Lorraine Hansberry’s
A Raisin in the Sun
in Context

Judy Wilburn Hill
Other Titles in This Series

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Item Number: 4B4991

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Item Number: 4B5904
Table of Contents

About the Author ..................................................................................................................... 8

To the Teacher .......................................................................................................................... 9

Correlation to Common Core College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards.............................. 12
  Writing Standards Correlation ................................................................................................. 12
  Reading Standards Correlation ............................................................................................... 13
  Speaking and Listening Standards Correlation ......................................................................... 14

Overview .................................................................................................................................. 15

How to Use This Book ........................................................................................................... 16

“Let’s Talk About Racism in Schools,” by Rick Wormeli ....................................................... 18

Handouts .................................................................................................................................. 25
  Handout 1: A Raisin in the Sun on Stage and in Film: An Enduring Fascination ...... 25
  Handout 2: How to Spice Up a Play! ....................................................................................... 27
  Handout 3: Suggestions for Further Reading ......................................................................... 28
  Handout 4: Visual Analysis—Visual Elements of Design ......................................................... 30
  Basic Visual Analysis Outline .................................................................................................. 31
  Handout 5: Teach the Class! .................................................................................................... 32
  Handout 6: Review of A Raisin in the Sun Original 1959 Broadway Production, by Brooks Atkinson .............................................................. 34

Context Is Everything ............................................................................................................. 37
  Lorraine Hansberry’s Biography ............................................................................................ 37
  Synopsis of A Raisin in the Sun .............................................................................................. 40
2 Chicago Slums of the 1950s ......................................................... 45
“A dream unrealized for African-Americans in Chicago,” by Steve Bogira ............ 45
“Lorraine Hansberry. A Raisin in the Sun: The Ghetto Trap,” by Brandon Colas ...... 48
“Housing and Race in Chicago,” from the Chicago Public Library .......................... 51
Vocabulary and Definitions ....................................................................................... 52
Vocabulary in Action ................................................................................................. 53
Discussion Questions ................................................................................................. 54
Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun ....................................... 59
Activities .................................................................................................................. 59

3 “The play’s the thing...” ................................................................................. 61
“Background and Criticism of A Raisin in the Sun,” from the Chicago Public Library ................................................................. 61
“A Raisin in the Sun as timely as ever,” by Robert Hurwitt .................................... 63
“A White Mother Reviews A Raisin in the Sun at Seattle Rep,”
by Natalie Singer-Velush ......................................................................................... 65
Vocabulary and Definitions ....................................................................................... 67
Vocabulary in Action ................................................................................................. 67
Discussion Questions ................................................................................................. 68
Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun ....................................... 70
Activities .................................................................................................................. 71

4 Characters and Family Matters ...................................................................... 73
“Character Analysis: A Raisin in the Sun,” by Amanda Kelly ................................. 73
Vocabulary and Definitions ....................................................................................... 77
Vocabulary in Action ................................................................................................. 78
Discussion Questions ................................................................................................. 78
Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun ....................................... 81
Activities .................................................................................................................. 82

5 Black Masculinity ............................................................................................ 83
“To Be a Man: A Re-Assessment of Black Masculinity in Lorraine Hansberry’s
A Raisin in the Sun and Les Blancs,” by Julie M. Burrell ....................................... 83
“Defining Black Masculinity: Defining Ourselves By Ourselves,”
by Matthew Jones .................................................................................................... 85
Vocabulary and Definitions ....................................................................................... 87
Dreams and “Youthful Idealism” ............................................. 91

“Analysis of A Raisin in the Sun,” by David D. Cooper ................................. 91
“Dreams ‘Deferred’ But Identity Affirmed and Manhood Restored:
A New Look at A Raisin in the Sun,” by Sayed Abdelmawjoud ........................ 93
“The Art of Social Criticism: Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun,”
by Amanda Kelly .................................................................................... 95
“Dreams Deferred: Hughes’s ‘Harlem’ and Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun,”
by Anne Cunha ..................................................................................... 97

Vocabulary and Definitions ........................................................................ 98
Vocabulary in Action .................................................................................. 99
Discussion Questions .................................................................................. 99
Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun .......................... 103
Activities .................................................................................................. 104

Poetry, Art, and Multimedia ................................................................. 107

Poetry
Poem One: “Mother to Son,” by Langston Hughes ................................. 107
Poem Two: “Dreams,” by Langston Hughes ............................................. 108
Poem Three: “Those Winter Sundays,” by Robert Hayden ..................... 108
Poem Four: “We Wear the Mask,” by Paul Laurence Dunbar ................... 109
Poem Five: “Equality,” by Maya Angelou ............................................... 110

Vocabulary and Definitions ........................................................................ 111
Vocabulary in Action .................................................................................. 111
Discussion Questions .................................................................................. 111
Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun .......................... 115
Activities .................................................................................................. 115

Art
The Cradle, by John Biggers ....................................................................... 116
Behind Every Great Man, by Kevin Williams ......................................... 118

Vocabulary and Definitions ........................................................................ 119
Vocabulary in Action .................................................................................. 119
Discussion Questions .................................................................................. 120
Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun .......................... 122
Activities .................................................................................................. 122
## Multimedia

- **Film:** “A Raisin in the Sun (1961),” by Paul Tatara .................................................. 123
- **Vocabulary and Definitions** .................................................................................. 124
- **Vocabulary in Action** ............................................................................................ 125
- **Discussion Questions** ............................................................................................ 125
- **Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun** ................................ 127
- **Activities** .................................................................................................................. 127
- **Song:** “To Be Young, Gifted and Black,” by Nina Simone and Weldon Irvine ...... 128
- **Discussion Questions** ............................................................................................ 129
- **Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun** ................................ 131
- **Activities** .................................................................................................................. 131
- **Musical:** Raisin (1973) ............................................................................................ 132
- **Discussion Questions** ............................................................................................ 133
- **Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun** ................................ 134
- **Activities** .................................................................................................................. 135
- **The Music and the Artists of 1959: “America Rocks and Rolls,” from UShistory.org** ................................................................. 135
- **Top 10 Songs of 1959** ............................................................................................ 137
- **Top 10 R & B Singles of 1959** ................................................................................ 138
- **Vocabulary and Definitions** .................................................................................. 139
- **Vocabulary in Action** ............................................................................................ 140
- **Discussion Questions** ............................................................................................ 140
- **Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun** ................................ 143
- **Activities** .................................................................................................................. 144

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**Answer Key** .............................................................................................................. 145

**Sources and Resources** ......................................................................................... 159
About the Author

Judy W. Hill earned her bachelor’s degree in Education at Texas Christian University and her master’s degree in English at the University of North Texas. She has taught secondary English, served as a coordinator for advanced academics, and worked as a curriculum specialist. She served as English department head and created the SAT® prep programs for various high schools. Judy is the author of 10 Great Speeches Viewed Through a Literary Lens: Analysis and Activities; Looking at Literature with a Beat: Poem and Song Pairings with Analysis and Activities; Related Readings: Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein in Context; Related Readings: Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in Context; and Related Readings: William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet in Context, all from Teacher’s Discovery®.

In 2009, Judy received $10,000 from the Reilly Family Foundation for the Marva Collins Teaching Excellence Award in the Aledo Independent School District. Judy’s passion is British literature, and she has visited England three times to enhance her knowledge and teaching. Having taught ninth-grade English through Advanced Placement® English Literature and Composition, she has a passion for teaching all levels of students.
To the Teacher

During my 25 years in education, teachers constantly asked me how to “spice up” a novel or play—especially the classics that, in many ways, seem so far removed from the fast-paced, plugged-in world that our students live in today. Three main categories immediately came to mind: literary context, historical context, and the relevance to contemporary society.

Many times the literary component is already laid out in the textbook or in the separate work (novel, play, poem, etc.). The historical component is usually included in the preface to the literary work, but it is often one-sided and/or brief. And often the relevancy component is lacking or missing completely—the very component that is crucial to the teaching of literature.

Compare teaching a classic play to a great recipe. What makes that recipe great? Ingredients, of course! So what ingredients does a teacher need to make teaching a classic play a great experience for both the students and the teacher?

