

Literary Analysis

“A Raisin in the Sun” and "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

Response to Prompt 4 - Comparison

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Comparison of Literature - Prompt 4

Black American families in the United States have struggled and battled to ensure they have equal rights. Racism and all forms of discrimination ran rampant in the 1950s throughout the end of the 1960s. The black community struggled for equal rights in every aspect of life: employment, education, housing, and healthcare. They did not have access to the same privileges extended to white Americans. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Martin Luther's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* written on April 16, 1963, clearly portray these concepts. On one hand, Hansberry portrays this by reflecting on the life of the Youngers, a typical African-American family of the period between World War II and the 1960s who lived in the south side of Chicago in a ghetto. On the other hand, Martin Luther portrays the plight of the Black Americans through the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, which was a response to eight white religious leaders from the South. In a close analysis, the two plays portray the concept of the unfulfilled American dream of the Black Americans, as they struggle to fit and find their place and purpose in a world full of racism and injustices such as discrimination and unequal compensation, unequal employment, and unequal education opportunities without compromising their dignity, pride, and honor.

In particular, we explore the time-period in which black Americans in the United States faced extreme racial prejudice and were not treated equally because of the color of their skin. Black Americans would have to overcome segregation, denial, or limited access to public services and education, lack of high paying employment, and limited and poor housing options. These circumstances resulted in restricted opportunities to improve their quality of life, which continued the cycle of generational poverty. This was a very volatile time in America where non-violent and violent protests, riots, and excessive arrests took place due to the black community standing up against hate, racial prejudice, and unequal opportunities.

Both authors demonstrate their experiences about their deferred American dreams in different ways, as portrayed in their desire to have a quality life, devoid of discrimination. They seek harmony and the best for their families and those they represent with equal opportunities. In the play *A Raisin in the Sun* and the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, the authors highlight the needs and actions required to push for equal opportunities and to break through the boundaries of segregation. Lorraine Hansberry critically analyzes the cruel effects of racism between the northern and southern areas of Chicago. This is expressed by the character, Mr. Lindner in his awkward and mild-mannered way, "It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing rightly or wrongly, as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities" (Hansberry, 1988, p. 118). In Dr. King's letter, he discusses Birmingham as "the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States where Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts and had more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches" (King, 1963). Martin dreamed of a Nation that was United and where Blacks were treated equally to the Whites. By highlighting Birmingham as the most segregated city, he demonstrates the unfulfilled dream of the residents of this city to live in an equal, fair, and just society.

In another case of the Black Americans living the American dream, the two authors also bring out the element of uncompromised pride, dignity, and honor. For instance, Mama Younger desired better housing for her family and future generations. She purchased a home in Clybourne Park with the insurance money she received from her deceased husband, which was a white neighborhood. When the Younger family was told that the community association was going to offer them money to not move in, Mrs. Younger responded to her son, "I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers - but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we

wasn't fit to walk the earth." (Hansberry, 1988, p 142). Mama Younger aspired to live in a better community. However, her dream to live in this community peaceful and in harmony with her neighbors is interrupted by the white community who wants to buy her home. She remains adamant, refusing to compromise on her dignity and instead fights for her American dream. Dr. King shared similar sentiments, "For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation - and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop." (King, 1963). In both instances, the Black community is willing to work for their livelihood without accepting handouts from the White community and thus, maintaining their pride, honor, and dignity. They are determined to realize their American dream.

In the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, the author vividly expresses that although it was apparent that black women were being held back by unequal opportunities and gender discrimination; they still possessed their pride, dignity, and honor as they struggle to fit and find their place and purpose. The black families instilled this sense of pride in their children, as mama asks Beneatha, "... You ain't got the pride you was born with!" (Hansberry, 1988, p. 38) after she invites a visitor over her house. Similarly, in a *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, King shares the confidence and pride of an elderly black woman. From the letter, King says, "they will be old, oppressed, and battered Negro women, as symbolized in a seventy two year old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness, "My feet are tired, but my soul is at rest" (King, 1963). The excerpt from the Birmingham Letter by Martin Luther indicates that amidst their oppression, the African Americans did not give up their quest to fit and find their place and purpose in America, which was their home and their pride.

