A Raisin in the Sun

by Lorraine Hansberry

INTRODUCTION

The certainty that the ideals of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" can become reality for anyone willing to work for them is what we call the American dream. For many, the dream does come true. For many it does not.

Lorraine Hansberry knew about disappointment, false hope, and despair. For many of her African-American ancestors who had come North for a better life only to find exploitation and frustration, the dream had become a nightmare. In contemporary terms, she chronicles their nightmare in *A Raisin in the Sun*, an epic story of the Younger family struggling to realize the dream by escaping ghetto life. Hansberry's screenplay not only tells the story of the Youngers but reveals the plight of all who have failed dreams.

Her cosmic vision gives *Raisin* its power. For high school juniors who often study U.S. history concurrently with American literature, this previously unpublished version of the screenplay allows students to read an engrossing American play, while they experience a culture that either mirrors their own lives or provides a window into a world of people who are more similar to them than they are different from them.

Raisin is an excellent choice for literature, drama, history, and film classes. There is plenty of action, salty dialogue, and a cast of dynamic characters to captivate even the most "video-ed out" teenager. Rebellion against parents and frustration with a lifestyle that brings little gratification are conditions most young people endure. However, beneath the cynical veneer of the adolescent beats the heart of an idealist who wants to believe in dreams that do come true. Through Hansberry's careful craftsmanship, the universal themes of the importance of dreams and the frustration of dreams deferred, the strength of family, the importance of not selling out, the problems of conflicting expectations, the belief that love and trust will win over deceit and selfishness, and the dangers of prejudice and stereotyping are as powerful today as they were nearly four decades ago when she wrote the play. Today's students, often from fractured families, need as much exposure as possible to values taught within a traditional family unit, and Raisin delivers without preaching.

Another reason for using *Raisin* is its historical value. The play is a provocative reflection of racial attitudes of the 1950s and of today. Prejudice assumes many forms, and Hansberry's characters and the screenplay's visuals bring this theme to life in a way no textbook could.

This teacher's guide contains an annotated list of characters, a brief synopsis of the screenplay, and teaching suggestions to be used before, during, and after reading the play. There are activities, discussion questions, and topics for writing assignments. All suggestions are applicable for students of average academic ability. Those recommended for the advanced student are denoted with an asterisk (*).

OVERVIEW

Dramatis Personae

Lena Younger:
Matriarch; proud; strong-willed; deeply religious; believes in the strength of family.

Walter Lee Younger Jr:
Ambitious; loves his family; longs to prove his manhood by owning his own business.

Beneatha Younger:
As ambitious as her brother, with plans to be a doctor; needs to express herself, as her varying hobbies indicate; interested in her African roots.

Ruth Younger:
Loving and faithful wife and mother; wants what's best for her family; her dream is to move into a place with more space and sunlight.

Travis Younger:
His family's pride and hope for the future; typically energetic ten-year-old.

Asagai:
Fellow student; loves Beneatha; a "modern" African, committed to preserving the cultural heritage of his Nigerian people.

George Murchison:
Modern African-American who believes that success lies in imitating whites; scorned by Walter Lee, who considers him a phony.

Synopsis of the Screenplay

The screenplay is presented as a continuous unit of action rather than divided into dramatic acts. Punctuated only by Hansberry's clear instructions for camera shots and angles and her precise notes for the actors, it reads with the sweeping motion of a film. The camera is in many ways the film's most important voice. Through Hansberry's camera instructions, readers learn more about her characters than from their words alone.

The opening scene, Hansberry tells us, is a pan shot of Chicago's South Side during the 1950s (although it could as well be the 1990s). Exterior and interior images show that we are in a ghetto, and this is how people live here. More importantly, this is a ghetto of African-Americans who have few choices in a white society. Over the panning shots is

superimposed Langston Hughes' poem "Dream Deferred," providing the inspiration for the title: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

The next series of shots introduces the family whose dreams provide the basis for the play. Lena Younger, the family matriarch, is expecting a $10,000 life insurance check from the estate of her late husband, Walter Lee. With it, she is planning to retire from her maid's job for a white family. Her son, Walter Lee, Junior, wants to use the money to buy a liquor store. His wife, Ruth, also a domestic in a white household, hopes to move to a larger apartment. Beneatha, Lena's daughter, dreams of going to medical school.

