Sociology Through Five Plays

Curriculum Unit 86.01.08
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This curriculum unit was designed for a sociology class of inner city students from the eleventh and twelfth grades and of average to above average reading ability. While the unit was designed specifically for these students, it would work equally well in an English, drama, or social studies classroom and could be used for junior high school students as well. The estimated time for the unit is ten weeks. The five plays to be read, acted out, and studied are: *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Blood Knot*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and *The Oxcart*.

These plays are rich in themes for studying: family, pride, racism, brotherhood, isolation, illusion, self-delusion, cultural identity, personal identity, migration, and the success ethic.

These themes are central to every adult’s life, especially in the United States today. Even *The Blood Knot*, a play set in South Africa, affects Americans because of American corporate involvement in South Africa and because of the theme of brotherhood. High school is an especially appropriate time to introduce these issues and themes to students, for it is during adolescence that students seem naturally to become curious about them. These are the years when they begin to grapple with questions like identity and, if they are not members of the dominant group, cultural identity. Moreover their attitudes are not yet frozen; they are open to discussion with others whose opinions might differ, and they are willing to speculate. Besides introducing them to examples of fine literature, these plays give them a chance to deal with themes all thinking men and women must come to terms with.

So that the teacher might choose only one or two of the plays, I will discuss the plays one by one, present some questions I believe should come up in discussion, and then for each play, I will present specific lesson plans.

*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry

*A Raisin in the Sun* is essentially a play involving an extended family and its struggle over personal and racial pride. The three generations of Youngers live in a Chicago southside slum after World War II. The apparent conflict in the family is about how to spend a $10,000 insurance check from the labors of the deceased father.

The family has two highly volatile members. One is Walter Lee, who dreams of a life better than that of a chauffeur. He dreams of being a businessman, maybe even a mogul. At present he hopes to go into a liquor store partnership with two friends. He sees the money as his entry into a totally different world than the one in
which he has been living. The other explosive force is his younger sister Beneatha, a college student who wants to become a doctor and who has a flirtation with her own African roots through her dating Joseph Asagai, an African native.

The central and strongest character is Mama, Lena Younger, who holds the family together and understands its past, present, and future. Mama’s enduring dream has been to own a home. Without consulting anyone, she puts a downpayment on a small house in a white neighborhood.

When Walter Lee learns the fate of the money, his spirits are dashed and he speaks bitterly about his future. He is even seemingly insensitive to his wife who has recently learned that she is pregnant and is considering an abortion. Mama shows her trust in Walter Lee by giving him $6,500 of the remaining money, half of which is intended to be banked for Beneatha’s education. Walter Lee, trusting his more “knowledgeable” business partner turns all the money over to him to “grease” some palms to enable them to get a liquor license more quickly. Naturally, the friend and money disappear.

Meanwhile whites in the new neighborhood have sent an agent to buy off the Youngers if they will give up the house. Almost yielding to the agent’s offer, Walter Lee finally achieves his manhood and pride by standing up to the agent in front of his young son Travis, his sister, his wife, and his mother. It is Mama who gives him the courage and strength to refuse the offer and to affirm his manhood.

The play allows students to discuss extended families, personal pride, racial pride, ambition, African roots, and dreams of upward mobility. These are the issues that teens, especially black ones, discuss informally among themselves. A play which yields structured discussions would sharpen their thinking on these issues. Such discussions will no doubt bring out controversy, which is healthy in a classroom.

