



An Analysis of Walter Lee’s Growth Trajectory Based on the Actantial Model

Yuru Tong

School of English Studies, Xi’an International Studies University, China
Email: yuria1128@163.com

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Abstract— Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* remains a watershed moment in American theater, yet critical discourse surrounding its protagonist, Walter Lee Younger, often reduces his trajectory to a simplistic moral triumph. This essay moves beyond such readings by applying Greimas’s actantial model to map the structural logic underpinning Walter Lee’s transformation. Rather than charting a conventional arc of improvement, his growth is a fundamental restructuring of his relationship to the object of desire. Initially positioned as a passive receiver of his deceased father’s legacy, Walter Lee becomes ensnared by a distorted object: wealth as a proxy for dignity. This deviation destabilizes the actantial structure, reconfiguring his family as opponents and his friend Willy Harris as a false helper. Only through the crucible of betrayal and the temptation of Lindner’s bribe does Walter Lee recognize that accepting white paternalism would foreclose not only his father’s dream but also his son’s future. His final refusal constitutes not capitulation but reclamation—a conscious repossession of dignity as the authentic object. By exposing the deep structural mechanics of Walter Lee’s awakening, this essay argues that Hansberry scripts a vision of Black masculinity rooted not in material acquisition but in subjective agency and generational honor; advancing an understanding of dramatic form as a vehicle for articulating minoritarian identity formation under systemic duress.



Keywords— *A Raisin in the Sun*, actantial model, dream, American Drama

I. INTRODUCTION

In *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, Algirdas Julien Greimas proposed the “action metamodel” — the basic framework for structuralist narrative analysis, which aims to draw the functional role and relationship dynamics of narrative (Greimas). He divides the characters into six action elements according to their behaviors and functions:

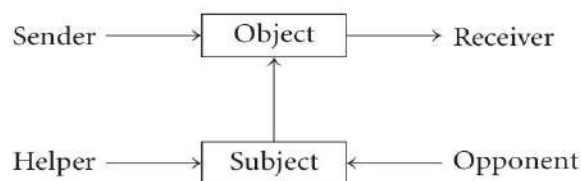


Fig.1 Greimas’s actantial model (Greimas 207)

The model organizes six abstract actants (Subject, Object, Sender, Receiver, Helper, Opponent) along three

interlocking axes: the quest axis (Subject-Object), the communication axis (Sender-Object-Receiver), and the conflict axis (Helper-Subject-Opponent), framing narrative as a system of semantic and functional interactions rather than a sequence of character actions (Wang and Roberts 66-67). The relationship between three actantial binaries promotes the produce and development of the plot, and helps to analyze the relationship between characters, events and values in narrative works.

Lorraine Hansberry's drama *A Raisin in the Sun* about the hopes and aspirations of a struggling, working-class family living on the South Side of Chicago connected profoundly with the psyche of Black America. This article employs Greimas's actantial model to focus on analyzing the growth trajectory of the male protagonist Walter Lee, aiming to reveal a process of minority ethnic identity formation. Their growth is not simply growing and being better, but rather a process of transforming from a passive subject dominated by external ideologies to a spontaneous subject centered on ethnic identity dignity through the realization of true core values.

II. CONSTRUCTION OF THE ACTANTIAL MODEL OF WALTER LEE'S GROWTH TRAJECTORY

The growth of Walter Lee is one of the core themes of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Based on Greimas's actantial model and the stable relationships among the actants presented in the drama's ending, this article constructs an actantial model of Walter Lee's growth process. The functions of each actant are sorted out as follows:

Walter Lee: He is the subject in the actantial model. A thirty-five-year-old Black chauffeur, Walter Lee is deeply dissatisfied with his current living conditions. He dreams of getting rich overnight by investing in a liquor store and improving his life to become a respected boss.

Big Walter: As the sender, Walter Lee's father, his

dream was to own a big house and improve the living conditions of his family. The insurance money he obtained at the cost of his life carried the deep wish of improving the family's living situation and having their own space. As the eldest son, Walter Lee naturally became the receiver of this "family legacy".

Mama: As the owner of the family's decision-making power and the controller of the insurance money, Mama always remembers Big Walter's hard work to try to earn a big house for his family. Therefore, she has been guiding Walter Lee to return to and fulfill his father's uncompleted wish. She is the helper in the model.

Lindner: After the Younger family acquired a house in a white community, Lindner, as the representative of the white community's rejection of black neighbors, offered monetary compensation to prevent the Younger family from moving in. Clearly, he is the opponent in the play who hinders the subject from pursuing the object.

Accordingly, the model is constructed as follows:

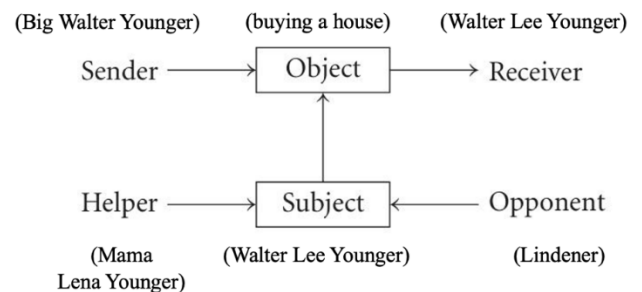


Fig.2 The actantial model of Walter Lee

III. THE ALIENATED OBJECT: WALTER LEE'S SELF-WORTH PURSUIT

The above model is a stable model that accomplishes at the end of the drama. The value object in this model is Big Walter's wish to "improve the family's living conditions and have their own independent space". At the same time, this wish symbolizes Walter's — and, more broadly, Black Americans' — struggle against fate in a society filled with racial discrimination. The reason why

their wish couldn't be realized was not because blacks didn't work hard, but because the social structure is dominated by whites, within which Black individuals occupy a marginalized position. Therefore, wanting to have an independent space symbolizes that blacks wanted to have a place in society and defend their dignity.