When the check arrives, the tensions within the family build. Walter Lee feels he is entitled to it as the rightful head of the family. Ruth and Beneatha counter that it is Lena's money, and she should decide how it is to be spent. Because Lena realizes that the family's survival depends on their escape from the apartment, she makes a down payment on a "nice house" in Clybourne Park, an all-white residential neighborhood, without consulting anyone. The family's reactions range from Walter Lee's disbelief and disappointment, to Ruth's joy.

The plans for the move exacerbate the tensions. Feeling his manhood threatened by his mother's authority, Walter escapes to bars. When he does not return home for several days, Lena finally acknowledges his desperate need and finds him in his favorite lounge. Opening her purse, she entrusts him with the rest of the money, part of which is to be used for Beneatha's tuition, the rest for his liquor store.

The residents of all-white Clybourne Park have learned of their new neighbors and send an emissary to meet with the Youngers to explain the "rules." Mr. Lindner, the representative, carefully disguises his racist attitudes beneath neutral terms ("not rich and fancy people; just hardworking, honest people who don't really have much but those little homes and a dream of the kind of community they want to raise their children in" 164). Beneatha immediately realizes he is proposing to buy them out ("Thirty pieces and not a coin less," 165). He makes the Youngers a generous offer that Walter Lee refuses. His family has a right to a new life, and they will move to Clybourne Park.

The tension reaches a climax on moving day, when Walter Lee receives the worst possible news: Lena's money never made it to the bank. He had given it to Willy Harris, a "trusted" business partner. However, Willy took the money and ran, leaving no forwarding address.

Overwhelmed, the family members react in different ways. Beneatha is furious and totally repudiates her relationship with Walter. Lena starts to unpack, saying they can no longer move. Ruth refuses to give, in believing that with hard work they can make the house payments. In a desperate act to set matters right, Walter Lee sends for Mr. Lindner, whose offer could replace the money he has given away. No one supports his decision, feeling contempt for his willingness to sell their dreams so cheaply. In the final scenes, Walter Lee has an epiphany, recognizing not only who he is, but, his place within his family and race. As he starts to tell Mr. Lindner they will accept the offer, he hears what he is about to say and, instead, refuses it. The moving men are told to continue, and the family departs for what everyone hopes will be a new and better life.

A Brief Biography of the Author

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, and died of cancer at the age of 34. *A Raisin in the Sun*, her first play, was also the first Broadway production written by an African-American woman and the first by an African-American to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award (1959). It was subsequently made into a film (1961), for which this screenplay was written by Hansberry but only partially used by David Susskind, the film's director and producer, a musical (1973), and a PBS television production for American Playhouse (1989). Although deeply committed to the African-American human rights struggle, Hansberry was not a militant writer. Her only other completed play is *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* (1964). Another drama, *Les Blancs* (1970) was adapted after her death by her husband and Broadway producer Robert Nemiroff. He also compiled her writings in *To be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words* (1969), also presented as an off-Broadway drama in 1969.

BEFORE READING THE PLAY

Teaching *A Raisin in the Sun*

It is helpful to introduce students to a work of literature prior to reading it. This is particularly important when the work may be difficult for some students to read or may present themes or ideas that are complex and/or controversial. Although the screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun* is simple in terms of vocabulary and sentence structure, many students will be unfamiliar with how to read a screenplay or even a play. Therefore, it is important to help them understand how reading a screenplay differs from reading a novel. In addition, the themes of *Raisin* are mature and may need some introduction, so that students can appreciate the power of Hansberry's deceptively simple work.

How to Read a Screenplay

Help students understand the differences between a play and a screenplay/film. In the screenplay, Hansberry's camera instructions are very clear. Most students will have no difficulty picking up on her cues as they read. Margaret Wilkerson's introduction (xxvix-xliv) explains them within the context of the entire screenplay. Teachers might find it helpful to read this introduction before teaching the screenplay. The teacher cannot stress enough the importance of the camera's role in this screenplay. It provides the most important voice, albeit a visual one. Hansberry's screenplay represents her belief that images, characters, and dialogue work as one entity. Her "cinematic vision" (Wilkerson, xxx) should be introduced to the students, since it is easy to get caught up in her words and lose the power of these complementary images.

As a class, go to a stage play being presented in your school, another school, college, or the community. If this is not possible, brainstorm stage plays the students have previously seen.