**Some Discussion Questions**

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in an extended family? Many students live in homes which are not traditional nuclear families and are not shy about discussing their family life.
2. Who do you think should have decided what to do with the $10,000? What would have advised if you had been a member of the Younger family?
4. Why do you think Mama gives Walter Lee $6,500. What does it take to be a man?
5. Why do you think Beneatha is interested in Africa? Why do some other relatives make fun of this interest? Do you think Beneatha would be happy if she married Mr. Asagai and moved to Africa? Do you think the play gives a just picture of Africa?
6. How does George Murchison represent a different type of black from the Youngers? from Mr. Asagai?
7. How would you have acted toward the agent who came to “buy you off”? How would you have felt about moving into a neighborhood where your neighbors did not want you?
8. Why is Travis in the play?
Given the confines of time, the students will read parts of the play at home and act out certain scenes in the classroom. Since *Raisin* is action-filled and has many good lines, it adapts itself well to acting in the classroom and requires a minimum of props. Some scenes which might be good for acting in the classroom would include the scene in which Water Lee expresses his dream to be more than a chauffeur, the scene in which Mama discovers that Walter Lee has lost the money, and the scene in which the agent confronts the Youngers. A good comic scene might be the one in which Beneatha tries to “explain” Africa to Mama.

**Activities**

*Role-play 1.*

Mama informs the family that soon a check in the amount of $10,000 will be arriving from the insurance company. She tells them they want to make the best use of the money.

Have students volunteer to be Walter Lee, Ruth, Beneatha, Travis, and Mama. Act out a conversation which might have occurred in the Younger family.

*Role-play 2.*

After Mama realizes how disappointed Walter Lee is about the downpayment on the house, she decided to trust the remainder of the money to him. Have the two sit near one another and discuss why she is giving him the $6,500 and what she thinks he ought to do with it.

*Role-play 3.*

After the agent leaves the apartment and the moving men begin to move out the furniture, Travis and Walter Lee talk about what has been happening.

*Role-play 4.*

Invite Lloyd Richards, the original director of the play to class to talk, he can be reached c/o Yale Repertory Theatre.

**The Blood Knot by Athol Fugard**

By contrast to *Raisin*, *The Blood Knot* is taut and tense with just two characters: Morris, who can pass for white, and his darker skinned half-brother Zachariah. It is set in a shack on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth, South Africa, where the apartheid system holds sway. After a long absence Morris shows up on Zachariah’s doorsteps and they spend a year of quiet, lonely existence together.

In this dreary existence, devoid of other male and any female companionship, they are saving money to build a farm. To quiet Zach’s complaints about being womanless, Morris suggests a pen pal. One is chosen and a correspondence begun. When she includes a photograph and requests the same, they realize they have chosen her name from a white newspaper. At first, fear creeps in, but then they both enjoy the correspondence game even though Ethel has a policeman brother and there is always the danger that she might show up in Port Elizabeth.

Finally the pen pal does announce she will be in the area. Zach, who has done all the working and saving for the farm, insists that Morris use the money to buy appropriate gentleman’s clothes to impersonate him in a meeting with Ethel.
Ethel’s visit never materializes because she writes that she has become engaged. But in the meantime Morris and Zach play white-black games from childhood and adulthood. As they reminisce, Zach claims their black mother always gave Morris better toys, better everything. Morris does not deny it. They play other games in which whites humiliate blacks or force them to act in a subservient way. All their fantasy games focus on the nature of being white and black in South Africa: on power and impotence. The most powerful line is delivered when Morris shouts to Zach: “I arrest you in the name of God,” as if God had ordained the current racial relations. The power of the relationship between the two brothers makes these games work on stage. I think most students are imaginative enough to believe these games. In some classes, particularly if all the students are of the same race, students might act our or role-play some of these games.

The play is so powerful because the two men, though so different, are born of the same woman. They are brothers. This “bond between brothers” or bloodknot can be used to study apartheid in present day South Africa. With daily news coming from South Africa students are curious to know the history of the country, the present conditions, just what apartheid means, and how it can be ended. The play documents the antithesis of brotherhood, the stated ideal in most countries in the world. Some students may wish to discuss the ideal of brotherhood in America and the reality of racial conditions. On another level, the play might lead to a discussion of the bonds there are between brothers of any color and race.

Some discussion questions

1. Why do you think the author chose two brothers to illustrate apartheid?
2. Why do you think Zach accepts Morris when he returns?
3. When the brothers discover that Ethel is white, why do you think they continue the correspondence? Which brother seems more eager to continue the letters?
4. Why do you think Zach is willing to give up the money he has saved to buy the farm in order to clothe Morris to meet Ethel? What will Zach get out of it?
5. Why do the brothers play the racially humiliating games?

