

Construct of Racial Cultural Identity in Dramatic “Reversal”

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Abstract: Aristotle expounds in his Poetics the function of “reversal” in producing twists and turns of drama plot. The expounding is however confined to its formal function. In the tragicomedy “A Raisin in the Sun”, the playwright Lorraine Hansberry breaks through the confinement and employs creatively “reversal” as a link to connect the “explicit” plot with the “implicit” cultural context. Hansberry uses the main characters’ reversal of fate in the explicit plot to bring forth the value narrative in the implicit cultural context. Reversal urges the characters to forsake the values of white oppressors and to reclaim the root of African American culture so that they are on the right track to construct their racial cultural identity.

Keywords: Reversal; “explicit” plot; “implicit” cultural context; value narrative; construct of racial cultural identity

“A Raisin in the Sun” is considered to be the first naturalistic and realistic depiction of black characters and their struggles. Lorraine Hansberry adopts an objective tone throughout the work, describing a black American family whose members struggle to find their cultural identity and realize their dreams. Set in 1950’s America, the play reflects the racial conflict between black and white. In this context, the Youngers confront the adversity, and try hard to find and construct their own racial cultural identity.

Throughout the whole work, there are two plots in the form of shock waves. The first shock wave is the “explicit” plot clue of the whole play, which indicates the characters’ situation. The other is an “implicit” plot clue, which goes hand in hand with the “explicit” one and takes on a completely opposite trajectory. The implicit plot is the core of the play. It represents a change in the cohesion of the Youngers. This cohesion is held together by black family traditions and black racial and cultural identity. It peaks at the death of the father. With the settlement of death benefit later, family members begin to part ways. The cohesion falls to the lowest point. When the Youngers closely unite to resolutely face adversity and take their first step to struggle in the end, the strength of the family is at its highest. The family members have also got the answer to the question: “who are we?”. The whole drama then reaches the climax.

1. Plot Arrangement of the Play

According to the drama theory, “A Raisin in the Sun” (hereinafter referred to as “A Raisin”) combines the characteristics of tragedy and comedy. The main characters of the play are ordinary and humble. However, facing social pressure, failure, suffering and even death, they all show the courage of resistance, which is the uncompromising spirit of tragedy. In addition, “A Raisin” also contains comedy effect. The heroes of the play struggle with their fate, and have the possibility to overcome it, which is the characteristic of tragicomedy.

In his great book Poetics, Aristotle summarizes the characteristics of tragedy. In his opinion, “tragedy is an imitation of an action.”[1] Through the action, the work presents a series of tragic events and then presents the tragic effect. The tragic effect means that the tragedy can make the

audience appreciate the vicissitudes of life, produce pity for the fate of the hero in the play and fear that they will suffer the same fate, so that the emotion can be cathartic. He also believes that the plot is the imitation of the character’s action, which is actually the arrangement of a series of events that the tragic character experiences. In tragedy, the tragic effect is presented through the plot. The plot of a good tragedy must be complex. According to Aristotle, a complex plot is one in which the change of the tragic hero’s fate involves either reversal or discovery or both.[2] Reversal is an indispensable element for a tragicomedy as well. It generally takes on a “interlace of sadness and joy”. [3]

The first explicit plot clue of “A Raisin”, that is, the situation of the characters in the play, reveals the tragic fate of the protagonist through the technique of reversal of the plot arrangement. Lorraine Hansberry creatively applies “reversal” to lead from the first “explicit” plot clue to the second “implicit” cultural context, the change in the cohesion of the Youngers. This change is exactly the process of awakening and constructing the racial and cultural identity of the family.

2. “Reversal” and Its Function in the Play

Aristotle discusses the definition of “reversal” in his Poetics. In his view, “a reversal is a change to the opposite in the actions being performed.”[4] As mentioned above, plot is the imitation of the character’s actions and an arrangement of events. Therefore, “reversal” is a sudden turn of the character’s circumstances, especially a change from good to bad, presented by actions and arrangement of events in plot.

