

**IS IT ALL ABOUT MONEY?
WOMEN CHARACTERS AND FAMILY BONDS
IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*
AND TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON***

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Abstract: This paper carries out a far neglected comparative analysis between Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* (1977). By means of a combined feminist and black feminist critical approach we analyze how aspects of gender, race, and wealth shape the two works. As a corollary, we argue that capitalism's wave of materialism is questioned by both women characters who struggle to foster family bonds and keep their cultural heritage alive. Through the characters of Lena and Pilate, Hansberry and Morrison delineate women characters that challenge stereotypes commonly associated with black women and emphasize the complexity of black women's experience.

Keywords: Black women writers. Materialism. Bonds.

**É TUDO UMA QUESTÃO DE DINHEIRO?
PERSONAGENS FEMININAS E LAÇOS DE FAMÍLIA
EM *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* DE LORRAINE HANSBERRY
E *SONG OF SOLOMON* DE TONI MORRISON**

Resumo: Este artigo faz uma análise comparativa da peça teatral *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), de Lorraine Hansberry, e do romance *Song of Solomon* (1977), de Toni Morrison. Por meio de uma abordagem que combina crítica feminista e crítica feminista negra, analisa-se como aspectos de gênero, raça e riqueza modelam as duas obras, o que nos permite argumentar que a onda de materialismo trazida pelo capitalismo é questionada pelas duas personagens femininas que lutam para nutrir laços de família e manter viva a própria herança cultural. Em Lena e Pilate, Hansberry e Morrison delineiam personagens femininas que desafiam os estereótipos associados comumente às mulheres negras e enfatizam a complexidade e riqueza de sua experiência de vida.

Palavras-chave: Escritoras negras. Materialismo. Laços

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Contemporary literary canon should be redefined to include black women's writing. For too long neglected to the margins of mainstream literature, it is important to analyze black women's writing to establish a literary tradition. Toni Morrison and Lorraine Hansberry are two of the greatest voices in African American literature that deserve international scholarly attention. Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) was a playwright, writer, and activist for civil rights in the U.S. Her family was politically active in Chicago defending African Americans' civil rights. Intellectuals such as W.E.B. Dubois and Paul Roberson frequently visited her house and were friends of her family. Hansberry had the creative ability to transpose deep social issues into literary works, which continues to inspire readers today. Toni Morrison (1931-) is a contemporary novelist, editor, and professor. Morrison's literary works depict the everyday struggles of African Americans in both the contemporary and old U.S. Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* and Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* can be compared and contrasted as both literary works depict the different struggles of African American families to succeed and yet resist the dominant culture's wave of materialism. Through a comparative analysis of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Song of Solomon*, we suggest that both works challenge stereotypes commonly associated with women characters that question the paradigms of dominant culture to overcome different boundaries to keep their cultural heritage and unite their family. Although Pilate and Lena are not the main characters in the conventional sense, I argue that they are the gravitational force of the narrative and of the play.

Before the analysis of both works, a brief introduction helps to shed light into the stories. Hansberry was the first African American woman to have a play produced on Broadway. The play entitled *A Raisin in the Sun* was an automatic success. The play highlights the lives of African Americans living in racial segregation in Chicago. The Younger family struggles to thrive in capitalist society without losing their cultural heritage. Lena is a mother who tries to help her two children, Walter and Beneatha, to understand the importance of family bonds and have pride in their heritage. Lena receives a check for 10,000 dollars from her husband's life insurance, and she decides to spend half of the amount on buying a house. Despite the fact that Chicago had segregated neighborhood, she buys a house in a white

neighborhood because it is the best deal she finds. The rest of the money Lena plans to save for Beneatha's education, but after a quarrel with her son Walter, she gives him the money.

In *Song of Solomon*, money and wealth is also an underlying problem throughout the narrative. Macon Dead is the provider for his family and he becomes obsessed with becoming rich at any cost. Macon's sister, Pilate Dead, is the opposite, as she rejects society's adherence to capitalism and wealth. She decides to live an alternative lifestyle. When Macon dies, his son, Milkman, undergoes a journey to find himself and reconnect with his cultural heritage. He is only able to complete his quest with the help of his aunt Pilate.

