

# A Comparative Analysis of Dramatic Structure in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and August Wilson's *Fences* (1986)

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## Abstract

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the dramatic structures in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and August Wilson's *Fences*, utilizing Freytag's Pyramid as a framework. Despite differences in scene and act composition, both plays share a similar narrative structure marked by multiple climactic points rather than a single one. Each play presents the lives of African American families in mid-20th century America, grappling with themes of racial oppression, economic hardship, and personal aspirations. Hansberry's work primarily addresses the relationship between African Americans and White society, while Wilson's focuses on intergenerational conflicts within a Black family. Both playwrights weave moments of heightened tension throughout the narratives, surprising audiences with new inciting incidents just as the action seems to be falling. This study reveals that although *Fences* was written nearly 30 years after *A Raisin in the Sun*, the two plays mirror one another in their exploration of socio-economic struggles and racial dynamics. Ultimately, the paper illustrates how both works encapsulate a continuous struggle for dignity and self-actualization within the constraints of a racially discriminatory society.

**Keywords:** Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Fences*, Freytag's Pyramid, dramatic structure, African American drama.

**Suggested citation:** El Bakal, M., & Amesnaou, M. (2024). A Comparative Analysis of Dramatic Structure in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and August Wilson's *Fences* (1986). *European Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(5), 85-88. DOI: 10.59324/ejahss.2024.1(5).05

## Introduction

From the very beginnings of dramatic theory, critics and dramatists have unanimously agreed that every dramatic text revolves around a story. A 'story' can be defined, according to Pfister (1988), as "something that requires the three following ingredients: one or more human or anthropomorphic subjects, a temporal dimension indicating the passing of time and a spatial dimension giving a sense of space" (p. 196). This is not solely a defining characteristic of dramatic texts but every narrative as well. As can be seen, 'story' and 'plot' are quite distinct. A 'story' is a chain of events that follows a chronological order, whereas the 'plot' refers to the same chain of events, but in the order it is communicated in the work.

Gustav Freytag, a 19<sup>th</sup> century German novelist, noticed common patterns in the plots of ancient Greek and Shakespearean dramas, as well as novels, and developed a diagram to analyze them, which is called Freytag's Pyramid. According to the latter, every plot is made up of five parts: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement. In addition to the aforementioned parts, there are two dramatic moments or crises of paramount importance: the agon or the conflict which sparks off action and the resolution which precedes the denouement (Freytag, 1895, pp. 114-115). Freytag's analysis of dramatic structure is based on five-act plays. However, it can be deployed in the analysis of three and four-act



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plays as well, such as Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and August Wilson's *Fences* (1986). The paper at hand aims to apply a comparative study of the dramatic structure in the aforementioned two plays relying on Freytag's Pyramid.

### Analysis of Plot and Structure in *A Raisin in the Sun*

In the exposition the playwright introduces and provides important background information about the setting and the characters ("Analyzing a Story's Plot: Freytag's Pyramid"). In the first two pages of Act I Scene One of *A Raisin in the Sun*, it is Friday morning when Lorraine Hansberry introduces the Youngers: a poor African American family living in Chicago's Southside during the 1950s. She provides a vivid and meticulous description of this family's unfavorable circumstances. They live in a small, old and stuffy apartment furnished with weary furniture, and they share a bathroom with the neighbors, which is a territory to fight for. This apartment, in fact, accommodates two families: Mama Beneatha along with Walter Lee, his wife, Ruth, and their son, Travis. Apparently, the agon in this play is housing.

In the same scene, the Youngers are expecting a ten thousand dollar check from their deceased father's insurance policy. This big check is supposed to make all their deferred dreams come true and change their life forever. Mama wants to buy a house with the insurance money. Walter Lee wants to invest the money in a liquor store with his friends. Beneatha wants to use the money to pay her medical school tuition fees. And Walter's wife, Ruth, shares the same aspiration of Mama.

