

a raisin in the sun by hansberry

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry: A Timeless Exploration of the American Dream

Lorraine Hansberry's seminal play, "A Raisin in the Sun," remains a powerful and enduring masterpiece, resonating deeply with audiences decades after its premiere. This groundbreaking work by Lorraine Hansberry delves into the complex realities of the Younger family, an African American family striving for upward mobility in mid-20th century Chicago. Through the lens of their individual dreams and the collective struggles they face, the play offers a profound examination of the American Dream, racial discrimination, and the enduring strength of family. This comprehensive article will explore the multifaceted themes, compelling characters, historical context, and lasting impact of Hansberry's iconic play, "A Raisin in the Sun." We will unpack the symbolism, analyze the character arcs, and discuss why "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry continues to be a cornerstone of American literature and theatre.

- Introduction to "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry
- The Younger Family: A Portrait of Resilience
- Key Characters and Their Aspirations in "A Raisin in the Sun"
 - Lena Younger (Mama)
 - Walter Lee Younger
 - Beneatha Younger
 - Ruth Younger
 - Travis Younger
- Central Themes Explored in "A Raisin in the Sun"
 - The Elusive American Dream
 - The Weight of Racial Prejudice and Discrimination
 - Family Bonds and Generational Conflict
 - Identity and Self-Discovery

- Symbolism in "A Raisin in the Sun"
 - The Insurance Check
 - The Apartment
 - Beneatha's Hair
 - The Plant
- Historical Context of "A Raisin in the Sun"
 - Post-World War II America
 - The Civil Rights Movement
 - Housing Discrimination and Redlining
- The Enduring Legacy and Impact of "A Raisin in the Sun"
- Conclusion: The Enduring Power of "A Raisin in the Sun"

The Younger Family: A Portrait of Resilience

"A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry centers on the Younger family, a working-class African American family living in the segregated South Side of Chicago. Their cramped apartment is the stage upon which their dreams, frustrations, and hopes are played out. The family is bound by love and a shared desire for a better future, yet their individual aspirations often clash, creating internal conflict. Despite the immense pressures of poverty and systemic racism, the Youngers exhibit remarkable resilience, navigating their challenges with dignity and determination. The play masterfully portrays the daily struggles of this family, making their quest for dignity and self-respect a universal narrative. The strength of family ties is paramount in "A Raisin in the Sun," as they draw upon each other for support and encouragement.

Key Characters and Their Aspirations in "A Raisin in the Sun"

The power of "A Raisin in the Sun" lies in its richly drawn characters, each representing different facets of the African American experience and the universal pursuit of happiness. Lorraine Hansberry imbues each member of the Younger family with distinct desires and struggles, making

their interactions compelling and their individual journeys deeply resonant.

Lena Younger (Mama)

Lena Younger, affectionately known as Mama, is the matriarch of the Younger family. She is a devout woman whose faith and moral compass guide her decisions. Mama's primary dream is to own a home with a garden, a symbol of security and a better life for her family, away from the confines of their current apartment. Her unwavering hope for her family's future is the bedrock of the play. She represents tradition, spiritual strength, and the enduring wisdom of elders in "A Raisin in the Sun."

Walter Lee Younger

Walter Lee Younger, Mama's son, is a chauffeur who feels stifled by his circumstances. He dreams of financial independence and the prestige that comes with wealth, specifically by investing in a liquor store. Walter Lee's aspirations are often at odds with his mother's more conservative values, leading to significant conflict. He embodies the frustration of a generation of Black men denied opportunities, and his journey in "A Raisin in the Sun" is one of seeking respect and a sense of manhood.

Beneatha Younger

Beneatha Younger, Walter Lee's sister, is an ambitious and intellectual young woman pursuing a medical education. She is on a quest for identity, exploring her African heritage and questioning societal norms. Beneatha's desire for self-discovery and her rejection of assimilation are central to her character arc. She represents a new generation eager to break free from the past and define their own futures in "A Raisin in the Sun."

Ruth Younger

Ruth Younger, Walter Lee's wife, is a hardworking and pragmatic woman who often acts as the emotional anchor for the family. Her primary concern is providing a stable and loving environment for her son, Travis, and supporting Walter Lee's dreams, even when they seem unrealistic. Ruth's quiet strength and enduring hope are vital to the family's survival. She embodies the sacrifices often made by women in pursuit of familial well-being in "A Raisin in the Sun."

