

A Raisin in the Sun

by Lorraine Hansberry · Language: EN

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Overview

A Raisin in the Sun, first performed in 1959, is Lorraine Hansberry's landmark play about the Younger family, three generations of Black Americans living in a cramped, worn-out apartment on Chicago's South Side. The plot centers on the life insurance check of ten thousand dollars that arrives after the death of the family patriarch, and the conflicting dreams of how to use it: Mama wants to buy a house, her son Walter Lee wants to invest in a liquor store, and her daughter Beneatha wants to pay for medical school. The play follows the family over a few weeks as they struggle with poverty, racism, and their own internal conflicts, ultimately deciding to move into a white neighborhood despite the threat of a hostile welcome. The story is a powerful exploration of identity, dignity, and the meaning of the American Dream for Black families in mid-century America.

The play's title comes from Langston Hughes's poem 'Harlem,' which asks what happens to a dream deferred—whether it dries up like a raisin in the sun, or explodes. Hansberry's work dramatizes that question through the Youngers' choices and sacrifices. The play matters because it was the first play written by a Black woman to be produced on Broadway, and it gave voice to the everyday struggles and aspirations of Black working-class families. It challenges audiences to consider the cost of assimilation, the value of heritage, and the necessity of hope in the face of systemic injustice. The play remains a touchstone of American theater, studied and performed widely for its honest, compassionate, and unflinching look at race, class, and family.

Key Takeaways

- The play's central question is what happens to a dream deferred, and it shows that dreams can be deferred but not easily destroyed.
- Mama's decision to buy a house represents a commitment to family legacy and a tangible step toward a better life, even in the face of racial hostility.
- Walter Lee's journey reveals that true manhood and dignity come not from money or status but from self-respect and standing up for one's family.
- Beneatha's exploration of her African heritage through Joseph Asagai shows the importance of knowing one's roots in forming a personal identity.
- The Youngers' choice to move to Clybourne Park, despite the white neighborhood's opposition, is an act of courage that asserts their right to live where they choose.

- The play illustrates that family unity is more valuable than any single individual's dream, and that sacrifice is sometimes necessary for the collective good.
- Hansberry critiques both the racism of white society and the internalized limitations that can hold Black families back, urging self-determination.
- The play's ending is hopeful but ambiguous, suggesting that the fight for equality is ongoing and requires both personal and collective action.

Chapter Summaries

Act I, Scene 1

The play opens in the Youngers' cramped apartment on the South Side of Chicago. The family is awaiting a \$10,000 life insurance check from the death of Big Walter. Walter Lee, the son, is frustrated with his job as a chauffeur and dreams of investing in a liquor store with his friends. His wife Ruth is exhausted and weary, and his sister Beneatha is in medical school, exploring her identity. Mama, Lena Younger, is the matriarch who wants to buy a house. The scene establishes the family's financial strain and the tension between Walter's desires and the needs of the household.

Act I, Scene 2

The next morning, the check arrives. Mama reveals that she has made a down payment on a house in Clybourne Park, a white neighborhood, without consulting anyone. Walter is devastated because he wanted the money for the liquor store. Ruth collapses from exhaustion, and the doctor later reveals she is pregnant. The family discusses the move, and Mama explains that she wants to give the family a better home. Walter feels emasculated and resentful, and the scene ends with Mama expressing her faith and her hope for the family's future.

Act II, Scene 1

A week later, the family is packing. Beneatha has cut her hair to embrace her African heritage, influenced by her Nigerian suitor Joseph Asagai. Walter comes home drunk and tells a story about a man who lost his family's money, foreshadowing his own actions. Ruth and Mama confront him about his drinking and his obsession with money. The scene highlights the generational and ideological differences within the family, especially between Walter's materialistic dreams and Mama's more traditional values.