Judy’s Winning Recipe to Spice Up a Play

• Take one literary component: the classic play.
• Blend in historical context.
• Add relevancy and role-play.
• Fold all together in a light mix.
• Top with dollops of topical interest to students—to add spice and depth!

Consider this book a convenience store: a one-stop shop for extra ingredients to teach *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Remember that a play should be acted out with an active discussion of the language, staging, and characterization. Assigning students, especially middle school or ninth grade, a play to read at home for homework seldom works. The play needs to come alive for the students! Clear out a part of your classroom for a “stage.” I always had the center of my room open for activities (with desks on each side of the room), and students learned very quickly that this area became the “activity” center of the room. You, the teacher, will role-play right along with the students. Believe me, this is both entertaining and educational for the students.

*A Raisin in the Sun* poses questions that are as relevant today as they were when it was written and first produced in the 1950s. Lorraine Hansberry addresses issues that continue to resonate and that students experience in their everyday lives. Many play guides and lesson plans have been written for *A Raisin in the Sun*, and it is the discerning teacher who uses those and who also makes the play and subject matter come alive for their students.

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Related Readings: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in Context
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9
Discussing race and racism is difficult for everyone. Educator and author Rick Wormeli’s piece on how to approach and discuss race-related topics in the classroom offers timely and thoughtful points and practical tips for a teacher to incorporate an open approach to a sensitive subject. Read the article on page 18.

English teachers may wish to work with other teachers to explore the cross-curricular benefits when teaching A Raisin in the Sun. The historical context component as well as other historical references throughout the play lend themselves to cross-curricular teaching. If your school offers psychology, refer to Sections Two through Six as these articles lend themselves to tenets of psychology. Work with your school’s drama and art teachers using Section Seven to explore ways to enhance the teaching of the play. Remember that learning does not happen in isolation!

Related Readings: Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun in Context gives both teacher and student the opportunity to study A Raisin in the Sun through its literary genius, its historical/topical aspect, and its relevance in today’s world.

Introduce your students to Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun with the rousing song “Let the Good Times Roll,” performed by Ray Charles (an icon of the 1950s). Share that Ray Charles, who died at the age of 73 in 2004, was called “The Genius.” Ray Charles was born into poverty, was five years old when his four-year-old brother drowned, was blind by age seven, and attended the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind from 1937 to 1945. He already had a love of piano by age three, when he first heard Wylie Pitman play the boogie-woogie on an old piano at a local café. Pitman taught Ray Charles to play, and he would take that love of music to school where he was taught how to read music by using braille—a very difficult process. Ray Charles pioneered the way for soul music with his love of the blues and gospel music, and later his passion for country and pop music.

“Let the Good Times Roll” emphasizes, “If you want to have a ball, / You got to go out and spend some cash / And let the good times roll now.” This line mirrors Walter’s dream that money will solve all their problems—that he needs cash from the $10,000 insurance check to make his dreams come true. Play this version of Ray Charles singing on YouTube™ for your students: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuCJ-mXJW44.

“Let the Good Times Roll”

By Sam Theard

Hey everybody!
Let’s have some fun
You only live but once
And when you’re dead you’re done
So let the good times roll,
I said let the good times roll,
I don’t care if you’re young or old,
You oughtta get together and let the good times roll

Don’t sit there mumbling
Talkin’ trash
If you want to have a ball,
You got to go out and spend some cash

And let the good times roll now,
I’m talkin’ ‘bout the good times
Well it makes no difference whether you’re young or old
All you got to do is get together and let the good times roll

Hey y’all tell everybody! Ray Charles’s in town
I got a dollar and a quarter and I’m just ringing the clock
But don’t let no female, play me cheap
I got fifty cents more than I’m gonna keep

So let the good times roll now
I tell y’all I’m gonna let the good times roll now
Well it don’t make no difference if you’re young or old
All you got to do is get together and let the good times roll

Hey no matter whether, rainy weather
If you want to have a ball, you got to get yourself together
Oh, get yourself under control, and let the good times roll

Overview

This collection of readings related to the play *A Raisin in the Sun* allows students to read, study, and analyze the following:

- articles evaluating the power of a 1959 play by a young African American female playwright
- articles on the relevancy of the play
- an article analyzing the Younger family members, their dreams, and their dramas
- articles examining life in Chicago in the 1950s
- discussions of adaptations of the play
- articles on black masculinity
- five poems by noted African American poets
- artwork
- music, lyrics, and multimedia

These varied genres enrich both the teaching and the study of Hansberry’s play and give students new insight into the historical context of the play.

*Related Readings* includes the following sections to help set the background of the play:

- a biography of Lorraine Hansberry
- a short synopsis of the play
- historical context of the period
- a list of characters
- a select list of adaptations based on the play

All reading selections feature:

- advanced vocabulary in boldface
- vocabulary words and short definitions
- a Vocabulary in Action assignment
- discussion questions
- writing exercises and application to *A Raisin in the Sun*
- group and individual activities

The “How to Spice Up a Play!” graphic organizer includes 14 components. Each component is included in this book. When you start teaching any play, refer to this graphic organizer to help you choose which components would best align with the specific play.
How to Use This Book

Related Readings: Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun in Context is divided into nine sections:

• Handouts
• Context Is Everything
• Chicago Slums of the 1950s
• “The play’s the thing…”
• Characters and Family Matters
• Black Masculinity
• Dreams and “Youthful Idealism”
• Poetry, Art, and Multimedia
• An Answer Key beginning on page 145

The book includes handouts listing notable film adaptations. A screening of a film adaptation of A Raisin in the Sun is an engaging method of bringing the play into the classroom. Students may enjoy viewing classic or contemporary adaptations of the play. A handout listing books related to the play’s themes is included. Students may wish to explore how other authors treat family, racism, dreams, and dreams deferred.

As you explore the artwork included in Related Readings, use the Visual Analysis Handout to help connect art to literature.

The collection of readings related to A Raisin in the Sun allows students to read, study, and analyze the following pieces:

• articles discussing the background and roots of the play
• articles evaluating the themes of family and racism
• nonfiction pieces discussing the themes of family and racism
• an article on the theme of family
• poems related to the themes in A Raisin in the Sun
• discussions of adaptations of the play
• artwork
• music, lyrics, and multimedia

Each reading section features:
• difficult or unfamiliar words in boldface
• vocabulary words defined
• a Vocabulary in Action assignment
• discussion questions
• writing exercises and application to A Raisin in the Sun
• group and individual activities
• optional online activity assignments with applicable websites

The varied genres enrich both the teaching and the study of the play and give students new insight into the historical context of the play. Students will relate fiction, nonfiction, poetry, art, and even contemporary music to the classic play, deepening and enriching their understanding of the text and its context.

The varied readings allow the teacher to use all of the readings or to choose the ones that will most enrich their students’ study of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Some articles contain links (active links in the download version, complete links in the printed version for ease of entering into a search engine) that connect to source articles that add depth or extra material. Quoted definitions of words or terms are attributed to the publisher and are not active links.

Use the Biography, Synopsis, Context, and Character List to provide background and support for students as they read the play.

A Sources and Resources section lists websites that were used for image sources and article research, which may be useful for student research.

Choose sections and articles with assignments to complement your existing lesson plans. The assignments require reading time either in class or assigned as homework. The articles are short, and the time commitment for writing assignments will vary depending on your choice of assigning the number (one, several, or all) of the questions.

Diverse questions and activity assignments also allow students to choose an assignment (especially in the writing and activities sections) that aligns with their abilities and interests.