Lesson Plan

This could last three or four days.

1. Spend some time on the concept of apartheid and what that means in South Africa.
2. Discuss the concept of pen pal. What are your obligations to your pen pal?
3. Divide the class into groups of four to discuss further what apartheid means.
4. Have students write letters individually. The teacher gives four or five possibilities of the identity of the pen pal. Pretend you are Zach and Morris. Write fictitious letters to your white pen
5. On the next day have some students read their letters aloud.

Goals better understanding of apartheid and brotherhood. This exercise also works to improve writing and communication skills.

Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller

Ostensibly Arthur Miller’s play begins with the most typical family in today’s American society: the nuclear family, a family which owns a home, mortgaged though it be, a father who is in sales, a mother who stays at home, and two sons, one of whom is an ex-high school football hero.

Very soon it becomes clear that Willy Loman’s world is not perfect. In his fantasy world he is a successful super salesman who is known, welcomed, and well-liked throughout the New England region. But in fact he has been cut off salary and is working strictly on commissions, dwindling ones at that. He is unable to meet his weekly bills. We learn that his friend and neighbor Charlie has been even has been subsidizing him to the tune of $50 a week. He even offers Willy a job, but Willy rejects it; for staying with the company is the only success he understands.

Willy’s lack of touch with reality extends to his sons, especially to Biff, the ex-football star. Biff has recently arrived in New York after a long absence during which he drifted from one job to another. Buoyed up by his own dreams and his hopes for Biff, Willy convinces Biff to go to see a former employer to borrow money for opening a sporting goods store where he and his brother Happy can know no limit to success. Willy is so good at dream building that he convinces Biff that the man will have fond memories of him, faith in him, and will lend him $15,000. The truth is the man barely remembers Biff, who held only a menial job with him once.

Not only has Willy failed as a businessman, he fails as a father. When Biff travels to Boston to try to convince his father to speak with the math teacher on his behalf, he finds Willy in a hotel room with a woman.

Willy’s wife, Linda, has become increasingly worried about Willy: his dreams haunt him that he could have been a financial success if he had gone prospecting with his brother Ben many years ago; his frequent car accidents, and a piece of hose that she finds in the basement. She keeps her fears to herself and encourages him to apply for a home office job in New York.

When he makes his request, Loman is shocked that he is at first ignored, and finally fired. Where are the trust, the recognition, and the loyalty owed to a man who has given his life to a company?

In what was supposed to be a celebratory dinner on the town, Willy still goes off to find his sons in a restaurant. He finds they have stood him up, abandoned him for two girls they picked up in the restaurant. When his sons arrive home, they find him in the cramped yard, trying to plant vegetables in the dark. Here, Biff promises that he will leave New York and cut off contact with the family; he seems to have come to the realization that he is an ordinary man, not destined for fame or fortune. In the end Willy takes the car out and has a fatal accident. The family is shocked that there are so few at the funeral.
Sociologically the play is about identity, self-delusion, and the national success ethic. Just how much it is a criticism of our economy is debatable. It is not clear to me that Howard, the boss, pays Willy so little attention because he’s intrigued by the new tape-recorder or because he intends to rid the company of Willy all the time. The play may not be so much a criticism of the system as of individuals in the system who treat others as ciphers. Charlie, like Howard, is a capitalist, but Charlie is a good person who treats Willy quite kindly.

Biff’s epitaph for Willy seems most fitting. He had the “wrong dreams”. Willy believed that there was only one way to make a living in the world. He believed everyone had to know you and like you; he believed that there was no place for you unless you were #1. Biff comments that his father did not even know who he was. Happy, on the other hand, feels he must vindicate his father’s dream and show people that his dream was all right.

Note: the interweaving of the past and the present on the stage probably requires an explanation for some students. The flute music represents Willy’s father, a flute maker, and Ben is a fantasy who appears on the stage from time to time when Willy is thinking about what might have been if he had gone to Alaska.