Another common theme in both works of literature is that Black Americans have to fight for equal opportunities. Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter highlighted that whites feared Negroes and they did not feel safe having them live in their neighborhoods. This corresponds to Lorraine Hansberry's literature where she describes the endeavors of her characters and how they faced trials and tribulations in a period when the gender and skin color defined what a person could or could not have or do.

Black Americans dealt with unequal education opportunities, high unemployment rates, and unequal compensation in comparison to White Americans, which did not deter their struggle to fit and find their place and purpose in a world full of unfair treatment. For instance, many blacks were employed in roles of service such as Walter who was a chauffeur while Mama and Beneatha cooked and cleaned for white families. Beneatha, the younger sister of Walter aspired for more. She was a twenty-year-old young woman who wanted to remain unmarried and go to school to be a doctor. Beneatha wanted to break the curse of generational poverty in her family and make a difference for generations to come. She demonstrated great confidence, as these aspirations were very high and most unlikely in those days because she was a woman and black. Equal opportunities for education would not be easy for her, yet she was determined to achieve success. The same issue of unequal opportunities/treatment is demonstrated in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, as Martin Luther talks of rampant segregation among the Black Americans. Luther talks of the way segregation statutes give the segregator a sense of superiority and the segregated a sense of inferiority. For example, one example of unequal opportunities is the way segregation laws prevented Negroes from becoming registered voters in Alabama despite being the majority of the population. African Americans were denied the opportunity to make individual choices without restrictions that limited them to achieving their dreams and choosing the leaders of their choice.

Consequently, African Americans were constantly subjected to injustices. For instance, according to the *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther states, "Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation." (King, 1963). In several other instances, Martin Luther discusses the concept of injustice in general and philosophical terms and explicitly establishes criteria to attack segregation subjected to the Black Americans. Martin Luther frames his argument using universal values such as suggesting that the one who tolerates injustice is acting unjustly and that law and morality cannot be two separate elements to make his argument timeless and unimpeachable. In the play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, the author uses imagery, symbols, and allusion to expose the injustice in society. For instance, early in the novel, Lorraine uses symbols to portray an injustice when Mama brings a dying plant, which she says will never see spring, "...Lord, if this little old plant don't get more sun than it's been getting it ain't never going to see spring again (Hansberry, 1988, p. 28). The flower is a symbol of the fading chances that African Americans have in a society where the Whites see them differently. The lack of sunlight symbolizes the absence of hope and their miserable lives. Another way Lorraine portrays the injustices suffered by the African Americans is by using a metaphor to help the readers visualize it. This is demonstrated when Mr. Linder offers to buy the house of the Younger family. On the outside, it may seem like he was helping them but in actual sense, it was because he did not want them near the white community, which was an injustice to segregate against the Black community.

Both authors express the desires that black individuals have dreams and higher aspirations than they have opportunities. They both stand for racial and gender equality for all people. It is because of people like Hansberry and King who spoke out through their literature that people living in America today have equal opportunities and are not discriminated based

upon gender, race, religion, and color. They were not afraid of getting uncomfortable to become comfortable. Dr. King's speech brings up his desire for a better life, not only for him but also for the entire black population experiencing the same challenges and disadvantages. A similar desire is evident in Hansberry's artistic work through the Younger family's experiences. *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Letter from Birmingham Jail* demonstrated how black families empowered themselves and others to fight for their rights to have a better chance of getting out of the "Ghettos" and become part of a higher profitable society led by white supremacy. Through diligent efforts and hard work, blacks are able to overcome their obstacles and achieve the American dream. This was shown in *A Raisin in the Sun* where the children managed to prosper in life from the payout of their father's insurance. They fought for their rights to move into better housing in a white neighborhood. They were also able to have additional money to spend on college education for Beneatha that would positively impact the future of the Younger generations. The integrity of the black American stems from generations that fought against discrimination and objection. Both works of literature displayed the common theme of struggle, integrity, pride, moral values, and the desire for equal justice for all. Dr. Martin Luther King's quote, "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever" (King, 1963) is a good summary for both works of literature.

References

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