

تحدي العبودية في مسرحية لورين هانزبيري "شرب القرع" *Challenging Slavery In Lorraine Hansberry's*

The Drinking Gourd

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وزارة التربية/ الكلية التربوية المفتوحة

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المستخلص:

لقد أثنى العديد من الكتاب الأمريكيين مكتبات العالم بالروايات والمسرحيات والقصائد حول العبودية والتحدي. تعامل الكتاب أمثال ؛ فيليس ويتلي ، W.E.B. دوبوا ، ولانجسون هيوز ، وهانسبيري ، مع ظروف الحياة وقضايا الأمريكيين الأفارقة ، الذين عانوا من أسيادهم والأمريكيين البيض بشكل عام. تدور هذه الدراسة حول مسرحية "شرب القرع" للكاتبه هانسبيري. حيث تدحض الكاتبه المسرحيه في "شرب القرع " الصور النمطية السطحية للسود التي رسمها البيض. تحلل وتناقش الدراسة الحالية العبودية والعنصرية في هذه المسرحية. وتركز على الشخصية الرئيسية ، هانيبال ، وهو عبد أسود يتميز بروح متمردة ضد الأضطهاد و العبودية من قبل الأمريكيين البيض الذين تسلطو على السود وحرموهم من أبسط حقوق الإنسان ، بما في ذلك الحق في تعلم القراءة و الكتابة. اشتهرت هانسبيري بروح التحدي والتمرد ضد أشكال التمييز والعنصرية. ستتبع هذه الدراسة منهجًا تحليليًا وصفيًا ، حيث تعتقد الباحثة أن هذا المنهج مناسب لتحليل الشخصيات والاضواح وفكرة تحدي العبودية في

نص المسرحية. لذلك اختارت الباحثة بعض المقطعات المتعلقة بشخصيات المسرحية. كما أنها تناولت الآراء ذات الصلة للكتاب الآخرين لدعم آرائها. ومن نتائج البحث نجاح بطل المسرحية في الهروب من استبداد سيده على الرغم من إصابته بالعمى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العبودية , التحدي , التمرد , شرب القرع, هانزبيري

Abstract:

Many American writers have enriched world libraries with many novels, plays, and poems about slavery and the spirit of challenging. Writers like; Phillis Wheatley, W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, and Hansberry, as they deal with the life circumstances and issues of African- American, who had suffered from their masters and White American in general. This study deals with Hansberry's play Drinking Gourd, where the playwright refutes the superficial stereotypes of blacks as portrait by whites. The present study analyzes and discusses slave and racism. The Drinking Gourd's main character, a black slave Hannibal, is characterized by a rebellious spirit against the injustice of slavery practiced by white Americans against black slaves such as the denial of the most basic human rights, including the right to learn reading and writing. Hansburry was known for her spirit of defiance and rebellion against oppression and racism. This study sheds light on the enslavement of black people. It follows an analytical-descriptive approach, as the researcher believes that this approach is suitable for the analysis of the characters, setting and theme of challenging the slavery in the play. Therefore, the researcher chooses some related extracts of the characters in the play. She also takes the related views of other writers in order to prove her claim. One of the findings is that the protagonist successfully escaped from the tyranny of his master in spite of his blindness.

Keywords: slavery, challenge, rebellion, literacy, Hansberry, The Drinking Gourd.

Introduction

Slavery spread throughout America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Slave owners treated their slaves with extreme cruelty and heartlessness. The slaves began to challenge their masters by different ways like, slowing work, pretending to be sick, destroying tools and productions. William Wells Brown states that some of white American writers largely called for the abolition of slavery, but African- American believe that white Americans writers consciously wrote strongly against slavery than racism (xxxiii).

*It has been reported that challenges occur when slaves did some personal experiences which result in provoking their masters such as learning reading and writing in English language. The spirit of challenge was a symbolic issue in the mind of African Americans that can put an end to their struggle (Ferguson 25). This study will investigate the issues of slavery and the spirit of challenge in Hansberry's play *The Drinking Gourd*. The researcher will analyze and discuss selected relevant scenes using the analytical-descriptive approach. Some of the findings are that despite the loss of his vision, the protagonist Hannibal, resisted the treatment of his masters and encouraged his girlfriend and other family members to follow his path.*

Theoretical Review

Slavery and racism have existed in the United States since the colonial era in the sixteenth and seventieth centuries. White Americans were given privileges and rights that were limited to them which did not entail other races. These rights were education, voting rights, immigration, land tenure and citizenship. The conditions of the "slaves" began to worsen, especially in the

southern states that depended on them in all fields, and there the African "slaves" tried to organize rebellion movements. The most important one was the Nat Turner movement in 1831 in Virginia, which was followed by ascension in the American political arena (Allmendinge, 309).

