

## **Self-Realization in Modern American Drama: A Comparative Study of A. Miller's *The Crucible* and L. Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun***

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**Abstract:** *This article is an attempt to deconstruct and comment on how the notion of self-realization is represented and embodied in Modern American drama. To do so, we consider two prototypical plays, The Crucible and A Raisin in the Sun, as sample cases. Both plays are tackled from a psychosocial perspective in a bid to reveal how self-realization as a dramatic theme strongly imposes itself as one of the pillars of modern American drama. In both plays, we have remarked that the notion of a psychological journey is a prerequisite for the protagonists' final arrival at a state of full selfhood. The psychological journey in both plays is represented as being that which implies social and inner hardships that are capable of hardening, thereby transforming the main characters into individuals with a satisfactory sense of personal integrity. The surrounding environment in the plays, therefore, provides fertile circumstances that function as "rites of passage" for the protagonists to harden and harness their inner qualities. As such, this analysis goes beyond the instrumental socio-political significance of the plays.*

**Keywords:** *Modern American drama; self-realization; dramatic theme; psychosocial perspective; psychological journey; The Crucible; A Raisin in the Sun.*

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### **I. Introduction**

Both written around the middle of the twentieth century, *The Crucible* and *A Raisin in the Sun* constitute prototypical American Modern plays reflecting the turmoil of the era. Though addressing different areas of society, the two plays join each other in their accurate portrayal of human inner conflicts, aspirations and interaction with the surrounding environment and circumstances. In these two plays, Miller and Hansberry revolutionize our perception of dramatic production by reaching beyond conventional themes as well as by probing deeply the hidden corners of human psyche. Notions like personal integrity, self-evaluation and self-realization are all identifiable in the two plays. In fact, the dominant theme in both plays is the individual's struggle to attain full selfhood, a quality depicted as being attainable only through hard life experiences, and through an uneasy journey of interaction with external nuisances that ultimately leads to coming to terms with oneself.

### **II. The background of the characters**

John Proctor, *The Crucible*'s protagonist, and Walter Younger, the main character in *A Raisin in the Sun*, by undergoing hardships, are used by Miller and Hansberry respectively to embody the quest for personal integrity which the two characters will come to in the end of both plays. Proctor, a character set by the playwright in the seventeenth century, is a common young man who, during witch-hunt events in Salem, stands firm against the unjust trials and ultimately sacrifices his life for the cause and for the protection of his family. Set in a totally different modern context, Walter Younger is also a common young man with high ambition to improve his life and that of his family. While striving for his dream, his life is shaken hard when the money with which he intends to build his life is treacherously taken from him. In both characters' lives, the impetus that triggers their revolt against the surrounding atmosphere, and more importantly against themselves, is a combination of external and inner drives. Thus, it is the determination to preserve one's dignity, to stand against society, against one's own weakness as well as the inevitable role of one's past wrongdoings that prompt the main characters' moral consciousness. It is also the ability of hard, chaotic experiences to awaken the characters' will to evaluate themselves. How all these elements interact to result in self-contentment and personal integrity is the focus of this study.

### III. The initial moral consciousness

While for Walter Younger the source of pride is his status as a black citizen in American society, his ability to secure decent living standards for himself and his family, pride for John Proctor is determined by one's, and one's family's, reputation in society. Through Proctor and Younger the two playwrights celebrate man's search for a rightful position in this world. In Walter Younger's character, rediscovering oneself and finally getting to know one's identity goes through two opposing stages; one where he is still reluctant to identify himself in terms of his sense of belonging and where he still conceives of pride only as financial success; and a final stage where he comes to realize that his pride stems primarily from identifying oneself with one's community and family. As for Proctor, his journey towards identifying his source of pride starts once he is accused of witchcraft and not before. It is once he is in contentment with himself that he sees clearly his source of pride which is his name, his reputation and his respectability.