In the early stage of the play, the value object that Walter Lee pursued was different from it presented in the ending, causing this model to lose its stability. At this point in the narrative, Walter Lee functions as a passive subject. His pursuits and actions do not stem from a conscious recognition of his family's legacy or of his own self-worth; rather, they are shaped by the "money above all" ideology imposed by the white-dominated mainstream society. As the chauffeur of a white wealthy businessman, Walter is granted access to a prosperous world that does not truly belong to him. This close observation and contrast led him to regard "luxurious life" as a model of success and magnified his own material desires. At this point, Walter Lee was not an active subject with subjective consciousness, instead, he is a blind pursuer of wealth, driven by an external value system that defines success solely in material terms.

Exactly so, Walter Lee initially believed that money equals status and dignity. He thought that as long as he became wealthy, he would gain respect. Consequently, the value object he pursued was not the independence and dignity symbolized by the house that his family desired, but money. When the value object changed, Mama and the family became opponents on his path to pursue his dream, while his good friend Willy Harris became a helper who helped him realize his dream.

As Dr. Shalini Sharma mentioned in her article, "Walter Lee Younger's pursuit of personal dignity is most clearly manifested in his desire to invest the life insurance money in a liquor store. For Walter, the liquor store symbolizes financial independence and an opportunity to prove himself as a man capable of providing for his family in a way that brings him pride." (Sharma 28) However, the

reality was exactly the opposite. When he was looking forward to the day when he would earn a fortune, what he got was not wealth but the news that Willie Harris had absconded with the money.

Even so, he did not give up. He even proposed to accept the compensation offered by Lindner, continuing to pursue wealth at the cost of his dignity. If he chose to accept, he gave up both personal and collective racial dignity, and it marks a moment in which the value object in the original actantial model becomes completely alienated.

IV. WALTER LEE'S GROWTH: THE AWAKENING OF SUBJECTIVITY AND THE RECLAMATION OF VALUE OBJECTS

Willy Harris's betrayal and Lindner's temptation place Walter Lee at a moment of ultimate choice: whether to accept the compensation money that symbolizes humiliation and continue chasing an illusory dream of wealth, or to defend the family's non-negotiable dignity. This choice was no longer merely an economic consideration but had risen to a test of subjectivity. When he saw his son Travis, the symbol of the future of the family and even the black community, present, his thought underwent a decisive reversal. He realized that accepting this money not only meant selling his personal dignity but also sent a fatal signal to the next generation: the dignity and equal rights of black people can be marked in price and casually given away. This would lead to an endless oppression across generations, trapping future generations in the mentality and reality of being inferior. As one critic observes, "Finally, Walter denies the empty capitalist values he has absorbed (money is life), in order to affirm the core values inherited from the African American tradition (freedom and dignity), values which will spur him on to lead the charge for housing de-segregation" (Burrell). This action marks the deep values hidden in Big Walter's unfulfilled wish, transforming from a family heritage that was about to be abandoned into a self-assertion that Walter

lee actively understood, reclaimed, and defended.

Thus, the value object return to its correct position and then the original actantial model also regained a stable structure. Mama's guiding role as a helper was confirmed, Lindner's nature as an opponent was exposed without reservation, and Walter Lee himself truly unified the dual identities of receiver and subject, evolving from a passive entity driven by desires to a conscious entity capable of controlling values and leading the family. The stability of the model is precisely the structural manifestation of the completion of the positioning of its subjectivity.

V. CONCLUSION

Walter Lee's growth is not a typical success story of the kind that inspires people. Instead, it traces a process where he lost his sense of self within the mainstream value myths, and then regained his identity and autonomy. Initially, he wrongly equated the material symbols of the white society with personal dignity and family happiness, falling into a common illusion criticized by Hansberry — "the desire for possessing things has rapidly replaced among too many of us the impulse for possessing ourselves, for freedom." (Chapman 452). This value of money even once drove him to consider sacrificing his racial dignity in exchange for economic benefits, marking his complete loss.

However, the crucial turning point of the script lies in the fact that Walter eventually sees through his illusion. His refusal of the white community's buyout offer is not merely an individual moral decision; it constitutes, as Washington observes, "a strong and unqualified repudiation of American racist 'values'" (Washington 122-123). Through this, Walter affirms that Black dignity is not a negotiable commodity. He moves away from the pursuit of externally imposed standards of success and toward the defense of an internally grounded sense of self, rooted in collective history and cultural value. Therefore, Walter's trajectory thus reveals a broader and more representative pattern of

awakening. For many marginalized groups struggling within oppressive social structures, the true American Dream practice often requires a painful and necessary transition from internalizing mainstream material values to reconfirming their own cultural and self-identity as the subject of dignity. It is precisely this transition that constitutes the play's most enduring and universal growth trajectory.

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