



GUTHRIE
THEATER

Play Guide

2021-2022 SEASON



A
RAISIN
IN
THE **SUN**

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A Raisin in the Sun

by LORRAINE HANSBERRY

directed by AUSTENE VAN

April 30 – June 5, 2022

McGuire Proscenium Stage

THE PLAY

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A Raisin in the Sun sponsored by



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THEATER**

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The Guthrie creates transformative theater experiences that ignite the imagination, stir the heart, open the mind and build community through the illumination of our common humanity.

Guthrie Theater Play Guide

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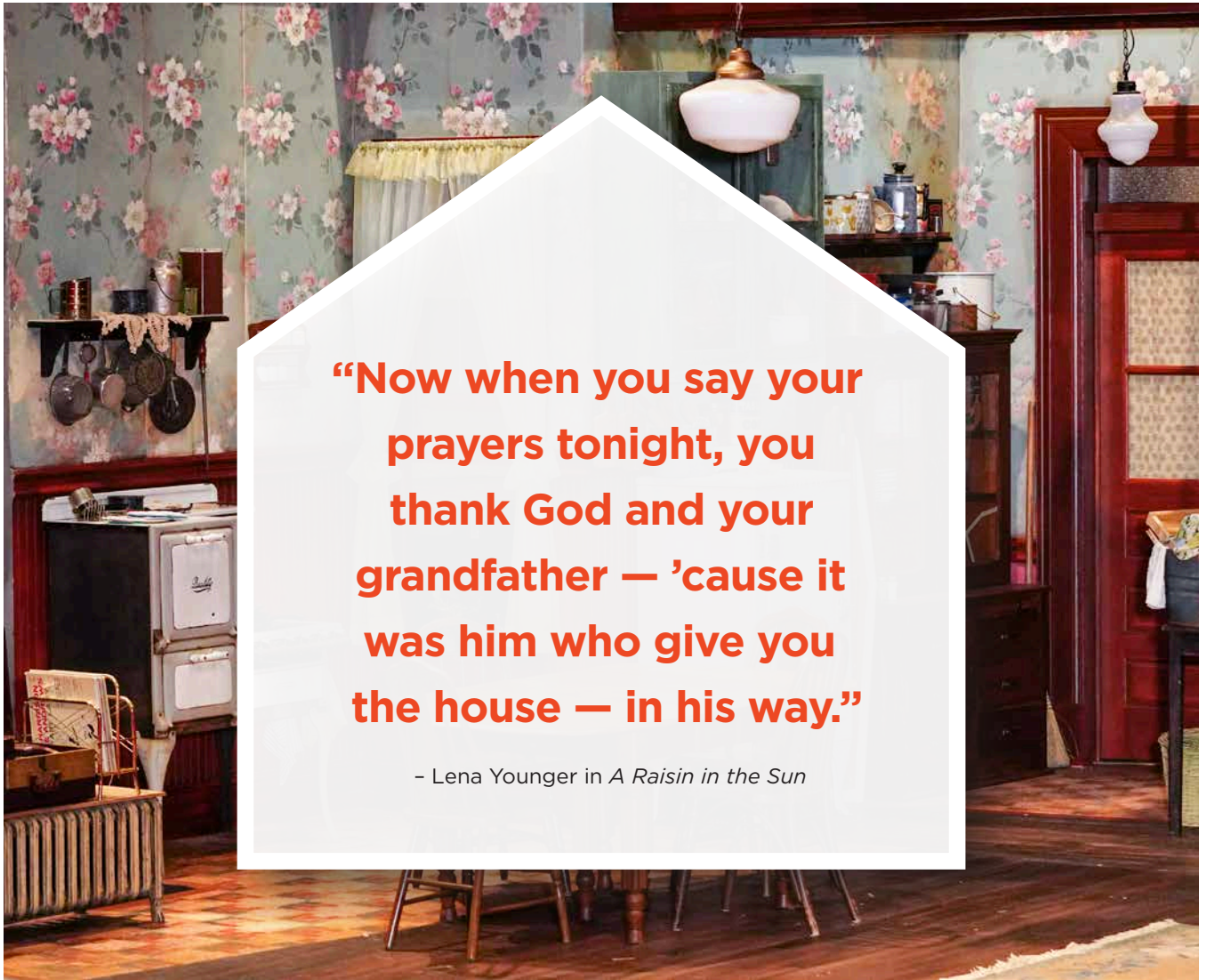


PHOTO: TOM WALLACE

“Now when you say your prayers tonight, you thank God and your grandfather — ’cause it was him who give you the house — in his way.”

- Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*

About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for additional content.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Thanks for your interest in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.




PHOTOS: TOM WALLACE

Left: Director Austene Van in rehearsal with Anita Welch (Ruth Younger) and James T. Alfred (Walter Lee Younger). Above: Nubia Monks (Beneatha Younger) and Tonia Jackson (Lena Younger)

Synopsis

The Younger family of Chicago's South Side recently lost their patriarch and anticipates the arrival of a \$10,000 check from his life insurance. Matriarch Lena Younger wants to use the money — representing her husband's life, love and hard work — for something on which her family can build their dreams. Her son, Walter Lee, wants to invest the money in a liquor store that will allow him to be his own boss. Her daughter, Beneatha, is studying to be a doctor. Lena tells her daughter-in-law, Ruth, that she plans to set aside some of the money for Beneatha's school and put the rest toward a down payment on a house with a yard where her grandson, Travis, can play and she can garden.

While Lena watches her family grapple with exhaustion, restlessness and dissatisfaction, she buys the nicest house she can find for the least amount of money, which happens to be in the all-white Clybourne Park neighborhood. She entrusts the remaining \$6,500 to Walter Lee. But when Karl Lindner from the “welcoming committee” presents the Youngers with a buyout offer to prevent them from integrating in the community, and Walter Lee's investment (including Beneatha's tuition money) is stolen, the dream for a new life in a new house may prove to be beyond the family's grasp.

The play's title comes from the poem “Harlem” by Langston Hughes, which begins with these lines: “What happens to a dream deferred?/Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” 

SETTING

The Younger family's apartment on Chicago's South Side. September 1953.

CHARACTERS

Lena Younger, also known as Mama

Walter Lee Younger, Lena's son, also known as Brother

Ruth Younger, Walter Lee's wife

Travis Younger, their son

Beneatha Younger, Lena's daughter

Joseph Asagai, Beneatha's friend, a student from Nigeria

George Murchison, Beneatha's suitor

Mrs. Johnson, the Youngers' neighbor

Bobo, Walter Lee's friend

Karl Lindner, from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association

Moving Man

Comments on *A Raisin in the Sun*

I had never in my life seen so many Black people in the theater. And the reason was that never before, in the entire history of the American theater, had so much of the truth of Black people's lives been seen on the stage.

James Baldwin

From the introduction of *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* by Lorraine Hansberry, 1969

Since *A Raisin in the Sun* has the gift of emotionally involving the audience in the crises of the play, the audience cannot be indifferent to the solution. But Miss Hansberry has not written a melodrama or a thesis-play or a morality. She has rendered a practical accounting of the life of a family. Even if the plot were less commonplace, *A Raisin in the Sun* would still be a vivid play.