In the two plays, moral consciousness is an important force which, once awakened, works ceaselessly to energize the characters' quest for personal integrity. Commenting on Miller's conception of the role of moral consciousness, J. Wintle contends that "Miller is a moralist who believes that self-realization can only come through helping others; man is a social and caring animal and must show himself as such in his immediate context, the family unit" (Wintle 531). Indeed, it is this moral awareness of responsibility for close people that motivates the protagonists in both plays. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter Younger's moral consciousness is awakened when he loses a part of the family's money. Shaken by this event, he starts to feel his moral commitment to his family's aspirations. His feeling is also what makes him stand in the end of the play firm against Lindner's offer. At that stage bell hooks (Bell Hooks), in her book *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*, describes him as becoming "a man of integrity who can assume full responsibility for the care and protection of his family" (Hooks 8).

As for Proctor, he is a character whose moral consciousness is prompted under the pressure of the chaotic events taking place around him. Once his wife's life is jeopardized, proctor's sense of responsibility arises and he eventually comes to terms with himself. He soon decides to confess his adultery to save his wife's life. Moreover, he is ready to lay down his life to clear her name and the names of other unjustly accused people. In so doing, Proctor comes to a stage where he is able to evaluate himself justly, to weigh his wrongdoings, and ultimately to achieve his moral integrity. Miller contends in his essay "Tragedy and the Common Man" that it is even one of the causes of tragedy when a man comes to a point where he undergoes a process of just self-evaluation (Miller 5). Elizabeth's last statement in the play: "he [Proctor] has his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him" reveals Proctor's success in attaining full moral integrity. But Proctor's moral awakening is not only self-addressed but also projecting to his community. Pointing out to this, Susan Abbotson states that Proctor's "refusal to go along with the confession indicates his awareness that he has a responsibility to himself and his community" (Abbotson xiii). It is evident, then, that Miller's protagonist, Proctor, is an embodiment of commitment to human inner goodness and to social moral bonds.

### IV. Recognizing the guilty self

Another key element in the process of self-realization as depicted in *The Crucible* and *A Raisin in the Sun* is the role of the sense of guilt in shaping the protagonists' character and ushering them into change and self-correction. Bearing in mind that Miller was strongly influenced by the Greek playwrights and Henrik Ibsen's interest in the effect of past mistakes on the present, we should view Proctor in the light of how his misdeeds influence his conception of himself. Commenting on this, Enoch Brater says that one of the play's main interests is to show how Proctor "transforms his personal guilt into a wider responsibility for others" (Brater 116). Proctor has betrayed his wife and ruined the life of a teenage girl and up to the moment his wife is accused of witchcraft, his sense of guilt has been latent in his mind. It has been difficult for him to confront his wrongdoings until he becomes aware that what took place is partly his fault. During the course of the play he is shown cautious in his conversations with his wife. He even reacts with anger when she shows suspicion of his relationship with Abigail when he tells her "I'll have your suspicion any more" or "You doubt me yet?" (Act II. Scene1.)

Proctor's development, therefore, is a journey from guilt denial to confrontation and confession, a journey from delusion to an elevated state of responsibility. Throughout the play, Proctor is in caught between his deeds and his conception of himself. But passing through the process of self-evaluation ignited by the chaotic state in the town, for which he feels partly responsible, Proctor starts to feel he must pay for his moral sin. This will ultimately lead him to publicly confess his adultery, first to clear his wife's name, and second to regain her vision of him as a good man, which he will get at the end of the play when she allows him to die rather than relinquish his integrity. Going further with torturing himself for his shortcomings, Proctor makes even a false confession of witchcraft and decides to sacrifice himself for the sake of the townspeople. After

succeeding in confronting his guilt, Abbotson says; Proctor “has become his own harshest critic” (Ibid.). Put differently, Proctor’s inner voice of reason and self-criticism has finally come to the surface of his character.

Seen in the same light, Walter Younger is a character whose mistakes, and consequently his feeling of guilt, serve awaken his inner goodness and unleash his quest for personal integrity. Not until Willy Harris runs off with his money that Walter starts to realize his wrongdoings. In the first scenes of the play Walter is portrayed as a character whose ambition and dreams are detached from those of his family, and throughout the play he is even shown as a selfish character who does not have any appreciation to what his family members aspire to. His only interest is to gain control over the insurance money to start his liquor business. At the climax of the play’s events, Walter comes to realize his mistake and eventually proceeds in an act of self-evaluation. It is therefore the sense of guilt that provokes, as we have seen in *The Crucible*, that feeling of responsibility for close people.

