

# A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry

## A Raisin in the Sun's' Enduring Passion

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### Full Text:

In the wake of its twenty-fifth anniversary, Lorraine Hansberry's great play *A Raisin in the Sun* is enjoying a revival of a most encouraging kind. Complete with restorations to the text of scenes and passages removed from the first production, the work is currently being given a new direction and interpretation that reveal even more clearly the play's profoundly imposing stature, continuing relevance, and pointed social analysis. At major regional theaters in city after city *Raisin* has played to packed houses and, as on the night I saw it, standing ovations. It has broken or approached long-standing box office records and has been properly hailed as "a classic," while the *Washington Post* has called it succinctly: "one of the handful of great American dramas ... in the inner circle, along with *Death of a Salesman*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *The Glass Menagerie*."

For a playwright who knows, too well, the vagaries and realities of American theater, this assessment is gratifying. But of even greater significance is the fact that *A Raisin in the Sun* is being viewed by masses of people, black and white, in the light of a new day.

For *Raisin* typifies American society in a way that reflects more accurately the real lives of the black U.S. majority than any work that ever received commercial exposure before it, and few if any since. It has the life that only classics can maintain. Any useful re-appreciation of it cannot be limited, therefore, to the passages restored or the new values discovered, important though these are: it is the play itself, as a dramatic (and sociopolitical) whole, that demands our confirmation of its grandeur.

When *Raisin* first appeared in 1959, the Civil Rights Movement was in its earlier stages. And as a document reflecting the *essence* of those struggles, the play is unexcelled. For many of us it was—and remains—the quintessential civil rights drama. But any attempt to confine the play to an era, a mind-set, an issue ("Housing") or set of topical concerns was, as we now see, a mistake. The truth is that Hansberry's dramatic skills have yet to be properly appreciated—and not just by those guardians of the status quo who pass themselves off as dramatic critics. For black theater artists and would-be theorists especially, this is ironic because the play is probably the most widely appreciated—particularly by African Americans—black drama that we have.

*Raisin* lives in large measure because black people have kept it alive. And because Hansberry has done *more* than document, which is the most limited form of realism. She is a *critical realist*, in a way that Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Margaret Walker are. That is, she *analyzes* and *assesses* reality and shapes her statement as an aesthetically powerful and politically advanced work of art. Her statement cannot be separated from the characters she creates to embody, in their totality, the life she observes: it becomes, in short, the living material of the work, part of its breathing body, integral and alive.

George Thompson in *Poetry and Marxism* points out that drama is the most expressive artistic form to emerge out of great social transformation. Shakespeare is the artist of the destruction of feudalism—and the emergence of capitalism. The mad Macbeths, bestial Richard III's, and other feudal worthies are actually shown, like the whole class, as degenerate—and degenerating. (pp. 9-10)

Hansberry's play, too, was political agitation. It dealt with the very same issues of democratic rights and equality that were being aired in the streets. It dealt with them with an unabating dramatic force, vision, political concreteness and clarity that, in retrospect, are awesome. But it dealt with them not as abstractions, fit only for infantile-left pamphlets, but as they are *lived*. In reality.

All of *Raisin*'s characters speak *to* the text and are critical to its dramatic tensions and understanding. They are necessarily larger than life—in impact—but crafted meticulously from living social material.

When the play opened on Broadway, Lena Younger, the emotional adhesive of the family, was given a broad, aggressive reading by Claudia McNeil. Indeed, her reading has been taken as the model and somewhat institutionalized in various productions I've seen.

The role itself—of family head, folksy counsel, upholder of tradition—has caused many people to see her as the stereotyped “black matriarch” of establishment and commercial sociological fame. Carrying with them (or rebelling against) the preconceived baggage of that stereotype, and recalling the play through the haze of memory (or from the compromised movie version), they have not bothered to look more closely at the actual woman Hansberry created—and at *what* tradition she in fact upholds. (p. 11)

[In the recent New York revival of the play, Olivia Cole's reading of Lena] was revelation and renewal.

