

## A RAISIN IN THE SUN: A STUDY

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### Abstract

*The Black dramatists had to struggle to assert their own racial and cultural identity in the American society. This story embodies Hansberry's use of strong black women and shows the change in black arts and intellectualism. In A Raisin in the Sun Hansberry gave a very intimate depiction of the Black family. The play tackled issues of patriarchy (sexism and homophobia), poverty and white supremacy. The daily human challenges of family responsibility and love became harsher struggles in the face of inner city poverty and the threats of white racism. We also looked at the transformation of the Challenges of an older generation of working poor in comparison to a younger generation's challenges. Lorraine Hansberry's play gave great Black Cultural insight into the Struggles that came before the Hip-Hop generation that was born.*

**Keywords:** black drama, black women, black aesthetics, black family, black arts

### LORRAINE VIVIAN HANSBERRY (1930-1965): A BRIEF SKETCH

"Black" was the word handwritten on Lorraine Vivian Hansberry's birth certificate on May 19, 1930 in Chicago. Challenging the system was part of Hansberry's way of life. "I was born black and female", Lorraine Hansberry said. Race and gender would dominate her life and her work. Rejecting the limits placed on her race and her gender, she employed her writing and her life as a social activist to expand the meaning of what it meant to be a black woman. Her first play, A Raisin in the Sun, is based on her childhood experiences of desegregating a white neighbourhood. It won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as Best Play of the Year. She was the youngest American, the fifth woman and the first black to win the award. Her success opened the floodgates for a generation of modern black actors and writers who were influenced and encouraged by her writing. Important black leaders such as Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Dubois and Langston Hughes frequently had visited Hansberry's home when she was growing up.

She married Robert Nemiroff, a white Jewish intellectual. She used the success of A Raisin in the Sun as a platform to speak out for the American Civil Rights Movement and for the African struggle to free itself from white rule. Hansberry's work was a preview of the African-American spirit that engulfed the nation in the historic changes of the Civil Rights Movement. Her writing foresaw feminism, the Gay Liberation Movement and the demise of colonialism. She was a spearhead of the future, a woman who refused to be confined by the categories of race and gender.

Her works include A Raisin in the Sun (1957), A Raisin in the Sun, and screenplay (1960), The Drinking Gourd (1960), The Sign in Sidney Burstein's Window (1964), The Movement: Documentary of a Struggle for Equality (1964) and To be Young, Gifted and Black: An Informal Autobiography (1970).

### BLACK DRAMA

Black drama has existed since Mid 19th Century. The Black dramatists had to struggle to assert their own racial and cultural identity in the American society. The Black drama in America had twin goals. On the one hand, it has always had the crucial objective of presenting the Negro to himself, forced to wear the abstracting mask shaped by an implacable white hostility; on the other hand, it has set itself the task of testing American principles of exposing a gulf between spiritual and practical politics. And so, for the black dramatist, personal and cultural identities are of primary significance.

### A RAISIN IN THE SUN: AN ANALYSIS

A Raisin in the Sun was first produced in 1959 and anticipates many of the issues which were to divide American culture during the decade of the 1960s. This play focuses on major issues such as racism between white and black communities, abortion, marriage, assimilation and finding one's true identity but in the end, the play boils down to a timeless point; dreams are what make each person, white or black, push on in life in order to live each day like it was their last. A Raisin in the Sun is central, in the continued debate over racial and gender concerns, making this play a critical cultural document in an essential period of American history.

A Raisin in the Sun portrays a few weeks in the life of the Youngers, an African-American family living on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s. When the play opens, the Youngers are about to receive an insurance check

for \$10,000. This money comes from the deceased Mr. Younger's life insurance policy. Each of the adult members of the family has an idea as to what he or she would like to do with this money. The matriarch of the family, Mama, wants to buy a house to fulfil a dream she shared with her husband. Mama's son, Walter Lee, would rather use the money to invest in a liquor store with his friends. He believes that the investment will solve the family's financial problems forever. Walter's wife, Ruth, agrees with Mama, however, and hopes that she and Walter can provide more space and opportunity for their son, Travis. Finally, Beneatha, Walter's sister and Mama's daughter, wants to use the money for her medical school tuition. She also wishes that her family members were not so interested in joining the white world. Beneatha instead tries to find her identity by looking back to the past and to Africa.

