

# InsideOUT

PRODUCED BY THE DENVER CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

October 2009



## A RAISIN IN THE SUN

BY LORRAINE HANSBERRY  
THE STAGE THEATRE  
OCT 2 – OCT 31

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# InsideOUT

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## Synopsis

*What happens to a dream deferred?*

*Does it dry up*

*Like a raisin in the sun?*

*Or fester like a sore---*

*And then run?*

*Does it stink like rotten meat?*

*Or crust and sugar over---*

*Like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags*

*like a heavy load.*

*Or does it explode?*

—Langston Hughes, “Harlem,” 1951.

Set in the self-segregated world of 1950s Chicago, *A Raisin in the Sun* centers on the Youngers, an African-American family. They are about to receive an insurance check for \$10,000, coming from the deceased Mr. Younger’s life insurance policy. Each of the adult family members has plans for the money. The matriarch of the family, Mama (or Lena), wants to buy a house to fulfill a dream she shared with

her late husband, but her son, Walter Lee, would rather use the money to invest in a liquor store with his friends, believing this entrepreneurial step will solve the family’s financial problems forever. Ruth, Walter’s wife, wants to live in a house with more space and more opportunities for her adolescent son, Travis. Finally, Beneatha, Mama’s daughter and Walter’s sister, aspires to medical school and wants to use the money for her tuition. She also wishes her family members were not so interested in joining the white world and more interested in finding their identity by looking back to their African past.

The Youngers clash over their competing dreams and display their hopes and fears for the future. Finally, when Mama puts a deposit on a house in an all-white community, they are visited by a soon-to-be-neighbor who is a representative of the white homeowners. He offers the family money if they would be willing to stay out of the neighborhood. The Youngers must then decide: do they stay in their old apartment or move? Their decision highlights the tensions between white and black society and the strains of a black family trying to make a home while each one achieves a dream.

# The Playwright, Lorraine Hansberry

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*I suppose I think that the highest gift that a man has is art, and I am audacious enough to think of myself as an artist—that there is both joy and beauty and illumination and communion between people to be achieved through the dissection of personality.*

—Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*

Lorraine Hansberry was born into a middle-class Chicago family on May 19, 1930 to Nannie Perry and Carl A. Hansberry, active proponents of civil rights. As a child, she witnessed her father’s participation in challenging segregation through his work with the NAACP and the Urban League. His attempt to break down the barriers of racism continued in the political arena when he ran for Congress.

One of her father’s boldest actions occurred when he moved the family into a white neighborhood in Chicago to test real estate covenants barring blacks. As a result, the family’s home was vandalized and on one occasion Lorraine was injured. Her father, determined to fight residential segregation, brought legal action with the aid of the NAACP. Although he won the case, his actions did not end neighborhood segregation in Chicago.

After high school, Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin for two years. She left early to pursue a career as associate editor of the New York City based newspaper, *Freedom*, a radical black paper founded by actor/singer Paul Robeson. In 1953, she married Robert Nemiroff, an aspiring Jewish writer and graduate student in English and history at New York University. In 1956 the success of the hit song “Cindy, Oh Cindy,” written by Nemiroff and Burt D’Lugoff, enabled

Hansberry to resign from the paper and write full time. Nemiroff also ran a music publishing firm.

Influenced by her father’s dedication to civil rights, Hansberry wrote the play *A Raisin in the Sun* that opened to glowing reviews in New York in 1959. It was the first play by an African American woman to open on Broadway and to be directed by an African American director, Lloyd Richards. *A Raisin in the Sun* won the New York Drama Critics Circle Best Play of the Year Award, making her the first African American to win the award. For the film version of the play, she won the Screen Writer’s Guild Award.

In 1963 Hansberry was diagnosed with cancer. Nevertheless, she attended rehearsals for her new play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window*, about Jews after World War II. One year later, her marriage ended in divorce. For the next two years she continued to write while she battled cancer with radiation and chemotherapy. On January 12, 1965, Hansberry died.

After her death, her ex-husband, the executor of her estate, collected her unfinished plays, poems and writings and published them in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*. He also published her last three plays in *Les Blancs: the Collected Last Plays*.

Carter, Steven R. *Hansberry’s Drama: Commitment amid Complexity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

<http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/lorrainehansberry/p/bio>

# Production History

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**A** *Raisin in the Sun* debuted on Broadway in 1959. Lorraine Hansberry and producer Phillip Rose did not expect the play to be a success, for it received mixed reviews from a preview audience the night before. The original cast starred Sidney Poitier as Walter Lee Younger, Claudia McNeil as Lena Younger, Ruby Dee as Ruth Younger, Diana Sands as Beneatha Younger, Ivan Dixon as Joseph Asagai, Glynn Turman as Travis Younger, John Fiedler as Karl Lindner, Lonnie Elder III as Bobo, Ed Hall and Douglas Turner Ward as the Moving Men and Louis Gossett Jr. as George Murchison.