Carole Boyce Davies argues that black women's writing should be read as "boundary crossings and not as fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally texts bound to any category of writing" (1994, p. 22). In this sense, in order to draw parallels among black women's writing, two genres of literary works, a novel and a play, by different authors and from different time periods are chosen.

Discussing the marginality of minority groups within the dominant culture, Shifra Goldman states that: "The dominant culture persistently considers cultural traits differing from its own to be deficiencies" (1994, p.170). This exclusion of minority groups draws Anglo-American culture as the desired model associated with success. Both literary works here analyzed depict this tension between the models of success in Anglo-American culture and the beliefs of African American culture. The characters struggle to keep their family heritage and achieve success according to the paradigms of dominant culture. The women characters, Pilate and Lena, play a vital role in this struggle, as they are able to fight against assimilation and help their family members reconnect with their cultural heritage.

During an interview with Studs Terkel, Hansberry commented on the issue of black women's struggles to assert their independence:

Obviously the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women, who are twice oppressed. So I should imagine that they react accordingly: as oppression makes people more militant, women become twice militant, because they are twice oppressed. So that there is an assumption of leadership historically. (1959, p. 6)

In this sense, black women become twice as strong in order to survive in a racist and sexist society. Discussing the plight of black women, Toni Cade Bambara argues that black women suffer a double jeopardy as they try to insert themselves in the dominant western white society, because they are oppressed by both racial and gender aspects (1970, p. 8). In the case of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Song of Solomon*, the women characters encounter another factor of exclusion: poverty. The lack of money relegates the women characters even further to the margins of capitalist society.

One goal of this paper is to deconstruct the common stereotypes often associated with black women. Ann E. Imbrie points to the tainted paradigms that confine black women's experience. She states that "binary oppositions such as male/female, good/bad, black/white as well as traditional hierarchies relegate the black woman in particular to the inferior position" (1993, p. 474). This paper moves away from these binary oppositions as the women characters are not defined according to confining paradigms. Pilate and Lena are complex characters that resist any simplistic categorization. Both act accordingly to their experience and social condition. They cannot be judged by biased binaries of good and bad. They are associated with matriarchs, but, at the same time, they challenge such label as they push the men in their families to thrive and assume control of their lives and of their families.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry deconstructs stereotypes associated with African American women and more specific "degree of journeying between patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and women-defined patterns of mothering, in and out of its biological mandates and social constructs" (142). This paper problematizes black mothers to deconstruct tainted paradigms that confine women's experience as mothers. Lena Younger, or mama, is the head of the household. She is strong willed, a hard working, down to earth, and bossy mother. She is also very religious: she constantly thanks God and does not allow her children to take the Lord's name in vain. These traditional images associated with Lena paint her as the stereotypical African American mama who controls the household. The mama label implies that black women oppress black males. When Lena is talking to her son, he aggressively replies: "You the head of this family [...] So you butchered up a dream of mine" who "always talking

‘bout your children’s dream” (HANSBERRY, 1959, p. 2238). Walter is frustrated because he has lost his job and he cannot provide for his family. He lashes out at Lena, blaming her for all his troubles. Lena is shocked at her son’s claims and decides to give him the rest of the insurance money, in an attempt to help him feel empowered. The tainted image of the black mama as inflexible and excessively in control is deconstructed when Lena gives the money to her son.

Lena underscores the stereotype of the black mama during another instance with her daughter Beneatha. She challenges the traditional image associated with the black mama by this time showing her malleable opinion in a conversation with her daughter Beneatha and her friend Asagai. When Beneatha takes her African friend, Asagai, to her house, she begs her mother not to embarrass her with strong-willed opinions. Lena deconstructs her daughter’s stereotyped vision by having an interesting conversation with Asagai. Lena comments:

I think it’s so sad the way our American Negroes don’t know nothing about Africa ‘cept Tarzan and all that. And all that money they pour into these churches when they ought to be helping you people over there drive out them French and Englishmen done taken away your land. *The mother flashes a slightly superior look at her daughter upon completion of the recitation.* (HANSBERRY, 1959, p. 2239).

Lena’s words shock Beneatha, because Lena sets aside her strong Christian perspective to respond with a more politically engaged argument. Lena appropriates Beneatha’s words to talk with Beneatha’s university friend, Asagai. Once again, Lena moves away from the stereotype associated with the black mama as she proves herself to be flexible and able to bend her discourse in any way she desires whenever she sees fit.

