A Raisin In the Sun
Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Literary Text: A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry (Random House 1994 edition)

Summary

Walter and Ruth Younger and their son Travis live with Walter’s mother, Lena, and sister Beneatha, in a small, poverty stricken apartment in south Chicago. Lena receives an insurance check for ten thousand dollars, enough money to finally pull the family out of the slums, which Walter desperately wants. The play covers a small amount of time in which the family all desire to spend the money in different ways: Walter to open a liquor store with friends and “make their fortune”, Beneatha to go to medical school, and Lena and Ruth to buy a new house. As the family decides how to spend the money, each family member struggles in the white-dominant society to find peace and pride within themselves and their loved ones. A Raisin in the Sun was the first play written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway and is said to have changed American theater forever. Its title comes from Langston Hughes poem titled “Harlem”

Organizational Patterns

Because A Raisin in the Sun is a play it is organized into three untitled acts with accompanying scenes. The first act covers two consecutive mornings in the Younger apartment. The second act picks up on the same day and then skips to a few weeks later, where the rest of act two and three finish in the short time period. Hansberry claims the action to be set sometime between World War II and present (1958) meaning the story could fit in a variety of times and contexts. The structure of a play, being mostly dialogue and stage directions, requires prior understanding of how to read and interpret the text as it greatly differs from prose writing.

Central Question or Enduring Issue

What is the American Dream? The American Dream can loftily be defined as a rags to riches idea and is often associated with immigrants who come to America in search of a better life. A Raisin the Sun takes a different look at the people who live in American cities and struggle to accomplish their dreams of being successful. The personal conflicts of the Younger family effect their idea of the American Dream and how it can be accomplished. Hansberry’s portrayal of how an African American family strives to accomplish this dream poses many more conflicts than it typically perceived, forcing readers to redefine the American Dream for people like the Younger family.

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What defines us? There are many things each character relies on to form their identity. For Walter it is money and social status, both class and the expectations he has of being a father and husband. For Beneatha it is being an educated woman, for Ruth and Lena it is being a mother and for each character it is also being black. Issues such as race, money, family, gender, and societal norms/expectations help shape each of these characters and how they act in response to the situations they are put in. A Raisin in the Sun forces the reader to think about how he or she defines themselves and if they rely on any of these mediums to form their own identity.

Issues related to this Study of Literature

THEME

The Power of Dreams: The entire play centers around dreams, as each character and the Younger family as a whole have a dream they struggle to achieve in their oppressive environment. Even the title of the play refers to a poem written by Langston Hughes, which talks about “dreams deferred.” The family’s mood, both happiness and depression, is effected by the realization of, or failure to attain, each person’s dream. In the end, the family decides to chase the dream of owning a house, since it will benefit and unite the family most. However, the desire for and efforts put into each person’s dreams are what make up the play, and the integrity of each character. This of course ties into the great American Dream and the African families who struggle to attain their own version of it.

Race: One of the biggest themes in the play deals with racism, evident in everyday life in Chicago. The Youngers live in a segregated neighborhood, and work as ‘servants’ to white people, Ruth being a housemaid and Walter as a chauffer. The Youngers obviously lack the opportunities given to white people in order to improve their living situation, as they can barely afford to give Travis money for school or for a treat. The most obvious form of racism is the visit with Karl Lindner who offers to pay off the Youngers from moving into his all-white neighborhood. The Youngers face issues of racism every day and demonstrate how greatly it can affect (for good and bad) them.

Family Relationships: Despite the several hardships the Younger family is forced to endure, in the end the family exemplifies love and strength in their relationships with each other. Being forced to live in such small and unfortunate circumstances, many families may have fallen apart, and the Younger family almost did, but the three generations represented as well as Walter and Ruth’s marriage survive the trying times because they all agree in the end, that family is more important than the individual.
Identity: Easily relatable to the theme of both dreams and race, the idea of identity is prevalent in the play. Both Walter and Beneatha struggle to find their identity (mainly in their gender roles) in their current circumstances. Even Ruth and Lena struggle in their roles of being mothers and how that affects their lives. Walter especially, begins to define himself by the vehicles in which will improve his life, mainly money and social status, but in the end learns that it is his integrity and the choice of his actions in which define him as the man of his house and his family. The issues of finding one’s identity were a particular struggle for African Americans in this time period.

Other themes: Class and generational conflicts, poverty, the human need for self-respect, issues of pride and honor, sex roles, justice, and prejudice and tolerance.

SETTING

The entire action of the play takes place in the Southside of Chicago sometime between WWII and present (1958): namely the 1950’s. During this era, Chicago was strictly divided by race and segregation. The 1950’s are often considered a prosperous time for the United States; a time where blacks were content with their inferior status, and women were happy to stay at home and be housewives. This of course caused great tension in both blacks and women and ultimately led to the great civil rights and feminist movements in the 1960’s. A Raisin in the Sun predates both of these movements, but provides great insight into life during this time period and how it erupted into the 60’s.