Ms. Cole came at the role from the inside out. Her Lena is a woman, black, poor, struggle-worn but proud and loving. She was in the world *before* the rest of the family, before many of us viewing the play. She has seen and felt what we have not, or what we cannot yet identify. She is no quaint, folksy artifact; she is truth, history, love—and struggle—as they can be manifest only in real life. (p. 12)

Similarly, the new interpreters of Walter Lee ... are something “fresh,” like our kids say. They bring a contemporary flavoring to the work that consists of knowing—with more certainty than, say, Sidney Poitier could have in the original—the frustration and rage animating the healthy black male, *post*-civil rights era. They play Walter Lee more aggressively, more self-consciously, so that when he does fall we can actually hate him—hate the frivolous, selfish male-chauvinist part of ourselves. And when he stands up at the finale and will not be beaten, we can cry with joy.

Part of the renewed impact of the play comes with the fresh interpretation of both director and actors. But we cannot stop there! The social materials that Hansberry so brilliantly shaped into drama are not lightweight. For me this is the test of the writer: no matter the skill of the execution—*what* has been executed? What is it he or she is talking about? Form can never be dismissed, to say the least, particularly by an artist. But in the contradiction between form and content, content must be the bottom line—though unless the form be an extension of (and correctly serve) that content, obviously even understanding of the content will be flawed.

Formalist artists must resort to all kinds of superficial aberrations of form because usually they have nothing to say. Brecht said how much safer the red is in a “non-objective” painting than the red of

blood rushing out of the slain worker's chest.... And it is one reason why some critics will always have a problem with the realism of a Hansberry—and ignore the multilayered richness of her form.

*A Raisin in the Sun* is about *dreams*, ironically enough. And how those psychological projections of human life can come into conflict like any other product of that life. For Lena, a new house, the stability and happiness of her children, are her principal dream. And as such this is the completion of a dream she and her late husband—who has literally, like the slaves, been *worked* to death—conceived together.

Ruth's dream, as mother and wife, is somewhat similar. A room for her son, an inside toilet. She dreams as one of those triply oppressed by society—as worker, as African American, and as woman. But her dream, and her mother-in-law's, conflicts with Walter Lee's. He is the chauffeur to a rich white man and dreams of owning all and doing all the things he sees “Mr. Arnold” do and own. On one level Walter Lee is merely aspiring to full and acknowledged humanity; on another level he yearns to strut his “manhood,” a predictable mix of *machismo* and fantasy. But Hansberry takes it even further to show us that on still another level Walter Lee, worker though he be, has the “realizable” dream of the black petty bourgeoisie. “There he is! *Monsieur le petit bourgeois noir*—himself!,” cries Beneatha, the other of Lena Younger's children. “There he is—Symbol of a Rising Class! Entrepreneur! Titan of the system!” The deepness of this is that Hansberry can see that the conflict of dreams is not just that of individuals but, more importantly, of classes. Not since Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog* (1938) has there been a play so thoroughly and expertly reflective of class struggle within a black family.

Beneatha dreams of medical school. She is already socially mobile, finding a place, as her family cannot, among other petty bourgeois aspirants on the rungs of “education,” where their hard work has put her. Her aspiration is less caustic, more attainable than Walter's. But she yearns for something more. Her name Beneatha (as who ain't?) should instruct us. She is, on the one hand, secure in the collegiate world of “ideas” and elitism, above the mass; on the other, undeceived by the myths and symbols of class and status. Part militant, part dilettante, “liberated” woman, little girl, she questions everything and dreams of service to humanity, an identity beyond self and family in the liberation struggles of her people. Ah, but will she have the strength to stay the course?

Hansberry has Beneatha grappling with key controversies of the period, but also some that had yet to clearly surface. And she grapples with some that will remain with us until society itself is changed: The relationship of the intellectual to the masses. The relationship of African Americans to Africans. The liberation movement itself and the gnawing necessity of black self-respect in its many guises (e.g., “straightened” hair vs. “the natural”). Written in 1956 and first seen by audiences in the new revivals, the part of the text in which Beneatha unveils her hair—the “perm” cut off and she glowing with her original woolly crown—precedes the “Afro” by a decade. Dialogue between Beneatha and her mother, brother, Asagai and George Murchison digs into all these still-burning concerns.

