Response Paper #7: An Argument about the Meaning of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*

Using the Lens of Literary Criticism (just one)

**Value:** 20 points

**Format:** Typed, double-spaced, MLA style

**Length:** 300-500 words

**Due Date:** See Syllabus or Website

**Directions:** In one to five paragraphs, present, support, and develop a claim about Lorraine Hansberry’s play “A Raisin in the Sun.” The claim should present a single, focused argument about the meaning of the play, one which reflects the concerns or questions raised by one of the literary theories. (Do name the literary theory in your intro & also in the assignment line of your heading.) Support your claim with evidence from the play and discussion of that evidence, keeping the literary theory in mind and using it as a lens for your examination of the play and the evidence. **Note:** You can focus on just one character or a pair of characters in making and supporting your argument.

Quote and cite the text correctly, using proper MLA parenthetical in-text citation. As long as you’re using the assigned textbooks/versions of the texts, you do not need a Works Cited page. But if you do use outside sources (which will likely be necessary for New Historicism), be sure to cite them and provide a Works Cited page for them. Regardless, the bulk (80% or more) of the paper should focus on your own argument and ideas and development of them.

Easiest literary theories to apply: Gender Criticism, Psychological Criticism, New Criticism, Postcolonial Criticism, Marxist Criticism.

Greatest difficulty: Deconstruction (due to the difficulty of finding conflicting meanings from the same perspective, so that the play itself seems to be arguing two contradictory positions on the same issue) & New Historicism (difficult primarily because of the need to do research correctly and to use it in support of your analysis of the text, including a unified argument about its meaning).
Sample Questions to get you started & point you in the right direction
(This is by no means an exhaustive list, nor should you try to answer all of the questions.)

Psychological Criticism

What (fears or desires) motivate the character(s)? Do you see a character or characters exhibiting self-destructive or self-preserving behavior? How so & so what?

Gender Criticism

According to the play, what traditional or stereotypical role(s) are men or women expected to play? Be specific. What attitude does the play demonstrate toward those roles? Is it upholding them as ideal? Is it reflecting them as natural or simply as truth? Is it questioning them, challenging, or denouncing them? What evidence in the play suggests this attitude?

New Criticism

What is the significance of the title “A Raisin in the Sun?” to the meaning or argument of the play? OR What is the significance of the plant and other natural elements of the play? What do these symbols reflect about the play’s argument or meaning? The truth is whatever literary theory you adopt, you use the methods of New Criticism to support it. The New Criticism approach just means you find a stand alone argument about the meaning of the play or really an aspect of the play and then prove it with your close analysis of the text.

Marxist Criticism

What different classes exist in the play? How do they interact? What privileges, responsibilities, burdens, or obligations does each class (or simply the class you wish to focus on) have and so what? What can each expect from life? Who has the power and how does he/she use it? Who wants power, and how does he/she go about attaining it? To what extent are the characters oppressed by the society they live in and especially the class they belong to? In this play, especially, which focuses on characters who belong to one class (with the other class more playing an indirect role in the play, someone the characters are aware of, react to, and only rarely interact with in view of the audience), you may wish to focus just on that one class.

Postcolonial Criticism

What different cultures seem to exist in the play? Who belongs to the dominant culture? Who is considered or portrayed as “other?” That is, who is the colonizer and who is the colonized? How is each characterized? How do they interact? Who has the power and how does he/she use it? Does the play seem to uphold the status quo or question or challenge it? How do you know?

Deconstruction

Consider looking at two conflicting meanings of the ending: hopeful or hopeless or at two conflicting meanings of Mama giving the money to Walter, or even two different meanings of the money itself, etc. Why does the conflicting meaning exist? What is its purpose? What is the play saying/arguing through this seemingly irreconcilable contradiction about life in America (for blacks or the poor, etc)?
New Historicism

You might look up Lorraine Hansberry & see how her experiences influenced her to write this play. Similarly, you might research housing laws in the U.S. at the time. You might also research the poem the title comes from “Harlem” by Langston Hughes as well as the Harlem Renaissance. Remember the research must not take the place of literary analysis, so make sure you identify the play’s or Hansberry’s argument, and use the research to help you support and develop your claim about the play’s meaning or purpose. As with any literary analysis, the paper will focus on your claim, your reasons, & your discussion of evidence from the play & from outside sources.) Also, you’ll need to use correct parenthetical in-text citation, a Works Cited, and photocopies of outside sources.

