




Study Guide 2026

Oregon Shakespeare Festival



A RAISIN IN THE SUN



TO BE YOUNG, GIFTED AND BLACK: WHO WAS LORRAINE HANSBERRY?

- Born 1930, died of pancreatic cancer in 1965.
- Playwright and writer.
- Best remembered for *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first play written by an African American woman produced on Broadway.
- Other notable plays include *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and *Les Blancs*.
- She was only the fifth woman, and the youngest, to win a New York Drama Critics Award.
- *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, published posthumously by Robert Nemiroff, was a play that used collected Lorraine Hansberry writings to create a sort of autobiography. The play inspired a famous song by Nina Simone.



Lorraine Hansberry speaking to an audience.

Before seeing/reading the play

1. The title of *A Raisin in the Sun* comes from the poem “Harlem” by Langston Hughes.

Below are the first three lines:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Read the full poem at this link:

<https://poets.org/poem/harlem-o>

**“WHATEVER YOU WANT TO BE —
YESSIR! YOU JUST NAME IT SON...AND I
HAND YOU THE WORLD!”**

-WALTER LEE

2. Discuss the imagery Hughes used in the poem. What is the effect of each image? What does the poem say about dreams? These and other websites provide information:
Dream Deferred Then and Now:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-pacific-heart/202005/dream-deferred-langston-hughes-then-and-now>
Langston Hughes Masterpiece:
<https://owlcation.com/humanities/langston-hughes-masterpiece-harlem-a-dream-deferred>
3. Who was Langston Hughes? What were some of his notable accomplishments? These and other websites provide information:
Langston Hughes Wikipedia entry:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Langston_Hughes
Langston Hughes from BlackPast:
<https://blackpast.org/african-american-history/hughes-langston-1902-1967/>

4. *A Raisin in the Sun* is set in 1959. What was the United States like politically, socially, and economically, in 1959? What were expectations for women? Wives and mothers? What were the expectations for men? Husbands and fathers? What were expectations for children? How did racial identity change expectations? How were expectations different for Black people? These and other websites provide information:

1959 in the United States Wikipedia:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1959_in_the_United_States

1959: The Year that Changed Everything:

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/1959-the-year-that-changed-everything/>

Mrs. America: Women’s Roles in the 1950’s:

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/pill-mrs-america-womens-roles-1950s/>

Black History from 1950-1959:

<https://www.thoughtco.com/african-american-history-timeline-1950-1959-45442>

5. What is the American Dream? How does the mythology of the American Dream affect U.S. citizens? Discuss ways that the American Dream is and isn’t accessible to different groups in the U.S. based on race, gender, education, marital status, and other social factors. These and other websites provide information:
American Dream Wikipedia entry:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream
1940s/1950s: The rise of the American Dream & the forces that made America:
<https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2017/the-people-vs-america/1940s.html>
The Original Meanings of the “American Dream” and “America First” Were Starkly Different from How We Use Them Today”:
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/behold-america-american-dream-slogan-book-sarah-churchwell-180970311/>
The American Dream while Black:
‘Locked in a vicious cycle’:
<https://www.nbcnews.com/specials/american-dream-while-black-homeownership/>

MATCH THE ACTOR WITH THE ROLE:

Familiar Faces in
A Raisin in the Sun

Lena: Family matriarch

Walter Lee: Lena’s Son

Ruth: Walter Lee’s Wife

Travis: Ruth and
Walter’s Son

Bobo: Walter Lee’s
friend

Claudia McNeil

Sidney Poitier

Audra McDonald

Phyl

Lena | Toussaint Battiste - Travis | Sophie Okonedo - Ruth | Denzel Washington - Walter Lee | Bill Nunn -

6. Research the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. What were the major issues? Who were a few important leaders? What progress had been made in the struggle for civil rights in 1959? What major events were yet to come? These and other websites provide information:

Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom:

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/index.html>

Civil Rights Movement:

<https://www.history.com/articles/civil-rights-movement>

The Fight for Civil Rights in 1950s and 1960s America:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zq9hp4j#zxw-fydm>