Activities may be completed individually or with partners or a group. Copy or print the pages from each section for distribution to the students as needed. Complete in class or assign as homework.
Lorraine Hansberry’s Biography

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry (1930–1965)—author, playwright, and activist—was born in Chicago and died from cancer in New York City at the age of 34. The granddaughter of a freed slave, Hansberry was the youngest of four children, whose father was a real estate broker and whose mother was a teacher. When Hansberry was eight years old, her father purchased a home in the all-white neighborhood in the Washington Park subdivision on the South Side of Chicago. Attacked by their white neighbors, the Hansberry family fought a legal battle all the way to the Supreme Court—*Hansberry v. Lee*—and won the right to stay in the all-white neighborhood. But this fight took a physical toll on Carl Hansberry, Lorraine’s father, and he died in 1946 at the age of 50 in Mexico, where he had gone in the hopes of resettling his family due to the racism in America. Lorraine said that “American racism helped kill him” (encyclopedia.com). Sam Lasman’s article “Fighting for Home: The Roots of *A Raisin in the Sun*” explores the impact this move had on the Hansberry family:

When real estate developer Carl Augustus Hansberry sought to buy a better home for his family in 1938, he settled on a turreted brick structure at 6140 South Rhodes Avenue in the Washington Park area of Chicago. In doing so, he directly confronted one of the most entrenched realities of urban segregation: restrictive covenants. These agreements, signed by the property holders of Chicago’s white neighborhoods, stipulated the exclusion of all black residents with the insulting exception of “janitors, chauffeurs, or house servants.”
Ironically, even as the covenants grew stricter, the economic situation worked against them. By 1937, Chicago had 50,000 more African-American residents than apartments where their occupancy was permitted. White property owners capitalized on the great demand, at times extracting exorbitantly high rent from black tenants in violation of the covenants. James T. Burke, the prior owner of the house that Hansberry purchased, was one such landlord. He asserted that he would “put negroes in every block of that property.” In the end, it took only Carl Hansberry’s occupancy to set off an uproar.

Predictably, the local property owners association challenged Hansberry’s residency […] But Hansberry fought back, using his own real estate expertise and enlisting the aid of experienced NAACP lawyers. The Illinois Supreme Court ruled that since an earlier case had upheld the legality of the covenant, the issue was res judicata—already adjudicated and not subject to further decisions. On these grounds, it ordered the family to “remove from the premises.” Undaunted, Hansberry appealed, and the case ultimately landed before the United States Supreme Court in October 1940.

While the legal battle raged in Washington, Hansberry’s family was fighting a far more brutal war from their new home. His daughter Lorraine, ten years old at the time, would later describe how her mother, Nannie Louise Hansberry, stayed up nights clutching a pistol to defend her children from the “hellishly hostile” mobs, thrown bricks, and threats of arson that besieged them.

After two weeks, the Supreme Court finally reached a verdict, reversing the Illinois decision and securing the Hansberrys’ residency.

[…] Thus, the realities of her family’s struggle tempered Lorraine Hansberry’s optimism. Her father had gained a legal victory, but only by a technicality. It had cost him, she wrote, “a small personal fortune, his considerable talents, and many years of his life.” Six years later he died in Mexico while searching for a place to relocate his family, convinced that US racism was so pervasive it could only be evaded, not defeated.

A Raisin in the Sun takes place over a decade after Hansberry v. Lee, but the Youngers are engaged in a nearly identical struggle for dignity.

Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, but after two years she left school and moved to New York City where she wrote for the progressive newspaper Freedom. Her mentor, Louis E. Burnham, taught her “that all racism is rotten, white or black; that everything is political; that people tend to be indescribably beautiful and uproariously funny” (encyclopedia.com). Another mentor, W. E. B. Du Bois—civil rights activist, historian, and co-founder of the NAACP in 1909— influenced Hansberry. Du Bois visited the Hansberry home when Lorraine was a child, and as an adult, Hansberry “studied African history and
Although Hansberry was foremost an activist involved in the civil rights movement in the U.S., she also recognized and fought for the rights of people on a global basis. During her travels while covering various news stories and conferences, Hansberry wrote: “Even in its astounding imperfection, the earth of ours is magnificent. But, oh, this human race!” (encyclopedia.com). During this time, Hansberry continued writing plays, poems, and short stories—yet to be published.

In 1953, Hansberry married Robert Nemiroff, a political activist and musician. Hansberry and Nemiroff divorced in 1962, but they remained close and continued to work together. Success as a playwright came for Hansberry in 1959 with *A Raisin in the Sun*—the first play by an African American woman to be staged on Broadway. The play ran for 530 performances, and the 29-year-old Hansberry became the youngest American playwright and only the fifth woman to be awarded the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play.

*A Raisin in the Sun* has been translated into 35 languages and performed all over the world, and in 1961, the film version, starring the original cast from the 1959 Broadway stage, was a tremendous success.

“It was the glories and weaknesses of her fellow humans that inspired Hansberry’s remarkable artistic output during a tragically short career” (encyclopedia.com). In 1963, Hansberry was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and she died in 1965. Her funeral was held in Harlem, and a message from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was delivered from the pulpit: “Her commitment of spirit… her creative ability and her profound grasp of the deep social issues confronting the world today will remain an inspiration to generations yet unborn” (lhlt.org).
Synopsis of A Raisin in the Sun

A Raisin in the Sun made its debut on Broadway in 1959 and tells the story of the Younger family, who lives in poverty in a two-bedroom apartment on the south side of Chicago in the 1950s. The family unit consists of Mama (Lena), her daughter, Beneatha, her son, Walter, and his wife, Ruth, and their son, Travis. The family is awaiting a $10,000 life insurance check from the death of Mama’s husband, and this money is the impetus for realizing dreams for Mama, Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha. Being the man of the house, Walter feels entitled to the money and wishes to invest in a liquor store. Mama dreams of buying a house for her family, and Ruth shares Mama’s dream, but Ruth’s unexpected pregnancy causes her untold worry. Beneatha’s dream is to be a doctor, and she needs money for her tuition.

Walter, with his sense of entitlement, and Mama, with her strong, moralistic sense of using the money wisely, clash as both fight for their dreams. Walter is an angry man who feels cheated by the world, arguing that money is “life.” Mama responds, “So now it’s life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it’s money.” Mama also expresses concern about Walter when she says to him, “Something eating you up like a crazy man. Something more than me not giving you this money. The past few years I been watching it happen to you. You get all nervous acting and kind of wild in the eyes.” The chasm between Mama and Walter becomes deeper as the play progresses, and Mama adamantly tells her son that “there ain’t going to be no investing in no liquor stores.” Later, Walter tells Mama that she “butchered up a dream of mine—you—you always talking ‘bout your children’s dreams.” Soon, Mama placates her son by entrusting the remaining $6,500 to him after she deposits $3,500 down on a house in an all-white neighborhood in Clybourne Park.

Clybourne Park sends Karl Lindner, a representative for the neighborhood, to convince the Youngers to sell out and not move into the all-white neighborhood. His pleas fall on deaf ears, and he leaves. Beneatha, with her sarcastic wit, explains, “He [Lindner] talked Brotherhood. He said everybody ought to learn how to sit down and hate each other with good Christian fellowship!” Beneatha is juggling two suitors, George Murchison and Joseph Asagai. George is a wealthy college student whom she will reject, and Joseph is the native Nigerian who wants Beneatha to come to Africa with him and be a doctor. But she soon learns that her portion of the money is gone, along with her dreams.

Bobo, a friend of Walter’s and partner in the anticipated liquor store venture, appears at the Youngers’ door to tell them that the third partner, Willy Harris, has absconded with the money. Walter screams, “THAT MONEY IS MADE OUT OF MY FATHER’S FLESH.” Mama is in shock and starts talking about her husband, Big Walter. “I seen him grow thin and old before he was forty… working and working and working like somebody’s old horse... killing
himself... and you—you give it all away in a day.” Chaos and sadness envelop the Younger household.

