

**Twentieth Century American Drama**  
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**Lecture - 40**  
**Hansberry's Day in the Sun Part 1**

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This is a play by Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin In The Sun*. This play has a slightly different flavor from the ones that we have discussed so far, it also belongs to the same generation in some sense though the 1950s.

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## INTRODUCTION



- *A Raisin in the Sun* written by Lorraine Hansberry was debuted on the stage in 1959 by Broadway.
- It is a play in three acts.
- The title of the play is taken from Langston Hughes poem "*Harlem*". It is taken from the line :  
"What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

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This was written by Lorraine Hansberry and he debuted the stage in 1959. It was also Broadway production. This is a play which is structured in three acts. The title is taken from Langston Hughes poem *Harlem*. So, this is where draws from, "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

This also addresses a lot of questions which are connected with race and gender and it is also very centrally located in the concerns, which the nation as a whole has been addressing. So, we find that, the treatment of race here is very different from how we saw in the first play that we discussed in *Emperor Jones*, where a lot of other techniques a non realistic techniques; a lot of expression is techniques had to be brought in as tropes in order to facilitate discussion.

We find a more pungent realism at work; there are lot of objects in the supplementary language, which also contributes to the overall spirit and the overall theme of the play. We find how the American theater is evolving through these different stages and three different themes. We find the 1950 particularly is very powerful in terms of the ways in which it is addressing a lot of concerns, which are very central to the society.

Here too, we noticed that in a lot of other plays; the life of the individual is very important and the life of the individual becomes the center from where a lot of takes off to the other discourses.

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- The play is semi-autobiographical, which is based on the racial discrimination faced by Lorraine Hansberry's family when she was young.
- Accolades:  
New York Drama Critic's Circle Award for the best play of 1959.
- Lorraine Hansberry became the youngest playwright and the first African-American writer ever to win that award.

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This is a play which is semi-autobiographical in nature and this is again something which would resonate where there are lot of other playwrights too, they draw from real life, while they are crafting their characters. This is based on the racial discrimination that Lorraine Hansberry, his family faced when she was young, when she was growing up.

It is about the conflicting ideas, it is about these conflicting notions that the American dream talks about; on the one hand there is an opportunity for everyone, there is a promise of prosperity, material comfort and all kinds of success and a fame. But there is also, there are also these delimiting factors which operate in the form of class and here in the form of race.

It would be difficult to say which one is more tragic than the other; but we find that having looked at Edward Albee's play and Lorraine Hansberry's play here, we know that the tragedy sort of different kind altogether. It is very individualistic in nature; but the kind of impact that they have on the society, on the larger ethos is almost quite similar and they are irrevocable as well.

This is a play which went on to win the drama critic circle award for the best play in the year 1959. So, most of the plays that we are looking at here, they were successful in two different ways; they were massive huge way, they were massive Broadway successes and they were also had received lot of critical acclaim.

Lorraine Hansberry also became the youngest playwright and the first African American writer to win that award. This play, thus becomes very important in the historiography of American theater itself by marking a lot of new beginnings in such forms. These different angles of gender, race and class we find all of these coming together in this work.

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## SYNOPSIS



- *A Raisin in the Sun* tells the story of an African-American family's struggle to negotiate with each other and improve their economic condition, with the insurance pay-out they receive following the death of the patriarch of the family.



This is the plot summary in a nutshell, it is a story of an African American family and about their struggle to negotiate with each other and to improve their economic condition. So, class in some form, the economic realities they also become characters over them. This is also specifically following a set of incidents, a set of events that happen after the insurance payout, they receive right after the death of the patriarch in the family.

We find class, caste and gender, operating within certain set frameworks; there is also a lot of bureaucratic elements coming in and it makes it a very interesting combination in terms of the realism that it has. So, again to reiterate the approach towards race is very different, radically different from how race was treated maybe in a play like *The Emperor Jones*.

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## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- **Walter Lee Younger** – The Protagonist of the play. He is ambitious and dreams of becoming rich. When the Youngers received the insurance money, Walter invests it in a new liquor store business along with his friends and loses the money.
- **Beneatha Younger** – Walter's younger sister. She is twenty years old, educated than the others in the family, and aims to become a doctor. She tries hard to achieve an identity as a well- educated Black Woman.



These are the major characters, Walter Lee Younger and he is a protagonist of the play. He is very ambitious like most typical characters in these plays are and he dreams of becoming rich; because this is also an offshoot of the promise that the American dream holds out. So, when the Younger's received this insurance money, Walter invests it in a new liquor store business and but he also an ends up losing a lot of money.

The tragic turn of events; the crisis which happens here which is economic in nature, it also reminds us, it also reminds us of all my sons and the prosperity which came through war and the crisis of a different kind which operated there and the various crisis say in Arthur Miller's play which get foregrounded.