7. Research housing conditions for African Americans in Chicago during the 1950s and '60s. In a report of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in 1959, Chicago was called "the most residentially segregated large city in the nation." Why? What factors contributed to housing segregation? These and other websites provide information:

Housing and Race in Chicago:

<https://www.chipublib.org/housing/>

Chicago's 250 Year History of Segregation:

<https://www.chicagoreporter.com/chicago-250-year-history-of-segregation/>

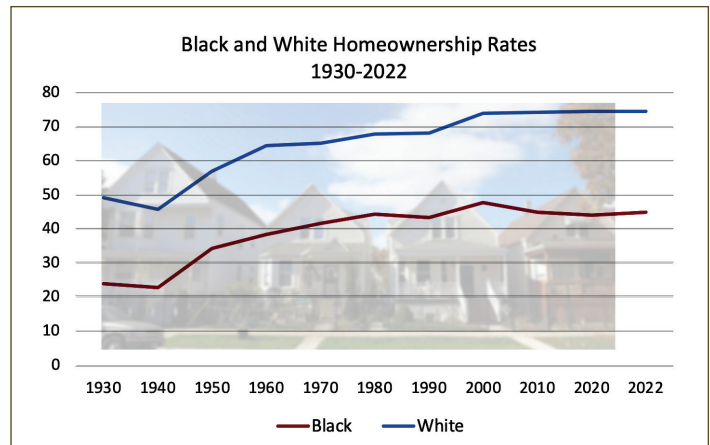
8. In 1938 the Hansberrys challenged Chicago's segregation laws by moving into an all-white neighborhood. Refer to page 7 to read about the case Lorraine Hansberry's father fought and won in the United States Supreme Court. These and other websites provide information:

Hansberry v. Lee on Library of Congress Blogs:

<https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2023/01/hansberry-v-lee-the-supreme-court-case-that-influenced-the-play-a-raisin-in-the-sun/>

Truman Gibson Jr. – A Connection to Hansberry v Lee...:

<https://www.chicagocovenants.com/research/truman-gibson-jr-a-connection-to-hansberry-v-lee-james-burke-and-shelley-v-kraemer>



9. Redlining was a practice seen across the United States in which poor people and people of color, especially Black people, were denied financial access to properties outside of specific areas. Discuss the impacts of redlining and how it continues to shape U.S. neighborhoods. These and other websites provide information:

A Brief History of Redlining: <https://www.chicagohistory.org/redlining/>

Redlining from Federal Reserve History: <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/redlining>

A 'Forgotten History' of How the U.S. Government Segregated America: <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america>

10. Beneatha, Lena's daughter and Walter Lee's sister, is attending college with hopes of becoming a doctor. Research the experiences of women attending college in the U.S. during this time. What challenges might she face? Discuss ways the college environment has shifted for women since then. How has it stayed the same? These and other websites provide information:

Women in College during the 1950s: <https://sites.lib.jmu.edu/sc-interviews/2020/03/30/women-in-college-during-the-1950s/>

Centering Black Women's Experiences Regarding College Choice: <https://tcf.org/content/report/centering-black-womens-experiences-regarding-college-choice/>



Ice Cube

Toussaint Battiste

Sophie Okonedo

Denzel Washington

Bill Nunn

Danny Glover

Esther Rolle

THE Chicago Defender

WORLD'S GREATEST WEEKLY

Early in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Beneatha asks Walter Lee to pass her the paper. It's very likely that the paper he passes her way was the *Chicago Defender*. Founded in 1905 by Robert S. Abbott, the *Defender* was a Chicago paper written specifically for Black audiences. It was initially published weekly, but during the height of the Civil Rights Movement in 1956, the paper shifted to a daily publication. The content included news articles, health columns, comic strips, and poetry. Best known for its editorials, the paper's writers championed equality, calling for civil rights, condemning lynching and police violence, and campaigning against antisemitism.

The *Chicago Defender* played an important role in Black communities far beyond Chicago's borders. Starting with 300 copies of the paper printed in the small kitchen of the founder's rented apartment, in five years the paper attracted

a national audience after Abbott encouraged Black railroad porters and traveling entertainers to take copies of the paper to readers in the South. In those years, the *Defender* claimed more than 100,000 readers. This nationwide readership played an important role in the Great Migration, encouraging thousands of Black Americans to leave the rural, agricultural South for large, industrialized northern cities.