For Miss Hansberry has managed to express a personal opinion about many engrossing topics. ... When the mother buys a house in a white neighborhood, *A Raisin in the Sun* touches on the inflammatory topic of race relations. Miss Hansberry faces the issue frankly, giving the spokesman for the white people as much dignity as his humiliating situation affords. But she argues no causes. Note that she resolves the situation not in terms of social justice but in terms of the pride of a family that has ethical standards. Not the least remarkable aspect of *A Raisin in the Sun* is the unvarying humanity of the author's point of view. Although Miss Hansberry is aware of the big social and political issues, she has sufficient independence of mind to concentrate on the everyday problems of a family. She has succeeded in confining herself to what she wants to say. ...

Altogether, *A Raisin in the Sun* is a lively and illuminating drama about people of great emotional vitality.

Brooks Atkinson

"*Raisin in the Sun* review," *The New York Times*, March 29, 1959



PHOTO: RUBY DEE, CLAUDIA McNEIL, GLYNN TURMAN, SIDNEY POITIER AND JOHN FIELDER IN THE ORIGINAL 1959 BROADWAY PRODUCTION OF *A RAISIN IN THE SUN* (FRIEDMAN-ABELES)

How to describe the effect *A Raisin in the Sun* had on most of us when it opened in 1959! From my standpoint, as a resident of Detroit who had only recently become interested in theater and had no guide whatsoever, *A Raisin in the Sun* opened doors within my consciousness that I never knew existed. There I was in Detroit's Cass Theatre, a young man who had never seen anywhere a Black man (Walter Lee) express all the things I felt but never had the courage to express — and in a theater full of Black and white people, no less! ... [I]n all of the cities the play had toured, young actors and actresses had been moved. The power of the play had made us all aware of our uniqueness as Black and had encouraged us to pursue our dreams. Indeed, the play had confirmed that our dreams were possible.

Woodie King, Jr.

"Lorraine Hansberry's Children: Black Artists and *A Raisin in the Sun*," *Freedomways*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1979

When I saw Woodie King's revival of *Raisin* at New York's Henry Street Settlement House, it was as if I were seeing it for the first time. Lorraine had raised the classic question: How do men and women who are oppressed manage to behave like loving, dignified human beings in spite of it all? She did this in 1959, a minute before the '60s when Black people were beginning to stir, and she somehow captured the rumblings and the approaching political storm of the era precisely and sensitively. [G](#)

Aishah Rahman

"To Be Black, Female and a Playwright," *Freedomways*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1979



About Lorraine Hansberry

Playwright, activist and essayist Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, the youngest of four children born to Carl and Nannie Hansberry. Her parents had moved to Chicago, he from Mississippi and she from Tennessee. While in Chicago, Carl established a bank and launched a successful real estate career and Nannie taught school.

The Hansberrys also actively fought for the civil rights of African Americans, and in 1936, when they purchased a home in an all-white neighborhood, the Hansberrys defied a real estate covenant that segregated African Americans to a small area of the city. After a four-year legal battle, the Supreme Court ruling *Hansberry v. Lee* found in favor of Hansberry on a technicality. *A Raisin in the Sun* was partly inspired by this experience in her family's history during her childhood.


Upon her high school graduation, Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin for two years, studying theater and discovering her own political ideas. She left college to study painting in Chicago and Mexico; then she moved to Harlem in New York City. She soon became a full-time reporter for Paul Robeson's monthly newspaper *Freedom*. She traveled to the International Peace Congress in Uruguay as Robeson's representative, raising her awareness of additional issues around U.S. foreign policy, women's conditions, poverty and dictatorships. In 1953, she married theater producer Robert Nemiroff.

After spending the next four years focusing on writing for theater, Hansberry finished the first draft of *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1957. Two years later, the play opened on Broadway. For the first time, a play hailed an all-Black principal cast, a Black playwright and a Black director. *A Raisin in the Sun* was nominated for four Tony

Awards, and Hansberry was the first Black woman to be produced on Broadway and the first Black playwright to win a New York Film Critics Circle Award. *A Raisin in the Sun* was extremely well received by critics and audiences alike, and the play ran for 538 performances. A film version starring Sidney Poitier was released in 1961.

Hansberry used her elevated profile to continue her activism, joining with others to encourage then-Attorney General Robert Kennedy to work for civil rights in the South, engaging in the work of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and advocating for the rights of African Americans and women as well as advocating against racism.

In 1962, she and Nemiroff divorced, and her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, was produced on Broadway to somewhat mixed reviews. It was the final play she would finish. Having been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer the year before, Hansberry died at age 34 on January 12, 1965, in New York City. A third play, *Les Blancs*, which was in draft form at her death, premiered on Broadway in 1970 and was edited by Nemiroff, her literary executor. Some of her unfinished writings were adapted into the play *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* in 1969 and produced posthumously. Nemiroff also adapted her writings into an autobiography titled *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: A Portrait of Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words*.

Though Hansberry's playwriting career was short, her legacy and that of *A Raisin in the Sun* has been bountiful. Among the plays inspired by or in conversation with *Raisin* are *Beneatha's Place* by Kwame Kwei-Armah, *Clybourne Park* by Bruce Norris, *Neighbors* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, *Etiquette of Vigilance* by Robert O'Hara and *Living Green* by Gloria Bond Clunie. 

In Her Own Words

I was born on the South Side of Chicago. I was born Black and a female. I was born in a depression after one world war and came into my adolescence during another.

While I was still in my teens, the first atom bombs were dropped on human beings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And by the time I was 23 years old, my government and that of the Soviet Union had entered actively into the worst conflict of nerves in history — the Cold War.

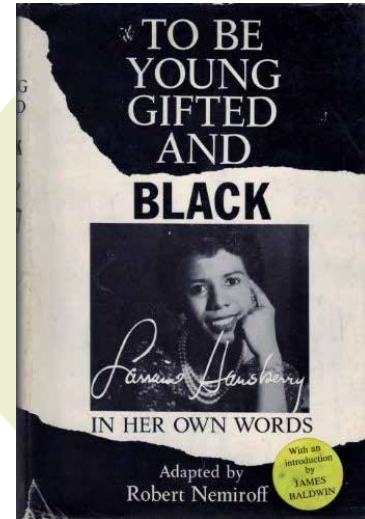
I have lost friends and relatives through cancer, lynching and war. I have been personally the victim of physical attack, which was the offspring of racial and political hysteria. I have worked with the handicapped and seen the ravages of congenital disease that we have not yet conquered because we spend our time and ingenuity in far less purposeful wars; I have known persons afflicted with drug addiction and alcoholism and mental illness. I see daily on the streets of New York street gangs and prostitutes and beggars. I have, like all of you, on a thousand occasions seen indescribable displays of man's very real inhumanity to man, and I have come to maturity, as we all must, knowing that greed and malice and indifference to human misery and bigotry

and corruption, brutality and, perhaps above all else, ignorance — the prime ancient and persistent enemy of man — abound in this world.

I say all of this to say that one cannot live with sighted eyes and feeling heart and not know and react to the miseries which afflict this world.