**Some discussion questions**

1. Have you ever known or read about a man like Willy who thinks he is more successful than he really is?
2. Why do you think being a salesman has such an appeal to Willy?
3. Why do you think Miller chose that calling for him?
4. Have you ever met or read about anyone like Biff who merely drifted from job to job at thirty-four? What explanations for it does the play offer or imply?
5. Why do you think Biff threw away his sneakers and never went to summer school to make up the math course?
6. Have you ever met parents who had exaggerated views of their children’s skills or their potentialities?
7. Why do you think Howard fires Willy? Is he justified?
8. What is ironic about Linda’s comments about the mortgage at the funeral?
9. What is ironic about Happy’s decision to take up Willy’s work?
10. Is the problem Willy or the American society?
Lesson Plan

This play is about Willy’s dreams and illusions. Choose two examples from the text. Quote them. Take them home. Comment on why you think each one is an unrealistic dream. Bring your ideas to class tomorrow to be shared.

Day 2

Have students read and discuss the dreams they have chosen and the reasons they have given.

Activity

Follow along the record of the play while following the text.

Activity

Bring in articles about companies that treat their workers especially well or especially poorly. These can help generate class discussion about work and the work place.

Activity

Watch videotape of the Dustin Hoffman version of the play. This is aired from time to time on CBS.

The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams

Williams’ play is about isolation and illusions. The characters include the mother Amanda, the daughter Laura, 23, who has one leg shorter than the other, the son Tom, and the Gentleman Caller. The play is memory and Tom is the narrator.

Amanda is forever stuck in the southern world of cotillions and entertaining as many as seventeen gentlemen callers at one time. Even though the family now lives in St. Louis, Amanda has ambitions—some would call them illusions—for her two children. Laura is engrossed in a world of miniature glass animals. Her mother enrolled her in a business school, but Laura was so shy and frightened that she made just one appearance. After that she leaves home as if to go to school, but spends the day exploring cultural spots in the city.

Tom tries to be reality conscious. As a worker in a shoe factory, he does have contact with the outer world, but even he has his illusions. He is torn between his desire to escape his hated job in the factory, to escape his mother and the guilt over his sister, or to stay and face his responsibility. His love of the movies is a cue to us that he is a dreamer. He pays his dues in the merchant marine so that one day he can escape and travel the same way as his father, who long ago abandoned the family.

Pressed by his mother to bring home a young man to court his sister, Tom finally brings home Jim O’Connor, who attended high school with Laura and him. Jim was a star in many fields in high school and most likely to succeed. Now he has a job only slightly higher than Tom’s, but unlike Tom, he’s always trying to take courses to better himself. Jim is very attentive to Laura: he engages her in conversation and tells her she needs more self-confidence. He even teaches her to waltz, but while dancing they bump into the table on which favorite glass piece is sitting. It falls and its horn breaks off, but Laura is not upset and comments that a unicorn with a broken horn is less freakish.

When the gentleman caller leaves early announcing that he has to meet his fiancee’s train, the evening is a
disaster as far as Amanda is concerned. In the end, Tom is finally able to announce that he intends to join the merchant marine.

**Some discussion questions**

1. Have you ever met or read about anyone as shy as Laura? What do you think makes people shy? Are they born that way? Can shyness be overcome? Does the play imply any reason for her shyness? What do you think will become of Laura now?
2. Do you believe in Amanda’s grandiose past?
3. What do you think she really wants for her children?
4. Can you think of other young people, real, in television, books, or movies who are torn between two possibilities?
5. Why do you think Jim dances with and kisses Laura when he has a fiancee?
6. Why do you think Laura gives Jim the broken unicorn to keep?
7. How do you know that the men at the factory think Tom is a dreamer?

**Lesson Plan**

*Day One*

Tell your students that they’re going to role play a scene between Tom and a future shipmate. Tom will discuss why he joined the Merchant Marine and how he feels about his sister and his mother.

Then ask students to come up with characterization of the shipmate. Is he older? Younger? Does he have a family? Does he help his family out financially?

