

Lorraine Hansberry: The Rhetoric of *A Raisin in the Sun*

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In this paper, I hope to examine the rhetoric used in Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, to explore the racism and economic hardship experienced by African Americans in the 1950s, in the lead up to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The play examines the experiences of a working-class African American family in the Chicago area who, despite an influx of cash due to an insurance payment, struggle to realize the American Dream of housing ownership due to racism. The key conflict point in the play is when they attempt to purchase a home in a white neighborhood, at which point they are offered a large sum of money to stay out of their dream house in that white neighborhood.

The title of the play derives from a line in the poem entitled "A Dream Deferred" by the African American poet, Langston Hughes: "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / Like a raisin in the sun? / Or fester like a sore and then run? / Does it stink like rotten meat or crust and sugar over like a syrupy sweet? / Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. / Or does it explode?" (Champion, 2014). The use of this title captures the theme of the play, which is the out-of-reach nature of the American Dream for most African Americans living in urban centers during the period between emancipation from slavery, after the World Wars, and before the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In her play, Hansberry uses the Aristotelian rhetorical devices of both pathos (argument through appeal to emotion) and ethos (argument appealing to the writer's character). Pathos, according to Heinrichs in his book *Thank You for Arguing*, is the most useful tool for rousing one's audience to action. Persuading logically is always an option, but just because you present the facts of a case to someone it doesn't guarantee that evidence alone will change their perception and turn them to your cause. Emotion is what makes the difference between agreement and commitment. By appealing to the emotions of your audience, you are able to sway their mood and get them in the right headspace to want to fight for your cause, or take action. Some of the important tools used in pathos that Heinrichs describes are storytelling,

patriotism, and desire. Storytelling can give the audience a virtual experience - particularly if it can call on the audience's past experience. Patriotism appeals to the audience's group identity. Finally, desire: if you can figure out what the audience wants you can get them more involved (Heinrichs, 2020).

Heinrichs echoes Aristotle's words on ethos, making the claim that of the three arguments, ethos is the most important appeal of all. It employs the speaker's personality, reputation, and ability to look trustworthy. People are more likely to believe and back you if you are trusted. In order for your audience to be receptive, attentive, and like and trust you, you must make an argument of character. The three essential elements of a persuasive ethos are defined as follows. The first aspect is virtue, or cause, which means the audience believes you share their values. Trusting someone comes much easier when you believe you have the same morals. This is an appeal that many politicians use. To secure a vote, the politicians present themselves as the voice of the people, and as representatives of a group, they want the members to believe that they care about the same issues the group does. This can be achieved through showing off your achievements through character references or revealing flaws in yourself that show dedication to the audience's values. The second element is practical wisdom. In presenting the practical wisdom, the audience should believe that you know what you're doing - that you know your craft. If you appear like you always know the right thing to do, whether from showing off your experience, or appearing the more moderate option, the trust the audience has in you will be boosted. The final aspect is disinterest. In rhetoric, a disinterest appeal does not mean that you don't care, it instead means that you are not biased. It gives you the appearance of having only the best interest of the audience at heart. Make yourself authentic, and make it seem like the decisions you make for the audience are the right ones (Heinrichs, 2020).

Through pathos, Hansberry's play gives voice to African Americans who are experiencing extreme economic disparities and encountering racial discrimination, all while reaching for the American Dream of a home in the suburbs where their family can be together, live safely, and flourish. Through ethos, Hansberry bases the play on her own experiences; like the fictional Younger family in the play, Hansberry's family had to fight in court for the right to own the house they had purchased in a White neighborhood. She also uses this form of rhetoric to appeal to the audience's sense of commonly held American values, aspirations, and priorities related to their families, homes, and communities.

Though it deals with a particular time in American history, the play still resonates and remains relevant today, as issues of systemic and institutional racism and economic disparity are present throughout the United States—all of which inhibit many African Americans and their communities from gaining access to the same kind of economic and cultural capital that their White counterparts hold. Hansberry's rhetorical approach—of connecting with the audience's shared humanity through the use of pathos, and pointing to the reality of African Americans' lived experiences through the use of ethos—points to an approach that those from oppressed communities of color can continue to use today to address and combat the effects of ongoing disadvantage and discrimination; these include gerrymandering, educational funding, disparity in economic investments in communities of color, and access to healthcare and community resources (Hartman et al., 2020). Therefore the news in this essay is to look not only at the rhetorical approaches that the playwright uses, but also to consider the impact of the play from a historical perspective. The thesis of this essay is that Lorraine Hansberry uses the pathos of storytelling and the ethos of practical wisdom to demonstrate the racism and economic disparity faced by African Americans in the United States, which prevent them from achieving the American Dream.

According to Jay Heinrichs in his book *Thank You for Arguing*, storytelling is a tool found underneath the pathos umbrella. Giving the audience a detailed narrative is one of the most effective ways to change their mood. The more vivid, the more it seems like a real experience, and the more the audience can believe it could happen to them (Heinrichs, 2020, p.85). Storytelling plays an essential role in the art of theater. In fact, without it there wouldn't even be a theater. Anne Bogart -an American theater and opera director- writes on the role of storytelling in the 21st century theater (Bogart, 2015). She speaks on how the theater uses storytelling to build bridges between the audience and the message the play is trying to convey. Storytelling is also used to make the invisible visible. Tough social issues that people may not want to talk about are brought to the forefront.

