Fourteen years after the novel's publication, Irving Howe argues on behalf of *Native Son* in his essay "*Black Boys and Native Son*." Howe acknowledges the novel's artistic weaknesses but argues for its cultural significance:

“ *Native Son assaults the most cherished American vanities: the hope that the accumulated injustice of the past would bring with it no lasting penalties, the fantasy that in his humiliation the Negro somehow retained a sexual*

potency a strength of will that the white man had long since dissipated.” (Howe, 1963, p. 210)

This quote shows how *Native Son* challenges the way many Americans see their history and race. Howe argues that the book dismantles the comforting idea that the unfair treatment of Black people in the past would not have long-term effects. It also questions a false belief some white people had that even when Black people were mistreated, they still possessed some kind of hidden strength or power. Howe openly challenged Baldwin's opinion: "How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried?" (Howe, 1963, p.218). For Howe, Wright's achievement is precisely in the novel's ability to force white America to confront uncomfortable truths regarding the psychological and social impact of racism. For Howe, Wright's protest literature serves a crucial function by compelling readers to face the realities of racial oppression and its enduring consequences on both Black individuals and American society as a whole.

Another critical study is that of David Bradley, whose 1986 essay "*On Rereading 'Native Son'*" discusses how critical viewpoints of *Native Son* changed over time. Initially, some critics saw Bigger Thomas as a one-dimensional character lacking complexity. Later, Bradley came to accept that this apparent simplification was in fact an intentional part of Richard Wright's narrative technique. Bradley explains that Wright deliberately crafted Bigger in this way to demonstrate how society constructs certain racial identities and then punishes individuals for adhering to them. This interpretive shift recontextualizes the novel not just as a story about an individual man, but as a sustained critique of a society that dehumanizes Black men and then blames them for the destructive behaviors and outcomes that result from this systematic dehumanization (Bradley, 1986). This shift in Bradley's point of view shows how attitudes toward *Native Son* have changed as people have become more attuned to structural racism.

Bradley goes on to say: "In *Bigger* Thomas, Wright creates not just a character but a devastating indictment of a society that creates such men and then condemns them for being exactly what society has made them" (Bradley, 1986, p.2). Bradley's analysis reveals how Wright uses *Bigger* to expose the cyclical nature of racism—society shapes individuals through oppression and limited opportunities, then holds those same individuals responsible for the very conditions society imposed upon them.

Concerning *A Raisin in the Sun*, literary critic Harold Bloom highlighted the universality of themes of disillusionment and hope in the play in his critical collection. Bloom contended that "*A Raisin in the Sun* transcends its specific historical context, resonating with anyone who has faced societal barriers while pursuing their dreams" (Bloom 2009, p. 11). Bloom praised Hansberry for her ability to "bend private and political complaints into each other easily" (Bloom 2009, p. 11), asserting that this union is part of the enduring nature of the play. According to Bloom, "Hansberry's achievement lies not merely in representation but in transformation she elevates the particular struggles of the Younger family to universally recognized human experiences" (Bloom 2009, p. 14). That is the observation which points to why the play still resonates across diverse audiences over decades since the initial staging. Play critic Frank Rich acknowledged Hansberry's triumph in capturing the richness of emotion in the struggle of a Black family within an America that was racially and economically fragmented. Rather than mere comment on style, Rich highlighted how Hansberry's play relates individual experience to forces from society.

Rich emphasizes that Hansberry's achievement lies in connecting the personal struggles of the Younger family to the broader systemic forces of racism and economic inequality that shape their lives. By presenting the Younger family's desire for advancement under the circumstances of systemic racism and class inequality, Hansberry renders the aspiration for upward mobility both necessary and elusive. The family's dreams are not simply personal

ambitions but survival strategies in a society that limits their opportunities. Rich's remarks reflect how the play balances hope with reality, showing how characters maintain dignity even in despair. Even when faced with discrimination, financial hardship, and deferred dreams, the Younger family refuses to surrender their humanity or self-respect.

This conflict is a continuation of the broader battle many disenfranchised communities face in striving for the American dream where possibility is present but all too often deprives it of those who need it most. Hansberry illustrates how the promise of the American dream exists theoretically for all Americans, yet structural barriers systematically prevent marginalized communities from accessing it. It is this real and compassionate depiction of race and class that ensures the play's long-lasting influence on American theatre. Rich further opined that "the brilliance of Hansberry's writing is most evident in how she balances hope with harsh reality allowing her characters dignity even in their moments of greatest despair" (Rich, 1983, p. C4). This balance reveals Hansberry's nuanced understanding that hope and despair are not mutually exclusive but coexist in the lived experiences of oppressed communities. Such equilibrium, Rich contends, explains the play's long term impact on American drama. The play's enduring relevance stems from its honest portrayal of how people maintain their dreams and dignity while confronting harsh social realities.

James Baldwin, in his eulogy "*Sweet Lorraine*," praised the play for its realistic portrayal of Black family life. Baldwin wrote that Hansberry "illuminated how Black families navigate dreams within systems designed to crush them" (Baldwin 1969, p. 9). His criticism pointed out how Hansberry overturned and challenged traditional stereotypes about African American families, subverting these harmful representations both in literature and on stage. Baldwin praised how "Hansberry refused to create characters who were merely symbols of oppression; instead, she presented them as fully human, with all the complexity that entails" (Baldwin 1969, p. 12). By such humanization, Baldwin argued, the play turned revolutionary: "She showed

America not just the effects of racism, but the emotional and spiritual costs exacted by a society that denies full humanity to any of its members" (Baldwin 1969, p. 15).

Issue and working hypothesis

It can be seen from the above review that Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* have been analyzed from various perspectives. However, to our best knowledge, no study has so far compared the issue of Race, class and dream in the two novels. This work focuses on the life of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* and the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun* as model characters whose life courses express the structural confines of systemic racism in mid-20th-century US society. With reliance on Kimberlé Crenshaw's Critical Race Theory, we will try to answer the following questions: How do these stories reflect the historical realities of African Americans in their respective time periods? Do they offer a complete picture of the Black experience, or do they emphasize only certain aspects?

Our basic assumption stems from the fact that the issues of race, class, and the pursuit of American Dream are major themes shared by the two writers. Wright and Hansberry portray the struggles of Black individuals and families who attempt to claim dignity and opportunity within a racially stratified society. Both writers demonstrate that racism is not only embedded in overt actions but also in institutional policies, spatial segregation, and inherited social inequalities.

Methodological Outline

At the methodological level, our dissertation follows the Imrad method. In the Introduction, we present the background of the two literary texts and the historical contexts in which they are written. Then we establish our topic focus on the issue and working hypothesis. In the Method and Materials section, we present our theory which is Critical Race Theory

(1970). We also provide the reader with general summaries of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Native Son*, with an emphasis on the key points within each work and the biographies of the authors. In the Results section, we reveal the findings reached through our study. As for the Discussion section, we discuss and analyze the two works under study to explore the themes of race, class, and dream in the two works in a way that makes the reader understand how the Black identity of the protagonists intersects with residential segregation, economic disenfranchisement, cultural erasure, and structural violence.

The two texts explain the reasons why racial oppression remains an issue among African Americans even after the legal end of slavery and segregation. To achieve this, we divide our work into two chapters. The first chapter deals with Race, Class, and Dream in *Native Son* through the ways in which Bigger Thomas resists or responds to the forces delimiting his agency. It includes subsections on racialized space, psychological alienation, and limited economic opportunity. The second chapter deals with Race, Class, and Dream in *A Raisin in the Sun*, exploring the harsh realities of Black life in a capitalist society where structural racism continues to dictate access to housing, work, and education. This chapter includes analyses of symbolic and material barriers that define the limits of the American Dream.

Method and Materials

This section is concerned with the presentation of the method through which we will guide our study. This work applies Critical Race Theory to analyze how race, class and the American Dream are portrayed in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Using CRT's focus on systemic racism lived experience and historical context, we explore how both works depict the limitations placed on Black individuals in mid twentieth century America and the development of the black life through decades.

Method

Kimberlé Crenshaw's Theory: Intersectionality as a method in Critical Race theory (1989)

This study employs Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality as a central methodological framework within Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze how race, class, and the American Dream are portrayed in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Introduced by legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her groundbreaking 1989 essay, intersectionality provides a critical lens through which to examine the multiple, overlapping systems of oppression that shape African American experiences in twentieth-century America. This theoretical framework enables us to move beyond single-axis analyses of discrimination to understand how various social identities—including race, class, and gender—intersect and compound to create unique experiences of marginalization and resistance. By applying Crenshaw's intersectional approach to these seminal works of African American literature, this study illuminates how Wright and Hansberry depicted the complex realities of Black life in America, revealing the intricate ways systemic racism intersects with economic exploitation to undermine access to the American Dream.

