A Raisin in the Sun

Spark Notes

Lorraine Hansberry

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- **Context**

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, the youngest of four children. Her parents were well-educated, successful black citizens who publicly fought discrimination against black people. When Hansberry was a child, she and her family lived in a black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. During this era, segregation—the enforced separation of whites and blacks—was still legal and widespread throughout the South. Northern states, including Hansberry's own Illinois, had no official policy of segregation, but they were generally self-segregated along racial and economic lines. Chicago was a striking example of a city carved into strictly divided black and white neighborhoods. Hansberry's family became one of the first to move into a white neighborhood, but Hansberry still attended a segregated public school for blacks. When neighbors struck at them with threats of violence and legal action, the Hansberrys defended themselves. Hansberry's father successfully brought his case all the way to the Supreme Court.

Hansberry wrote that she always felt the inclination to record her experiences. At times, her writing—including *A Raisin in the Sun*—is recognizably autobiographical. She was one of the first playwrights to create realistic portraits of African-American life. When *A Raisin in the Sun* opened in March 1959, it met with great praise from white and black audience members alike. Arguably the first play to portray black characters, themes, and conflicts in a natural and realistic manner, *A Raisin in the Sun* received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play of the Year. Hansberry was the youngest playwright, the fifth woman, and the only black writer at that point to win the award. She used her new fame to help bring attention to the American civil rights movement as well as African struggles for independence from colonialism. Her promising career was cut short when she died from cancer in 1965, at the age of thirty-four.

A Raisin in the Sun can be considered a turning point in American art because it addresses so many issues important during the 1950s in the United States. The 1950s are widely mocked in modern times as an age of complacency and conformism, symbolized by the growth of suburbs and commercial culture that began in that decade. Such a view, however, is superficial at best. Beneath the economic

prosperity that characterized America in the years following World War II roiled growing domestic and racial tension. The stereotype of 1950s America as a land of happy housewives and blacks content with their inferior status resulted in an upswell of social resentment that would finally find public voice in the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s. *A Raisin in the Sun,* first performed as the conservative 1950s slid into the radical sixties, explores both of these vital issues.

A Raisin in the Sun was a revolutionary work for its time. Hansberry creates in the Younger family one of the first honest depictions of a black family on an American stage, in an age when predominantly black audiences simply did not exist. Before this play, African-American roles, usually small and comedic, largely employed ethnic stereotypes. Hansberry, however, shows an entire black family in a realistic light, one that is unflattering and far from comedic. She uses black vernacular throughout the play and broaches important issues and conflicts, such as poverty, discrimination, and the construction of African-American racial identity.

A Raisin in the Sun explores not only the tension between white and black society but also the strain within the black community over how to react to an oppressive white community. Hansberry's drama asks difficult questions about assimilation and identity. Through the character of Joseph Asagai, Hansberry reveals a trend toward celebrating African heritage. As he calls for a native revolt in his homeland, she seems to predict the anticolonial struggles in African countries of the upcoming decades, as well as the inevitability and necessity of integration.

Hansberry also addressed feminist questions ahead of their time in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Through the character of Beneatha, Hansberry proposes that marriage is not necessary for women and that women can and should have ambitious career goals. She even approaches an abortion debate, allowing the topic of abortion to enter the action in an era when abortion was illegal. Of course, one of her most radical statements was simply the writing and production of the play—no small feat given her status as a young, black woman in the 1950s.

All of this idealism about race and gender relations boils down to a larger, timeless point—that dreams are crucial. In fact, Hansberry's play focuses primarily on the dreams driving and motivating its main characters. These dreams function in positive

ways, by lifting their minds from their hard work and tough lifestyle, and in negative ways, by creating in them even more dissatisfaction with their present situations. For the most part, however, the negative dreams come from placing emphasis on materialistic goals rather than on familial pride and happiness. Hansberry seems to argue that as long as people attempt to do their best for their families, they can lift each other up. *A Raisin in the Sun* remains important as a cultural document of a crucial period in American history as well as for the continued debate over racial and gender issues that it has helped spark.

A Note on the Title

Lorraine Hansberry took the title of *A Raisin in the Sun* from a line in Langston Hughes's famous 1951 poem "Harlem: A Dream Deferred." Hughes was a prominent black poet during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance in New York City, during which black artists of all kinds—musicians, poets, writers—gave innovative voices to their personal and cultural experiences. The Harlem Renaissance was a time of immense promise and hopefulness for black artists, as their efforts were noticed and applauded across the United States. In fact, the 1920s are known to history as the Jazz Age, since that musical form, created by a vanguard of black musicians, gained immense national popularity during the period and seemed to embody the exuberance and excitement of the decade. The Harlem Renaissance and the positive national response to the art it produced seemed to herald the possibility of a new age of acceptance for blacks in America.

Langston Hughes was one of the brightest lights of the Harlem Renaissance, and his poems and essays celebrate black culture, creativity, and strength. However, Hughes wrote "Harlem" in 1951, twenty years after the Great Depression crushed the Harlem Renaissance and devastated black communities more terribly than any other group in the United States. In addition, the post–World War II years of the 1950s were characterized by "white flight," in which whites fled the cities in favor of the rapidly growing suburbs. Blacks were often left behind in deteriorating cities, and were unwelcome in the suburbs. In a time of renewed prosperity, blacks were for the most part left behind.

“Harlem” captures the tension between the need for black expression and the impossibility of that expression because of American society’s oppression of its black population. In the poem, Hughes asks whether a “dream deferred”—a dream put on hold—withers up “[l]ike a raisin in the sun.” His lines confront the racist and dehumanizing attitude prevalent in American society before the civil rights movement of the 1960s that black desires and ambitions were, at best, unimportant and should be ignored, and at worst, should be forcibly resisted. His closing rhetorical question—“*Or does [a dream deferred] explode?*”—is incendiary, a bold statement that the suppression of black dreams might result in an eruption. It implicitly places the blame for this possible eruption on the oppressive society that forces the dream to be deferred. Hansberry’s reference to Hughes’s poem in her play’s title highlights the importance of dreams in *A Raisin in the Sun* and the struggle that her characters face to realize their individual dreams, a struggle inextricably tied to the more fundamental black dream of equality in America.

PLOT OVERVIEW:

A Raisin in the Sun portrays a few weeks in the life of the Youngers, an African-American family living on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s. When the play opens, the Youngers are about to receive an insurance check for $10,000. This money comes from the deceased Mr. Younger’s life insurance policy. Each of the adult members of the family has an idea as to what he or she would like to do with this money. The matriarch of the family, Mama, wants to buy a house to fulfill a dream she shared with her husband. Mama’s son, Walter Lee, would rather use the money to invest in a liquor store with his friends. He believes that the investment will solve the family’s financial problems forever. Walter’s wife, Ruth, agrees with Mama, however, and hopes that she and Walter can provide more space and opportunity for their son, Travis. Finally, Beneatha, Walter’s sister and Mama’s daughter, wants to use the money for her medical school tuition. She also wishes that her family members were not so interested in joining the white world. Beneatha instead tries to find her identity by looking back to the past and to Africa.