Throughout the play, there is also no idealized version of the relationship among African Americans in the U.S. The Murchison family is represented in sharp contrast with the Younger family. The Murchisons are economically wealthier and set themselves aside to a superior position to differentiate themselves from the Youngers. Of the Murchison family, the play focuses on George, Beneatha’s boyfriend. He is the typical college-

educated black male who wears preppy clothes. He completely ignores his African heritage and deeply enjoys America's favorite pass time: going to the movies. George constantly talks down to Walter, whom he sees as "an unsuccessful ignorant black driver" (HANSBERRY, 1959, p. 2217). George's attitude shows that he considers himself superior and different from Walter because of his social and economic status. Beneatha comments on George's behavior to her mother: "the only people in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich colored people" (HANSBERRY, 1959, p. 2217). As with many members of minority groups, George confuses material achievement with the total promise of the American Dream. Black families can succeed economically, but the American Dream is only accessible in its whole for white families.

In *From Folklore to Fiction*, Nigel Thomas explores the role of rituals in African American novels, and he suggests that materialism ruins rituals, which are closely linked to any group's survival (1988, p. 177). As African Americans reject their cultural heritage, it becomes harder to survive in a capitalist and racist society. Margaret Wilkerson discusses the role of wealth in *A Raisin in the Sun* and she argues that "the seductiveness of material values is at issue in the play and the Youngers' struggle for a spiritual and economic future poses fundamental questions about the American dream of success" (HANSBERRY, 1959, p. 445). Walter is seduced by the idea of becoming rich and desiring the money from his father's life insurance to spend on whatever he feels is best. It is not easy for him to stand against the gradual reduction of his material worth, especially since in the capitalist society it is an undeniable fact that economic success is associated with self-fulfillment. As Wilkerson suggests, there is a contradiction between the profitable, economic values of acquisition, power, and status and the "unprofitable" values of integrity, justice, and freedom, which runs deep in the American psyche (1986, p.447). Walter believes that his family is discriminated against because of their economic status, not because of their race. When Walter is given the rest of the insurance money from Lena, he assumes the position of the head of the house. Now as an economically successful man he believes he will live the American Dream. But he makes a bad deal and loses all the money. Walter begins to understand that money comes and goes, but the question of racism is more complex because

African Americans are discriminated independent of other factors. Walter says to his mother: “No – it was always money, Mama. We just didn’t know about it.” (HANSBERRY, 1959, p. 2228). With the help of Lena, he realizes that the question of marginality of minority groups goes far beyond economic means. A household of blacks in a white neighborhood, triggers acts of racism that illustrate the gap in the American dream for whites and blacks. White neighbors attempt to buy the house, and when Lena is tired of fighting, Walter steps in to help and say they will keep the house. After Walter experiences his fall, he comes to realize that he cannot achieve complete self-fulfillment solely through money. He sees that the only way to reach empowerment is through strengthening his family bonds, being proud of and accepting his cultural heritage.

The debate over materialism and integrity is also present in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman’s father, Macon, strives to live the American Dream. He desires to be wealthy and successful at any cost. Macon has several properties that he rents in the black community. As he becomes more and more obsessed with being rich, he does not empathize with the hardships of many members of the community who struggle financially. As an example, Mrs. Bains struggles to support her family, which includes young grandchildren who completely depend on her. When Macon asks her for the rent money, she tries to explain the delicacy of her situation and how much she works to provide for necessities such as food. Macon does not care, because he only worries about the rent money: “Can they make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That’s where they gonna be if you don’t figure out some way to get me my money” (MORRISON, 1977, p. 47). Mrs. Bains does not have the money and Macon forces her to move out. When her grandsons ask her if they have to move, she only answers: “A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible, terrible thing to see.” (MORRISON, 1977, p. 48). Mrs. Bains is shocked that a friend, a member of the community, a black male, has expelled her from her home. Macon has no sympathy for the members of his community because he is blinded by the desire to succeed economically. He associates being rich with living the American Dream. However, the American Dream is not available for minority groups, as issues of race and ethnicity imply an exclusion of total achievement of such dream.