African-Americans resistance to slavery focuses on White American's ideology, policy and ways of oppressions, whether it was individualistic or collectivistic (Chadwick 2021). In order to shed light on the history of slavery and the spirit of challenge, the researcher will shed new light on slavery issues by going through some related literatures works that dealt with slavery. Good examples are John Guare's play, A Free Man of Color, the scenes of the play reach the climax as the protagonist Cornet met Thomas Jefferson and Napoleon Bonaparte and confronted them. These confrontations enable the readers to know about the slavery struggle that nearly controlled Santo Domingo's government (one of the largest of the European colonies in the West Indies, in 1801) (Stein , 10).

Freda L. Scott indicates that, African-American playwrights during this period succeeded in making an evolutionary dramatic process as their plays handle "the lives, problems and aspirations" of black people (439).

Hansberry's rebellious spirit is displayed in her play, The Drinking Gourd (1960), which is set in the south. Hansberry's maternal and paternal grandparents and many relatives were Southerners who experienced the violent racial oppression. She was never allowed to forget that her uncle was one among others lynched in the South infamous Elaine Arkansas riot of 1919. Stories of this and other atrocities in the South haunted her. One of the important features that makes Hansberry distinguished is that "she is a visionary playwright and believes that human

beings have the will to control their inhumanity, oppression and greed; this leads her to ask challenging rhetorical questions in her African American plays and on the American stage”.(Farahani, Maryam Jalali, et al, 116).

Hansberry's vision was particularly shaped by the cruelties of the 1950s, including legal lynching of Josephine Grayson of the “Martinsville Seven” and the gouging out of the eyes of Mrs. Westry's son by policemen who subsequently fatally shot on the operating table (Nemiroff, From These Roots, 33-43). Almost a decade later, Hansberry wrote about another son whose eyes are gouged out in The Drinking Gourd confronting the myth of the happy, contented and loyal slaves. In her article “The Scars of the Ghetto,” Hansberry writes that “Our African ancestors came to the new world fighting slavery by mutiny on the high seas ... by suicide by act of violence against those who enslaved him, and by running away of thousands from slavery”(52).

Analysis of The Drinking Gourd (1960)

Hannibal bravely challenges the kinds of oppression, injustice and enslavement and represents the driving force for change and urges his girlfriend, Sarah, to be rebellious and he severely criticizes his mother's subsmissiveness to her white master. The play shows how a rebellious young slave, bravely and defiantly, manages to learn to read and write despite all the barriers imposed by white masters in order to prevent the slaves from being literate, to keep them under the brunt of ignorance, to facilitate their control..... The play gives a significant lesson of struggle and defiance against all the policies of racism to all humanity and encourages individuals to get their human rights and economic equality.

Hansberry was commissioned by the National Broadcasting Company to write the first play for the national television that would deal with the slavery issue from the African-American's point of view. The three acts-play is one in a series of ninety-minute television dramas commemorating the Centennial of the Civil War (1861-1865). Though scenes have been staged, the play was never produced. NBC praised the drama as superb, and then put it on the shelf because it was deemed controversial for the American television-viewing public (Bloom, 90). Maragret B. Wilkerson notes that, "The Drinking Gourd is an incisive analysis and indictment of slavery as a self-perpetuating system based on the exploitation of cheap labor" (Wilkerson, 8). In Lorraine Hansberry: Playwright and Voice of Justice, Catherine Scheader asserts:

Hansberry took her title, The Drinking Gourd, from a Negro spiritual sung by slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad. "Follow the drinking gourd" became a code for runaway slaves. It urged them to look to the skies and find the stars known as the Big Dipper for direction in their nighttime flights of freedom (85).

