

## Themes

### **Stereotyping**

- Stereotyping is when you judge a group of people or person who is different from you based on your own and/or others opinions and/or encounters.
- Walter stereotypes his sister Beneatha by judging her on her career choice
- He believes that because of her gender she should get married and start a family not become a doctor.
- The play is fraught with sibling rivalry
- He resents that she wants to be a doctor and feels that the insurance money should be for him
- He reminds her that they are supporting all her whims and fancies when she spends money on her hobbies
- He tells her that she should rather go be a nurse like all other women instead of being a doctor or just get married and be quiet. This incident clearly exposes his stereotyping her and his chauvinistic attitude
- Walters choice to not bank a portion of the insurance money for Beneatha's schooling reiterates the fact that he does not take her choice to become a doctor seriously
- Walter tells Ruth that business and money matters are for men only and womans affairs are domestic
- The phrase "your eggs are getting cold" is used in the play to bring across the point of gender stereotyping that men are suffering and need support but all their woman are saying is essentially "keep quiet and eat your food"
- He accuses coloured woman of not supporting and understanding their men.
- Sexist mindset=woman must support him but he does not support his sister.

### **Feminism**

- The advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of political, social, and economic equality to men.
- Three generations of women reside in the Younger household
- Each possessing a different political perspective of herself as a woman.
- Mama (Lena Younger), in her early sixties, speaks "matter-of-factly" about her husband's prior womanizing.
- Ruth, about thirty, is more vocal about her feelings to her own husband than Mama was; still, Ruth is not as enlightened about a woman's "place"
- As is Beneatha, who is about twenty and pursuing a career that, in 1959, was largely a male-dominated profession.
- Mama is the "head of the household" prior to her it was big Walter
- She believes that Walter lee should be the man of the house and gives him

- the insurance money
- Mama is the type of woman who believes that the man should be in charge.
- Ruth apparently agrees, but Beneatha does not. She is always out to please everyone, especially her husband
- Ruth's advice to Beneatha is that she should just "be nice" sometimes and not argue over every one of Walter's insensitive remarks
- Ruth tries to change herself in order to please everyone in her life, most especially to please her husband,
- Beneatha insists that others accept her as she is
- Hansberry skillfully introduces issues of feminism that were not addressed as a political issue until a decade after the play's Broadway opening.

## Gender

- Used to refer to those characteristics of socio-cultural origin which are attributed to the different biological sexes
- Notions of masculinity and femininity are woven throughout the play
- Each of the Youngers takes a different attitude towards shifting gender roles.
- The characters' perspectives shed light on their identities.
- Setting up of the gender conflict in the heart of the play is Ruth and Beneatha not standing up for Walters entrepreneurial dream of opening up a liquor store
- He says that this is what is wrong with the world, coloured woman not building their men up and making them feel like somebody
- He feels his socio-economic situation much more strongly given that he's supposed to be the "man" of the family.
- He uses manhood as an argument for why his wife should support him, why his mother should give him money, and why he needs a better career.
- He holds conventional views on gender, and his ability to adequately fulfill his role as a man greatly affects his self-esteem.
- Walter links his own identity and self-worth to his sense of "manhood," which ebbs and flows during the play.
- Walter resents his emasculating work as a white man's chauffeur and Mama's standing as "head" of the family, which confines him to the position of a "child" in his home.
- Mama's eventual decision to make Walter head of the family "like you supposed to be," along with Walter's courageous refusal of Karl Lindner's offer, prompt Mama and Ruth to note that Walter "finally come into his manhood today."
- Thus, Walter's status as a man parallels both his success as the "man" of the house *and* his ability to establish himself as an equal in his interactions with Lindner and others.

- Georges dismisses Beneatha's appearance (African dress) and forcing her to conform to his image of what a young lady going on a date should look like shows gender conflict.
- Beneatha holds the most modern views, pursuing her dream to become a doctor (a male-dominated profession at the time)
- She tells a shocked Mama and Ruth that she isn't concerned about marriage—and that she might not ever get married at all.
- She does not understand how Ruth can put up with Walter and her vow to not marry could be based on her experience with men. Marriage means men will control you.
- She wants to discover her identity and remain independent without relying on a man like most women do
- She is portrayed as a feminist and her dream is self-serving, self-orientated and not family orientated.
- She does not see obstacles like gender or race deter her
- Mama and Ruth share more traditional views on marriage and their role as women.
- Both characters work in traditionally female roles as domestic servants, one of the few jobs open to African-American women at the time.
- Mama Younger, who has great aspirations for the family and hopes to one day own a house to keep her family safe and provided for
- Essentially she relies on a man and his money (the insurance check belongs to her late husband)

### **Race/racial segregation**

What is the role of race in *A Raisin in the Sun*? How would the story be different if the characters were not African American?