Joyce Middleton emphasizes this relationship between materialism and rituals in *Song of Solomon* and states that: “Morrison’s readers observe how alphabetic literacy, a means to success and power in the external, material, and racist world – as Macon Dead’s family achieves it – alienates these characters from their rituals, their inner spiritual lives, and their oral memories” (1993, p. 65). Macon’s obsession with financial success makes him greedy for money and he rejects his past and cultural heritage. Macon exchanges the oral traditions of his African ancestry for assimilation into print and Anglo-American culture. Joyce Middleton suggests that in *Song of Solomon* memory and intimacy are essential for regaining ancestral knowledge and, therefore, personal wisdom (1993, p. 67). Milkman learns from his aunt, Pilate, how to dismiss the misleading desire for money and to look for his cultural heritage and family’s past to shape a positive subjectivity and find himself.

In *Song of Solomon*, the narrative will center mostly on Milkman’s journey. Morrison’s choice of a male hero does not imply the marginalization of women, especially because Milkman is dependent on the women characters to fulfill his quest. The use of multiple perspectives and narrative voices, including those of women characters, enriches the narrative, as women characters often speak without interference by a male character. Milkman has a female guide, his Aunt Pilate, who is able to balance freedom and connection, which is what Milkman must learn. Even though the central character is Milkman, his aunt is a fascinating and very important character who will actively help him complete his quest.

Pilate’s story, starting from birth, illustrates the complexity of her character. Her mother dies during childbirth, and her father chooses her name. Although he was illiterate, he decides to open the Bible to a random page. From that page he chooses a word that stands out and asks the nurse to read it to him. The name was: Pilate. The name can be associated with death, for the Roman Pontius Pilate presided over the trial of Jesus before the Crucifixion. Another possibility is the association of the term with light, as her father comments that when he saw the word in the Bible, it was illuminated. In a sense, Pilate will become exactly that: a light in Milkman’s journey and a savior for other characters, including Ruth, Milkman’s mother who begged her to help her get pregnant.

When Macon is trying to teach Milkman a lesson about the importance of becoming successful and not falling back into anonymity, he mentions: “If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate” (MORRISON, 1977, p. 54). Pilate is associated with the origins of Africans in the U.S. and anonymity. Unlike Macon, who sees a connection with Africa as a negative characteristic, Pilate is proud of herself and her cultural heritage. Milkman describes the loveliness in Pilate’s voice and its importance to him during their first acquaintance as he listens to her talking from outside of her house. In that moment he says: “Her voice made Milkman think of pebbles. Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other” (MORRISON, 1977, p. 40). Milkman is seduced by her voice. In the same meeting with Milkman, Pilate’s strength is expressed and captures Milkman’s attention. Pilate is able to make a “perfect soft-boiled egg” (MORRISON, 1977, p. 40), which symbolizes female power. Milkman starts to learn from Pilate the importance of the mystery of simply being.

Pilate can be seen as Milkman’s spiritual mother. At the literal level, she is responsible for his birth, because she gives Ruth the aphrodisiac to seduce Macon Dead and makes a voodoo doll to keep Macon from killing his son in Ruth’s womb. In fact, Pilate can be seen as a primal mother as she can be compared to Eve, who is the only other woman in history without a navel. The fact that Pilate was marginalized when she was young, due to her missing navel, made her seclude herself from social circles. Pilate was able to fight against discrimination, think for herself, and redefine her own values: “What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world?” (MORRISON, 1977, p. 149). In this moment of epiphany, Pilate is able to transcend society’s pressure to fit in and create an ideal image for her family to aspire towards. The first person she shows her belly to is her first love, but he is scared by her looks and rejects her. She finds strength to continue her life and comes to an understanding: if men are too scared to love her, that is not her problem; there is nothing she can do about it, so she will not allow this to affect her anymore. Pilate is aware of her existence, and she is determined to search for what she believes is essential for her survival: family and heritage. This allows her to experience freedom of the spirit.