As the play progresses, the Youngers clash over their competing dreams. Ruth discovers that she is pregnant but fears that if she has the child, she will put more financial pressure on her family members. When Walter says nothing to Ruth's admission that she is considering abortion, Mama puts a down payment on a house for the whole family. She believes that a bigger, brighter dwelling will help them all. This house is in Clybourne Park, an entirely white neighbourhood. When the Youngers' future neighbours find out that the Youngers are moving in, they send Mr. Linder, from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, to offer the Youngers money in return for staying away. The Youngers refuse the deal, even after Walter loses the rest of the money (\$6,500) to his friend Willy Harris, who persuades Walter to invest in the liquor store and then runs off with his cash.

In the meantime, Beneatha rejects her suitor, George Murchison, whom she believes to be shallow and blind to the problems of race. Subsequently, she receives a marriage proposal from her Nigerian boyfriend, Joseph Asagai, who wants Beneatha to get a medical degree and move to Africa with him (Beneatha does not make her choice before the end of the play). The Youngers eventually move out of the apartment, fulfilling the family's long-held dream. Their future seems uncertain and slightly dangerous, but they are optimistic and determined to live a better life. They believe that they can succeed if they stick together as a family and resolve to defer their dreams no longer.

## PORTRAYAL OF BLACK WOMEN

This story embodies Hansberry's use of strong black women. She was a realistic artist, fascinated by ordinary and real people with each one clearly and vividly drawn. In this play, she portrays courageous and revolutionary women who share struggles with each other and also with their men. Her women characters have positive characteristics. She speaks loudly about the role of women have played in the struggle for freedom. Even her choice of the name Beneatha (beneath) which means darkness also clearly represents this. A Raisin in the Sun, Hansberry shows three major female characters in very different stages in their lives.

The play shows a wavering line in the previously clearly defined gender roles. Men no longer consistently hold power over women. There are three generations of Younger women in the play, each with a different opinion of what it means to be a woman, and different view of who holds the power in the gender relationship.

The three main female characters in this play are Mama, Beneatha, and Ruth. Each has very different personalities and different dreams for the future. Mama, also known as Lena Younger, is Walter's and Beneatha's mother. She is definitely the matriarch of the family. She is extremely maternal, moral, and religious. Mama demands that her children are proud of their dreams and respect themselves and each other. Cleanliness is also very important to her as she likes the house to be sparkling, polished, and neat. Mama makes a point to stand up for herself, her family, and her beliefs. Mama believes that men should be in charge and speaks very matter-of-factly about who her husband was. It was her 'role' to accept it: "God knows there was plenty wrong with Walter Younger-hard-headed, mean, kind of wild with women- plenty wrong with him." (Act I, Scene I)

She provides a wonderful perspective from a much older generation. Mama is openly opposed to Beneatha's un-Christian like behaviours and thoughts and is deeply disappointed in Ruth for considering abortion. So, when Walter suggests investing in a liquor store, Mama refuses to take part in something that is so un-Christian like. Mama is not as interested in money and wealth as she is in dreams and aspirations. Clearly the most nurturing of the characters which can be seen in her constant verbal reminders that she only wants to help her children be happy and to properly provide for them as their mother.

Then there is Ruth, Walter's wife and mother of Travis. Ruth does not always accept her role. She does not blindly agree with everything Walter says or does. She acts out in small ways to show Walter, he does not have ultimate power over her: when Walter responds to the question, "What kind of eggs you want" with, "Not scrambled" she immediately begins scrambling the eggs. However, Ruth is still traditional. She wants her family to behave in a traditional fashion, she wants a traditional home, and she wants Beneatha to act traditional-"sweeter". The only time Ruth truly comes alive is at the prospect of seeing that traditional life come to fruition. It's easy to see that if the Youngers move to their house, Ruth will revert to a very traditional gender role. Ruth acts out only in times of trouble.

Much different from her mother, is Beneatha who is a young and attractive college student who provides this family with an independent feminist perspective focussed on an ambition to become a doctor. Throughout this

story, Beneatha's search for her identity and many times is very unsure of her. She dates two different men, one of whom she feels more attached to because of his culture and the importance of such culture to him.

Beneatha shows the power of change in gender roles by her desire to become a doctor. "Listen, I'm going to be a doctor. I'm not worried about who I'm going to marry yet- if I ever get married" (Act I, Scene I). The men in the play try and try again to exert their power over Beneatha and put her in her 'place'. "Who the hell told you, you had to be doctor? If you so crazy 'bout messing' round with sick people- then go be a nurse like other women- or get married and be quiet." (Act I, Scene I)

Yet Beneatha is a feminist. When Asagai makes the statement, "For a woman it should be enough", Beneatha replies, "I know because that's what it says in all the novels that men write. But it isn't. Go ahead and laugh-but I'm not interested in being someone's little episode in America" (Act I, Scene II). Hansberry was also a feminist ahead of her time to put these ideas into writing.