Known for passionate editorials, cartoons, and articles that chronicled important events and issues for the African American community, the paper employed notable writers throughout its history. From Ida B. Wells to Langston Hughes, some of the most impactful writers of their day were featured in its pages. The *Defender* is still published and available online, continuing a more than 120-year legacy that started in an ambitious man's kitchen.



11. Research dating and dating expectations during the 1950s. What rules existed about dating? What expectations might Beneatha's family have regarding her relationships. These and other websites provide information:
Surprising Dating Etiquette from the 1950s: <https://historyfacts.com/arts-culture/article/surprising-dating-etiquette-from-the-1950s>
Dating in the 1950s Was No Picnic: <https://www.cbc.ca/life/backintimeforwinter/dating-in-the-1950s-was-no-picnic-1.5395630>
Before 'Loving': <https://artsci.washu.edu/ampersand/before-loving>

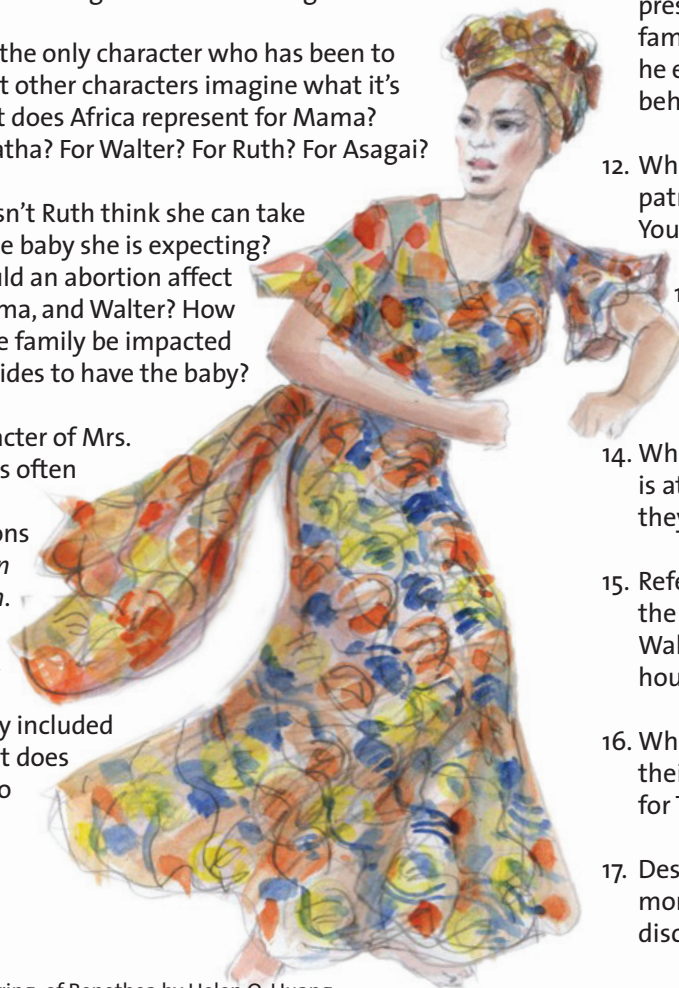
12. Discuss the types of legacies people might leave to future generations: financial, personal, cultural, etc. How do thoughts about legacy shape people's actions? These and other websites provide information:
Legacy Wikipedia entry: <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legacy>
The True Meaning of Legacy: <https://www.journeybeyondwealth.com/the-true-meaning-of-legacy>
<https://historyfacts.com/arts-culture/article/surprising-dating-etiquette-from-the-1950s>
Dating in the 1950s Was No Picnic: <https://www.cbc.ca/life/backintimeforwinter/dating-in-the-1950s-was-no-picnic-1.5395630>
Before 'Loving': <https://artsci.washu.edu/ampersand/before-loving>

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The True Meaning of Legacy: <https://www.journeybeyondwealth.com/the-true-meaning-of-legacy>