Similarly, Walter Lee and Ruth's dialogues lay out his male chauvinism and even self- and group-hate born of the frustration of too many dreams too long deferred: the powerlessness of black people to control their own fate or that of their families in capitalist America where race is place, white is right, and money makes and defines the man. Walter dreams of using his father's insurance money to buy a liquor store. This dream is in conflict not only with the dreams of the Younger women, but with reality. But Walter appreciates only his differences with—and blames—the women. Throughout the work, Hansberry addresses herself to issues that the very young might feel only *The Color Purple* has raised. Walter's relationship to his wife and sister, and Beneatha's with George and Asagai, gives us a variety of male chauvinism—working class, petty bourgeois, African.

Asagai, the Nigerian student who courts Beneatha, dreams of the liberation of Africa and even of taking Beneatha there: “We will pretend that ... you have only been away for a day.” But that's not reality either, though his discussion of the dynamics and dialectics of revolution—and of the continuity of human struggle, the only means of progress—still rings with truth!

Hansberry's warnings about neo-colonialism and the growth (and corruption) of a post-colonial African bourgeoisie—“the servants of empire,” as Asagai calls them—are dazzling because of their subsequent replication by reality. As is, above all, her sense of the pressures mounting inexorably in this one typical household, and in Walter Lee especially, and of where they must surely lead. It was the “explosion” [Langston Hughes](#) talked about in his great poem “Harlem”—centerpiece of his incomparable *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, from which the play's title was taken—and it informs the play as its twinned projection: dream or coming reality.

These are the categories Langston proposes for the dream:

Does it dry up  
Like a raisin in the sun?

Dried up is what Walter Lee and Ruth's marriage had become, because their respective dreams have been deferred. When Mama Lena and Beneatha are felled by news of Walter Lee's weakness and dishonesty, their life's will—the desired greening of their humanity—is defoliated.

Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?

Walter Lee's dream has festered, and in his dealings with the slack-jawed con man Willie (merchant of the stuff of dreams), his dream is “running.”

We speak of the American Dream. [Malcolm X](#) said that for the Afro-American it was the American Nightmare. The little ferret man ... is the dream's messenger, and the only white person in the play. His name is Lindner (as in “neither a borrower nor a Lindner be”), and the thirty or so “pieces of silver” he proffers are meant to help the niggers understand the dichotomous dream.

“But you've got to admit that a man, right or wrong, has the right to want to have the neighborhood he lives in a certain kind of way,” says Lindner. Except black folks. Yes, these “not rich and fancy” representatives of white lower-middle America have a dream, too. A class dream, though it does not even serve them. But they are kept ignorant enough not to understand that the real dimensions of that dream—white supremacy, black “inferiority,” and with them ultimately, though they know it not, fascism and war—are revealed every day throughout the world as deadly to human life and development—even their own.

In the post-civil rights era, in “polite” society, theirs is a dream too gross even to speak of *directly* anymore. And this is another legacy of the play: It was one of the shots fired (and still being fired) at the aberrant white-supremacy dream that is American reality. And the play is also a summation of those shots, that battle, its heightened statement. Yet the man, Lindner, explains him/himself, and there is even a hint of compassion for Lindner the man as he bumbles on in outrageous innocence of all he is actually saying—that “innocence” for which Americans are famous, which begs you to love and understand me for hating you, the innocence that kills. Through him we see this other dream:

Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—

Like a syrupy sweet?

Almost everyone else in the play would sound like [Martin Luther King](#) at the march on Washington were we to read their speeches closely and project them broadly. An exception is George Murchison (merchant's son), the “assimilated” good bourgeois whose boldest dream, if one can call it that, is to “get the grades ... to pass the course ... to get a degree” en route to making it the American way. George wants only to “pop” Beneatha after she, looking good, can be seen with him in the “proper” places. He is opposed to a woman's “thinking” at all, and black heritage to him “is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-ass spirituals and some grass huts.” The truth of this portrait is one reason the black bourgeoisie has not created the black national theaters, publishing houses, journals, galleries, film corporations, and newspapers the African American people desperately need. So lacking in self-respect are members of this class of George's, they even let the Kentucky Colonel sell us fried chicken and giblets.