As for the function of “reversal”, Aristotle does not discuss it systematically in Poetics, but only uses it to highlight the suffering of the protagonist. Generally speaking, “reversal” is mainly used to create the twists and turns of the plot and produce dramatic effect. This is the function of “reversal” in terms of form and structure. In the “reversals” of “A Raisin”, the protagonists experience rollercoaster-like effects, and let the audience feel that “people are always fooled by the god of destiny”.

In terms of the first plot clue, the Youngers experienced two great reversals. The first one came when the family was devastated by the sudden death of their father. This is also the first trough of the shock wave. The second reversal occurred

in the second trough of the shock wave and consists of two small reversals superimposed together. The family, who had just recovered from the grief of their father's death, received a generous life insurance payout. The family began to regain hope, but two successive small reversals shattered their dreams. The first one is that the eldest son Walter secretly invested with part of his father's death benefit, but finally lost every penny. The money was to pay for the youngest daughter, Beneatha, to attend medical school. However, misfortunes never come singly, and a second reversal almost followed. The mother, Lena, had considered using some of the money to buy an apartment in a better neighborhood so the family could move out of Chicago's slums. Everything was ready, and they were prepared to move. But the white community refused to let the black family in. Carl Lindner, a representative of the community, came to show his hand, promising to pay the Youngers three times the price of the house if they did not move. At this point, the family's hope for the good was mercilessly trampled by racism. The Youngers' fortunes followed suit, and then hit rock bottom.

In comparison to the first plot clue, the second one is hidden under the surface. It is the trajectory of the Youngers' family cohesion, based on their black cultural identity. The author uses the explicit plot clue, which is marked by two great reversals, to introduce the implicit plot clue with the theme of African-American racial cultural identity. It is reflected in the fact that although the Youngers were treated unfairly, they still found the basis of the black family's foothold in American society, which is the racial and cultural identity of African Americans. Identification is "constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation." [5] This identification process is arduous. As Stuart Hall puts it, identification is "a construction, a process never completed - always 'in process' "[6]

As black people, the Youngers' racial and cultural identity is their weapon in their struggle against the reversal of fortune. The reversal in the play is a catalyst. Although it is the source of the family's suffering, it is also a formal technique of reversal to "express and deepen the theme and ideological connotation of the play". [7] In "A Raisin", the reversal transcends the formal function of creating the tragic fate of the protagonist. Moreover, it is also a key means for the author to express the importance of the construction of black cultural identity in the face of adversity.

3. Text Analysis

The story takes place in the 1950s. The Youngers live in a slum on the south side of Chicago. They, like many other black families, did not enjoy the benefits of the postwar boom. Although segregation had been legally abolished, black people still suffered from white people's exclusion and discrimination under the pretext of "separation but equality". While affluent white families were fleeing the cities (white flight) [8], many blacks remained trapped in cramped, crowded, run-down slums, struggling for a meager living.

At the beginning of the play, the first reversal in the "explicit" plot clue occurs. The sudden death of his father is a major blow to the family. "Money" becomes the most sensitive topic in the family. Especially for black families, when money is gone, everything is gone. At their wit's end, the family received a handsome sum of money from their father's life insurance. This sum of money improved their lot. The

trajectory of the first plot begins to rise and then reaches its climax. At this point, everyone in the family began to regain confidence. But the truth is that the family members had their own agendas around money. The youngest, Beneatha, wanted to use the money to finish college and eventually become a doctor and live a prosperous life. The elder son, Walter, wanted to use money to invest in his business, and to support his family. Although mother Lena did not make a clear commitment, but she wanted to use part of the money to buy an apartment as a down payment, and let the family move out of the slum. Money helps solve the emergency, but it also makes the family fall apart. Family members' argument on money reflects the weakening cohesion of the family. This is also the development trajectory of the "implicit" plot clue in this process. More importantly, it reflects the conflict between family members' different values. Some of these values are the cause of the weakening of family cohesion, but also the root cause of the confusion in the construction of family identity. They are the ones that the author wants to get rid of through this play.