Bogart uses the example of slavery: "Slavery is really hard for Americans to talk about. The film *Twelve Years a Slave* makes visible the invisible. It creates identity and memory" (Bogart, 2015). The audience can witness firsthand the story that the theater (or in this case, the film) is trying to convey. Watching it play out right in front of your eyes, with characters you can identify with and sympathize with makes the issues exist at the front of the audience's minds. Bogart also speaks on how storytelling allows us to get unstuck. Using storytelling through the theater allows us to define our future and share our own stories. Bogart remarks on the powerfulness of sharing our own stories (Bogart, 2015). In writing and performing plays about issues that may be overlooked, the audience is moved to action. When you go to the theater and see a very thought provoking play that focuses on important issues, the playwright and the actors are using storytelling to get this across. They set up the story with characters you can root for. When conflict arises, you get to feel emotional about what is happening. Whether the deeper issue is explicitly stated, or just mentioned implicitly, the theater gets you to think.

In terms of ethos, a key aspect of building your ethos through practical wisdom - knowing your craft - is showing off your experience. Heinrichs (2020) explains regarding practical wisdom:

If you debate a war and you're a veteran yourself, bring it up. "I've been in battle," you say. "I know what it's like." In an argument, experience usually trumps book learning. And it is fine to brag about experiences, rather than yourself. Even God did that with Job. Rather than call himself a great guy, God mentioned all the feats he had accomplished, like inventing the whale (70).

It is significant to note that the main conflict at the end of the play resembles this—it was not a made up story, but rather something that came directly from Hansberry's lived experience and thus the "practical wisdom" that she accrued. In other words, she had already been "in battle" around racial discrimination and housing in the United States. The important piece of background information for this topic comes in the court case *Hansberry v. Lee* in 1940. Lorraine Hansberry grew up during a time when segregation was widely accepted and practiced. When she was a child, her family purchased a home in the all-white neighborhood of Washington Park. The transaction was done in secret, with the owner selling the house officially to two other men, who had actually purchased the home for the Hansberrys. The reason for this was that the neighborhood was under a racially restrictive covenant, which prevented African Americans from purchasing or leasing land there.

The Hansberry family had moved in and when it was discovered that they were Black, they were threatened by mobs and their house was attacked. The issue of them living there was taken into the Supreme Court of Illinois, where Hansberry's lawyers argued that the covenant required a certain percentage of people in the neighborhood to sign in order for it to be effective and in this particular case, the actual percentage of members of the neighborhood was below the required percentage. However, the Supreme Court of Illinois declared that the previous

owner had signed the restrictive covenant, and because the covenant was deemed valid in a previous court case the issue could not be brought up again, thereby making the sale to the Hansberry family invalid.

However, the Supreme Court of the United States reversed this decision. The clause to which Illinois had appealed—*res judicata*—stated that matters settled in a competent court cannot be pursued further by the same parties. Because Hansberry had not been represented in the court case that deemed the covenant legal, *res judicata* couldn't apply (Kamp, 1987, p.481-499). As such, Lorraine's family was permitted to keep the house. Lorraine would take this childhood experience and base the latter conflict in *A Raisin in the Sun* on it. This background information is important to the rhetoric of *A Raisin in the Sun* because it builds into Hansberry's ethos. More specifically, her practical wisdom. Ethos is one of the Aristotelian methods of convincing the audience—the argument from character. Hansberry's main conflict in the play related to the house sale therefore came from her own life, and is written from the perspective of the practical wisdom around housing and racism that the playwright had experienced.

Before analyzing the text of the play for specific uses of pathos and ethos, it is important to focus on storytelling and its relationship to the theater. Fryer (2003) captures the persuasive power of storytelling in particular:

The other way to persuade people—and ultimately a much more powerful way—is by uniting an idea with an emotion. The best way to do that is by telling a compelling story. In a story, you not only weave a lot of information into the telling but you also arouse your listener's emotions and energy. Persuading with a story is hard. Any intelligent person can sit down and make lists. It takes rationality but little creativity to design an argument using conventional rhetoric. But it demands vivid insight and storytelling skill to present an idea that packs enough emotional

power to be memorable. If you can harness imagination and the principles of a well-told story, then you get people rising to their feet amid thunderous applause instead of yawning and ignoring you.

When it comes to the theater, which is the medium that Hansberry uses to communicate through this play, she leverages the power of storytelling. Thus it is important to consider alongside the content of the play, the actual medium used.