As the play progresses, the Youngers clash over their competing dreams. Ruth discovers that she is pregnant but fears that if she has the child, she will put more financial pressure on her family members. When Walter says nothing to Ruth’s

admission that she is considering abortion, Mama puts a down payment on a house for the whole family. She believes that a bigger, brighter dwelling will help them all. This house is in Clybourne Park, an entirely white neighborhood. When the Youngers' future neighbors find out that the Youngers are moving in, they send Mr. Lindner, from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, to offer the Youngers money in return for staying away. The Youngers refuse the deal, even after Walter loses the rest of the money ($6,500) to his friend Willy Harris, who persuades Walter to invest in the liquor store and then runs off with his cash.

In the meantime, Beneatha rejects her suitor, George Murchison, whom she believes to be shallow and blind to the problems of race. Subsequently, she receives a marriage proposal from her Nigerian boyfriend, Joseph Asagai, who wants Beneatha to get a medical degree and move to Africa with him (Beneatha does not make her choice before the end of the play). The Youngers eventually move out of the apartment, fulfilling the family's long-held dream. Their future seems uncertain and slightly dangerous, but they are optimistic and determined to live a better life. They believe that they can succeed if they stick together as a family and resolve to defer their dreams no longer.

Character List

The protagonist of the play. Walter is a dreamer. He wants to be rich and devises plans to acquire wealth with his friends, particularly Willy Harris. When the play opens, he wants to invest his father's insurance money in a new liquor store venture. He spends the rest of the play endlessly preoccupied with discovering a quick solution to his family's various problems.

Beneatha Younger ("Bennie") - Mama's daughter and Walter's sister. Beneatha is an intellectual. Twenty years old, she attends college and is better educated than the rest of the Younger family. Some of her personal beliefs and views have distanced her from conservative Mama. She dreams of being a doctor and struggles to determine her identity as a well-educated black woman.

Lena Younger ("Mama") - Walter and Beneatha's mother. The matriarch of the family, Mama is religious, moral, and maternal. She wants to use her husband's insurance money as a down payment on a house with a backyard to fulfill her dream for her family to move up in the world.

Ruth Younger - 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.

Travis Younger - Walter and Ruth's sheltered young son. Travis earns some money by carrying grocery bags and likes to play outside with other neighborhood children, but he has no bedroom and sleeps on the living-room sofa.

Joseph Asagai - A Nigerian student in love with Beneatha. Asagai, as he is often called, is very proud of his African heritage, and Beneatha hopes to learn about her African heritage from him. He eventually proposes marriage to Beneatha and hopes she will return to Nigeria with him.

George Murchison - A wealthy, African-American man who courts Beneatha. The Youngers approve of George, but Beneatha dislikes his willingness to submit to white culture and forget his African heritage. He challenges the thoughts and feelings of other black people through his arrogance and flair for intellectual competition.

Mr. Karl Lindner - The only white character in the play. Mr. Lindner arrives at the Youngers' apartment from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. He offers the Youngers a deal to reconsider moving into his (all-white) neighborhood.

Bobo - One of Walter's partners in the liquor store plan. Bobo appears to be as mentally slow as his name indicates.

Willy Harris - A friend of Walter and coordinator of the liquor store plan. Willy never appears onstage, which helps keep the focus of the story on the dynamics of the Younger family.

Mrs. Johnson - The Youngers' neighbor. Mrs. Johnson takes advantage of the Youngers' hospitality and warns them about moving into a predominately white neighborhood.

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.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols

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.

Act I, scene i

Summary

It is morning at the Youngers' apartment. Their small dwelling on the South Side of Chicago has two bedrooms—one for Mama and Beneatha, and one for Ruth and Walter Lee. Travis sleeps on the couch in the living room. The only window is in their small kitchen, and they share a bathroom in the hall with their neighbors. The stage directions indicate that the furniture, though apparently once chosen with care, is now very worn and faded. Ruth gets up first and after some noticeable difficulty, rouses Travis and Walter as she makes breakfast. While Travis gets ready in the communal bathroom, Ruth and Walter talk in the kitchen. They do not seem happy, yet they engage in some light humor. They keep mentioning a check. Walter scans the front page of the newspaper and reads that another bomb was set off, and Ruth responds with indifference. Travis asks them for money—he is supposed to bring fifty cents to school—and Ruth says that they do not have it. His persistent nagging quickly irritates her. Walter, however, gives Travis an entire dollar while staring at Ruth. Travis then leaves for school, and Walter tells Ruth that he wants to use the check to invest in a liquor store with a few of his friends. Walter and Ruth continue to argue about their unhappy lives, a dialogue that Ruth cuts short by telling her husband, "Eat your eggs, they gonna be cold."

Beneatha gets up next and after discovering that the bathroom is occupied by someone from another family, engages in a verbal joust with Walter. He thinks that she should be doing something more womanly than studying medicine, especially since her tuition will cut into the check, which is the insurance payment for their father's death. Beneatha argues that the money belongs to Mama and that Mama has the right to decide how it is spent. Walter then leaves for his job as a chauffeur—he has to ask Ruth for money to get to work because the money he gave Travis was his car fare. Mama enters and goes directly to a small plant that she keeps just outside the kitchen window. She expresses sympathy for her grandson, Travis, while she questions Ruth's ability to care for him properly. She asks Ruth what she would do with the money, which amounts to $10,000. For once, Ruth seems to be on Walter's side. She thinks that if Mama gives him some of the money he might regain

his happiness and confidence, which are two things Ruth feels she can no longer provide for Walter. Mama, though, feels morally repulsed by the idea of getting into the liquor business. Instead, she wants to move to a house with a lawn on which Travis can play. Owning a house had always been a dream she had shared with her husband, and now that he is gone she nurtures this dream even more powerfully.

Mama and Ruth begin to tease Beneatha about the many activities that she tries and quits, including her latest attempt to learn how to play the guitar. Beneatha claims that she is trying to “express” herself, an idea at which Ruth and Mama have a laugh. They discuss the man that Beneatha has been dating, George Murchison. Beneatha gets angry as they praise George because she thinks that he is “shallow.” Mama and Ruth do not understand her ambivalence toward George, arguing that she should like him simply because he is rich. Beneatha contends that, for that very reason, any further relationship is pointless, as George’s family wouldn’t approve of her anyway. Beneatha makes the mistake of using the Lord’s name in vain in front of Mama, which sparks another conversation about the extent of God’s providence. Beneatha argues that God does not seem to help her or the family. Mama, outraged at such a pronouncement, asserts that she is head of the household and that there will be no such thoughts expressed in her home. Beneatha recants and leaves for school, and Mama goes to the window to tend her plant. Ruth and Mama talk about Walter and Beneatha, and Ruth suddenly faints.