Even her name implies that she believes everything is beneath her. Sometimes irritating, Beneatha is a true feminist before her time. Feminist as anything else is a progression in coming into womanhood. For example, Mama speaks matter-of-factly of her husband's womanizing ways. She does not condemn him, but seems to accept that womanizing is what men do. Ruth would not put up with that from Walter although she does defer to him on a number of occasions. She also has a more gentle way of getting him to come around. Beneatha represents the "new woman" or feminist in that she would not put up with any of this. She wants to forge her own identity independent of a man. She believes that people must accept her as she is and refused to "be nice" as Mama tells her.

Beneatha expresses the cynicism that many minority intellectuals, including Lorraine Hansberry, held towards religion in light of white Christian leadership favouring segregation. Mama tells Beneatha that she will be a doctor someday, "God willing". Beneatha "drily" replies to Mama that "God hasn't got a thing to do with it", later saying, "God is just one idea that I don't accept...I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort" (Act I, Scene I). Hansberry further reveals her own attitude towards religion when Mama fouds over, begging God for strength, as she realizes that Walter has lost all of their insurance money. Beneatha tries to gain her mother's attention to help her, speaking to her "plaintively" (130). This implies that she is pleading with her mother as a parent to an emotionally immature child.

Mama represents a hardworking woman who takes control of her life and family, while Ruth is the most typical of the three in regard to women at the time. Ruth works in the home and takes her husband Walter's lead when it comes to various situations. She is clearly beneath Walter and her decisions, such as not giving Travis money, are often ignored or overruled by Walter. This is why Ruth decided to keep her pregnancy to herself and was going to make a decision on her own. Overall, all three of the characters are extremely important to the story, each of whom are extremely strong women. From a historical perspective, these women represent a difficult time for women. However, Beneatha's ambition of becoming doctor shows advancement and hope for women to look toward making their dreams come true.

## BLACK AESTHETICS

Black Aesthetics is a search for a system of isolating and evaluating the works of art of the Black people that reflect the special feature of Black experience. It is a search for a new program, a search for a new quality of the recapture of an old one, lost and buried deep in our past. Black Aesthetics has always been part of the lives of black people. When the writers write about themselves from a point of view that takes life seriously, that views it in scale with human dimensions, then they are creating a Black aesthetics. It is reflected in this play as she focuses on the Black experience and the beauty of the Black power.

This play also shows the change in black arts and intellectualism. According to Schmoop, "A Raisin in the Sun is part of broader shift in black art towards depicting working-class, ordinary African-Americans. Previously, black intellectuals did not use literature, art or the stage to portray working-class African-Americans for fear they would perpetuate undesirable stereotypes" (Web). Lorraine Hansberry and Langston Hughes both thought this idea ridiculous. They, in fact, felt the opposite. They felt that they could challenge these stereotypes by writing about them. Also according to Schmoop, "By focusing on the dreams and aspirations of one particular working-class black family, moreover, Hansberry was able to show audiences the universality of black aspirations while also demonstrating that their race posed a significant barrier to achieving those goals" (Web). That is precisely what Hansberry did.

A Raisin in the Sun is a masterful play. It can be compared to a war. The characters are soldiers who are fighting in the endless battles. The battles are the constant problems which are faced by the Younger family. Emotions always run high when a war is going on and the characters always express their emotions strongly. Life for the Youngers was hard and unpredictable, but in the end good conquered evil. Everything turns out better than planned for the family. Life is an endless battle, those who are strong survive.

## CONCLUSION

“Never before, the entire history of the American theatre, has so much of the truth of black people’s lives been seen on the stage”, observed James Baldwin shortly before *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in 1959. Hence, Hansberry gave a very intimate depiction of the Black family. The play tackled issues of patriarchy (sexism and homophobia), poverty and white supremacy. The daily human challenges of family responsibility and love became harsher struggles in the face of inner city poverty and the threats of white racism. We also looked at the transformation of the Challenges of an older generation of working poor in comparison to a younger generation’s challenges. Lorraine Hansberry’s play gave great Black Cultural insight into the Struggles that came before the Hip-Hop generation that was born.

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