Ask for or choose two students to do the role-play. Tell them to think about it overnight.

*Day Two*

After the role playing, discuss the differences between the two characters. If the two characters are too similar, ask why do you think other people would treat their families differently.

**Goals** *I hope the students will come to look back on the past and explain why they have taken certain actions. I hope they will come to recognize another’s position.*
Activity

View the film which is available from the New Haven Public Library.

Activity (writing exercise)

Compare and contrast the relative independence of Tom and Laura in relationship to their mother. Why has Amanda not been able to cripple Tom as much as she crippled Laura?

The Oxcart by Renée Marqués

A three generation family lives in a rural district in the mountains outside San Juan, Puerto Rico. Don Chago is the grandfather; widowed Dona Gabriela is the mother; Luis, the elder son; Juanita, the daughter, and Chaquito, the younger son.

The family is gathering its meagre belongings and waiting for an ox-cart which will take them to the outskirts of San Juan. There they will take a bus into the city. After all no one wants to arrive in San Juan in an oxcart.

There is a lot of bickering about why the farm failed. Don Chago is resolved not to move with the family, while Luis is the chief motivator for moving. He sees moving as a way to better their lives. Though they are leaving relatives, friends, and their roots—their past and all they are accustomed to—still they mount the oxcart when it arrives, leaving Don Chago behind.

When they arrive in one of the poorest slums of San Juan, they find that life is no better than it was in the mountains. They live in an alley with a bar in it. It is noisy. There’s crime. Juanita is raped. Honest jobs are hard to come by. Chaquito becomes a petty thief instead of going to school. The second time he is apprehended, he is sent to reform school. The urbanization process has taken its toll on another rural family.

Ultimately even Luis sees no point in staying. The airplanes overhead send his thoughts in the direction of New York. He borrows money from the bartender’s wife for the flights.

New York seems little better than the rest of the world they have seen. Dona Gabriela hates the cold weather and misses her village and the close ties one has in such a place. She is unhappy that Juanita has moved away from home, is no longer abiding by the moral standards of her youth, and has permed her hair. Dona Gabriela wants to return to Puerto Rico because her son will be getting out of reform school soon.

Juanita hates the mechanization of New York and the racism to which Puerto Ricans are subjected. Only Luis is happy in New York:. he enjoys the material comforts he buys, even if he must work many overtime hours. He is magnetized by the machines.

A letter from Uncle Tomas arrives, offering the family four acres on shares. Luis is contemptuous, But Juanita and her mother want to return to their native village.

The play comes to a shocking end when Luis is killed by one of the machines he so adores.

Some discussion questions

1. Why does Don Chago choose to stay in the village?
2. Why does Chaquito try to take the rooster to the city with him?
3. Why does the final decision about moving rest with Luis instead of his mother?
4. Why is the village so poverty-stricken?
5. Why does the family abandon the oxcart just outside the city?
6. Why does everyone think Luis is romantically involved with the bartender’s wife?
7. Why do you think Chaquito keeps stealing?
8. How do you think Juanita changes?
9. What pictures do you think go through Luis’ mind when he sees airplanes overhead?
10. Which family member misses the village the most?
11. What do you think family members miss most when they move to New York?
12. The Census Bureau shows a reverse migration of American blacks from the north to the south. How can you explain this?
13. Do you know anyone who moved from the mainland back to Puerto Rico? Do you know the reasons?
14. For each move Luis makes, what decision would you have made? Why?
15. Who, if anyone, was hurt the most by the move from the village?
16. Why does Luis like machines so much? Is this a genuine expression of his character, or the author’s way of ending the play?
17. Why do you think Marqués has Luis killed by a machine instead of having him die in some other manner?
18. Why do you think the author entitled the play The Oxcart?
Lesson Plan

Plan a panel discussion of five or six students and/or parents who have migrated to the United States, particularly from Puerto Rico. Have the class choose a moderator and help the moderator think of questions to ask.