To Be Young, Gifted and Black

Prentice Hall, 1969



I sit at this desk for hours and hours and sharpen pencils and smoke cigarettes and switch from play to play — *Sidney*, *Touissant*, *Les Blancs* and — nothing happens. I begin to think more and more of doing something else with my life while I am still young. I mean, almost anything — driving an ambulance in Angola or running a ski lodge in upstate New York instead of this endless struggle. I expect the theatre will kill me.

Hansberry's journal

September 16, 1964

All art is ultimately social; that which agitates and that which prepares the mind for slumber. The writer is deceived who thinks that he has some other choice. The question is not whether one will make a social statement in one's work — but only what the statement will say, for if it says anything at all, it will be social.

“The Negro Writer and His Roots: Toward a New Romanticism” speech

Given at the American Society of African Culture on March 1, 1959, and printed in *The Black Scholar*, March/April 1981

In Her Own Words

I believe that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic variety is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific. In other words, I've told people that not only is [A Raisin in the Sun] a Negro family, specifically and definitely culturally, but it's not even a New York family or a Southern Negro family. It is specifically South Side Chicago.

That kind of care, that kind of attention to the detail of reference and so forth. In other words, I think people will, to the extent they accept them and believe them as who they're supposed to be, to that extent they can become everybody. So I was — it's definitely a Negro play before it's anything else. ... Universality, I think, emerges from truthful identity of what is. ...

Obviously, people who are sophisticated enough to know it say that, obviously, the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women, you know? Obviously. Since women, period, are oppressed in society and if you've got an oppressed

group they're twice oppressed. So I should imagine that they react accordingly as oppression makes people more militant and so forth and so on then twice militant because they're twice oppressed so that there's an assumption of leadership historically. ...

I come from an extremely comfortable background, materially speaking and, yet, I've also tried to explain we live in a ghetto, you know? Which automatically means intimacy with all classes and all kinds of experiences. It's not any more difficult for me to know the people that I wrote about than it is for me to know members of my family because there is that kind of

intimacy. This is one of the things that the American experience has meant to Negroes: We are one people. ... I had a reason for choosing this particular class. I guess at this moment, the Negro middle class may be from five to six to seven percent of our people. The, you know, comfortable middle class. And I believe that they are atypical of the more representative experience of Negroes in this country. Therefore, I have to believe that whatever we ultimately achieve, however we ultimately transform our lives, will come from the kind of people that I chose to portray.

Radio interview with Studs Terkel


Broadcast on WFMT Radio, Chicago, May 12, 1959

I wanted to be able to come here and speak with you on this occasion because you are young, gifted and Black. In the year 1964, I, for one, can think of no more dynamic combination that a person might be. Look at the work that awaits you! Write if you will, but write about the world as it is and as you think it ought to be and must be. Work hard at it. Care about it. Write about *our* people. Tell their story. You have something glorious to draw on begging for attention. ... And that is why I say to you that, though it be a thrilling and marvelous thing to be merely young and gifted in such times, it is doubly so, doubly dynamic — to be young, gifted and Black.

“The Nation Needs Your Gifts” speech

Given to six teenage winners of the *Reader's Digest*/United Negro College Fund creative writing contest, New York City, May 1, 1964

For some time now — I think since I was a child — I have been possessed of the desire to put down the stuff of my life. That is a commonplace impulse, apparently, among persons of massive self-interest; sooner or later we all do it. And, I am quite certain, there is only one internal quarrel: How much of the truth to tell? How much, how much, how much! It is brutal, in sober uncompromising moments, to reflect on the comedy of concern we all enact when it comes to our precious images!

Even so, when such vanity as propels the writing of such memoirs is examined, certainly one would wish at least to have some boast of social serviceability on one's side. I shall set down in these pages what shall seem to me to be the truth of my life and essences ... which are to be found, first of all, on the South Side of Chicago, where I was born. 

To Be Young, Gifted and Black

Prentice Hall, 1969

Comments on the Playwright

The list of Hansberry's contributions is lengthy, but one thing in particular has always struck me as unique, perhaps due to my own special interest in this subject.

She wasn't the *first* Black writer to illuminate the relationship between the American Black and Africa (that credit belongs to the Harlem Renaissance writers), but she was the first to popularize the notion. ... Her educated African character, Asagai, was certainly the first time a large audience had seen and heard an African portrayed as carrying himself with dignity and as being, moreover, a primary spokesman for sanity and progress. It must also have been the first time a mass audience had ever seen a Black woman gracefully don African robes or wear an "afro" hairstyle.

Alex Haley

"The Once and Future Vision of Lorraine Hansberry," *Freedomways*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1979

The death of a writer of intelligence and integrity diminishes us all. The loss of Lorraine Hansberry at the age of 34 is particularly poignant because her work hardly had begun and her potentiality for largeness of utterance in the theater was great. ...

Miss Hansberry brought a burning passion and a mature, sensitive viewpoint to a theater where they are in short supply.

Howard Taubman

"Lorraine Hansberry," *The New York Times*, January 17, 1965

Were she writing today, she would be called a feminist. The term, however, would merely obscure her special vision. Today the cross-current of issues between women and men, Black and white, forces us into even smaller factions, and the humanistic views of a Lorraine Hansberry could easily be lost in the rush to take sides and profit from the ensuing conflict.

Margaret B. Wilkerson

"Lorraine Hansberry: The Complete Feminist," *Freedomways*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1979

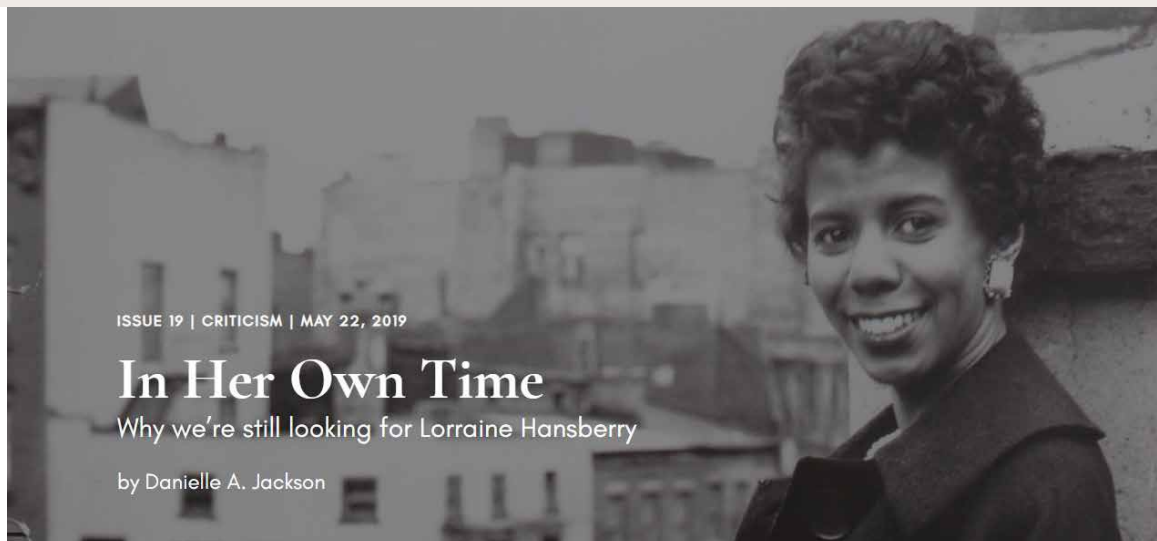


Lorraine Hansberry was a pioneer. She broke new ground. She crossed new frontiers. She created new possibilities. Her impact and influence upon her own generation and succeeding ones are historic. Her death cut short a career of limitless potential.