By admitting his mistakes, to himself more importantly, Walter becomes able to see beyond his immediate needs. While he has never shown care about his racial identity before he loses the family’s money, Walter’s black pride is awakened once he admits his guilt. Walter’s obsession with money has always made him unable to identify pride in deeper sense. This obsession has made him pride can only be attained with financial success. The total twist in his character is portrayed in his conversation with Karl Lindner near the end of the play. In this tense conversation we feel Walter’s corrected self. By telling Lindner proudly that they are not willing to give up their new house, Walter is redeeming his guilt of being for a long period of time indifferent about his real source of pride. This is clearly noticeable in the play when Walter stresses many times to Lindner that they are “proud people”.

#### **V. Hardship as a requirement for self-realization**

Noteworthy is also the fact the twist in the two protagonists’ character is made by the two playwrights as being energized only by tragic events. In both plays it is tragic impetus that brings about the characters’ moment of truth with themselves. For Miller, tragedy and self-evaluation are interrelated. For him it is through tragedy that we come to understand what is wrong with us and with society around us. Even the title *The Crucible* suggests that it is through undergoing severe testing that people can achieve purification. It is the characters’ reaction to crises that enables them to evaluate themselves and ultimately attain integrity.

For Proctor’s journey towards contentment with himself to be initiated, there has to be an inner turmoil triggered by external pressure. As Abbotson puts it, characters need to “endure intense suffering to emerge as more morally secure and more self-aware individuals” (ibid.). In other words, characters should be placed in a difficult situation wherein they are forced to evaluate themselves. Before being caught in the tragic climax where his wife’s life is at stake, Proctor is not able to confront his wife and society with his misdeeds. Once he has gone through “the crucible”, Proctor becomes able to stand for righteousness not only for himself or his wife but for all the townspeople. It is through the enormous mess and suffering that he has become stronger and wiser as he has never been before. This is no surprise if we know, according to Abbotson, that Miller, through Proctor and those who die with him, “acknowledges the heroism of these victims in order to recognize and celebrate the existence of such personal integrity even in the bleakest of worlds” (ibid.). Personal integrity for Miller is, thus, the outcome of the “furnace”.

Thought far from being tragic in the full sense as *The Crucible* can be seen, *A Raisin in the Sun* also employs the necessity for hard, demanding experiences to achieve self-realization. As the central character in the play, Walter Younger is faced with testing situations where he has to evaluate the outcomes of his actions. The first is when he learns that Willy has run off with the family’s money and the second when he has to decide about Lindner’s tempting proposal. Since the first incident is the hardest, it has forced Walter to reconsider his over-ambition and obsession with money. His reaction in the second situation where he has to face Lindner’s tempting offer, though being loose at the beginning, confirms his success in coming to terms with himself. Put under the embarrassment and feeling of guilt for jeopardizing his family’s dreams, especially that of his sister attending a medicine school, Walter becomes able to break from his obsession with financial success as the only way to dignity, an obsession which, throughout the play, is depicted as a major flaw in his character. On the other hand, he comes to realize that honour is the prime source of pride and dignity.

## VI. Conclusion

Highly reflective of American society as well as of the playwrights' views and concerns, *The Crucible* and *A Raisin in the Sun* probe deep to the heart of human inner conflicts, aspirations and contradictions. Centred on human psychological journey from delusion to consciousness, from innocence to experience, the two plays also depict, through their protagonists, how the human character is, under external intimidation, bound to develop and mature. Through the central characters of their plays, Miller and Hansberry expose also their literary as well as ideological positions. While Miller worked to establish his conception of social tragedy and its imperatives, in addition to instrumental political significance of his play, Hansberry used the play to reflect her political stand towards ethnic affairs in an era of political instability. As such, both playwrights encapsulate their contemporary social and literary inclinations through similar theatrical structure though using different historical settings; *The Crucible* being set in the seventeenth century, while *A Raisin in the Sun* is set in the twentieth century.

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