The play is based in part on a class action lawsuit (*Hansberry v. Lee*, 311 U. S. 32 (1940)) to which the Hansberry family was a party. They sought to have their day in court over racially motivated restrictive covenants and won their right to be heard as a matter of due process of law guaranteed by the 14th Amendment. However, they lost the case in the Supreme Court because the Court determined the Hansberry suit and the 1934 case on the housing covenants had conflicting goals.

In 1961 a black and white film version was made of the play featuring the Broadway cast. It was released by Columbia Pictures; Ruby Dee won the National Board of Review Award for Best Supporting Actress. Both Poitier and McNeil were nominated for Golden Globe Awards, but the film received no Academy Award nominations.

In 1973, the play was turned into a musical, *Raisin*. Hansberry's former husband, Robert Nemiroff, wrote the book. It won the 1974 Tony Award for Best Musical.

In 1989 the play was adapted into a made-for-TV movie starring Danny Glover and Esther Rolle. This production received three Emmy Award nominations, but they were all for technical categories. Bill Duke directed the production and Chiz Schultz produced. The cast included Danny Glover as Walter Lee, Starletta Dupois as Ruth, Esther Rolle as Mama, Kim Yancy as Beneatha and John Fiedler reprised his role as Karl Lindner.

The play was revived in 2004 at the Royale Theatre in New York. It was directed by Kenny Leon and featured Sean Combs as Walter Lee, Phylicia Rashad as Mama, Audra McDonald as Ruth and Sanaa Lathan as Beneatha. It was nominated for four Tony Awards: Best Revival of a Play, Best Performance by a Leading Actress and two nominations for Best Performance by a Featured Actress. Phylicia Rashad won the Tony for Best Leading Actress, becoming the first African American to win this award, and Audra McDonald won the Tony for Best Performance by a Featured Actress.

Another made for television film premiered on February 25, 2008 on ABC. It featured the cast from the 2004 revival and was directed by Kenny Leon.

<http://www.raisinonbroadway.com/news.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Raisin\\_in\\_the\\_Sun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Raisin_in_the_Sun)

# The Source of the Title

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The title *A Raisin in the Sun* is taken from a line in Langston Hughes 1951 poem “Harlem.” 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 voice to personal and collective experiences. It was a time of immense hope and promise for black artists as their efforts were finally being noticed; in fact, the 1920s are known in history as the Jazz Age since that musical form created by black musicians gained national popularity. However, the Great Depression crushed the hopes of the Harlem Renaissance and devastated black communities economically and socially.

Hughes wrote “Harlem” in 1951 with memories of the Depression and the 1950s flight of white Americans from the cities to the suburbs. He felt that blacks once again were being left behind in deteriorating conditions and were not welcome in the new suburbs.

Hughes’s poem captures the frustration between the need for black expression and the impossibility of it being heard. When it is not acknowledged, “Hughes questions whether people simply surrender to circumstances when their aspirations are frustrated or whether those dreams retain their power and erupt in unpredictable ways.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Domina, p. 1.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/raisin/context.html>

Domina, Lynn. *Understanding A Raisin in the Sun*. London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

## Themes of the Play

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A clear primary theme of *A Raisin in the Sun* is race and racism. The Youngers live in a poorly maintained apartment in a segregated neighborhood of a segregated city. Virtually every act they perform is affected by race, especially their employment. Ruth works as a domestic and Walter as a chauffeur for rich white families because they are poor uneducated blacks and these are the only positions for which they are qualified. Their low-paying jobs limit their domicile to a small apartment, probably owned by an absentee landlord who cares nothing about the existence of rats or cockroaches. The most significant scene that blatantly portrays racism is the visit paid by Karl Lindner. This representative of the district in which Mama has put a deposit on a house, wants to live in an all-white neighborhood—and he is willing to pay off the Youngers to stay out. Non-violent and non-threatening, Mr. Lindner is a quiet racist manifesting the prejudices of a whole community.

Although the play would debut before any major Civil Rights movement occurred in the United States during the 1960s, it raises many of the issues that would eventually be addressed. “Civil Rights generally refer to the rights a person has by law—such as the right to vote or the rights to attend adequate schools—and are often referred to as human rights.”<sup>1</sup> The central civil rights issue in the play is, of course, where the Youngers can live. Mama refuses to live in the ghetto neighborhood, and when she chooses the house she can afford, she is almost prevented from moving there because of her race. She is not trying to make a political point, but rather to purchase the best place available for the money.