As the play opens, the author gives some details about some men, who are "dressed in rough trousers of haphazard lengths and coarse shirts" and women, who "single piece shifts, some of them without sleeves or collars" (I, p. 715). The author asserts that:

These people are slaves. They did not come here willingly. . . there is no education to pay for—in fact, some of the harshest laws in the slave code are designed to keep the slave from being educated. Some of the penalties are maiming or mutilation—or death.

(I, pp. 716-17)

*The play, set during the Pre-Civil War, was written in 1960 and therefore reflects Hansberry's commitment to equal rights. It embodies the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s, which is captured in this play in the defiant and courageous Hannibal. The protagonist, resembles the legendary African general of the same name, whose "life was one of constant struggle against the Roman Republic." (Britanica, 625). Hansberry's television play is not only a condemnation to the inhumane slavery system of the slave Southern Society, but it can be regarded as a social study of rich white planters, black slaves and poor whites of this society. Anne Cheney, in Lorraine Hansberry, points out that, "From Fredrick Douglass, Hansberry learned about slavery and its psychology. Hansberry would put this knowledge in *The Drinking Gourd*" (713). She uses the play as an occasion to debate a basic notion that slaves were happy, compliant and loyal. At the beginning of the play, for example, "the unseen sweet sound of the massed voices" of slaves is heard, as they chant "Steal Away":*

*Steal away, steal away
Steal away to Jesus
Steal away, steal away home—
I ain't got long to stay here.*

(I, p. 715)

This song is employed to show, implicitly, not only the slaves' determination to runaway sooner or later, but also to represent a call for all slaves to put an end to the act of their slavery and go forward to freedom.

Traditionally, in the Southern United States before the Civil War, the most satisfying achievement was to establish a profitable plantation. For example, Hiram Sweet is a white planter and slave-owner, "in his mid-sixties with an over-generous physique and a kind, if somewhat over-indulged face" (Ibid. 718). He continually recalls both for himself and others how he started thirty-five years earlier "with four slaves and fifty dollars" and as he says, "I planted the first seed myself and supervised my own baling" (Ibid. 720). He is proud that his work and ambition are directed in terms that his society regards as a great achievement. His idea of manhood significantly involves, power and family tradition. He tells Rissa, who is a black slave woman, about his most treasured possession, an old weapon he has kept in perfect condition, "My father gave me this gun and I remember feeling, I was fourteen—I remember feeling, 'I'm a man now. A true man I shall go into the wilderness and not seek my fortune—but make it!'" (I, p. 720). However, Hiram's plantation is losing money, in part; because Hiram's relatively humane policies do not produce enough to allow him to compete favorably with large, less liberal plantations.

Hiram's son Everett, who was educated in the best schools of his time, including studying in Paris, sees himself as an aristocrat. He thinks that the type of hard physical labor, which his father's always pride of in front of other people, is embarrassing. His ambition is to exist exclusively as a gentleman with an overseer as his "instrument" (Ibid. 730) for directing and doing the dirty work in the field for him. Dr. Macon Bullet (a friend of the master's family), believes that owning a slave "is not a sin" and "that's why He made men in different colors" (Ibid. 722). He advises Hiram to give up running the plantation because of his health's failure and let his thirty-year-old son Everett run it. However, Hiram refuses the suggestion because he knows well that his son will violate the family "tradition" by following, according to Hiram, "modern" parasitic way in which Everett will "put everything in the hands of overseer" (Ibid. 720). The disagreement also extends to their attitudes and expectations of the war which is about to occur between the South and the industrial North. While Everett and Dr. Bullet think that the war is a necessity and the Southerners' victory is inevitable, Hiram sees that "it doesn't make sense to fight a war you know can't win". Moreover, he asserts that they ignore the fact that most of the slaves, on whom the South's economy depends, will run away when the Southerners "go off to fight" and "for the first time in history, running away will be so easy" (Ibid. 719).

