
KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN SPEZIAL

Textanalyse und Interpretation zu

Lorraine Hansberry

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

Patrick Charles

Analyse | Interpretation in englischer Sprache

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1. AT A GLANCE

This study guide to Lorraine Hansberry's drama *A Raisin in the Sun* is designed to provide an easy-to-use overview of the structure, context, themes and characters of the play.

Part 2 takes a brief look at **Lorraine Hansberry and her career**.

- ⇒ p. 9 → Hansberry was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1930. Her parents both worked and were both active in pushing back against racism and discrimination.
- ⇒ p. 26 → *A Raisin in the Sun* was **first performed on stage in 1959**, the first play written by an African-American woman to ever be performed on Broadway, and was an instant success.

Part 3 provides analyses and interpretations of the play.

A Raisin in the Sun – Origins and Sources:

- ⇒ p. 35 Hansberry's play was influenced by her own experiences and her parents' activism, by the Harlem Renaissance and the poet Langston Hughes, and the reality of life for African-Americans living in a big city like Chicago in the 1950s.

Summaries:

- ⇒ p. 44 *A Raisin in the Sun* is about the Younger family – “Mama” Lena, her son Walter, his wife Ruth, and their son Travis, and Lena's other child, her daughter Beneatha. They share an apartment in a poor district in Chicago. The family is about to receive a \$10,000 pay-out from Mama's dead husband's life insurance, and the money causes trouble. Walter wants to invest in a liquor store with a shady friend, Willie Harris: Ruth and Mama want to invest in a nice house in a

better part of town. A representative of the white residents of the area the Younger family wishes to move to tries to buy them off, not wanting black families to move into their neighbourhood. When the cheque arrives, Mama allows Walter to look after the majority of the money to help him fight off depression and a sense of being a failure. But he loses all of the money she gives him when Willie steals it. Luckily, Mama has saved the rest and made a down payment on the house in Clybourne Park. The family gets ready to move, deciding to defy the white residents and fight for their unity and happiness.

Structure:

Raisin is a three-act play. The dramatic structure follows the classic development of build-up, climax and resolution. ⇒ p. 59

Characters:

The play is about the Younger family and a few important characters around them.

- **“Mama” Lena Younger** is a widow. She is a strong, caring, loving figure who holds the family together. ⇒ p. 66
- **Ruth Younger** is a weary, prematurely aged housewife. She works non-stop and is showing signs of breaking under the pressure of her work, her difficult husband, and the fact that she is pregnant. ⇒ p. 69
- **Walter Lee Younger** is a bitter and frustrated young man in his 30s. He is intense and his sister describes him as an “elaborate neurotic”. ⇒ p. 70
- **Beneatha Younger** is Walter’s sister. She is an educated, interesting woman who is determined to explore her potential and express herself. ⇒ p. 72

- ⇒ p. 73 → **Travis Willard Younger** is the 10-year old son of Ruth and Walter. He is a lively, charming boy.
- ⇒ p. 74 → **Joseph Asagai** is a sophisticated Nigerian student who is friends with Beneatha. He has a strong influence on her interest in Africa and her African heritage.
- ⇒ p. 74 → **George Murchison** is a wealthy, middle-class young black man who is courting Beneatha. She finds him shallow.
- ⇒ p. 75 → **Karl Lindner** is the representative of the white residents' association of Clybourne Park. He has been sent to the Younger family to persuade them not to buy the house there: the residents don't want black people living there.
- ⇒ p. 75 **Other characters** like Bobo, Mrs. Johnson or Willie Harris.

Themes:

- ⇒ p. 80 The major themes we will look at in this study guide are racial identity (including white-black racism and African/African-American issues): family relationships and gender equality; social issues like poverty and ghettos; and the important theme of dreams, faith and hope.

Style and Language:

- ⇒ p. 94 We have to deal with two distinct categories of language: the stage directions and the lines.