There is a contrast we also find, there are of course plays like *You Cannot Take It With You*; when this entire economic system, this entire framework which celebrates fame and success is rejected. But, *A Raisin In The Sun* also tells us that, sort of a rejection that negotiation is also sometimes not possible, when one is inhabiting, one is located in a different gender or a race reality altogether.

Beneatha Younger is a Walter's Younger sister, she is twenty years old and she is the most educated in the family, she aims to become a doctor. There are these very definite markers of these Youngster's in the family who aspires to become rich, who aspires to occupy certain positions which would take them ahead professionally.

She desires result, her ambition is also has a political import; because she really tries hard to achieve an identity as a well educated black woman. This aspiration is not just individual, it is rooted in certain anxieties and certain ambitions as within her community as well. These aspirations have a larger impact on the quality over here; because her achievements or her under achievements will also reflect on her community.

And this anxiety is something that we do not find with the other the white characters so to speak; yeah the anxiety is work in a different way altogether, the focal point seems to be the family and never the community at large. But here it is about the larger identity and this desire to map on to the privileges of the nation from these specific community locations.

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- **Lena Younger (Mama)** – Walter and Beneatha's mother. She is religious and practical. She wants to use the insurance money to secure a good house for her family. She chooses a house in the white neighbourhood citing that the house is affordable.
- **Ruth Younger** – Walter's wife. She is a pragmatist who tries to be content with what they have. She takes care of the family and stays emotionally stable and strong throughout their rough days.



So, Lena Younger; so, Lena Younger is Walter and Beneatha's mother; she is religious and practical, she wants to use the insurance money to secure a good house for her family. So, you find this practical element in glass menagerie also in the mother, where she also wants to make the future secure.

So, we find these tendencies at work in a multiple plays and we are able to find a pattern, which will also help us reflect on the microcosm, which the American theater foregrounds. She chooses a house in the white neighborhoods citing that the house is affordable. So, here we find that, the there is a mixture of ambition and practicality over

here about what to do with the money; she is religious and practical and there is money and there is ambition.

So, this her identity as a black woman, makes it all the more complex when she is trying to negotiate these different aspects which are otherwise seen as part and parcel of the American dream. So, Ruth Younger is Walter's wife and she is also a pragmatist and she, but in her pragmatism is very different from that of Lena Younger. So, unlike Lena, Ruth wants to stay satisfied, contented with what they have.

Her kind of ambition sometimes may not be seen as the model which could be replicated; but she stays very strong emotionally and helps the family to navigate through the rough times that they have.

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- **Travis Younger** – Walter and Ruth's son. He earns some money by carrying grocery bags. He plays with the children in the neighbourhood. He sleeps on the living room sofa as he has no bedroom.
- **Joseph Asagai** – A Nigerian student who is very proud of his African heritage. He is in love with Beneatha. Beneatha learns a lot about her African heritage from him. Towards the end of the play, he proposes marriage to Beneatha and asks her to accompany him to Nigeria to practice medicine, which she accepts.



We come to Travis Younger, they he is Walter and Ruth's son and he tries to make some money by doing certain mundane jobs like carrying grocery bags; he also is a very lighthearted fellow, who tries to play with the children in the neighborhood and he sleeps in the on the living room sofa, as he has no bedroom of his own, that also tells us about the condition of the family.

And this the living room space which gets described as again a repetitive a recurrent trope that, we can see in most of these American plays. And the living room, its location,

the way its presenter, the way it is the furniture is placed that, the way action happens there that also tells us a lot about the characters and the families that they are part of.

Joseph Asagai is a Nigerian student in the play and he is very proud of his African heritage. He is in love with Beneatha, but her Beneatha also learns lot about her own African heritage from him. We also find the differences between Joseph Asagai and Beneatha here; because though both of them are racially similar, their backgrounds are very different, the cultural backgrounds become very different.

This play in that sense accentuates the difference between race and culture by also trying to show that the; just because one belongs to a certain race, there is no guarantee that there is a shared culture. So, towards the end of the play, we find that the Joseph Asagai proposes to Beneatha and she accepts the proposal and accompanies him to Nigeria to practice medicine.

The decisions over here, and how the community, how the locations of gender and race influences such decisions that is something that we will come back to talk again about.

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- **George Murchison** – The wealthy and educated boyfriend of Beneatha. He willingly assimilates himself into the White culture and denies his African Heritage. Beneatha dislikes him for this attitude. The Younger family like him.
- **Mr. Karl Linder** – He is the representative of the white neighbour hood the Youngers are planning to move to. He makes an offer to buy their new house, citing that he was trying to avoid a tension in the neighbourhood over an interracial population. He is the only white character in the play.



