

Machiavellian Identity and Reflections of Walter in A Raisin in the Sun

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Abstract:

Walter Lee Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* is a character conspicuously affected by the notion of the American Dream. However, to his disdain, his dictum of the American Dream is erroneous and profoundly infested by a Machiavellian spirit. His notion of ends justifying the means is identified as an underlying limitation to the reach of the American Dream. This paper studies the character of Walter, specifically his consequentialism, which is a philosophy often attributed to Machiavelli. Deductive reasoning is used to reduce an otherwise discursive idea into a laconic and resolute premise. The premise is then put against the actual philosophy of the American Dream to show the differences clearly. Such differences help the reader observe the American Dream through the spectacle of modern society and question the implications of consequentialism for it.

Keywords: American Dream, Machiavelli, Consequentialism, Raisin in the Sun, Society

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was an African-American playwright who lived between 1930 and 1965. She was born into a wealthy family in Chicago, Illinois, and over time developed into a powerful spokesperson for the country's racial underclass. Additionally, she succeeded in becoming the first Afro-American playwright to reach Broadway. She had the opportunity to meet famous people like W.E.B. Du Bois and

Paul Robeson because her father was a Republican. At the tender age of ten, she witnessed a possession case in a neighborhood where everyone was white. Despite winning their legal battle, the Hansberry family still had to contend with a racist neighborhood. In order to further her writing career, she moved to New York after dropping out of college in 1950. By 1957, she had completed the first draft of the book that is now known as *A Raisin in the Sun*. Beginning in 1959, the play was presented at the New York Ethel Barrymore Theatre for 530 performances, setting a record. Her play had the distinction of being the first Broadway production of a play by an African-American playwright with an all-Black cast. She enjoyed her meteoric rise to fame and made use of her reputation among influential Americans to raise her concerns about the struggles faced by the African-American community. Her play is a partially autobiographical depiction of the issues the Younger family encountered among Americans. They are motivated to seek different goals in the ludicrous social, political, and economic praxis of America, where, they think, much is possible with limited resources. The play aims to examine a number of themes, including the American Dream, capitalism, race, society, and, most importantly, desires and dreams. The dreams of the Younger family are shattered by the interpolation and discovery of the truth that the only security that they could enjoy in America is family. This develops a key theme of the play, which draws its inspiration from Langston Hughes' poem *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Moreover, the play's title is derived from this poem.

In the play, Walter Lee Younger is portrayed as the embodiment of the African-American working-class population that aspires to the benefits of the American Dream. He makes hazardous decisions, motivated by his Machiavellian spirit and avarice. At the very onset of the play, it is known that the Younger family has lost the only earning member of their family (Walter's father), and they are awaiting a cheque for ten thousand dollars from his insurance. The play's opening scene explores the family's economic hardship since the family members start imagining the potential uses of the insurance money as soon as they get over the loss of a loved one. After his father's untimely death, Walter Lee Younger deems himself responsible for the well-being of his family, which consists of his mother, Lena; his wife, Ruth; his sister, Beneatha; and his son, Travis. He perceives himself as the family's governor and believes that he is responsible for the choices that must be made in order to ensure the welfare of his family. Lena, who is well aware of Walter's ignorance, maintains composure and makes prudent decisions. She asserts her position as chief of the family and maintains the decorum of her family. Walter is portrayed as dissatisfied with his mother's evasive behavior, as she attempts to use

the insurance money to accomplish his personal goals. With the assistance of a few street-smart pals, Walter envisions investing and multiplying his money in the alcohol industry. He is given \$6,500 with the stipulation that he set aside \$3,000 for his sister's educational expenses. His sister hopes to pursue a lucrative career as a doctor and establish herself in the field. However, before the money is put to any kind of use by the younger members of the Younger family, Lena buys a house to evade living in a ridiculously cramped apartment. The newly purchased house is located in an unfriendly neighborhood, but it is the only asset they are able to maintain. The Younger family then encounters a great deal of difficulty due to their distinct skin color. The majority of the offers they receive for their property aim to drive them out of the neighborhood. Walter, motivated by his Machiavellian nature, invests the remaining sum in the liquor business with his street-smart associates and loses it, thwarting his family's hopes and dreams. Due to this, he is tempted to accept the ostensibly lucrative offers for the sale of their newly purchased home, and his blunder results in a significant conflict. Only at the conclusion of the play does Walter decide to abandon his vile disposition entirely and reject all offers to purchase his family property.