Interpretation:

- ⇒ p. 99 We will look at the film in this chapter and at the continuing story of the Younger family by other authors.

2.1 Biography

2. LORRAINE HANSBERRY: LIFE & WORKS

2.1 Biography

YEAR	PLACE	EVENT	AGE
1930	Chicago, Illinois (USA)	On May 19th Lorraine was born. Her parents were Carl (a real estate broker) and Nannie (a local activist). Lorraine was the youngest of four children.	
1938	Chicago	Carl Hansberry bought a house in the Washington Park Subdivisions area on Chicago's South Side. The mostly white neighbours tried to legally force the Hansberry family out of their house. Carl Hansberry took the case all the way to the US Supreme Court, where he won the right to live there with his family (see Hansberry v. Lee, p. 36).	8
1946	Chicago	March 17: Carl Hansberry died in Mexico. He was there looking for a new home for his family. He had wanted to remove them from the pervasive racism in the USA.	15
1948	Chicago/ Wisconsin	Lorraine graduated from high school, and went on to study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She worked on the presidential campaign of the Progressive Party candidate Henry A. Wallace.	18
1949	Guadalajara, Mexico	Summer: Lorraine studied painting at the University of Guadalajara.	19
1950–1953	New York	Lorraine moved to New York to become a writer. She moved to Harlem and became politically active: She worked at the <i>Freedom</i> newspaper and met Black Pan-Africanists. ¹	20–21



Lorraine Hansberry
(1930–1965)
© picture alliance/
Everett Collection

¹ Lorraine's environment, work and acquaintances in New York are discussed more fully in the chapter on Contemporary Background in this study guide, see p.12.

2.2 Contemporary Background

2.2 Contemporary Background

SUMMARY

A Raisin in the Sun was written against the background of an interesting time in US history and culture. The country was wealthy and powerful following the Second World War: industrialisation, consumerism and mass culture had become dominant forces which were reshaping the world; and capitalism and Communism were squaring off on the world stage, with America emerging as a major superpower. Within America, we are in the 1950s, on the eve of the most famous era in the history of the civil rights movement, during a critical and traumatic time for African-Americans as their leaders and activists struggled for equality. Culturally, the after-effects of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s/1930s are important, and socially we must look at issues of segregation, zoned housing policies in cities, poverty and equality. One further point we will look at in this chapter is the relationship between African-Americans and their African heritage and origins.

The USA after World War II

The play *A Raisin in the Sun* is set in a major industrial city in the US in the years following the Second World War. **This is the age of the superpowers**, as the war had left two monolithic powers facing each other across the globe – the forces of capitalism and democracy, led by the USA, and the Communist bloc, dominated by the Soviet Union.

America in the 1950s was economically, politically and militarily a global player of unprecedented power. The country was rich, and its rapidly growing “soft” power – meaning culture – was unequalled,

Global player
America

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

SUMMARY

Lorraine Hansberry is remembered primarily for her stage play *A Raisin in the Sun*. But by the time she died at the age of 34, she had made a big impression and earned the respect of many significant literary and political figures.

After her death, Lorraine Hansberry's ex-husband (they divorced in 1964) **Robert Nemiroff became her literary executor**. This means that he was chosen – by Lorraine, before she died – to manage her literary work. He was responsible for looking after legal issues like maintaining the copyright of her published works, but literary executors are also often responsible for caring for the writer's legacy and reputation.

Ex-husband
Robert Nemiroff

Because she died so young (aged 34), but had been very active as a writer, Hansberry left behind **a large amount of material** which had not yet been formed into finished, polished formats. The only two plays she completed and saw performed during her lifetime are listed below. **She had published articles, essays reviews and letters**. But some of her most significant work was only published or performed after her death, as Nemiroff worked to arrange what he had into a form which he believed would have done justice to Hansberry's ideas and beliefs. The autobiographical play (and later autobiography) *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* is the most prominent. But *Les Blancs* is also a very important and controversial work by a writer whose talent and potential tragically overshadowed her short life.