Travis Younger

Travis Younger, Ruth and Walter Lee's son, is a young boy who witnesses the struggles and dreams of his family firsthand. Though a child, his presence highlights the future the family is fighting for. Travis represents innocence and the hope for a brighter tomorrow, a constant reminder of the stakes involved in the Youngers' decisions in "A Raisin in the Sun."

Central Themes Explored in "A Raisin in the Sun"

"A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry is a rich tapestry of interwoven themes that continue to provoke thought and discussion. The play tackles profound issues that remain relevant today, making it a timeless piece of American literature.

The Elusive American Dream

At its core, "A Raisin in the Sun" is a powerful examination of the American Dream and its accessibility for African Americans in the 1950s. The Younger family, like many families of their time, grappled with the promise of opportunity versus the harsh realities of systemic inequality. Their dreams of financial security, homeownership, and upward mobility are constantly challenged by external forces, illustrating how the "dream" was often deferred or denied based on race. The play questions whether the American Dream is truly attainable for all or a privilege reserved for a select few.

The Weight of Racial Prejudice and Discrimination

Racial prejudice and discrimination are pervasive forces that shape the lives of the Younger family. The dream of moving to a white neighborhood is met with resistance from a man named Mr. Lindner, who represents the insidious nature of housing discrimination. The play vividly portrays the psychological toll of living in a society where opportunities are limited and one's potential is judged by skin color. Lorraine Hansberry uses these experiences to highlight the systemic barriers that prevented many African Americans from achieving their full potential, making "A Raisin in the Sun" a crucial social commentary.

Family Bonds and Generational Conflict

The play beautifully illustrates the strength and complexity of family bonds. The Younger family is united by love, but their differing perspectives and dreams create inevitable friction. Mama's traditional values often clash with Walter Lee's desire for immediate gratification and Beneatha's modern aspirations. These generational conflicts, however, are ultimately rooted in a shared desire for the family's betterment. The play emphasizes the importance of family as a source of support and a foundation for identity, even amidst disagreements in "A Raisin in the Sun."

Identity and Self-Discovery

Beneatha Younger's journey in "A Raisin in the Sun" is particularly focused on identity and self-discovery. She grapples with her African heritage, exploring different cultural expressions and questioning the assimilationist pressures of American society. Her interactions with characters like George Murchison and Joseph Asagai highlight the diverse paths to self-understanding. Beneatha's quest for identity mirrors the broader search for cultural belonging and self-definition within the African American community during this era.

Symbolism in "A Raisin in the Sun"

Lorraine Hansberry masterfully employs symbolism throughout "A Raisin in the Sun" to deepen the play's thematic resonance and enhance the audience's understanding of the characters' struggles and aspirations.

The Insurance Check

The ten-thousand-dollar insurance check, a result of Lena Younger's late husband's life insurance policy, is the central symbol of the play. It represents hope, opportunity, and the potential for the family to escape their current circumstances. The allocation of this money becomes a focal point for the family's differing dreams and desires, highlighting how money can be both a source of salvation and a catalyst for conflict in "A Raisin in the Sun."

The Apartment

The cramped and deteriorating apartment where the Younger family lives is a potent symbol of their confinement, both physically and socially. It represents the limitations imposed by poverty and segregation. The dream of moving to a larger, better house in a white neighborhood signifies their desire for freedom, dignity, and a life unburdened by their current oppressive environment. The apartment in "A Raisin in the Sun" is a constant reminder of their struggles.

Beneatha's Hair

Beneatha's evolving relationship with her hair serves as a powerful symbol of her journey towards self-acceptance and cultural identity. Initially, she wears her hair straightened to conform to societal beauty standards. Her eventual decision to wear her natural hair, particularly when influenced by Joseph Asagai, represents a reclamation of her African heritage and a rejection of imposed assimilation. This transformation is a significant visual metaphor in "A Raisin in the Sun."

The Plant

Mama's small, struggling plant, which she meticulously tends to, symbolizes her enduring hope and nurturing spirit. Despite the harsh conditions of their apartment and the hardships they face, the plant continues to grow, mirroring Mama's persistent belief in a better future for her family. It represents life, resilience, and the potential for growth even in adverse circumstances, making it a poignant symbol in "A Raisin in the Sun."

Historical Context of "A Raisin in the Sun"

Understanding the historical context in which "A Raisin in the Sun" was written and first performed is crucial to fully appreciating its impact and enduring significance. Lorraine Hansberry's masterful

portrayal of the Younger family is deeply rooted in the realities of mid-20th century America.