Analysis

All of the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* have unfulfilled dreams. These dreams mostly involve money. Although the Younger family seems alienated from white middle-class culture, they harbor the same materialistic dreams as the rest of American society. In the 1950s, the stereotypical American dream was to have a house with a yard, a big car, and a happy family. The Youngers also seem to want to live this dream, though their struggle to attain any semblance of it is dramatically different from the struggle a similar suburban family might encounter, because the Youngers are not a stereotypical middle-class family. Rather, they live in a world in which being middle class is also a dream.

Mama's plant symbolizes her version of this dream, because she cares for it as she cares for her family. She tries to give the plant enough light and water not only to grow but also to flourish and become beautiful, just as she attempts to provide for her family with meager yet consistent financial support. Mama also imagines a garden that she can tend along with her dream house. The small potted plant acts as a temporary stand-in for her much larger dream. Her relentless care for the plant represents her protection of her dream. Despite her cramped living situation and the lifetime of hard work that she has endured, she maintains her focus on her dream, which helps her to persevere. Still, no matter how much Mama works, the plant remains feeble, because there is so little light. Similarly, it is difficult for her to care for her family as much as she wants and to have her family members grow as much as she wants. Her dream of a house and a better life for her family remains tenuous because it is so hard for her to see beyond her family's present situation.

Beneatha's dream differs from Mama's in that it is, in many ways, self-serving. In her desires to "express" herself and to become a doctor, Beneatha proves an early feminist who radically views her role as self-oriented and not family-oriented. Feminism had not fully emerged into the American cultural landscape when Hansberry wrote *A Raisin in the Sun,* and Beneatha seems a prototype for the more enthusiastic feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. She not only wants to have a career—a far cry from the June Cleaver stay-at-home-mom role models of the 1950s (June Cleaver was the name of the mother on *Leave it to Beaver,* a popular late-1950s sitcom about a stereotypical suburban family)—but also desires to find her identity and pursue an independent career without relying solely on a man. She even indicates to Ruth and Mama that she might not get married, a possibility that astonishes them because it runs counter to their expectations of a woman's role. Similarly, they are befuddled by her dislike of the "pretty, rich" George Murchison. That Beneatha's attitude toward him differs from Ruth's or Mama's may result from the age difference among the three women. Mama and Beneatha are, of course, a generation apart, while Ruth occupies a place somewhere in the middle; Hansberry argues that Beneatha is the least traditional of the women because she is the youngest.

Act I, scene i

Walter and Ruth, who occupy the middle ground in terms of age between Mama and Beneatha, have also tempered their dreams more than Beneatha has. Though Walter and Ruth harbor materialistic dreams, they desire wealth not solely for self-serving purposes but rather as a means to provide for their family and escape the South Side ghetto in which they live. The tension evoked by issues of money and manhood comes sharply into focus when Travis asks for fifty cents. Ruth, the household manager, refuses to give her son the money; Walter, as a father trying to safeguard his son's ability to be accepted, gives Travis twice as much as he asks for. Walter does so knowing that he faces the emasculating task of having to ask Ruth for money himself as a result. As the two talk about their entrapping situation, Ruth's reply of "[e]at your eggs" answers every statement that Walter offers, reflecting the stereotypical perception that blacks have an inability to overcome problems.

Act I, scene ii

Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money.

(See Important Quotations Explained)

Summary

The next day, Saturday, the Youngers are cleaning their apartment and waiting for the insurance check to arrive. Walter receives a phone call from his friend Willy Harris, who is coordinating the potential liquor store venture. It appears that their plan is moving smoothly. The insurance check is all Walter needs to pursue the venture. He promises to bring the money to Willy when he receives it. Meanwhile, Beneatha is spraying the apartment with insecticide in an attempt to rid it of cockroaches. Beneatha and Travis start fighting, and Beneatha threatens him with the spray gun.

The phone rings, and Beneatha answers. She invites the person on the phone over to the still-dirty apartment, much to Mama's chagrin. After hanging up, Beneatha

explains to Mama that the man she has spoken to on the phone is Joseph Asagai, an African intellectual whom Beneatha has met at school. She and Mama discuss Beneatha's worries about her family's ignorance about Africa and African people. Mama believes that Africans need religious salvation from "heathenism," while Beneatha believes that they are in greater need of political and civil salvation from French and British colonialism.

Ruth returns from seeing a doctor, who has told her that she is two months pregnant. She reveals this information to Mama and Beneatha. Ruth and Beneatha are worried and uncertain, while Mama simply expresses her hope that the baby will be a girl. Ruth calls the doctor "she," which arouses Mama's suspicion because their family doctor is a man. Ruth feels ill and anxious about her pregnancy. Mama tries to help her relax.

Asagai visits Beneatha, and they spend some time together by themselves. He brings her some Nigerian clothing and music as gifts. As Beneatha tries on one of the robes, Asagai asks about her straightened hair. He implies that her hairstyle is too American and unnatural, and he wonders how it got that way. Beneatha says that her hair was once like his, but that she finds it too "raw" that way. He teases her a bit about being very serious about finding her identity, particularly her African identity, through him. Asagai obviously cares for Beneatha very much, and he wonders why Beneatha does not have the same feeling for him. She explains that she is looking for more than storybook love. She wants to become an independent and liberated woman. Asagai scorns her wish, much to Beneatha's disappointment.

Mama comes into the room, and Beneatha introduces her to Asagai. Mama then recites Beneatha's views on Africa and African people as best she can. When Asagai says goodbye, he calls Beneatha by a nickname, "Alaiyo." He explains that it is a word from his African tribal language, roughly translated to mean "One for Whom Bread—Food—Is Not Enough." He leaves, having charmed both women. Finally, the check arrives.

Walter returns home and wants to talk about his liquor store plans. Ruth wants to discuss her pregnancy with him and becomes upset when he will not listen. She

shuts herself into their bedroom. Mama sits down with Walter who is upset by—and ashamed of—his poverty, his job as a chauffeur, and his lack of upward mobility. Finally, Mama tells him that Ruth is pregnant and that she fears that Ruth is considering having an abortion. Walter does not believe that Ruth would do such a thing until Ruth comes out of the bedroom to confirm that she has made a down payment on the service.

Act I, scene ii

Analysis

While the play takes place entirely within the Youngers' apartment, Hansberry takes care to introduce external influences. This scene includes two phone calls: one for Walter from Willy about the liquor store investment and the other for Beneatha from Joseph Asagai, her good friend and fellow intellectual. These phone calls serve parallel functions for those who receive them and demonstrate what is important to both of the characters: Walter is waiting to move quickly on the investment, while Beneatha cannot wait to see Asagai and introduce him to her family.
Beneatha's spraying of the apartment seems symbolic of her dissatisfaction with her surroundings. She wants to rid herself and her family of what she later refers to as "acute ghetto-itis." It is obvious that Beneatha is not proud of her family's economic and social situation and is a bit embarrassed by it when Asagai visits. As she asks him to sit down, she scurries to throw the spray gun off the couch in the hopes that Asagai won't see it. Interestingly, Beneatha's spraying reverses the pattern the Youngers' dreams. While most of their dreams involve the acquisition of some markers of success, such as a home, large cars, and privileged education, Beneatha has to begin by first ridding herself of the bugs that plague her current situation.