For those who knew her, Lorraine's premature loss is especially wrenching, since we can't help but ponder what might have been and contemplate the direction her work might have taken during the tumultuous social and political upheavals of the last fifteen years. Yet, as tempting as such speculations are, they are fruitless exercises. Future generations will render their verdict upon Lorraine's work.

Douglas Turner Ward


"Lorraine Hansberry and the Passion of Walter Lee," *Freedomways*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1979



We've only just begun to recognize Lorraine Hansberry, the preeminent, leading figure of Black drama, the respectable, elegantly coiffed arbiter of 20th-century Black womanhood, as a queer, boundary-pushing experimentalist. Part of the reason we misremembered Hansberry for so long is because we became enamored when *A Raisin in the Sun* made her famous. It is also because, to again look to [scholar Margaret B.] Wilkerson, "suppression of her other works robbed the public of her insights."

Our collective intelligence suffered when NBC refused to produce *The Drinking Gourd*, and when she died six years after *Raisin's* debut, Robert, whom she divorced in 1962, became executor of her estate. It meant he was in charge of everything — work in various stages of completion as well as her correspondence and plans for future projects. Adrienne Rich considered Robert's role "a problem" and pondered the silences his stewardship may have enabled. Hansberry's letters to *The Ladder*, for example, the first national lesbian magazine, were long unacknowledged by her estate and largely unknown to the wider public until a few years ago because she signed them with only her initials. Was it old-fashioned privacy or deference to the prohibitive climate of the Fifties? It's thrilling to read them now. ...

What shifts if we consider Lorraine's queerness to be just as integral to who she was as her Blackness? She was part of a milieu of lesbian Manhattan women that included Patricia Highsmith and Edie Windsor. We know that during her lifetime, Lorraine chose to live that part of her life in secret. ... In order to live the public life she did, under FBI surveillance since the early Fifties, she likely had to carefully shroud her intimate life — to dissemble. We cannot know if she wanted to remain partially obscured in death as well. ...

We wouldn't have the plays of Adrienne Kennedy, Tarell Alvin McCraney, Dominique Morisseau or Lynn Nottage, or the films of Kathleen Collins, Julie Dash, Cheryl Dunye, Ava DuVernay or Spike Lee, without her. They're all artists who dive into the crevices and sweat of ordinary Black life and surface resonant beauty. They're also very different from one another. Lorraine, in her defiant multiplicity, lives through them. She is at once in the crowded audience of *Slave Play* and in the saturated colors and poignant intimacy of a film by Barry Jenkins. 

Danielle A. Jackson

"In Her Own Time: Why We're Still Looking for Lorraine Hansberry," *The Point*, May 22, 2019

IMAGE: JACOB LAWRENCE, *THE MIGRATION SERIES*, PANEL 23, "AND THE MIGRATION SPREAD"

Chicago: From the Great Migration to Redlining

By Taylor Barfield
Production Dramaturg

Chicago, like many northern cities in the U.S., saw its demographics change drastically from the end of the 19th century through the middle of the 20th century. Colloquially called the Great Migration, Black Americans from all over the South moved north after the American Civil War during Reconstruction. You can read more about the Migration in *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson, who argues that slavery and the brutal Jim Crow laws that followed created an exodus of Black folk from the South that was more akin to the violent displacement associated with contemporary refugee crises.

In Chicago, the Black population skyrocketed from 30,000 in 1900 to 278,000 in 1940. The population then grew to 813,000 by 1960. One of Chicago's most prominent Black newspapers, *The Chicago Defender*, played a strong role in propelling the migration to Chicago and other northern cities in general. The paper began a campaign to bring Black folk from the South to their city by publicizing the opportunities and relative prosperity of Chicago (and other northern cities) as opposed to the harsh conditions of the South. For example, in 1916 they published a poem by M. Ward called "Bound for the Promised Land," which

led to the issue becoming one of the newspaper's most popular:

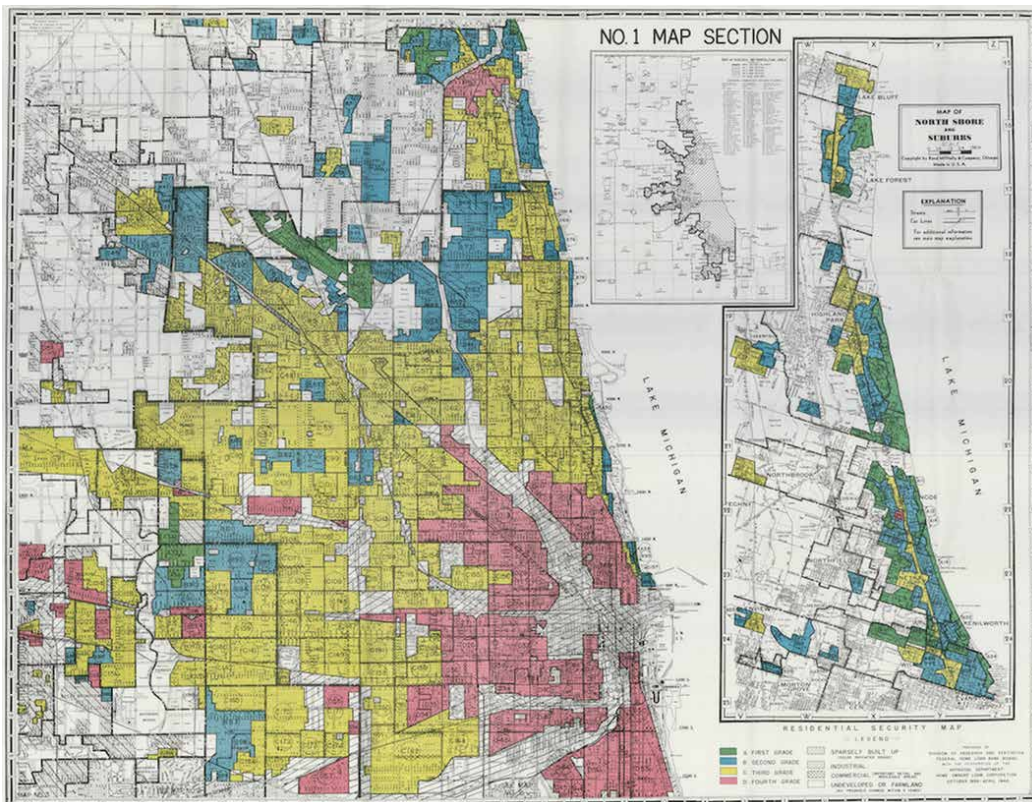
From Florida's stormy banks I go, I'll bid the
South good-bye/No longer shall they treat
me so, and knock me in the eye/HASTEN
ON, MY DARK BROTHER, DUCK THE "JIM
CROW" LAW/NO "CRACKERS" NORTH TO
SLAP YOUR SISTER/NOR TO HANG YOU TO
A LIMB/AND YOU'RE NOT OBLIGED TO CALL
'EM MISTER/NOR SKIN 'EM BACK AT HIM

Scholar and activist Timuel Black says simply of his own family’s move from Alabama to Chicago in 1919 that “[his family] came for three principal reasons: to be able to fight back if they were attacked, to be able to vote and to be able to have a better education for their children.”