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in her 1989 essay 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,' published in the

University of Chicago Legal Forum. Crenshaw developed this concept to address a critical gap in both antidiscrimination law and social theory: the failure to adequately account for the experiences of individuals who face multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination. As Crenshaw (1989) articulates, Black women's experiences are often 'greater than the sum of racism and sexism' because the intersection of these identities creates qualitatively different forms of oppression that can not be understood by examining race or gender in isolation (p. 140). Through her analysis of employment discrimination cases, Crenshaw demonstrated how legal frameworks that treated race and gender as mutually exclusive categories failed to protect Black women, who experienced discrimination precisely because of the intersection of their racial and gendered identities.

Crenshaw's framework emerged from Critical Race Theory, a movement that began in the mid-1970s as a response to the limitations of traditional civil rights scholarship. Intersectionality challenges the single-axis framework that dominated antidiscrimination discourse, which tended to treat categories such as race, class, and gender as separate and distinct. Crenshaw (1989) argues that this approach renders invisible those who are subject to multiple grounds of discrimination, particularly Black women who 'are theoretically erased' when discrimination is analyzed exclusively through the lens of either race or gender (p. 139). By introducing the metaphor of an intersection—where multiple roads of oppression converge—Crenshaw provided a powerful analytical tool for understanding how various systems of subordination interact and reinforce one another, creating distinct experiences of discrimination that cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts.

Central to Crenshaw's theory is the recognition that identity categories are not merely additive but fundamentally constitutive. As Crenshaw (1989) explains, intersectionality reveals how 'the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately'

(p. 140). This insight has profound implications for understanding discrimination: it suggests that the experiences of those at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities are qualitatively different from those who experience only one form of oppression. For instance, a Black woman faces not simply racism plus sexism, but a unique form of discrimination that targets her specifically as a Black woman—a phenomenon that neither traditional antiracist nor feminist frameworks adequately address.

As a methodological approach, intersectionality provides scholars with a framework for analyzing how power structures operate through multiple, interlocking systems of oppression. Crenshaw's work demonstrates that intersectionality is not merely a theory of identity but a critical analytical tool for examining structural inequality. In her analysis, Crenshaw (1989) emphasizes that intersectionality allows us to see how 'the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism' that existing conceptual frameworks fail to capture (p. 243). This methodological orientation requires researchers to move beyond examining isolated variables and instead investigate how different forms of oppression work together to shape social experiences and maintain hierarchical power relations.

Applied to literary analysis, Crenshaw's intersectional methodology enables us to examine how texts represent the complex interplay between race, class, gender, and other identity markers. Rather than analyzing racial oppression in isolation from economic exploitation or gender subordination, an intersectional approach recognizes that these systems of power are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Crenshaw (1989) argues that this multidimensional analysis is essential because 'the failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color' (p. 166). Similarly, antiracist strategies that ignore class and gender dimensions risk perpetuating other forms of inequality. When examining literary representations of African American experience, this framework directs our attention to how characters navigate multiple,

simultaneous forms of oppression—how racial discrimination intersects with poverty, how gender shapes the experience of racism, and how the pursuit of the American Dream is mediated by these intersecting identities.

Crenshaw's intersectional methodology also emphasizes the importance of centering marginalized voices and experiences that have been rendered invisible by dominant frameworks. As Crenshaw (1989) notes, 'because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated' (p. 140). This methodological imperative to attend to intersectional experiences is crucial for literary analysis of African American texts, as it requires us to examine not only explicit representations of racial oppression but also the subtler ways that class position, gender, and other factors shape characters' opportunities, choices, and ultimate fates. By foregrounding these intersecting dynamics, we can develop more nuanced readings that do justice to the complexity of African American experiences depicted in literature.

Furthermore, Crenshaw's framework requires an examination of how structural and institutional forces operate to maintain inequality. Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates that discrimination is not merely the product of individual prejudice but results from systemic patterns embedded in social, economic, and legal institutions. This structural dimension of intersectionality is particularly relevant for analyzing African American literature of the mid-twentieth century, a period characterized by both explicit legal segregation and deeply entrenched economic marginalization. An intersectional methodology compels us to investigate how literary texts represent not only interpersonal forms of racism but also the institutional mechanisms—housing discrimination, employment barriers, educational inequality, and legal injustice—that systematically excluded African Americans from economic opportunity and social advancement.

One of the most significant applications of Crenshaw's intersectional framework to literary analysis involves examining how texts critique dominant ideologies such as the American Dream. The American Dream—the belief that anyone, regardless of background, can achieve prosperity and success through hard work and determination—is fundamentally premised on a single-axis understanding of social mobility that ignores how intersecting systems of oppression create differential access to opportunity. Crenshaw's (1989) analysis reveals how this meritocratic ideology obscures structural inequality: 'The struggle of subordinated groups to articulate and address the multiple ways in which their experiences are shaped by systems of power requires a framework that can accommodate complexity' (p. 167). An intersectional approach thus enables us to analyze how African American literature exposes the contradictions inherent in the American Dream narrative, revealing how intersecting racial and economic barriers make this promise fundamentally unattainable for those positioned at the margins of multiple systems of power.

Crenshaw's methodology is particularly valuable for analyzing mid-twentieth-century African American literature because it illuminates how the period's dual systems of racial segregation and economic capitalism worked in tandem to maintain Black subordination. As Crenshaw (1989) demonstrates, intersectionality reveals 'how various forms of subordination intersect and reinforce each other' (p. 150). In the context of mid-century America, racial oppression was inseparable from economic exploitation: African Americans were confined to the lowest-paying jobs, excluded from wealth-building opportunities such as homeownership, and denied access to quality education—all while being told that individual effort alone determined success. An intersectional analysis allows us to examine how literary texts represent this compound oppression, showing how characters face not simply racial prejudice or economic hardship in isolation, but a mutually reinforcing system in which racial identity determines economic position and economic marginalization intensifies racial vulnerability.

Moreover, Crenshaw's framework directs attention to the ways that gender complicates experiences of racial and economic oppression. Crenshaw (1989) argues that 'feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse have failed to consider the intersections of racism and patriarchy (p. 166), resulting in analyses that cannot adequately account for the specific experiences of Black women. In African American literature, this intersectional dimension is crucial: Black women characters often navigate distinct challenges that differ from those faced by Black men, white women, or white men. They experience what Crenshaw terms 'double discrimination'—but more than this, they face unique forms of marginalization that emerge specifically from the intersection of their race and gender. An intersectional methodology thus requires literary scholars to attend to how gender shapes characters' access to economic resources, their vulnerability to exploitation, and their strategies for survival and resistance within systems of compound oppression.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, developed as a critique of single-axis frameworks in antidiscrimination law and social theory, provides an invaluable methodology for analyzing how African American literature represents the complex realities of racial oppression and economic inequality. By directing our attention to the ways that race, class, and gender intersect to create unique experiences of subordination, Crenshaw's framework enables a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the barriers African Americans faced in pursuing the American Dream. As Crenshaw (1989) emphasizes, 'the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences' (p. 166). An intersectional approach therefore allows us to appreciate the full complexity of African American literature's engagement with questions of race, class, and the possibilities for Black advancement in mid-twentieth-century America.

This study will employ Crenshaw's intersectional methodology to examine how race and class intersect to foreclose access to the American Dream in the selected literary texts. By analyzing the compound effects of racial and economic oppression on characters' lives and aspirations, we will demonstrate the continued relevance of Crenshaw's theoretical framework for understanding both historical and contemporary forms of structural inequality. The intersectional analysis that follows will illuminate how these literary works expose the systemic barriers that made the promise of the American Dream fundamentally unattainable for African Americans, not through isolated acts of discrimination but through the complex interaction of multiple, mutually reinforcing systems of oppression that Crenshaw's framework helps us to see and understand. Through this lens, we can examine how African American writers represented the lived realities of navigating intersecting oppressions and contested the dominant narratives that obscured these structural inequalities.

Materials

Biographies of the Authors

This section tells the life stories of Richard Wright and Lorraine Hansberry, the two writers whose books are discussed in this study. Learning about their lives helps us understand why they wrote what they wrote. Both writers experienced racism and discrimination in their own lives, which had a big impact on their writing and their work fighting for equality and justice.

Richard Wright (1908-1960)

Richard Wright was born on September 4, 1908, in Mississippi. His father, Nathan Wright, could not read or write and worked as a sharecropper (a farmer who worked on someone else's land). His mother, Ella Wilson, was a schoolteacher. The family had very little money,

and life was extremely difficult because of the harsh racism in the South during that time. Wright's father left the family when Richard was young, so his mother had to work as a cook and caretaker to support them (Rowley, 2001, p. 45). After his mother had a stroke and became sick, Wright went to live with different relatives, and many of these situations were difficult and even abusive.

In 1927, Wright moved to Chicago as part of the Great Migration (when many Black people left the South looking for better opportunities in Northern cities). He discovered both good and bad things about life in the North. While Chicago offered more freedom than the South, Wright found that racism and poverty still existed there too. (Fabre, 1993, p. 72-73).