The interaction between Beneatha and Asagai reveals how serious Beneatha is about finding her identity. Beneatha does not want to assimilate into, or become successful in, the dominant white culture of the 1950s. Yet while she wants to break free of conforming to the white ideal, she still wants to acclimate herself to an educated American life. Many African-American intellectuals and writers, especially in the 1960s, faced this dilemma; Beneatha's character thus seems somewhat

ahead of her time. Indeed, her seeking of her roots in Africa to forge her identity (even though her family has been in America for five generations) precedes the New African movement of the 1960s. In this movement, African-Americans embraced their racial history, stopping their attempts to assimilate, even in physical appearance. Asagai hints at what is to come by telling Beneatha that by straightening her hair she is “mutilating” it. In his opinion, her hair should look as it does naturally: she should stop straightening it to look like white hair and instead wear an afro. Unsure of her identity as an African-American woman joining an overwhelmingly white world, Beneatha turns to Asagai to see if he can supply a lost part of her self.

This scene also reveals Walter’s growing restlessness, as well as the desperation with which Ruth is trying to hold her family together. Ruth does not want to have an abortion, but she considers it because she sees it as the only way to keep the family together. It is possible that Hansberry is attempting to make a bold feminist statement with this plot twist. During the 1950s, abortion was illegal, but Ruth has valid reasons for not wanting her pregnancy. Obviously, Ruth is not an immoral or evil woman. She simply wants to do the best for the family that she already has. Walter, on the other hand, lacks this singular dedication to his family. His character is meant to represent a kind of broken masculinity that society perceived among African-American men of the 1950s, men who were shut out of the American dream by racism and poverty. Because of this exclusion, Walter’s dreams of money and success in business become inextricably linked to his image of himself as a man.

Through the announcement of Ruth’s pregnancy, we can see the power that Mama wields as the matriarch of the family. She is at the center of her family’s life, and she controls many of the interactions of the members of her household. Actresses seem to portray the character of Mama in two primary ways: either as a folksy relic of an earlier time, a woman who hopes one day to have a garden in the sun, or more recently, as a hardworking, powerful, all-knowing matriarch. Both interpretations seem valid. She reminds the family of the importance of family and history, and she holds the power to make economic decisions. She does so literally in this scene by holding the insurance check.

Act II, scene i

Summary

Later on the same Saturday, Beneatha emerges from her room cloaked in the Nigerian clothes that Asagai has brought her. She dances around the apartment, claiming to be performing a tribal dance while shouting “OCOMOGOSIAY” and singing. Ruth finds Beneatha’s pageantry silly and questions her about it. Meanwhile, Walter returns home drunk. He sees Beneatha all dressed up and acts out some made-up tribal rituals with her, at one point standing on a table and pronouncing himself “Flaming Spear.” Ruth looks on wearily.

George Murchison arrives to pick up Beneatha. Beneatha removes her headdress to reveal that she has cut off most of her hair, leaving only an unstraightened afro. Everyone is shocked, amazed, and slightly disappointed with Beneatha, prompting a fierce discussion between Beneatha and George about the importance of their African heritage. Beneatha goes to change for the theater, and Walter talks to George about business plans. George does not seem interested. Walter then becomes belligerent as he makes fun of George’s white shoes. Embarrassed, Ruth explains that the white shoes are part of the “college *style.*” George obviously looks down on Walter—calling him “Prometheus”—and Walter gets even angrier at him. George and Beneatha finally leave, and Ruth and Walter then begin to fight about Walter going out, spending money, and interacting with people like Willy Harris. They do begin to make up, though, by acknowledging that a great distance has grown between them.

Mama comes home and announces that she has put a down payment on a house with some of the insurance money. Ruth is elated to hear this news because she too dreams of moving out of their current apartment and into a more respectable home. Meanwhile, Walter is noticeably upset because he wants to put all the money into the liquor store venture. They all become worried when they hear that the house is in Clybourne Park, an entirely white neighborhood. Mama asks for their understanding—it was the only house that they could afford. She feels she needs to buy the house to hold the family together. Ruth regains her pleasure and rejoices, but Walter feels betrayed, his dream swept under the table. Walter makes Mama feel

guilty, saying that she has crushed his dream. He goes quickly to his bedroom, and Mama remains sitting and worrying.

Analysis

Beneatha's exploration of her African heritage and her entrance with her afro and Nigerian garb were perhaps the first such appearance on an American stage. Hansberry creates a radical character in Beneatha, one who does not willingly submit to what she calls "oppressive" white culture. Since the audience for this play's initial run was mostly white, such a threat to white dominance was extremely revolutionary.

The dancing scene with Beneatha and Walter is difficult to interpret, as the drunken Walter seems to mock the African dances and practices, while Beneatha seems not to comprehend this mocking. In addition, Beneatha's fight with George and the rest of her family represents a larger battle within the black community over whether to enhance and celebrate their differences from whites or whether to join white culture and try to elevate their status within it. This desire to join white culture, referred to as assimilationism, was a contentious issue for the black community in the 1950s and 1960s. The overall tone of this scene seems to be anti-assimilationist—that is, the scene seems to value Beneatha's expression of her cultural roots.

Beneatha's two suitors embody this dichotomy between the conflicting identities available to blacks: the identity that seeks assimilation and the identity that rejects assimilation. This scene separates George and Asagai into completely different categories where George, as his common name suggests, represents a black person assimilating into the white world, while Asagai, with his ethnically rich name, stands for the New Africanist culture that those who oppose assimilation pursue. As Beneatha dances in a robe that Asagai gives her, George deems her interest in her African roots absurd. His comments put him further at odds with Beneatha, and she begins to feel more of an affinity with Asagai and her African roots than with George and what she considers to be his false roots in American society.

Act II, scene i

Ruth and Walter's conversation reveals that they do have love left in their marriage and that they have both been oppressed by their circumstances. Their entrapment in the ghetto, in their jobs, and in their apartment results in the desire to leave physically, to escape mentally through alcohol, and to lash out at those involved in the entrapment. One way for them to escape this entrapment, though, seems to be through a reliance on each other. Yet, often, circumstances are so difficult for them that they cannot even do that. They continue to fight, as they put their own concerns before each other's and before their marriage.

