



## [A Raisin in the Sun](#), by Lorraine Hansberry

### **In A Nutshell**

*A Raisin in the Sun*, written by Lorraine Hansberry and produced on stage in 1959, marks a watershed moment in American theater. On the face of it, *A Raisin in the Sun* was not destined for success. With only one white cast member, an inexperienced director, and an untried playwright, Hansberry had difficulty finding financial backing for the play at a time when theater audiences were overwhelmingly white. It was an immediate success, however, and after several tours, it opened on Broadway, making it the first-ever Broadway play written by an African-American woman.

What makes Hansberry's writing remarkable is not only her accuracy in capturing the racial dynamics of her time, but her foresight in predicting the direction black culture would take in subsequent years. The play's setting covers a pivotal time period for race relations in America – after WWII and before 1959. When Americans fought in World War II, they were fighting to uphold equality for all...which exposed the hypocrisy of the very *unequal* conditions for blacks back home. Americans were only beginning to address these inequalities at the time Hansberry was writing, and she did a great job at capturing the mood of her time through only one family.

As discussed in the "What's Up with the Epigraph?" section, the Younger family's fulfillment/non-fulfillment of their dreams mirrors how black Americans as a whole had gained some concessions while still being oppressed in other respects. A character like

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Beneatha, however, is way ahead of her time. The play opened in 1959, remember, which is *before* all the feminists started demanding their rights, and *before* black Americans began embracing Africa as part of their identity. Beneatha embodies both movements before they ever existed.

One last note: *A Raisin in the Sun* is part of broader shift in black art towards depicting working-class, ordinary African-Americans. Previously, black intellectuals did not use literature, art, or the stage to portray working-class African-Americans for fear they would perpetuate undesirable stereotypes. Both poet Langston Hughes and Lorraine Hansberry thought this was ridiculous; they felt that writing about lower class African-Americans would actually debunk the stereotypes. By focusing on the dreams and aspirations of one particular working-class black family, moreover, Hansberry was able to show audiences the universality of black aspirations while also demonstrating that their race posed a significant barrier to achieving those goals.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 The decision between principle and money is a hard decision to make, especially when you 're as hard-up as the Youngers. What do you think of their choice?
- 2 In an earlier version of the script, Hansberry ended the play by showing the Youngers sitting in their new home, armed and awaiting an attack from their white neighbors. Should this scene have been kept in? What 's the effect of deleting it? Would the presence of this scene have changed the overall message of the play, or not?

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- 3 To what extent are the racial issues addressed in the play still relevant today? In other words, how far have we come in race relations since 1959?

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