

For only love can conquer hate  
You know we've got to find a way  
To bring some lovin' here today

(Marvin Gaye)

Mama's Christian Love in *A Raisin in the Sun*

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While Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* has been noted as an enduring work because it denotes the societal ills of racism and segregation, it also endures because Christian values lace the play and these values appeal to its audiences who either believe in God, are predominantly Christian, are guided by Christian ideals or a combination of any of these principles. In Hansberry's own words, "...it is a play that tells the truth about people[...]people who are the very essence of human dignity" (Nemiroff 91). While Mama's children, Beneatha and Walter Lee, struggle to find their human dignity throughout the play, the matriarch, Lena Younger (Mama), exudes this quality. According to Christian teachings, human dignity derives from God – every human being was created in God's image and so by their very existence they have inherent value and worth (The Holy Bible, Gen 1.27-8; Groody 111). Mama is sure in her faith in God and she uses her faith knowledge to teach her children. Because of this, *A Raisin in the Sun* sets an enduring example of how all people should support, get along with, and love each other. In a "Raisin in the Sun," Mama Younger is a Christian who sets an example of how family members should love one another.

Since its opening, *A Raisin in the Sun* has been acclaimed by critics and audiences alike for various reasons. In 1959, Brooks Atkinson, a New York Times theater critic, stated that Lorraine Hansberry had brought up “some serious problems, but has not tipped the play to prove one thing or another” and “told the inner and out truth about a Negro family in the Southside Chicago” (1). James Baldwin, award-winning African-American writer and poet, notes that “Never before, in the entire history of American theater, had so much of the truth of black people’s lives been seen on stage” (Nemiroff – xii). The play has won numerous awards including the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award in 1959, the Cannes Gary Cooper Award (for most social and human significance) in 1961, and a Tony in 1974 (Wilkerson 1; Perkins, Loren 1, 4; Tony Awards). In her 1986 essay, “*A Raisin in the Sun*: Anniversary of an American Classic,” Margaret Wilkerson states that the play “has become an American classic within a quarter of a century,” and in a 1986 Washington Post essay, playwright and poet Amari Baraka concludes that “what is most telling about our ignorance is that Hansberry’s play remains overwhelmingly popular and evocative of black and white reality; and the masses of black people saw it was true” (Wilkerson 1; Baraka F3 Col 1). While critics and intellectuals have noted that the play is an enduring classic, they normally note that the reason for its long-standing relevance is its treatment of racism, sexism, Marxism, intergenerational conflict, and Africanism<sup>2</sup>. However, one reason that the play endures that is not fully explored in other criticisms is the Christian spirituality that infuses the play.

Although the play is laced with spiritual allusions and Christian themes, there is only one critical essay that relates the play to the Christian Faith. This is Angeletta K. M. Gourdine’s “The Drama Of Lynching In Two Blackwomen's Drama, Or Relating Grimke's Rachel To Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun*,” in which Gourdine relates Ruth from *A Raisin in the Sun* to the biblical

character Ruth (541). In the play, Ruth is devoted to her mother in law Lena, just as the biblical Ruth is devoted to her mother in law Naomi. Although there are no other critical essays dealing with the spirituality of the play, there is reason to believe that part of the play's enduring success stems from its Christian themes that likely resonate with Christian or God-worshipping audiences.

From the time the play was released in 1959 through the present, America has been a nation that believes in God and was founded on Christian principles. According to Gallup polls from 1952 to 1965, the years around the time of the play's release, 92% of Americans identified as Christians and 98% believed in God (Gallup: America Remains; Gallup: Religion Historical Trends). Although this percentage has decreased, as of 2014, the majority of Americans identify as Christians and 89% of Americans polled have a belief in God. (Gallup: Three-Quarters; Gallup: Religion Historical Trends). The United States Constitution is based on a belief in God. In the Declaration of Independence, our founding fathers wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" (par. 2). It is clear that America is and has been a predominantly Christian Nation that believes in Christianity and God. Therefore it is likely that the audiences and critics who watched the play were predominately Christians or ones who believed in God. They would have noticed the play's spiritual allusions as well as the depictions of Mama's faith in and Beneatha's questions about God.