Walter decides to solve their problems by calling Karl Lindner to come over in order for Walter to sell the Clybourne house to him and recover some of the lost $6,500. However, when Lindner appears, Walter informs him about the Youngers’ proud heritage and ends with “We don’t want your money.” Mama tells Ruth that Walter was a man today, and the Younger family, already packed and ready to go, are headed to their new home. Mama takes a final look around the room, then “grabs her plant, and goes out for the last time.”
Historical Context

Lorraine Hansberry’s family lived in a black neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, a city with defined black and white neighborhoods. The family eventually moved to Washington Park, a white neighborhood, only to suffer attacks from their white neighbors. The homes in the neighborhood were “restricted”: the deeds to the homes contained clauses that prohibited selling the houses to African Americans. Carl Hansberry, Lorraine’s father, fought the discrimination all the way to the Supreme Court and won his case in the 1940 decision *Hansberry v. Lee*. However, his health suffered and he died in 1946. These heart-wrenching events in Hansberry’s life are reflected in *A Raisin in the Sun*, and it is in this play that Hansberry depicts some of the major conflicts and challenges that African Americans continue to face every day.

In 1948, in *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the Supreme Court conceded that restrictive covenants constituted private action and therefore did not violate the 14th Amendment. However, because state courts enforced the covenants, the Court found that was an unconstitutional state action.

The pursuit for racial equality resulted in two events with far-reaching consequences: the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, and the 1955 Rosa Parks stand against bus segregation, which resulted in the Montgomery bus boycott. In 1956, the Supreme Court ruled in *Browder v. Gayle* that segregated seating on public transport was unconstitutional.

As Amanda Kelly wrote in an article about *A Raisin in the Sun*, “Hansberry anticipated the need and called for minority empowerment against inequality and discrimination. One of her major thematic criticisms was the ‘gap between the American dream and the Black American reality.’” *A Raisin in the Sun* raises questions about the place that African Americans hold in a “white” society as well as the challenges they face within their own black community. Both Ruth and Beneatha face feminist challenges: Ruth, in dealing with her pregnancy, and Beneatha, in presenting her views on education, marriage, and a woman’s place in the world.

The 1950s saw a nation recovering from World War II while laying a foundation for the volatility of the 1960s. While teenagers danced at malt shops to new music—itself a cause for parental concern—deep social unrest lay under the calm that many people see as a decade of contentment and economic growth. The role of the African American and views on women would come center stage in the 1960s with peaceful and violent demonstrations that threatened to tear a country apart.

From the inception of the Korean War in 1950 to the 1959 NASA selection of the first astronauts known as the Mercury Seven, the 1950s was a decade of tremendous change and challenge. The following list encapsulates major events both in the United States and on a global scale:
• 1950—The Korean War begins when North Korean troops, backed by the Soviet Union, invade South Korea. President Truman orders ground and air forces against North Korea.
• 1951—Transcontinental television begins.
• 1952—Oslo, Norway, holds the 1952 Winter Olympics, and U.S. skater Dick Button lands the first triple jump in figure skating history.
• 1952—General Dwight D. Eisenhower wins the presidential election.
• 1953—The Korean War ends.
• 1953—President Eisenhower declares that the U.S. nuclear arsenal be increased due to the Communist threat—the Cold War.
• 1953—Color televisions go on sale.
• 1954—Children start receiving polio vaccinations on a large-scale basis.
• 1954—Brown v. Board of Education declares segregation in public schools unconstitutional as this violated the 14th Amendment that guarantees equal protection.
• 1955—U.S. starts to train troops in South Vietnam.
• 1955—The Supreme Court orders all public schools be integrated immediately.
• 1955—Disneyland opens.
• 1955—Rosa Parks protests bus segregation laws by refusing to give her seat to a white man, which leads to a boycott and the declaration that bus segregation laws are unconstitutional.
• 1956—Elvis Presley’s “Heartbreak Hotel” tops the charts at number one.
• 1956—The interstate highway system begins.
• 1957—The FBI arrests Jimmy Hoffa, American labor union leader associated with organized crime, who later disappears in July 1975.
• 1957—Congress approves first civil rights bill since Reconstruction with more protection of voting rights.
• 1957—The National Guard in Arkansas is sent to stop nine black students from entering an all-white high school in Little Rock. The students are eventually allowed to enter, but the threat of violence remains.
• 1957—The U.S. attempts to launch a satellite into space, but it explodes on the launch pad.
• 1957—Gordon Gould, American physicist, invents the laser.
• 1958—The World’s Fair in Belgium witnesses a Cold War debate between the members of the pavilions of the U.S. and the Soviet Union.
• 1958—Jet airline passenger service begins with the first flight between New York City and Miami.
• 1959—Alaska is admitted to the U.S. as the 49th state, followed later that year by Hawaii.
• 1959—Rebel leader Fidel Castro becomes prime minister of Cuba.
• 1959—The Daytona 500 is run for the first time, and Lee Petty wins.
• 1959—NASA selects seven military pilots for the Mercury Seven, the first astronauts of the United States: John Glenn, Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra, Alan Shepard, and Deke Slayton.
• 1959—President Eisenhower hosts Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the first visit of a Soviet Union leader to the U.S.
<table>
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<th>List of Characters</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mama (Lena Younger)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walter Younger</td>
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<td>Ruth Younger</td>
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<td>Beneatha Younger (Bennie)</td>
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<td>Travis Younger</td>
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<td>George Murchison</td>
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<td>Bobo</td>
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<td>Willy Harris</td>
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<td>Karl Lindner</td>
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<td>Mrs. Johnson</td>
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Chicago Slums of the 1950s

Introduction: A Raisin in the Sun is set in the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s. Hansberry realistically placed the Younger family in a two-bedroom apartment in this impoverished area. What were the living conditions like in Chicago in the 1950s, and what challenges did African Americans face during this time? The following three articles delve into these questions.

The first article begins with a quote by Martin Luther King Jr. as he reiterates the “shameful condition” that many African Americans are forced to live in. This article provides a chart illustrating that Chicago since 1960 has seen very little progress, if any, for the 21st-century African American.

The second article addresses the “Ghetto Trap” within which some African Americans were forced to live due to “racism from the housing industry, government, religious leaders, and average Americans,” who “supported the segregated housing environment of Chicago.” The last article addresses the overcrowding conditions in Chicago from 1940–1960 as well as the “integration of neighborhoods” and the protests that ensued.

*** “A dream unrealized for African-Americans in Chicago” ***

By Steve Bogira
Chicago Reader | August 21, 2013

“We have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check,” Martin Luther King Jr. told the rapt throng on the National Mall 50 years ago [August 1963].

King told the gathering of 250,000 people, most of whom were black, that the Constitution and Declaration of Independence were a promissory note “to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

“It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned,” King said on that hot August afternoon. “Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’”
King’s “I Have a Dream Speech” today is celebrated more for the lyrical, hopeful portraits he ended with, of what the nation could be, than for the stinging rebukes he began with, about the nation as it was.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, at which he gave the speech, commemorated the 100-year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. A century after that proclamation, “the Negro still is not free,” King told the crowd. “The life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.”

It was no longer a time for patience, he said. “This sweltering summer of the colored people’s legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.”

In the 50 years since that sweltering summer, the chains of discrimination have loosened some, but the manacles of segregation are still taut. And as a result, for many blacks throughout the nation, the invigorating autumn has yet to appear.

“The generation of African-American children raised during the civil rights era has made virtually no advancement out of the nation’s poorest neighborhoods,” sociologist Patrick Sharkey writes in a new book, Stuck in Place. It’s a conclusion many other researchers have arrived at as well. […] Segregated neighborhoods

“We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro’s basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one,” King said on that August day.

But in Chicago, that’s exactly what happened. […]

A host of social scientists have demonstrated how the segregation that was imposed on African-Americans has concentrated their poverty, intensifying the ills of their neighborhoods. For his book, Sharkey tracked the economic outcomes of a large cohort of children raised after the civil rights movement. The black children had “substantially lower” income as adults than the white children—even when they were raised by parents with similar jobs and levels of education and aspirations for their kids.

The key variable, Sharkey found, was the vastly different kinds of neighborhoods the children grew up in. “The rigid segregation of urban neighborhoods means that the black child will be raised in a residential environment with higher poverty, fewer resources, poorer schools, and more violence,” Sharkey
writes. “These differences have an important impact on children’s opportunities as they move toward adulthood.” The stark racial differences in neighborhoods “has been a primary mechanism for the reproduction of racial economic inequality in the post civil rights era.” […]  

**Economic status**

“The Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity,” King said on that August afternoon in 1963.