The clash between Walter Lee and George, one of the high points of class struggle in the play and a dramatic tour de force, gives us the dialogue between the *sons* of the house and of the field slaves. (pp. 12-18)

When *Raisin* appeared the movement itself was in transition, which is why Hansberry could sum up its throbbing profile with such clarity. The baton was ready to pass from “George's father” as leader of the “Freedom Movement” (when its real muscle was always the Lena Youngers and their husbands) to the Walter Lees and Beneathas and Asagais and even the Georges.

In February 1960, black students at North Carolina A & T began to “sit in” at Woolworth's in a more forceful attack on segregated public facilities. By the end of 1960, some 96,000 students across the country had gotten involved in these sit-ins. In 1961, Patrice Lumumba was assassinated, and black intellectuals and activists in New York stormed the United Nations gallery. While Ralph Bunche (George's spiritual father) shrank back “embarrassed”—probably more so than by slavery and colonialism! But the Pan African thrust had definitely returned.

And by this time, too, [Malcolm X](#), “the fire prophet,” had emerged as the truest reflector of black mass feelings. It was of someone like Malcolm that Walter Lee spoke as in a trance in prophecy while he mounts the table to deliver his liquor-fired call to arms. (Nation of Islam headquarters was Chicago where the play is set!) Walter Lee embodies the explosion to be—what happens when the dream is deferred past even the patience of the Lena Youngers.

Young militants like myself were taken with Malcolm's coming, with the immanence of explosion. (pp. 18-19)

We thought Hansberry's play was part of the “passive resistance” phase of the movement, which was over the minute Malcolm's penetrating eyes and words began to charge through the media with deadly force. We thought her play “middle class” in that its focus seemed to be on “moving into white folks' neighborhoods,” when most blacks were just trying to pay their rent in ghetto shacks.

We missed the essence of the work—that Hansberry had created a family on the cutting edge of the same class and ideological struggles as existed in the movement itself and among the people. What is most telling about our ignorance is that Hansberry's play still remains overwhelmingly popular and evocative of black and white reality, and the masses of black people dug it true.

The next two explosions in black drama, Baldwin's *Blues for Mr. Charlie* and my own *Dutchman* (both 1964) raise up the militance and self-defense clamor of the movement as it came fully into the Malcolm era.... But neither of these plays is as much a statement from the African American majority

as is **Raisin**. For one thing, they are both (regardless of their “power”) too concerned with white people.

It is Lorraine Hansberry's play which, though it seems “conservative” in form and content to the radical petty bourgeoisie (as opposed to revolutionaries), is the accurate telling and stunning vision of the real struggle.... The Younger family is part of the black majority, and the concerns I once dismissed as “middle class”—buying a house and moving into “white folks' neighborhoods”—are actually reflective of the essence of black people's striving and the will to defeat segregation, discrimination, and national oppression. There is no such thing as a “white folks' neighborhood” except to racists *and to those submitting to racism*.

The Younger family is the incarnation—*before* they burst from the bloody Southern backroads and the burning streets of Watts and Newark onto TV screens and the *world* stage—of our common ghetto-variey Fanny Lou Hamers, Malcolm X's, and Angela Davises. And their burden surely will be lifted, or one day it certainly will “explode.” (pp. 19-20)

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## Civil Rights Movement

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The American [civil rights](#) movement emerged with the "separate but equal" standard set by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision. The discrete efforts of different groups were galvanized in 1954 by the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision ordering the integration of public schools, just as the [United States](#) was getting involved in the Cold War. The timing of the two events was no coincidence. As Americans grew increasingly aware of the difference between their democratic right to freedom and Soviet totalitarianism, they were forced to see the hypocrisy in enforced racial [segregation](#). The transformative effect of the Cold War was not limited to international relations. The East-West confrontation also influenced domestic life in the United States. Civil rights leaders in the late [1940s](#) were given ammunition for their cause in light of the fact that America's self-proclaimed role as world protector of freedom and democracy flew in the face of its system of legal racial oppression. The discrepancy was not lost on President Truman. In 1947, he shocked the nation by appointing the President's Committee on Civil Rights. A year later, he issued an executive order to end segregation in the United States armed forces.

