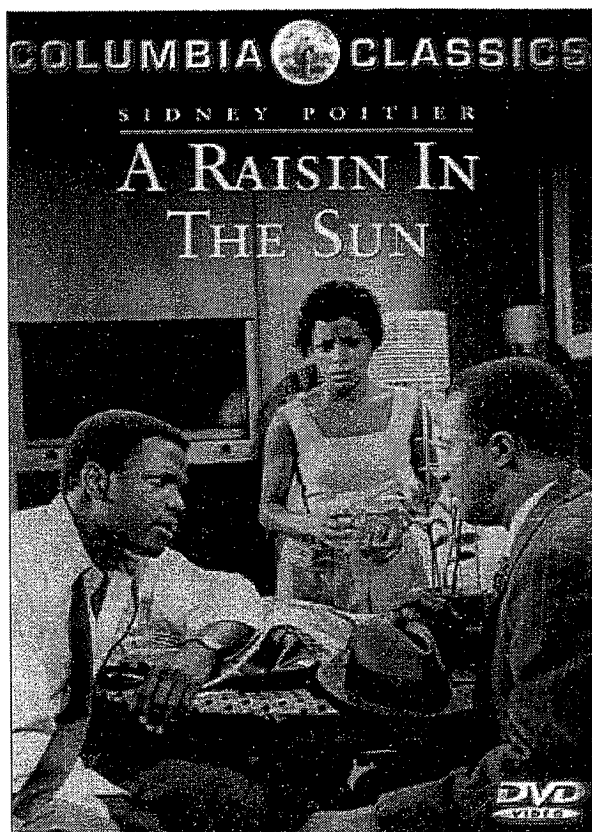


About the Play



Hansberry's recognition of the close relationship between art and propaganda is the reason she chose the environment of the powerless as a backdrop for her work about American culture. Her objective was to be a spokesperson for those who, prior to *Raisin*, had no voice. The thought that anyone outside of the black community would care about the struggles of a black family in Southside Chicago, prior to the opening of *Raisin*, was all but preposterous. Not only did Hansberry choose as the voice of her theme a black family (and a *poor* black family, at that), but she also threaded information about Africa throughout the fabric of her play, mainly through her most stable character, Asagai, Beneatha's suitor from Nigeria.

Through Asagai (and sometimes through Beneatha), the audience gains valuable insight into African history, politics, art, and philosophy. Even the character of George Murchison glorifies, by default, the ancient African civilizations when he derisively mentions "the African past," "the Great West African Heritage," "the great Ashanti empires," "the great Songhay civilizations," "the great sculpture of Benin," and

"poetry in the Bantu." Although George is being facetious, still he uses adjectives that praise and laud the accomplishments of a continent with which many theatergoers, at the time of the opening of *Raisin*, were extremely unfamiliar.

To structure her drama, Hansberry utilizes the traditional classic European dramatic forms: *Raisin* is divided into three conventional acts with their distinct scenes. Yet, Hansberry employs techniques of the absurdist drama—particularly in the scene in which a drunken Walter Lee walks in on Beneatha's African dancing and is able to immediately summon a memory which psychically connects him with an African past that his character, in reality, would not have known. Walter Lee is able to sing and dance and chant as though he had studied African culture.

Hansberry's skillful use of this momentary absurdity makes Walter's performance seem absolutely plausible to her audience. Note also in this work that Hansberry refers to an ancient Greek mythological titan, Prometheus, then makes a reference to an icon of the American entertainment world, Pearl Bailey, and then a reference to Jomo Kenyatta, a major African scholar and politician, yet there is no loss of continuity because the audience is able to immediately perceive the connection.

SYNOPSIS

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 representative of the white neighborhood that blacks are not welcome.

List of Characters

Ruth Younger

The thirtyish wife of Walter Lee Younger and the mother of Travis, their ten-year-old son. Ruth acts as peacemaker in most of the explosive family situations. Very low-key, Ruth reveals her strongest emotions only when she learns of the possibility of their moving to a better neighborhood.