Act II, Scene 2

George Murchison, a wealthy Black man, comes to take Beneatha on a date. He is dismissive of her African interests, and they argue about assimilation and identity. Walter insults George, mocking his assimilationist ways. After George leaves, Mama tells Walter that she has put a down payment on the house and gives him the remaining \$6,500, trusting him to put part of it in a savings account for Beneatha's education and to keep the rest for himself. She warns him not to

waste it, but Walter is already dreaming of his liquor store.

Act II, Scene 3

The family is moving, and the apartment is nearly empty. Bobo, Walter's friend, arrives with terrible news: Willy Harris, their partner, has run off with all the money, including Walter's share and Beneatha's tuition. The family is devastated. Walter is crushed, and Mama is heartbroken. Beneatha is furious and says she no longer believes in love or dreams. The scene ends with Mama expressing her deep disappointment and her fear that the family is falling apart.

Act III

An hour later, the family is in despair. Asagai visits and proposes to Beneatha, encouraging her to come to Nigeria with him. He tells her that her dream of becoming a doctor is still possible, and that she must not give up. Walter is considering accepting a bribe from the white neighborhood association to not move in. Mama tells him that she has always taught her children to have dignity, and that if he sells his pride, he will be no better than the men who oppress them. Walter finally decides to refuse the bribe and tells Mr. Lindner that the family will move in. The play ends with the family gathering their belongings and leaving the apartment, ready to face the future.

Themes

- The American Dream
- Racial discrimination
- Family and sacrifice
- Identity and heritage
- Dignity and pride
- Gender roles

Notable Quotes

- "What happens to a dream deferred?" — This is the epigraph of the play, taken from Langston Hughes's poem 'Harlem,' and it frames the central question of the work.
- "I want so many things that they are driving me kind of crazy..." — Walter Lee says this to his wife Ruth early in the play, expressing his frustration with his unfulfilled dreams.
- "Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams—but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile." — Mama says this to Walter in Act I, Scene 2, reflecting on the role of family in sustaining hope.
- "I am a giant—surrounded by ants!" — Walter says this in Act II, Scene 1, while drunk, expressing his feeling of being trapped and underestimated.

- "There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing." — Mama says this to Beneatha in Act III, after the family has lost the money, teaching her about resilience and love.
- "I want to be a doctor—and I want to be a doctor who helps people." — Beneatha says this to Asagai in Act I, Scene 2, stating her ambition and her desire to make a difference.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is *A Raisin in the Sun* about?

A Raisin in the Sun is a play about a Black family, the Youngers, living in Chicago in the 1950s. After the death of the father, they receive a \$10,000 insurance check. Each family member has a different dream for the money: buying a house, investing in a liquor store, or paying for medical school. The play explores their struggles with poverty, racism, and family conflict, and their decision to move to a white neighborhood.

Is *A Raisin in the Sun* worth reading?

Yes. It is a classic of American theater and literature. The play offers a powerful, realistic portrayal of Black life in mid-century America, with complex characters and timeless themes like the pursuit of dreams, family loyalty, and racial injustice. Its dialogue is sharp and its emotional impact is strong. It is widely taught in schools and remains relevant today.

How does *A Raisin in the Sun* end?

Spoiler: The Youngers lose the money Walter invested in a liquor store when his partner runs off with it. Walter is tempted to accept a bribe from the white neighborhood association to not move into their new house. But after a heartfelt plea from his mother, he refuses the bribe and asserts his family's dignity. The play ends with the family leaving their old apartment, moving to their new home in Clybourne Park.

Who should read *A Raisin in the Sun*?

Anyone interested in American literature, theater, or civil rights history. It is a staple in high school and college English courses. Readers who enjoy character-driven dramas about family, race, and social justice will find it compelling. It is also valuable for those studying the Black experience in America or the history of Broadway.

How long does it take to read *A Raisin in the Sun*?

The play is about 150 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes roughly 2 to 3 hours to read. Many readers finish it in a single sitting, but it can also be read in shorter sessions. The play is often performed, so watching a production is another way to experience it.