In the 1930s, Wright joined the Communist party because he believed it could help fight against racism and poverty. Wright became famous when he published his short story collection "*Uncle Tom's Children*" (1938), which was praised for showing the brutal reality of racial violence in the South. However, his most important book was "*Native Son*" (1940), which made him a major literary figure (Hakutani, 1996, p. 112). Feeling disappointed with racism and politics in the United States, Wright moved to Paris, France in 1947, where he joined a community of American writers living abroad. Wright died of a heart attack on November 28, 1960, in Paris. His legacy as an important voice in African American literature continues with "*Native Son*" and "*Black Boy*" remaining essential books in American literature (Gates, 2014, p. 156).

Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965)

Lorraine Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago. Her father was Carl Augustus Hansberry, a successful real estate broker (someone who buys and sells property), and her mother was Nannie Louise Perry, a schoolteacher. She was the youngest of four children

and grew up in a fairly wealthy African American family during a time when Black and white people were kept separate by racist laws (Carter, 2008, p. 34).

Hansberry went to the University of Madison where she studied art and design but left before graduating. In 1950, she moved to New York City to become a writer. She worked as an editor for a magazine called *Freedom*, where she developed her skills as a journalist and activist. Hansberry wrote articles about colonialism (one country controlling another), civil rights, and gender equality (equal treatment of men and women). (McKissack, 1998, p. 67).

In 1957, Hansberry finished writing "*A Raisin in the Sun*", which opened on Broadway (the famous theater district in New York) in 1959. The play was named after a line in a poem called "Harlem" by Langston Hughes. The play was a huge success, making Hansberry the first Black woman to have a play performed on Broadway. It won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play, making her a groundbreaking voice in American theater. (Wilkerson, 1994, p. 112).

Hansberry used her fame to fight for social change. She supported the Civil Rights Movement and women's rights. She spoke out strongly against racism, sexism, and imperialism (powerful countries controlling weaker ones), often talking about these issues in her speeches and writings.

In 1963, Hansberry was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer but continued to write and speak publicly until her health declined. Hansberry remains an important figure in American literature and activism, celebrated for her deep understanding of race, class and gender (Keppel, 2002, p. 156).

Summaries of the Novels

Summary of *Native Son*

Richard Wright's "*Native Son*" (1940) takes place in the 1930s in Chicago and tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a young Black man living in extreme poverty on the city's South Side.

The novel is divided into three parts: "fear, flight, and fate," following Bigger as his life spirals out of control because of systemic racism and his desperate attempts to have some control over his own life in an oppressive society.

"Fear" introduces Bigger's bleak reality. He lives with his family in a cramped apartment, surrounded by grinding poverty and racial segregation that define his life. Bigger feels trapped and powerless, constantly switching between fear of the white world and rage at his circumstances. This inner turmoil comes to a crisis when he accepts a job as a chauffeur for the wealthy Dalton family. The Daltons are well-meaning but oblivious to the complexities of race and class, treating Bigger with a mixture of condescension and pity.

One night, Bigger drives Mary Dalton, the rebellious daughter of the family, to meet her boyfriend Jan Erlone, a communist who tries to befriend Bigger. Mary becomes drunk, and Bigger helps her to her room. When Mrs. Dalton unexpectedly enters the room, Bigger panics and accidentally smothers Mary to keep her quiet. Realizing he has killed her, he burns her body in the furnace to cover up the crime.

In "Flight", Bigger becomes the target of a huge manhunt. At first, he feels powerful and in control, thinking that what he did has given him a way to fight back against the unfair system. But this feeling doesn't last long as people start discovering the truth. When Mary's body is found, the whole city becomes scared and angry. Newspapers describe Bigger as a dangerous Black man who needs to be caught and punished.

The final part "Fate" shows Bigger getting caught, questioned by police, and put on trial. His lawyer, Boris Max, tries to explain that Bigger became this way because of how society treated him badly his whole life and stripped away his humanity. Even though Max tries hard to defend Bigger, the jury finds him guilty and sentences him to die. In his last days, Bigger starts to think deeply about his life and how society pushed him to do what he did.

Through Bigger's sad story, Wright shows readers how racism is built into society, how poverty damages people's minds and spirits, and how society creates endless cycles of violence and oppression. The novel makes readers face the terrible truth about racial injustice and how African Americans were treated as less than human in 20th century America.

Summary of *A Raisin in the Sun*

Lorraine Hansberry's play "*A Raisin in the Sun*" (1959) takes place in Chicago in the 1950s. It's about the Younger family, a Black family working hard to reach their dreams even though they face racism and money problems. The title comes from a poem by Langston Hughes that asks "what happens to a dream when you have to keep waiting for it?"

The Younger family includes Lena (called Mama), her son Walter Lee, his wife Ruth, his sister Beneatha, and Walter and Ruth's young son Travis. The story starts with the family expecting to receive \$10,000 from a life insurance policy after the father died. This money means something different and important to each person in the family.

Mama decides to use part of the money as a down payment on a house in a predominantly white neighborhood. However, the family faces opposition from the residents, represented by Mr. Lindner who offers to buy the house back from the Younger family to prevent them from moving in. Walter, tempted to accept Lindner's offer, faces heartbreak when he discovers that the rest of the insurance money has been stolen by a deceitful business partner. This crisis forces Walter to confront his values and responsibilities. In this moment, Lindner's offer, affirming the family's dignity and determination to move into the new house despite the challenges they will face, the play ends on a hopeful note with the family united in their resolve to pursue a better life.

Mama decides to use some of the money to make a down payment on a house in a neighborhood where mostly white people live. However, the family faces opposition from the people who already live there. A man named Mr. Lindner offers to buy the house back from the

Younger family because he doesn't want them to move into the neighborhood. Walter is tempted to take Lindner's offer and faces a heartbreaking situation when he finds out that the rest of the insurance money has been stolen by someone he trusted in a business deal. This crisis forces Walter to think about what really matters to him and his responsibilities to his family. In this important moment, Walter rejects Lindner's offer, standing up for his family's dignity and their determination to move into the new house despite the challenges they will face. The play ends on a hopeful note with the family united in their resolve to pursue a better life.

Results

Throughout our dissertation, we tried to investigate the theme of Race, class and dream in Richard's novel *Native Son* and Hansberry's novel *A Raisin in the Sun*. By drawing the affinities between the two works, we intended to argue that the experience of racism and social

oppression is lived by the African Americans. To achieve our purpose, we relied on the theoretical guidelines of Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory which argues that racism is not an individual anomaly but a structural and systemic force deeply embedded in legal, economic, and cultural institutions. The study reveals that the two works demonstrate how race and class intersect to shape the lives and limit the dreams of African Americans.

In *Native Son*, Wright offers an analysis of how racial and class hierarchies truncate Black life. Bigger Thomas is more than a poor black man he is a symbol of how society criminalizes Blackness itself. Through Crenshaw's argument, we realize that Bigger's actions are not motivated by individual pathology but by intersecting systems of racial and economic oppression, he is unable to dream because he is unable to imagine freedom. The American Dream in this context becomes a bitter irony, one never intended for someone like Bigger, his racial position and social conditions constitute a kind of structural invisibility which Crenshaw terms “a constitutive feature of institutional racism.”

A Raisin in the Sun, on the other hand, provides characters that suffer the constraints of race and class but respond with resistance and hope. The Younger family's collective dream owning a home, gaining social mobility, and affirming dignity is tested by structural racism. Their economic struggles and encounters with white hostility reveal how Black aspirations are systematically undermined. However, Crenshaw's theory allows us to see how Beneatha, as a young intellectual Black woman, experiences unique layers of exclusion by race and class. Both works demonstrate how the American Dream is racialized and classed, often constructed as a universal idea while being inaccessible to Black citizens. In Wright's novel, the dream is a violent illusion, in Hansberry's novel, it is a contested space that must be defended and reimagined. Critical Race Theory helps us understand that this is not due to isolated prejudice but because of the way laws, housing markets, and cultural values have historically excluded African Americans from participation in economic and civic life.

Our comparative analysis has shown that both *Native Son* and *A Raisin in the Sun* offer critiques of how race and class shape Black lives and hold back their dreams and how it makes it hard for them to achieve their goals. Through Crenshaw's theory, we see that these are not simply stories about poor Black families or individual failure, but narratives that expose how systemic racism and classism work together to restrict access to opportunity, dignity, and mobility.

Discussion

In this section of our dissertation, we will analyze the theme of race and class in *Native Son* and *A Raisin in the Sun* and their impact on African Americans. We will examine how both Wright and Hansberry present characters whose aspirations are shaped and limited by the social

conditions they live in. Through Kimberlé Crenshaw's Critical Race Theory, specifically her concept of intersectionality, we will explore how race and class work together to create barriers for Black identity and opportunity in America.

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate how both writers critique the American Dream and whether their narratives reveal similar patterns of exclusion. We will apply Critical Race Theory to examine whether racism and classism function as isolated individual attitudes or as interconnected systems built into American institutions. Through a comparative analysis of both novels, we will explore how each text challenges the idea that hard work alone can lead to success in America.