But Chicago was not necessarily the escape that many imagined. Racial tensions erupted on several fronts between Chicago’s newest Black residents and the city’s white community. One of the major racial conflicts of the early 20th century occurred in 1919 in what would be called the Chicago Race Riots. On July 27, 1919, six Black teenagers went swimming in Lake Michigan and drifted too close to a whites-only beach. One of the young men drowned after a white man hit him in the head with a stone. Rumors began floating in both Black and white communities. The Black community stated that a cop was present who prevented anyone from aiding the drowned boy. The white community stated it was, in fact, a white boy who drowned after being hit by a stone thrown by a Black man. The incident resulted in five days of unending violence. From July 27 to 31, white gangs roamed the South Side of Chicago shooting Black residents from their cars, and Black gangs began to beat up white merchants. After July 31, 23 Black Chicagoans and 15 white Chicagoans had been killed. More than 237 were injured.

Further, new Black residents found novel forms of racism and inequality in Chicago. Although Illinois banned racial segregation in the late 19th century, local and federal housing laws banned or strongly disincentivized racially integrating Chicago neighborhoods. Beginning in 1934, the Federal Housing Administration offered mortgage insurance to banks and other loan-giving institutions. This created a security blanket for potential homeowners, lowered the potential risk for banks and resulted in lower interest rates for those approved. With this insurance, homebuyers could purchase a home in the Chicago suburbs for \$5,000 (\$104,769 today) with monthly payments around \$30 (\$629 today).

The FHA, however, argued that the presence of racial minorities in neighborhoods drove property values down. Local appraisers created a property rating system that determined who could receive an FHA-insured loan. As Beryl Satter writes, “they ranked properties, blocks and even whole neighborhoods according to a descending scheme of A (Green), B (Blue), C (Yellow) and D (Red). ‘A’ ratings went to properties located in ‘homogeneous’ areas — ones that (in one appraiser’s words) lacked even ‘a single foreigner or Negro.’” Minorities and immigrants were disqualified from FHA-insured loans under this rating system. The system made it much easier for residents in Green and Blue areas in the Chicago suburbs to receive financial resources.



“They ranked properties, blocks and even whole neighborhoods according to a descending scheme of A (Green), B (Blue), C (Yellow) and D (Red). ‘A’ ratings went to properties located in ‘homogeneous’ areas — ones that (in one appraiser’s words) lacked even ‘a single foreigner or Negro.’”

Beryl Satter
Family Properties: Race, Real Estate and the Exploitation of Black Urban America, Henry Holt & Company, 2010

Federal Housing Administration map for Chicago in 1939

IMAGE: COURTESY OF MAPPING INEQUALITY (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

People in Red areas were almost never eligible for resources to buy or improve homes, deepening already stark financial disparities. The FHA system is where the term “redlining” emanates from.

To ensure the homogeneity of Blue and Green neighborhoods, local housing authorities began to further establish the use of restrictive housing covenants in predominantly or totally white neighborhoods dictating that homeowners could not sell or rent to any racial minorities or Jews. Bolstered by national law, Chicago’s housing covenants served as a legal barrier for Black families wishing to move into more affluent areas of the city. These legal barriers, coupled with white gang violence toward families who moved out of redlined neighborhoods, created de facto segregation in Chicago and many cities in the North.

As result, most of Chicago’s Black residents lived in the Black Belt of the South Side, a narrow corridor from 22nd to 31st Streets along State Street. By 1950, the Black Belt grew south to encompass up to 55th Street. This neighborhood spanned about 30 blocks and housed over 80% of Chicago’s vastly growing Black population. Overcrowding soon became the norm, and as more people moved in, many homes fell into disrepair.

Even though lending agencies were loath to give loans to racial minorities (or anyone living near racial minorities), real estate companies bought large swaths of buildings in the Black Belt and other redlined neighborhoods. Since housing laws made it difficult



IMAGE: FROM “RUIN FOR PROFIT” BY GENEVA MORRIS (THE URBAN OPUS)

Example of a one-family home split into four rooms, each with one stovetop, one ice box and a shared bathroom

for Black tenants to move elsewhere, these companies split one-family homes formerly inhabited by white families into multifamily “kitchenettes” and increased the rent exponentially. Four, five and sometimes six families would live on one floor and share one bathroom. Chicago’s landlords in the 1930s had zero incentive to fix or clean anything on their properties, contributing to squalid conditions in many (though not all) of these homes. The Younger family from *A Raisin in the Sun* lives in one of these kitchenettes.

The Chicago Public Library’s *Housing and Race in Chicago* series details some of the conditions in these Chicago kitchenettes:

Such overcrowding, while difficult in itself, also contributed to generally poor housing conditions for Black families. Because there were so many people living in this one area, demand far exceeded supply, and landlords would divide apartments into tiny units called “kitchenettes” and charge exorbitant rents. These apartments often had no bathrooms, with all the occupants of a floor having to share a single hall unit. Buildings sometimes lacked such basic amenities as proper heating. Residents used kerosene lamps instead, and their improvised stoves often overheated and caused fires. The partitions used to divide the apartments were flammable as well, adding to the hazardous conditions. Approximately 751 fires occurred in one year in the Black Belt, many of them fatal. Despite building codes, landlords were rarely penalized for owning slum housing and the few landlords who were fined found it was far more profitable to pay the usually small fine than to maintain their buildings. These conditions of ramshackle and dangerous housing, neglect and indifference from city officials and poor sanitation resulted in infestation by rats. ... Rats reportedly



IMAGE: COURTESY OF MAPPING INEQUALITY (PUBLIC DOMAIN)

Home Owners’ Loan Corporation redlining map for Chicago in 1939, zoomed in on the Black Belt neighborhood

attacked sleeping children, sometimes maiming and even killing them. Tuberculosis and other diseases spread; the infant mortality and overall death rates were higher in the Black Belt than in the rest of Chicago.

for maintenance or repairs, and if a Black family was late on a single payment, the contract holder would evict them and keep all the equity that had built up. In fact, until the home was paid off in full, the contract holder held the equity, not the Black owner.

Although many Black citizens lived in these tenement-like conditions, there were also positives in Black families living in such close proximity to each other. There was often a stronger sense of community in the Black Belt and other such communities. Since Black folk couldn't necessarily spend money outside of the community, most money stayed within the community, helping some families to grow financially to the point that they might be able to purchase property outside of kitchenettes.

Author Ta-Nehisi Coates explores how these types of contracts stifled Black wealth in his essay "The Case for Reparations." These kinds of contracts along with racial covenants prevented most of Chicago's Black residents from being able to even attempt a move to Blue or Green neighborhoods. However, some families, such as Lorraine Hansberry's, aimed for a better life (and better contracts) in predominantly white, working-class neighborhoods.