In 1960, 29.7 percent of black Chicago families were living in poverty, compared with 7.4 percent of white families. Median income was 62 percent higher for white families than for black families ($7,700 versus $4,800). The city’s ten poorest community areas were all overwhelmingly black.

In 1983, 20 years after King’s speech, the Chicago Urban League analyzed socioeconomic indicators from the 1980 census—unemployment, female-headed households with children, persons in poverty, high school graduation rates—and found disparities between blacks and whites in the Chicago area to be greater than in any major metropolitan area in the nation. “No other urban center even comes close to matching this ignominious record,” the Urban League said in its report.

The report attributed the disparities to the city’s extreme racial segregation, and the machine politics which for decades had “funneled most resources to non-black sections of the community.” Whatever the causes, one thing was clear, the report said: “Chicagoans need to recognize the severity of the racial inequities which exist in this city, and we must begin to make a concerted effort to reduce this gap in the years immediately ahead.” […]  

Child poverty also has been rising for African-Americans in Chicago, according to census data compiled for us by the Social IMPACT research center of the Heartland Alliance. Now one of every two black children in Chicago is poor, compared with one of every 11 white children.

Sharkey’s study of post-civil rights children found most white children to have been upwardly mobile economically—whereas most black children were actually worse off than their parents had been. This, again, is likely due to neighborhood disparities, he observes: a black family that makes economic gains finds it hard to sustain them in areas of high crime, low property values, and inferior schools—which characterizes the neighborhoods most black children and almost no white children grow up in.” The ideal of America as the land of equal opportunity is simply not supported by the evidence,” Sharkey writes. […]  

**Realizing the dream**

Given how deep and long-standing the disparities, fixing them is a monumental task. But it’s not an impossible one. […]  

The first steps, of course, are recognizing the extent of the crisis and committing fully to addressing it. For decades now, African-Americans in Chicago and many other big cities have been living in intolerable circumstances, or circumstances that would be deemed intolerable if whites were living in them. And their cities and states and nation continue to tolerate their plight.

“We have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition,” King said at the Lincoln Memorial 50 years ago.

It still is.


Related Readings: Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* in Context ©2017 Teacher’s Discovery®

*By Brandon Colas*

During 1959, in a growing neighborhood outside Chicago, Progress Development Corporation planned to sell ten to twelve new homes to blacks. When the all-white neighborhood of Deerfield discovered this, they were furious (Rosen 24). One resident, Bob Danning, explained his feelings and the feelings of his neighbors when he stated, “We’re not bigots. We don’t go around calling people names. And I don’t think we want to deny Negroes or anybody else the right to decent homes, just as good as ours. But not next door” (Rosen 16).

Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965) analyzes northern racism, as expressed by Bob Danning, and its cruel effects in her play *A Raisin in the Sun*, which she claims is “specifically [about] Southside Chicago.” Many social issues of the 1950’s, including feminism, gender roles, the black family, and the pan-African movement, as well as events within Hansberry’s own life, are interwoven in this play. However, a central theme of *A Raisin in the Sun* reveals how racism from the housing industry, government, religious leaders, and average Americans supported the segregated housing environment of Chicago.

The setting of *A Raisin in the Sun* is the ghetto of Chicago, where most blacks lived. These districts consisted of overpriced, overcrowded, and poorly-maintained apartments and homes. In the ghettos, crime rates were high and public services were limited. Most blacks living in the ghetto had hopes of leaving to [go to] better suburban neighborhoods, but segregated housing kept them stuck in the ghetto.

The housing industry was the greatest cause of segregated housing in Chicago. Within the housing industry, many social scientists observed that “real estate agencies play the largest role in maintaining segregated communities.” Real estate agents made enormous profits manipulating white fears of integration and black desires to escape the ghetto, as evidenced by the lucrative practice of blockbusting. A real estate agent would encourage a black family to move to an all-white neighborhood. Housing costs within the white neighborhoods were much lower than black neighborhoods, so some black family would attempt to move, despite threats from future white neighbors. After the black family moved in, nervous whites feared their property values would crash. The real estate agent would then purchase much of whites’ houses for well below their market value, and resell them well above their market value to blacks wanting to flee the ghetto. This lucrative bait-and-switch procedure could double real estate agencies’ profits within two years. Whites who experienced blockbusting held hard feelings towards blacks which sometimes turned violent.

Real estate agents also fostered the segregation in Chicago by developing separate housing markets for blacks and whites. In 1917 the Chicago Real Estate Board condemned the sale and rental of housing to blacks outside of city blocks contingent to the ghetto. Conditions did not change in the next half-century, and blacks interested in a home or apartment were usually shown only ghettos or transition neighborhoods. Real estate agents limited blacks’ housing options by rarely offering them housing opportunities outside the ghetto. The real estate industry literally trapped the black family in the ghetto.

The real estate industry was aided in segregating Chicago by unfair costs of liv-
ing within the housing industry. Landlords charged black families high prices for low
quality housing, and the average black family in the ghetto had to pay 10% more in
housing taxes and fees than in a comparable white neighborhood. Higher housing costs
limited blacks’ opportunities to move to better neighborhoods by taking away a large
portion of their income. In addition, most white landlords did not maintain their slum
property, leading to poor living conditions. Many black families suffered these higher
housing costs and poor living conditions within the ghetto because they could not
save enough money to move to a cheaper suburban neighborhood.

A Raisin in the Sun notes that the housing industry has a racist nature because of
discrepancies in housing cost within black and white communities and their separate
housing locations. Walter and Ruth are stunned that Mama purchases a house in
an entirely white neighborhood, because moving to a white neighborhood could put
their lives at risk. Mama explains why she was unwilling to stay in the black community
when she states, “Them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out all seem
to cost twice as much as other houses. I did the best I could,” also noting that the new
houses built for blacks are located in their own segregated communities, “way out.”

When Ruth observes to Mama that “we’ve put enough [money] in this rat trap to pay
for four houses by now,” she is not making an idle statement considering the unreason-
ably high costs of ghetto housing. Like most blacks in the Chicago ghetto, the Younger
family lives in a “tired,” run-down, “rat trap.” Neighborhood games further reveal poverty:
Travis chases and kills a rat “as big as a cat” with his friends (59). The Youngers’ house
is roach-infested, and a Saturday morning chore consists of “spraying insecticide into
the cracks in the walls.” Like the “rat trap” of the Youngers, living conditions for blacks in
the ghetto were poor. […]

When Lorraine Hansberry was a child, her family experienced firsthand the results
of a government unconcerned with blacks leaving segregation. After the Hansberrys
moved into a white neighborhood, their neighbors brought a lawsuit to evict them.
The local Chicago government was willing to eject the Hansberrys from their new
home but Lorraine’s father, Carl Hansberry, took their case to court. With the help of the
NAACP, he eventually won the right to stay, but never recovered from the emotional
stress of their legal battles.

The problem of the government which held blacks in the ghetto and which the
Hansberry family experienced is implied in A Raisin in the Sun. Walter plans to chop
through the government’s forest of red tape to gain a liquor license by bribing a city
official. He explains his reasoning to Ruth, his wife, saying, “don’t nothing happen for
you in this world ‘less you pay somebody off!”[.] A government where graft is com-
mon is a government slow to respond to its peoples’ needs—as was Chicago. Despite
the poverty that the Younger family lives in, there is no mention of help or any sort of aid
from the government, even to fumigate their house for healthier living conditions. […]

Besides the housing industry, the government, and religious leaders, personal
racism on the individual level kept blacks in the Chicago ghettos. Terrified of blacks en-
tering their neighborhoods, whites believed that integration “endangered their turf, their
community, the place they called home.” Moving to a white neighborhood could be
deadly for black families. From 1944 to 1946 there were over 46 arson bombings within
Chicago directed at black homes on the ghettos’ outskirts. In 1965, the Southern
Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) marched against segregated housing in
Chicago. In one instance, 500 black protesters marched in a white neighborhood, Gage Park, to protest segregation. They were promptly attacked by 4000 outraged whites. Even the KKK and the American Nazi party came north to Chicago during SCLC’s open-housing movement because conditions appeared ripe for recruits.