After seeing/reading the play

1. What is success for Mama, Beneatha, Walter Lee, Ruth, and Travis?
2. How do you see characters demonstrate their love for one another?
3. Refer to your research on Langston Hughes and his poem "Harlem." Why do you think Lorraine Hansberry alluded to the poem with the play's title? What dreams do the Youngers have, as a family and individually? What is each willing to do to achieve their dream? How have their dreams been deferred? How does deferring dreams affect each family member?
4. Minor characters in the play each represent a "good" reason for deferring a dream. What arguments do they make? How do they affect the Youngers?
5. What role does God play in each of the characters' lives? How does Mama's reliance on God give her strength? How does Beneatha's rejection of God give her strength?
6. In what ways is Beneatha ahead of her time? In what ways is she a product of her time? What does it say about Mama that she is willing to support Beneatha's ambitions? How do Beneatha's boyfriends, Asagai and George, reflect her ambitions? What would Beneatha's life be like as Asagai's wife? As George's?
7. Asagai is the only character who has been to Africa, but other characters imagine what it's like. What does Africa represent for Mama? For Beneatha? For Walter? For Ruth? For Asagai?
8. Why doesn't Ruth think she can take care of the baby she is expecting? How would an abortion affect Ruth, Mama, and Walter? How would the family be impacted if she decides to have the baby?
9. The character of Mrs. Johnson is often cut from productions of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Why do you think Lorraine Hansberry included her? What does she add to the play?



Costume rendering of Beneatha by Helen Q. Huang.

STILL HERE

By Langston Hughes

*I been scarred and battered.
My hopes the wind done
scattered. Snow has friz me,
Sun has baked me,*

*Looks like between 'em they
done Tried to make me
Stop laughin', stop lovin',
stop livin'--*

*But I don't care!
I'm still here!*



10. When Walter tells Mama that money is life, she challenges him saying, "Once upon a time, freedom used to be life—now it's money. I guess the world really do change..." Mama sees freedom as more powerful than money. Why? How has the world changed in Mama's lifetime? What is Walter's view of freedom? Why is it different?
11. How did Mama and Big Walter provide their children with a better childhood than they had? How did they fall short? How do Walter Lee and Ruth try to give Travis a better childhood than they had? Describe the pressure Walter Lee feels as the main provider for the family. What does being a man mean to Walter? How does he embrace responsibility, and in what ways does he behave immaturely?
12. What is the difference between a matriarchy and a patriarchy? Discuss how these concepts show up in the Younger family's interactions.
13. What does it mean to Walter when Mama gives him the money? What does it mean to him when he loses it? What has Walter lost besides the money?
14. What does Mr. Lindner's offer mean for the family? What is at stake for them? What would they lose? What might they gain?
15. Refer to your research on the American Dream. How does the desire for homeownership show up for Mama, Ruth, Walter, and Beneatha? What status does owning a house provide?
16. What kind of parents are Walter Lee and Ruth? Describe their relationship with Travis. What dreams do they have for Travis?
17. Describe Walter Lee and Ruth's relationship. What moments show their connection? What moments show disconnection?

18. What does it mean for the Younger family to move into a neighborhood where they are not wanted? What will their lives be like in their new neighborhood? What challenges do they face? What is hopeful about their relocation?
19. Refer to your research on the Civil Rights Movement. What events happened soon after 1959 which Lorraine Hansberry seems to foreshadow in *A Raisin in the Sun*? How does the play portray the emerging Women's Movement?

"ISN'T THERE SOMETHING WRONG IN A HOUSE – IN A WORLD – WHERE DREAMS, GOOD OR BAD, MUST DEPEND ON THE DEATH OF A MAN?"

-ASAGAI

20. *A Raisin in the Sun* highlights many civil rights issues including racism, neighborhood integration, equal housing opportunities, and equal job opportunities. What changes do you see in each area between 1959 and now?
21. Dreams play a role in *A Raisin in the Sun*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Hedley II*, and *You Are Cordially Invited...* How does each playwright use dreams in their play? How is the dream world different than the conscious world?