As discussed in *A Raisin in the Sun*, one common stereotype associated with black women is that of the mama, which the character of

Lena deconstructs. In *Song of Solomon*, another stereotype associated with black women is problematized: the careless pariah. Pilate chooses to live a different lifestyle, one that challenges social order based on the dominant culture's principles. Characters often see her as a pariah and as such she is constructed as careless and adrift from society. Throughout the novel, however, it becomes evident that Pilate's lifestyle is not a random revolt, but a cultural stance. She chooses to live according to her beliefs and what she feels is part of her cultural heritage, rejecting the confining paradigms of capitalism. She is Milkman's spiritual guide and mother. She chooses to live in the margins of society because it is where she has more freedom. Pilate is the backbone of the family, always caring about them and supporting each character in different parts of the story. Even on her deathbed she thinks about others: "I wish I'd known more people. I would loved 'em all. If I'd knowed more, I would loved more" (MORRISON, 1977, p. 336). She loves people without judging them according to society's rules about whom one should love; she loves people unconditionally. Despite her choice to live in the margins of society, she does not exclude her family, but on the contrary, she becomes the most present and needed family member. She loves and cares for her family, always showing them how to keep their cultural heritage, in order to survive in a racist, sexist, and classist society.

Discussing the death of Pilate, Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin argue that: "Although it offers an attractive option to the oppressiveness and sterility of conventional models, Pilate's way of life does not represent a lasting option" (1994, p. 73). Pilate's death seems to be inevitable because she challenges society's confining paradigms. She rejects assimilation of the dominant culture's paradigms and refuses to compromise her beliefs and cultural heritage. As proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, women who defy society's roles and transgress boundaries of gender confinements are classified mad, crazy and pariah (1979, p. 77). In the case of Pilate, she has a transgressive behavior that liberates her from society's expectations, but only offers her death, as this kind of lifestyle is not possible for her to maintain. Pilate's concern for humanity and her powers of healing are useless or unused because the community sees her as different, as something to fear. Pilate's behavior represents an alternative possibility of living conditions

that scares people because, as she moves away from the dominant culture's paradigms, she transitions into the unknown.

The clash of cultures is negatively shaped by capitalism's wave of materialism. As Imbrie points out, in *Song of Solomon*, the world is characterized as a diseased place in many different ways, such as how "making money takes precedence over love" (1993, p. 477). In the novel, money has a destructive power that deteriorates human relationships, family bonds, and a sense of community. In *A Raisin in the Sun* money plays a similar role, as it divides the characters and is the object of desire that generates so many different conflicts. Hansberry and Morrison focus on the importance of values, dignity, and love. In order to achieve self-fulfillment and freedom, the acceptance of cultural heritage is vital. This is the case with Milkman and Walter, who need to turn their focus to their family or else "they blindly accept the nationally ordained life plan for success" (ELLIOT, 2007, p. 18). They are tempted to incorporate the dominant society's models of success which sends them in the exact opposite direction of what they have been trying to reach: freedom. After learning from his mother the value of cultural heritage, Walter can overcome his self-destructive behavior and be supportive of his family. Milkman learns, with Pilate, how to look into his past and heritage to find his identity.

Pilate and Lena may act in unconventional ways to preserve their heritage and unite their families. Their actions cannot be simply classified as bad or good because their experience as mothers and as participants in certain social and historical contexts shapes their decisions. Pilate and Lena both have a self-sacrificing love that makes them strong, caring, and determined. Pilate has to die in order for Milkman to truly learn his lesson and finish his quest. Lena has to give up her own dreams in order to give her son the opportunity he has always wanted: to have money and be the head of the household. Lena and Pilate challenge stereotypes associated with black women as the authoritative matriarch, or black mama, and the careless pariah. They worry about their families, even when their actions are unorthodox. In their own ways, they are both a progressive force, courageous spirits that inspire and help their family move forward without forgetting their past.

Although the United States is an ethnically pluralistic society, throughout history, the Anglo-American culture has prevailed as the face of the nation. In this sense, it is important to study and research black women's writing. Many intellectuals, activists, scholars, and writers have worked in different spheres to redefine literary canons to include black women's writing. Lorraine Hansberry and Toni Morrison are among the most influential writers to advocate black women's writing, calling us to rethink and redefine definitions of literary works. Hansberry and Morrison write captivating stories about the past and present, the young and the old, that enrich American literary tradition and black diaspora. Through a comparative analysis of Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, it is argued that both literary works challenge stereotypes associated with black women and illustrate how black women characters defy capitalism's tainted paradigms by claiming their cultural heritage and fostering family bonds. Overall, this paper brings black women's writing into the forefront of literary discussions to rethink and redefine the literary canon.

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