After Carl Hansberry sued to remain in his new neighborhood, “howling mobs” surrounded the Hansberry’s house. At one point a brick hurled through their window barely missed Lorraine’s head before embedding itself in their wall. This violence, from the perspective of many whites, was unfortunate, for as long as both races remained separate, conflict was unnecessary. When integration threatened the carefully crafted white society, violence ensued.

The role of individual racism within segregated housing in Chicago is an important focus of A Raisin in the Sun. When Ruth and Walter first hear the news that they will be moving to Clybourne Park, they are shocked. Walter looks at his mother with “hostility,” while Ruth’s stunned response is, “Clybourne Park? Mama, there ain’t no colored people living in Clybourne Park.” Walter becomes bitter as Ruth tries to adjust to the shock. They realize that their lives could be at risk from an irate vigilante if they move within a white neighborhood.

Just as individuals’ violence fought to keep Chicago segregated, violence threatens the Younger family. Fire bombings are discussed in the play by the simplistic Mrs. Johnson. She arrives to chat, and while discussing the Younger’s upcoming move asks if Mama and Ruth have read “about them colored people that was bombed out of their place out there.” She then idiotically states, “Lord—I bet this time next month y’all’s names will have been in the papers plenty—‘NEGROES INVADE CLYBOURNE PARK—BOMBED!’”[...] She warns Mama and Ruth that “these here Chicago pecker-woods is some baaaad peckerwoods,” an accurate statement of white Chicago’s general hatred of integration [a peckerwood is a disparaging term for a white Southerner].

The characterization of Karl Lindner is a scathing commentary on white Northern racism on the personal level. He appears innocuous, “quiet-looking,” “middle aged,” and “a gentle man.” He explains to the Youngers that “most of the trouble [between whites and blacks] exists because people just don’t sit down and talk to each other.” He is calm, patient, and “almost sadly” warns the Youngers that they will be in physical danger if they move into Clybourne Park. However, by desiring to keep the Youngers from Clybourne Park, he is implying to them, as Mama says, “they aren’t fit to walk the earth.” Like Bob Danning, Karl Lindner says, “I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn’t enter into it.” At the end of the play, when Walter triumphantly kicks him out of the house, Karl’s true character is as weak and shallow as that of whites who openly support housing segregation. The Younger family ignores his veiled threats and concentrates on Walter, the unexpected hero. Karl’s last line is a lame, “I sure hope you people know what you’re getting into.”

Carl Sandburg called Chicago America’s laughing city, “proud to be alive and coarse and cunning.” Bill Berry, of Chicago’s Urban League, called Chicago “America’s largest segregated city.” A Raisin in the Sun shows through the triumph of the black spirit amidst white racism and segregation that both observations are accurate. Robert Nemiroff, in his introduction to the 1987 text, called the play “so contemporary” because of Lorraine Hansberry’s ability to tie social issues, including the rise of second-wave feminism, questioning of gender roles, the difficulties of the black family, and the
death of colonialism, throughout A Raisin in the Sun. However, her portrayal of Chicago’s segregated housing market is particularly **poignant** because of her accurate observation that Chicago’s segregated housing existed mainly because of racism within the housing industry, the government, religious leaders, and the individual American.

In Deerfield, the white community halted Progress Development Corporation’s building project in court. By 1962, three years from when the controversy began, Harry and David Rosen concluded, “in Deerfield, there are no Negroes next door.” A Raisin in the Sun is still a rebuke to suburban audiences today. For most of us, there are still no Negroes next door.

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### “Housing and Race in Chicago” ###

*From the Chicago Public Library*

Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun chronicles the efforts of an African American family to move out of the ghetto to a better neighborhood. It draws upon a complicated and difficult part of Chicago’s history. The play is set sometime between 1945 and 1959, and illustrates many of the conflicts that surrounded the questions of race and housing during this period in Chicago. Although less well known than The Great Migration of 1910–1930, when large numbers of African Americans first moved to Chicago from the South, the period of 1940–1960 actually saw more African Americans arrive in the city, owing to such factors as the availability of industrial jobs during World War II and the collapse of the Southern sharecropping system. […]

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. This is illustrated in A Raisin in the Sun when Travis Younger and his friends kill a rat as “big as a cat.” Rats reportedly 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.

After the war there was an outward migration from the Black Belt into surrounding neighborhoods. In 1948, the Supreme Court declared restrictive covenants unconstitutional. A predominantly white housing boom on the fringes of the city and in the suburbs meant more available housing in the city. An increasing number of African Americans were moving into the middle class and were finally able to get out of the slums—some were able to move to better neighborhoods and enjoy a far better quality of life. In other cases, however, the migration of African Americans only amounted to an expansion of the slums they were trying to escape. […] Integration of neighborhoods was an extremely charged affair. Riots by white mobs were not uncommon. Most Chicagoans, however, had no idea of the situation’s volatility. For much of the 1940s the major newspapers, at the request of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, would simply not report the occurrence of these riots. The white families who lived along the border of the “Black Belt,” and could not afford to move[,] formed neighborhood associations to let blacks know that they were not welcome. In A Raisin in the Sun, Karl Lindner, of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, visits the Younger family and states, “Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities.” Mr. Lindner offers to buy the property back from the Younger family for more than they paid. More often, efforts to keep African Americans out were not so gentle.

Sometimes, the first African American family to move into a white area would require police escorts in order to move around the neighborhood. They suffered constant verbal abuse and the threat of physical violence. Their property was damaged by hurled bricks and explosives were thrown through their windows. African Americans endured danger and ostracism in the neighborhoods where they were simply seeking a decent place to live.


**Vocabulary and Definitions**

rapt (adj.): fascinated; engrossed; absorbed

throng (n.): densely packed crowd

rebukes (n.): expressions of sharp disapproval or criticism

manacles (n.): metal bands or chains used to fasten someone’s hands or ankles

sweltering (adj.): oppressively hot

invigorating (adj.): giving life or energy to

taut (adj.): pulled tightly with no slack

cohort (n.): people working as a group

stark (adj.): severe; obvious
disparities (n.): differences; inequalities
ignominious (adj.): deserving or causing public disgrace or shame
concerted (adj.): joined; united; planned
bigots (n.): people who are intolerant toward people that are different from themselves
lucrative (adj.): producing a great deal of profit
graft (n): the acquisition of illicit funds
scathing (adj.): severely critical; very harsh
innocuous (adj.): harmless; unlikely to irritate
cunning (adj.): employing skill in a shrewd manner
poignant (adj.): painfully affecting the feelings
exorbitant (adj.): unreasonably high
amenities (n.): features that provide comfort or convenience
covenants (n.): formal, binding agreements
volatility (n.): the tendency for a rapid and unpredictable change
ostracism (n.): exclusion from a society or group

Vocabulary in Action

Directions: Choose five of the boldfaced vocabulary words and incorporate those words into the Writing and/or Activities assignments. Highlight your chosen words in yellow.
Discussion Questions

Directions: Work in small groups to answer the questions, and jot down your ideas as you discuss. Be prepared to share with the class.

1. In the third paragraph of Bogira’s article, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. states, “America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’” Explain what King meant by this metaphor and discuss whether or not it is effective based on the point that King is trying to make.