While Mama stresses the importance of family, the Youngers are split over gender roles. Mama understands that Walter must experience himself as head of the family, but he is frustrated with his mother. “He feels worthless to the family because he is not regarded as primarily responsible for its welfare.”<sup>2</sup> When Mama gives him the opportunity

to manage the remainder of the money, Walter gives it to the nefarious Willy who promptly runs off with it. Walter must find his manhood before he can become head of the family.

The American Dream is another theme of the play. This phrase includes many ideas, but is primarily the belief that anyone who comes to or is born in America can achieve success through hard work. Walter Younger works hard and aspires to his piece of the dream, but is frustrated at every turn because his opportunities are limited by his race. He wants to be the Big Man, but more importantly, he wants chances for his son that he never had. Working for a pittance as a servant for wealthy whites has taken a toll on Walter's sense of authority and he lashes out at the women who surround him—all of whom have dreams, too.

At the time the play opened, the feminist movement was just gaining momentum. Hansberry's women are strong and resilient like Mama's plant and are "women who exemplify the strength and focus diminishing in Walter Lee."<sup>3</sup> Ruth wants a decent place to raise her son and

Beneatha dreams of becoming a doctor, but Walter exhibits blatantly sexist behavior when he treats his wife and sister as though their dreams lack the importance of his. Even the educated George and Joseph Asagai insist that women have only one role in life—wife and mother. Though Ruth and Beneatha get little opportunity to achieve their dreams in the play, Hansberry asserted: "Women (like Ruth and Lena) have become the backbone of our people in a very necessary way."<sup>4</sup>

1. Galens, p. 187.
2. Penumbra Theatre Co., p. 24.
3. Ibid, p. 17.
4. Carter, p. 53.

Carter, Steven R. *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment amid Complexity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Galens, David, ed. *Drama for Students Volume 2*. Farmington Hills, MI: the Gale Group, 2002.

Penumbra Theatre Co. *Study Guide for A Raisin in the Sun*. Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN: 2008.

## Historical Context of the Play and the Chicago Setting

*The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.*  
—W. E. B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.

Significant historical events occurred in the 1950s that would influence the Younger family. For example, in 1954 the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision ruled that the "separate but equal" doctrine regarding school segregation was unconstitutional. In 1955 the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott occurred with blacks and some whites refusing to sit in the back of the bus. In 1958, the public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, were closed by the governor in defiance of the Supreme Court order. In 1960, "sit-ins" began at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina to protest segregated lunch counters.

Because of technological discoveries many aspects of daily life changed during the 1950s. American automakers began to manufacture some compact cars and computers were in their early stages of development. Television became a huge source of home entertainment, while supermarkets were replacing the small "mom and pop" stores. Frozen orange juice became more popular than fresh, and the frozen TV dinner became a household staple.

Chicago's racial problems of the 1950s can be traced back to historical and geographic coincidences. The city was incorporated in 1837, forcing out the remaining Native Americans; this was followed by several surges of European immigration. For example, as a result of the potato famine of 1845, many

Irish people settled in Chicago and their descendants became influential in local politics. After the Civil War, German and Polish immigrants arrived and established their own neighborhoods. During World War I, large numbers of African Americans came to the city to work in the industries created to fill the demands of war. Many of Chicago's neighborhoods have retained an ethnic flavor that promotes a cultural diversity that can be positive but also can contribute to tension among different groups.

Chicago was a transportation hub during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and its location marked the border between the industrial East and the agricultural West. It functioned as a facilitator between the exchange of raw materials and manufactured goods. Walter Younger describes this geographic situation after driving to the steel mills of Gary, Indiana, one day and the dairy lands of Wisconsin the next.

Domina, Lynn. *Understanding a Raisin in the Sun*. London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Galens, David, ed. *Drama for Students, Volume 2*. Farmington Hills, MI: the Gale Group, 2002.