Another indication of the play's spiritual relevance is its nomination to a religious foreign film festival. In 1961, *A Raisin in the Sun* was nominated for competition in the Moral Values category at the Valladolid Religious Film Festival in Spain ("3 U.S. Pix" 10). This is significant because the US film company Columbia campaigned hard for it to win in Spain and according to

a Variety Weekly article, even though it did not win the Valladolid's Golden Sheaf award for moral values, "There were many delegates and visitors [...] who felt that "Raisin in the Sun" more than merited the City of Valladolid award [...]" (Japan's Prizes 15). From this, one can infer that the US and foreign film community and audiences felt that the film depicted religious values. But, there are no in-depth discussions of the play's religious themes. So, in the following paragraphs, I will explore one of the play's Christian themes: love. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Mama Younger reflects the vast majority of the film's audiences when she exhibits Christian morality and belief in God. Throughout the play, her most prominent Godly characteristic is Christian love.

Several sources have noted that love is a key aspect of Mama's character. In "Hansberry's A RAISIN IN THE SUN," Frank Ardolino describes Mama as "the family nurturer" (Par. 1). In describing Lena's nurturing nature, Ardolino states that she and her husband, though he is now deceased, "love their children" (Par. 2). He also feels that Lena is a loving mother who cares about the development and advancement of her children (Par. 1, 3). Amari Baraka makes similar comments about Mama's love. He states that Mama is the "emotional adhesive of the family" (F1 Col 1). He does not see her as "the stereotypical black matriarch," who is merely a "folksy counsel" and an "upholder of tradition" (F1 Col 1). Instead he describes her as "proud and loving," and he refers to her as the embodiment of "truth, history and love" (F1 Col 1). Mama loves, and her love stems from her Christian faith and values.

According to the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the church in Corinth, "Love is patient and kind; [...] Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (The Holy Bible 1 Cor. 13.4, 7-8). According to the New International Bible, the phrase "bears all things" is translated as love that "always protects" and another way to look at

love that “never ends” is love that perseveres or never fails (1 Cor 13:7-8). According to the biblical commentary in Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible, love that believes all things is belief in “all that God says in his word, all his truths, and all his promises” (1 Cor 13:7). So, from two different versions of the Bible and Gill’s commentary, Christian love includes these seven elements: patience, kindness, protection of others, belief, hope, endurance, and perseverance. Mama Younger has all of these qualities and through many examples she teaches them to her children and the audience at large. Because her Christian belief in God is the lynchpin of this thesis, I will begin with it, followed by the other six elements in this order: patience, kindness, protecting others, hope, perseverance, and endurance.

Mama believes in God and Christianity; it is obvious from our first encounters with Mama that she is a devout Christian. As Mama enters the stage for the first time, the stage direction indicates that, “she has, we can see, [...]faith[.]” (Hansberry 1920). Her belief in the Christian faith is reinforced throughout the script, which is infused with comments like, “It’s too early in the morning to be talking about money. It ain’t Christian,” “... I don't want that on my ledger this late in life” and “God knows...,” (Hansberry 1921 and 1922). This Christian faith informs her interactions with the other characters in the play; it is an integral part of Mama’s character. In her critical essay, “The Visions of Lena Younger created by Lorraine Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lizandra Gomes<sup>1</sup> states that Lena is a woman “who guides her life and her family’s life by the rules of Christianity” (88). Because she is guided by her Christian beliefs, she exhibits the other six elements of Christian love with little difficulty. We see her patience with Beneatha, her kindness toward Ruth, her protection of the family, her hope in Walter Lee, her perseverance with Beneatha and Walter Lee and her endurance through many hardships.

