

ANALYZING RESISTANCE IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S "A RAISIN IN THE SUN"

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Abstract

The play serves as a cultural and political milestone, offering an intimate yet universal examination of systemic racism, generational conflicts, and the resilience of dreams under oppression. The play explores themes of racial discrimination, economic hardship, and the pursuit of the American Dream.

Keywords: South Side Chicago, American Dream, racial segregation, civil Rights era, themes, dreams deferred, racial discrimination, housing inequality, family conflict, identity and heritage, assimilation, cultural pride, generational conflict, gender roles.

Introduction

Published in 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* is a groundbreaking play by Lorraine Hansberry, the first Black woman to have a play performed on Broadway.

The title is drawn from Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" (also known as "A Dream Deferred"), asking, "What happens to a dream deferred?"

A Raisin in the Sun chronicles a pivotal few weeks in the life of the Younger family, an African American household residing on Chicago's South Side during the 1950s. At the start of the play, the family anticipates receiving a \$10,000 insurance check following the death of Mr. Younger. Each adult member of the family envisions a different use for the money. The family matriarch, Mama, hopes to fulfill her shared dream with her late husband by purchasing a house. Her son, Walter Lee, has different ambitions—he wants to invest the money in a liquor store with his friends, convinced it will solve their financial struggles permanently. Walter's wife, Ruth, sides with Mama and dreams of providing a better home and opportunities for their young son, Travis. Meanwhile, Walter's sister, Beneatha, intends to use the money for medical school tuition and is critical of her family's desire to assimilate into white society. Instead, she seeks to reconnect with her African heritage to better understand her identity.

As the play unfolds, tensions rise as the family members' competing aspirations come into conflict. Ruth discovers she is pregnant but worries that another child will exacerbate their financial difficulties. When Walter reacts indifferently to her contemplation of abortion, Mama takes decisive action by placing a down payment on a house in Clybourne Park, an entirely white neighborhood. She believes a larger, more welcoming home will uplift the family. However, their prospective neighbors, alarmed by the Youngers' impending move, send Mr. Lindner from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association to offer them money to stay away. Despite their financial troubles, the Youngers reject the offer, even after Walter loses \$6,500—the remaining insurance money—when his supposed business partner, Willy Harris, absconds with the funds.

Simultaneously, Beneatha grows increasingly disillusioned with her suitor, George Murchison, whom she views as superficial and dismissive of racial issues. She instead finds a deeper connection with Joseph Asagai, a Nigerian student who proposes marriage and invites her to move to Africa with him to pursue her medical ambitions. By the play's conclusion, Beneatha's decision remains unresolved. Nevertheless, the Youngers prepare to leave their cramped apartment, finally realizing their long-held dream of owning a home. Although their future in Clybourne Park is fraught with uncertainty and potential danger, the family remains optimistic and united, determined to pursue a better life and abandon the deferral of their dreams.

Materials

This section focuses on the primary and secondary sources used for the analysis. Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959): The central text for analysis, exploring themes such as racial discrimination, family dynamics, and dreams. Langston Hughes's poem *Harlem* (1945): The inspiration for the play's title and its central theme of deferred dreams. *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* by Robert Nemiroff provides Hansberry's personal insights into her work. Imani Perry's *Looking for Lorraine* contextualizes her life and activism. Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns* and Arnold R. Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto* frame the play within the Great Migration and housing discrimination in Chicago.

Harold Bloom's edited volume offers a range of interpretations of the play's social and political impact. Born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois, Hansberry grew up in a racially segregated neighborhood. Her family was involved in a famous 1940 legal battle (*Hansberry v. Lee*) over racially restrictive housing covenants. Hansberry's personal experiences deeply informed her work, including *A Raisin in the Sun*. Set in the late 1940s to 1950s, the play reflects the impact of systemic racism and housing discrimination during the post-World War II era. The Great Migration and urban segregation are central to the story's backdrop.

The Younger family lives in a cramped apartment on Chicago's South Side.

Lena Younger (Mama): The matriarch who dreams of buying a house for her family.

Walter Lee Younger: Her ambitious son, who wants to invest in a liquor store to improve his family's fortunes.

Ruth Younger: Walter's pragmatic wife, who worries about the family's future.

Beneatha Younger: Walter's younger sister, who aspires to become a doctor and explores her African heritage.

Travis Younger: Ruth and Walter's young son.

The Younger family receives a \$10,000 life insurance check after the death of Lena's husband. The family members clash over how to use the money, reflecting their differing dreams and priorities.

Despite facing blatant racism from a white neighborhood's residents, the family decides to move into the house Lena buys, signifying hope and resilience.

Methods

This section outlines the approach for analyzing the play and its contextual materials.

Thematic analysis: Examining key themes such as deferred dreams, family unity, and racial injustice.

Character study: Exploring the motivations and symbolic roles of characters like Mama, Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha. Linking the Younger family's struggles to the broader societal challenges faced by African

Americans in mid-20th century America. Comparing Hansberry's themes with Langston Hughes's poetic vision in "Harlem." Examining how the Younger family's experiences reflect larger cultural and political trends. Investigating Beneatha's feminist perspective and exploration of African heritage. Analyzing how gender roles and cultural identity intersect in the play.

Symbolism:

Mama's Plant: Represents hope and the family's resilience, surviving despite poor conditions.

The New House: Symbolizes progress and the fight for equality.

Results:

This section presents the findings from the analysis. Key Themes Identified. The devastating impact of systemic racism, particularly in housing and economic opportunities. The centrality of dreams—both personal and collective—in shaping the Younger family's resilience. The tension between assimilation and cultural pride, especially in Beneatha's character.

Hansberry uses naturalistic dialogue and domestic settings to ground the story in realism. The interplay of humor, conflict, and hope keeps the audience emotionally engaged. Challenged stereotypes of African Americans by presenting nuanced, multidimensional characters. Opened doors for greater diversity in American theater.

Discussion:

The first play on Broadway written by an African American woman. One of the earliest works to present an authentic portrayal of African American life on stage. Widely acclaimed, the play won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play in 1959. Critics have praised its universal themes and realistic depiction of racial struggles. Inspired future African American playwrights like August Wilson.

Its themes remain relevant in contemporary discussions of race, housing, and inequality. The play vividly illustrates the systemic racism in housing policies, which confined African Americans to under-resourced neighborhoods. Herry's personal experience with restrictive covenants informs this narrative. Written on the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement, the play reflects the social and political tensions of the era. It anticipates later legislative battles for fair housing, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1968.

Conclusion

Reiterate the play's enduring significance as a work of resistance and a call for social change. Emphasize Hansberry's legacy in challenging systemic inequality through art and storytelling.

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