In scene two, it is the following morning, which is the day the check is supposed to arrive. The Youngers are doing a bit of house cleaning. Beneatha is spraying insecticide into the cracks in the walls. As they do the housework, blues music inappropriately fills the house. Afterwards, Joseph Asagai is introduced offstage in a phone call with the latter. After a quick chat between Beneatha and Mama about Asagai and Africa, Ruth comes back home and discloses to the two ladies that she is pregnant. Straightaway, Mama senses something wrong with Ruth. Actually, she has visited a woman who helps pregnant ladies abort. Ruth is trying to get rid of the baby because it is going to be a burden on the poor family. Walter does not object his wife's decision. Mama does not accept this. This is the first test for her. In fact, this is a climactic point which raises suspense in this scene along with the awaited check.

Later in the same scene, Mama is not happy as the check is finally there. She remembers Big Walter and does not like the fact that all his suffering to make his family happy was summed up in a small piece of paper. Mama is aware of the importance of money, but she believes that money is not everything. Indeed, this is what she has been trying to inculcate into her children. On the contrary, Walter is in high spirits, but his mood changes quickly when his mom tells him that they are not investing the money in the liquor store.

In Act II, Scene One, Mama reveals what she is going to do with the money. She is going to buy a house in Clybourne Park. Walter, of course, is not happy with this. The playwright, at this moment, delays Mama's revelation to Walter that she is not planning to spend all the money on the house. Thus, the tension between the two comes to its height. As a result, Walter quits his job for 3 days. Later on in Scene Two, Mama reveals to Walter that she has divided the money into 3 parts: \$3500 as a down payment for the house, \$3500 for Beneatha's medical school and \$3500 for him, yet she does not tell him to go invest it in the liquor store. As can be seen, Mama wants a compromise with Walter. Therefore, she gives him full control over the part that is going to Beneatha and his.

In Scene Three, everybody is happy, but this is not going to lead to a happy ending. Karl Lindner comes to the Youngers' place with a deal. He tries to make them sell their newly bought house to keep them out of the white dominated Clybourne Park. He takes advantage of Walter and Ruth because they do not understand his elevated jargon. Fortunately, Beneatha is present; she starts to grasp his point. Consequently, they are going to refuse his offer and kick him out of their house. This is the occasion for Walter to assert his manhood since Mama was intentionally made absent by the playwright. After the drastic news that Lindner came with, Willy runs off with the money that Walter secretly invested in the



liquor store, including both his share and Beneatha's. This is the first major climactic point in the play. It gives the reader/spectator the impression that the play has come to a tragic end as we have falling action and moods.

In Act III, the family's gloomy mood is juxtaposed with Asagai's proposal to Beneatha. Is she going to give up on her dreams and her family at such a hard time and go with Asagai to Nigeria? Indeed, she is going to stay with her family, but she is not going to turn him down. This moment serves as a climactic test for Beneatha, preventing the play from reaching a dead end. Meanwhile, Mama pulls herself together and restores her hopes and dreams. She has come to a resolution; she decides to stay at home. The doubtful Walter is contemplating about life. He is in a state of recognition too. However, he decides to call Lindner back and strike a deal with him. Mama does not agree with the idea of taking money from Lindner, which means that they are not really fit to live in Clybourne Park. She thinks that would take away his humanity and pride. Beneatha tells him that he is not her brother anymore.

Action intensifies before the climax. A truck pulled up to take the Youngers' stuff to their new house at Clybourne Park. Mama is supposed to ask them to leave since she has decided to stay home. Lindner comes in too. Suspense is at its height. Walter stands in front of his son as he talks to Lindner. This surely puts much pressure on him. This is the face-to-face scene. This is the occasion for Walter to assert his manhood and make up for the wrongs he has done to his family. He turns Lindner down, stating that they are a proud family and have no intention of causing trouble with anyone at Clybourne Park. With Walter's heroic decision the play comes to a denouement. In the end, the plant, which symbolizes the Youngers' dreams and the broader African American dream, reminds the reader or spectator of the play's opening scene and the metaphor of 'a raisin in the sun', bringing the play to a full circle.

