

Raisin in the Sun

Characters, Synopsis, & Discussion Questions

The title of Lorraine Hansberry's play is an allusion to the poem "Harlem" by Langston Hughes. Use the poem to discuss potential issues that students might discover while seeing the play.

Harlem
By Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Meet the Characters

Lena Younger: Known throughout the play as "Mama," Lena, who recently lost her husband, Walter Sr., is the matriarch of the Younger family. Mama's actions show her strength, spirituality, and selflessness.

Walter Lee Younger: As Lena's oldest child, Walter Lee feels the pressure to be the provider for his mother as well as his wife Ruth and son Travis. A man in his mid-thirties, Walter Lee works as a chauffeur for a wealthy white family, but he has aspirations for bigger and better things.

Beneatha Younger: Also known as "Bennie," Beneatha is Lena's second child and Walter Lee's sister. She is in college and is eagerly looking forward to attending medical school. She currently has two suitors: George Murchison and Joseph Asagai.

Ruth Younger: Even though Ruth married into the Younger family, she is the peace-maker, helping to extinguish conflict between her husband, Walter Lee, and sister-in-law, Beneatha. She helps her mother-in-law care for their home.

Travis Younger: As the youngest member of the Younger family living in a three-generation household, Travis is playful and clever, knowing how to play the adults in the family to get what he wants. He's the ten-year-old son of Walter Lee and Ruth.

Joseph Asagai: An immigrant from Nigeria, Joseph Asagai is one of Beneatha's suitors. He opens her eyes to Nigerian customs.

George Murchison: In contrast to the Younger's poverty, George Murchison is a very wealthy college student. He is the other of Beneatha's suitors.

Karl Lindner: As a member of the Clybourne Park Welcoming Committee, Karl Lindner meets with the Younger family to discuss the neighborhood's policies.

Bobo: One of Walter Lee's business partners. Bobo, too, hopes for bigger and better things.

Plot Summary

This play tells the story of a lower-class black family's struggle to gain middle-class acceptance. When the play opens, Mama, the sixty-year-old mother of the family, is waiting for a \$10,000 insurance check from the death of her husband, and the drama will focus primarily on how the \$10,000 should be spent.

The son, Walter Lee Younger, is so desperate to be a better provider for his growing family that he wants to invest the entire sum in a liquor store with two of his friends. The mother objects mainly for ethical reasons; she is vehemently opposed to the idea of selling liquor. Minor conflicts erupt over their disagreements.

When Mama decides to use part of the money as a down payment on a house in a white neighborhood, her conflict with Walter escalates and causes her deep anguish. In an attempt to make things right between herself and her son, Mama entrusts Walter Lee with the rest of the money. He immediately invests it secretly in his liquor store scheme, believing that he will perhaps quadruple his initial investment.

One of Walter Lee's prospective business partners, however, runs off with the money, a loss which tests the spiritual and psychological mettle of each family member. After much wavering and vacillating, the Youngers decide to continue with their plans to move — in spite of their financial reversals and in spite of their having been warned by a weak representative of the white neighborhood that blacks are not welcome.

Discussion Questions

Characters

1. Based on what you know about the father and the children, who is most like Big Walter? Explain your choice.
2. How do Mama and Ruth parallel each other? Why might Hansberry have chosen to make these characters similar?
3. A foil is a character who contrasts with the protagonist in order to emphasize particular qualities of the protagonist. Which characters are foils of each other? How?
4. Beneatha represents viewpoints of the women's liberation movement (feminism) and the Afrocentrism movement. Where do we see evidence of both these movements in her actions and words?
5. In Act 1 Scene 2, what does Beneatha mean when she tells Asagai, "We've got acute ghetto-itus"? What is her purpose in telling him this?
6. Walter Lee is the only adult male family member in this play. How would the events of the play change if the genders were reversed?

7. Is Walter Lee behaving more like a son or a husband towards Mama? Is Mama emasculating (depriving a man of his male role) Walter Lee? Explain your answer. If she is, is she doing it consciously or unconsciously? What cultural traditions affect their relationship?
8. How does the generational conflict manifest itself in the play? What evidence of a generational conflict do you see between Mama and her children?
9. How would you describe the marriage between Walter and Ruth? Is it a loving marriage?
10. Despite Walter Lee and Beneatha's outward antagonism towards each other, when do they unite? What does this show us about their relationship?
11. What does money represent to Beneatha, Ruth, Travis, George Murchison, Asagai, and Mr. Lindner? Why are their attitudes about money so different?
12. How do each of the characters react to the news of Mama buying a house? What does this show us about their personalities?
13. What does moving into Clybourne Park mean to each of the characters?

Themes

1. In Act 1 Scene 1, Mama quotes Big Walter as saying, "Seem like God didn't seem fit to give the black man nothing but dreams—but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile." How are the Youngers' dreams worthwhile? Which dreams are worthwhile and which aren't?
2. What does Mama mean when she says in Act 1 Scene 2, "Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money"? Where do we see those ideas in the play? Do the Youngers have freedom?
3. In Act 2 Scene 1, what does Mama mean when she says, "We was going backwards 'stead of forwards"? How was the family going backwards? How does buying the house make them go forward?
4. What is the "American Dream"? Does this dream come true for any of the Younger family members?
5. The title *A Raisin in the Sun* is from a line in the poem "Harlem" by Langston Hughes. The first line reads: "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?" Is this an appropriate title for the play? Why or why not?

Symbolism

1. What does the plant symbolize? Explain your answer. What does the introduction of the plant early in the play foreshadow?
2. What do the characters of George Murchison and Joseph Asagai represent? Who do you think would make a better match for Beneatha? Why?
3. In the Park Square Theatre production, how was the symbolism reflected in the set design?

Contemporary Connections

1. What evidence do you see in today's society of discriminatory practices in housing? In education?
2. Walter Lee is deeply frustrated by the lack of opportunities he has to advance as a black man in America. What evidence do you see of this frustration today?
3. What generational conflicts about race relations do you see today?
4. According to the Pew Research Center, the wealth of white households was eight times the median wealth of black households in 1983, compared with 13 times the wealth in 2013. What social/political policies have contributed to that difference? What actions need to be done to equalize this?