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Slapping the Fresh Mouth: Dissecting Discipline

in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*

The role of physical discipline as a child-rearing tool in American culture has undergone an ebb and flow of controversy since the days of the schoolhouse hickory switch. In contrast to liberal maxims about child abuse and the effectiveness of the “time out,” pro-discipline elements of our society have adopted “spare the rod and spoil the child” as a tried-and-true mantra. Needless to say, this disciplinary argument nearly always revolves around children and adolescents, since rarely do adults receive corporeal punishment from their parents. In her 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun*, however, Lorraine Hansberry presents an exception to this general rule when the matriarchal Lena strikes her grown children on two separate occasions, each for a radically different reason. Foremost, Lena slaps her collegiate daughter Beneatha for blasphemy during a heated argument about the existence of God. Lena’s second disciplinary measure befalls Walter, her eldest child, who endures repeated blows after he squanders the family fortune on a bad business deal. Both instances occur very near the end of their respective scenes as climactic displays of force, and both call for explanation in a play ultimately devoted to reinforcing the loving bonds—rather than the violent rifts—that characterize the Younger family. Lena’s dramatic beatings of her adult children raise important questions not only about physical punishment within the nuclear family, but also about race, violence, and familial structure at the outset of the civil rights movement that would transform American culture during the 1960s.

On the one hand, Lena’s forceful discipline of her grown children suggests the frustrating pressures of parenting within a marginalized social group. These burdensome responsibilities, which lead Lena to outbursts of physical violence, seem especially acute given her status as a recent widow. With the death of her husband, Lena stands alone. She remains the sole survivor of a generation that endured incredible hardships under racism—painful adversities second only to the dehumanization of slavery itself. Lena bears the enormous weight of ensuring that her children continue the struggle against racial oppression in Jim Crow America, and this burden may be part of the reason that the play depicts her striking Beneatha and Walter for their philosophical backtalk and botched entrepreneurship. In effect, these scenes show an aging mother desperate to slap sense *into*, not *out of*, her grown kids, to alert them forcefully to their heritage within a system of racial violence.

In addition, Lena’s display of parental force signals the frantic uneasiness of the share-cropper generation towards the mounting waves of cultural and civil change in the post-WWII era. Beneatha exemplifies this generational strain between herself and her mother in her constant call for critical reasoning. For a young, empowered thinker like Beneatha, intelligence remains the chief virtue, replacing old notions of piety and righteousness. “It’s all a matter of ideas,” declares Beneatha, “and God is just one idea I don’t accept” (51). From a position of social bondage—one to which Lena and others like her have grown accustomed—the notion that “ideas” can trump traditional “absolutes” such as the presence of God simply does not register. Indeed, after striking Beneatha, Lena says of her children: There’s something come down between me and them that don’t let us understand each other and I don’t know what it is. One done almost lost his mind thinking ’bout money all the time and the other done commence to talk about things I can’t seem to understand in no form or fashion. (52)

Through her generational lens, Lena cannot fathom the changes that inform her children’s lives and decisions, and these shifts trouble Lena to the point of aggression. In her time, God proved an immovable source of stability in the lives of oppressed African- Americans. In addition, Lena’s era offered little financial mobility. For this reason, the very prospect of Walter’s business proposal seems alien to Lena, and the generational lack of understanding fuels her torrent of slaps.

Despite the difficulties of commanding the house alone and comprehending the social changes unfolding around her, Lena nonetheless places herself as head of this family. Thus when she strikes Beneatha, her strength and resilience become amplified, not only by the slap itself but also by her stern repetition, “In my mother’s house there is still God” (51). While the relevance and centrality of religion in people’s lives fluctuates throughout history, Lena’s stressing of God’s existence through violence and verbal repetition helps to cement the foundation of the family through its essential religious bond. Such latent significances find resonance, too, in the way in which Hansberry herself promoted strong familial ties rooted, it seems, in stern mothering. In a radio interview, Hansberry affirmed the importance of familial structure: “we might well long for the day when knowledge of the debt all society owes to organized womanhood in bringing the human race closer together, not pushing it farther apart, will still laughter in the throat of the uninformed” (qtd. in Carter 160). When situated alongside these comments, Lena appears to embody Hansberry’s “organized womanhood.” Her torrent of smacks at Walter further solidifies the place of the powerful matriarch, since shortly thereafter Lena’s son experiences a coming of age against the shady Lindner character. When Walter tells Lindner of their proud and hard-working legacy, the stage directions imply a deep satisfaction in Lena: “Mama has her eyes closed and is rocking back and forth as though she were in church, nodding the Amen yes” (148). In this moment, the text reinforces the notion that Lena’s discipline has paid off. Indeed, Lena yields her aggressive stance only when Walter undergoes his ascension to family head. In response to Lindner’s plea to curb her son’s obstinacy, for example, Lena retorts, “I am afraid you don’t understand. My son says we was going to move and there ain’t nothing left for me to say” (148-49). With Walter’s finally assuming the position of father figure, Lena has brought the family together with her “organized womanhood” and may now rest.