In the first chapter, we will analyze the themes of racial violence, poverty, and fear in Bigger Thomas's experience in Wright's novel. We will investigate how these forces interact in his life and what they reveal about the possibility of dreaming in such conditions. In the second chapter, we will examine the Younger family's confrontation with racism, poverty, and deferred dreams in Hansberry's work. We will explore the role of economic hardship and housing discrimination in shaping their experiences. Additionally, we will compare how these themes manifest in the different historical and social contexts of 1940s and 1950s Chicago, and we will investigate the connections between both novels in their treatment of the American Dream as it relates to economic hardship, housing segregation, and social exclusion for Black families.

Chapter one

Race, Class and Dream in *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright

In this section, I will examine the ways in which Wright constructs a narrative that reveals the failures and contradictions of the American Dream when perceived from the margins of society. First, I will situate Bigger's social and spatial environment, demonstrating

the ways in which segregation, poverty, and systemic neglect give rise to a worldview for which fear, resentment, and limited possibility are the building blocks. Then I will show how the novel deploys the American Dream, an ideal conventionally tied to possibility and self-actualization, as an empty ideological pledge that has been written off for Black Americans. Finally, I will explore the way Bigger's ultimate demise functions not as a personal tragedy but as a structural inevitability built up through the crossing forces of racism, class oppression, and institutional violence. Through these three aspects, I seek to prove that Wright utilizes Bigger's story as a means through which to condemn the national mythology that perpetuates itself through the deliberate exclusion it purports to uplift.

Historical Context

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) appeared at a pivotal moment in American history, characterized by fierce social, economic and race forces. The novel's setting and themes are a direct reaction to the harsh realities of Black America in the 1930s. The Great Migration (1916-1970) in which millions of African Americans fled the deadly Jim Crow South in search of better opportunities in Northern cities (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 31) serves as a background for the novel. The city of Chicago, in which the novel is located, saw its Black population grow exponentially, but arrivals were subjected to extreme housing discrimination and segregation that led to the tight "Black Belt" of Wright's novel, that refers to a narrow, densely populated area in the South Side of Chicago where African Americans were confined due to racial housing discrimination and redlining practices during the early 20th century, this segregation was the result discriminatory housing , including restrictive covenants and redlining, which prevented Black residents from living outside this confined district (Grossman, 1989, p. 137).

Wright wrote his book during the late Great Depression, when Black Americans experienced unemployment that was approximately twice those of white Americans.

Economic inequality can be observed through protagonist Thomas's limited job opportunities and housing (Kelley, 2009, p.53). The novel takes place against such a context of institutionalized inequality, where redlining strategies and covenant restrictions legally barred Black residents from targeted areas and economic opportunities. It set during an era marked by entrenched racial segregation and economic exclusion, during this period, discriminatory laws and housing policies systematically limited Black Americans access to neighborhoods, jobs, and opportunities (Rothstein, 2017, p. 88).

The political environment during this period also influenced Wright's work. The Communist Party, as portrayed within the novel through the character Jan, was actively sought to recruit Black members by appealing to their disillusionment with mainstream politics and encouraging participation in alternative political movements (Maxwell, 1999). Wright himself had been associated with the Party before he became disillusioned, his experience influenced how fairly and critically he portrayed white liberals' efforts to fight racial injustice (Fabre, 1993, p. 296).

Native Son preceded the Civil Rights Movement by nearly twenty years, emerging when lynchings were still prevalent and legal struggles against segregation were only beginning to take shape. Wright's unflinching portrayal of racial violence and systemic oppression marked a turning point in American literature (Rampersad, 2007, p.123). This historical backdrop is essential to understanding the racial and economic entrapment at the heart of the novel. The systemic oppression faced by Black Americans through violence, segregation, housing discrimination and limited access to education or employment, severely restricted their ability to imagine or pursue personal or collective advancement. For Bigger Thomas and others like him, the American Dream was not just out of the reach it was structurally impossible. This crushing of aspiration, in turn, shaped a psychology defined by fear, frustration, and alienation. Wright illustrates how racialized poverty and social exclusion

not only limit material outcomes but also distort emotional and cognitive life, reducing possibility to survival and hope to rage or resignation.

Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Richard Wright's groundbreaking novel *Native Son* (1940) offers a biting critique of racial injustice, structural oppression, and the psychological effects of racism on both perpetrators and victims. Published before the official description of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and intersectionality as theoretical frameworks, the novel prefigures many of their Key tenets. This theoretical framework considers how such contemporary critical strategies might be employed to illuminate Wright's brilliant analysis of Bigger Thomas's tragic experience within a society constructed around white supremacy and racial capitalism.

Critical Race Theory assumes that racism is not a matter of individual prejudice but a structural dimension embedded within social structures and institutions. This idea is exemplified by Wright in the narrow life circumstances of Bigger Thomas and his family: "The moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else" (Wright, 1940, p. 14).

This is accurate to the extent that Bigger's consciousness is not simply a product of of personal choice, but is fundamentally shaped by structural forces beyond his control. His thoughts, fears, and decisions are molded by systemic racial oppression, economic deprivation, and social marginalization, leaving him little room for individual agency. In this sense, his actions cannot be understood as arising from free will alone, but as responses to the circumstances imposed by a society structured to limit and constraint Black lives. CRT's interest convergence thesis states that racial progress happens only when it benefits the dominant group holds that Black Americans experience serve only when they work to white advantage. Wright analyzes that in the character of Jan Erlone and the Communist Party whose political interest in Bigger initially works to their ideological agenda rather than to

directly address his own individual circumstance. This dynamic is also reflected in how the legal system operates in the novel, working to protect white property and power while rendering Black lives disposable. The psychological toll of this reality is powerfully conveyed in a moment of introspection, when Bigger, after following murder, feels a warped sense of ownership and autonomy for the first time. As the narrator reveals his inner thoughts: 'He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life that he had had anything that others could not take from him' (Wright, 1940, p. 105). By this, the author alludes that Bigger's violent acts ironically represent his attempt to exert control in a system where real power is systematically denied to him.

Critical Race Theory challenges colorblind approaches to race and challenges the adequacy of incremental reform (Crenshaw et al., 1995) which means that CRT criticizes the idea that racism can be solved by ignoring race or making slow, surface level changes. It calls for confronting racism directly and making deeper systemic reforms. Wright illustrate this through Mr. Dalton who despite practices housing discrimination is a clear illustration of this type of critique: "We don't house them here. They live on the South Side. We don't want them in this neighborhood" (Wright, 1940, p. 53). Dalton's liberalism on "Negro education" operates side by side with his fervent advocacy for the segregation of housing, encapsulating the ways in which liberalism is able to simultaneously acknowledge racial inequality and perpetuate systems that produce it. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality deepens this understanding by showing how forms of oppression like race and class interact rather than operate separately. In *Native Son*, Wright delineates the manner in which Bigger's race can not be separated from his class: "They were not simply afraid of physical death, but had been living a death from day to day" (Wright, 1940, p. 359). This 'social death' emerges out of the combined power of racial segregation and economic marginalization, demonstrating

how race and class are mutually reinforcing systems of oppression.

The segregated setting of the novel in Chicago demonstrates the way intersectionality plays out even geographically: "Goddamnit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't" (Wright, 1940, p. 23). This spatial organization of inequality reveals that race, class, and power are written upon spatial divisions, creating what Katherine McKittrick (2006) would later refer to as "demonic grounds" which is a space defined by racialized control, exclusion, and violence, yet also one where the effect of oppression on Black people's lives become visible and analyzable.

While predating official Critical Race Theory by a number of decades, Wright's novel performs a critical work anticipating some of the most significant ideas in CRT. In fact, Critical Race Theory points out the need for counter-narratives to balance out over-powering perspectives. *Native Son* becomes a longer counter-narrative that forces the reader to confront Bigger's life as he perceives it: "He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair" (Wright, 1940, p. 14). This quote shows how Bigger suppresses his emotions to survive the daily trauma of racism and poverty. Feeling the full weight of his reality would overwhelm him with fear and despair. Wright uses this to create a counter-narrative that exposes the deep psychological toll of systemic oppression.

Wright's narrative process generates what Katherine McKittrick (1994) would later refer to as a "demonic ground" upon which hegemonic race, crime, and justice constructions are undermined. Wright examines what Du Bois (1935) and later CRT theorists would describe as the "psychological wages of whiteness" the symbolic and social advantages that white people receive from racial hierarchies, even when they are themselves economically oppressed. This idea is echoed in Bigger Thomas's inner monologue as he reflects on the overwhelming power white society holds over every aspect of life: "They owned it all. They

owned it all. They had done it all. It was theirs and Bigger lived in it as an intruder" (Wright, 1940, p. 331). The quote narrated from Bigger perspective captures his profound alienation and the way whiteness defines ownership, belonging and legitimacy in America.

This portrayal anticipates later CRT scholarship on whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) highlighting not only the material advantages such as access to wealth, housing, and economic opportunity but also the psychological investments that sustain racial hierarchies. By illustrating how these structures operate in both tangible and symbolic ways, the novel exposes the deliberate mechanisms through which dominant groups protect their privileges and reinforce social exclusion, making clear that the preservation of racial power is as much about ideology and perception as it is about tangible assets.