I, TOO

By Langston Hughes

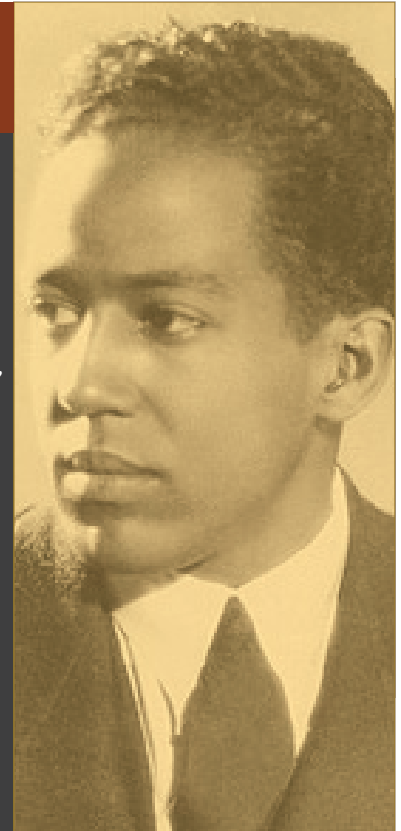
I, too, sing America.

*I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in
the kitchen When
company comes,
But I laugh, And eat well,
And grow strong.*

*Tomorrow, I'll be at the
table When company
comes. Nobody'll dare
Say to me, "Eat in the
kitchen," Then.*

*Besides, They'll see how
beautiful I am
And be ashamed—*

I, too, am America.



22. *A Raisin in the Sun* grapples with the cost of deferred dreams. How does that theme show up in other productions this season? How does easy success show up in productions this season? What cost do characters pay for instant gratification?



Costume renderings by Helen Q. Huang.

THE SUPREME COURT AND A RAISIN IN THE SUN

Events in Lorraine Hansberry's young life provided inspiration for the plot of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Chicago experienced waves of migration as Black folks moved out of the agrarian South toward the promise of better quality of life in industrialized areas. During the Great Migration, the collective term for movement of folks from the South to the North in the 1900s, reaching a peak in the 1940s and fading by the 1970s. Nearly six million Black people moved from the South to cities like Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Pittsburgh, Black people hoping to find economic stability, better education opportunities, and safety for their families. However, the rapid increase in Black citizens caused fear and resentment to flare among White populations.

Black residents faced extreme violence in cities across the U.S., particularly before and after WWI. In 1919 alone, during what was called the Red Summer, 26 cities, including Chicago, erupted in violence. The Chicago Race Riot was sparked by the murder of Eugene Williams, a Black teenager. He was killed after mistakenly drifting on a raft near a Whites-only beach. In just a week, around 38 Chicagoans died, 537 were injured, and more than 1,000 Black residents were rendered homeless after White mobs burned and destroyed homes and businesses. Violence on this scale was uncommon; however, people found other ways to intimidate people of color, including the adoption of racially restrictive covenants, used to legally segregate neighborhoods.

In 1938, Lorraine's father, Carl Augustus Hansberry, bought a home in the Woodlawn neighborhood and shortly thereafter, White neighbors sued to keep them out. The neighborhood's covenant, which was adopted in 1928, constrained Black communities from spreading west. Covenants like this began to break down in the wake of the Great Depression, during which large numbers of White folks lost their homes as, housing needs in the Black communities grew. Though the Hansberry's made the only offer to purchase the home, an injunction was filed, blocking them from the residence. Mr. Hansberry and the home's seller argued that the covenant wasn't enforceable because fewer than the required 95% of residents had signed it. The case finally landed in the U.S. Supreme Court, where the Hansberrys' right to live in the home they purchased was upheld, not because they should have been able to live where they wanted, but because the Court felt that upholding the injunction might violate the due process rights of folks who hadn't signed the covenant.

The Hansberrys' eleven years on Rhodes Avenue were far from easy. Lorraine Hansberry remembered mobs outside their house and her mother carrying a gun to protect her children. She and her siblings were spat at, cursed, and assaulted on their way to school. While the NAACP and a collection of multicultural allies lauded the Supreme Court's decision, she said: "...[this is] the sort of 'progress' our satisfied friends allude to when they presume to deride the more radical means of struggle. The cost in emotional turmoil, time, and money...does not seem to figure in their calculations."

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www.osfashland.org/education