

## **Background to *A Raisin in the Sun***

**Author:** Lorraine Hansberry

**From:** *A Raisin in the Sun*, Bloom's Guides.

In 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* made Lorraine Hansberry the youngest American and the first black playwright to win the Best Play of the Year Award of the New York Drama Critics's Circle. She was twenty-nine years old. The play was subsequently published in more than 30 languages and produced worldwide. It quickly became an American classic, and her unprecedented success opened the floodgates for a new generation of black actors and writers.

Nobody expected this kind of success. Because Hansberry was an African-American woman, as well as a new playwright, it was difficult to find support on Broadway. The producer, Phil Rose, had never mounted a play before, and it took eighteen months to find a co-producer, with nearly every established producer turning him down. Finally, he was joined by David Cogan, another newcomer to the business. Once they had the money, not a single theater in New York would rent to them. The play was moved to New Haven, Philadelphia, and Chicago, where it received critical and popular support. It opened on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, where it was an enormous success, running for 530 performances. The stellar cast included Sidney Poitier in the lead role of Walter Lee, Ruby Dee as Ruth, Claudia McNeil as Mama Younger, and Diana Sands as Beneatha.

When the play was produced in 1959, several cuts were made. The long running time was a concern, and some of the cuts helped strengthen the play. But other cuts affected specific racial themes, altering the way the play was interpreted. For example, the scene in which Beneatha displays her natural haircut was taken out, removing Hansberry's point about the beauty of natural black hair. Mrs. Johnson's visit, which adds about ten minutes to the play, did not appear in the first production and even now is rarely included. However, this important scene reveals the violence the Youngers may face by moving to a white neighborhood. Another scene that was cut depicted Travis chasing the rat, an example of the horrible conditions of ghetto life.


Many early reviews praised the play for its universal themes, stressing that the Younger family could have been any American family, including a middle-class white family. Hansberry was thrilled by the supportive reviews and positive critical response but also felt troubled by the various misunderstandings of the play that also emerged. She insisted that her play was essentially about an African-American family in a particular time and place and restored some of the cuts in the 1959 Random House edition.

*A Raisin in the Sun* predated the explosive revolution in the black and feminist movements and was one of the major literary catalysts of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Ironically, during the height of the movement, many African-American artists objected to the play, viewing it as conservative and assimilationist. Years later, Amari Baraka explained, "We thought Hansberry's play was part of the 'passive resistance' phase of the movement" and realized later, "We missed the essence of the work—that Hansberry had created a family on the cutting edge of the same class and ideological struggles as existed in the movement itself and among the people." He now sees the play as "the accurate telling and stunning vision of the real struggle" (19).

Some of the material in the play came from Hansberry's personal life. When she was a child, her family moved from the Chicago projects to a white neighborhood. They faced intense racism, and their home was attacked by a mob, with someone hurling a brick through the

window and narrowly missing eight-year-old Lorraine. Her father waged a legal battle to desegregate the white neighborhoods and was victorious in the landmark Supreme Court case of *Hansberry v. Lee*, 311 U.S. 32 (1940). Years later, in college, Hansberry saw a performance of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, about the struggles of a poor Irish family, and she knew then that she wanted to tell a similar realistic story about the oppression of African Americans. An outspoken social activist, Hansberry proudly declared, "I was born black and female," rejecting the limits society placed on her race and gender. She addressed many of the issues that she felt strongly about in *A Raisin in the Sun*, including racism, feminism, Africanism, abortion, and assimilation.

*A Raisin in the Sun* is considered a classic, and its reputation has continued to grow after the first Broadway production. In 1961, the play became a popular film starring one of the original cast members, Sidney Poitier; Hansberry's film adaptation won a Cannes Festival Award and was nominated for best screenplay. In 1974, the play was adapted into a Tony Award-winning musical, and in the 1980s a major resurgence began with revivals being mounted at many regional theaters. In 1989, the American Playhouse produced the complete play, unabridged for the first time, for television. *A Raisin in the Sun* has since undergone many revivals, including a well-publicized 2004 production on Broadway, starring Phylicia Rashad and Sean "Diddy" Combs.

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