



**November 5, 2014 at 9 a.m.  
GSU Center for Performing Arts**

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## SYNOPSIS

This groundbreaking play starred Sidney Poitier, Claudia McNeill, Ruby Dee, and Diana Sands in the Broadway production which opened in 1959 and has since been revived. Set on Chicago's South Side, the plot revolves around the divergent dreams and conflicts within three generations of the Younger family: son Walter Lee, his wife Ruth, his sister Beneatha, his son Travis, and matriarch Lena. When her deceased husband's insurance money comes through, Mama Lena dreams of moving to a new home and a better neighborhood in Chicago. Walter Lee, a chauffeur, has other plans, however: buying a liquor store and being his own man. Beneatha dreams of medical school. The tensions and prejudice they face form this seminal American drama. Sacrifice, trust, and love among the Younger family and their heroic struggle to retain dignity in a harsh and changing world is a searing and timeless document of hope and inspiration.

## CHARACTERS

**Walter Lee Younger:** The protagonist of the play. Walter is a dreamer. He wants to be rich and devises plans to acquire wealth with his friends, particularly Willy Harris. When the play opens, he wants to invest his father's insurance money in a new liquor store venture. He spends the rest of the play endlessly preoccupied with discovering a quick solution to his family's various problems.

**Beneatha "Bennie" Younger:** Mama's daughter and Walter's sister. Beneatha is an intellectual. Twenty years old, she attends college and is better educated than the rest of the Younger family. Some of her personal beliefs and views have distanced her from conservative Mama. She dreams of being a doctor and struggles to determine her identity as a well-educated black woman.

**Lena "Mama" Younger:** Walter and Beneatha's mother. The matriarch of the family, Mama is religious, moral, and maternal. She wants to use her husband's insurance money as a down payment on a house with a backyard to fulfill her dream for her family to move up in the world.

**Ruth Younger:** Walter's wife and Travis's mother. Ruth takes care of the Youngers' small apartment. Her marriage to Walter has problems, but she hopes to rekindle their love. She is about thirty, but her weariness makes her seem older. Constantly fighting poverty and domestic troubles, she continues to be an emotionally strong woman. Her almost pessimistic pragmatism helps her to survive.

**Travis Younger:** Walter and Ruth's sheltered young son. Travis earns some money by carrying grocery bags and likes to play outside with other neighborhood children, but he has no bedroom and sleeps on the living room sofa.

**Joseph Asagai:** A Nigerian student in love with Beneatha. Asagai, as he is often called, is very proud of his African heritage, and Beneatha hopes to learn about her African heritage from him. He eventually proposes marriage to Beneatha and hopes she will return to Nigeria with him.

**George Murchison:** A wealthy, African American man who courts Beneatha. The Youngers approve of George, but Beneatha dislikes his willingness to submit to white culture and forget his African heritage. He challenges the thoughts and feelings of other black people through his arrogance and flair for intellectual competition.

**Mr. Karl Lindner:** The only white character in the play. Mr. Lindner arrives at the Youngers' apartment from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. He offers the Youngers a deal to reconsider moving into his (all-white) neighborhood.

**Bobo:** One of Walter's partners in the liquor store plan. Bobo appears to be as mentally slow as his name indicates.

## PLAYWRIGHT BIOGRAPHY



Lorraine Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois. She wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*, which opened on Broadway to great success. Hansberry was the first black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Critics' Circle award. Throughout her life she was heavily involved in civil rights. She died at 34 of pancreatic cancer.

### **Early Life**

Playwright, author, activist. The granddaughter of a freed slave, and the youngest by seven years of four children, Lorraine Vivian Hansberry 3rd was born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois. Hansberry's father was a successful real estate broker, and her mother was a schoolteacher. Her parents contributed large sums of money to the NAACP and the Urban League. In 1938, Hansberry's family moved to a white neighborhood and was violently attacked by neighbors. They refused to move until a court ordered them to do so, and the case made it to the Supreme Court as *Hansberry v. Lee*, ruling restrictive covenants illegal. Hansberry broke her family's tradition of enrolling in Southern black colleges and instead attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison. While at school, she changed her major from painting to writing, and after two years decided to drop out and move to New York City.

### **Commercial Success**

In New York, Hansberry attended the New School for Social Research and then worked for Paul Robeson's progressive black newspaper, *Freedom*, as a writer and associate editor from 1950 to 1953. She also worked part-time as a waitress and cashier, and wrote in her spare time. By 1956, Hansberry quit her jobs and committed her time to writing. In 1957, she joined the Daughters of Bilitis and contributed letters to their magazine, *The Ladder*, about feminism and homophobia. Her lesbian identity was exposed in the articles, but she wrote under her initials, L.H., for fear of discrimination. During this time, Hansberry wrote *The Crystal Stair*, a play about a struggling black family in Chicago, which was later renamed *A Raisin in the Sun*, a line from a Langston Hughes poem. The play opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, and was a great success, having a run of 530 performances. It was the first play produced on Broadway by an African-American woman, and Hansberry was the first black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Critics' Circle award. The film version of *A Raisin in the*

*Sun* was completed in 1961, starring Sidney Poitier, and received an award at the Cannes Film Festival. In 1963, Hansberry became active in the Civil Rights Movement. Along with other influential people, including Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne and James Baldwin, Hansberry met with then attorney general Robert Kennedy to test his position on civil rights. In 1963, her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened on Broadway to unenthusiastic reception.