Post-World War II America

The period following World War II saw significant social and economic changes in the United States. While there was an overall sense of prosperity for some, African Americans continued to face widespread discrimination and limited opportunities. The Great Migration, which saw millions of Black Americans move from the rural South to urban centers in the North, led to increased racial tensions and housing segregation in cities like Chicago. "A Raisin in the Sun" captures the specific anxieties and aspirations of Black families navigating this post-war landscape.

The Civil Rights Movement

"A Raisin in the Sun" premiered in 1959, just as the Civil Rights Movement was gaining significant momentum. The play's exploration of racial prejudice, housing discrimination, and the pursuit of equality resonated deeply with audiences and contributed to the broader national conversation about civil rights. Hansberry's work provided a powerful, humanizing depiction of the Black experience, challenging prevailing stereotypes and advocating for social justice. The play's themes are intrinsically linked to the struggles of this era.

Housing Discrimination and Redlining

A central conflict in "A Raisin in the Sun" revolves around the Younger family's dream of moving into a white suburban neighborhood. This dream is directly confronted by Mr. Lindner, who represents the discriminatory practices of housing covenants and redlining. These policies legally and illegally prevented Black families from purchasing homes in desirable areas, perpetuating segregation and limiting opportunities for wealth accumulation. The play vividly illustrates the devastating impact of such discrimination on the aspirations and well-being of Black families.

The Enduring Legacy and Impact of "A Raisin in the Sun"

The impact of "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry extends far beyond its initial Broadway run. The play broke significant ground as the first play written by a Black woman to be produced on Broadway, and it was also the first Broadway play to feature a Black director. Its critical and commercial success, including winning the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best American Play, cemented its place as a landmark achievement in American theatre. The play's relevance has only grown over time, with its themes of racial injustice, economic disparity, and the universal pursuit of dreams continuing to resonate with diverse audiences. "A Raisin in the Sun" has been adapted into multiple film and stage productions, ensuring its continued accessibility and influence. Its exploration of the Black family and the challenges they face offers a vital perspective that remains essential for understanding the American experience. The play continues to be studied in schools and universities worldwide, a testament to its enduring power and literary merit.

Conclusion: The Enduring Power of "A Raisin in the Sun"

"A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry remains an unparalleled achievement in American drama, offering a profound and moving depiction of an African American family's struggle for dignity, prosperity, and their place in the American Dream. The play's exploration of universal themes such as hope, resilience, family, and the persistent impact of racial injustice continues to captivate and enlighten audiences. Through its richly developed characters and masterful storytelling, Lorraine Hansberry's masterpiece compels us to confront societal inequities and to celebrate the enduring strength of the human spirit. The legacy of "A Raisin in the Sun" is one of breaking barriers, fostering empathy, and reminding us that even in the face of overwhelming odds, the pursuit of one's dreams, however deferred, is a fundamental human right.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central conflict of "A Raisin in the Sun"?

The central conflict revolves around the Younger family's struggle for upward mobility and a better life in the face of systemic racism, poverty, and differing individual dreams. Specifically, it centers on their decision about how to spend the \$10,000 insurance check after the death of the patriarch, Walter Sr.

What does the title "A Raisin in the Sun" refer to?

The title is a direct allusion to Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" (also known as "A Dream Deferred"). It metaphorically represents the potential decay or "drying up" of dreams when they are postponed or denied, as the Younger family experiences.

What are the main dreams of the characters in the play?

Mama dreams of owning a house with a garden to provide a stable and nurturing environment. Walter Lee dreams of owning a liquor store to achieve financial independence and respect. Beneatha dreams of becoming a doctor, reflecting a desire for self-fulfillment and a rejection of societal limitations.

How does the play address the theme of racial discrimination and prejudice?

The play powerfully illustrates racial discrimination through several instances, including the Younger family's inability to buy a house in Clybourne Park, the constant struggle against poverty due to discriminatory housing and employment practices, and the overt racism from their white neighbors.

What is the significance of the Clybourne Park house?

The house in Clybourne Park represents hope, opportunity, and a chance for the Younger family to

escape the cramped and oppressive conditions of their current apartment. It symbolizes their aspiration for a better future and a step towards social and economic advancement.

Who is Karl Lindner and what is his role in the play?

Karl Lindner is a representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. He offers to buy out the Younger family's contract for the house at a profit, attempting to prevent them from moving into the white neighborhood. His role highlights the institutionalized racism and prejudice the family faces.