2.3 Notes on Other Important Works

TITLE	YEAR	NOTES
<i>A Raisin in the Sun</i>	1959	A stage play. Her first published work and her greatest success.
<i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> (screenplay)	1961	The screenplay to the film adaptation of her play.
<i>The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window</i>	1964	Her second play and the last to be staged during her lifetime.
<i>To Be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in her own words</i>	1969	A posthumous (after her death) collection of her writing in various forms which was adapted by her ex-husband Nemiroff into a stage play and, later, a kind of autobiography.
<i>Les Blancs</i>	1970	A play, put together by Nemiroff.

1961 The screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun*

The film adaptation is examined more closely in the chapter on Interpretations later in this study guide (see p. 100). The screenplay which Hansberry wrote herself is **almost identical to the original stage version**. A few newly integrated scenes focus on Walter Lee sitting in his favourite bar, the family visiting the house they want to buy in Clybourne Park, and Mama Lena coming to find Walter Lee in the bar. Some of these scenes are mute: there is no new dialogue for them. The family's visit to the house and Mama's visit to the bar both adapt existing material and content to a new situation. The film is as a whole quite theatrical; it sticks to the limited settings of the stage, and, in particular when contrasted with modern films, has a lot of monologues and talking. Put very basically, the film communicates with language to the near-exclusion of expressive camera work or music or other cinematic tools.

Film adaption
see chapter 3.7,
p. 100

3. ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATIONS

3.1 Origins and Sources

The themes of *A Raisin in the Sun* are inspired by Hansberry's experiences and by her parents. There are many cultural references throughout the play which highlight the strong influence of other sources of inspiration (intertextuality). The main areas we will look at here are the influence of her parents and their political activism; the poet Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance; and we will look at the literary and cultural references made in the play.

SUMMARY

Hansberry completed work on *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1957. Philip Rose (1921–2011), a Broadway theatrical producer whom Hansberry had met at a summer camp, wanted to produce the play. He had **great difficulties securing financing for the production** (see also Robert Nemiroff's Introduction in the study edition of the play, pp. 5–14). The play was first staged in New Haven and then on 11th March 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun* premiered at the *Ethel Barrymore Theater* on Broadway. **It was the first play by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway.** It was also the first Broadway play to be directed by a black man, Lloyd Richards.

Premiere on
Broadway (1959)

Random House published the play in hardback in 1959. In 1961 the film adaptation was released, with a screenplay by Hansberry adapted from her own play (see also chapter 3.7 in this study guide for more on the film, p. 100).

3.2 Summaries

3.2 Summaries

SUMMARY

A Raisin in the Sun is a stage play, and so it has a clearly defined structure: it is divided into three acts, each of which is divided into scenes. Here are brief summaries for reference of the events and persons involved in each of the play's scenes.

The scenes are listed at the beginning of the text (p. 22), giving the general time and place and the days and approximate times during which the scenes take place.

Act I

Scene 1 (p. 23)

Small flat of the
Younger family

The small flat in which the Younger family lives is described in detail, including who lives there and in which room. It is early morning on a Friday. Ruth is the first to wake up. She begins to get her family going for the day. Walter appears next. Walter and Ruth squabble as she gets breakfast ready. Their son Travis appears. Both Walter and Travis ask about a check that is supposed to arrive on Saturday. Travis and Ruth argue and the boy is sullen and frustrated. Ruth teases him to soften the mood. Travis needs 50 cents for school and Ruth says she can't give it to him because they have no money, but Walter gives Travis 50 cents, and then another 50 cents to annoy Ruth.

Travis leaves for school. Ruth and Walt argue about Walt's friends. He has plans for an investment in a liquor store and Ruth is sceptical. Walt complains about the differences between men and women and how they think and behave.