Travis Younger

The ten-year-old son of Walter and Ruth Younger. Living in a household with three generations in conflict, Travis skillfully plays each adult against the other and is, as a result, somewhat "spoiled." In spite of this, he is a likeable child.



Walter Lee Younger

In his middle thirties, he is the husband of Ruth, father of Travis, brother of Beneatha, and son of Lena (Mama) Younger. Walter works as a chauffeur and drinks a bit too much at times. When he discovers that his mother will receive a \$10,000 check from his father's insurance, he becomes obsessed with his dreams of a business venture which will give him financial independence and, in his mind, will make him a more valuable human being.

Beneatha Younger

The twentyish sister of Walter Lee and the daughter of Lena Younger. She is a college student planning to go to medical school. The only family member privileged to have the opportunity for a higher education, she is sometimes a little overbearing in the pride she takes in being an "intellectual."

Lena Younger (Mama)

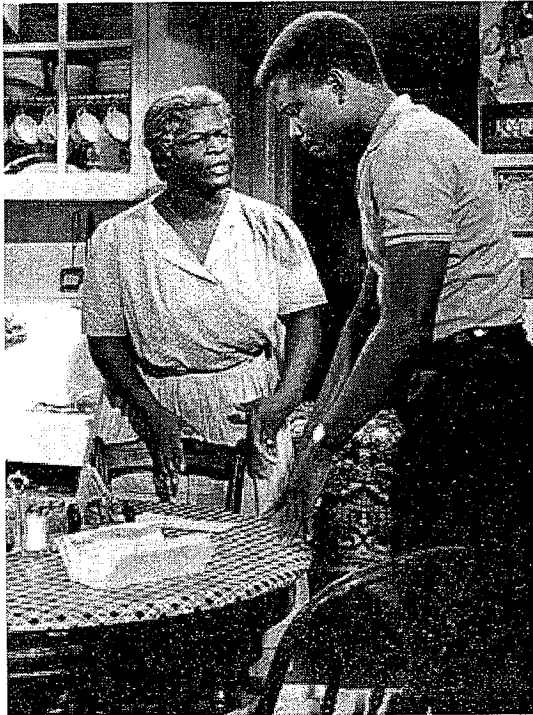
The mother of Walter Lee and Beneatha, mother-in-law of Ruth, and grandmother of Travis. Lena's (Mama's) every action is borne out of her abiding love for her family, her deep religious convictions, and her strong will that is surpassed only by her compassion. Mama's selfless spirit is shown in her plans to use her \$10,000 insurance check for the good of her family, part of which includes plans to purchase a house in a middle-class white neighborhood.

Joseph Asagai

An African college student from Nigeria, Asagai is one of Beneatha's suitors. Mannerly, good looking, and personable, he is well liked by all members of the Younger household.

George Murchison

Beneatha's other boyfriend, he too is a college student. His wealthy background alienates him from the poverty of the Youngers. Easily impressed, Ruth is the only member of the Younger household who naively overlooks George's offensive snobbishness.

**Mrs. Johnson**

Brash and abrasive neighbor of the Youngers, she insensitively points out to the Youngers all the negative repercussions that await them should they decide to move into the white neighborhood.

Karl Lindner

A middle-aged white man, Lindner is the spokesman for the white community into which the Youngers plan to move. He has been sent to persuade the Youngers not to move into the white neighborhood. In fact, he has been authorized by the white community to offer the Youngers a monetary incentive *not* to move in.

Bobo

The somewhat dimwitted friend of Walter Lee who, along with another friend, Willy, plans to invest in Walter Lee's business scheme.

Two Moving Men

Having no speaking parts, they enter at the end of the play to help the Youngers move to their new neighborhood.

Walter Younger

The husband of Lena Younger, father of Walter Lee and Beneatha, and grandfather of Travis. His death before the action of Act I provides the insurance money that will change the lives of the Younger family.

Willy

The unscrupulous "friend" of Walter Lee and Bobo who absconds with all the money for the prospective business venture. Although the audience never meets him, Willy's character is assessed through the dialogue of others.