Of course, most real estate companies continued to make it difficult for Black families to purchase homes anywhere. As Lena Younger points out in the play, most middle-class homes in Red or even some Yellow neighborhoods would be sold for double or triple their actual worth, and they would often make Black tenants sign more predatory loan contracts than white families. The Chicago Public Library writes:

In the 1930s, Hansberry's father Carl, a successful real estate broker, bought multiple houses in the Washington Park Subdivision of Chicago just south of The University of Chicago. The move was an opportunity to live in a better neighborhood but also a means to challenge the use of racial covenants in court. Washington Park is the inspiration for the fictional Clybourne Park in *A Raisin in the Sun*. To the east of that neighborhood stood Hyde Park and Woodlawn, whose nonwhite population ranged from only 0.1% to 9.9%. Washington Park was considered a barrier between the Black areas that lay west and these communities, which were predominantly German and Irish families. At the time, Washington Park was not integrated and had a covenant against selling to Black families.

As for contract sales, the average price markup for homes sold through contract was around 84%. Typically, homes in Chicago "purchased by a speculator for \$12,000 would be resold days or weeks later on contract to a Black buyer for \$22,000," the report said. This would often stretch Black homeowners so thin that no money was left

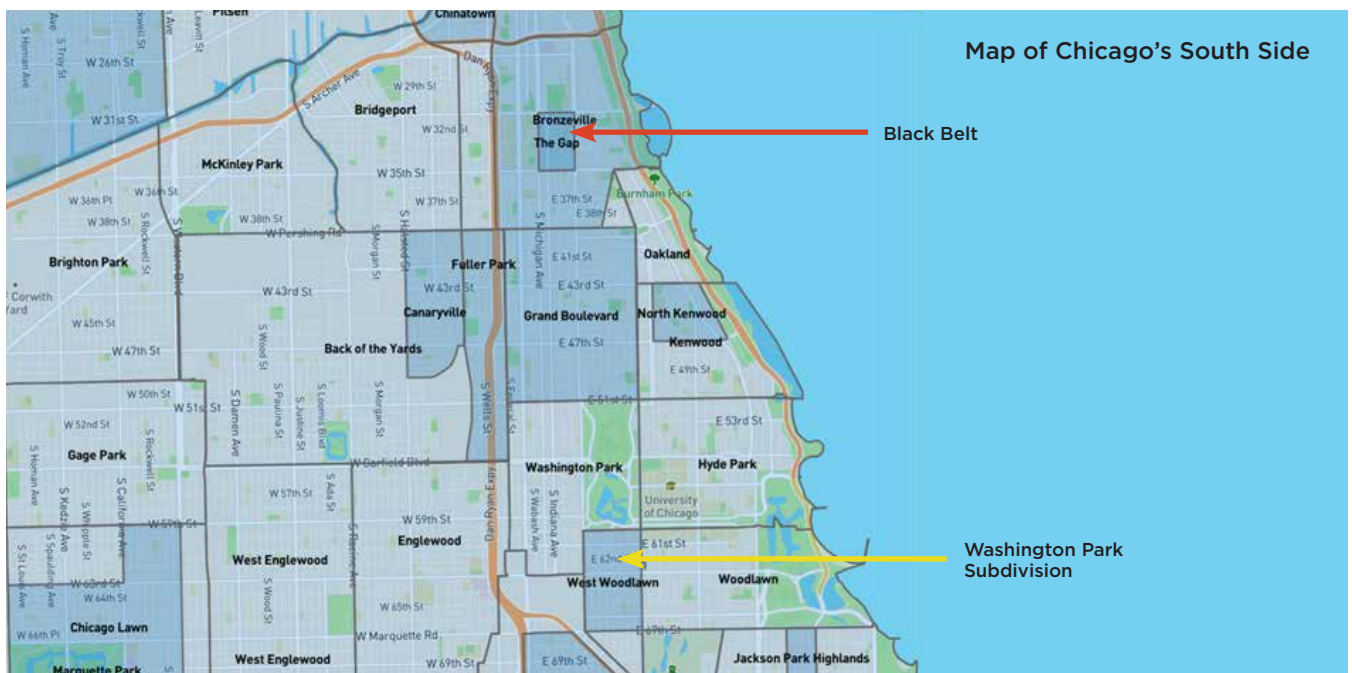


IMAGE: GOOGLE MAPS (MODIFIED BY TAYLOR BARFIELD)

Carl Hansbery took his battle all the way to the Supreme Court in 1940. In the court case *Hansberry v. Lee*, the Supreme Court determined that the specific restrictive covenant that the Washington Park Subdivision had in place was not legally binding and the Hansberry family could live in their home. Despite this victory, the case did not deem the use of the racially restrictive covenants to be unconstitutional. The U.S. would have to wait until 1948 and *Shelley v. Kraemer* before the enforcement of racially restrictive covenants became illegal and until the Fair Housing Act of 1968 before writing discriminatory housing covenants became illegal. Even still, Hansberry's victory opened up many houses to Black families within that specific area of Chicago.

In her new biography, *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry*, Soyica Diggs Colbert goes into more detail about the Hansberry case and the toll it took on Lorraine and the family:

Although the Hansberrys found financial security during the Great Depression and its aftermath, the mass impact of the extended financial crisis caused many families to wonder about American possibility. The Hansberrys' ability to thrive in a financial climate that rendered millions of Americans



Front page of *The Chicago Defender* announcing the results of *Hansberry v. Lee*

destitute not only distinguishes Lorraine's family as Black Americans but also as Americans in general. Thanks to her parents' investments, she had a stable childhood, for the most part.

Lorraine enjoyed the comforts of her parents' financial stability, but racism disrupted their domestic tranquility. In 1937, Carl's economic achievements allowed him to purchase a house at 6140 South Rhodes Avenue, in Woodlawn, an all-white neighborhood near The University of Chicago. There was a racial covenant attached to the property, which set in motion a series of confrontations that shaped Lorraine's understanding of racial justice work. When Carl and his family attempted to move into the building, neighbors responded by spitting on them and jeering at them, and finally throwing concrete through their window. Eventually, the family moved. Carl ultimately filed a lawsuit that ended up confirming his right to buy a home in that neighborhood, although the courts did not find, as he had sought, that the racially restrictive housing covenants were illegal. He won a battle but lost the war that segregated Black people and kept them from purchasing property in general.

Racism worked to keep the Hansberrys in their place by offering a violent rebuke to Carl's attempt to integrate the Woodlawn neighborhood of Chicago. Lorraine's childhood exposure to civil rights advocacy taught her that freedom required a multi-pronged approach, with financial, legal, social and cultural change-makers working together. From experience, she learned that when any one aspect of freedom work functioned independently of the others, individuals could experience uplift but not freedom. Freedom,



PHOTO: SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE

A portrait of Carl Hansberry

Lorraine deduced, required cultivating a set of practices over time that were coordinated with other members of a movement that addressed intersecting forms of oppression.