## The African Image in the Play

MAMA: *I don't think I never met no African before.*"

— A Raisin in the Sun

The most significant representative of Africa in the play is in the character of Joseph Asagai, Beneatha's friend. Except for her, the Younger family sees no relationship between themselves and Africa. Although Mama donates money to missionaries in Africa to convert the locals, she does not realize they function in cooperation with the European colonial powers. Beneatha alters her way of thinking about Africans in knowing Joseph. He gifts her with Yoruba tribal robes and music and encourages her to resume her natural hairstyle. He criticizes African Americans for trying to assimilate and become part of the mainstream. To Hansberry, Asagai was a representative of the Harlem Renaissance writers who "discovered the African past and became very aware of it."<sup>1</sup> Joseph's purpose is to gain an education in America that will allow him to return to Nigeria and liberate his people. He understands that his involvement in a de-colonization process may result in a revolution, and "[should it] prove successful it may ultimately call for his death."<sup>2</sup>

According to Steven R. Carter in *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment and Complexity*, Hansberry wanted to demonstrate "that the African heritage of black Americans is a glorious one."<sup>3</sup> In her stage directions for Mama she notes that "her bearing is most like that of the Herero (tribal) women."<sup>4</sup> With Joseph Asagai's gifts to Beneatha she introduces audiences to all the beauty of these African traditions

of clothing and music.

When Walter fantasizes about being an African he shouts: "Yeah—and Ethiopia stretch forth her hands again!" Hansberry recalled in an interview that as a child she saw newsreels of the Italians killing Ethiopians and felt the outrage of the black community. As Walter comically portrays an African, it is with serious overtones. The African tribal culture was built around hunters and warriors "whose spirits live on in Walter despite the shackling of his ambition and aggressiveness by American society."<sup>5</sup> Hansberry truly felt that American blacks as well as whites needed to be educated about the achievements and values of Africans.

1. Carter, p. 38.
2. Penumbra Theatre Co., p. 34.
3. Carter, p. 36.
4. Hansberry, p. 21.
5. Carter, p. 37.

Carter, Steve R. *Hansberry's Drama: Commitment and Complexity*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Domina, Lynn. *Understanding a Raisin in the Sun*. London: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun*. New York: Samuel French, 1959.

Penumbra Theatre Co. *A Study Guide for A Raisin in the Sun*. Minneapolis/St. Paul, 2008.

# Fair Housing Laws

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If the Youngers had been purchasing their house in 1968 or later, they would not have been subjected to the racism of Mr. Lindner, at least, not legally. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 “prohibits the discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of dwellings, and in other housing-related transactions, based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, familial status.”<sup>1</sup> Certain acts are specifically prohibited: the refusal to rent or sell housing; the refusal to negotiate for housing; falsely denying that housing is available for inspection, sale or rental, among others. In the case of Mr. Lindner, it is illegal for anyone to: “threaten, coerce, intimidate or interfere with anyone exercising a fair housing right or assisting others who exercise that right.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the Fair Housing Laws, residential segregation still exists. In *The Black Metropolis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* edited by Robert D. Bullard, the author asserts blacks living in the Midwest are most segregated, followed by those in the Northeast. The South and West have the lowest levels of African American segregation. “Blacks continue to live in different neighborhoods from whites regardless of their having similar education, income and occupations. This suggests that race and not class is the most important factor explaining the residential segregation of blacks in 2000.”<sup>3</sup>

In May 2009 the National Fair Housing Alliance reported that housing discrimination in the nation had spiked because of the worsening foreclosure crisis. People of color were sucked into sub-prime loans or Adjustable Rate Mortgages (ARM) and did not realize the consequences. Theirs was not an

irrational decision for people who had been kept outside the American Dream of owning a home.

Another complaint of discrimination is housing ads on the Internet that violate fair housing laws. Shanna Smith, National Fair Housing Alliance president, says: “As more and more people turn to the Internet for information, we anticipate hundreds more complaints from around the country.” She urges the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Justice to investigate thoroughly and enforce fair housing programs.

1. [www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov).
2. [www.nis.gov](http://www.nis.gov).
3. Bullard, p. 81.
4. NFHA

Bullard, Robert D., ed. *The Black Metropolis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

<http://www.hud.gov/offices/fheo/FHlaws>

[http://www.nis.gov/offices/fheo/FHlaws/your rights](http://www.nis.gov/offices/fheo/FHlaws/your%20rights)

<http://the.politicsofdebt.com/?p=44>

National Fair Housing Alliance

# Questions

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- 1) What is the “American Dream?” Explain how the “American Dream” differs from culture to culture? Does the dream come true for any member of the Younger family?
- 2) How does each member of the Younger family want to spend the insurance money? How do the characters want to change their lives and do they believe they can change it? What are their expectations of the other family members?
- 3) How would you describe the hierarchy in the family? Is this hierarchy based on age or gender?
- 4) What is Beneatha searching for in the play and how does this shape her character and the way she relates to the other characters in the play?
- 5) How would you describe George Murchison and Joseph Asagi? What do the characters represent? How does Beneatha treat them?
- 6) How would you define the marriage between Walter and Ruth?
- 7) What does Ruth’s pregnancy do to the family? What decisions are made or ignored and who is involved?
- 8) How does the purchase of the house in Clybourne Park affect the family? Why does Mr. Lindner want to keep the Younger family from moving into his neighborhood and how does he try to prevent their move?
- 9) How does Walter become a “man?” What does it mean to be a “real” man?
- 10) The playwright, Lorraine Hansberry, uses the poem, “A Dream Deferred,” by Langston Hughes to introduce her play. After reading the poem (see page 2), what are the similarities and differences between the poem and the play?