### Analysis of Plot and Structure in *Fences*

Concerning August Wilson's *Fences*, it is an unconventional play. It consists of two acts with four and five scenes, respectively. In the opening scene, Wilson puts us in the life of Troy Maxon, a 53-year-old hardworking black man. Troy has issues with his employers. He aspires to a promotion; he wants to become the first colored garbage truck driver. He is introduced along with his friend Bono; they work as garbage collectors. The first scene is set in 1957, on a Friday night in the Maxons' household's yard. Unlike Lorraine Hansberry, Wilson does not provide us with the exact location where the events of the play take place. Important to realize, both *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Fences* opening scenes are set on Friday which is payday. It refers to weekly payment which means that one has a mean job, reflecting their low socio-economic status. In the same scene, the audience meets Rose, Troy's dedicated wife, and Lyons, his son from another marriage. Nevertheless, Troy is a womanizer. He is actually cheating on Rose.

*Fences* primarily explores the volatile relationship between father and son, rather than focusing on the dynamics between African Americans and Whites. In Scene Three, Cory, Troy's son with Rose, is introduced. Cory hopes to attend college on a football scholarship, but Troy stands in the way of his dream. The latter believes his son will face the same mistreatment and discrimination from Whites that he experienced during his baseball career. As a result, he discourages Cory from pursuing sports altogether. This becomes the inciting incident that triggers the central conflict of the play.

The relationship between Troy and Cory will get complicated when the former goes to his son's coach and tells him that Cory cannot play football anymore. Moreover, he asks the coach to tell the recruiter to not come for Cory. Now that the recruiter is not coming for him, his only chance to go to college is gone. He is mad at his father. Cory explains his dad's deed as follows: "Just cause you didn't have a chance! You just scared I'm gonna be better than you, that's all" (*Fences* act I, scene IV).

Events escalate throughout act II. Troy discloses his affair with Alberta to Rose after the former becomes pregnant. Rose is deeply upset by her husband's betrayal after 18 years of marriage. After a very intense argument between them, Cory intervenes and knocks Troy down, who then stands up and beats him up. This is a climactic point in *Fences*. Six months later, Alberta dies giving birth to Raynell. Troy asks Rose



to raise the newly born girl; she does not turn him down because the baby is innocent and has nothing to do with their marital problems. However, she tells him that from now on he is a “womanless man” (*Fences* act II, scene III). As a result of these mishaps, Troy and Cory fight once again, but this time Troy kicks Cory out of the house. This is the play’s second major climax after which there will be falling action.

In the final scene, Cory returns home after six years in the Marines, on the day of Troy’s funeral. Cory tells his mother he does not plan to attend the funeral, which upsets Rose. She tries to convince him that disrespecting his father will not make him a man. Suspense builds once again. The play reaches its resolution (denouement) when Cory and Raynell sing Troy’s song about his dog, Blue, as they prepare to attend the funeral. The play concludes with Gabriel, Troy’s brother, performing a ritualistic dance to signal St. Peter to open the gates of heaven “as wide as God’s closet” for Troy (*Fences*, Act II, Scene V).

## Conclusion

In the final analysis, it becomes evident that August Wilson, while influenced by similar themes, deployed the narrative and structural elements used by Lorraine Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun* in a different way. While the two plays differ in the composition of acts and scenes, they share a similar dramatic architecture, as both are built around multiple climactic points rather than relying on a single climax. Each time the audience expects a resolution, new inciting incidents re-energize the plot, creating a dynamic and suspenseful progression. This shared structural technique keeps the audience engaged and highlights the cyclical nature of the struggles faced by both families in the plays.

Though *Fences* was written nearly three decades after *A Raisin in the Sun*, both plays are set in the same socio-historical period, reflecting the persistence of racial and economic struggles faced by African Americans in mid-20th century America. However, while Hansberry focuses on the external racial dynamics between African Americans and White society, Wilson emphasizes the internal familial conflicts, particularly the tension between generations. Both plays explore the complexities of the African American experience, but through distinct lenses: Hansberry examines aspirations tied to integration and upward mobility, while Wilson delves into the disillusionment and burdens passed down from one generation to the next.

Ultimately, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Fences* stand as powerful explorations of race, identity, and socio-economic status. Despite their differences in focus, both plays underscore the resilience and dignity of their characters in the face of systemic challenges. They also reveal the enduring nature of these struggles, as the conflicts between personal ambition, racial identity, and societal limitations recur in the lives of their protagonists. This comparative study highlights not only the evolution of African American drama but also the deep thematic continuity that resonates across these works.

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