Either orally or in writing, have students respond to these questions: What did you like about the play? What did you dislike about the play? How was it different from watching a movie? How was it different from watching a video or television program at home?

(NOTE: If you cannot arrange to see a stage play and some or all of the students have never seen one, substitute a church pageant, rock concert, or any unfilmed event involving a stage, performers, and audience.)

Using one or two plays students have seen in common, or one they have previously read in common, review the basics of dramatic structure. Ask students to respond either in writing or in small group discussion to the following:

- What is meant by **exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution**? Give examples from a play you have seen or read.
- What purpose does an act serve in a play? Why do some plays have more acts than others? Give examples from plays you have seen or read.
- What are stage directions?
- What do the lighting and costumes add to a production?
- What is the purpose of an audience in a stage play?
- What is the purpose of the stage?

Either see a film or video as a class or have the students brainstorm ones they have seen. Using a film or video most of the students have seen, ask students to respond in writing or orally to the following:

- What does a film have that a play does not? Give some examples.
- What does a play have that a film does not? How does this change each medium?
- What is the camera's role in a film?
- How is the camera used to enhance our knowledge of the plot and of characters?
- Of the two media (stage or film), which has the more fluid movement? Why do you think so? Give some examples from films you have seen.

To help students learn the technical terms related to a screenplay, suggest that they develop individual or small group glossaries of film terms: **pan shots, tracking shots, traveling shots, full shot, two shot, close up, dissolve, P.O.V. (point of view), short, long, medium shots, high angle, and montage**. Have students define each term and provide an example from films or videos they have seen of how each is used.

Group discussion: To give students a frame of reference, discuss a familiar film or video, asking the students for examples of each type of shot.

Assign two or three types of shots to several small groups. As a homework assignment, ask students to watch a video selected by their group and prepare to present examples of

each type of shot to the class. They can show sections of the video to the class as they explain the camera technique employed.

In pairs, students can prepare a notebook of visuals from magazines or the students' own photography, illustrating several different types of film shots. Entries should be labeled and defined. Students should explain in writing the message the camera is attempting to convey and how this is accomplished.

Introducing the Themes

Because the themes of *A Raisin in the Sun* are mature and, in some communities, controversial, it may be helpful for students to be introduced to some of them prior to reading the screenplay. Students may first respond to the themes in a journal, then discuss their response in small groups prior to sharing them with the class.

Stereotyping and prejudice.

A frank exploration of cultural/racial stereotyping should "break the ice." Topics to which students are asked to respond should relate to their personal experiences and observations.

- What is a stereotype? Give an example.
- Identify the ethnic/racial/religious groups to which you belong. Discuss one way in which one or all of these groups are stereotyped. How does this make you feel?
- Give some examples of how African-Americans have been stereotyped.
- Give some examples of stereotyping of white Americans.
- Using any stereotype you have been subjected to, explain the basis for this stereotype. How does this make you feel? How might this stereotype interfere with your ability to be successful or happy?
- Using any stereotype of an ethnic/racial/religious group of which you are not a member, explain the basis for the stereotype. How do you think this makes the members of this group feel? How might this stereotype impede a group member's ability to be successful or happy?
- Relate a situation in which one of your stereotyped attitudes turned out to be wrong. How do you feel now?
- What is meant by prejudice? How do stereotypes relate to prejudice?

Dreams and dreams deferred.

Students can respond in writing and orally to the themes of the importance of dreams, what happens when dreams are deferred or destroyed, and the American Dream.

This topic is particularly good for individual or small group research. What is meant by the American Dream? Trace its evolution from 1600 to the present. When did the phrase

come into vogue? How has its meaning changed? Does it mean the same for African-Americans as for white Americans? What must happen for the dream to come true?

Either read aloud or have a student who reads well read aloud Langston Hughes' poem "Dreams." Ask the students to respond to one or more of the following in writing or in small group discussion:

- What is the mood of the poem? How does the poet feel about dreams?
- What is the tone of the poem? If you were to hear the poet read it, what would be the sound of his voice?
- What simile does the poet use? What does it mean? How might it relate to what is likely to occur in the screenplay *A Raisin in the Sun*?
- Do you agree with Hughes? Give examples from personal experiences, books, and television or film plots about what happens when dreams are lost.
- Find other poems or songs about dreams. How do they differ? How are they similar? Why?
- Research Langston Hughes. Read other poems by Hughes. Present the result of your research to the class.*
- Write your own poem (song or rap) about dreams.
- Write an essay about your personal dreams (goals, aspirations). You might include why the dream is important, why you are likely to succeed, what could cause you to fail, and what you can do to avoid failure.*

The conflict between expectations.