3.3 Structure

3.3 Structure

- *A Raisin in the Sun* is a stage play, and it follows the traditional organisational structure of stage plays: the whole thing is divided into acts, each of which is subdivided into scenes.
- Throughout history, the most widely used structures have been five acts (which was the norm in Western drama up until the 18th century, and which remains the standard structure for traditional Japanese Noh theatre), and three acts, which has become more usual in Western drama since the 1700s. *Raisin* has three.

SUMMARY

Scenes

In the world of the theatre, a scene is a unit of time and action which **typically takes place in one location**, in which different characters can come and go (it doesn't always have to involve only those characters who are present at the beginning of the scene). Due to the technical and physical limitations of the theatre – what can actually be done on stage – scenes in stage plays can't really involve more than one location within the world of the play, unless the scene takes place in a setting which is itself transitional in nature (for example in a train carriage, or walking along a road from A to B, in which case the changing locations will have to be suggested by a combination of text and stage effects).

Location

Similarly, a scene will treat time as it treats space: a scene will usually present **a unit of time flowing uninterrupted**, with stage time (the passage of time within the play) running parallel to real time as it is experienced by the audience, and typically, but not

Time

3.4 Characters

3.4 Characters

SUMMARY

For students, there is something very convenient and useful about the way characters are introduced in the text of a stage play – this will typically be with a brief physical description, including age, and comments or notes on the character’s most important personality traits. In the case of *A Raisin in the Sun*, each character is presented in specific, concrete terms, to which we can refer while analysing the individual figures and how they develop and act through the course of the play.

The Younger family

These are the main characters of the play. There are three generations of Youngers living in the apartment (see below for a family tree) – Lena (“Mama”), her son Walter and his wife Ruth and their son Travis, and her daughter Beneatha.

“Mama” Lena (p. 39)

She is in her early 60s. Her maiden name (before she was married) was Eggleston (see p. 139). Mama is religious and believes that people should behave decently. She doesn’t like people taking the Lord’s name in vain or yelling, she doesn’t approve of talking about money too early in the morning, and **she doesn’t approve of making a profit from selling alcohol**. She is also shocked and offended by the idea of abortion. Family is very important to her: She respects and loves her late husband, despite his apparently difficult behaviour, for the fact that he worked so hard to provide for his family. **She does all she can to hold the Younger family together**, trying to make Walter and Ruth talk and solve their problems, and she seems

Mother to Walter and Beneatha (introduced and described on p. 39)

3.5 Notes on themes

3.5 Notes on themes

SUMMARY

The play is about the efforts of an African-American family in Chicago in the 1950s to get out of poverty and the ghetto. The major themes are racial identity, family relationships (including questions of gender equality), social issues like poverty, and the importance of dreams, faith and hope. Other issues like money and the diverse relationships African-Americans have to their African origins are also important.

Poverty and money

“Once upon a time freedom used to be life. Now it’s money.”
(p. 74)

TEXT	REFERENCE	NOTES
[opening stage directions]	(see pp. 23–24)	The setting and scenario of the play tell us how the Younger family are living. Look at the words used to describe the apartment in the stage directions at the beginning: tired, weariness, depressing uniformity, and so on.
[breakfast conversations between Ruth, Travis and Walter]	(pp. 28–32)	Money is an issue from the very beginning, with Travis asking for 50 cents, his mother telling him he can’t have it because they haven’t enough money, and then Walter Lee giving the boy the coins and having to ask his wife to borrow some because now he has none. The comedy in this scene highlights a difficult fact of life for the Younger family, a very real and practical problem.

3.6 Style and language

3.6 Style and language

SUMMARY

- Because it is a stage play, written in a specific format, *A Raisin in the Sun* contains two distinct kinds of language: stage directions and dramatic lines.
- We will also look in this chapter at the unusual, creative use of language, and the Yoruba language of West Africa, which plays a small but significant role in the relationship between Beneatha and Joseph.

The language of plays, scripts and screenplays

In prose (the kind of language used in short stories or novels) there will usually be at least two different kinds of language: the **language used to describe the world** and what is going on, and then the **language used by the characters** when they talk to one another.