Hannibal fully recognizes that the labor demanded of him as a black slave worker on the Sweet's Plantation is not for his benefit but for the Sweet's. On his land, he would push himself to exhaustion every day, but on the Sweet's plantation he works only to make the Sweet's feel better. As he affirms to his mother Rissa:

I am.—a bad one! Every day that come and every hour that pass that I got sense to make a half step do for a whole; every day that I can pretend sickness 'stead of health; to be stupid, 'stead of smart, lazy 'stead of quick—I aims to do it. And the more pain it give your master and the more it cost him —the more Hannibal be a man! (Ibid. 728)

Having, long ago, abandoned all hope of gaining freedom or even tolerable life for herself, Rissa looks forward to getting her son Hannibal out of the fields, where he faces dangerous clashes with Hiram's black driver, Coffin, who always informs his master about Hannibal's misbehavior on the plantation. Therefore, she thinks of bringing him into the Sweet's house as a servant, where he would not only be somewhat safer but also he can get “decent food and nice things to wear and learning manners like a real genamun” (Ibid. 728). To achieve this goal, Rissa intends to make use of her closeness to Hiram for being one of the “favorite house slaves” (Ibid. 730) who helped Hiram to establish the plantation thirty-five years ago. Moreover, Rissa knows that Hiram feels more comfortable with her because she shares with him many of his favorite memories, than with his elder son Everett and his best friend Dr. Macon Bullett, both of whom differ widely from him by virtue of their higher education, social polish and political attitudes.

During the discussion in which Hannibal admits that he wants to escape from the plantation as his brother Isaiah did, Rissa wants to convince Hannibal that, “Things jes ain't that bad here.

Lord, child, I been in some places (closing her eyes at the thought of it) when I was a young girl which was made up by the devil. I know masters in my time come from hell” (Ibid. 728). Rissa's testimony leaves no doubt that, according to her long experience of slavery, Hiram is indeed a kind master. Part of what she means by this becomes clear in her subsequent argument with Hannibal, “Much trouble as you been and he ain't hardly never put the whip to you more than a few times” (Ibid. 728). Rissa has also pointed out that, in comparison with other white planters, who typically oblige their slaves to work twelve to fourteen hours and even more during harvest time, Hiram is kinder than them because he only forces his slaves to do nine and one-half backbreaking hours of work in the field. Moreover, Hiram takes care of the slaves when they are too old and that he does not force the slave women to have sex with him. In addition, Hiram knows all of his slaves personally and shows a little concern about their welfare, with carefully defined limits. However, Hannibal believes that, “all masters come from hell” (Ibid. 728). He is not convinced of his mother's opinion of Hiram's kindness. It seems that Hannibal believes that slave's ownership and kindness cannot be met together in one person. What Hannibal suggests, through his angry response to his mother's speech, is that Hiram, like any other slave owner, has built a comfortable life for himself on the basis of forced labor. This means that he eats the best food while his slaves barely fill their stomachs after a long hard work day. He also sends his son to the finest schools in the United States and Europe, while his slaves are forbidden to learn to read and write. Moreover, Hiram and his family are clothed in fine garments in the latest fashion, but his field slaves, if they are lucky, get cast-offs. Hiram and his family also demand immense respect from

everyone while his slaves receive respect from no one, including him, and they are whipped for many different reasons. Hiram is so proud of all the power at his command that he can say and believe:

I am master of this plantation and every soul on it. I am master of these fields out there and I am master of this house as well . . . There are some men born into this world who make their destiny. Men who do not tolerate the rules of other men or other forces.

(I, p. 723)

Hansberry suggests that even supposedly 'kind' masters, like Hiram, are condemned because they have the basic evil view that slavery is a business in which human beings are sold like cattle. It is noteworthy that the reason Hannibal's brother Isaiah ran off was that Hiram sold Isaiah's woman, the mother of his son Joshua. As Sarah, who is a slave young woman and Hannibal's girlfriend, observes to Hannibal, "Seem like your brother just went out of his head when Master sold Joshua's mother. I guess everybody on this plantation knew he wasn't gonna be long then" (Ibid.717). Hannibal's comment on Sarah's observation is that, "Master couldn't keep him here then! Not all Master's dogs and drivers and guns" indicates the lengths to which Hiram was willing to regain his lost "property" (Ibid. 717-18). As an activist, Hannibal tries to convince those around him that it is not normal for one group of people to enslave another. He attempts to motivate his girlfriend, Sarah, who is a timid black slave young woman, to become rebellious. Hannibal scolds his mother sharply for her contentedness in slavery. At another point, he ridicules the

black assistant of the overseer, Coffin, who takes great pride in helping his master to keep the blacks suppressed. When Hannibal fails to draw those nearest him into the revolutionary spirit, he reacts violently against his master's possessions, breaking tools every chance he gets to slow up production, and as he says:

Coffin, how you get so mixed up in your head? Them ain't my fields yonder, man! Ain't none of it my cotton what'll rot if I leaves it have picked. They aint't my tools what I drops and breaks and loses every time I gets a chance. None of it mines.
(II, p. 727)

Hannibal takes great pleasure in devising different ways to avoid working and to cause pain to his master. Refusing to accept his place as a slave, Hannibal tricks his master's young son, Tommy, into teaching him how to read and write. Hannibal's plan is first to free himself of illiteracy so he might successfully extricate himself from the physical and emotional chains of slavery. In fact, he "risks his life to breathe the air of freedom from the deadly rules of slave masters" (Priya, 314). When Hannibal informs his mother that he has learned how to read and write, Rissa warns him, as she says "Don't you know what they do to you if they finds out? I seen young Marster Everett once tie a man 'tween saplin's for that. And they run the white man what taught him out the country" (Ibid. 729). Hannibal knows well what can happen if he is discovered studying with Tommy, but feels that literacy is worth any price he may pay. When he shares with Sarah that he can read and is planning to escape, she tries to

persuade him to abandon such thoughts. She cautions him about the difficulty he will encounter as a wandering fugitive:

Sarrah :You aim to go, don't you, Hannibal (he does not answer and it is clear because of that he intends to run off) H' you know it's so much better to run off? (a little desperately, near tears, thinkng of the terrors involved) Even if you make it—h' you know what's up there, what it be like to go wanderin' round by yourself in this world?

Hannibal: I don't know. Jes know what it to be a slave.

Sarah : Where would you go—?

Hannibal: Jes North, that's all I know . . . Way I look at it, ever' slave ought to run off 'fore he die. (Ibid. 718)

Imbued with 1960s consciousness, Hannibal boldly tells her that he refuses to dwell on what freedom might bring and that he only knows he cannot tolerate remaining a slave. In short, Hannibal reminds Sarah that to be a slave, definitely, means to be denied recognition as a human being. His message to Sarah is that every slave ought to run off before he dies. Far removed from the loyal, contented stereotype, Hannibal, who is bold and proud, boasts that as long as he can pretend sickness instead of health, act stupid instead of smart, move lazily instead of quickly, he will do it. He angers Coffin by telling him that the more the master is pained by his rebelliousness, the more he will feel like a man. Hannibal, though his eyes have been gouged out, at the end of the play, escapes with the assistance of his mother and Sarah and with his dignity intact. He refuses to submit to the restrictions of slavery. Hannibal's reflectiveness and imagination extend beyond his analyses of slavery, however. When he is first encountered, he

is “staring up at the stars with bright commanding eyes” and immediately afterwards plays “the poet-fool” (Ibid. 717) with Sarah. The composition Hannibal writes to Tommy, about the drinking gourd (the slave metaphor for the “Big Dipper” constellation that points to the “North Star” (Ibid. 717), which guided runaways toward freedom) is perhaps the best example of his deep thinking, through which Hansberry attempts to prove that being a black slave does not bar Hannibal from expressing such senses. Hannibal writes:

When I was a boy I first come to notice . . . the Drinking Gourd. I thought (there is a 'u' and 'g' in 'thought' . . . it was the most beautiful thing in the heavens. I do not know why, but when a man lie on his back and see the stars, there is something that makes every man feel like King Jesus on his milk-White horse racing through the world telling him to stand up in glory which is called-freedom. (Ibid, p. 731)

For all the spelling and grammatical mistakes, Hannibal's composition is clearly the work of a thoughtful person seriously attempting to come to terms with the world itself, not just with the little world of plantation. When the condition of Hiram's heart prevents him from continuing to run his plantation, his wife Maria helps her son to take over, counseling him to:

Take over the running of the plantation—no, listen to me—and you must make him believe you have done no such thing. Every night if necessary you must sit with pencil and

pad and let him tell everything he wishes. And then —well, do as you pleased you will be the master then. (Ibid. 724)