How does Walter Lee Younger change throughout the play?

Initially, Walter is frustrated, irresponsible, and consumed by his desire for wealth and status, often belittling his family's dreams. By the end of the play, after losing most of the insurance money, he demonstrates a newfound maturity and a commitment to his family's dignity and self-respect when he confronts Lindner.

What is the role of Beneatha's suitors, George Murchison and Joseph Asagai, in her development?

George represents assimilation into white American culture, embodying a more superficial and materialistic approach to success. Asagai, on the other hand, encourages Beneatha to embrace her African heritage and identity, representing intellectual and cultural awakening, and challenging her to think beyond conventional paths.

Why is Mama's plant significant in the play?

Mama's wilting plant symbolizes her enduring hope and her persistent, though often challenged, dream for a better life and a home for her family. Despite the harsh conditions, the plant continues to grow, mirroring Mama's own resilience and her unyielding nurturing spirit.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, with descriptions:

1. Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

This seminal work explores the experiences of an unnamed Black man navigating racism and identity in mid-20th century America. Like the Younger family, the protagonist grapples with societal expectations and the struggle to be seen and recognized for who he truly is. The novel delves into themes of alienation, the search for belonging, and the complexities of defining oneself in a prejudiced world. It resonates with *A Raisin in the Sun*'s depiction of Black Americans striving for dignity and self-determination.

2. Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

This novel follows Janie Crawford's journey of self-discovery and independence as she navigates multiple relationships and societal constraints in early 20th-century Florida. Janie's quest for agency and her desire to live life on her own terms echo Lena Younger's (Mama's) own aspirations for her family's future. The story beautifully portrays the resilience of Black women and their pursuit of

fulfilling lives amidst challenging circumstances.

3. The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison's debut novel confronts the devastating impact of internalized racism and beauty standards on young Black girls, particularly Pecola Breedlove, who longs for blue eyes. This book shares *A Raisin in the Sun*'s focus on the psychological toll of systemic racism and the desire for a better, more beautiful life. It explores how societal oppression can shape an individual's sense of self-worth and their perception of belonging.

4. Native Son by Richard Wright

Richard Wright's powerful novel tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a young Black man living in poverty in Chicago, whose life takes a tragic turn. The book starkly illustrates the suffocating effects of systemic racism and economic deprivation on individuals, leading to desperate choices. Like *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Native Son* exposes the societal forces that limit opportunity and trap characters in cycles of despair, highlighting the fight for a decent existence.

5. The Color Purple by Alice Walker

This epistolary novel chronicles the life of Celie, a poor, uneducated Black woman in the early 20th-century American South, who endures abuse and hardship but ultimately finds her voice and independence. Celie's journey toward self-empowerment and her search for love and connection mirror the aspirations of Beneatha Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The book celebrates the strength and resilience of Black women and their capacity for personal growth.

6. If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin

James Baldwin's poignant novel tells the story of Tish, a young Black woman fighting to prove her fiancé's innocence and secure his release from prison. The narrative deeply examines the injustices faced by Black individuals within the American legal system and the strength of familial love. This work shares *A Raisin in the Sun*'s exploration of the challenges of racial prejudice and the profound desire for family unity and a secure future.

7. Uncle Tom's Children by Richard Wright

This collection of novellas depicts the brutal realities faced by Black sharecroppers in the Jim Crow South. Wright's stories powerfully illustrate the crushing weight of racial injustice and the desperate measures taken by individuals to survive and maintain their dignity. The themes of oppression, resistance, and the longing for freedom are central, much like in *A Raisin in the Sun*, where characters strive for a life free from the limitations imposed by racism.

8. A Good Man Is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

This collection of short stories, set in the American South, often features characters grappling with moral and spiritual questions amidst mundane or violent circumstances. While stylistically different, O'Connor's exploration of flawed humanity and the search for meaning, even in darkness, can be seen as a parallel to the Younger family's own struggles. The characters' often grim realities and their quests for something greater resonate with the yearning for dignity present in Hansberry's play.

9. Black Boy by Richard Wright

This autobiography chronicles Richard Wright's early life and his escape from poverty and racial oppression in the American South to the North. The narrative vividly details the formative experiences that shaped his understanding of race, class, and identity. Similar to the Younger family's ambitions in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Wright's account underscores the drive for opportunity, intellectual growth, and a life unburdened by the constraints of prejudice.

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