## Post-1945 America

The Cold War profoundly affected the [politics](#), society, and culture of postwar America. It shaped family life, gender relations, and the trajectory of domestic policies. But it most significantly challenged the predominant social question of the era—the struggle for racial justice. Now that the Soviets were using America's "Jim Crow" segregationist policies to garner support from the rest of the world, Americans had to scrutinize more closely questions about democracy, freedom, tyranny, and oppression.

Tensions between the East and West served as the perfect vehicle for civil rights leaders to advance their domestic aims. They pointed time and again to the inconsistency between America's mission abroad and the persistence of segregation at home. Leading figures in the civil rights movement asserted relentlessly at conferences and meetings, on the radio, and in newspapers and magazines that Jim Crow was incompatible with America's international role. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), W. E. B. DuBois (1868-1963), Walter White (1893-1955) of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ([NAACP](#)), and other prominent activists made clear that the United States must practice at home what it preached abroad. It did not take long for their message to get through to President Truman.

## Truman Supports Civil Rights

In 1947, as the Cold War intensified and the United States became increasingly intolerant, President Truman shocked the nation by authorizing a fifteen-man committee on civil rights. The goal of the committee was to recommend new legislation to protect people from discrimination. That same year, Truman became the first president to address the NAACP. In his address, he announced that the federal government was working to protect [African Americans](#) against discrimination, violence, and race prejudice. In 1948, an election year, Truman continued his push for civil rights, partly out of conscience and partly out of politics. Senator Hubert Humphrey (1911-1978), a deeply committed civil rights advocate, persuaded the [Democratic Party](#) to support a strong civil rights platform in its campaign. When the platform passed at the Democratic Convention, South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond (1902-2003) and a group of Southern delegates walked out. After the convention, Truman issued an executive order calling for the desegregation of the U.S. armed forces. His stance on civil rights won him the black vote that year—and the presidential election.

## Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) was the most famous civil rights activist of the twentieth century. The youngest man to receive a Nobel Peace Prize for his promotion of peace, [nonviolence](#), and the equal treatment of people of all races, King followed the teachings of pacifist Indian activist Mahatma Gandhi. He became active in the civil rights movement in 1955 as the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and continued to lead [civil rights activists](#) in marches and protests until his violent shooting death on April 4, 1968.

King was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. He loved books, even before he could read, and showed talent as an orator from an early age. For years he deliberated the decision to become a minister like his father, but King Sr. dissuaded him, explaining that the ministry was not a sufficiently intellectual pursuit for his bright son. In 1944, King entered Morehouse College where he majored in sociology. After graduating in 1948, he entered Crozer Theological Seminary. Despite his father's advice, King had decided to pursue a career in the ministry. As a seminary student, King attended a lecture by Howard University president, Modest Johnson, about Indian pacifist, Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi. The lecture

gave King his purpose and direction in life. He graduated from Crozer in 1951 and entered Boston University. He received his doctorate degree from the university in 1955. That year, King became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, [Alabama](#).

In 1957, King and minister Ralph Abernathy founded the [Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#) (SCLC) following the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. The goal of the SCLC was to coordinate the action of local protest groups throughout the South. That year, King's home and church were bombed, and violence against black protestors escalated. The bombing made King conscious of the possibility of being killed, but it also reinforced his dedication to nonviolence because, as he said, "Nonviolence can touch men where the law cannot reach them." Because he was always ready to demonstrate the power of nonviolence, he made himself vulnerable to violent confrontations and run-ins with the police. He was arrested and jailed many times, was stabbed while autographing copies of his book *Stride Toward Freedom* and criticized by militant black activists, like [Malcolm X](#) (1925-1965) and Stokely Carmichael (1941-1998), who favored more extreme methods of protest.

King used visionary language and wisdom to bring people together. His now-famous "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech, delivered from the Lincoln Memorial at the March on Washington in 1963, has become one of the most eloquent and stirring [speeches](#) in American history. King's insistence on nonviolence and his gift as a powerful and persuasive orator made him the center of a whirlwind of historical events. In 1963, *Time* magazine named him Man of the Year. A year later, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. He continued his work as a driven civil rights leader until he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. There to assist striking garbage workers in their push for increased wages, King spoke almost prophetically about his demise. In his speech to the garbage workers, he said, "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land."

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## "A Raisin in the Sun": The Quest for the American Dream

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