Maria, who appreciates her husband's powerful authoritative trend, thinks of satisfying her son's longing desire to run his father's plantation according to his aristocratic beliefs. However, she does not think of injuring her husband's pride of being the ultimate master of everything and everyone around him. Therefore, although she knows that her son intends to enforce his own policies in running the plantation, she asks her son to make his father, who is not ready yet even after his health fails to give up being the undisputable master, believe that he is still the old powerful master. The opposite of his father, Everett runs the plantation with a harsh hand, hiring Zeb Dudley to enforce his new policies. Zeb, who is a poor white farmer, feels forced to sign in as an overseer on the Hiram Sweet's plantation because economically he cannot survive as an independent farmer. Moreover, Zeb's desire to build a big profitable plantation leads him to become the pitiful "instrument" (Ibid. 730) of Everett Sweet against the advice of his friend, the poor white preacher, who cautions him about driving slaves for the Sweet's family, as he says, "That ain't fit thing for a man to do, Zeb, (pointing to Everett) them people hate our kind . . . field and swamp and pastures yonder was given to us by Him what giveth all gifts—to do right by" (Ibid. 726). James V. Hatch and Ted shine, argue that, "Lorraine Hansberry represents the white preacher in The Drinking Gourd as an ineffective moral agent. Religious percepts without pragmatic economic power were valueless to the poor Southern White" (Black Theater, 713).When we first meet him,

Zeb is thinking of moving West, both because his crops have done poorly and because competition with the big plantation is too great. He is anxious by his children's near starvation, which he would like to prevent, but he is even more appealing to the West as a place where "if a man got little get up in him, he still got a chance" (Black Theater, 193). However, the moment Everett Sweet arrives and offers him a job as overseer, Zeb is instantly ready to abandon his project. Within a minute he is calculating if, by getting fertilizer and tools on credit, he can use his entire first year's salary to buy "two prime hands" (II, p. 726). When his first act as overseer, whipping Hannibal for general behavior rather than for any specific offence, meets with Everett's disapproval, Zeb proudly asserts that "there's some things have to be left up to me if you want this here plantation run proper, Mister Sweet" (Ibid. 730).

When Everett discovers that Hannibal has learned to read and write, he says to him "There is only one thing I have ever heard of that was proper for an educated slave . . . when a part is corrupted by disease . . . One cuts out the disease" (Ibid. 732). He orders the overseer, Zeb, to carry out a brutal punishment, which is gouging out Hannibal's eyes with the butt of Zeb's whip. Everett attempts to bar Hannibal from the free world that lies outside the limitations of slavery. Hansberry asserts that, "the withholding of education has been one of the prime instruments of the oppressors of American Negroes" (The Scars of the Ghetto, 52). Furthermore, Everett takes away Hannibal's sight for fear that his revolutionary vision will corrupt other slaves. Commenting on slavery as an economic system when the play takes off, Robert Nemiroff, in "A Critical Background," points out

By the mid-nineteenth century . . . slavery as an economic system, had become outmoded and, increasingly, not viable. In competition with the advanced industrial economy of the North, the planter found himself facing curious difficulties inherent in the system of production. . . He could not allow his labor to become overly trained, skilled or educated, because education might turn against the master.

(Nemiroff, Background, 152)

Though Hannibal's body is destroyed, his spirit is not. The play ends with Hannibal escaping to freedom with the aid of his girlfriend, Sarah. Hannibal's blindness represents the inhumanity heaped upon blacks in the struggle for freedom. Margaret B. Wilkerson claims that the gouging out of Hannibal's eyes refers to the moral decay of slavery (11). One might conjecture that Hansberry uses this play to argue against present day institutional racism, which is rooted in slavery. Hansberry's commitment led her to encourage blacks not to accept quietly injustices that began during slavery and continued to be the focus of the struggle. She made good promise to tell the truth. Hansberry wrote about the world as it is and as she thought it to be.

Although Hiram Sweet is not directly involved in Hannibal's blinding and torturing, he is indirectly responsible because he "believes in the system of slavery, yet tried not to abuse the slaves much and controlled his whimsical anger, has definitely contributed to Hannibal's growing sense of human and social consciousness, later on reconciled with political consciousness as well. However, Hiram actively supports the widespread prohibition of learning among slaves because he is like other

slave owners, recognizes the dangers of education. They know that slaves who can read and write can gather information about the outer world, the conflicts between the North and the South, the slave revolts, the means of keeping slaves under control and so on. Moreover, slaves who can read and write could pass messages, and more effectively conspire to escape, rebel or even threaten their masters' lives. Thus, slave owners believe that slaves have to be prevented at all costs from gaining knowledge of law for example . In addition, the way Hannibal acquires his ability to read and write was sure to offend his master personally. Hannibal has convinced Hiram's younger son Tommy, a boy around ten, to teach him how to read and write in exchange for lessons on how to play the banjo. When he discovers this, Everett, who knows that Hannibal has been protected by Hiram for Rissa's sake, asserts with outrage, "You have used your master's own son to commit a crime against your master . . . Even my father wouldn't like this, Hannibal" (II, p. 732). Thus, when Everett acts against him, he believes that "Hannibal's crime" is beyond forgiveness even in his father's eyes.