What is the significance of the fact that Mama and Big Walter lived in a time when lynching was still a serious threat?

Why does Walter blame his race for his misfortunes?

What are the ways that Beneatha thinks about race? How are they different from how the rest of her family sees race?

- Defined as a group of people who are socially defined in a given society as belonging together because of physical markers such as skin colour, hair texture, facial features ex.
- In 1959 much of the United States, including Chicago, remained segregated, meaning that racial segregation persisted in education, employment, and housing
- *A Raisin in the Sun* demonstrates how race can complicate the American Dream
- The character of Mr. Lindner makes the theme of racial discrimination prominent in the plot as an issue that the Youngers cannot avoid.

- The governing body of the Youngers' new neighborhood, the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, sends Mr. Lindner to persuade them not to move into the all-white Clybourne Park neighborhood.
  - Mr. Lindner and the people he represents can only see the color of the Younger family's skin, and his offer to bribe the Youngers to keep them from moving threatens to tear apart the Younger family and the values for which it stands.
  - After losing the insurance money Walter Lee tells his family that he called Lindner back to beg for the money.
  - He will play into the role of the inferior black man to a superior white man.
  - He would have accepted the money offered to him and also accepted that low position.
  - Mama scolds him and is shocked to learn that she has raised such a man with no pride.
  - When Lindner does in fact arrive at the Younger's home, Walter Lee has digested Mama's words.
  - He tells Lindner that his family has pride and cannot be bought by money or color.
  - It is through these words that Walter emerges a mature man.
  - Ultimately, the Youngers respond to this discrimination with defiance and strength.
  - The play powerfully demonstrates that the way to deal with discrimination is to stand up to it and reassert one's dignity in the face of it rather than allow it to pass unchecked.
- 
- One of the first major allusions to any sort of racism appears with the character of George Murchison.
  - When the wealthy Negro enters the picture, the Younger family sees the differences in race and group him with snobbish white people.
  - George Murchison, address persistent racial discrimination by directing their efforts toward assimilation, whereby one integrates into the mainstream of society.
- 
- Mama tells Walter Lee of the differences in racism from her generation to the present day.
  - She was worried about her personal survival from lynching and hate crime.
  - It seems as though her children have lost sight of the benefits of the new society.
  - They simply see the problems they face as monumental, illustrating the relativity of the plight of society.
- 
- Bennie teases Ruth and Walter about their old-fashioned dancing. However, she adds in the idea of "old-fashioned Negro" dancing.
  - This word choice perpetuates the racial distinctions and separations. Within both races, people seem to label themselves by their color.

## **Class/upward morality**

- You can usually tell the economic class of a character by the type of work they do and where they live, thus the younger family will fall under the working Class.
- The entrance of George Murchison introduces cross-class conflict between rich and poor blacks
- George Murchison is Beneatha's well-to-do boyfriend.
- He is educated and wealthy
- Ruth, does not understand Beneatha's ambivalence: he is good-looking, and able to provide well for Beneatha.
- Beneatha "the only people in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich colored people."
- Even though the two families are black, they are deeply divided.
- Beneatha suggests that class distinctions are more pronounced amongst African-Americans than between African-Americans and whites.
- Despite their degree of wealth or education, blacks in America were discriminated against.
- Wealthy African-Americans had limitations on schools, housing, and occupations just like their poor counterparts.
- Mrs. Murchison's 'snobbishness' is emblematic of a desperate yet futile attempt to be seen as different from poor blacks and thus gain acceptance by whites.
- However, radical legislative and social change proves to be the only substantive solution to America's problem.

## **Poverty**

- What will the extra child mean to the families well being: thus the idea of poverty is introduced
- A harsh living environment is introduced when we read that the children are chasing rats as big as cats. South side Chicago was run down and unsafe for human inhabitants

## **Dreams**

- The entire play centers around dreams, as each character and the Younger family as a whole have a dream they struggle to achieve in their oppressive environment.
- Even the title of the play refers to a poem written by Langston Hughes, which talks about "dreams deferred."
- The family's mood, both happiness and depression, is effected by the realization of, or failure to attain, each person's dream.
- In the end, the family decides to chase the dream of owning a house, since it will benefit and unite the family most.
- The desire for and efforts put into each person's dreams are what make up the play, and the integrity of each character.
- This of course ties into the great American Dream and the African families who struggle to attain their own version of it.