### **Personal Life**

Hansberry met Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish songwriter, on a picket line, and the two were married in 1953. Hansberry and Nemiroff divorced in 1962, though they continued to work together. In 1964, the same year *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* opened, Hansberry was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She died on January 12, 1965. After her death, Nemiroff adapted a collection of her writing and interviews in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, which opened off-Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theatre and ran for eight months.

## CONTEXT

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, the youngest of four children. Her parents were well-educated, successful black citizens who publicly fought discrimination against black people. When Hansberry was a child, she and her family lived in a black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. During this era, segregation—the enforced separation of whites and blacks—was still legal and widespread throughout the South. Northern states, including Hansberry's own Illinois, had no official policy of segregation, but they were generally self-segregated along racial and economic lines. Chicago was a striking example of a city carved into strictly divided black and white neighborhoods. Hansberry's family became one of the first to move into a white neighborhood, but Hansberry still attended a segregated public school for blacks. When neighbors struck at them with threats of violence and legal action, the Hansberry's defended themselves. Hansberry's father successfully brought his case all the way to the Supreme Court.

Hansberry wrote that she always felt the inclination to record her experiences. At times, her writing—including *A Raisin in the Sun*—is recognizably autobiographical. She was one of the first playwrights to create realistic portraits of African-American life. When *A Raisin in the Sun* opened in March 1959, it met with great praise from white and black audience members alike. Arguably the first play to portray black characters, themes, and conflicts in a natural and realistic manner, *A Raisin in the Sun* received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of the Year. Hansberry was the youngest playwright, the fifth woman, and the only black writer at that point to win the award. She used her new fame to help bring attention to the American civil rights movement as well as African struggles for independence from colonialism. Her promising career was cut short when she died from cancer in 1965, at the age of thirty-four.

*A Raisin in the Sun* can be considered a turning point in American art because it addresses so many issues important during the 1950s in the United States. The 1950s are widely mocked in modern times as an age of complacency and conformism, symbolized by the growth of suburbs and commercial culture that began in that decade. Such a view, however, is superficial at best. Beneath the economic prosperity that characterized America in the years following World War II roiled growing domestic and racial tension. The stereotype of 1950s America as a land of happy housewives and blacks content with their inferior status resulted in an upswell of social resentment that would finally find public voice in the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s. *A Raisin in the Sun*, first performed as the conservative 1950s slid into the radical sixties, explores both of these vital issues.

*A Raisin in the Sun* was a revolutionary work for its time. Hansberry creates in the Younger family one of the first honest depictions of a black family on an American stage, in an age when predominantly black audiences simply did not exist. Before this play, African-American roles, usually small and comedic, largely employed ethnic stereotypes. Hansberry, however, shows an entire black family in a realistic light, one that is unflattering and far from comedic. She uses

black vernacular throughout the play and broaches important issues and conflicts, such as poverty, discrimination, and the construction of African-American racial identity.

*A Raisin in the Sun* explores not only the tension between white and black society but also the strain within the black community over how to react to an oppressive white community. Hansberry's drama asks difficult questions about assimilation and identity. Through the character of Joseph Asagai, Hansberry reveals a trend toward celebrating African heritage. As he calls for a native revolt in his homeland, she seems to predict the anticolonial struggles in African countries of the upcoming decades, as well as the inevitability and necessity of integration.

Hansberry also addressed feminist questions ahead of their time in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Through the character of Beneatha, Hansberry proposes that marriage is not necessary for women and that women can and should have ambitious career goals. She even approaches an abortion debate, allowing the topic of abortion to enter the action in an era when abortion was illegal. Of course, one of her most radical statements was simply the writing and production of the play—no small feat given her status as a young, black woman in the 1950s.

All of this idealism about race and gender relations boils down to a larger, timeless point—that dreams are crucial. In fact, Hansberry's play focuses primarily on the dreams driving and motivating its main characters. These dreams function in positive ways, by lifting their minds from their hard work and tough lifestyle, and in negative ways, by creating in them even more dissatisfaction with their present situations. For the most part, however, the negative dreams come from placing emphasis on materialistic goals rather than on familial pride and happiness. Hansberry seems to argue that as long as people attempt to do their best for their families, they can lift each other up. *A Raisin in the Sun* remains important as a cultural document of a crucial period in American history as well as for the continued debate over racial and gender issues that it has helped spark.