POINT OF VIEW

Because A Raisin in the Sun is a play it is read differently than a novel and is meant to be performed before an audience. It is written from a third person objective point of view with the ‘narrator’ giving stage directions to what the characters are doing. Hansberry is often considered the narrator herself because she is the one who chooses exactly what scenes to describe. Point of view does not play a major role in this piece because of the nature of the play, but we do see equal amounts of perspective from all the characters.

TONE

The tone of A Raising in the Sun alternates between somber and ironic. The Youngers live a hard life and to many modern day readers it can be a depressing book to read. The somber tone is seen throughout the play, but Hansberry throws in sarcasm and some tongue-and-cheek in the family’s conversation, particularly Walter and Beneatha’s sibling quarrels. Irony also holds a big part in the overall tone of the play. The most ironic scene is Mr. Lindner explains that his neighbors work hard to achieve their dreams and have a right to see them through—as if the Youngers don’t. There
is also some irony in the sequence of events that follow Mr. Lindner’s departure, that Walter turns down the money but so easily loses it, causing him to call Mr. Lindner’s back the very same day.

ALLUSION

It is rare to discuss *A Raisin in the Sun* without mentioning Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem” which is often printed before the opening act. Hughes was a prominent African American poet during the 1920’s Harlem Renaissance. In his poem he asks if a dream deferred dries up “like a raisin in the sun” or if it explodes. In the play, some are seen as drying up while at the same time Walter is about to explode if their dreams are deferred longer than they already have been.

SYMBOLISM

The main symbol in the play is Mama’s plant. While the plant has struggled to survive over the years, Lena keeps it because it expresses her and is representative of her dream of owning a house with a garden someday. The plant is significant to Lena because she finds beauty in it despite what others say and it has survived the biggest struggles her family has had to face.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Despite being placed in 1950’s, many of the racial, familial or financial struggles presented in the play are still real today for a lot of people. The play hits on difficult subjects that some students may be dealing with in their own lives. This of course depends on the area this play is being studied, but in actuality, the Younger family comes from a one parent home (Lena’s husband recently passed away) where three generations of the family are crammed into small living quarters. The family has to share a bathroom with several other families and deals with an absent landlord. There are rats in the street that children play with and Travis is left to take care of himself most of the time, being forced to sleep on the couch in the main room. The family works at minimum wage to support each other, and especially to help Beneatha through school. Many students may have the same living situation and may find it easy to relate to a number of characters in the play, whether they must support their family financially, or come from a poor home life.

Racism can also be a touchy subject in a classroom for students. For students of color they will most likely have stories of times in which they were the victims of racism, and they may want to share their feelings.
about this. Racism often can make Caucasian students uncomfortable, as they tend to think racism no longer exists.

Other students may react when questioned about their identity and if they rely on money, class status, or other issues to define themselves, and struggle to understand the actions of the characters.

**Vocabulary Issues**

There is some slang/ street language, literary dialect or pronunciation spelling of words to help enrich the language and African culture of the family. There are also some more advanced vocabulary words that student may not recognize. Other than this, the play is simple to read because it is completely conversational. Because it is a play and it lacks many descriptions that the audience would see, the reader must make several inferences and The language itself is reflective of the times and culture of the Youngers and gives great insight into the emotional and mental processes of each character. There are many hidden references into the Chicago lifestyle the Youngers live and the racism they face every day and so it’s important to read details carefully. Vocabulary should give students little to no problem, yet comprehension may be more difficult.

**Background Knowledge**

First and most importantly it will be important to teach students how to read a play. Because the author intends their work to be seen, the reader is put at a disadvantage and must make up through his or her inferences and close examination of dialogue and stage directions. Visualization, summarization, descriptions of characters and setting, props, genre, title, background and theme can all influence how a play is to be read and understood. Instruction and discussion of these elements prior to reading the play is necessary for students to understand and follow along while reading.

The social, economic, and emotional context of the 1950’s as well as the perception of blacks and race during this time period is heavily reflected in the play itself. Student will need to understand that the actions of Mr. Lindner were common and legal during this time period and that the issues raised pre-dated the civil rights and feminist movements of the time. *A Raisin in the Sun* anticipated many of these issues and raises key questions for this time period and what it meant to be an African American. For this reason, Hansberry is accredited with a classic piece of work that greatly helped transition American theater and politics. A study of 1950’s America, and even Hansberry’s life (since the play is somewhat autobiographical) would be recommended prior to reading the play.
Implications for Students of Diversity

Since race is a major theme of the play, ethnic diversity within the classroom will play a major role. Students of different ethnicities may be able to relate and appreciate the play more so than students who have lived in the majority their entire lives. Asking students to share experiences will depend on the individual and the class as a whole and may not be a good idea, yet a general discussion of racism in modern society could be discussed. What are the reasons for racism and how is it evident in the Younger’s life and in today’s society would be important questions to ask. There is also diversity within the African American culture presented in the play as seen in Asagai who is African and in George Murchison, who is considered better than the Younger family. What do these characters add to the play’s diversity?