Mama is patient. Her Christ-like patience is most evident during her discussion with Beneatha about God. The conversation begins with Beneatha disparaging God in front of Mama. Despite Beneatha taking God's name in vain and making sarcastic comments about losing her saltiness (a biblical metaphor for spirituality), Mama lets her off with a warning, "Now that will do. I just ain't going to have you 'round here reciting the scriptures in vain – you hear me?" (Hansberry 1924). Beneatha adheres to the admonition for the time being and Mama, showing more patience, changes the conversation by asking Beneatha what time she will be home from school. The conversation continues with Beneatha talking about the many activities she has been involved in (drama, horse-riding, photography, and now guitar). Then, the conversation meanders through other topics, including how Beneatha is trying to express herself, how she is going out with a wealthy boy, how she thinks ill of her brother, her negative feelings about rich people, and her desire to be a doctor. In other words, Mama patiently listens to, chides, and encourages her daughter through many topics of conversation and minutes until Beneatha again begins to disparage God. During this next interchange, Beneatha first states that "God hasn't got a thing to do with it," then, twice she says that she is "sick of hearing about God" (Hansberry 1926). At this point the ever-patient Mama warns Beneatha "[y]ou 'bout to get your fresh little jaw slapped!" (Hansberry 1926). But Beneatha does not heed the warning and declares that she doesn't "believe in God," and that "[t]here simply is no blasted God..." (Hansberry 1926). At this point, Mama must correct Beneatha and does so with control and determination, absent of wrath. The stage direction states that, "Mama absorbs this speech, studies her daughter and rises slowly and crosses to Beneatha and slaps her powerfully across the face" (Hansberry 1926). Then, to restore God to his place in the family, Mama has Beneatha state that, "In my mother's house there is still God" (Hansberry 1926). Mama again does all of this with patience. The stage

direction states that, “Mama repeats the phrase with precision and cool emotion” (Hansberry 1926). Although Beneatha sorely tests Mama’s patience, Mama maintains her patience throughout her discussion about God with Beneatha. So Mama is patient. She is also kind.

Her kindness is evident through her care about Ruth’s condition; she truly cares about Ruth’s health and happiness. One of the first things that Mama does when we meet her in the play is to ask after Ruth’s health and to offer to do some of the ironing (Hansberry 1920). Gomes sees this kindness as nurturing and states “This is obvious when Lena offers to help Ruth ironing some clothes after realizing that Ruth is not feeling well” (90). Shortly after offering to iron clothes for Ruth, Mama encourages Ruth to take better care of herself, “[g]irl, you better start eating and looking after yourself better” and to stay home and rest when Ruth says that she is tired (Hansberry 1921-2). Later, Mama shows great concern when Ruth collapses from fatigue and while massaging Ruth’s shoulder to relax her, Mama states, “[n]ow you just relax. That’s right...just lean back, don’t think ‘bout nothing at all...nothing at all—“ (Hansberry 1927, 1930). Ultimately she cares for Ruth by fulfilling Ruth’s dream of moving out of the tenement and into a larger house. Ruth is so happy when Mama tells her the news that Ruth exclaims, “[p]raise God!” twice and later proclaims, “Hallelujah! and good-bye misery...” (Hansberry 1947). Ruth is important to Mama as is the rest of the family. Mama cares deeply about the family and has spent her life protecting it.

She protects her family members by working hard, buying a house for them, sharing her money with them and wanting to keep them safe. She and her husband spent years working hard to pay the rent and take care of the family, and her husband “finally worked hisself to death...” (Hansberry 1921, 1923). While thinking about buying a bigger house, Mama says that “maybe [she] could take on a little day work again...” (Hansberry 1923). She decides to buy the family a

house in the white suburbs of Chicago and tells Travis that she “went out and she bought you a house!” (Hansberry 1946). She also shares her \$10,000 insurance check with them, giving Walter Lee \$3500 and Beneatha \$3000 (Hansberry 1951). We learn that she and her husband made the Northward Migration to escape the threat of lynchings in the South and to give her children a safe home (Hansberry 1937). She prays to God to protect her family from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association after Mr. Lindner, their representative, let the Youngers know that the white housing development did not welcome the Youngers moving into the neighborhood (Hansberry 1958). Her family is precious and paramount and she does everything possible to protect them. She also puts her hope in them.