Beneatha is taken good care of by the family. The family has been working hard to afford her schooling. Beneatha, who seemed to have grown accustomed to such affection, was not impressed. After learning about the compensation, she and Walter broke out in an argument. Here's the conversation:

Walter: You know the check is coming tomorrow.

Beneatha: That money belongs to Mama, Walter, and it's for her to decide how she wants to use it. ...

Walter: Now ain't that fine! You just got you mother's interest at heart, ain't you, girl? You such a nice girl—but if Mama got that money she can always take a few thousand and help you through school too—can't she?

Beneatha: I have never asked anyone around here to do anything for me!

Walter: No! And the line between asking and just accepting when the time comes is big and wide—ain't it! [9]

Beneatha has always prided herself on being an educated and independent woman. She has a dismissive attitude toward the traditional black woman who hovers around the pot all day. Deep down, she seems more attuned to the values of the white middle class, the idea that if you work hard, you can earn a decent living. For this, she can sacrifice the affection between the family members.

Beneatha is not the only one affected by the compensation. Walter also clashes with his family, especially his mother, over the money. As the only adult male in the family after his father's death, Walter becomes the pillar. However, there is always an insurmountable gap between the beautiful ideal and the cruel reality. Walter thinks he can barely support his family on his small income. He feels very desperate and even afraid that his wife would run away with someone else. Walter is talking to his mother about his job in the following:

A job. Mama, a job? I open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say, "Yes, sir; no, sir; very good, sir; shall I take the drive, sir?" Mama, that ain't no kind of job ... that ain't nothing at all. [10]

Walter knows very well that it is impossible for a black man to get ahead in such an environment. One reason is that they are rejected by the white majority. The other is that they have no money and have to live from hand to mouth with money in their pockets.

Speaking to his son Travis about the life he hopes to lead, Walter goes:

Rich people don't have to be flashy ... though I'll have get something little sportier for Ruth—maybe a Cadillac convertible to do her shopping in ... And I'll come up the steps to the house and the gardener will be clipping away at the hedges and he'll say, "Good evening, Mr. Younger." And I'll say, "Hello, Jefferson, how are you this morning?" ... and we'll go up to your room to see you sitting on the floor with the catalogues of all the great schools in America around you ... Just tell me where you want to go to school and you'll go. Just tell me, what it is you want to be—and you'll be it.[11]

In this passage, Walter expresses his longing for the white middle class life. The imagination of all this is a desire for wealth. In Walter's view, only wealth can turn a family around.

Then, when Walter learned that the family could get his father's life insurance, he and his mother broke out a fierce conflict. Mother totally disagreed with Walter's plan to invest in liquor stores. For Walter, money is life.

At this point, the "explicit" plot clue and the "implicit" one develop in opposite directions. The former, because of the compensation money, turns the family's situation from despair to hope. On the other hand, the money threatens to tear the family apart, and the cohesion of the family plummets to near zero.

At the same time, a second reversal occurs in the "explicit" line, including two small ones. The first is that Walter's investment failed, and the second is that the idea of moving met with hostile rejection from the white, racist residents of the community. Hopes of a better life for the family were dealt a blow. The desire for money and a mainstream white lifestyle has not prevented them from falling from their previous peaks to their lows. When money is gone, the family is no longer united.

Thus, the money brought by the first reversal does not save the family. The author uses reversal as a formal technique to present the first theme in the "implicit" line. That is that the black family tradition can play a great role in coping with adversity. And the family is an indispensable element of the black American racial and cultural identity.

In that money was swindled out, the family became nearly devastated. At this time, it was the mother who persuaded the family to have courage. In the end, the mother bravely made the decision not to give in to the evil forces and insisted on moving out of the slum. This is because mother always believes that the family is all they have for them to survive in American society. "The love of the family that has been passed down for generations among African Americans has been a powerful force"[12]. This has enabled them to fight adversity and racism.