Wright's portrayal of the limitation of legal solutions and liberal reform anticipates Derrick Bell's (1992) "theory of racial realism" which argues that racism is a permanent and structural feature of American society. Rather than placing hope in gradual reform or legal fairness, Wright suggest these systems are adequate for achieving true racial justice. This is reflected in Bigger Thomas's internal reasoning : "The thing to do was to act just like others acted, live like they lived, and while they were not looking, do what you wanted" (Wright, 1940, p. 106). Bigger's cynical strategy for survival reveals a proto-racial realist awareness a belief that justice within existing institutions is not only unreliable but often illusory. By showing how racism shapes both the structures of power and individual's psychological response, Wright aligns with later Critical Race Theory analyses of superficial reforms and racial liberalism, showing how changes that appear progressive often fail to address the deep-rooted structures of racial oppression.

Richard Wright's *Native Son* presents a powerful literary critique of the ways in which race and class shape individual consciousness and dreams. Analyzing the novel by means of Critical Race Theory and intersectionality reveals the way in which Wright's novel anticipated

contemporary understandings of structural racism and interlocking systems of oppression. The enduring timeliness of the novel is a testament to how literary fiction can be a location of theoretical construction and critical examination. Wright's unflinching portrayal of Bigger Thomas's attempts to find his way in America's racial landscape remains a stimulus to readers to engage with contemporary realities of racial injustice and to imagine more equitable futures. Through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and intersectionality, *Native Son* reveals how Richard Wright anticipated modern understandings of structural racism and the interlocking systems of race and class oppression. The novel's continued relevance testifies to fiction's power as a space for theoretical insight and critical resistance. Wright's uncompromising depiction of Bigger Thomas's fight to find his place in a racially divided and economically unfair world challenges readers not only to confront timeless racial wrongs, but also to consider the socio-economic obstacles that still limit Black aspirations. As Bigger's universe illustrates, however, the American Dream is not an evenly spread commodity: for individuals such as him, class and race are irrevocably intertwined forces shaping and usually stifling individual agency, possibility, and ambition. Here in the alignment of race, class, and the breakdown of the dream lies the beginning for a further examination of how *Native Son* challenges the very foundations of the American Dream.

Double Chains: Segregation and Class Stratification in *Native Son*

Wright from the novel's first scene presents how race determines the physical and psychological limits of Bigger Thomas's life. The Thomas family inhabits a small, rat-infested apartment, where they pay outrageous rent eight dollars per week for rooms that white renters could rent for less money elsewhere in Chicago. This contrast emphasizes the structural exploitation of Black Americans to reside under poor living standards merely because of their race. Wright's portrayal of the apartment 'The room was small and the Thomases, being black, paid eight dollars per week for it. The houses on the street were all old, and since the rent was

small they were inhabited by poor people; but to many black people such houses were home'(Wright, p. 6) reflects the bitter aspect of racial segregation coupled with economic disparity. This living condition of the Thomases is the larger constraint of Black communities that even survival would be a battle against the design that has whites on its favor. Which means they living conditions reflect the broader constraints faced by balck communities, where even the basic act of survival is a struggle against a system deliberately structured to favor white people, rendering daily existence a constant confrontation with structural injustice.

Poor white family might be wishing for a better life, but for Black American, the best would be hoping to attain the level of poverty that whites are occupying. This stark juxtaposition unveils the deeply entrenched racial order in America, where opportunity is not merely unqueal but sometimes impossible for Black citizens. By referencing Chicago's South Side, Wright highlights the spatial and social marginalization of Black communities. This can be further developed with historical evidence, such as redlining and restrictive covenants, and textual examples from *Native Son*, including overcrowded apartments and Bigger Thomas's encounters with institutional barriers, showing how systemic forces enforced exclusion.

The Chicago South Side of *Native Son* is more than merely setting it is a carefully crafted racial geography that underscores how segregation functions as control. Wright's description of the "invisible line" separating the Black Belt from the white communities establishes parameters for how race dectates not only where Black individuals can live but also the harsh realities of their existence. These conditions are restrictive, dehumanizing and marked by systemic oppression, reinforcing a life of limited opportunities and constant surveillance under the weight of racial segregation: "He looked at the map again. Then he turned it upside down and stared at it. He saw a big black sprawling blob, something like a cross between a spider-man... That was where they made him live" (Wright, p.114). Segregation creates what Wright describes as an inescapable environment that shapes Bigger's

consciousness, limiting not only his material mobility but also his ability to envision alternative futures. Throughout the novel, Wright traces the manner in which this racial space becomes internalized so as to radically alter the way in which Bigger sees himself, and where he is in the world and it restricts his dreams.

Bigger's Emerging Class Consciousness in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

In Book One "Fear", Bigger initially experiences his lower-class position through shame, fear, and unarticulated rage. His consciousness is limited to an awareness of physical restriction and powerlessness, as his cramped apartment constantly reminds him of his economic constraints. When Bigger enters the Daltons mansion, he feels intense discomfort crossing class boundaries, revealing how deeply he has internalized his working-class status. His fear and hesitation show his struggle to control himself and speak naturally in a space that symbolizes wealth and power. At this stage, Bigger's class consciousness remains incomplete, as he lacks the political awareness needed to understand how racism and class systems deliberately structure and limit his life. Consequently, rather than challenging oppression, he releases his frustration in destructive ways toward those around him.

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas's unintentional murder of Mary Dalton in "Book Two Flight" represents a crucial but catastrophic turning point in his class consciousness. Even though the act is unintentional, it strangely gives Bigger his initial feeling of control in a world that has systematically excluded him from empowerment summed up in his discovery that "He had killed and created a new life for himself. The first thing in his life that was his and could not be taken away from him" (Wright, 1940, p. 101). This brutal action compels him to face the constructedness of the economic system that traps him: as he probes the deserted buildings of Chicago's Black Belt, he witnesses how the Daltons and other rich whites profit on Black destitution while projecting an image of benevolence. His dawning awareness of these structural inequities is further sharpened by the media's demonization of him, which

exposes how institutions reinforce racial and class hierarchies. Yet Wright underscores the tragedy of this awakening—Bigger’s fleeting sense of empowerment emerges through destruction rather than collective resistance, leaving him isolated and ultimately crushed by the very system he begins to understand. The murder thus becomes a grotesque metaphor for the impossible choices imposed by systemic oppression, where even self-realization is born of violence and doomed by its terms. (Wright,1940)

By "Book Three Fate", Bigger's class consciousness peaks. Through his discussions with Max, he starts to relate his own difficulties to systemic oppression, observing how economic hierarchies are reinforced by racial fear and hatred. His statement to Max : "What I killed for must've been good! When a man kills, it's for something. I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" reveals his newfound ability to frame his violence as a response to societal forces. Here, Bigger contends that his radical actions are a response to his desperate need to affirm his existence in a world that has made him invisible. His last encounters with Jan further refine his perception of how class oppression affects Black and white Americans differently, though his perception is rudimentary and crude which means that his awareness is only in its earliest, most basic form and remains unrefined and lacking nuance. While still politically unsophisticated, this marks a profound shift from his earlier, wordless rage to a more conscious, though still imperfect, grasp of the systems that shape his life.

Throughout the novel, Wright shows how Bigger's awareness changes from reactive response to increasingly nuanced comprehension. The brutality he unleashes curiously gives him a comprehension of the social structures that have defined his existence. By the conclusion, Bigger has attained a primitive yet deep comprehension of how the economic forces have structured his options and limited his humanity. This growth in class consciousness forms one of the novel's most powerful narrative threads in Wright's scorching

examination of race and class in America.

Race, Class and Dreams Deferred

The saddest part of Wright's book is his account of how economic exploitation, institutional racism and class distort Bigger's aspirations and dreams. Bigger and his buddy Gus watch as an airplane writes advertisement jingles across the sky at the beginning of the book, which elicits a revealing conversation: "I could fly a plane if I had a chance," Bigger said. "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane," Gus said. Bigger lay on his elbow and looked up. To learn to fly an airplane, he would have to attend a flying school. But they would not permit him to attend the flying school because he was black. He glanced at Gus and saw his own sentiments reflected on Gus's black face (Wright, p.17). This refers to the manner in which racism places Bigger's hopes literally and symbolically beyond his grasp. The repetition of "if" highlighted by Gus identifies the multiple barriers racial, economic, and institutional standing between Bigger and hope. Wright describes how these barriers end up converting natural ambition and aspiration for success and self-mastery into anger and violence.

The deformation of Bigger's fantasies is best evident in his response to accidental violence. When, he accidentally kills Mary Dalton, Bigger experiences a paradoxical feeling of freedom. Despite the horror and guilt of the act, Bigger feels liberated from the weight of his circumstances, as the depth opens up new possibilities, however grim, for him to act without the oppressive constraints of societal expectations.