Mama's down payment on a house reveals her belief that to be a happy family the Youngers need to own space and property. Her dream is a perfect example of the quintessential American dream. Part of her dream is the simple desire for consumer goods. She believes, as did many in the post–World War II consumer culture, that, to some degree at least, ownership can provide happiness. Therefore, although she means only to find the best for her family, she also succumbs to the powerful materialism that drives the desires of the society around her. Still, her desire is somewhat radical, because African-Americans were largely left out of depictions of the American dream during this period. Only white families populated suburban television programs and magazine advertisements. Therefore, Hansberry performs a radical act in claiming the general American dream for African-Americans.
The radical nature of the Youngers' desire to participate in the American dream does bring along some hardship. Ruth and Walter's concern about moving into a predominantly white neighborhood reflects the great tension that existed between races—even in the Northern states. Their concern foreshadows, among other developments, the arrival of Mr. Lindner, who reveals that the white people of Clybourne Park are just as wary of the Youngers as the Youngers are of white people.

Act II, scene ii

[Y]our daddy's gonna make a . . . business transaction that's going to change our lives. . . . You just name it, son . . . and I hand you the world!

(See Important Quotations Explained)

Summary

On a Friday night a few weeks later, Beneatha and George return from a date. The Youngers' apartment is full of moving boxes. George wants to kiss Beneatha, but

she does not want to kiss. Rather, she wants to engage George in a conversation about the plight of African-Americans. It seems that George wants to marry a “nice . . . simple . . . sophisticated girl.” Mama comes in as Beneatha kicks him out. Mama asks if she had a good time with George, and Beneatha tells her that George is a “fool.” Mama replies, “I guess you better not waste your time with no fools.” Beneatha appreciates her mother’s support.

Mrs. Johnson—the Youngers’ neighbor—visits. Mama and Ruth offer her food and drink, and she gladly accepts. She has come to visit to tell them about a black family who has been bombed out of their home in a white neighborhood. She is generally insensitive and unable to speak in a civil manner. She predicts that the Youngers will also be scared out of the all-white neighborhood once they move in and insults much of the family by calling them a “proud-acting bunch of colored folks.” She then quotes Booker T. Washington, a famous African-American thinker and assimilationist. A frustrated and angered Mama retaliates by calling him a “fool.” Mrs. Johnson leaves the apartment.

Walter’s boss calls, telling Ruth that Walter has not been to work in three days. Walter explains that he has been wandering all day (often way into the country) and drinking all night (at a bar with a jazz duo that he loves). He says that he feels depressed, despondent, and useless as the man of the family. He feels that his job is no better than a slave’s job. Mama feels guilty for his unhappiness and tells him that she has never done anything to hurt her children. She gives him the remaining $6,500 of the insurance money, telling him to deposit $3,000 for Beneatha’s education and to keep the last $3,500. With this money, Mama says, Walter should become—and should act like he has become—the head of the family. Walter suddenly becomes more confident and energized. He talks to Travis about his plans, saying that he is going to “make a transaction” that will make them rich. Walter’s excitement builds as he describes his dream of their future house and cars, as well as Travis’s potential college education.

Analysis

In Beneatha and George's conversation, Hansberry reveals two sets of values regarding education. Beneatha believes in education as a means to understanding and self-fulfillment, while George sees education as a means to get a good job. The difference in their views about education displays a deeper divergence between the two, one of idealism versus pragmatism. Beneatha believes that society must be changed through self-knowledge and, thus, through consciousness and celebration of one's heritage. George and his family, however, believe that they should become wealthy and perhaps achieve respect through their economic status, which demands a certain degree of assimilation into the dominant, white culture. Though George's wealth and bearing impress Mama at first, she eventually shares Beneatha's point of view.

Indeed, in the episode with Mrs. Johnson, it becomes clear that Mama agrees with Beneatha far more than one might expect. This scene portrays both George Murchison and Booker T. Washington as assimilationists, and Mama refers to them both as "fools." While Mama calls George a "fool" only in response to Beneatha's remark, her branding of Booker T. Washington with such an insult has profound historical and cultural implications. Washington, historically a hero to many in the black community, preached assimilation into mainstream America as the primary goal of African-Americans. Though he attained great stature in the first half of the twentieth century, public opinion had turned against him by the late 1950s.

Many African-Americans had begun to reject assimilationist ideals, believing by this time that mainstream America would always mean white America and that assimilating into this culture would always mean degrading themselves to fit white society's perceptions of how blacks should be and act. These African-Americans thus sought an independent identity that would allow them to embrace and express their heritage and culture.

The scene closes with Walter's description to Travis of his materialistic fantasy about the future—Walter still wants to be a part of the culture that excludes him. He wants to be rich if being rich is the solution to his family's problems. Most of all, he wants his son to have a better life than he has had and wants to provide him with the education he deserves. His wish for Travis seems selfish as well; he wants

desperately to feel like a man, and he believes that Travis's success would reflect on his own success as the man of the house.

Act II, scene ii

Walter's view of education seems to fall somewhere between Beneatha's and George's views. Walter seems to care more for Travis's education than for Beneatha's, partly because Travis is his child and partly because Beneatha is a woman. Within the marginalized group of blacks exists the even more marginalized group of black women who have to fight with prejudice across both racial and gender lines. Walter, whether consciously or not, is acting as if his and his son's interests are more important than Beneatha's, even though Beneatha has proven she is intellectually capable. Walter believes that the insurance money Mama gives him can provide him with financial success and educational resources for his son, a priority he values more highly than his sister's goal of becoming a doctor.

Act II, scene iii

Summary

On Saturday, a week later, it is moving day. Ruth shows Beneatha the curtains she has bought for the new house and tells her that the first thing she is going to do in their new house is take a long bath in their very own bathroom. Ruth comments on the changed mood around the household, noting that she and Walter even went out to the movies and held hands the previous evening. Walter comes in and dances with Ruth. Beneatha teases them about acting in a stereotypical fashion but does not really mean any harm. Ruth and Walter understand and join in the lighthearted teasing, and Walter claims that Beneatha talks about nothing but race.
A middle-aged white man named Karl Lindner appears at the door. He is a representative from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, and he tells the Youngers that problems arise when different kinds of people do not sit down and talk to each other. The Youngers agree, until he reveals that he and the neighborhood coalition believe that the Youngers' presence in Clybourne Park would destroy the community there. The current residents are all white, working-class people who do

not want anything to threaten the dream that they have for their community. Mr. Lindner tells the Youngers that the association is prepared to offer them more money than they are to pay for the house in exchange for not moving to Clybourne Park. Ruth, Beneatha, and Walter all become very upset, but they manage to control their anger. Walter firmly tells Mr. Lindner that they will not accept the offer and urges Mr. Lindner to leave immediately.

When Mama comes home, Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha tell her about Mr. Lindner's visit. It shocks and worries her, but she supports their decision to refuse the buyout offer. Then, as she is making sure that her plant is well packed for the trip, the rest of the family surprises her with gifts of gardening tools and a huge gardening hat. Mama has never received presents other than at Christmas, and she is touched by her family's generosity. Just as the whole family begins to celebrate, Bobo, one of Walter's friends, arrives. After some stumbling, he announces that Willy Harris has run off with all of the money that Walter invested in the liquor store deal. It turns out that Walter had invested not only his $3,500 but also the $3,000 intended for Beneatha's education. Mama is livid and begins to beat Walter in the face. Beneatha breaks them up. Weakness overcomes Mama, and she thinks about the hard labor her husband endured in order to earn the money for them. She prays ardently for strength.

