

Is *Raisin In The Sun* an antiquated, out-dated play?

Why is Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin In The Sun* still so relevant today?

The groundbreaking work featuring an African American cast, debuted in 1959 to a racially segregated United States. Walter Younger, a chauffeur for a white family, yearns to be an entrepreneur. Beneatha Younger wants to know more about her African heritage. Ruth Younger is a domestic in the homes of wealthy whites and sees no other avenue of income. The matriarch of the family, Lena Younger, "Mama," wants her family to realize their American dreams. However, audiences soon realize one important fact, regardless of race, individuals are essentially the same. Aside from dealing with the issue of being black in America, the Younger family also deals with the issue of being an American family. Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry's husband, in response to why there was such widespread acceptance of the play notes that, "some people were ecstatic to find that it didn't really have to be about Negroes at all. It was, rather a walking, talking, living demonstration of our mythic conviction that underneath all of us Americans, color ain't got nothing to do with it....People are just people, whoever they are, and all they want is a chance to be like other people."¹ The Younger family's dreams are still the dreams of American families even up to the present.

In the 1950s two very important events were unfolding, the advent of the television and the beginnings of suburban living. After the end of World War II marriage rates and birth rates were climbing. Extended families, crowded together in one apartment indicated that more housing was desperately needed. Huge suburban

¹ Lorraine Hansberry, "A Raisin In The Sun," With an Introduction by Robert Nemiroff (New York: Random House, 1994) p. 9.

communities such as Levittown were built.² Television shows such as “Father Knows Best,” and “The Donna Reed Show,” portrayed American families living idyllic existence in these new communities. Everyone wanted a version of this dream.

The opening scene of the play shows Travis Younger sleeping in the living room on a pullout couch. Ruth and Walter Younger are sleeping in a room that was once the breakfast nook. Mama and Beneatha share a bedroom, and the entire family shares a bathroom with another family or families.³ This less than ideal situation fuels the bickering we see among the family members. When Mama purchases a home for the family in an all-white suburb, her simple explanation is not that she wanted to be a pioneer for civil rights, but simply, “I tried to find the nicest place for the least amount of money for my family.”⁴

Some might argue that Hansberry’s introduction of Mama purchasing a home and Mr. Lindner’s proposal to purchase it for more money just to prevent the family from moving in is the central theme of the play and speaks to her personal experience. “In 1938, Hansberry’s father moved the family into a “white” neighborhood where a mob gathered and threw bricks, one of which nearly hit Lorraine. Embittered by U.S. racism, Carl Hansberry planned to relocate his family in Mexico in 1946 but died before the move.”⁵ However, her purposefulness in not writing an Act showing retaliation due to the move to their new home shows her wanting to focus on the universal family theme.

² Kenneth T. Jackson, “Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States,” (New York: Oxford Press, 1985) p. 232

³ Lorraine Hansberry, “A Raisin In The Sun,” p. 24 - 25

⁴ Ibid, p. 93

⁵ American National Biography Online, <http://www.amb.org.ezp-prod.1.hul.harvard.edu/articles/18/18-01856-print.html>

The sentiment of African American families wanting the same as any one else, is echoed by Andrew Wiese in *The New Suburban History*, “middle-class African Americans shared with their white counterparts an emphasis on a materially abundant family life in a residential setting removed from the “grind” of paid labor....⁶ Emphasis on safe space was not unique to African Americans, of course...many postwar parents perceived suburban homes as a “a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world,” a warm hearth in the midst of a Cold War.”⁷ Mama dreams of having a yard for her grandson to play in and a place where she can tend to her garden. She tells the family that she watched their father grow old, working hard so that eventually they could realize that dream. It is interesting to note that Mr. Lindner echoes Mama’s dream as the reason for the family not to move into the neighborhood. “Well, you see our community is made up of people who’ve worked hard as the dickens for years to build up that little community. Hard-working, honest people...with a dream of the kind of community they want to raise their children in.”⁸ Is it coincidence that Hansberry chooses this dialogue? Hardly. The wording is especially chosen to unify the common interests of all Americans.