The author further answers the question of what it means to be an African American with another theme, which is introduced by reversals as well. Values of the family members parted ways under the first reversal. Conflicts ensued. As mentioned earlier, Beneatha and Walter both strongly believe that money is everything. They strongly identify themselves with the materialism and consumerism that pervades mainstream society. The mother believes that family, faith and freedom are always more important to blacks. As shown later, mother's values are proved correct.

The second reversal brings home to the Youngers that blacks could not have freedom even if they had money. In the process of the second reversal, apart from the mother, there is another character who plays a key role in the construct of the racial cultural identity of the family. He is Asagai. Asagai helped the Youngers, especially Beneatha, see the confusion and error of their values.

Asagai is a student from Nigeria. He is Beneatha's classmate. The man is proud of his African identity. He criticized Beneatha, a black American who claimed to reject assimilationism. "Assimilationism is so popular in your country,"[13] he told Beneatha. As LeRoy Jones argues, the so-called "assimilationism" refers to the blacks (especially the middle-class blacks) who desire "not only to disappear within the confines of a completely white America but to erase forever any aspect of a black America that had ever existed." [14] And the "assimilationism" can directly leads to the confusion in the construct of black identity.

After the second reversal, the Youngers became almost despondent. At this point, Asagai pointed out that Beneatha's self-proclaimed "independence" is false. Beneatha and her family only built their future on money and the mainstream lifestyle. Besides, Asagai also offered another choice. He believes that black Americans should return to their African roots.

By this time Beneatha was awake. She was the assimilationist she despised. She concludes that assimilationist is "someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case oppressive culture!" [15] Therefore, she immediately broke up with her black boyfriend, George Murchison. This man cherishes the values and lifestyle of the white majority and reduces the splendid civilization of his African ancestors to "some grass huts" [16]. Beneatha realizes that she is not white, but a black woman from a black family. Beneatha also rejected Asagai's offer to return to Africa. She thinks the idea of returning African Americans to Africa is too "idealist" [17]. Africa for African Americans is no longer an option but a cultural legacy. For they have become too intertwined with the soil where they now live.

Two reversals led to the Youngers' epiphany. In the first one, they forgot who they were, which led to the subsequent tribulations. In the second one, they began to wonder who they really are. Now, they have a clearer understanding of these questions. Through reversals, the author creates a tragic effect, and presents the family's separation and unity, and introduces the value narrative. The value narrative records the process of family identity construction. First, wholesale acceptance of white values and lifestyles is not feasible because they are not white. Second, blacks cannot return to Africa. Separatist values are not viable, because they are not African. At the end of the drama, they are determined to move into the unfriendly white neighborhood. It seems to send a message to the readers that the Youngers have rejected material compensation as much as they have rejected the values and lifestyles imposed on them by whites. Their racial and cultural identity is not provided by others, but is defined by them. The dual identities of Americans and blacks are indispensable for them. The "American dream" promoted by the white society represented by Lindner is "based on abolishing the racial individuality of black people and completely assimilating black people to the white materially and spiritually" [18]. The dreams the Youngers pursued are both black and American.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The Youngers' experience, and their search for racial and cultural identity, confirm the assertion that "identity is mobile, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being"[19]. The construct of cultural identity is more an interactive process with tradition and "the invention of tradition"[20] based on it. The identity of African Americans is formed in the game of "root seeking" and "Other culture". This inevitably leads to its multiplicity and resistance.

At the end of the play, the Youngers are united again. The "explicit" plot line that symbolizes their situation starts to turn for the better. At the same time, their family cohesion of the "implicit" plot line also begins to rise. They know who they are and what they want. Everything seems to be moving in a positive direction. In fact, the good expectations here are not real, but a vision. The uncertain future of moving to white areas also shows that the author is still pessimistic in the light of social reality. At the time, the black civil rights movement was beginning to make some progress, but it was also met with strong backlash from racists. In the opening lines of the play, Lorraine Hansberry cites the image of a "raisin in the sun" in Langston Hughes's poem. What becomes of a raisin in the sun? The author gives no clear answer. However, in the face of sudden adversity, the characters still show a positive, optimistic, indomitable spirit. This is perhaps what the author intends to present by means of reversal.

5. REFERENCES

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