As he has demonstrated in his decision to sell Joshua's mother, Hiram, like so many slave owners, feels that family and romantic ties among the slaves are much less important than these among their masters or even among poor whites. It is vital that these ties be diminished, otherwise the master's power to sell whomever he chooses, to serve his economic needs, would be greatly restricted. However, as Eugene D. Genovese affirms that, although the plantation owners often claim in their propaganda that Blacks have no sense of family, they never succeed. Genovese argues that, "tenderness, gentleness, charm and modesty . . . often marked the love lives of ordinary field hands as well as of more privileged house slaves." (485).

Hansberry obviously agrees with Genovese assessment of romantic and family relationships among the slaves in her depictions of them in The Drinking Gourd. Hannibal's love for Sarah is idealized. It is so strong that he approaches her romantically, wistfully, "playing the poet-fool" (Ibid. 717). At the same time, Sarah's love for Hannibal is equally strong and helps in her growth from a timid girl, terrified at the thought of escaping or even of making the slightest gesture of defiance in front of her white masters, to a woman still terrified but carries a gun in hand to lead a blind man and a boy to freedom. The reason for this growth is clearly her admiration for Hannibal. At the play's beginning she appears so concerned about Hannibal's safety as a result of his restless and constant challenging of Coffin's authority of leaving the fields without permission and contemplating running off. While Sarah seems naïve enough to believe Hiram Sweet's propaganda that abolitionists "catches runaways and makes soap out of them" (Ibid. 718), she fully recognizes how evil slavery is. This awareness is shown clearly in her verse for the song "Raise a Ruckus", in which she sings:

My old mistress promised me

Mmm Mmm Mmmm

(Mimicking)

'Say-rah! . . . going to set you free'

But a dose of poison kinda help her along

Mmm Mmm Mmm

And may devil sing her funeral song!

(Sarah pantomimes gleefully helping "Mistress" along to her grave with a motion of her hand).

(Ibid. 727)

It is noteworthy that what changes the “skeerified” (Ibid. 718) Sarah, as Hannibal describes her, to think of going with him is her horror at the punishment Everett inflicts on Hannibal. Seeing this, she knows that things are so bad that she has to help him get away, for their sakes. Earlier she criticized Isaiah for leaving his son Joshua behind when he escaped; therefore, she takes the boy along, although he can only add difficulties in an already very hard task. But love makes Sarah brave, and she, Hannibal and Joshua, show a collective strength as a family that provides them with hope for survival in a world dedicated to their destruction.

Like Sarah, Rissa's transformation happens out of love of her son Hannibal. At the beginning of the play, she is so concerned about Hannibal's safety that she tries to push him into accepting the position she has worked so hard to earn him as a house servant, even though it will make him feel diminished as a man. However, she believes that the job will protect him from being whipped or worse. Rissa is convinced that her other son Isaiah died while escaping, (Hannibal disputes this), and is terrified that a similar fate awaits Hannibal. But when she learns that she is wrong about the possibility of gaining the minimal security in slavery, she without hesitation, assists and perhaps even plans, her son's and grandson's escape in the company of Sarah. She stays behind, probably both because her age would make her an additional burden to the already overloaded little group and because her presence on the plantation might help delay the whites' realization that the others have gone. There can be no doubts that love for her son and grandson is the most vital force in Rissa's life and decisions.

Rissa moves from a mammy to a militant. She is subservient to and protective of her Master Hiram until, through neglect, he allows Rissa's son to be physically maimed. Unlike the classic

mammy who ignores the needs of her own family and caters faithfully to her master, Rissa courageously reprimands her master when he comes to console and tell her that he did not order the gouging out of her son's eyes. Hansberry, thus, attempts to refute the traditional stereotypical image of the black mammy. Near the end of the play, the dying Hiram goes to Rissa's cabin in the slave quarters where she is caring for her blinded son, and says:

Hiram: " Rissa. I want to tell you and ask you to believe me, that I had nothing to do with this, that I had some things do seem to be out of the power of my hands after all . . . Other men's rules are a part of my life . . .