Lorraine's parents were the best Americans they knew how to be. They worked hard, amassed wealth and fought for political change. Carl founded one of the first Black banks in Chicago, Lake Street Bank, but by 1946, he knew that he needed more space. Not physical space, not more land per se, but more breathing room to be at peace as a Black man living in a segregated world. The type of space he sought did not exist in the U.S. in 1946. With [his wife] Nannie, he purchased a home for their retirement in Polanco, Mexico, a suburb of Mexico City. Before he made his retirement plans, Carl's high blood pressure showed that he had signs of cardiovascular disease. The Hansberry family hoped relocating to Mexico would help his health. In March 1946, they visited their future home where the two planned to retire as expatriates. ...

The peculiar American landscape that allowed Carl to amass a small fortune and made him a stranger in his own land prompted Lorraine to later reflect, "American racism helped kill him."

The struggles and violence directed toward Black families moving to predominantly white neighborhoods were fairly common in the early-to-mid 20th century. You can read more about a history of violence in "How White Housing Riots Shaped Chicago" by Whet Moser. One notable streak of violence is the Trumbull Park Homes Riots in 1953-1954, as these would be instances of violence that the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* might be hearing about as they plan to move into

Clybourne Park. The follow excerpt was written by D. Bradford Hunt for the Encyclopedia of Chicago:

Trumbull Park Homes Race Riots, 1953-1954

South Deering erupted in violence in 1953 over the issue of racial integration at the neighborhood's lone public housing project, Trumbull Park Homes, located at 105th Street and Yates Avenue. Since 1937, the Chicago Housing Authority had maintained an unstated policy to house only whites at projects that, like Trumbull Park, were located in entirely white neighborhoods. However, the project was "accidentally" integrated on July 30, 1953, because the CHA assumed that Betty Howard, an exceptionally fair-skinned African American, was white. Beginning on August 5 and continuing nightly for weeks thereafter, crowds of whites directed fireworks, rocks and racial epithets toward Betty and Donald Howard's apartment. Police responded with a show of force but few arrests. South Deering leaders openly pressured Chicago politicians and the CHA to remove the Howards, while progressive forces argued for further integration. In October, after lengthy debate, the CHA's commissioners reluctantly agreed to move in 10 additional Black families, triggering a new round of white violence directed at Blacks. A massive police presence prevented full-scale rioting, but chronic racial tension and sporadic violence continued through the 1950s. Not until 1963 could African Americans openly use a neighboring public park without police protection. The conflict claimed the career of the CHA's progressive executive director, Elizabeth Wood, who had pushed the CHA's commissioners to further integrate the project. White violence had succeeded in blocking any further racial integration beyond the token Black population in the project. 

Sourced from "Growing Up in Chicago's 'Black Belt' — Timuel Black" by The University of Chicago; *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* by Beryl Satter; "Ruin for Profit: The Rise of Kitchenette Apartments in Chicago's Black Belt, 1940-1960" by Geneva Morris; "Housing and Race in Chicago" by Chicago Public Library; "The Case for Reparations" by Ta-Nehisi Coates; *Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry* by Soyica Diggs Colbert; "How White Housing Riots Shaped Chicago" by Whet Moser; and "Trumbull Park Homes Race Riots, 1953-1954" by D. Bradford Hunt for Encyclopedia of Chicago.



IMAGE: COURTESY OF STAR TRIBUNE

Integrating Neighborhoods in the Twin Cities

The events happening in Chicago during the 1950s when *A Raisin in the Sun* takes place are indicative of dynamics occurring all over the country, including Minneapolis and St. Paul. Below are some notable examples to explore.

1909

Madison Jackson, a lawyer and Pullman porter, moved his family to Prospect Park in Minneapolis, which was entirely white. Although things did not end in violence, the Jackson family consistently dealt with white homeowners marching on their property to argue why they should leave their neighborhood, including threats to involve Minnesota's Ku Klux Klan.

1924

W.T. and Nellie Francis moved into an all-white neighborhood in St. Paul and faced near-constant harassment until W.T. became a consul to Liberia and they moved to Africa.

1931

Arthur Lee, a World War I veteran, and his wife, Edith, moved to 4600 Columbus Avenue in South Minneapolis, which was predominantly working-class, white homeowners. The family experienced continual terrorism including mobs, projectiles and even their dog being poisoned. 📍

DIG DEEPER

See “Jim Crow of the North” and Mapping Prejudice in the Additional Information section.



IMAGE: COURTESY OF MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Voice of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan newspaper, Minneapolis, 1923



Edith and Arthur Lee

PHOTO: COURTESY OF STAR TRIBUNE

Money Just Ain't What It Used to Be

Money plays a key role in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. From Travis Younger asking his mother for 50 cents in the first scene to the urgent question of how Lena Younger will spend the \$10,000 from her late husband's life insurance policy, money has the ability to set the Younger family up for life or shatter their dreams for good.

The chart below compares the relative buying power for the monetary references in *A Raisin in the Sun* to today's economy. How does knowing this buying power change your perspective on the play?

Monetary references in <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>	1953	Buying power in 2022
Money Travis needs to bring to school	50 cents	\$5.14
Amount Charlie Atkins is allegedly making per year	\$100,000	\$1,028,211.90
Cost of the liquor store Walter Lee wants to invest in	\$75,000	\$771,158.92
Initial investment by Walter Lee, Bobo and Willy Harris	\$30,000	\$308,463.57
Amount of Walter Sr.'s life insurance check	\$10,000	\$102,821.19
Beneatha's riding habit that she never uses	\$55	\$565.52
Lena's down payment on the house in Clybourne Park	\$3,500	\$35,987.42
Amount Walter Lee is supposed to reserve for Beneatha's medical school tuition*	\$3,000	\$30,846.36
Amount Willy Harris takes from Walter Lee	\$6,500	\$66,833.77
Monthly mortgage payments for the house in Clybourne Park	\$125	\$1,299.76
Hourly minimum wage in the U.S. in 1953	75 cents	\$7.71
Average yearly salary for Black men in Chicago in 1950	\$2,361	\$27,788.37
Average yearly salary for Black women in 1950	\$1,234	\$14,523.86
Average cost of a new home nationally in 1950	\$8,450	\$99,454.34

*Although many of these values have increased steadily due to inflation, the cost of medical school in the U.S. has increased exponentially since 1953. When Beneatha wants to attend medical school, tuition for most institutions was \$200 – \$800 per year (approximately \$2,090 – \$8,359 today). The average yearly tuition in the U.S. for medical school in 2021 was \$49,842 (public) and \$59,555 (private).

Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities

The following questions and activities are based on an interview with Lorraine Hansberry from the WFMT Studs Terkel Radio Archive that was originally broadcast on May 12, 1959.

Scan the QR code to listen with your students, using the **timestamps** in each section as a guide. We've also transcribed Hansberry's comments for reference.



THE UNIVERSAL AND THE SPECIFIC



1:48-3:24 Lorraine Hansberry:

"I believe that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic variety is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific. In other words, I've told people that not only is this a Negro family, specifically and definitely culturally, but it's not even a New York family or a Southern Negro family. It is specifically South Side Chicago. That kind of care, that kind of attention to the detail of reference and so forth. In other words, I think people will, to the extent they accept them and believe them as who they're supposed to be, to that extent they can become everybody. ... Universality, I think, emerges from truthful identity of what is."