Analysis

This scene presents two conflicts and worries for the Youngers and their future. First, the incident with Mr. Lindner of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association reveals the power of both dreams and racial prejudice. Mr. Lindner's comments do not intimidate the members of the Younger family. Rather, they seem to expect the conflict. The Youngers know that they are about to achieve some of their dreams and are not going to let racism get in their way. Mama's careful packing of her plant when she hears of the incident shows she is proud of her fortitude in holding onto her dream. She knows that she needs a token of the dream's power in order to face hardship in the all-white neighborhood. The plant symbolizes her dream of escaping from their poverty-stricken life. It also represents a dream for African-American

equality and acceptance in the general culture. In addition, this episode shows that the fact that Mama holds onto her dream is as important as the realization of this dream.

The second conflict, Walter's duplicitous investment of the insurance money and its disastrous result, evokes much greater strife and discord.

When Bobo arrives and announces that the money is gone, Walter yells, **"THAT MONEY IS MADE OUT OF MY FATHER'S FLESH,"** reflecting his belief that money is the lifeblood of human existence.

None of the Youngers feels pity for Walter, and it seems now that none of their dreams will come true. Ruth and Beneatha reach a new low of depression and pessimism. While Mama protests at first, she seems to agree with their attitude when she talks about watching her husband wither from hard work. In the face of the loss of the money, Mama's idealism about family falters. Mama's sudden sad realization that her husband's life boils down to a stack of paper bills compels her to turn on Walter as if he had killed his father himself. This anger is uncommon for Mama, and it is significant because it demonstrates that her compassion is not born of passivity. She cares too much for the memory of her husband, for their mutual dream of buying a home, and for her family to let Walter off the hook. Her beating him is the only way for her to force Walter to realize his mistakes and to look for a way to correct them.

Though the other characters talk about Willy Harris, the man who runs away with Walter's and Bobo's money, he never makes an appearance onstage. Willy remains a faceless symbol for Walter's negligence and risky handling of the money. Moreover, Hansberry's focus is not on the act of theft but rather on the Younger family and the reactions of its members to adversity.

Act III

Summary

I will go home and much of what I will have to say will seem strange to the people of my village. But I will teach and work and things will happen, slowly and swiftly.

(See Important Quotations Explained)

One hour later on moving day, everyone is still melancholy. The stage directions indicate that even the light in the apartment looks gray. Walter sits alone and thinks. Asagai comes to help them pack and finds Beneatha questioning her choice of becoming a doctor. She no longer believes that she can help people. Instead of feeling idealistic about demanding equality for African-Americans and freeing Africans from the French and English colonizers, she now broods about basic human misery. Never-ending human misery demoralizes her, and she no longer sees a reason to fight against it. Asagai reprimands her for her lack of idealism and her attachment to the money from her father's death. He tells Beneatha about his dream to return to Africa and help bring positive changes. He gets her excited about reform again and asks her to go home with him to Africa, saying that eventually it would be as if she had "only been away for a day." He leaves her alone to think about his proposition.

Walter rushes in from the bedroom and out the door amid a sarcastic monologue from Beneatha. Mama enters and announces that they are not going to move. Ruth protests. Walter returns, having called Mr. Lindner and invited him back to the apartment—he intends to take his offer of money in exchange for not moving to Clybourne Park. Everyone objects to this plan, arguing that they have too much pride to accept not being able to live somewhere because of their race. Walter, very agitated, puts on an act, imitating the stereotype of a black male servant. When he finally exits, Mama declares that he has died inside. Beneatha decides that he is no longer her brother, but Mama reminds her to love him, especially when he is so downtrodden.

The movers and Mr. Lindner arrive. Mama tells Walter to deal with Mr. Lindner, who is laying out contracts for Walter to sign. Walter starts hesitantly, but soon we see that he has changed his mind about taking Mr. Lindner's money. His speech builds in power. He tells Mr. Lindner that the Youngers are proud and hardworking and intend to move into their new house. Mr. Lindner appeals to Mama, who defers to Walter's statement. Ultimately, Mr. Lindner leaves with his papers unsigned. Everyone finishes packing up as the movers come to take the furniture. Mama tells Ruth that

she thinks Walter has finally become a man by standing up to Mr. Lindner. Ruth agrees and is noticeably proud of her husband. Mama, who is the last to leave, looks for a moment at the empty apartment. Then she leaves, bringing her plant with her.

There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing.

(See Important Quotations Explained)

[W]e have decided to move into our house. . . . We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes, and we will try to be good neighbors.

(See Important Quotations Explained)

Analysis

Though this act begins in despair, the Youngers regain hope and motivation to pursue their dreams as it continues. Asagai renews Beneatha's courage and pride. His discussion of colonial Africa and his stated belief that the ruling powers must fall predicts the unrest that was to occur in those countries in the decades following the 1950s. Asagai's claim that when Beneatha arrives in Africa she will feel as if she has been gone for only a day is a claim that America can never be home to blacks, no matter how long they have lived there.

Asagai's radicalism, which Hansberry seems to endorse, is somewhat problematic. As an extreme position of anti-assimilationism, Asagai's views differ little from self-segregation. In practical terms, Asagai's desire to leave white America and Mr. Lindner's desire to keep African-Americans out of his neighborhood have a similar basis—the rejection of integration. Each man wants to preserve his notion of cultural identity, one through returning to an African homeland and the other through racist extortion tactics. After all, as a Nigerian, Asagai has a distinct cultural identity to preserve, and arguably, Mr. Lindner has one as well. But Beneatha, as a black American, does not have a clear-cut cultural identity. Her ancestry may originate in Africa, but she has never been there. She and her immediate relatives have all

grown up in Chicago. Though racial lines definitely exist between the area in which the Youngers currently live and the area to which they plan to move, the working-class neighborhood of Clybourne Park is clearly not an entire world away from the South Side. In harmony with an age-old argument about racial identity, it seems that the color lines that engender wrongful prejudice on the part of some (white society at large) are being reinforced by a movement (black anti-assimilationism) to establish a minority characterized by those lines. Beneatha, after all, understands the working-class plight and language of the white people of Clybourne Park, while she is, at least initially, wholly ignorant of the language and customs of West Africa.