This theme is a part of every student's life and students can respond to it individually or in small groups.

- What is expected of you at home? At school (by adults)? Are these expectations realistic? How do your expectations of yourself differ from adults' expectations of you?
- What do your peers (friends, members of your group or gang, others who are not friends or members of your group) expect from you? Do you share these expectations? How do they differ?
- What problems occur if your expectations and others' expectations of you differ? Give a specific example from experience or the experience of someone you know.

- If your expectations differ from those others have of you, how can you resolve this? Where does your personal loyalty belong?

A scene related to this theme that should capture students' interest is the confrontation between Walter Lee, Ruth, and Lena over the spending of the insurance check. Ask three students who read aloud well to present this scene (102-108) to the class. Or, present this scene from the film. Following the reading/viewing, have students respond in writing or orally to the following:

- What is your opinion of each character?
- What conflicts are taking place? Why?
- How could they be resolved?
- Why are the expectations of each character so different?

The strength of family.

Most students are a part of a family of one kind or another. This is an opportunity for them to explore their own feelings about family.

- Write about or discuss what family means to you. You might include: different types of families, what type of family you are a part of, why your family is important to you, positive or negative aspects of being a member of a family, what you have learned by being a part of your family, loyalty or lack of loyalty within your family.
- Imagine what it would be like not to be part of a family. Write a story or poem about how this makes you feel.

Use of Language

Lorraine Hansberry uses language to help develop her characters. As in Shakespearean drama, the language in *A Raisin in the Sun* reflects the social and economic status of the characters in the play. It is helpful for students to understand that the language of the characters helps viewers understand who they are.

Point out to the students some examples of how language helps us know Hansberry's characters.

RUTH: What you mean, out? He ain't hardly had a chance to be in there good yet.(9)

WALTER: Un-hunh. That's what you mad about, ain't it? The things I got to talk about with my friends just couldn't be important in you mind, could they! (11)

TRAVIS: Teacher says we got to do something 'bout teaching colored kids 'bout their history. So they set up a fund to buy special books that tell all about the things the poor Negroes did. (13-14)

LENA: Near 'bout. 'Cept – 'cept, Lord have mercy, when the war, praise God, come along a few years back. That sure changed things for a while. My husband had been a porter on the railroads all his life, and just as soon as we heard they had started taking colored in the de-fense plants and all, me and him both marched right on over and took the classes they was giving in the welding and all. (41)

ASAGAI: Because I suppose all Africans are revolutionaries today, even those who don't know that they are. It is the times. In order to survive we must be against most of what is. (50)

BENEATHA: Mama, you don't understand. It's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don't acept. It's not important. I am not going out and commit crimes or be immoral because I don't believe in God. I don't even think about it. It's just that I get so tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no God! There is only Man, and it's he who makes miracles! (76)

LENA: Now – you say after me: "In my mother's house there is still God." (Silence.) "In my mother's house there is still God." (77)

LINDNER: Well – it's what you might call a sort of welcoming committee, I guess. I mean they – we – I'm the chairman of the committee – go around and see the new people who move into the neighborhood and sort of give them the lowdown on the way we do things out in Clybourne Park....And we also have the category of what the association calls – (he looks elsewhere) – uh – special community problems.... (161)

In small groups, have the students respond to or complete the following:

- What does each of these quotes tell you about the person's character, beliefs, fears, frustrations? What emotions are you likely to hear in the person's voice?
- Prepare one quote to present to the class as you believe the character would deliver it to the audience. Try it using different tones of voice. Does the meaning change?
- If the quote is in non-standard English, rewrite it in standard English. Now, answer the same questions about each rewritten quote.
- Prepare to deliver the quote you rewrote to the class as originally written and in standard English. Ask the class: What does each version suggest about the character?

WHILE READING THE PLAY

Teachers will want to select some activities from the many suggestions offered.

Film Techniques

It is helpful to analyze Hansberry's camera instructions closely as you read. Ask: What silent messages do they convey? The following camera shots represent highlights from the screenplay; students should be encouraged to find others:

- Pan shots of Chicago's South Side (3). Ask: Who lives here? Why do they live here? Why does Hansberry think these shots are important?