Reader Response Criticism

Whom do we sympathize and/or identify with most in this play? What in the play elicits this sympathy or identification? Whose dream most elicits our sympathy? Which character does Hansberry must seem to be speaking through? Why? What meaning and/or purpose does it promote?
Grading Rubric

Score: ___/20      Grade: ___      Percentage: ___ %

Late (50%) Deduction: ___  One-Time Late pass used: ___  Incorrect Formatting (5%) Deduction: ___  Turnitin +/- ___ (10%) points

An "A" Essay or Paper (18-20 points) – SUPERIOR
1. Will demonstrate excellence in Critical Thinking, responding effectively, insightfully, and originally to the assignment, fulfilling or exceeding the length, consistently, thoughtfully, and thoroughly analyzing the text, and demonstrating keen understanding of it (and the literary criticism).
2. Will have excellent Focus, presenting a clear, specific, unified claim (thesis) and aptly focused reasons (points) in support of it.
3. Will provide excellent support and development, offering an abundance of relevant, specific reasons (support points), evidence (examples & details from or about the text), warrants, and backing (explanation and discussion of the meaning of the evidence).
4. Will have logical and effective Organization.
5. Will have correct, sophisticated, and effective Integration of Sources, with correct presentation and effective use of quotations, paraphrase, and summary, and correct MLA in-text citation, according to genre.
6. Will have clear, specific, and expressive Writing, effectively communicating the ideas.

A “B” Essay or Paper (16-17 points) – STRONG
1. Will demonstrate good Critical Thinking, responding effectively and originally to the assignment, fulfilling the length, consistently and thoughtfully analyzing the text, and demonstrating good understanding of it (and the literary criticism).
2. Will have good Focus, presenting a clear, specific claim (thesis) and focused reasons (points) in support of it.
3. Will provide good support and development, offering sufficient relevant, specific reasons (support points), evidence (examples & details from or about the text), warrants, and backing (explanation and discussion of the meaning of the evidence).
4. Will have effective Organization.
5. Will have correct and effective Integration of Sources, with correct presentation and effective use of quotations, paraphrase, and summary, and correct MLA in-text citation.
6. Will have clear and specific Writing, effectively communicating the ideas with occasional awkwardness or minor errors that do not detract from the ideas.

A “C” Essay or Paper (14-15 points) – ADEQUATE
1. Will demonstrate adequate Critical Thinking, responding adequately to the assignment, fulfilling the length, demonstrating adequate understanding of the text (and the literary criticism), and presenting some analysis of the text with occasional slips into (plot) summary, (character) description, judgment, or personal experience that do not derail from the overall analytical purpose.
2. Will have adequate Focus, presenting a vague or general claim and reasons (points).
3. Will provide adequate Support and Development, offering general and often vague evidence, warrants, and backing.
4. Will demonstrate adequate Organization, so that the reader can follow the argument despite occasional lapses.
5. Will have adequate Integration of Sources, clearly distinguishing between the student’s ideas and ideas from the text though presentation or use of quotations, paraphrase, summary, and parenthetical in-text citation may be inconsistent or incorrect.
6. Will have Writing that communicates the ideas but has some serious errors as well as considerable awkwardness, vagueness, and minor errors.

A “D” Essay or Paper (12-13 points) – WEAK
1. Will demonstrate minimal Critical Thinking, responding incompletely or inconsistently to the assignment, falling short of fulfilling the length, failing to stay focused on analysis but instead summarizing or judging the text or its contents or discussing irrelevant material, or demonstrating an oversimplified or incomplete understanding of the text (&/or literary criticism).
2. Will be poorly Focused, having an unclear, unfocused claim and reasons.
3. Will have minimal Support/Development, mostly relying on generalizations without explanation of them or vaguely or minimally supported opinions.
4. Will be poorly Organized, lacking transitions or clear sense of division or progression of ideas.
5. Will have sloppy Integration of Sources, attempting to distinguish others’ ideas from one’s own but often lacking correct or clear attribution and/or citation.
6. Will have poor Writing due to frequent and/or serious errors so that the reader has to work and sometimes guess at the meaning.

An “F” Essay or Paper (0-11 points) – INADEQUATE
1. Will lack Critical Thinking, failing to respond to the assignment, failing to fulfill the length, failing to analyze but instead summarizing or judging the text or its contents or discussing material not in the text, or failing to understand the text (and/or literary criticism).
2. Will lack Focus, having no claim.
3. Will lack Support/Development, listing facts from the text without explanation of them and/or listing opinions without supporting them.
4. Will lack any sense of Organization.
5. Will be plagiarized or contain plagiarism unintentional or intentional.
Will have unclear Writing due to numerous and often serious errors that prevent the ideas from being communicated.