While Hansberry seems to use Asagai and Beneatha to make a radical point about race, she also returns Beneatha to a conservative position in terms of her feminism. Whereas Beneatha claims at the beginning of the play that she might not marry, Asagai's marriage proposal sweeps her off of her feet. According to the stage directions, she mentions it to her mother, "[g]irlishly and unreasonably trying to pursue the conversation." From a feminist perspective, Hansberry seems to abandon Beneatha's development. The status of Beneatha's education remains ambiguous, but it is clear that she intends to accept Asagai's proposal, his beliefs, and his dreams. She maintains her independence from female convention by accepting Asagai and rejecting the financially secure and socially acceptable George Murchison. Other aspects of her previously expressed self-reliance and strong beliefs in education remain unresolved.

Act III

Walter's dream for money and material goods remains unrealized, but he has modified his dream as he has matured. While he almost succumbs to accepting Mr. Lindner's money, his family convinces him that they have worked too hard to have anyone tell them where they can and cannot live. In other words, his pride, work, and humanity become more important to him than his dream of money. Walter finally "come[s] into his manhood," as Mama says, recognizing that being proud of his family is more important than having money. For Walter, the events of the play are a rite of passage. He must endure challenges in order to arrive at a more adult understanding of the important things in life.

While both of her children achieve happiness but incomplete fulfillment of their dreams, Mama realizes her dream of moving at last. As the matriarch and oldest member of the family, Mama is a testament to the potential of dreams, since she has lived to see the dream she and her husband shared fulfilled. The younger Youngers, aptly named to show the shifting emphasis from old to young, are at midpoints in their lives. With the new house, they are well on their way to the complete fulfillment of their dreams. Mama's last moment in the apartment and her transporting of her plant show that although she is happy about moving, she continues to cherish the memories she has accumulated throughout her life. Hansberry implies, then, that the sweetness of dream fulfillment accompanies the sweetness of the dream itself. Mama pauses on her way out of the apartment to show respect and appreciation for the hard work that went into making the dream come true. Her husband lingers in her recollections, and when she says to Ruth a few lines earlier, "Yeah—they something all right, my children," it becomes almost an invocation of their unmistakably solid futures.

Important Quotations Explained

1.

Mama: Oh—So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money. I guess the world really do change . . .
Walter: No—it was always money, Mama. We just didn't know about it.
Mama: No . . . something has changed. You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not being lynched . . . You ain't satisfied or proud of nothing we done. I mean that you had a home; that we kept you out of trouble till you was grown; that you don't have to ride to work on the back of nobody's streetcar—You my children—but how different we done become.

This exchange occurs in Act I, scene ii when Mama asks Walter why he always talks about money. Walter responds that "[m]oney is life," explaining to her that success is now defined by how much money one has. This conversation takes place early in the play and reveals Mama's and Walter's economic struggles. These lines demonstrate the ideological differences between their generations. Throughout the play, Mama's views are at odds with Walter's and Beneatha's views. For Walter, money seems to

be the answer to everything. Money, he believes, allows people to live comfortable and carefree lives. It also seems to define a man by measuring his success and ability to provide for his family. For Walter, who feels enslaved in his job and life, money is the truest freedom.

Throughout *A Raisin in the Sun,* characters connect money to discussions of race. Mama says, “Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it’s money. I guess the world really do change.” Walter grew up being “free” in the way that Mama means, but he faced other problems, such as the lack of financial and social freedom that he talks about here. Walter believes that freedom is not enough and that, while civil rights are a large step for blacks, in the real world—for the Youngers, the South Side of Chicago in the 1940s and 1950s—blacks are still treated differently and more harshly than whites. Mr. Lindner, who later comes to persuade the Youngers not to move into his all-white neighborhood, embodies one example of this racist treatment. Mrs. Johnson later speaks of reading about the bombing of a black family’s house in the “colored paper” and complains that the racist white people who were responsible for the bombing make her feel like times have not changed, as if they still live in turbulent Mississippi, a hotbed of racism during the mid-twentieth century.

2.

Walter: You wouldn’t understand yet, son, but your daddy’s gonna make a transaction . . . a business transaction that’s going to change our lives. . . . That’s how come one day when you ‘bout seventeen years old I’ll come home . . . I’ll pull the car up on the driveway . . . just a plain black Chrysler, I think, with white walls—no—black tires . . . the gardener will be clipping away at the hedges and he’ll say, “Good evening, Mr. Younger.” And I’ll say, “Hello, Jefferson, how are you this evening?” And I’ll go inside and Ruth will come downstairs and meet me at the door and we’ll kiss each other and she’ll take my arm and we’ll go up to your room to see you sitting on the floor with the catalogues of all the great schools in America around you. . . . All the great schools in the world! And—and I’ll say, all right son—it’s your seventeenth birthday, what is it you’ve decided? . . . Just tell me, what it is you want to be—

and you'll be it. . . . Whatever you want to be—Yessir! You just name it, son . . . and I hand you the world!

This speech from Act II, scene ii, which Walter delivers to Travis as he tucks him in bed, closes an important scene and foreshadows the climax of the play. Walter explains to Travis, and to the audience, that he will move quickly to invest the money that Mama has just given him (part of it meant for Beneatha's future schooling costs).

Walter seems to be rehashing conversations he might have heard while he was working as a chauffer to rich people. That he envisions having a gardener makes it seem that Walter wants to live a life that he has seen others enjoy and be like the people he has serviced. He explains his dream of the future in detail, as if it were being presented before his eyes. He paints the future vividly, even describing what sort of tires his cars will have and how busy his day will be with important matters. He never speaks in the conditional mood, which entails words such as "if" and "would" and suggests uncertainty, but in the future tense, using the word "will" throughout. This use of the future tense makes his dream appear to be something that will inevitably come true.

Yet Walter's dream is not entirely materialistic. He envisions a better relationship with his wife, Ruth, in which they kiss and hold hands—a far cry from the relationship they have now. He also explains to Travis that he will have his choice among all the best colleges and that they will have enough money to send him to whichever one he chooses. At heart, Walter wants to provide for his family and reduce their cares.

3.

Asagai: Then isn't there something wrong in a house—in a world—where all dreams, good or bad, must depend on the death of a man?
Beneatha: AND YOU CANNOT ANSWER IT!
Asagai: I LIVE THE ANSWER!

This exchange occurs near the end of the play in Act III, as Asagai and Beneatha fight after Bobo comes to tell the Youngers that the money Walter has invested is gone. Beneatha is terribly depressed and cynical, knowing now that the money for her future education is also gone and that her future and her dreams are likely

ruined. Asagai gets her more angry by arguing that her dream and her means for achieving it are inextricably bound up in the death of her father and Walter's financial savvy. While Beneatha considers herself to be independent, Asagai argues that she has been anything but.

Asagai goes on to describe his dream: he wishes to return to Nigeria, bring back what he has learned, and share it with the people of his homeland so to improve their lives. In other words, Asagai believes in bringing modern advancements from Western society back to Africa to improve the quality of life there. He is optimistic about his dream while understanding the difficulties that lie ahead. This exchange also allows Asagai to ask Beneatha to marry him and return to Africa with him in a few years. He will teach and lead the people, he says, and she can practice medicine and help take care of people. While Beneatha hesitates a bit when she says that she will consider going with him, it seems she will undoubtedly take him up on his offer. Asagai and his dream enable Beneatha to discover a new energy and shape a new dream for herself.