Plays are similar, but they are more formally structured: there are stage directions (the world and what is going on in it) and there are lines (what the characters say to one another).

Stage directions

The first kind of language is primarily functional. It has to provide **concrete information and guidelines** for the people who will be turning the words on the page into a living, breathing stage performance. But it has another, more complex purpose. It also has to suggest tone and nuance: How is Beneatha feeling? Is her response sarcastic? Is Ruth tired, sad, angry, impatient, happy, or irritated? The combination of theatrical language, spoken lines and the context can create strong impressions for anyone planning a performance of the play.

The performance
of the actors

3.7 Interpretations

3.7 Interpretations

- *A Raisin in the Sun* tells a clear and unambiguous story. There is not too much room for speculation about the themes and motives of the play and its characters. The play should be interpreted in the context of its own contemporary background and against the history of black people inside and out of Africa.
- Efforts to expand upon (the “Raisin Cycle”) or adapt the play to other media (the film) have remained close to the tone and message of Hansberry’s original play.

SUMMARY

Background

As discussed in the chapter in this study guide on the play’s Contemporary Background (see chapter 2.2, p. 12), *Raisin* is inspired by real things which were **close to Hansberry’s life**. The author does use metaphors and symbols – the weary state of the family’s apartment is one, Mama’s little plant is another – but the play as a whole is more realist and concerned with existing issues. The play is not an allegory or a poetic effort to talk about something other than what it seems to be.

Interpreting the play and its success and relevance requires students to know a little about **Hansberry’s history** (discussed elsewhere in this study guide), and the situation facing **African-Americans in the US** (specifically in the big cities) in the 1950s. Hansberry was a civil rights activist, and she and her play should be seen as belonging to **the civil rights movement** which was about to enter its most historically prominent, critical phase with the rise (and assassinations) of Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X.

Black history

4. RECEPTION

SUMMARY

A Raisin in the Sun was a critical success and has maintained a good reputation since it was first performed. It is considered to be one of the first, and certainly one of the most important plays about the modern African-American experience, as well as being a fine drama about family dynamics.

Success

"Black playwright Charles Gordone, author of *No Place to Be Somebody* [...] considered Hansberry's 1959 *A Raisin in the Sun* [...] to be the initiating work in modern Black theatre."¹⁷

"The events of every passing year add resonance to *A Raisin in the Sun* [...]. It is as if history is conspiring to make the play a classic."¹⁸

"It was 25 years ago that a 28-year-old black woman from this city changed American theater forever with her first produced play. The woman was Lorraine Hansberry, and the play, of course, was '*A Raisin in the Sun*'. [...] this seminal play – which sparked the growth of the black theater movement in the 1960's [...]."¹⁹

¹⁷ White, Edmund: *Genet*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1993, p. 308.

¹⁸ From J-R. Bruckner's New York Times review of the 1986 production, quoted in Nemiroff's Introduction to the play, p. 5. See also <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/08/15/theater/stage-at-roundabout-a-raisin-in-the-sun.html> for the complete review.

¹⁹ Rich, Frank: *Theater: Raisin in the Sun Anniversary in Chicago* (1983). <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/05/theater/theater-raisin-in-sun-anniversary-in-chicago.html>

5. MATERIALS

Lorraine Hansberry and Bobby Kennedy (1963)

On May 24 1963 Robert (“Bobby”) Kennedy, the Attorney General of the US²⁷ and brother to the current president, John F Kennedy, organised a meeting with various African-American thinkers, celebrities, artists and cultural figures.

The aim of the meeting was to discuss ways to improve race relations within the US. The group of invitees included primarily novelist James Baldwin, activist and singer Harry Belafonte, the singer and activist Lena Horne, Martin Luther King Jr’s senior advisor Clarence Benjamin Jones, and several others. Lorraine Hansberry was included in the group. She was 33 at the time, and it was a year before her death.