Rissa: Why, ain't you Marster ? How can a man be marster of some men and not at all of others—

Hiram: You got too far—

Rissa: Oh—? What will you have done to me? Will your overseesr gouge out my eyes too? I don't spect blindness would matter to me. I done seen all there was worth seein' in this world —and it didn't 'mount to much.) I think this talking disturb my boy. (Ibid. 734)"

Margaret B. Wilkerson observes that it is highly significant that:

Hansberry . . . put these important words, which expose the bankruptcy of the economic system upon which this country is founded, into. . . a Black slave woman to have reject her master for her own child—an action which runs counter to the stereotype of the forgiving, master-loving slave woman.

(Lorraine Hansberry, 243).

Rissa turns away from him and continues tending her son. A “dejected, defeated” (III, p. 734) man, Hiram leaves the cabin weak from his illness; he falls in the dirt outside the cabin. Rissa ignores his cries for help, closes the door on him as he dies near her doorstep. When he lies dying outside her cabin she refuses to go to his aid, thus taking revenge on him. Rissa is not the only slave to turn her back on this likely kind master. As “he cries out for help . . . One by one the lights of the cabins go out and doors close” (Ibid. 734), thus turning his death into a form of collective revenge. Rissa's logical reaction to the blinding of her son contradicts the traditional, stereotypical image of the black mammy. This image, as Robert Nemiroff explains, is that of the “patient, long-suffering, devoted and indomitable . . . , but above all loving and forgiving” (Background, 152). Rissa, who indeed possesses most of these virtues, is not, however inhumanly forgiving. She neither pardons Hiram for not preventing this cruelty, even though he was not informed about it until it was done, nor places Hiram's welfare above that of her son Hannibal. She rejects his unconvincing justifications and rebuffs his allegation of being the ultimate master of the lives of all people around him.

Before the play ends, Everett goes to war (the Civil War), probably to be killed, believing it to be a glorious cause and an assured victory. As Hiram has expected the South and its slave system have been defeated by the industrial North. Hansberry opposes that, “when the time came to give the blow to the slavery system, Negroes by tens of thousands fell into the ranks of Lincoln's Union Army to serve in any way they could destroy that hideous cancer against human dignity” (The Scars of the Ghetto, 52). As the narrator begins the play, he ends it with a prophetic statement that slavery has cost the nation too much of its soul and

he wishes that those who heard this play will somehow work to overcome the destiny in motion by human greed.

With his desire to struggle against exploitation and to improve his knowledge of the world to bring him a confrontation with Everett Sweet, Hannibal finds how cruel and absolute the restrictions placed on his ambition are. However, he is still ready to try to escape from the plantation after having been blinded accompanied by his timid girlfriend Sarah and his brother eight-year-old son, Joshua. Hannibal proves that personal will can be exerted, even under the most adverse social conditions, but a very high price may be paid for it. Hannibal is presented not simply as an individual, but also as a representative of a large number of slaves willing to pay any price to gain freedom.

Conclusion

In The Drinking Gourd, Hansberry reveals that the black people's unity can survive only if its members come together to form a fortress against any force that manipulates, threatens, or oppresses them. The protagonist, Hannibal, in this play is an active seeker of rebellion and survival. Although he is poor slave, he is rebellious, dignified, supportive and strong and represents the driving force for change. He urges his girlfriend, Sarah, to be rebellious and he severely criticizes his mother's submissiveness to her white master. Moreover, this play problematizes the portrayal of the black family in White-American literature. Hansberry shows the intimate relationship between the black family's members and how this relationship helps them to evolve and change to be better. Through Hannibal's character, the play shows the unjust laws of the white masters who insist on preventing slaves from literacy. As depicted in the play, Hannibal

learn to read and write despite the punishment of eye gouging that awaits him because he believes in his right as a human being in the importance of knowledge and its role in the development of the human mind to resist all kinds of injustice and slavery. The play presents a significant lesson of struggle and defiance against all the policies of racism to all humanity and encourages individuals to get their human rights and economic equality. For Hansberry, struggle against the oppressive policies is painful, but it is quite necessary because it is the core of the blacks' lives.

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