

"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?

WHAT MAKES HUGHES' POEM IMPORTANT?



Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" exhibits how powerful subject matter can produce what Ezra Pound defines poetry as being "news that stays news." The poem begins by questioning, "What happens to a dream deferred?" This draws on the black experience of the American Dream. The poem questions the position of an oppressed people and the subject has remained topical ever since the 1930s when Hughes wrote the poem. The poem does not define what exactly the "dream" is: economic equality, respect, dignity or forty acres and a mule? Thirty years after the publication of Hughes' poem in a speech illustrative of the impact of Hughes' question, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. defined the "dream."

A "raisin in the sun" is a charged simile. It's one of the most powerful images in Black Literature. Lorraine Hansberry used this line as the title of her play about the black experience in America, which shows how powerful the image remained for generations after Hughes. Normally one would expect a grape to be left in the sun in order to produce a raisin. Here the raisin, an object already drained, is left in the sun. The image brings to mind slavery and sharecropping institutions that forced blacks to work in the fields under the sun. The last line of the poem—"Or does it explode?"—has been and remains charged with meaning for blacks. It was meaningful for the blacks beaten and terrorized as they went on "freedom rides," bus trips from the South to Washington D.C. to demand equality; for the SNCC; for the blacks attacked by police in Birmingham, Alabama during the sixties, and for all African Americans facing inequality today.

About the Playwright: Lorraine Hansberry



Lorraine Vivian Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* exploded onto the American theater scene on March 11, 1959, with such force that it garnered for the then-unknown black female playwright the Drama Circle Critics Award for 1958-59--in spite of such luminous competition as Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet*, and Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*

Since its Broadway debut, *Raisin* has been translated into over thirty languages, including the language of the eastern German Sorbische minority, and has been produced in such culturally diverse places as China, the former Czechoslovakia, England, France, and the former Soviet Union. Its universal appeal defies, in retrospect, some of the early critics' views of *Raisin* as being simply "a play about Negroes." Although *Raisin* addresses specific problems of a black family in Southside Chicago, it also mirrors the very real problems of *all* people. In an interview with social historian Studs Terkel, Hansberry explains, ". . . in order to create the

universal, you must pay very close attention to the specific."

Lorraine Hansberry was born in Chicago on May 19, 1930, the last of four children born to the independent, politically active, Republican, and well-to-do Carl and Nannie Perry Hansberry. Hospitals were required at that time to list the racial identities of newborns; however, upon receiving their daughter's birth certificate, Hansberry's parents crossed out the word "Negro" and wrote "Black," an act of minor significance but certainly a testament to the Afrocentric ideology that the elder Hansberrys bequeathed to their children.

Although 1930 is the year that most Americans associate with the Great Depression, Hansberry's family remained economically solvent through this period. By 1930s standards, the Hansberrys were certainly upper middle class, but by the standards of most Chicago blacks, many of whom lived in abject poverty at this time, they would have been considered "rich."

Hansberry was never comfortable with her "rich girl" status, identifying instead with the "children of the poor." Admiring the feistiness exhibited by these children who were so often left alone, Hansberry often imitated their maturity and independence. They wore housekeys around their necks, symbols of their "latchkey children" status, so Hansberry decided to wear keys around her neck--any keys that she might find, including skate keys--so that she too might be thought of as one of them. The characters in *Raisin* do not know the middle-class comforts of the Hansberry family; in her plays, Hansberry focuses on the class of black people whom she cared most about, even though her knowledge of these people was, at best, peripheral.

Though Hansberry grew up on the south side of Chicago in the Woodlawn neighborhood, she never lived in a "Younger" household, although she closely observed such households throughout her childhood.

Hansberry's father, Carl, not only established one of the first black savings banks in Chicago, but he was also a successful real estate businessman. Credited with developing the concept of the "kitchenette," the studio apartment, he was able to maximize all available space, converting a large area into several smaller areas.

The family then moved into an all-white neighborhood, where they faced racial discrimination. Hansberry attended a predominantly white public school while her parents fought against segregation. Always politically active, Hansberry's father engaged in a legal battle against a racially restrictive covenant that attempted to prohibit African-American families from buying homes in a white area where no other blacks lived. The legal struggle over the Hansberry's move to the neighborhood led to the landmark Supreme Court case of *Hansberry v. Lee*, 311 U.S. 32 (1940). Though victors in the Supreme Court, Hansberry's family was subjected to what Hansberry would later describe as a "hellishly hostile white neighborhood."

Shortly afterward, Hansberry herself was nearly killed by a brick hurled through a window by angry whites. Hansberry remembers her mother's "standing guard" many times with a loaded gun in order to protect her family from the violence of racism. Such traumatic memories were probably a part of the reason that Hansberry incorporated into her first play the theme of a black family's courageous decision to move into a hostile and new environment.

When Hansberry enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, she had every intention of remaining there for the four years necessary for graduation. However, after two years, her growing interest in the arts took her other places for brief periods. She attended the Art Institute of Chicago, Roosevelt College, the New School of Social Research in New York, and studied art in Guadalajara, Mexico. In New York, she worked on the staff of Paul Robeson's *Freedom* magazine, hung around the theater, read plays, and honed her craft. Several critics have noted that Hansberry's artwork, her drawings and sketches, is almost as noteworthy as her writing.

Her father's death at the age of fifty-one touched Hansberry deeply; she often said that it was perhaps her father's constant battle with the forces of racism that hastened his early death. Interestingly, the cause and effect of much of the action in *Raisin* evolves as a consequence of the death of Big Walter, a character whom the audience never sees, although much of the dialogue contains references to him.

Hansberry's own untimely death of pancreatic cancer at the age of thirty-four on January 12, 1965, left a void in American theater and in the circle of black writers. Jean Carey Bond, in an article in *Freedomways* magazine, says of Hansberry: "[Her] brief sojourn was, in one of its dimensions, a study in pure style. Born into material comfort, yet baptized in social responsibility; intensely individual in her attitudes and behavior, yet sensitive to the wills and aspirations of a whole people; a lover of life, yet stalked by death--she deliberately fashioned out of these elements an articulate existence of artistic and political commitment, seasoned with that missionary devotion which often intensifies the labors of the mortally ill."

Hansberry left behind three unfinished plays and an unfinished semi-autobiographical novel.