## Introduction

- This play was set in the United States of America, specifically in Chicago where tremendous internal migration took place in the 1940's and 1950's
- This play is of great significance because it provides us with insight into how American society has evolved over the years
- Like South Africa they have a history of racial segregation
- Even though it was not enforced by law after segregation was abolished in 1954

## Characters

### **Ruth**

- Her pregnancy further complicates the strained family circumstances as this means an extra mouth to feed
- Walter's wife and Travis's mother.
- Ruth takes care of the Youngers' small apartment.
- Her marriage to Walter has problems, but she hopes to rekindle their love.
- She is about thirty, but her weariness makes her seem older.
- Constantly fighting poverty and domestic troubles, she continues to be an emotionally strong woman.
- Her almost pessimistic pragmatism helps her to survive.

### **Walter lee**

- Ruth's husband
- Lean, intense, inclined to quick nervous movements and erratic speech habits
- He needs the insurance money to open a liquor store with Willy Harris so he can "move up in the world"
- He is disappointed that his sister Beneatha and Ruth do not stand up for his dreams and help convince Mama for the money.
- As he realizes his dreams are not going to be realised he begins to waste away, dodging work and simply being listless.
- Mama younger worries and then gives him the money to use and save for Beneatha's education
- As Mama's only son, Ruth's defiant husband, Travis's caring father, and Beneatha's belligerent brother
- Walter serves as both protagonist and antagonist of the play.
- The plot revolves around him and the actions that he takes, and his character evolves the most during the course of the play.
- Most of his actions and mistakes hurt the family greatly, but his belated rise to manhood makes him a sort of hero in the last scene.
- Throughout the play, Walter provides an everyman perspective of the mid-twentieth-century African-American male.
- He is the typical man of the family who struggles to support it and who tries to discover new, better schemes to secure its economic prosperity.
- Difficulties and barriers that obstruct his and his family's progress to

- attain that prosperity constantly frustrate Walter.
- He believes that money will solve all of their problems, but he is rarely successful with money.
- Walter often fights and argues with Ruth, Mama, and Beneatha.
- Far from being a good listener, he does not seem to understand that he must pay attention to his family members' concerns in order to help them.
- Eventually, he realizes that he cannot raise the family up from poverty alone
- He seeks strength in uniting with his family.
- Once he begins to listen to Mama and Ruth express their dreams of owning a house, he realizes that buying the house is more important for the family's welfare than getting rich quickly.
- Walter finally becomes a man when he stands up to Mr. Lindner and refuses the money that Mr. Lindner offers the family not to move in to its dream house in a white neighborhood.

### **Beneatha**

- Is comes across as an ambitious character
- She aspires to be the first female doctor in her family
- Not extremely romantically interested in Asagai
- She is interested as an African American in defining her identity as a fellow African who is not stereotyped as the savage heathen
- The name Asagai gives her "Alaiyo" which means "for one which food is not enough" touches on elements of her character
- Being a simple woman, living a simple life and just getting by on the essentials (food) is not enough for her.
- Beneatha is an attractive college student who provides a young, independent, feminist perspective, and her desire to become a doctor demonstrates her great ambition.
- Throughout the play, she searches for her identity.
- She dates two very different men: Joseph Asagai and George Murchison.
- She is at her happiest with Asagai, her Nigerian boyfriend, who has nicknamed her "Alaiyo," which means "One for Whom Bread—Food—Is Not Enough."
- She is at her most depressed and angry with George, her pompous, affluent African-American boyfriend.
- She identifies much more with Asagai's interest in rediscovering his African roots than with George's interest in assimilating into white culture.
- Beneatha prides herself on being independent.
- Asagai criticizes her for being both too independent by not wanting to marry and too dependent by not wanting to leave America.
- Asagai's wish that Beneatha be quieter and less ambitious obviously outrages her, and his contention late in the play that she has been far from independent—she has had to rely on the insurance money from her father's death and the investments made by her brother to realize her dream of becoming a doctor—greatly influences her.

- When she realizes this dependence, she gains a new perspective on her dream and a new energy to attain it in her own way.
- This realization also brings her closer to Walter.
- While she earlier blames him for his shoddy investing and questions his manhood, she eventually recognizes his strength, a sign that she has become able to appreciate him.