Lena’s violent behavior against her adult children may also function as a metaphor for the frustrated energy of African- American women in their struggle for civil equality. In the same interview cited above, Hansberry notes, “obviously the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women, and when they are twice oppressed often they will become twice militant.” The use of the word “militant” carries revolutionary overtones and signals a call to arms for the cause of civil liberty. Through her display of maternal discipline, Lena becomes both the embodiment of Hansberry’s call to action and the representative of a “twice oppressed,” “twice militant” woman. The play uses Lena’s open palm, in other words, to cast the African-American woman as a formidable force, demanding long overdue respect and unconditional equality. Lena’s outbursts, then, behave as a microcosm of a larger social context traditionally relegating black women to silent resignation in their marginal status. Through Lena the powerful mother, Hansberry dramatizes the hope that African- American women might emerge from the margins, with “militant” energies if necessary, to direct those of the younger generations in need of guidance.

In the figure of Lena, who lashes out momentarily with acts of parental policing, the play additionally raises complex questions about free will and its containment. If Hansberry’s drama explores themes of freedom from oppression and violence, then why does it show Lena aggressively monitoring the free choices of her intellectual daughter and her entrepreneurial son? Beneatha’s view of reality involves the fluidity of individual ideas, and yet Lena quashes her in this regard, asserting, “There are some ideas we ain’t going to have in this house” (51). Lena’s opinion of Beneatha’s plans to become a doctor also conveys an aura of condescension and oppressive doubt. When Beneatha first discusses her choice of profession, Lena retorts, “Course you going to be a doctor, honey, God willing” (50). This condescending tone implies a paradoxical tendency in Lena to restrict freedom and contain choice. Similarly, Lena judges her son Walter by contrasting him with big Walter—a rather problematic idea of the perfect man. On several occasions, she criticizes her son by shorting him in comparison to his father, as when she declares, “I’m waiting to hear how you be your father’s son. Be the man he was” (75). By judging Walter and suggesting his inability to make informed choices about his own future, Lena seems to repeat the restrictive actions that have historically characterized white relations with African-Americans. Cleverly, Hansberry appears to stage Lena’s aggressive acts of containment in order to pose the question: How can the African-American community attain civil justice if they do not reject the trends of their oppressors?

Despite such complex themes of power and punishment, choice and containment, Lena’s beatings also point toward a plainly painful cause: futility. The play carefully sidesteps, for example, the notion that the physical reprimand of Beneatha in any way changes her mind or, even less likely, reaffirms the existence of God in her. The punishment—and indeed embarrassment—of Lena’s daughter, in fact, might merely reinforce her sense of the oppressive nature of religion, and thus push Beneatha further away. And while Walter appears to mature following his mother’s discipline, he nonetheless squanders the family fortune. The prospect of a new home may seem like a felicitous resolution to the Youngers’ problems, but Walter’s blunder ensures that the dream of a comfortable life promised by the life-insurance money will not materialize any time soon. Moreover, Walter’s decision to inform Lindner of the family’s desire to move does not seem wholly motivated by his mother’s reprimand. Since the text showcases a rather impetuous streak in Walter throughout, this ultimate decision to stand firm in the face of Lindner’s veiled threats and racist rhetoric might represent nothing more than Walter’s continued spontaneity. Arguably, in fact, Walter may not have changed at all. He may have simply opted to perform maturity for his mother and, hence, soften her disdain for his wrongdoings. With this possibility in mind, the violent actions of Lena become fruitless, failing to elicit their desired effects. If such a critique of violence inhabits Hansberry’s play, then the drama fits perfectly into the canon of non-violent civil rights rhetoric, which suggests that cultural progress may only occur through diplomacy, understanding, and peaceful demonstration.

Lena’s choice to discipline her grown children speaks to the difficult challenges surrounding African-American culture as it vied for a renewed position and an important voice within post-WWII society. Thus, the powerful, climactic acts of familial violence in the play gesture not simply at maternal anxieties and generational strife among the Younger family itself, but also toward larger issues of racial solidarity under enduring oppression, and toward the promise of a non-violent civil rights movement. Most importantly, however, the sheer complexity and multiplicity of meaning within these two disciplinary instances serve to explode any racist assumptions regarding a “primitive” African-American culture. For Hansberry, it seems, such issues of culture and literary achievement are not just black and white.

Works Cited

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