Trapped in the System: A Psychological Analysis of Fear and Identity

Richard Wright's *Native Son* is more than just a novel of individual tragedy—it is also an incisive denunciation of how institutional racism distorts Black subjectivity. In the formal tripartite division of the novel into "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate," Wright maps the psychological

trajectory of Bigger Thomas, whose consciousness is structured by a world that pathologizes Black existence. Applying the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), it is evident that Bigger's choices and personal conflict are not merely personal shortcomings, but the natural consequence of a system of racial oppression. In "Fear," Wright acquaints us with a reality in which Black individuals internalize racial hierarchies. Critical Race Theory reminds us that racism is not an exception but a ubiquitous part of American life—a truism acted out in Bigger's acute discomfort upon his entry into white space. Preparing to encounter the Daltons, he experiences significant anxiety: "He hated himself at that moment. Why was he acting and feeling this way he had felt earlier in the day, but a wide barrier lay between him and that morning when he had lounged in bed, dreaming of Jo and Jack and Bigger robbing Blum's" (Wright, p.43). This "broad barrier" is more than momentary irritation; it is an expression of what CRT theorists refer to as double consciousness—the divided self that results from the way Black individuals are compelled to see themselves through the lens of a repressive white gaze. Bigger can't simply be; he has to continually perform, and his performance is one of fear of punishment, surveillance, and dehumanization. Wright illustrates that this internal disintegration is a form of racial-structured psychological violence, rather than merely personal anxiety.

In "Flight," after Mary Dalton's homicide, Bigger experiences a fleeting and ironic sense of liberation: "He was free, a free agent for the first time in his life; he held his life in his hands" (Wright, p.141). CRT argues that legal and social institutions are constructed to maintain white supremacy. Bigger's transient delusion of agency is not a product of empowerment, but of transgression and a breakdown in the racial script. And this so-called "freedom" is one that only occurs beyond the boundaries of lawfulness and morality, spaces already charted by racialized codes. His flight is not freedom, but entrapment in a system that has already charted his fate. As Critical Race theorist Derrick Bell argues: "racial progress is

often illusory, and here Wright is regretful that the idea of freedom for Black Americans exists only through disastrous paths, and that too, never being lasting.”

In "Fate," Wright stages a series of encounters between Bigger and Boris Max in which he dramatizes the disastrous psychological consequences of systemic racism. Bigger thinks: “What I killed for, I am! It must've been awful deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder. What I killed for must have been good” (Wright, p.391–392). This gruesome rationalization is indicative of internalization of oppression. The analysis uses Critical Race Theory to show how racism warps self-perception, but it has some limitations. The writing sometimes gets too abstract (like calling Bigger's thoughts "a distorted mirror of perception"), making simple ideas harder to understand than they need to be. Also, while racism clearly shapes Bigger's life, the analysis overlooks other important factors like his personal choices and the book's exploration of basic human struggles. The main points stay strong Wright shows how oppression damages minds but the explanation could be clearer and more complete.

In its tripartite form, *Native Son* dramatizes a core CRT tenet: that racism is not a question of moral failing of individuals but an institutional power that structures social, legal, and psychological realities. Bigger's existence is not an unproblematic journey toward development or rehabilitation since the world he inhabits does not allow him to be human. Wright uses the mind of Bigger as the site where the effects of institutionalized racism are most abhorrently pronounced.

The American Nightmare: Race, Class, and the Failure of the American dream in *Native Son*

Richard Wright's own communist shape his handling of Jan Erlone and Boris Max in *Native Son*, using them as foils for commentary on not only capitalist exploitation but also the manner in which class oppression and institutional racism work together to deny Black

Americans access to the so-called American Dream. Communism in the novel is not presented as an idealized solution but as a system that tries and fails to fully account for the psychological and social reality of human beings such as Bigger Thomas.

When Jan gives Bigger communist pamphlets and invites him to join the Party, Bigger's reaction shows that there is a deadly gap between ideological theory and lived experience: "He had not read the pamphlets Jan had given him; he did not know what they had said. And he did not want to do what Jan had said he should do join the Party and make himself feel at home. That was not what he wanted" (Wright, p.124). This highlights how political ideologies, even those designed to address class inequality, fail to grasp the deeper racial trauma and alienation from which Black individuals suffer. For Bigger, the possibility of solidarity or collective action is distant and theoretical, yet the presence of racial surveillance, terror, and exclusion is constant in his daily life.

Yet, with Boris Max's final courtroom speech, Wright creates a direct connection between America's founding myths and the structural conditions that have shaped Bigger's fate: "Your Honor, remember that men can starve from a lack of self-realization as much as they can from lack of bread!" (Wright, p.382). Wright has make the argument here that racial oppression and economic oppression are not separate forces, but complementary pillars of American existence. The ideology of the American Dream for anyone who tries hard enough when one attempts to apply it to characters like Bigger, whose material and emotional poverty are the outcome both of economic poverty and of a social order based upon white supremacy.

Wright, therefore, does not accept communism as a panacea. Rather, he uses it to broaden the indictment of a society that denies both racial justice and economic equality. In doing so, he criticizes not only the American capitalist system but also the myth of equal opportunity for all, revealing how deeply racialized and class-bound the American Dream is.

The Media and the Construction of Black Criminality

Wright devotes significant attention to how media accounts manufacture public perception of Bigger's wrongdoing. As soon as Mary's body has been discovered, newspapers eagerly put the news into well-worn racist clichés:

"REPORTER FINDS DALTON NEGRO SERVANT ACTING SUSPICIOUSLY. NEGRO SERVANTS ACTS QUEERLY WHEN QUESTIONED" (Wright 240).

These front-page headlines validate Bigger's culpability before any evidence has been found, demonstrating how willingly white society greets stories about Black criminality. As the manhunt gathers steam, the newspapers turn up the heat:

"HUNT BLACK RAPIST AND KILLER... AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME" (Wright, p.244).

By focusing on the sexual nature of the crime although no sexual assault occurred the media evoke enduring white fears of Black male sexuality. Wright illustrates how such accounts function to legitimate racial boundaries and sanction violence against the broader Black community: "Five thousand police searched the Black Belt for Bigger Thomas, while more than eight thousand police reserves patrolled the South Side streets, stopping all suspicious-looking Negro men and subjecting them to questioning" (Wright, p.247). This mass punishment of the Black community shows how individual crime is employed to criminalize an entire race, reinforcing systems of surveillance and control.

Native Son presents a tragic portrait of the manner in which racism and poverty organize human consciousness, raising fundamental questions about responsibility and agency in a world ruled by structural inequality. Even though Wright makes it barely more than explicit that the environment of Bigger has deeply shaped his character, the novel does not proceed all the way to complete determinism. In the final conversation with Max, Bigger achieves a limited sort of self-awareness: "I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em. It must have been pretty deep in me to make me kill" (Wright,

p.392). This awful discovery that violence was his path to self-knowledge is both the tragedy of Bigger's life and the spark of personal autonomy that remains even in the most oppressive of circumstances. Wright suggests that even when options are limited outside oneself, meaning creation is still possible on the inside

By declining to grant easy forgiveness to Bigger while demanding the larger social context of his offenses, Wright writes a novel that is both a psychological case study and a withering critique of American racism. *Native Son* challenges readers to think about the price of a society that habitually denies the full humanity of some of its members—costs that are expressed not just in individual tragedies like Bigger's, but in the communal wound of racial oppression.

As Wright himself described in "*How Bigger Was Born*," his goal was to create a character who "reflected the emotional reality of the Negro in America" and simultaneously dealt with universal human problems: "I had made up my mind to write of a Negro boy, Bigger Thomas, who had killed and felt no guilt; to show why, to delineate the influences of environment upon sensitivity, emotion, and psychology" Wright, "*How Bigger Was Born*". In this direction, *Native Son* succeeds triumphantly in giving us a graphic vision of the manner in which class and race intersect to create, deform, and eventually destroy the American Dream for the ones denied access to its fulfillment.

Chapter two

Race, Class, and Dream in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

Lorraine Hansberry's groundbreaking play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) is a classic of American drama, the first Broadway play authored by a Black woman and directed by a Black director. The play's depiction of a Black family's struggle to realize their aspirations in the face of racial segregation and economic hardships on Chicago's South Side continues to resonate with audiences today more than six decades since its release. In this chapter examines the intricate dynamic between race, class, and the American Dream through Hansberry's pioneering effort, noting the way that these intersecting forces influence the aspirations, tension, and ultimate resolutions of the Younger family.

Drawing on the play's history in pre-Civil Rights America and Hansberry's own experiences with housing discrimination, this analysis will explore how *A Raisin in the Sun*

critiques the American Dream, offering a perspective that neither fully embraces nor outright rejects its promises. Through a close reading of the text and engagement with the broader scholarly discourse, I will examine how Hansberry's play portrays Black striving, addressing both the institutional barriers to equality and the continuing power of hope and perseverance amidst systemic oppression.