### **Mama younger**

- Is central to the play as she draws all the other characters together as a family
- When Ruth tries to coax her into revealing her intentions for the money she is evasive
- This shows her indecisiveness and also her clear indication that she detests liquor trading
- Buying of the house and leaving it to Travis when he is older demonstrates care for both current and future generations
- But buying the house also destroys the dream of Walter who cannot conceive of the money being put into such use.
- Mama Younger, who has great aspirations for the family and hopes to one day own a house to keep her family safe and provided for
- Lena Younger believes in family and keeping family together, she tries through out the play to teach this value to her loved ones.
- Her dream is to one day own a house so that she is able to fully provide for her family and keep them safe.
- Mama Younger keeps a plant in the kitchen, which she nurtures; this plant can be seen as a symbol of her dream.
- She cares for the plant like she cares for her family and just as she tries to give her family everything she can; even in the most difficult of circumstances, she also tries to nourish the plant even in an undesirable environment.
- Mama also dreams of a garden then she can tend to and the plant fills her dream for the time being.
- Her persistent attention for the plant signifies her fortification of her dream.
- In spite of her confined living conditions and the strenuous work that she underwent, she continues to stay focused on her aspirations, which aids in her persistence.
- Even though Mama younger works with her whole heart the plant does not flourish due to the fact that there is minimal light in the apartment. Likewise, it is hard for her to look after her family, as she would like and to have each member flourish as much as she wants.
- Her wish for a home and an improved life for her family continue to be fragile, as it has become difficult for her to see past her family's current condition.
- Mama eventually realizes her dream and buys a house in a "white area" with the insurance money left to her by her diseased husband.



- The buying of the house brings about the key racial hindrance in the play with regards to all the Youngers' dreams and is brought forth by a character named Mr Linder (look at theme: race)
- Mama is Walter and Beneatha's sensitive mother and the head of the Younger household.
- She demands that members of her family respect themselves and take pride in their dreams.
- Mama requires that the apartment in which they live always be neat and polished.
- She stands up for her beliefs and provides perspective from an older generation.
- She believes in striving to succeed while maintaining her moral boundaries.
- she rejects Beneatha's progressive and seemingly un-Christian sentiments about God, and Ruth's consideration of an abortion disappoints her.
- Similarly, when Walter comes to her with his idea to invest in the liquor store venture, she condemns the idea and explains that she will not participate in such un-Christian business.
- Money is only a means to an end for Mama; dreams are more important to her than material wealth, and her dream is to own a house with a garden and yard in which Travis can play.
- Mama is the most nurturing character in the play, and she constantly reminds Walter that all she has ever wanted is to make her children happy and provide for them.
- She cares deeply for Walter and shows this care by giving him the remaining insurance money.
- She cares deeply for Ruth as well, consoling her when Walter ignores her.
- Mama respects Beneatha's assessment of George Murchison as being arrogant and self-centered, telling her daughter not to waste time with such a "fool."
- Mama loves Travis, her grandchild, and hopes their new house will have a big yard in which he can play.
- She is also very fond, though in a different way, of her plant, which she tries to nurture throughout the play.

### **Asagai**

- Nigerian student studying in Canada
- He is in love with Beneatha in the play
- He introducing the subject of self-love/self-loathing: processed African hair vrs natural (assimilation to dominant culture)
- Also serves to bring forward that even after the well-intentioned philanthropy very little is known of Africa by the American people
- Calls Beneatha "Alaiyo" one for whom food is not enough
- Him and George are of opposing view assimilation and anti-assimilation
- One of Beneatha's fellow students and one of her suitors, Asagai is from Nigeria
- Throughout the play he provides an international perspective.

- Proud of his African heritage, he hopes to return to Nigeria to help bring about positive change and modern advancements.
- He tries to teach Beneatha about her heritage as well.
- He stands in obvious contrast to Beneatha's other suitor, George Murchison, who is an arrogant African-American who has succeeded in life by assimilating to the white world.
- Though Asagai criticizes Beneatha a few times in the play, he seems to do so out of a desire to help her.
- He criticizes her straightened hair, which resembles Caucasian hair, and persuades her to cut it and keep a more natural, more African look.
- He criticizes her independent views, but seemingly only to give her new energy and strength.
- His final criticism of Beneatha—that she is not as independent as she believes herself to be because her dream of attending medical school is bound up in the insurance money from her father's death and her reliance on Walter's investing schemes—further helps to open Beneatha's eyes to the necessity of probing her own existence and identity.
- The text's implication that Beneatha intends to accept Asagai's proposal of marriage and move to Nigeria with him suggests that he is, in a way, a savior for her.