4.

Mama: There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing.

Mama makes this comment to Beneatha in Act III, near the end of the play, as Beneatha expresses her disappointment in Walter for losing the money in the liquor store venture and also for apparently having decided to give in to Mr. Lindner. Mama tells Beneatha that Walter needs her to be supportive. She also says that instead of constantly crying about herself, Beneatha should cry for Walter and everything that he has been through and try to understand how hard he has been trying to make everything better for his family.

One can argue that Mama speaks these words not only to Beneatha but also to the audience. Along the lines of this interpretation, she seems to be saying that if the audience hasn't learned to love, then it hasn't learned anything yet from the play. Since the audience when *A Raisin in the Sun* premiered in 1959 would have been

entirely or almost entirely white, we can see Mama as a power-ful voice for social change.

5.

Walter: [W]e have decided to move into our house because my father—my father—he earned it for us brick by brick. We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes, and we will try to be good neighbors. And that's all we got to say about that. We don't want your money.

Walter delivers these words to Mr. Lindner in Act III after learning that his investment in the liquor store has been stolen. The other family members strongly disagree with Walter's decision to accept Mr. Lindner's buyout, but Walter, standing firm, decides that he will take control of the situation. Walter's refusal here comes as something of a surprise, since it requires him to shift his priorities. Whereas earlier his desire for money trumps others' needs, he now focuses all of his energy on family. Walter has finally stood up to his worries, has overcome his obsession with money and his equating of money with success, and has decided to stand by his family. We are told by the stage directions that Mama nods, eyes closed, as if she were hearing a great sermon in church. Beneatha and Ruth are finally proud of Walter, and everyone believes that Walter now has finally become a man. The Youngers will no longer defer their dreams. Instead, they will face the future as Walter does Mr. Lindner—directly and strongly, without blinking.

Key Facts

full title · *A Raisin in the Sun*

author · Lorraine Hansberry

type of work · Play

genre · Realist drama

language · English

time and place written · 1950s, New York

date of first performance · 1959

date of first publication · 1959

publisher · Random House

tone · Realistic

setting (time) · Between 1945 and 1959

setting (place) · The South Side of Chicago

protagonist · Walter Lee Younger
major conflict · The Youngers, a working-class black family, struggle against economic hardship and racial prejudice.

rising action · Ruth discovers that she is pregnant; Mama makes a down payment on a house; Mama gives Walter the remaining insurance money; Walter invests the money in the liquor store venture.
climax · Bobo tells the Youngers that Willy has run off with all of Walter's invested insurance money; Asagai makes Beneatha realize that she is not as independent as she thinks.
falling action · Walter refuses Mr. Lindner's offer to not move; the Youngers move out of the apartment to their new house in the white neighborhood; Beneatha finds new strength in Asagai.

themes · The value and purpose of dreams, the need to fight racial discrimination, the importance of family

motifs · Racial identity, the home

symbols · "Eat your eggs," Mama's plant, Beneatha's hair

foreshadowing · Mrs. Johnson's news that a black family's house has been bombed foreshadows the objections that the Clybourne Park Improvement Association will raise to the idea of the Youngers moving in; Walter's hints to Travis

that he is investing the insurance money foreshadow the disappearance of the money.

Study Questions & Essay Topics

Study Questions

1. What are the dreams of the main characters—Mama, Ruth, Beneatha, and Walter—and how are they deferred?

Mama dreams of moving her family out of the ghetto and into a house with a yard where children can play and she can tend a garden. Her dream has been deferred since she and her husband moved into the apartment that the Youngers still inhabit. Every day, her dream provides her with an incentive to make money. But no matter how much she and her husband strived, they could not scrape together enough money to make their dream a reality. His death and the resulting insurance money present Mama's first opportunity to realize her dream.

Ruth's dream is similar to Mama's. She wants to build a happy family and believes one step toward this goal is to own a bigger and better place to live. Ruth's dream is also deferred by a lack of money, which forces her and Walter to live in a crowded apartment where their son, Travis, must sleep on a sofa.

Beneatha's dream is to become a doctor and to save her race from ignorance. The first part of her dream may be deferred because of the money Walter loses. Her dream is also one deferred for all women. Beneatha lives in a time when society expects women to build homes rather than careers. As for saving her race from ignorance, Beneatha believes she can make people understand through action, but the exact course she chooses remains unclear at the end of the play.

Walter dreams of becoming wealthy and providing for his family as the rich people he drives around do. He often frames this dream in terms of his family—he wants to give them what he has never had. He feels like a slave to his family's economic hardship. His dream has been deferred by his poverty and inability to find decent employment. He attributes his lack of job prospects to racism, a claim that may be

partially true but that is also a crutch. Over the course of the play, his understanding of his dream of gaining material wealth evolves, and by play's end, it is no longer his top priority.

2. What does Mama's plant represent, and how does the symbol evolve over the course of the play?

Mama's plant, which is weak but resilient, represents her dream of living in a bigger house with a lawn. As she tends to her plant, she symbolically shows her dedication to her dream. Mama first pulls out her plant early in the morning. In fact, it is the first thing that she does in the morning; thus, at the beginning of the play we see that her plant—and her dream—are of the highest importance to her. Mama admits that the plant has never had enough sunshine but still survives. In other words, her dream has always been deferred but still remains strong. At the end of the play, Mama decides to bring the plant with her to their new home. In doing so, she gives a new significance to the plant. While it initially stands for her deferred dream, now, as her dream comes true, it reminds her of her strength in working and waiting for so many years.

3. How does the description of the Youngers' apartment contribute to the mood of the play?

Because all of the action of the play takes place between its walls, the Youngers' apartment determines the play's entire atmosphere and feel. The residence is very small, with one window, and the Youngers—especially Walter—feel trapped within their lives, their ghetto, and their poverty. Hansberry creates a stage that helps to illustrate this feeling of entrapment. The lack of natural light in the apartment contributes to the sense of confinement, and the tiny amount of light that does manage to trickle into the apartment is a reminder both of the Youngers' dreams and of the deferment of those dreams. Similarly, the furniture, originally chosen with pride but now old and worn, symbolizes the family itself. The Youngers are overworked and tired, and their dreams are trampled under the conditions of day-to-day existence, though they retain a core of pride that can never be entirely hidden.

Suggested Essay Topics

1. How does the idea of assimilationism become important?

2. Discuss the title of the play. How does it relate to the dreams of each of the characters?

3. Think about the role of money in the play. How does it affect different characters?

4. How do power and authority change hands over the course of the play?

5. Discuss how minor characters such as George Murchison, Willy Harris, and Mr. Lindner represent the ideas against which the main characters react.

6. What sort of statement does Hansberry seem to be making about race? Does she make more than one statement? If so, do these statements conflict with each other?