Examples of questions

1. Where were you living when you decided to come to the mainland?
2. What type of community was it? How did most people make their living?
3. Did everyone in your family agree about moving?
4. Did you have relatives or friends already living in the mainland city you had chosen?
5. How did you choose the particular city in which to live?
6. How did you get your first place to stay?
7. How did you get your first job?
8. What do you miss most about Puerto Rico?
9. Do you know people who have moved back to Puerto Rico?
10. What do you like most about mainland U.S.A.?
11. Do you think you would ever move back to Puerto Rico?

Activities

1. Play the excerpt from West Side Story “I Like To Be In America”. Discuss the words and ideas about like in America expressed in the song. Is this the America seen by anyone in The Oxcart?
2. Make a chart comparing the advantages and disadvantages of living in a slum and a poor village.
3. Ask the class if there are any social agencies in New Haven which could help a family like that in The Oxcart. Students could look through blue pages of the phone book and make calls to various agencies to discover their functions; they could go to a large agency like Junta to find out what other agencies might provide assistance. The teacher could remind the class about resources such as school social workers and Infoline.
In addition to studying and enjoying each play separately, students should be able to make comparisons between characters in different plays. For example why is Luis the man of the house when he is not even Dona Gabriela’s natural child? Compare his position to Walter Lee, who feels he is treated like another child in the household and has to earn and prove his manhood. Does this difference have anything to do with the difference between Hispanic and black cultures. Or does it have something to do with the characters of the two mothers: Dona Gabriela and Lena Younger? Is it a combination of the two factors? Lena and Amanda are both strong figures, but it seems that Lena does finally yield and give Walter Lee a chance to be a man. Except on the subject of God, Beneatha certainly has no trouble expressing herself. In Amanda’s house Laura can only express herself through her glass figures and is painfully shy standing in the shadow of her mother. Even Tom usually gives in to his mother and lives for most of the play in the fantasyland of the movie theatre. Linda and Ruth are protective of their husbands though Ruth does show some independence when she decides to get an abortion. The women seem to be the major figures in the plays, except for Willy Loman. Of course, the father is never seen in Raisin as he is just the source of the insurance and in The Glass Menagerie where his enormous photograph or portrait emphasizes his absence.

As a sociology teacher I think it is essential that my students learn about relationships in other ways than reading graphs, charts, and short synopses of famous studies conducted by leading sociologists. It is important they they see that they can study roles and relationships and made discoveries themselves about how people live and relate to one another.

**Student Bibliography**

Fugard, Athol. *The Bloodknot*. New York: Samuel French, 1964. This is a powerful play about two half-brothers, one black and one who can pass, living under apartheid.


This play has power and a quite deal of wit; it is about a black mother who struggles to do what is best for her extended family in Chicago.


Willy Loman fails as a businessman and as a father; he spends his life living in an illusion.


Mother plans the social future of her crippled, shy daughter while son is torn between dreams of escape and sense of family responsibility.
Teacher’s Bibliography

Critique and analysis of all Miller’s plays.

An autobiographical sketch of Hansberry, including some of her writings.

Critique and analysis of Williams’ works.

Critique and analysis of Miller’s plays.

Critique and analysis of Miller’s writings.

In addition the teacher must do a thorough reading of the five plays the students will read, act out, and discuss.

Supplementary bibliography

These books are appropriate for the teacher and the student.

Chicano youth remains involved in crime and street gangs until he begins to identify with Mexican revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata.

First person accounts of life as a youthful Puerto Rican; covers many topics.

Young adolescent’s fears, hopes, fantasies are brought to the fore by the wedding of her brother.

Recommended for the mature student who is interested in feminism and/or radical Catholicism. Biography of a single parent who helped found a radical Catholic organization.

Recommended for the mature because of sexual scenes and sometimes coarse language.

Novel deals with the son of an ex-Mexican revolutionary who settles in California. Youth has difficulty with establishing cultural identity.

**Classroom Materials**

The motion picture film *The Glass Menagerie*.

The Dustin Hoffman videotape of *The Death of a Salesman*.

The records of *The Death of a Salesman*.

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