Economic diversity also plays a major role in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The entire plot of the play seems to revolve around what Lena will do with the insurance check, and the dreams of each member of the Younger family somehow centers around how the money is dispersed. The economic differences between the Younger family and the white people they serve as well as the neighborhood they hope to move into is obvious. Undoubtedly in each classroom there will be economic diversity that students will be able to recognize and relate to. How these situations affect each person, for good or bad, definitely help shape a person’s perspective and accomplishment of their goals and dreams.

Gender Issues

Gender issues are mainly seen in the character of Beneatha. It’s important to remember that *A Raisin in the Sun* was written before feminism really evolved, and so Beneatha struggles to find her identity as a black woman who wants to become a doctor. As a woman she is expected to raise a family and refuse an education, yet she breaks the norms by being ambitious and disciplined. Gender roles in the 1950’s were much more rigid and strict and her decision to continue her education, and later embrace her African heritage, make her stand out among other women. Female expectations and how their roles are played out are comparable to Lena and Ruth who are nurturing and responsible. Walter emphasizes the fact that he is a man and should be the provider, and struggles to feel pride in himself when he fails to do so. Men in this play are seen more negatively: as irresponsible, lacking direction or authority, or even hostile. These may be representative of the time and social expectations, but by the end of the play, the roles become more interchangeable.
Research Issues/Project Ideas

RESEARCH TOPICS

There are a number of research topics that you could have students go to the library and do a write up or project that they present to the class on. A few ideas are: the civil rights movement (and how *A Raisin in the Sun* prepared for that), Nigeria, insurance, living on a budget or financial planning, buying a home, how to achieve financial independence, biographies of important African Americans from the time (Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes or others they find on their own)

PROJECT IDEAS

Playbill design—have the students draw out a playbill advertisement for *A Raisin in the Sun* and present it to the class.

Have the students act out or draw scenes from the play, in which they depict the characters and apartment in the scene.

Ask students to break into ‘family groups’ and divide up the roles: father, mother and children. Give them a budget of $25,000 a year and ask them to plan a budget using the money provided.

Ask students to write a sequel to the play or rewrite the ending and present their ideas to the class.

Debate—ask the students to prepare debate speeches for various topics such as how Mama spends the money, who gets what and why (One student could act as Beneatha, another Walter, and another Ruth) or you could stage a debate between Mr. Lindner and the Youngers as if Mr. Lindner had taken the Youngers to court.

Review or go over Martin Luther King Jr’s “I Have a Dream Speech.” Ask students to compare this to the Langston Hughes poem in the beginning of the play. Which genre reaches more people and which piece of literature works better? Ask the students to write a speech or poem discussing their own dreams and hopes for the future. Have them present their project to the class.

Interviews—Ask students to interview someone who lived during the 1950’s and 60’s. Ask questions about economic, cultural or racial tensions they may have experienced. Ask them to describe how life changed between the two decades and any experiences they may have.

Enrichment Resources

Show the film production (or stage) of *A Raisin in the Sun* and ask students to make comparisons between their reading of the play and

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their watching it. What differences were there? Did the director make changes to the scene? What worked and what didn’t? (This could also be used as a project idea) There are two film versions 1968 and 2008, you could take clips from both and compare or choose one.

Websites on Lorraine Hansberry can provide good information http://aalbc.com/authors/lorraine.htm and http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/corhans.htm are good ones to start with.

This NPR site discusses the success of the play and movie and has clips of interviews with Hansberry, as well as newspaper clippings from when the play was produced in 2001. http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/raisin/

Often A Raisin in the Sun is studied alongside Death of a Salesman because characters from both plays believe money is the key to happiness and struggle through hard times. Both plays read at about the same level and so one could not necessarily replace the other for a struggling student, but a study of the two allow for further reflection of the 1950s America.

A study of electric blues music, a time of rhythm and blues that became popular in 1950’s Chicago would add diversity to a lesson plan and help bring students who may struggle with writing assignments or lack interest into a project. A study of the Chicago Blues Music Festival for more current times would also work. A few musicians big in Chicago at the time included Howlin’ Wolf, Willie Dixon, Jimmy Reed, J.T. Brown, Clifton Chenier, Chuck Berry, Big Walter Horton, and Little Walter. Wikipedia gives a nice overview but there are many resources in Chicago blues music.