She hopes that Walter Lee will behave responsibly with the \$6500 with which she entrusts him (Hansberry 1951). She knows that he wants to buy a liquor store against her approval, yet she still gives him the insurance money, hoping he will do the right thing. Unfortunately, he loses all the money (Hansberry 1962). Despite that, she does not lose hope in Walter Lee and forgives him for losing the money. She encourages him to choose human dignity and his family instead of the money with which the Improvement Association is trying to bribe the family. In answering Lindner, he focuses on his other family members, instead of himself, stating:

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

He even supports Beneatha, telling Lindner, “And that’s my sister over there and she’s going to be a doctor” (Hansberry 1972). Mama’s hope in Walter Lee is transformational. When he

chooses to keep the Clybourne Park house, choosing family well-being over money, Mama states that he is “Kind of like a rainbow after the rain” (Hansberry 1974). Through her hope in him, she ultimately guides him to the decision that will benefit the whole family. She also guides Beneatha through perseverance.

Mama perseveres in teaching Beneatha to love others, especially her brother. After Walter Lee loses the \$6500, part of which would have paid for Beneatha’s medical degree, she admits to Asagai that she has stopped caring about people. Asagai asks, “And you’ve stopped caring?” and she replies, “Yes—I think so” (Hansberry 1964). This lack of caring is especially evident when Beneatha states that Walter Lee is “[...]not a man. [He] is nothing but a toothless rat” and “there is nothing left to love” in him because Walter Lee wants to accept Lindner’s bribe (Hansberry 1970-1). So, Mama tells Beneatha:

There is always something left to love...have you cried for that boy today? I don’t mean for yourself and for the family cause we lost the money. I mean for him; what he been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain’t through learning—because that ain’t the time at all. It’s when he’s at his lowest and can’t believe in himself because the world done whipped him so (Hansberry 1971).

After this lesson, Beneatha supports Walter Lee’s decision to scorn Lindner’s bribe. She comes to his defense for the first time in the play. After Walter Lee tells Lindner that the family will be moving into Clybourne Park, Lindner states, “I take it then that you have decided to occupy” (Hansberry 1972). Beneatha answers for Walter, showing solidarity with him: “That’s what the man said” (Hansberry 1972). Mama’s lesson on love made a great impact on Beneatha and

encouraged her to support Walter Lee for the first and only time in the play. Mama persevered in teaching Beneatha to love even after Walter Lee lost the money.

Despite losing the money, Mama endures. She also endures through the Northward Migration, living in the tenement, and the loss of her baby, Claude (Hansberry 1923, 1937, 1962). Through all of this, she never loses faith in God, in fact she turns to God to strengthen her in the face of adversity. When she learns that Walter Lee has lost the money, she turns to God, “Oh, God... [She looks up to Him.] Look down here – and show me the strength” (Hansberry 1963). She is proud of the generations of slaves and sharecroppers, her ancestors, who persevered and never let anyone tell them they weren’t good enough (Hansberry 1970). And at the end of the play she triumphantly carries her plant out of the tenement and prepares to move into the racist, all-white neighborhood of Clybourne Park. Frank Ardolino also notes Lena’s endurance. He feels that Lena has successfully nurtured her family and that all members of the family “have had their humanity, maturity, and familial endurance confirmed” (Para 7). Through Mama’s perseverance and integral Christian faith, she loves her family, ultimately leading it to stay together and move to a better house.

Mama’s Christian love – her belief in God, her patience, kindness, protection, hope, perseverance and endurance -- brings her family through a difficult trial of loving each other in the face of adversity. It is a compelling story that is appealing to wide audiences and has become a lasting piece of literature. Although *A Raisin in the Sun* is an enduring American classic, most critics attribute the reasons for its universal appeal to be anything but religious. However, one key element of the play’s steady success is that it depicts true Christian love through the character of Mama. Because love trumps all, Mama and her family members forgive each other and find a way to support each other. At the end of the play, there is a hope that - as the family

members move out of the tenement and into a new, bigger home – their love for each other will continue to grow.

Note

1. This literary criticism is from an undergraduate thesis. However, I consider it peer-reviewed because according to the article,

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Ms. Gomes presented her entire thesis, "African American playwrights" at the New England Women's Studies Association Conference at UMass Dartmouth on May 1, 2010 (NEWSA 4).

2. For more information see works by Baraka, Nemiroff, and Wilkerson.

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