So, George Murchison is a wealthy and educated boyfriend of Beneatha and he assimilates himself into the white culture and he denies his African heritage; we do find the anxiety and stress at work over here when these characters are caught in this in between spaces. So, Beneatha also dislikes him entirely for this attitude, but the Younger



family by and large they like him. So, this appropriation is very significant for us to situate the characters and also the larger matrix within through which the play operates.

Mr. Karl Linder he is a representative of the white neighborhood, which is present in the play almost like a character and the Younger's family are planning to move into that predominantly white neighborhood. He makes an offer to buy their house and because he is saying what he is trying to do is just, trying to avoid an interracial conflict and because he does not want that sort of attention over there and he is offering to buy the house.

And instantly he is the only white character in the play; but there is a lot of whiteness in the form of appropriation, in the form of assimilation that, something again we would explore in detail as we make more, as we read through the play.

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- **Bobo and Willy Harris** – The two friends of Walter with whom he wanted to start the liquor store business. But Willy takes the money and leaves Walter in huge financial trouble.
- **Mrs. Johnson** – The nosy neighbour of the Youngers family. She warns the family about moving into a white neighbourhood.



Bobo and Willy Harris are two friends of Walter and he initially wanted to, Walter wanted to start this business with them; but Willy takes the money and he just disappears with that and he leaves Walter in a huge financial trouble, in a huge debt. The business patterns and the trouble that it could take individuals and families into that something that we explored in all my sons as well.

This also showcases the other side of American dream, the other side of these highly individualistic ambition, highly individualistic spirits which are led entirely by ambition.

We find that that there is also flip side to it; one could land into a huge financial trouble, if not treading very carefully.

Mrs. Johnson is the nosy neighbour of the Younger's family and she is the one who is also warning the family about moving into a white neighborhood. So, irrespective of having spent considerable time in America, we find that there is a lot of apprehension about the whiteness, about encountering whiteness, about in moving into certain spaces which are predominantly white.

It also challenges and complicates the question of race, it complicates the question of the American dream and the possibilities that it offers as well.

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## PLOT SUMMARY



- The Younger family lives in poverty in a two-bedroom apartment on the South Side of Chicago. Walter, the protagonist of the play and the bread winner of the family, is working as a Chauffeur. He is an ambitious man with the dream of becoming a wealthy businessman.
- At the beginning of the play Walter's father has recently died and his mother was waiting for his insurance pay-out of \$10,000. Walter plans to invest the money in a liquor store business he wants to start with his friends, Willy and Bobo. But Mama, who is religious, is opposed to alcohol. She uses some of the money to buy a decent house for the family in a white neighbourhood, Clybourne Park.



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## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- The play is set in the **1950s US**.
- Politically and socially **conservative society**.
- The idea of "**American Dream**" was very popular among the masses. People assessed good life based on financial security and material possessions.



The historical context of the play is that it is set in the 1950s in America and it is also like we have seen before in the other plays too; it focuses on this conservative society, politically as well as socially, the decisions that are being taken the moral canvas which is at work, the economic decisions being taken, they are all influenced by this conservatism.

Sometimes, it is conservatism also borders on to a certain kind of regressive behavior, which becomes the limiting to individuals and families. So, here, because the characters in question are also African American in nature; this has a larger input, because this conservatism has a very specific kind of impact, a specific kind of same effect on these characters, the families and the decisions and the associations that they have with the world around them.

The idea of the American dream here also we find is very popular; it continues to be this encouraging inspiring theme for the masses and people are also, they are continuing to be assessed, evaluated as individuals, as families based on the financial security that they manage to secure and the material possessions that they manage to gather.

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- **Civil Rights Movement (1954- 1968)** – African-Americans, along with their like minded whites, fought for ending legalized racial discrimination, disenfranchisement (Preventing a person's right to vote), and racial segregation.
- **Brown v/s Board of Education case, 1954** – The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (**NAACP**) filed five cases against the unequal status in the law-enforced segregated school system of United states.
- Black and white students were separately taught in public schools as per the "Separate but equal" legal doctrine. NAACP filed the case against the enforcement of this doctrine in schools.



So, in such a multiple ways, we find that the historical context is quite similar to that of the other plays too; but there are these unique attributes of race, unique attributes of particular kinds of ambitions, which are also heavily determined by ethnic identities, they are they give a different flavour altogether. It is also the time when the civil rights movement is beginning to pick up, where American African Americans along with their like-minded whites; they were a white population, they are fighting for ending legalized racial discrimination.

This play also celebrates those movements and again when we are looking at specific aspects, specific instances in the play; we will be talking more about these how these political movements had a lot of bearing on the formation of such plays.