- Pan shot within the Younger apartment (4-7). Ask: How does this shot introduce us to the family and the likely action of the film?

- Close-ups of Lena's hands (31), Walter's hands (43), their employers' hands (39,45). Ask: What do hands reveal about character and lifestyle? Why does Hansberry put so much emphasis on hands?

- Exterior shots of the neighborhoods Lena and Walter must pass through en route home to their apartment (57). Ask: What are these neighborhoods like? Why is Hansberry emphasizing these shots?

- Interior shots of Beneatha's relatively sheltered college routine (47). Ask: What do these shots tell us about Beneatha? Why is this knowledge important?

- Exterior high/wide angle shot of Lena's detour to the open market (56). Ask: What point is Hansberry making in this shot?

- Interior/wide angle shots of Walter drinking with Willy and Bobo in the type of lounge for which they hope to provide liquor (81). Ask: What does this shot reveal about Walter and his dreams?

- Montage of Walter drinking alone, driving around Chicago, wandering aimlessly around the Loop, stopping under the Negro Soldier's monument, listening to the street preacher harangue (128-132). Ask: What do these shots tell us about Walter? About his life? What do they reveal about the plot of the screenplay?

- The juxtaposition of shots of Asagai, the new African, with shots of Walter (132-133). Ask: What do these shots reveal about these two characters? Why is the juxtaposition important?

- Shots of the Youngers' visit to Clybourne Park including the neighbors' reactions (149-151). What do these shots reveal about what is to occur in the plot? What do we learn about the family from these shots?

- The final shot of the apartment, window, plant, and Walter Lee and Lena (206). What does this shot reveal about the characters and about their dreams?

Because this is a screenplay that is meant to be acted and seen, it is best when read orally by the students. To help them integrate the words with the images suggested by Hansberry's camera instructions, stop their reading periodically and ask:

- What does this shot convey about the character (or setting)? For example: The QUICK FLASH of Lena's annoyed face as she is being sold inferior apples (52).

- Why is this type of shot specified rather than another? For example: Later in the scene, Hansberry's directions change to a CLOSE SHOT of Lena's outraged face (53).

- How do the words spoken (or image seen) represent this character's point of view? For example: Mrs. Holiday, Lena's employer, is looking around the kitchen while Lena is speaking to her from the sink where she is washing a child's toys (39).

- Why is the camera on "this" character (scene) when another character is speaking? For example: Walter receiving his chauffeuring assignment for the morning (45).

As students become familiar with the interrelationships of camera shots, dialogue, and action, informal writing responses might be assigned.

- Offer your own camera directions as if you were writing the screenplay, defending why you altered Hansberry's directions.

Understanding Irony

The voice heard in *A Raisin in the Sun* is ironic. Students can be helped to see the irony in the screenplay by responding to it orally or in writing. Examples of irony can be suggested as they read, and they can then be encouraged to keep their own list of the play's ironies.

- African-Americans came North to find the economic, social, and educational equality denied them in the South only to discover the same (133-134). Examples of this can be seen throughout the screenplay: the inadequate housing in the ghettos (4-5), the lack of materials in Travis' school (13), and price gouging in an African-American neighborhood (56).

- The irony of having to pay more for homes and food (56) in poor neighborhoods than in rich neighborhoods.

- Lena's labors ease those of the Holiday family although Lena receives no leisure time or holidays (31-42). Mr. Lindner extols the values of hard work and neighborhood pride as he offers the Youngers "easy" money to stay away from Clybourne Park (162-167).

Getting to Know the Characters

Assign each character to partners, even if several partners have the same character. One student can chart a list of physical characteristics mentioned in the screenplay, and the other can trace the personality/character traits. Cite references from the screenplay.

At intervals during the reading, all students charting the same character should meet in a small group to discuss the character. Each group is to reach a consensus on how to present a definitive character portrait or sketch to the class. Appoint a recorder to keep notes. The following might be included in the portrait: a photograph, magazine illustration, or original art work to show the physical attributes of the character. Dramatic readings from the screenplay designed to reveal the character's personality. A video presentation of the character, incorporating some of Hansberry's character-revealing camera shots.

