

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**A Raisin in the Sun**

by Lorraine Hansberry

Written by Marie Y. Smith

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# A Raisin in the Sun

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. identify and define the literary devices Hansberry uses, such as similes, metaphors, and hyperbole.
2. explain Hansberry's use of allusions and symbolism as literary techniques.
3. identify theatrical conventions, such as monologues and stage directions, and explain how Hansberry uses them.
4. compare and contrast differing viewpoints on heritage, assimilationism, and Afrocentrism.
5. identify and explain the themes of the play, and discuss how they are developed.
6. discuss the growth of the relationship between Ruth and Walter.
7. analyze character growth of all major characters in the play.
8. discuss differing viewpoints on Caucasian oppression in the 1950s and how these affected poor African-American families.
9. identify events and characters based on Hansberry's own life.
10. discuss the differences of opinion among the Youngers, Mrs. Johnson, and George Murchison in relation to the pursuit of dreams.
11. analyze parallels that Hansberry draws between characters' viewpoints and the significance of those parallels.
12. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.

# A Raisin in the Sun

## Lecture Notes

### LORRAINE HANSBERRY AND *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago in 1930 during the height of the Great Depression. She was born into a very atypical family, not only because the Hansberrys were well-off during this period of extreme poverty for the majority of the country, but also because they were extremely wealthy according to African-American standards in the south side of Chicago. Her father was a successful real estate and banking businessman, her mother was a school teacher, and her uncle was a Howard University professor. Education was important to her family, and many famous literary figures were frequently seen in the Hansberry home, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes.

Although Hansberry's parents could afford to send her to private school, she attended public elementary and high schools. Her elementary school was segregated, with most of the students coming from extremely poor families. Hansberry felt isolated because of her family's wealth, and she spent a lot of time observing the differences between her family life and the other children's. She saw that most of the other African-American children were poor and wore house keys around their necks so they could let themselves into their houses after school. In an attempt to fit in with her peers, Hansberry began wearing a set of skate-keys around her neck so she could pretend to be a "latchkey child." This exposure to the poverty and independence of the African-American children and families during her childhood served as a basis for the development of the Younger family in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Lorraine Hansberry's parents were politically active from the time she was born. Her father was very involved in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and he once ran for Congress as a Republican. An example of the elder Hansberry's progressive and liberal ideals is when he received Lorraine's birth certificate in the hospital; he crossed out the hospital's designation of "Negro" as Lorraine's race and wrote in "Black" to emphasize his belief in and support of Afrocentric ideology. When Lorraine was eight years old, her family moved to an upper-class white neighborhood. During this time, her father was in the midst of a landmark Supreme Court case, *Hansberry v Lee*, in which he fought the Illinois laws concerning housing discrimination. The white neighbors did not want the Hansberry family to move into their neighborhood, and the hostility grew until a mob gathered at the house and threw bricks and pieces of concrete through the windows of the home. One of the bricks narrowly missed hitting Lorraine in the head. On a continual basis, Mrs. Hansberry had to watch her children walking to and from school to ensure that they were not harmed. The hostility she experienced directly while her family lived in this white community is the same hostility that Mrs. Jackson describes and the Younger family fears in *A Raisin in the Sun* when they decide to move to their new home despite Mr. Lindner's couched resistance.

# A Raisin in the Sun

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Identify three symbols in the play and discuss their importance.
2. Research Hansberry's life and find passages in the play in which she draws upon aspects of her life in the characters, situations, etc. Which characters best voice Hansberry's own opinions?
3. Identify specific scenes that illustrate changes in the relationship between Ruth and Walter, and discuss the significance of these changes to the themes.
4. Research the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and discuss what part each character would play in the movement.
5. Discuss the significance of Africa and African heritage in this play. How does it affect the characters' attitudes? How is their heritage significant to each character in the novel? How do these attitudes shape the characters?
6. Research life in the late 1950s in Southern Chicago. How does this relate to Hansberry's portrayal of the characters?
7. Discuss the importance of allusions in this play. How do these allusions help to develop the characters? How are these various allusions used? Why are so many of them biblical in nature?
8. The character of Travis is a very small role. Discuss his importance throughout the play. Why would Hansberry include him, but give him very little dialogue and interaction?
9. Discuss the differences between plays and novels. How do these differences affect character and plot development? Why would Hansberry have written this as a play rather than as a novel?
10. Research the issues of class and gender stereotyping. Discuss how these stereotypes play a role in *A Raisin in the Sun*. How do they affect the characters' actions? How do they affect the plot?
11. Hansberry's epitaph reads, "I care. I care about it all. It takes too much energy not to care... The *why* of why we are here is an intrigue for adolescents; the *how* is what must command the living. Which is why I have lately become an insurgent again." Review the play and identify specific scenes the support this idea of Hansberry's. How does Hansberry's epitaph reflect the play? Where in the play do you see these ideas?

# A Raisin in the Sun

## Act I, Scene One

1. What is the setting of the story? What characteristics of the Youngers are reflected by their surroundings?

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2. What is the significance of Travis's sleeping place?

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3. What signs of poverty do we see in the setting and in the family's early-morning routine?

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4. What signs of stasis do we see in the stage directions and in the family's early-morning routine?

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5. What does the first exchange between Ruth and Walter seem to foreshadow?

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6. Why does Walter get so angry with Ruth when she dismisses his scheme with Willy Harris? What theme does this start to develop?

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**Act II, Scene One**

1. What do Beneatha's new attire and haircut symbolize?

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2. What is the importance of the scene between Beneatha and Walter? What theme does it relate to?

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3. Why does George react so negatively to Beneatha's dress and hair? What does he represent? How does his attitude contrast with Beneatha's attitude?

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4. Why is Walter rude to George? What does this foreshadow?

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5. Why does Walter attempt to talk business with George? How does this relate to the theme of dreams?

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6. What is the significance of the following speech by Walter, and George's reaction to it?

WALTER: And you—ain't you bitter, man? Ain't you just about had it yet? Don't you see no stars gleaming that you can't reach out and grab? You happy? ... You got it made? ... Here I am a giant—surrounded by ants! Ants who can't even understand what it is the giant is talking about.

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**Act II, Scene Three**

1. Why would Hansberry choose to have Ruth singing at the beginning of this scene?

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2. What is the significance of the following statement by Beneatha? How does the fact that this is a play amplify the importance of this statement?

BENEATHA: (*Laughing to herself*) I guess I always think things have more emphasis if they are big, somehow.

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3. Why is Ruth happy about having gone to the movies and having held hands with Walter? How is this significant in relation to Walter?

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4. What is the significance of the banter among Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha right before Lindner comes to the apartment? Thinking of the three-act plot structure, what does this seem to precede and perhaps foreshadow?

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5. What is the significance of Lindner talking with Walter rather than with Mama?

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**Act III, Scene One**

1. Why would Hansberry choose to relate the setting of Act III to that of Act I?

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2. What is the significance of Asagai's opening statement?

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3. Why doesn't Beneatha want to be a doctor any more?

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4. What does Asagai mean by the following statement?

ASAGAI: Then isn't there something wrong in a house—in a world—where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man?

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5. How does Hansberry use Asagai to reflect the themes of *A Raisin in the Sun* in his final exchange with Beneatha?

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