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Familial differences of women among different generations in *A Raisin in the Sun*

Mama, Ruth, and Beneatha are the three main women characters in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The familial differences of them also contribute to a picture of familial differences of women among different generations in the middle of the 20th century in America. Women tend to be more independent from generation to generation and trying to pursue their own dreams to achieve self-worth instead of being attached to men or family. Lorraine Hansberry frames this change in women identities among different generations are giving individuals the freedom to live according to their own will while tearing apart the family.

Mama and Ruth are typical women from the last generation who put their family first and take the responsibility to support their family or their husband by giving up themselves. Walter complains that Ruth does not support his dream: "That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world ... Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something" (34) and then Ruth tries to convince Mama to invest in Walter's liquor store, "but he needs something-something I can't give him anymore. He needs this chance, Lena." (42) She is expected to support her husband, being his worshippers and build him up when he feels lost. Ruth feels guilty when she cannot offer Walter a chance, but it is not her fault that he cannot realize his dream to move up to an upper class. She feels like it is

her duty to build her husband up to achieve his dream. Similarly, Mama feels guilty when she sees Walter skip work and gets drunk every day because she refuses his investment, then she gives all her left money to him, "I say I been wrong, son. That I been doing to you what the rest of the world been doing to you" (107) Mama gives all she has to her son. It is Mama's money, moreover, it is Mama's husband's insurance money. Mama has the right to decide how to use it, but she feels guilty for she does not support him as usual. She blames herself for not taking good care of her family, but it should not be the responsibility of women alone. Walter feels he is the only victim since Mama does not support him, and protests by not working. Ruth and Mama both have to work in somebody's kitchen to support the family, they also work in service position like Walter, but Ruth insists on going to work even though she was not feeling well, "I got to go in. We need the money." (43) By comparison, Walter's behaviour is more childish, he concerns rather about himself than the whole family. Women from the last generation have more responsibility for the family, while men are able to speak for their own desires. Such double standards make women unable to pursue the life they want but only fall into the inferiority and guilt they should not be supposed to have. As a result, they will give up their dreams and personalities to meet the needs of their family. Mama spends all her money on her children and family, "I spec if it wasn't for you all ... I would just put that money away or give it to the church or something" (69) she gives up what she really wants to do and plan for the family's better future. Besides, when Ruth and Beneatha encourage her to forget about the family and take a trip, she thinks it is ridiculous: "Who'd go with me? What I look like wandering 'round Europe by myself?" (43) Mama does not have any hobbies to kill the time just for her own joys. The family is the most valuable thing for her. Even taking a trip like the rich is meaningless to

her if without the company of her family. Women become good wives and mothers but they lose themselves.

However, Beneatha is a much more independent woman from the new generation. She is able to pursue her own dream instead of being attached to the family or men. She has many hobbies, playing the guitar, playacting, riding a horse to “express” herself (47-48). She has her own personality. Unlike Ruth and Mama, who devote themselves to their families, there are many things she is interested in and enjoys herself in her life. She does not have to please anyone by giving up her interests or intelligence. Moreover, she does not feel guilty when she thinks more about herself rather than the family. Besides, she does not think she has to marry to someone, “I’m going to be a doctor, I’m not worried about who I’m going to marry yet-if I ever get married.” (50) Beneatha does not want to be attached to anybody else. She has her own dream that she wants to put more effort into rather than making the marriage her future career. Thus, she wants to be respected for her intelligent mind and abilities. Beneatha becomes very upset when George says education is useless and Beneatha does need to have an intelligent mind: “You’re a nice-looking girl ... all over. That’s all you need, honey, forget the atmosphere. [...] I want a nice -(Groping) -simple (Thoughtfully) -sophisticated girl ... not a poet - O.K.?” (96) She is not satisfied with being a beautiful decoration of men. Nor will she marry a rich man and stay at home serving for the whole family. There is a bigger dream of her. Most importantly, unlike Mama and Ruth, she is very confident and believes she can be more than just a part of the family but a whole of herself.

Hansberry suggests that individualism is good for women like Bennie so that they are able to live for themselves and achieve their dreams, also, they can stand up and get respect. But

Beneatha may not realize her dream is supported by her family, and her individualism is tearing apart the big family. Women like Mama and Ruth who put their family first are also great people. It is necessary to have such a role to take care of all family members in this stem family. Beneatha thinks she does not owe anyone, "I have never asked anyone around here to do anything for me!" (37) She considers herself as a self-made, independent person. But she is supported by the family, so, the whole family has to lower their living conditions. Being an individualist like Beneatha, she is able to pursue her dreams without any guilt. While for the family, they may think she does not care about the family enough, and she should be more grateful for the sacrifices they made to support her dream. On the contrary, Mama and Ruth are always planning for the family's future rather than living for themselves. It is the love of Beneatha's family to make her dream possible. Mama decides to support her to be a doctor right away. "Some of it got to be put away for Beneatha and her schoolin' -and ain't nothing going to touch that part of it, Nothing." (44) It is Mama's money also the only resource in the family while there are five people with different goals. Even so, Mama is very determined to help her to realize her dream. Again, she does not use it for herself but for the family. Mama feels she has the responsibility of the family not only to take care of all family members but also to protect them including their dreams. However, Beneatha's individualism is breaking down the family Mama works so hard to protect. When Beneatha finds out Walter loses all their money, she feels sorry for herself first, "He made an investment! With a man even Travis wouldn't have trusted with his most worn-out marbles." (132) Walter is also a victim here, losing his dream of a better life for the whole family. Nevertheless, Beneatha thinks it is all Walter's fault that she is not able to continue her dream of becoming a doctor. Moreover, she says: "He's no brother of mine"

(145) when Walter is going to accept Lindner's offer. While Mama is very angry about that and thinks she is too selfish, "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." (145) Beneatha never pities for Walter and feels superior to her brother. It is not that important for her whether the family is together or apart. She just wants to get away from the heavy family responsibilities so that she does not have to give up her rights to support the family. Hansberry makes the family get back together at the end of the story. She suggests that, as a family, they should not only love each other in good times but also understand and protect each other instead of blaming each other in bad times. They should get together and get through the difficulties rather than counting what they can gain or loss in the family.

Women from the last generation like Mama and Ruth, they do give up a lot for the family, but they are also the reason the family cannot be apart. It is they who hold the families together and protect their dreams. Women from the new generation in the middle of 20th-century America like Beneatha are supported by the last generation so that they have a chance to achieve bigger dreams for themselves. At the same time, they are given the opportunity to escape the shackles of family responsibilities and live for themselves. Thus, the change of women identities also leads to a transition from the stem family to the nuclear family. 1653

Work Cited

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun: with an Introduction by Robert Nemiroff*. Vintage Books, 1994.