### **A Note on the Title**

Lorraine Hansberry took the title of *A Raisin in the Sun* from a line in Langston Hughes's famous 1951 poem "Harlem: A Dream Deferred." Hughes was a prominent black poet during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance in New York City, during which black artists of all kinds—musicians, poets, writers—gave innovative voices to their personal and cultural experiences. The Harlem Renaissance was a time of immense promise and hopefulness for black artists, as their efforts were noticed and applauded across the United States. In fact, the 1920s are known to history as the Jazz Age, since that musical form, created by a vanguard of black musicians, gained immense national popularity during the period and seemed to embody the exuberance and excitement of the decade. The Harlem Renaissance and the positive national response to the art it produced seemed to herald the possibility of a new age of acceptance for blacks in America.

Langston Hughes was one of the brightest lights of the Harlem Renaissance, and his poems and essays celebrate black culture, creativity, and strength. However, Hughes wrote "Harlem" in

1951, twenty years after the Great Depression crushed the Harlem Renaissance and devastated black communities more terribly than any other group in the United States. In addition, the post–World War II years of the 1950s were characterized by “white flight,” in which whites fled the cities in favor of the rapidly growing suburbs. Blacks were often left behind in deteriorating cities, and were unwelcome in the suburbs. In a time of renewed prosperity, blacks were for the most part left behind.

“Harlem” captures the tension between the need for black expression and the impossibility of that expression because of American society’s oppression of its black population. In the poem, Hughes asks whether a “dream deferred”—a dream put on hold—withered up “[l]ike a raisin in the sun.” His lines confront the racist and dehumanizing attitude prevalent in American society before the civil rights movement of the 1960s that black desires and ambitions were, at best, unimportant and should be ignored, and at worst, should be forcibly resisted. His closing rhetorical question—“*Or does [a dream deferred] explode?*”—is incendiary, a bold statement that the suppression of black dreams might result in an eruption. It implicitly places the blame for this possible eruption on the oppressive society that forces the dream to be deferred. Hansberry’s reference to Hughes’s poem in her play’s title highlights the importance of dreams in *A Raisin in the Sun* and the struggle that her characters face to realize their individual dreams, a struggle inextricably tied to the more fundamental black dream of equality in America.

# THEMES

## **The Value and Purpose of Dreams**

*A Raisin in the Sun* is essentially about dreams, as the main characters struggle to deal with the oppressive circumstances that rule their lives. The title of the play references a conjecture that Langston Hughes famously posed in a poem he wrote about dreams that were forgotten or put off. He wonders whether those dreams shrivel up “like a raisin in the sun.” Every member of the Younger family has a separate, individual dream—Beneatha wants to become a doctor, for example, and Walter wants to have money so that he can afford things for his family. The Youngers struggle to attain these dreams throughout the play, and much of their happiness and depression is directly related to their attainment of, or failure to attain, these dreams. By the end of the play, they learn that the dream of a house is the most important dream because it unites the family.

## **The Need to Fight Racial Discrimination**

The character of Mr. Lindner makes the theme of racial discrimination prominent in the plot as an issue that the Youngers cannot avoid. The governing body of the Youngers’ new neighborhood, the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, sends Mr. Lindner to persuade them not to move into the all-white Clybourne Park neighborhood. Mr. Lindner and the people he represents can only see the color of the Younger family’s skin, and his offer to bribe the Youngers to keep them from moving threatens to tear apart the Younger family and the values for which it stands. Ultimately, the Youngers respond to this discrimination with defiance and strength. The play powerfully demonstrates that the way to deal with discrimination is to stand up to it and reassert one’s dignity in the face of it rather than allow it to pass unchecked.

## **The Importance of Family**

The Youngers struggle socially and economically throughout the play but unite in the end to realize their dream of buying a house. Mama strongly believes in the importance of family, and she tries to teach this value to her family as she struggles to keep them together and functioning. Walter and Beneatha learn this lesson about family at the end of the play, when Walter must deal with the loss of the stolen insurance money and Beneatha denies Walter as a brother. Even facing such trauma, they come together to reject Mr. Lindner’s racist overtures. They are still strong individuals, but they are now individuals who function as part of a family. When they begin to put the family and the family’s wishes before their own, they merge their individual dreams with the family’s overarching dream.

## **DISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS**

Theatre and Performance Studies

English Literature

History

Ethnic Studies

Identity Studies

Communication Studies

Anthropology and Sociology

Political Science

Social Work

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the dreams of the main characters—Mama, Ruth, Beneatha, and Walter—and how are they deferred?

Discuss the title of the play. How does it relate to the dreams of each of the characters?

What does Mama's plant represent, and how does the symbol evolve over the course of the play?

How does the description of the Youngers' apartment contribute to the mood of the play?

How does the idea of assimilationism become important?

Think about the role of money in the play. How does it affect different characters?

How do power and authority change hands over the course of the play?

Discuss how minor characters such as George Murchison, Willy Harris, and Mr. Lindner represent the ideas against which the main characters react.

In an earlier version of the script, Hansberry ended the play by showing the Youngers sitting in their new home, armed and awaiting an attack from their white neighbors. Should this scene have been kept in? What's the effect of deleting it? Would the presence of this scene have changed the overall message of the play?

What sort of statement does Hansberry seem to be making about race? Does she make more than one statement? If so, do these statements conflict with each other?

What message does *A Raisin in the Sun* offer the twenty-first century?