The Great Migration and Chicago's Racial Landscape

In order to fully grasp the importance of *A Raisin in the Sun*, one must have knowledge of the historical context that provides the backdrop for the Younger family's story. The play takes place during the Great Migration, a gigantic demographic movement where about six million African Americans migrated from the rural South to urban areas in the North, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970 (Wilkerson, 2010). This migration was the result of a combination of "push" forces racial violence, Jim Crow laws, and rural distress in the South and "attract" factors such as employment in industry within the urban areas of the North. Chicago, where the novel takes place, was a terminal destination in this migration. According to historian James Grossman, "Black Chicago grew from less than fifty thousand in 1915 to more than a quarter million by 1945" (1989, p. 4). But this expansion was taking place in an extremely segregated housing market, since African Americans were systematically confined to neighborhoods that were later referred to as the "Black Belt." Segregation was maintained by a variety of means, such as racially restrictive covenants, exclusionary lending, and at times, violent resistance to Black families' attempts to move into white neighborhoods (Grossman, 1989).

Hansberry herself experienced this discrimination. Her family, purchased a home in a white neighborhood, resulting in a legal dispute that eventually reached the supreme court in *Hansberry v. Lee* even though the Court ruled in favor of the Hansberry's on technical grounds, it did not strike down the practice of restrictive covenants, which was legal until the

landmark case of *Shelley v. Kraemer* in 1948. Hansberry herself later wrote about this experience: "That fight also required that our family occupy the disputed property in a hellishly hostile 'white neighborhood' in which, literally, howling mobs surrounded our house... My memories of this 'correct' way of fighting white supremacy in America include being spat at, cursed and pummeled in the daily trek to and from school" (Hansberry, 1964, p. 18). This personal experience greatly influenced Hansberry's writing of *A Raisin in the Sun*, particularly in how she portrayed the Youngers' decision to move into Clybourne Park despite resistance from the white community there.

Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality of Race and Class

Adopting Critical Race Theory (CRT) as its broad analytical framework, this chapter examines Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Developing during the 1970s and 1980s in the form of legal scholarship, CRT provides useful means by which to examine how race functions not merely as individual prejudice but as systemically constructed reality that permeates American social institutions, including housing, schools, and economic structures—all concerns central to Hansberry's play (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

Principles of Critical Race Theory in Hansberry's work

Critical Race Theory argues that racism is the typical experience for the majority of people of color in America. The Youngers' encounters with housing discrimination, restricted economic mobility and social prejudice are evidence of this normalized racism. Walter Lee's frustration at being consigned to drudgework in spite of his ability and aspirations shows how racism permeates everyday life, becoming "business as usual" rather than the exception.

As Derrick Bell (1980) postulated, racial justice advancement occurs only when it serves the interests of whites. In the play, this is illustrated by Karl Lindner's proposal to buy the Youngers—showing how white neighborhoods will treat Black families not due to recognition of equal rights but in an effort to maintain their perceived property values and

segregated lands. The ultimate rejection by the family is a repudiation of the circumscribed terms on which white America accommodates. CRT recognizes race as a legal and social construction rather than a biological reality. Hansberry explores this through the lens of Beneatha's quest to discover herself and her identification with Africa set against the assimilationism of George Murchison—and projecting different reactions to the social construction of Blackness in America.

CRT suggests the need for counter-stories from viewpoints of marginality to undercut hegemonic narrative. *A Raisin in the Sun* itself is a counter-narrative, retelling the American Dream narrative from the point of view of a Black family and redefining white-conceived versions of this national narrative.

CRT dissents from liberal approaches to racial justice, particularly color-blindness and gradual reform (Gotanda, 1991). This is exemplified in the play by Lindner's seemingly "reasonable" approach that conceals racism beneath economic logic and the constraints that are faced by the Youngers as much as possible despite their relative merit and endeavours.

By applying a CRT lens to *A Raisin in the Sun*, we can better understand how Hansberry was, in so many ways, a forebear of critical race theorists with her sophisticated critique of how American racism operates systematically through institutions, as opposed to solely through individual prejudice. The play's subtle examination of housing discrimination, in particular, foreshadows subsequent CRT literature on how ostensibly race-neutral policies and practices perpetuate racial inequality and segregation.

In addition, Hansberry's presentation of the aspirations of the Younger family is a concrete illustration of what critical race theorist Patricia Williams (1991) would later refer to as "rights as empty promises" the simultaneous critique of rights rhetoric as insufficient and acknowledgment of its affective and symbolic pull on subordinated populations. The family's insistence on asserting their right to live in Clybourne Park even as they are aware of the

failure of formal legal equality to secure such a conflicted message toward rights claims that would define CRT analysis.

An intersectional framework is used in this chapter to discuss how race and class function in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Created by lawyer and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how two or more dimensions of inequality or discrimination multiply and create new kinds of disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989). While Crenshaw's theory appeared some decades after Hansberry's play, the theory itself illuminates how Hansberry was actually accomplishing in her work the intricate interaction between racial and economic forces that govern the lives and ambitions of her characters.

Intersectionality further draws on scholarship examining the mythology of the American Dream, precisely as it relates to oppressed people. As James Truslow Adams, the originator of the term "American Dream" in 1931, once put it: "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Adams, 1931, p. 404). But, as others like Carol Nackenoff (1994) have argued, this ideal has always been framed in opposition to the brutal realities of exclusion and inequality in American society.

The Multifaceted Dreams of the Younger Family

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, dreams are both plot devices and rich metaphors for the deepest desires of the characters. Even the title, taken from Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" ("What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun?"), conveys a message at once about the primacy of deferred dreams as the thematic concern of the play. Each member of the Younger family develops individual dreams that are characteristic of their individual personalities and values but at the same time express various responses to the constraints offered by race and class in American society.

Walter Lee's entrepreneurial dreams represent perhaps the most conventional

encounter with the American Dream as an economic story of upward mobility. His dream of investing in a liquor store comes from his anger about being a chauffeur—a job that keeps him in close contact with wealth but continues to maintain him in a simple servant-master role. When Walter protests, "I open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say, 'Yes, sir; no, sir; very good, sir; shall I take the Drive, sir?' Mama, that ain't no kind of job... that ain't nothing at all" (Hansberry, 1959, p. 73), he is articulating not only personal disaffection but also a wider criticism of the limited economic options available to Black men in pre-Civil Rights America.

Literary critic Melvin Dixon argues that "Walter's dream of owning a business is his attempt to attain dignity and manhood in a society which historically has denied both to Black men" (Dixon, 1987, p. 112). His requirement to prosper economically forces him to give money

importance above all else, as evident when he lets his son Travis know: "You wouldn't understand yet, son, but your daddy's gonna make a transaction... a business transaction that's going to change our lives" (Hansberry, 1959, p. 108). The irony, as it were, is that Walter's pursuit of the American entrepreneurial Dream really has the effect of reinforcing his own vulnerability as a Black man under a racist economy when his partner absconds with the insurance money.

While Walter's entrepreneurial vision is one of material success, Beneatha's desire to become a doctor is an intellectual and professional path to success. Her ambitions counter gender and racial assumptions of the period. As Beneatha herself declares: "I am going to be a doctor and everybody around here better understand that!" (Hansberry, 1959, p. 50). Her determination to be a doctor in the face of economic challenges and social prejudice characterizes what literary critic Trudier Harris describes as "the dream of self-actualization that transcends materialistic goals" (Harris, 1991, p. 56).

For Mama (Lena Younger), home ownership is the dream—a tangible representation of stability and respectability. Her home buying in Clybourne Park is not just an economic decision but a moral act of defiance in the face of the segregation that has defined her life. When she tells Ruth about the purchase of the house, she emphasizes: "It's close to Travis's school and the way we figured it, we can all go together and make it work" (Hansberry, 1959, p. 92). This mutual building of her dream illustrates Mama's shared familial values and how she views the home as one of maintaining family.

Literary critic Wilkerson suggests that "Mama's aspiration to home ownership is the most traditional version of the American Dream, but within the context of housing discrimination, it is an act of revolutionary defiance" (Wilkerson, 2000, p. 443). The irony that trying the traditional dream of homeownership is revolutionary for a Black family illustrates how race radically alters the availability and meaning of the American Dream.

Class Consciousness and Economic Realities

While racial oppression is the most glaring barrier between the Youngers' dreams and the real world, class forces also play a significant role in determining their possibilities and perceptions. The \$10,000 death insurance check which Big Walter leaves behind is the literary impetus that challenges each member of the family to clarify and prioritize their wants, and in doing so, it exposes profound differences between them about economic advancement and social mobility.

The disagreement between Walter and Beneatha represents two competing philosophies of Black advancement that were prominent during the early-to-mid 20th century. This conflict mirrors the historical debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois about the most effective path toward racial equality and economic empowerment. Walter embodies Washington's philosophy of economic self-help and entrepreneurship. He believes that establishing Black-owned businesses is the path to financial independence and dignity.

His desire to invest the insurance money in a business venture reflects his belief that economic self-sufficiency through entrepreneurship is the foundation of true freedom and respect in American society.