In writing or in small groups, trace the development/resolution of conflicts between/among the characters to be shared later with the whole class. Examine/ discuss the following:

- Walter Lee and Ruth. What are their expectations of each other?
- Walter Lee and Beneatha. Are they sensitive to each other's needs, or have they become locked into the "sibling rivalry" syndrome?
- Walter Lee and Lena. Is she unconsciously emasculating him? Is he behaving more like a son than a husband and father? What cultural traditions affect their relationship?
- Lena and Ruth. Is Lena trying to undermine Ruth's maternal authority by commenting on what Travis eats, how he dresses, and her excusing his lapses as "he's just a little boy" [31]?
- Beneatha and Asagai. What cultural differences cause tension in their relationship? How does he prove he really cares for her?

Reenact the scenes in which dramatic tension is greatest. The teacher or a student director should position the actors and stress the most appropriate voice inflections to convey what is happening between/among them. Students can either memorize* or paraphrase their lines. Scenes that lend themselves to reenactment are the following:

- Walter, Ruth, Beneatha. The argument over the spending of the insurance money (20-29).
- Lena, Ruth, Beneatha. Beneatha's refuting the existence of God's will infuriates her mother (70-77).
- Walter, Lena, Ruth. Lena reemphasizes her objection to the liquor store; Ruth admits she is planning an abortion (102-110).

- The Younger family. Lena announces that she has made the down payment on the house in Clybourne Park (121-127).
- Lena and Walter. Lena finally acknowledges Walter's need and entrusts him with the rest of the money (138-142).
- Beneatha and Asagai. Asagai reveals his compassionate understanding of human nature and his wisdom; his proposal to Beneatha (180-190).
- The Younger family. Walter announces that he has agreed to accept Lindner's offer; Walter's moment of recognition when he subsequently refuses it (193-202).

As a complementary writing assignment, compare Walter Lee, Beneatha, and Lena as rebels. How are the young people really like their mother? Use citations from the screenplay.*

Write about Asagai, the "modern" black man. How are his values and those of the more traditional Lena surprisingly alike? Use citations from the screenplay.*

The minor characters can be assigned to a small group of students and treated as a unit. Ask students to analyze the function of each character in the screenplay according to the following guidelines: What does the character do to extend the plot; to explain another character; or to enhance a theme?

- Mrs. Holiday, Lena's employer (31-42).
- Mr. and Mrs. Arnold, Walter's employers (43-45).
- The white clerk at the neighborhood grocery (51-53).
- Mrs. Johnson, the Youngers' neighbor (54-55).
- Herman, the white clerk in a liquor store (59-63).
- Bobo and Willy Harris, Walter's hoped-for business partners (81-84).
- Mr. Lindner, the insensitive emissary from the Clybourne Park Neighborhood Association (157-168).

In an essay, discuss the different values represented by Lena, Walter, George Murchison, Beneatha, and Asagai. Why do you think these differences exist? As part of this assignment, you might want to read Spike Lee's commentary (xiv), noting the difference between "assimilationism" and "Afrocentricity" as he describes them.*

In an essay, explore the concept of black pride. Consider the definition of black pride and how different characters embody it. Opinions should be defended through research and citations from the screenplay.*

In a small group, discuss which character(s) represents Hansberry's voice. Explain your rationale.*

In an informal essay, discuss the meaning of manliness. In your opinion, what makes a "real" man? Extend your personal beliefs to the screenplay, defining Walter Lee's concept of manhood. In his eyes, what makes a "real" man? Trace the ways he changes as the film develops. To what extent do his ideas and yours coincide?

Write a portrait of Walter Lee Sr. Although he is dead, his influence permeates the entire screenplay. From Lena's comments, what were his values? (43, 70, 108, 201). Is she being fair when she compares him to her son? In what ways are father and son similar?*

Understanding Symbols

Throughout the play, Hansberry uses many symbols. The play will have much more meaning if students are aware of these.

Lena's Plant.

Ask students:

- What do most plants represent?
- How is the introduction of the plant early in the screenplay foreshadowing?
- How do the shots of and references to the plant reflect the corresponding action of the screenplay? (7, 66, 78, 170, 206)

Sunlight and contrasting darkness **(69, 126, 151).**

- Make a collage or play music to show this contrast.

Money.