Discussion Questions

- What does it mean when something is universally loved or admired? Do you think it's easy for people to agree on the universal? Why or why not?
- In the context of art and entertainment, sometimes the most popular thing isn't always what we connect with most. Do you believe it's more important to entertain people or tell the truth? Are these two things mutually exclusive? Explain your reasoning.
- In regards to creating characters, Hansberry proposes that "in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific." In other words, the most relatable character is often someone who is completely unique. Do you agree with Hansberry? Why or why not? Do you think this concept of the "universal and specific" applies to other areas outside of playwriting?
- Think about your favorite characters (past or present) from stories, books, movies, media and other forms of fiction or performance. What character traits lead you to favor these characters over others? Is it their personality? Their origin story? Make a small list of details you find most believable or truthful about them.

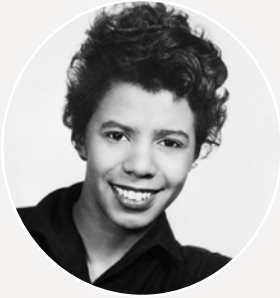
Classroom Activity: Finding Your Truth

Place students in pairs or small groups. Have each student individually make a list of 10 unique character traits describing themselves. Encourage them to be as specific as possible. This list can include where and when they were born, favorite foods, things that frighten them, unique life experiences or special talents.

Next, have them share their lists with their partner or group and determine which traits they have in common with each other. If none are found, encourage them to brainstorm traits they may share.

Invite each pair or group to share their list of common traits with other groups and once again make a list of shared traits with their new groups. Finally, discuss your class list of shared traits. Were any surprising or expected? Did the list help your students feel more connected to each other? Why or why not?

CHARACTERS AND ROLES



23:59–24:32 Lorraine Hansberry:

“One other thing that’s been very interesting to me is that no one has picked out something that I think is a very genuine criticism of the play. That is that it lacks a central character in true classical sense. There is no central character in this play. ... People come out and they think it’s the mother, or they think it’s the son, and some people are so enamored of the daughter they’re not sure that she isn’t really more relevant in some way or somehow.”


Discussion Questions

- Who do you think is the main character in *A Raisin in the Sun*? Explain your reasoning.
- Hansberry has stated that Walter Lee Younger is the “pivotal character” of the play, meaning his actions and decisions move the story forward. Do you agree with her statement? Why or why not? Does this mean the pivotal character is also always the central character?
- Thinking about other stories, plays or movies, there are many variations of what makes up a “classic” protagonist, foil and antagonist. What are some universal traits you would expect from these roles? List at least five traits for each role.
- Each member of the Younger family has a specific dream they hope will come true with the \$10,000 they receive. How do their dreams and aspirations help define their characters and their family roles? What would you do with \$10,000?

Classroom Activity: The Roles We Play

For this activity, have students work individually. Invite them to think about the many groups they belong to (family, friends, classmates, sports teams, after-school clubs). What role(s) do they feel they play in each group? Are they the main character? The supporting character? The comedic relief? The fan favorite? The antagonist? Have students make a list of at least five character roles they play within five different social groups. Ask them to explain the character traits or qualities that are required to fulfill those roles.

Next, have students share their lists with the class. Are their roles clearly defined or more flexible? Are the roles we are assigned the same as the ones we want? Spend some time discussing the different roles each student plays in different social groups.

Finally, bring the discussion of character roles back to the play. Where did the main characters end up in conflict with one another and why? Is it because each felt they were the central character? Does a play always need a main character? Do you believe people need to play different roles in order to create a well-balanced group? Why or why not? 

For Further Reading and Understanding

BOOKS

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry. Acting edition published by Samuel French (now Concord Theatricals).

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry. Vintage Books, 1994.

A Raisin in the Sun: The Unfilmed Original Screenplay by Lorraine Hansberry. Edited by Robert Nemiroff, Plume Books, 1992.

To Be Young, Gifted and Black by Lorraine Hansberry. Adapted by Robert Nemiroff, Signet Classic, 1970.

Hansberry's Drama: Commitment Amid Complexity by Steven R. Carter. University of Illinois Press, 1991.

Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry by Imani Perry. Beacon Press, 2018.

Lorraine Hansberry: Art of Thunder, Vision of Light. Special issue of *Freedomways: A Quarterly Review of the Freedom Movement*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fourth Quarter, 1979.

Reimagining A Raisin in the Sun: Four New Plays, edited by Rebecca Ann Rugg and Harvey Young. Northwestern University Press, 2012. Includes *Clybourne Park* by Bruce Norris, *Etiquette of Vigilance* by Robert O'Hara, *Living Green* by Gloria Bond Clunie and *Neighbors* by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins.

Family Properties: Race, Real Estate and the Exploitation of Black Urban America by Beryl Satter. Henry Holt & Company, 2010.

Radical Vision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry by Soyica Diggs Colbert. Yale University Press, 2021.

The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration by Isabel Wilkerson. Random House, 2010.

ARTICLES

"In Her Own Time: Why We're Still Looking for Lorraine Hansberry" by Danielle A. Jackson. *The Point*, May 22, 2019. <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/in-her-own-time-lorraine-hansberry/>

"Housing and Race in Chicago." Chicago Public Library, April 30, 2003. www.chipublib.org/housing/

"The Case for Reparations" by Ta-Nehisi Coates. *The Atlantic*, June 2014. www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/

"How White Housing Riots Shaped Chicago" by Whet Moser. *Chicago* magazine, April 29, 2015. www.chicagomag.com/city-life/april-2015/how-white-housing-riots-shaped-chicago/

"Trumbull Park Homes Race Riots, 1953-1954" by D. Bradford Hunt. Encyclopedia of Chicago, 2005. www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2461.html

FILM AND VIDEO

A Raisin in the Sun, directed by Daniel Petrie, screenplay by Lorraine Hansberry. Starring Claudia McNeil as Lena, Sidney Poitier as Walter Lee, Ruby Dee as Ruth, Diana Sands as Beneatha and Louis Gossett, Jr. as George Murchison. 1961. 128 minutes.

Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart, directed by Tracy Heather Strain. A documentary about the life and work of Lorraine Hansberry. 2017. 118 minutes. www.sightedeyesfeelingheart.com

"Growing Up in Chicago's 'Black Belt' — Timuel Black," presented by The University of Chicago. October 20, 2014. 2 minutes. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xqn5OmF23HY

"Jim Crow of the North," a Twin Cities PBS Original. This documentary on racial covenants and housing segregation traces racial geography and its impacts on Black communities in the Twin Cities from the Great Migration through redlining to the destruction of Black communities like the Rondo neighborhood through urban blight and construction projects such as I-94 and I-35. 60 minutes. www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWQfDbbQv9E&list=WL&index=168

RADIO

"Lorraine Hansberry discusses her play *A Raisin in the Sun*." The WFMT Studs Terkel Radio Archive, originally broadcast on May 12, 1959. studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/lorraine-hansberry-discusses-her-play-raisin-sun

WEBSITES

Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust. The official representative of Lorraine Hansberry, stewarding her legacy and celebrating her life and work. www.lht.org

Mapping Prejudice. This project by the University of Minnesota outlines how the racial covenants of the early 20th century continue to dictate the geography of Black communities in the Twin Cities today. mappingprejudice.umn.edu