Beneatha, conversely, aligns with Du Bois' vision of the "Talented Tenth" and his emphasis on higher education and intellectual development. She sees education as transformative and liberating, capable of creating new opportunities and challenging systemic barriers. Her medical school ambitions represent not just personal fulfillment but a broader vision of advancement through professional achievement and intellectual growth. This familial conflict serves as Hansberry's microcosm for exploring larger tensions within Black intellectual thought about advancement strategies. The insurance money becomes more than just a financial windfall—it's a symbolic battleground for these competing visions of progress. The play ultimately suggests that both approaches have merit and limitations, pointing toward the complexity of addressing racial inequality through either economic or educational means alone.

George Murchison's character introduces another aspect of class consciousness into the play. As the son of successful Black parents, George is the Black bourgeoisie who have achieved some economic success but at the cost of cultural assimilation. As George brushes Walter's overture aside with the remark, "Let's face it, baby, your brother is a sweet guy, but he's heading into his thirties, and he's still a chauffeur" (Hansberry, 1959, p. 84), he reveals class prejudices that exist even among the Black population.

Beneatha's rejection of George "I hate assimilationist Negroes!" signals her refusal to accept class advancement that requires breaking with Black cultural identity of white cultural norms (Hansberry, 1959, p. 81). With this interplay, Hansberry not only denounces racial oppression by white culture but also condemns the specter of class differences that would dismember unity within the Black community. This internal tension, however, unfolds against

a backdrop of crushing material deprivation imposed by the very system of racial capitalism Hansberry critiques. The pervasive economic insecurity shaping the Younger family's existence, evident in the cramped apartment with its half-bathroom and worn-out furniture, reaches its most devastating expressions in Ruth's consideration of abortion. Facing the impossible choice of bringing another child into their precarious financial reality, Ruth's potential action is not merely personal despair, but a direct consequence of the systemic oppression that traps Black families. Her dilemma starkly reveals how the external forces of racism and economic exclusion weaponize poverty, forcing agonizing decisions that threaten family bonds and survival itself, ultimately demonstrating that the struggle against internal division cannot be separated from the fight against the external structures that create the conditions for such desperation.

Economic insecurity pervades the Younger family's existence, from the half-bathroom down the hallway to the worn-out furniture in their apartment. Ruth's consideration of abortion is rooted directly in the family's economic uncertainty—a bleak reminder of how class constraints can cut short the most personal and significant life choices. As scholar Adrienne Rich describes, "The economic realities depicted in the play illuminate how poverty constrains not just material comfort but fundamental human dignity and reproductive freedom" (Rich, 1995, p. 213).

Housing Discrimination and Spatial Politics

The Youngers' insistence on moving to Clybourne Park despite resistance from the white neighborhood group demonstrates the intersection of race, class, and dreams. Karl Lindner's attempt to buy back out the house at a profit is the articulation of systemic racism to maintain racial segregation through economy. His diplomatic language attempts to cover up racism by the cover of concern about comfort on both sides: "I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of

Clybourne Park feeling, rightly or wrongly, as I say that for the happiness of all concerned our Negro families are happier if they live in their own communities" (Hansberry, 1959, p. 118).

This excerpt illustrates how racist housing practices were often couched in the guise of economic reasoning or statements of cultural compatibility. Lindner's proposal is one instance of what historian Thomas Sugrue has termed "the hidden violence of housing discrimination"the way that seemingly peaceful, legal methods of maintaining segregation could be as effective as more overt forms of intimidation (Sugrue, 1996, p. 233).

The final rejection of Lindner's offer by the family spearheaded by Walter's last stand, is their affirmation of dignity over expediency. Walter's statement to Lindner encapsulates this moral stance:"We have decided to move into our house because my father he earned it for us brick by brick. We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes, and we will try to be good neighbors. And that's all we got to say about that. We don't want your money" (Hansberry, 1959, p. 148). This is the time when the process of moving to Clybourne Park is transformed from a simple housing decision into a call for full citizenship and equal access to American society. As scholar Sandra Shannon explains, "The Youngers' insistence on their right to live where they choose challenges the spatial politics of segregation that confined Black families to designated areas regardless of their economic means" (Shannon, 2003, p. 119)

The Dialectic of Hope and Realism

Most remarkable about *A Raisin in the Sun* is its refusal to present either an uncompromisingly optimistic or pessimistic view of the American Dream for Black Americans. Instead, Hansberry establishes a complex tension between hope and realism that acknowledges both the structural barriers to equality and the power of human resilience and determination.

This dialectic is perhaps best exemplified in the character of Mama, who has learned

racism's bitter lessons through experience but who never wavers in her optimism about the possibilities of a greater tomorrow. When she entrusts Walter with the insurance money, stating, "It ain't much, but it's all I got in the world and I'm putting it in your hands" (Hansberry, 1959, p. 107).

Literary critic Hansberry's husband, remarked that "Lorraine's genius lay in her ability to portray both the structural constraints facing Black Americans and their amazing capacity to persist and create meaning despite these constraints" (Nemiroff, 1988, p. ix). This even-handed approach makes *A Raisin in the Sun* neither a simple celebration of the American Dream nor a blanket dismissal of its possibilities.

The play's open-ended with the Youngers moving to Clybourne Park despite certain knowledge that they will face hostility, embodies this dialectical approach. As Travis departs holding the plant that has symbolized Mama's tenacity throughout the play, Hansberry expresses both the vulnerability and determination of the family as they move into an uncertain future. Scholar Amiri Baraka states that "the plant represents the fragile yet persistent nature of Black dreams in America requiring care and protection but capable of growing even in inhospitable environments" (Baraka, 1984, p. 27).

Conclusion

A Raisin in the Sun neither affirms nor entirely rejects the American Dream but redefines it in Black terms. In portraying the Younger family's struggles and triumphs, Hansberry creates what scholar Lisbeth Lipari calls "a counter-narrative to dominant discourses about success, family, and belonging in America" (Lipari, 2004, p. 84).

The ongoing relevance of the play lies in its nuanced exploration of how race and class shape access to fundamental aspects of the American Dream—homeownership, education, entrepreneurship, and self-determination. In finally declining Lindner's offer, saying, "We come from people who had a lot of pride" (Hansberry, 1959, p. 148), Walter articulates a

vision of the American Dream that encompasses dignity and self-respect alongside material advancement.

Hansberry's achievement is that she will not provide us with simple answers or moral absolutes. Instead, she leaves us with characters grappling to reconcile the contradictions of American society—its promises of equality and the facts of discrimination, its celebration of individualism and the necessity of community, its material abundance and profound economic disparities. As scholar Margaret Wilkerson puts it, "Hansberry's brilliance was in showing how the American Dream itself needed to be redefined to encompass the experiences and aspirations of those historically excluded from its promises" (Wilkerson, 2000, p. 452).

The Younger family has not escaped the confines of race and class at the end of the play, but they have asserted their humanity and their right to pursue their dreams within these confines. As they go to face the challenges awaiting them in Clybourne Park, they embody what literary critic Houston Baker describes as "a distinctly African American version of the American Dream—one that recognizes the struggle for dignity as inseparable from the struggle for material security" (Baker, 1994, p. 139).

In this way, *A Raisin in the Sun* remains not just a classic of American drama but a profound meditation on the possibilities and limitations of dreams in a society defined by racial and economic injustice. Hansberry's dream continues to challenge readers and audiences to imagine a more inclusive American Dream—one that truly offers, as James Truslow Adams wrote, "opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" regardless of race, class, or gender

General Conclusion

Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, although contrasting in form novel and play offer powerful condemnations of structural racism and socioeconomic exclusion of African Americans in 20th-century America. The two authors, in various narratives and literary styles, reveal the deep psychological and material costs of racial segregation, poverty, and the failed promises of the American Dream.

At the center of both novels is an intense fascination with place and space: the confined, suffocating spaces that African Americans are forced to occupy. Bigger Thomas is trapped not only in the geographical confines of Chicago's Black Belt but in the society that criminalizes him. Similarly, *A Raisin in the Sun* centers on the Younger family's desire to move into a better neighborhood a physical and metaphysical quest for autonomy, identity, and dignity. Once more, the pursuit of spatial mobility is employed as a metaphor for the broader pursuit of freedom and citizenship.

Both Wright and Hansberry mourn the failure of American institutions to meet ideals of equality and justice. Both authors illustrate how racial discrimination and economic exclusion intersect to form black identity and restrict black advancement. Both authors also bear witness to how structural obstacles economic, social, and legal undermine the

possibilities of assimilation and legitimize a cycle of exclusion. The struggles of the characters are representative of a larger history of African American resistance and resilience.

This analogy has demonstrated how *Native Son* and *A Raisin in the Sun* complement each other in their representations of race, class, and dream. Where Wright paints a darker, more determinist portrait of black life under racism, Hansberry portrays a lighter, if still critical, portrait of black agency and family solidarity in the face of oppression. Both writers, however, agree that without political commitment and structural change, the conditions making racial inequality possible will persist.

Although this dissertation has discussed racial identity concerns, spatial confinement, and economic marginalization, additional research could delineate the generational conflict, and political consciousness in these works. Wright and Hansberry challenge us to confront the truth in the past and in our own time of racism not in isolated events, but as structural forces that call for communal knowledge and activism to create genuine social change.

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