

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

The term “American Dream” has become a widespread term since the 1930s. The term is connected to people who want to achieve wealth by having a full dedication to their goals – “that is, to raise their standard of living” (Dréan 32). Not to mention that the American Dream also focuses on the perfect American household, such as having a house in the suburbs, a steady job and children. “The phrase ‘going from rags to riches’ became a slogan for the ‘American Dream’” (Dréan 32). Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* are two literary works that in many ways reflect the idea of the American Dream, particularly in terms of material wealth.

Arthur Miller was one of the leading American playwrights in the 20th century. He considered himself as “a ‘social’ playwright, by which he means a playwright concerned with the way people live” (Gottfried xi). He “combined social awareness with a searching concern for his character’s inner lives” (“Arthur Miller”). Arthur Miller received many awards since he won his first award in the University of Michigan, namely, the Avery Hopwood Award for Playwriting. Other awards include Tony Awards and the Pulitzer Prize.

Death of a Salesman was first performed in the Morosco Theatre on the 10th of February 1949, running for 742 performances. The play was a huge success, for it is said that Arthur Miller's writing in the play is "splendid – terse, always in character and always aimed toward the furtherance of his drama" (Chapman 8). Arthur Miller "has looked with compassion into the hearts of some ordinary Americans and quietly transferred their hope and anguish to the theatre" (Atkinson 1). The setting of the play is in the 40's, when "many Americans were very focused on their economy and their personal gain" ("Death of a Salesman – Period 2" 2). The protagonist Willy Loman is an ageing salesman who is trying to earn a better life for himself and his family. He is "an ordinary little commercial traveler who talked bigger than he was and hoped for more than he got" (Chapman 6). However, his ideas are "so absurd and self-contradictory that you have to laugh about them" (Bigby). He always believes that he is well-known while in reality, nobody, except for his own family, comes to his funeral in the end.

Lorraine Hansberry had achieved her awards at a young age. She is said to be "such a phenomenon at the age of twenty-nine, so young, so brilliant, so marvelously articulate, that she cleared a space in American theater for new voices" (Sinnott). Hansberry is the youngest American and the first African-American to win the New York Critics' Circle award.

A Raisin in the Sun was first premiered on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, running for 530 performances. History was made, for *A Raisin in the Sun* is "the first play written by a black woman (a 29-year-old, no less) to ever be produced on Broadway" (Champion 7). The setting of the play is in the 50's, when "many Black families left the South and moved to big cities like Chicago to find better jobs and more opportunities" (Washington 5). The title of the play itself is an excerpt from Langston Hughes'

poem, Harlem, which indicates the uncertainty of whether Walter's dream will be shrivelled up or not. The protagonist, Walter Lee Younger, is a man who thinks that money is the only thing that can give his family a better life. Walter Lee thinks like this because he is the only one who realizes that his family has been living in poverty for too long. He thinks that he has to be involved in a risky business in order to save them from it.

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman believes that he is a successful salesman who is known throughout the city. However, in reality, all that Willy can do is lie to himself and also to other people around him. He "tries to make himself feel better by lying to himself and his family" ("Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman" 3). He cannot accept the reality that he is just an ordinary salesman who does not make much money from his job. Willy is struggling to pay debts that his family needs to pay.

On the other hand, in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter Lee may have a big dream that he aspires to achieve, but he is "totally disgusted with his life" ("Walter Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*" 2). Walter is unsatisfied with two conditions: that he works as a chauffeur and that his family is suffering from poverty. He is the only one in his family who can see that his family is not living a good life and the only one who cares about his family's future. He sees his late father's insurance money as the chance to reach his version of material wealth.

Walter Lee Younger has another reason for chasing his dream of material wealth. He has another dream, which is equality. The fact that he is African-American and he is a chauffeur for white people makes him want to be someone who is equal, in terms of position, with white people. He believes that being rich is the answer to gain equality.

The struggle of the two men in achieving their American Dream is the main focus here. Lower-middle class people have to have dedication in order to fulfill their dream. Their dedication is not only physical, but also mental. They have to get a job that pays well and they have to have the ability to make the best decision for their family. The protagonists reflect those struggles. Willy Loman has to get a better job whereas Walter Lee Younger decides to invest the money to earn more income.

After reading the two plays, I notice that the theme is the most important aspect. Theme itself is defined as “the central idea or ideas explored by a literary work” (Wiehardt). Protagonist is defined as “the main character in a story, novel, drama, or other literary work, the character that the reader or audience empathizes with” (Wiehardt). I believe that the protagonists are the key to reveal the theme of the play. Therefore, I decide to analyze the theme through the portrayal of the protagonist. Also, I decide to use formalism to analyze both plays. Formalism refers to “a style of inquiry that focuses, almost exclusively, on features of the literary text itself.” (“Formalism”) I believe that the theme of both plays can be revealed through the story of the plays itself. Both plays show many points that I need for my analysis.

Statement of the Problems

1. What are the themes of *Death of a Salesman* and *A Raisin in the Sun*?
2. How does the portrayal of the protagonists in these two plays help in revealing the themes?

Purpose of the Study

This study is carried out in order to show the following:

1. The theme of *Death of a Salesman* and *A Raisin in the Sun*.
2. The way the theme is revealed through the portrayal of the protagonists in these two plays.

Method of Research

In writing my thesis, I do some library and online research in order to find some references that are required for my thesis. First, I start by reading the two works, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Second, I decide what topic to analyze. Third, I study some reference books which are relevant to the subject. Fourth, I collect some information from my online research to support my analysis. Finally, I analyze the topic and draw some conclusions.

Organization of the Thesis

The thesis consists of four chapters. Chapter One is the Introduction, which contains the Background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Method of Research and Organization of the Thesis. Chapter Two contains my analysis of the theme in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, whereas Chapter Three contains my analysis of the theme in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Chapter Four contains the conclusion of what has been analyzed in the previous chapters. This thesis ends with the Bibliography and the Appendices, which consist of the summary of the plays and the biography of the authors.