With this larger context of the medium for the message in mind, a dramatic conflict and specific scene from the play that demonstrates both pathos and ethos takes place in act iii. We have spent the whole play looking into the lives and struggles of the Younger family. Walter, the son and man of the household, had always prioritized money. You can't provide for your family in the way Walter wants to if you don't have money. In making some tough financial decisions, he had just lost all of the money he received from the insurance payout from the death of his father. He had planned to accept the offer of the Clybourne Park community, to let them buy back the house. The audience has seen Walter gain it all and lose it all. When he gives the speech on how he would throw out his pride and beg for the money, his family strongly disagrees with him. This is the most climactic moment of the play. Instead of groveling, he refuses the offer. He and his family have worked too hard to give up on their dreams. Walter's lines are:

What I am telling you is that we called you over here to tell you that we are very proud... This is my son, and he makes the sixth generation our family in this country. And we have all thought about your offer... And we have decided to move into our house because my father—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. (Act iii)

First I want to address the ethos we can see in this scene. Walter is showing off his credibilities, which Heinrichs labels as bragging. This is a tool used to “pump up” one’s own rhetorical virtue (Heinrichs 2020). Walter states the fact that six generations of his family have been living in America. He and his entire family are American citizens. He is using this to show the representative of the community that he and his family are just as deserving of living in that neighborhood as everyone else. While he’s building his ethos, Walter also makes an appeal to pathos—both to the audience, and to the community representative. For the representative, Walter is challenging him to look them in the eyes and see them as fellow human beings who have just as much of a right to live as he does. Through the storytelling of theater, the audience has connected to the humanity of the characters and the realness of the plot. With the story coming to a close, Lorraine Hansberry has given the audience the “virtual experience” (Heinrichs, 2020) they needed to expose the very real discrimination that African Americans faced in the U.S. housing market.

Despite the critical acclaim *A Raisin in the Sun* received, it was a difficult process to get it to Broadway. Champion (2014) explains:

But the journey to the Great White Way wasn’t easy—it took over a year for producer Philip Rose to raise enough funds to bring the play to New York. After short pre-Broadway tryouts in Philadelphia, New Haven and Chicago, *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway on March 11, 1959 at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, starring Sidney Poitier as Walter Lee Younger, a struggling son with big dreams, Claudia McNeil as his mother Lena and Ruby Dee as his hardworking wife Ruth.

This makes it important to consider the contribution of this play to theater overall. Broadway has been known as the Great White Way. While this nickname originally stemmed from the bright white lights of the theater District of New York City, the nickname can be approached with a different theme in mind. Broadway has been historically dominated by white people. With

musicals being “written *by* white people, *for* white people, and *about* white people” (Hoffman, 2020). While Hoffman focuses primarily on Broadway musicals, the same can be said about plays as well. According to 2016/2017 statistics this is still the case, with 95% of all plays and musicals on Broadway being written and directed by white artists (Clement 2019).

Mitchell (2020) explores how Hansberry’s play itself is a communication feat, one that we should continue to learn from today. Mitchell explains:

Suburban home ownership became a barometer of American success in the 1930s and 1940s, with mortgage loans newly subsidized by the Federal Housing Administration. But Black and Brown citizens were systematically excluded, so most African Americans could not pursue home ownership until the 1950s. Placing Black people’s struggle to attain this marker of American achievement on Broadway, Hansberry accomplished a feat parallel to the family she portrayed. Both the Youngers and their creator encountered hostility for daring to reach for what the country defined as success.

As it turned out, Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* became her most famous work. It became the first play produced on Broadway that was written by an African-American woman. Not only that, but it also won the New York Drama Critics Circle award. Hansberry was the youngest and first African American to receive this award (Ross, 2018).

Her impact on the Black Arts movement was significant, even though it commenced the year after her death. James Baldwin (1970), an African American writer, explains the impact that *A Raisin in the Sun* had on him:

I had never in my life seen so many black people in the theater, and the reason was that never before, in the entire history of the American theater, had so much of the truth of black people's lives been seen on the stage. Black people had

ignored the theater because the theater had always ignored them... But, in *Raisin*, black people recognized that house and all the people in it.

Even after her death, Lorraine Hansberry's works continued to circulate. Her former husband and business partner - Robert Nemiroff - published the remainder of her unfinished and finished works posthumously. It is very important in the world of theater to remember and honor the influential figures of color who gave voice to African Americans within the theater, and thereby elevating consciousness of their experiences within the broader culture.

Lorraine Hansberry has been heralded as one of the most influential playwrights of the 20th century. Her play *A Raisin in the Sun* uses the pathetic art of storytelling inherent in theater and the ethos coming from her lived experience to create a work of art that demonstrates the racism and economic disparity faced by African Americans in the United States. In the white dominated space of theater in general and Broadway specifically, she showed the systemic problems that prevent African Americans from achieving the American Dream of housing ownership that was easily accessible to the white audience. Moreover, she gave voice to African American women in the theater world, which made a lasting impact on African American artists for years to come. While the play is situated in a specific era of U.S. history, its themes remain relevant today, with many communities of color still facing systemic discrimination, lack of equitable access to resources, and diminished economic and educational opportunities relative to predominantly white communities. At the same time, many white Americans do not have a window into these issues, and Broadway still remains dominated by plays written and directed by white artists. This suggests that the play, its themes, and its storytelling power remain as relevant as ever.

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