A hard-working, honest person with a dream completely describes Walter Younger. Walter works as a chauffeur for a wealthy family but obsesses on his dream of being an entrepreneur. He spends his night meeting with his friends, planning of being a corporate executive or a major business owner and having employees working for him, calling him, “Mr. Younger.” He yearns to be respected as a man in society.

⁶ Andrew Wiese, “The New Suburban History,” Edited by Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press) p. 105

⁷ Ibid, p.114

⁸ Lorraine Hansberry, “A Raisin In The Sun.” p. 117

Of interest to all American families is the relationship between a husband and wife. The play opens with the very defined role of women in the '50s. Ruth is the first to awaken and assumes her role of mother, preparing breakfast for the family, making sure the child gets ready to go to school. Her husband, Walter, expects her to be supportive of him fully and put her dreams aside for his. Walter complains loudly and often that Ruth doesn't believe in or supports his dreams. Hansberry writes specific dialogue for Walter, choosing racially charged words in his delivery to his wife, "What is wrong with the colored woman in this world, don't understand about building their men up and making them feel like somebody, like they can do something." However, remove the word "colored" and contrast this with the Mrs. Dale Carnegie's op-ed piece in the January 1954 issue of *Coronet* outlining specific rules for women in the 50s to put the interests of their husbands above their own and the universal appeal is apparent. She asks women in her piece, "If you have a job or career of your own, would you be willing to give it up if it would advance your husband's interests? If not you are more interested in promoting yourself than promoting your husband. Helping a man attain a success is a full-time career in itself."⁹ Interestingly, she does not use her given name in the piece but rather, "Mrs. Dale Carnegie." Against this backdrop Hansberry not so subtly introduces her feminist views.

Beneatha Younger is attending college and is intent on being a medical doctor. Her brother turns to her and asks, "Who told you you had to be a doctor? Go be a nurse like other women or just get married and be quiet."¹⁰ Beneatha's defiance to her brother is Hansberry's way of challenging the status quo of women in the '50s. Beneatha is

⁹ Mrs. Dale Carnegie, "How to Help Your Husband Get Ahead," *Coronet*, January 1954, 65.

¹⁰ Lorraine Hansberry, "A Raisin In The Sun.", p. 38

college-educated and free-spirited. She is entering a traditional male occupation and she indulges her own personal interests, guitar lessons, acting lessons, in an effort to “find herself.” These were issues of importance to women during this time of the emerging feminist movement.

Hansberry’s own life challenged the role of women in the ‘50s. She was college-educated; she marched on picket lines and made speeches on street corners. *Raisin* won the New York Drama Critic’s Circle Award for best play making her the youngest American, the first woman and the first black to win that award.¹¹ Women who wanted more for themselves besides being their husbands’ wives, and mothers in suburbia, could identify with the strong, determined Beneatha and the first woman to win a playwriting award.

The universal appeal of *Raisin* is still strong even today. There are still lines drawn in the roles of men and women. In the history of the United States there has never been a female president, even the percentage of women leaders worldwide is still dismally small compared to men. Women who work outside the home and have families are still assumed to be in charge of domestic chores and childrearing with limited assistance from men, just like Ruth Younger. Television shows such as *Desperate Housewives* and *The Real Housewives* series on The Bravo Channel portray men as the main breadwinners. Everyone regardless of race desires to live in a “nice” neighborhood, as evidenced by the mortgage meltdown in recent years. The saying, “Behind every successful man is a good woman,” used today still does not seem quaint.

¹¹ American National Biography Online, <http://www.anb.org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/articles/18/18-018566-print.html>

So Hansberry in portraying the struggles of an African American family in the '50s, gave the world a play that will continue to resonate in importance for years to come.