Ask students:

- What does money symbolize to Walter Lee? (107)
- How does Hansberry show the relative wealth of the characters in the play? What does the wealth symbolize? Mrs. Holiday's well-equipped kitchen (39); the Arnolds' affluent estate (44).
- What does money represent to Beneatha, Ruth, Travis, George Murchison, Asagai, and Herman? Why are their attitudes about money so different?

George Murchison's white shoes **(115-116)** ***and Asagai's Nigerian robes*** **(91-92; 187-188).**

- Discuss in a small group why these symbols of these two men's lives are so different. What does the symbol tell us about the man, his dreams, and his values?

- Create a visual representation of pride (self, racial, national) that reflects Hansberry's theme.

Make a collage that shows the symbols of your life, or write about the single symbol that best represents who you are.

Understanding the Themes

Although many of the themes were introduced prior to reading the play, during the reading it is possible to deal with them in more depth.

Each small group should select a different theme to investigate and present to the class. On chart paper, develop a flowchart highlighting examples of the theme from the beginning, middle, and end of the screenplay to present to the class. Specific citations should be highlighted. Groups might want to present these themes through dramatic interpretations of appropriate sections of the play.

Individuals, partners, or small groups might select a theme that they find particularly meaningful and explain why in one of the following ways (citations from the screenplay should be included):

- A visual and/or musical presentation of a particular theme.

- A collage or medley representing the importance of the theme.

- A reading from a novel, a poem, or another play that illustrates the importance of the theme.

- Creation of an art work that illustrates the meaningfulness of the theme.

Don't sell out.

Students can respond to this theme in writing, orally, or artistically.

- Write about how and why Walter Lee's opinion about selling out changes throughout the play.

- Write a story about a time you sold out and how it made you feel.

- Find clips from videos or sections from books showing how and why an individual sold out his/her beliefs or values.

- Write a poem about selling out.

The strength of family.

- Write about how the Younger family sustains its members.
- Discuss or write about why it is difficult to be a member of a family; use examples from the screenplay to help explain your point.

The problem of conflicting expectations.

- Write about the phrase "my time," which reoccurs throughout the play. What does this mean to the individual characters?
- Write a poem or song titled "My Time." What does this phrase mean to you?
- Discuss the positive and negative connotations of a phrase like "my time." Examine how believing that it is "my time" can lead to conflicting expectations with others.*

Love and trust prevail over deceit and selfishness.

- Discuss or write about how love wins out in the screenplay. Why do you think it wins?
- Search for other works of literature with this theme, or ones in which love and trust do not win out.*
- Write about or discuss a time in your life when love and trust did win/did not win. Why?
- Write a short story or poem that explores this theme.

Stereotyping and prejudice.

- In a small group, read aloud the scene of the visit from Mr. Lindner (158-167), or watch this scene from the film. Comment on the stereotypes you observe. What causes these stereotypes? How do they make the other characters feel? Could they be avoided?
- Write about how the Youngers' lives might be different if these stereotypes did not exist. Have the Youngers come to believe the stereotypes? Cite examples from the play.*

During (or after) reading the screenplay, significant quotes that advance the themes can be used as writing or discussion prompts. A partial list of suggested lines follows. Students can find others that hold personal meaning for them.

- "It means...One for whom Bread – Food – Is Not Enough. Is that all right?" (95) –Asagai

- "You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done." (108) –Lena to Walter

- "It makes a difference to a man when he walk on floors that belong to him." (124) –Lena

- "If this is my time...my time to say goodbye...then I say it loud and good! Hallelujah! And good-bye, misery." (126) –Ruth

- "I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be." (142) –Lena

- "As I say, the whole business is a matter of caring for the other fellow." (164) –Lindner

- "When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right." (198) –Lena

- "That's all dad – we don't want your money." (202) –Walter

AFTER READING THE PLAY

Understanding the Difference Between a Play and a Screenplay

Turn the screenplay into a stage play. To do this, students should be in groups of three to five. Give the following instructions to each group.

1. Carefully analyze the screenplay's directions for shifts in location as well as action between/among the characters.
2. Divide the screenplay into two acts that follow conventional dramatic form:

   Act I – Exposition and Rising Action; Act II – Turning Point and Resolution. Determine if any scenes should be omitted or added.

3. Select a scene that includes important camera directions to present to the class (e.g., shots of white neighborhoods, Chicago's South Side, Walter Lee's aimless driving, etc.). Be sure your staging of the scene incorporates the message the camera conveys in the film version. You will need to decide how you will incorporate the fluid cinematic approach into the more "static" stage medium.