2. Discuss your reaction to the chart “Chicago Then & Now,” used in Bogira’s article. What do these statistics tell us about the past 50 years in Chicago? Why do you think very little has changed?
3. “In 1983, 20 years after King’s speech, the Chicago Urban League analyzed socio-economic indicators from the 1980 census—unemployment, female-headed households with children, persons in poverty, high school graduation rates—and found disparities between blacks and whites in the Chicago area to be greater than in any major metropolitan area in the nation. ‘No other urban center even comes close to matching this ignominious record,’ the Urban League said in its report.” Based on the 1983 findings, what programs or approaches could have been initiated in 1983 to help those who needed the most help? Explain and support your answers.
4. Bogira states, “King’s ‘I Have a Dream Speech’ today is celebrated more for the lyrical, hopeful portraits he ended with, of what the nation could be, than for the stinging rebukes he began with, about the nation as it was.” Although the article has a despairing tone, Bogira ends his article on a more positive note with the following: “Given how deep and long-standing the disparities, fixing them is a monumental task. But it’s not an impossible one.” Go online and find a copy of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and study the part of the speech where he addresses the “dreams” he has for America and its people. Choose several of King’s “dreams” and connect them to the dreams of the family in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

5. Discuss your reaction to the opening paragraph in Colas’ article and how it relates to *A Raisin in the Sun*. 

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Related Readings: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in Context
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56
6. Colas emphasizes, “Walter and Ruth are stunned that Mama purchases a house in an entirely white neighborhood…” Why are they stunned? What was your reaction to Mama’s plan? Support your answers.

7. Colas states, “Violence, from the perspective of many whites, was unfortunate, for as long as both races remained separate, conflict was unnecessary. When integration threatened the carefully crafted white society, violence ensued.” Discuss the impact of this statement. What does this say about our society?
8. In the play, Karl Lindner’s final line is, “I sure hope you people know what you’re getting into.” Discuss Lindner’s use of the problematic phrase “you people” and how this contributes to his tone, revealing his true character.

9. In the fourth paragraph in the Chicago Public Library article, what is ironic about the following statement? “Integration of neighborhoods was an extremely charged affair. Riots by white mobs were not uncommon. Most Chicagoans, however, had no idea of the situation’s volatility. For much of the 1940s the major newspapers, at the request of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, would simply not report the occurrence of these riots.”
Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun

Directions: Choose one of the topics below based on your teacher’s instructions.

1. Write an essay addressing what “ghetto” means, connotations of the word, why ghettos exist, and a plan to eradicate ghettos.

2. Take a closer look at Mrs. Johnson from the play and write an essay analyzing her “true” character. As a minor character, is she important to the themes of the play? Explain and support.

3. In Bogira’s article, he states, “King’s ‘I Have a Dream Speech’ today is celebrated more for the lyrical, hopeful portraits he ended with, of what the nation could be, than for the stinging rebukes he began with, about the nation as it was.” Write an essay analyzing what you think this means, and support your viewpoint with examples from the article and from your own research.

4. In the final sentence of Colas’ article, he emphasizes, “For most of us, there are still no Negroes next door.” Write an essay addressing this statement and what it reveals about the moral fibers of America.

Activities

Directions: Choose one of the following activities.

1. Create a collage in any medium of Martin Luther King Jr.’s descriptive and emotional language quoted in Bogira’s article (e.g., “chains of discrimination” or “lonely island of poverty”). Present to the class. ([www.posterini.com](http://www.posterini.com), [www.postermywall.com](http://www.postermywall.com))

2. Choose any line from one of the articles in this section and illustrate that line in any chosen medium. The illustration must contain both text and images and allude to both the article and to A Raisin in the Sun.

3. Choose three important areas that Colas addresses in his article and create a presentation in any chosen medium. Present to the class.

4. Create a PowerPoint™ that depicts the difficulties the Hansberry family experienced when they moved into an all-white neighborhood. Present to the class.

5. Use the second paragraph from the article by the Chicago Public Library and create a virtual collage of the major points in this paragraph regarding “overcrowding.” ([www.posterini.com](http://www.posterini.com), [www.postermywall.com](http://www.postermywall.com))

6. The Great Migration is the name given to the migration or relocation of more than 6 million African Americans from the rural South to the industrial cities of the North, Midwest, and West from 1916 to 1970. Leaving their homes, family, limited economic opportunities, and harsh segregationist laws, many blacks headed north, where they found jobs on assembly lines, in packing houses, and in other manufacturing. The shift in population had a massive impact on urban life. As Chicago, New York, Detroit, and other
cities saw their black populations expand, people dealt with poor working conditions and competition for living space, as well as northern racism and prejudice. During the Great Migration, African Americans began to build a new place for themselves in public life, actively confronting economic, political, and social challenges and creating a new black urban culture that would exert enormous influence in the decades to come. (www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration)

**Directions:** Research the Great Migration and its relationship to *A Raisin in the Sun*. Prepare a PowerPoint that addresses the effects of such a large population migrating from the rural South to other parts of the United States. Present to the class.

7. Teach the Class! Refer to Handout 5 for directions on this activity. Since this activity is quite involved, the teacher will decide how to weigh the grading of this activity. Keep in mind that this activity will involve at least four students per “teaching” group in order to divide up the work.
6. An epigraph is a short quotation at the beginning of a literary work used to suggest the theme(s) of the work. In “The Art of Social Criticism: Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun,” the author examines the use of Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem,” especially the line “a raisin in the sun”—the title of Hansberry’s play. What would have been your initial reaction to the words “a raisin in the sun” had you never known the poem? Could Hansberry have chosen a more potent description than a raisin drying up in the sun in a play about deferred dreams? What image would you choose?

7. In “The Art of Social Criticism: Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun,” the author states, “Hansberry offers the belief that the dreams that can urge on our ambitions can also destroy our psyche if not properly nurtured to fruition.” Relate this statement to the play and your life.
8. Cunha analyzes the lines of Hughes’ poem by dividing the lines into five sections and adding her interpretation. Within your group, choose one of the five sections and discuss whether or not Cunha’s interpretation is effective and why. Using those same lines, discuss how you would analyze the lines as related to A Raisin in the Sun.

**Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun**

**Directions:** Choose one of the topics below based on your teacher’s instructions.

1. The last paragraph of Cooper’s article alludes to “the persistence of dreams,” “bonds and conflicts between men and women,” and “the endless struggle against human oppression.” What does this final paragraph say to you? Write an essay relating this last paragraph to the play and your own life.

2. Abdelmawjoud quotes Hansberry in his article, stating that “We must come out of the ghettos of America, because the ghettos are killing us, not only our dreams, but our very bodies… that is murder.” Write an essay addressing this quote by Hansberry.

3. Abdelmawjoud reminds us that Mr. Younger did not live long enough to see his dream fulfilled and that “his wife [Mama] has to wait for his life-insurance money to fulfill the
dream.” Must we put off a dream waiting for someone or something to help fulfill that dream? Write an essay addressing this question with references to the play and to your life or to another person’s life.

4. What do you think about Mama’s decision to buy a house in an all-white neighborhood? Per Abdelmawjoud’s article, is Mama a character forged of “steel” who will only grow stronger after the family moves? Have we seen enough clues in her life to prove that she will be able to face the challenges ahead? Has she given the other family members the courage to face the challenges ahead? Write an essay addressing this topic and these questions.

5. Cunha divides Hughes’ poem into five sections. Using these same five sections (but not her interpretation), write an essay in which you apply each section to your life or to the life of another.

Activities

Directions: Choose one of the following activities.

1. In the opening paragraph of the article by Cooper, he states, “The themes of hope, courage and idealism… are born out of despair, fear and fatalism” in Hansberry’s play. Create a collage that illustrates these six elements juxtaposed: despair/hope, fear/courage, and fatalism/idealism. Present to the class. (www.posterini.com, www.postermywall.com)

2. Beneatha claims that “there isn’t any real progress… there is only one large circle that we march in, around and around, each of us with our own little picture in front of us—our own little mirage that we think is the future.” Asagai claims that “It isn’t a circle—it is simply a long line… one that reaches into infinity. And because we cannot see the end—we also cannot see how it changes.” In any chosen medium, illustrate these two principles and share with the class.

3. Create an illustration that shows specific traits Mama possesses and that demonstrates how she will confront the challenges that await the Youngers in an all-white neighborhood. Choose any medium in which to create your illustration. You should include both images and text in the illustration.

4. Create a five-column chart with the following headings: (1) Person, (2) Dream, (3) Dream Deferred, (4) Dream Regained, and (5) Dream Won or Lost. Remember that “defer” means to postpone or to put off; it does not mean that the dream is forever out of reach. List each of the five members of the Younger family and complete the chart accordingly. Then, including yourself, list four more people you know and complete the chart accordingly. If column five has yet to be realized, you should predict if the dream will be won or lost.