# Activities

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## Columbian Hypnosis

1. Students are pair up and stand two feet from each other. Student A places the palm of his/her hand six to eight inches from Student B’s face. **THE STUDENTS ARE NOT TO TOUCH AT ANY TIME** and the exercise should be performed in total silence. The students are to pretend that a string runs from the palm of Student A to the nose of Student B.
2. Student A explores the space with his/her palm by moving it back and forth or up and down and around and B must follow so that imaginary string will not break. Start by having students mirror each other but then encourage movement in the space without collisions. Have a Student A manipulate Student B into grotesque shapes and images.
3. After the initial exploration, switch positions. Student B now leads Student A.
4. Discussion Questions:

How did it make you feel when you were the person leading or the person following? What do you think would happen if you add another person and had to follow and lead at the same time? Where are some of the places that we see a power struggle take place in *A Raisin in the Sun*? Where else do we see a power dynamic?

## Colorado Model Content Standards

**Civics 2.2: Students know how power, authority, and responsibility are distributed, shared, and limited.**

**History 5.3: Students know how political power has been acquired, maintained, used and/or lost throughout history.**

### Dinner Tables

Goal: The purpose of this exercise is to generate a discussion about similarities and differences of various social, economic, and cultural groups and their cultures and the power of stereotypes.

1. Divide into groups of between 4 and 6 students. For the first round, each group is assigned a particular family based on their world geography or culture. For example, you might choose: American, Japanese, Somalian, Italian, etc.
2. Each group has a few minutes to gather and discuss ideas of what their family group would look like when seated for dinner. Their ideas might be based on factual information, stereotype or just their imaginations.
3. Each group must then present a frozen portrait of their family at the dinner table.
4. After the first round, discuss:
  - a. How many people sit at a table? Where do the family members sit at the table? What type of food or utensils do they use? Are there any activities beyond eating that occur at the dinner table?
  - b. Is your picture based on fact or stereotype? What is a stereotype? How do we use stereotypes? What are some examples of stereotypes that are used positively?
5. For the second round, focus on a dinner table in the United States. Have each group change their family to either a regional demographic of the United States (Southern, Northern, Western, Southeastern, Northeastern, etc.) or a cultural demographic (Latin-American, African-American, Caucasian-American, Asian-American, etc.)
6. After the second round, discuss:
  - a. In these portraits, what were the similarities and differences?
  - b. Which ones were based on facts or stereotypes? What is a stereotype? How do we use stereotypes? What are some examples of stereotypes that are used positively?

## Colorado Model Content Standards

**History 3: Students understand that societies are diverse and have changed over time.**

**Geography 6: Students apply knowledge of people, places, and environments to understand the past and present and to plan for the future.**

### Perspective Writing

**All the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* have their own particular view of what is happening to the family and how the insurance money should be used. Write a short narrative from the perspective of a chosen character to tell their part of the story. For example, Beneatha has some strong opinions about what is to be done with the money and Walter Lee has some other ideas.**

## Colorado Model Content Standards

**Reading and Writing 2: Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.**

**Reading and Writing 4: Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing**

## **Timelines**

### **Historic Timeline**

1. Ask students to research significant events in United States history leading up to, during and following the play *A Raisin in the Sun* and to place these events in chronological order.
2. Have the students also compile events focusing on Civil Rights in the United States.
3. Create a timeline using the information gathered.
4. What changes or innovations in United States culture were happening during these times?
5. How was the United States changing? How was the world changing?

### **A Raisin in the Sun Timeline**

1. Ask students to chart the journey of Mama (Lena) Younger or one of the other characters in the story.
2. What significant events happened in that character's life? Track the events in the historic timeline and compare them to the character's life.
3. Create a timeline and plot the events of your chosen character that you know has happened. Add some events that you believe may happen in the future.

#### **Colorado Model Content Standards**

**History 1.1: Students know the general chronological order of events and people in history.**

**History 1.2: Students use chronology to organize historical events and people.**