Niccolo Machiavelli's 15th-century political treatise, *The Prince*, was very significant to the development of consequentialism. Although it didn't introduce the term, it definitely popularized it. The term later went on to be disseminated as "utilitarianism" under the able dichotomization of Jeremy Bentham and J. S. Mill. His avarice obscures his sense and intelligence, and he is totally committed to utilitarianism. Walter Lee Younger believes that he will lose his identity as the head of his family if he does not assert his right to spend the money in his own way. Walter is a young and ambitious man who considers the American Dream the only way to find a place in what he considers the true society of America. Early in the play, Walter feels like an imprisoned man, living in a tiny, cluttered apartment with his mother, sister, wife, and son. He feels that, after his father's untimely demise, he is responsible for the prosperity of his family and that he must extend his means in order to achieve success instantly. His yearning for success and wealth is explicitly visible when he offers a dollar to Travis. He is an impersonation of the tussle between moral grounds and unconfined ambition, but to add to it, he has a capacity for whimsical decision-making that gets him and his family into huge trouble. His character is built around dialogues such as "Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs." (Hansberry 1.2), which ascertains his ambitious nature. His ambition is also revealed when he voices his observation of young people at fancy restaurants closing deals. In Act One, Scene Two, he points this out to his mother, "Mama –

sometimes when I'm downtown and I pass them cool-quiet-looking restaurants where them white boys are sitting back and talking 'bout things...sitting there turning deals worth millions of dollars...sometimes I see guys don't look much older than me." (Hansberry 1.2) His ambition is boundless as he grows increasingly captivated by the prospect of unexpectedly acquiring a substantial sum of money. He is unable to contain his ambition and bursts out in greed, "I want so many things that they are driving me kind of crazy". His personality is a strange but interesting combination of a Shakespearean hero who is infested with hamartia and, in the meantime, exhibits the temperament of a typical Angry Young Man. His speech, like his personality and motivations, is intense, but he has "quick nervous movements and erratic speech habits—and always in his voice there is a quality of indictment." (Hansberry 1.2) Walter is an ideal protagonist for a typical domestic tragedy. A typical character who would be slowly tamed by the domineering order of the American dream, but at the same time, he would also emerge as a truly sound and mature gentleman.

His pursuit of money is not limited to the noblest means. He wishes to seek money using the quickest means, regardless of the deficit of uprightness in them. He reveals his doctrine of consequentialism repeatedly in the play, "There ain't no causes – there ain't nothing but taking in this world, and he who takes most is smartest – and it don't make a damn bit of difference how." (Hansberry 3.1) He believes that all of his race are constructed with the natural ability of submitting to the forces of culture and inferiority. As an individual, he feels helpless against the cycle of poverty, complaints, and false hopes. He expresses his frustration vehemently when Ruth inquires why he doesn't stop talking about the liquor store plan, " Why? You want to know why? 'Cause we all tied up in a race of people that don't know how to do nothing but moan, pray and have babies!" (Hansberry 2.2) His spirit of consequentialism is cultivated slowly by vaulting greed and gradually escalating frustration. He erupts like a volcano once he is unable to contain his temper. Like Machiavelli, he deems that moral perspectives are not essential when one has to act in order to achieve something. In relation to this, Tim Parks notes an interesting idea in his translation of *The Prince* at the point when Machiavelli exemplifies Borgia: "Here we approach the subtler scandal of Machiavelli's text: it is not that the author is insisting that Borgia's immoral acts should not be censured, rather that Machiavelli is just not interested in discussing the moral aspect of the question at all..." (54)

Lena's opposition turns out to be a crucial turning point in the narrative because Walter might have lost all of the money due to the unfortunate circumstances that befell him. The Younger family uses the house that Lena invests in as a

representation of their financial well-being. The fact that this house is now their only possession also calls into question their social standing. A lower-middle-class Black family has many difficulties integrating into society because their home is in a predominantly white neighborhood. In a predicament where assessing his impending future is challenging, he neglects fundamental principles and adopts a wholly Machiavellian persona, assuring his family of a prosperous future. Nevertheless, his persona is shaken when Walter and Ruth hear a knock at the door. Walter believes that Willy is at the door with good news about the liquor store plan. After Ruth asks him why he is hesitating to answer the door, he responds, "Cause sometimes it is hard to let the future begin!" (Hansberry 2.3) inadvertently informing the audience about the conflict between his Machiavellian inclinations and his true personality laden with principles. Walter endures the conflict until it is reported to him that his friend, Willy Harris, has absconded with all his money, extinguishing his aspirations for a new life. Upon the destruction of his aspirations, he is incapable of reverting to his authentic self. He becomes a frenzied, loquacious individual who timidly imposes his visions of a prosperous future after his family has relocated from the neighborhood. Nevertheless, his family remains unaffected by his remarks due to the revelation of his recent error in judgment. Left with no options, Walter is forced to resort to his real identity and leave his greedy, Machiavellian identity behind.

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