

## A Raisin in the Sun American Dream

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In the play *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry you go back in time to when segregation was still aloud. In this play you meet a cast of people with dreams of a better life. The American Dream, to be specific. This dream is portrayed differently for each character, all of which impact the play. Two of these character`s are Walter Lee Younger and Lena Younger. In *Raisin in the Sun* Mama and Walter`s American dreams conflict and impact the family through materialism and desire to be the ideal American family in society.

Mama and Walter both desire to provide for their family. They both look at money as success. When the \$10,000 insurance check comes along, Mama sees it as a chance for her family to finally live up and be more like the rest of the American society. She aspires to look after her family, by giving them a house, a car, and most of all- happiness. Walter on the other hand becomes obsessed with his dreams of business, which he believes will result in financial independence to provide for his family. He feels ashamed when he can't give money to his son. When Travis asks for fifty cents and Ruth tells him they don't have it, Walter gives him fifty cents anyway. "In fact, here's another fifty cents... Buy yourself some fruit today- or take a taxicab to school or something"(12) He yearns for his son Travis to look up to him. He adds another fifty to make this more real or true. This also shows how Walter looks at money as success. Walter believes this will be true if he has his dream of owning his own business or all in all- wealth. Success to both them means that they no longer have to struggle, and live up to what people perceive.

Mama distinguishes herself from Walter when it comes to materialistic matters. The first thing mama does when she gets the insurance money is buy a house for her family. This shows how the capitalistic society is... [\[continues\]](#)

# A Raisin in the Sun

## Lorraine Hansberry

### Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

#### The Value and Purpose of Dreams

*A Raisin in the Sun* is essentially about dreams, as the main characters struggle to deal with the oppressive circumstances that rule their lives. The title of the play references a conjecture that Langston Hughes famously posed in a poem he wrote about dreams that were forgotten or put off. He wonders whether those dreams shrivel up “like a raisin in the sun.” Every member of the Younger family has a separate, individual dream—Beneatha wants to become a doctor, for example, and Walter wants to have money so that he can afford things for his family. The Youngers struggle to attain these dreams throughout the play, and much of their happiness and depression is directly related to their attainment of, or failure to attain, these dreams. By the end of the play, they learn that the dream of a house is the most important dream because it unites the family.

#### The Need to Fight Racial Discrimination

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. 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.

#### The Importance of Family

The Youngers struggle socially and economically throughout the play but unite in the end to realize their dream of buying a house. Mama strongly believes in the importance of family, and she tries to teach this value to her family as she struggles to keep them together and functioning. Walter and Beneatha learn this lesson about family at the end of the play, when Walter must deal with the loss of the stolen insurance money and Beneatha denies Walter as a brother. Even facing such trauma, they come together to reject Mr. Lindner’s racist overtures. They are still strong individuals, but they are now individuals who function as part of a family. When they begin to put the family and the family’s wishes before their own, they merge their individual dreams with the family’s overarching dream.

### Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.

#### The Home

The Younger apartment is the only setting throughout the play, emphasizing the centrality of the home. The lighting seems to change with the mood, and with only one window, the apartment is a small, often dark area in which all the Youngers—at one time or another—feel cramped. While some of the play’s action occurs outside of the apartment, the audience sees this action play out in the household. Most of what happens outside of the apartment includes Travis’s playing out in the street with the rat and Walter’s drinking and delinquency from work. The home is a galvanizing force for the family, one that Mama sees as crucial to the family’s unity. The audience sees characters outside the family—Joseph Asagai, George Murchison, Mrs. Johnson, Mr. Lindner, and Bobo—only when they visit the apartment. These characters become real through their interactions with the Youngers and the Youngers’ reactions to them. The play ends, fittingly, when Mama, lagging behind, finally leaves the apartment.

## **Symbols**

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

### **“Eat Your Eggs”**

This phrase appears early in the play, as an instruction from Ruth to Walter to quiet him. Walter then employs the phrase to illustrate how women keep men from achieving their goals—every time a man gets excited about something, he claims, a woman tries to temper his enthusiasm by telling him to eat his eggs. Being quiet and eating one’s eggs represents an acceptance of the adversity that Walter and the rest of the Youngers face in life. Walter believes that Ruth, who is making his eggs, keeps him from achieving his dream, and he argues that she should be more supportive of him. The eggs she makes every day symbolize her mechanical approach to supporting him. She provides him with nourishment, but always in the same, predictable way.

### **Mama’s Plant**

The most overt symbol in the play, Mama’s plant represents both Mama’s care and her dream for her family. In her first appearance onstage, she moves directly toward the plant to take care of it. She confesses that the plant never gets enough light or water, but she takes pride in how it nevertheless flourishes under her care. Her care for her plant is similar to her care for her children, unconditional and unending despite a less-than-perfect environment for growth. The plant also symbolizes her dream to own a house and, more specifically, to have a garden and a yard. With her plant, she practices her gardening skills. Her success with the plant helps her believe that she would be successful as a gardener. Her persistence and dedication to the plant fosters her hope that her dream may come true.

### **Beneatha’s Hair**

When the play begins, Beneatha has straightened hair. Midway through the play, after Asagai visits her and questions her hairstyle, she cuts her Caucasian-seeming hair. Her new, radical afro represents her embracing of her heritage. Beneatha’s cutting of her hair is a very powerful social statement, as she symbolically declares that natural is beautiful, prefiguring the 1960s cultural credo that black is beautiful. Rather than force her hair to conform to the style society dictates, Beneatha opts for a style that enables her to more easily reconcile her identity and her culture. Beneatha’s new hair is a symbol of her anti-assimilationist beliefs as well as her desire to shape her identity by looking back to her roots in Africa.

### **Walter**

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, and 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.

## **Mama**

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.

## **Beneatha**

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.

## **Asagai**

One of Beneatha's fellow students and one of her suitors, Asagai is from Nigeria, and 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.