The Baldwin-
Kennedy-meeting

In his unfinished notes to a major book project with the working title *Remember This House*²⁸, James Baldwin recalls an interaction between Hansberry and Bobby Kennedy at this meeting. An infamous photograph of a white policeman standing on the neck of a black woman lying (see p. 112) on the ground had caused a great deal of shock and outrage, as had numerous reports and documents of brutality by whites and the police against black people during those most tumultuous years of the civil rights movement. Hansberry confronted Kennedy, and Baldwin, who knew her well and admired her greatly, was deeply impressed by her authority and

27 The chief lawyer representing the federal government of the United States.

28 The notes for this project were used by Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck as the basis for his documentary film (and accompanying book of the same title) *I Am not Your Negro* (2016). The passage here is quoted from the book: Peck and Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2017. pp 42–44.



Policemen restrain a woman on the ground during racial protest marches in Birmingham (May 6, 1963).
© picture alliance/AP

strength when facing up to one of the most powerful white men in the US.

"We would like," said Lorraine, "from you, a moral commitment." He looked insulted – seemed to feel that he had been wasting his time. Well Lorraine sat still, watching all the while... She looked at Bobby Kennedy, who, perhaps for the first time, looked at her.

6. SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Here are some sample essay questions and responses. The number of stars indicates the level of difficulty of the task.

Task 1 **

Dreams are an important theme in the play, and many characters have their own dreams and hopes for the future. Choose a character and describe and discuss their dreams – and how this relates to the significance of the title of the play and where it comes from (the poem *Harlem 2* from *Montage of a Dream Deferred*).

Model answer (Beneatha):

Beneatha is one of the characters in the play who has clear ideas about her dreams and her future. She wants to be a doctor (see p. 36), and so she has to study for a long time. She has more education than any of her relatives, which becomes clear whenever she argues with her brother, who is generally sullen and brutish, or her mother, who won't tolerate Beneatha's educated blasphemy (see pp. 50–51). Ironically, Walter, who complains so much about other people not supporting him enough when it comes to his dreams, is arrogantly dismissive of Beneatha's desire to study and become a doctor: "[...] just get married and be quiet", he tells her (p. 38).

Being a doctor

But Beneatha doesn't believe that her dreams and her future have to be defined by being a wife to a man who will run her life. When her mother and Ruth confront her about her relationship with George Murchison, she says that she is going to be a doctor,

Modern woman

and only then will she think about getting married – “if I ever get married” (p. 50). She is a strong and independent-minded young woman, and modern in the way she seeks to pursue her own dreams rather than conforming to traditional, socially prescribed patterns. Her dream of becoming a doctor comes from an incident in her childhood (pp. 132–133) – “I wanted to cure.” (p. 133).

Express herself

Beyond this practical dream she has for her future, Beneatha pursues other dreams which are related to her desire to express herself (see pp. 47–48). She is currently learning guitar; she has learned photography, taken riding lessons, and been in a drama club.

Beneatha also dreams of Africa and her African heritage: Inspired by Joseph Asagai and the gifts he brings her (Nigerian clothes and records), she play-acts at being African (rather than African-American – see pp. 76–79). This dream is a fantasy. Less concrete than her plans to become a doctor, and related to her desire to express herself with her various attempts to learn instruments or other artistic skills, the fantasy of Africa she shares in this scene with Walter is a strange mixture of child-like pantomime and trance-like vision of a mythical shared origin in a place and a culture neither of them has ever seen.

Destroyed dreams

The negative meaning of the title and where it comes from (Langston Hughes’ poem *Harlem* 2, about what happens to dreams when they are inhibited) apply to Beneatha most clearly in Act III (pp. 132–133). After having learned that Walter has lost all the family’s money, she realises that she will no longer be able to study (college education is very expensive in the USA). Being confronted with this brutal reality, she is, in a way, inside the poem. Her dreams have been deferred. The young woman who was so positive, energetic, and confident in her ability to make her dreams real is now crushed by the same bitterness afflicting her brother. She attacks