Comparing the Screenplay to the Film

1. Show the original 1961 film version of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

2. Review the screenplay, noting the scenes that have been omitted from the film. Discuss the possible reasons why. (To expedite this process, the screenplay could be divided into three sections [3-80, 81-143, 144-206] with a group of students assigned to each. Each group should summarize its discussion for the class.)

3. Read Margaret Wilkerson's Introduction (xxix-xliv) and Spike Lee's Commentary (xlv-xlvii) for background information.*

4. Respond in writing to one of the following:
    - Which missing scene affected you most deeply? Why?
    - Agree or disagree with one of Wilkerson's or Lee's arguments.*
    - Why do you think David Susskind, the producer, used so few of Hansberry's camera directions? Would the film have been better or worse if he had used them?
    - If you were going to remake the film, how would you change it?

Understanding Character

With a partner, pretend you are a producer and director who is auditioning actors for a new film of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Make a list of the characteristics you would seek in actors portraying each of the major characters. Include physical as well as personality characteristics.

Students can experiment with making their own mini-video production of a sequel to *A Raisin in the Sun*, featuring the same characters. For example:

- Walter Lee two years later. What has he done about the liquor store?
- Ruth and the new baby. Is she staying home?
- Lena and her family. Did she return to work for the Holidays? How is her garden growing?
- Beneatha. Did she stay in school? Did she marry Asagai?
- Travis. How is he contributing to the family now?
- Mr. Lindner and the neighbors. Are they still hostile?

Designing Units Based on *A Raisin in the Sun*

The film and the screenplay's introductions might form the basis for an interdisciplinary America in literature/U.S. history unit on Civil Rights and Racism. Hansberry was a keen observer of racist attitudes of both black and white Americans. Suggested activities/writing assignments might include the following:

- See a video or film about the Civil Rights period (many good ones are available) and/or do small group research on the period.

- Have the students conduct a panel discussion about this period and create a timeline of it. Invite parents or other adults to join the panel to add a historical perspective.

- As a class, discuss racial attitudes in the 1990s. Include the students' experiences in and observation of school, places of employment, social situations, films, and music.

- Invite parents or other adults in to participate in the discussion.

- Discuss the differences in attitudes of the three generations in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

- Discuss the white Americans in the screenplay: Mrs. Holiday, the Arnolds, Herman the grocery store clerk, and Mr. Lindner. What are their attitudes towards the African-Americans they deal with? Are these attitudes typical of the 1950s? How would the attitudes be the same or different today?

- Do a group research project on the status of African-Americans in the late 1950s, when the play was written, and today. Include such things as level of salaries, types of jobs, housing, and other demographic information available in numerous sources. Compare this data to data on white Americans during both periods. Present your information to the class and discuss.

- *A Raisin in the Sun* was written in 1958. Discuss as a class or in a small group the following: What makes it drama-worthy? Why does it appeal to multiracial audiences? Is it dated, or are the issues raised still relevant?*

- Read Jewell Gresham-Nemiroff's remarks about Hansberry's purpose for writing *A Raisin in the Sun* (x-xiii). Does Hansberry succeed in creating real people rather than racial stereotypes? What does she teach us about the American dream (xii) for both African and white Americans?*

Various Thematic Units Can Focus on *A Raisin in the Sun*

In a unit on Dreams Deferred, compare *A Raisin in the Sun* with *The Glass Menagerie* (Tennessee Williams) and/or *Death of A Salesman* (Arthur Miller). Film versions of all three can be shown to help students fully appreciate the integration of image and the artistry of the playwright. Points covered can include film techniques, characters, conflicts, symbols, tone, and themes.*

The bibliography in this teachers' guide suggests books that can be used in other units based on themes.

Another unit could focus on the life and work of Lorraine Hansberry.*

Read Hansberry's other writings (compiled by her husband, Robert Nemiroff, in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*).

In small groups and as a class compare her various writings.

Hold a panel discussion on her contention that art is a social responsibility. How does Raisin reflect her belief that a writer must be a teacher rather than merely an entertainer?

View the videotaped version of *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* (1972), which is available as part of the PBS Great Performances series. This might serve as the basis for a discussion of what constitutes "art." Does the artist have a social responsibility as a teacher? In contemporary music and films, which artists do you admire and why?

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