5. Cunha breaks down Hughes’ poem with her own interpretation. Perform a dramatic reading of both the poem and the interpretation with background music and props. Present to the class.

6. Using Cunha’s interpretation of Hughes’ poem, create a music video that presents elements from both the poem and the interpretation. Present to the class.

7. Choose any medium to illustrate your dream, including both images and text. This can be a dream that has already been realized or a dream for your future.

8. Teach the Class! Refer to Handout 5 for directions on this activity. Since this activity is quite involved, the teacher will decide how to weigh the grading of this activity. Keep in mind that this activity will involve at least four students per “teaching” group in order to divide up the work.
Related Readings: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in Context

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145

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**Section 2: Chicago Slums of the 1950s**

**Discussion Questions**

1. In the third paragraph of Bogira’s article, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. states, “America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’” Explain what King meant by this metaphor and discuss whether or not it is effective based on the point that King is trying to make.

   King emphasizes that the Constitution and Declaration of Independence were a “promissory note” to all people. A promissory note is a written promise to pay money to a person. King likens the money to promises of equal rights and justice laid out in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence for all people. King reiterates that America has not followed through on its promise—which also assured “rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” King proclaimed that the “Negro still is not free.” The metaphor of the promissory note, upon which America has not fulfilled, fits the ongoing situation of poverty, segregation, and discrimination for African Americans.

2. Discuss your reaction to the chart “Chicago Then & Now,” used in Bogira’s article. What do these statistics tell us about the past 50 years in Chicago? Why do you think very little has changed?

   Students’ answers will vary. The statistics are very telling and reinforce the “bad check” metaphor in King’s speech.

3. “In 1983, 20 years after King’s speech, the Chicago Urban League analyzed socioeconomic indicators from the 1980 census—unemployment, female-headed households with children, persons in poverty, high school graduation rates—and found disparities between blacks and whites in the Chicago area to be greater than in any major metropolitan area in the nation. ‘No other urban center even comes close to matching this ignominious record,’ the Urban League said in its report.” Based on the 1983 findings, what programs or approaches could have been initiated in 1983 to help those who needed the most help? Explain and support your answers.

   Students’ answers will vary. Students should address the factors of “unemployment, female-headed households with children, persons in poverty, [and] high school graduation rates,” noting that failure to help people in these pivotal areas is crucial.

4. Bogira states, “King’s ‘I Have a Dream Speech’ today is celebrated more for the lyrical, hopeful portraits he ended with, of what the nation could be, than for the stinging rebukes he began with, about the nation as it was.” Although the article has a despairing tone, Bogira ends his article on a more positive note with the fol-
lowing: “Given how deep and long-standing the disparities, fixing them is a monumental task. But it’s not an impossible one.” Go online and find a copy of Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and study the part of the speech where he addresses the “dreams” he has for America and its people. Choose several of King’s “dreams” and connect them to the dreams of the family in A Raisin in the Sun.

Students’ answers will vary. Make sure students have access to a computer, smartphone or tablet in order to access King’s speech. The “dream” references are quite numerous, and this is rich material for students to use.

5. Discuss your reaction to the opening paragraph in Colas’ article and how it relates to A Raisin in the Sun.

Students’ answers will vary. Students should agree that this paragraph mirrors the scene in the play where Karl Lindner tries to buy out the Youngers, and the last four sentences of this paragraph reflect Lindner’s attitude as well as the attitudes of the white people in Clybourne Park.

6. Colas emphasizes, “Walter and Ruth are stunned that Mama purchases a house in an entirely white neighborhood…” Why are they stunned? What was your reaction to Mama’s plan? Support your answers.

As the article states: “[M]oving to a white neighborhood could put their lives at risk,” and this is reiterated when Mrs. Johnson warns the Youngers about the bombings in specific neighborhoods.

7. Colas states, “Violence, from the perspective of many whites, was unfortunate, for as long as both races remained separate, conflict was unnecessary. When integration threatened the carefully crafted white society, violence ensued.” Discuss the impact of this statement. What does this say about our society?

Students’ answers will vary. Students should note that the “carefully crafted white society” dictated the segregation that supposedly thwarted conflict. Integration led to violence—which whites felt was not their fault—although they were the very ones who supported segregation. Students will have varied answers on the last part of this question.

8. In the play, Karl Lindner’s final line is, “I sure hope you people know what you’re getting into.” Discuss Lindner’s use of the problematic phrase “you people” and how this contributes to his tone, revealing his true character.

Students’ answers will vary. Students should note Lindner’s lame tone, indicative of a cowardly, weak man. There is also a condescending tone uttered in “you people” as if the Youngers are beneath him and all white people. Lindner is the true stereotype of prejudice and discrimination.

9. In the fourth paragraph in the Chicago Public Library article, what is ironic about the following statement? “Integration of neighborhoods was an extremely charged affair. Riots by white mobs were not uncommon. Most Chicagoans, however, had no idea of the situation’s volatility. For much of the 1940s the major newspapers, at the request of the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, would simply not report the occurrence of these riots.”

The fact is that a “Commission on Human Relations” is anything but “human” in its dealings with honest reporting about white mobs.
Writing Exercises and Application to A Raisin in the Sun

1. Students’ answers will vary.

2. Students’ answers will vary. Mrs. Johnson is the nosy neighbor of the Youngers, but she does verbalize realities about the critical situation in the white neighborhoods when African Americans move in, and she alludes to bombings.

3. Students’ answers will vary.

4. Students’ answers will vary. Students will have varying opinions on this topic, but most students will probably agree that we do have a serious problem with the tentacles of racism and discrimination that have reached across many generations with no end in sight.

Section 3: “The play’s the thing…”

Discussion Questions

1. The article by the Chicago Public Library quotes Hansberry as saying, “I don’t think there is anything more universal in the world than man’s oppression to man.” She went on to add, “one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that, in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific.” Discuss these two quotes as they relate to the play and to life.

   Students’ answers will vary. Something that is universal is common to many people and to many groups. Oppression is “prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or control; the feeling of being heavily burdened” (www.dictionary.com). Hansberry addressed the “specifics” in her play—the burdens the African Americans carried and the lack of control in their lives. All the specifics total the universal.

2. Hurwitt states in his article, “‘Raisin’ changed the face of the American theater and the national consciousness as well.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement based on your study of the play? Support your answers.

   Students’ answers will vary. Students should note that the play did, indeed, “change the face of the American theater” with many “firsts” for African Americans. Hansberry paved the way for other African American playwrights, directors, and actors. Hansberry touched the “national consciousness” of the nation, but students will probably debate how far our nation has come in dealing with discrimination and integration.

3. Discuss what Hurwitt means when he states, “the play [was] an unprecedented mainstream depiction of the social and economic constraints on urban black families and a stereotype-smashing portrayal of a diversity of black ideas and aspirations.” First, circle all the important words/phrases in this statement, and then analyze and discuss.

   Students should address the entire sentence with the main focus on Hansberry’s efforts to portray a realistic picture of life for the black families, while negating the stereotype that blacks do not have “ideas” and “aspirations.”
Lorraine Hansberry’s
A Raisin in the Sun
in Context

••• Judy Wilburn Hill •••

Related Readings encourages a new historical perspective on and contemporary connections with a classic.
- Includes an author biography, historical context, synopsis of the novel, a character chart, and handouts to enrich lessons.

Related Readings selections include nonfiction, artwork, poetry, magazine articles, and song lyrics, which encourage:
- Comprehension and Analysis: Students relate varied genres to the work, deepening their interaction with the text.
- Reading: Timely and relevant pieces engage student interest.
- Integration of Knowledge and Ideas: Evaluation activities involve students in analysis and synthesis of subject and theme.
- Vocabulary: Difficult or unfamiliar words and terms are bolded and then defined in a separate section for each piece. Each reading selection includes a Vocabulary in Action assignment to increase comprehension and language skills.
- Writing: Analytical and creative research questions and writing prompts inspire students to think more critically about the work and engage with the text.