Lorraine Hansberry who died of cancer in 1965, while her second play *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* was still running, left several works in progress, as well as some completed plays that had not been produced. Her last three dramas - *Les Blancs*, *The Drinking Gourd* and *What Use Are Flowers?* - are named under the title *Lorraine Hansberry : The Collected Last Plays*.1

*Les Blancs* is set in a mission compound - a hospital established in Africa by a European minister - and in the hut of a tribal leader. The play involves conflicting ideas during a period of change in Sub-Sahara Africa. The Blacks who once asked peacefully for freedom from the colonialists are now staging a revolution. The play focuses on three Black African brothers who reveal different attitudes towards Africa. The *Drinking Gourd* reveals the horrors and cruelties of slavery and it is, in Hansberry's own words, "a serious treatment of family relationships by a slave-owning family and their slaves."2
In *What Use Are Flowers?* Hansberry has an old hermit who has lived away from civilization for twenty years. He finds some wild children, who before an unnamed holocaust, were brought to the edge of the forest by someone who wanted the human race to continue. The hermit sets about the uneasy task of teaching the children the rudiments of civilization.

*Les Blancs* offers Hansberry's most detailed and penetrating analysis of colonialism and neocolonialism in Africa. Its centrality in the Hansberry canon is to found in that it expands the commentary begun by Joseph Asagai in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Both the structure of the play and direct statements by the major characters link the evils committed by whites against blacks to ones committed by whites against whites. This implies that neither the oppression of blacks nor their resistance to it are unique or exotic.

Most critics have noted the parallels between *Les Blancs* and *Hamlet* which deserve to be explored in detail, as they help clarify Hansberry's view on colonialism. The parallels between the two plays help to dispel several of the misconceptions about Hansberry's intentions. The worst of it is John Simons's assertion that *Les Blancs* "does its utmost to justify the slaughter of whites by blacks." This misconception is shared by a *Playboy* critic who contended that *Les Blancs* "advocated genocide of nonblacks as a solution to the race
Viewed from the perspective of Hamlet, the struggle of the black protagonist, Tshembe Matoseh, against the colonial powers exploiting his country, Zatembe, is a tragic and bitter necessity, the aim of which is the ending of injustice, not the destruction of a race.

The resemblances between the main plots of Hamlet and Les Blancs are by no means casual. Both Hamlet and Tshembe Matoseh return from abroad for their father's funerals. Both are confronted by spirits who demand that they act quickly to rid their countries of grave injustices. Tshembe's spirit, unlike Hamlet's, is not that of his father, but that of a woman warrior who shares his father's values and who reminds him of the colonial power's injustices. With her urgent prompting, Tshembe recalls not only the seizure of his people's land and toil but also the ruthless cutting away of the traditional and legitimate power of his father, Abioseh Matoseh, whose position became so enfeebled that he could not openly seek redress for the rape of his wife by a white colonist, Major George Rice. The spirit then insists upon the duty Tshembe shares with his brothers, Abioseh and Eric, to be their "father's sons" (98). Further, the spirit reminds Tshembe of the underground resistance movement that his father began.

Another similarity between the plots is that both Hamlet and Tshembe procrastinate and take a long time to
perform their duties. Meanwhile several innocent and not-so-
innocent people die because the two young intellectuals have such
great difficulty determining what their commitments are and how they should be performed. Like Hamlet, Tshembe is also 
outraged by a sexual act involving his mother. But he knows that, having been forced by Major Rice, she bore no guilt for it. She died as a result of it losing her life while giving birth to Eric. In fact, Tshembe might justifiably equate her rape with the rape of his country at the hands of European invaders.

Tshembe Matoseh, like his Danish counterpart, makes mistakes that lead to the deaths of people he cares for. He convinces a resistance leader, Ntali, to halt his attacks long enough for a respected, non-violent African leader Amos Kumalo (Jomo Kenyatta) to talk to the colonial government about a peaceful solution. But he finds that the treacherous government has put Kumalo in jail and his own treacherous brother, Abioseh, betrays Ntali to Major Rice. When he finally decides that armed resistance is the only way to end the exploitation and degradation of his people, Tshembe finds that the first person he must kill is Abioseh, a relative even closer to him than Claudius to Hamlet. However, the shot he fires at Abioseh attracts the attention of government forces outside and in the shoot-out that follows Mme. Neilsen, who matters almost as much
to Tshembe as Queen Gertrude does to her possibly too-loving son, is killed.

Les Blancs, like Hamlet, thus ends in a bloody tragic situation that nevertheless gives the audience the impression that the condition of the country is painfully on its way to being corrected. Hansberry mixes the supernatural with the realistic in order to increase dramatic intensity and to present psychological and symbolic truths rather than to express a genuine belief in a spirit world, even though spirits were widely believed in the society the playwright depicts.

Shakespeare makes penetrating observations about honour, loyalty, passion, justice, the tragic nature of existence and so on. Likewise, Hansberry's story of a twentieth-century African Hamlet enables her to comment not only on colonialism in Africa—and, by extension, racism and exploitation throughout the modern world—but also on the exceedingly painful conflicts that sometimes arise between love and duty, the meaning and desirability of equality, and the true significance of culture and "civilization."

Hansberry's extensive use of parallels to Hamlet in Les Blancs is highly creative. First, the device permits her to pay indirect but glowing tributes to one of the finest products of English and European culture. This indicates
Hansberry's keen awareness that Europe has created far more than colonialism and that much of what Europe has done remains valuable to the whole world including Africa. This appreciation is even stated explicitly in the play by Tshembe: "Europe in spite of all her crimes -- has been a great and glorious star in the night. Other stars shone before it -- and will again with it" (125). Second, having praised the highest ideals and achievements of European Civilization, Hansberry can easily point to the number of ways in which the European colonial powers and their offshoot, the United States, are currently failing to honour or live up to them. When Charlie Morris, an American journalist who has been seeking a dialogue with Tshembe, exposes his failure to understand the African's reference to the fierce woman spirit summoning him to fight for his people, Tshembe reminds this representative of Western culture that

When you knew her you called her Joan of Arc! Queen Esther! La Passionara! And you did know her once, you did know her! But now you call her nothing, because she is dead for you! She does not exist for you! (81)

As Tshembe rightly implies, one of the tragic ironies of history is that many of the countries that fought battles to establish the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity within their
own boundaries have fought battles to suppress those principles in other countries solely to satisfy their lust for power. An African nationalist upholding these values may thus be judged a truer heir to the mantle of Hamlet than European colonizers or their American counterparts. By paralleling the European drama of Hamlet with the African fable of the thinking hyena, Hansberry affirms that wisdom and folly are not the exclusive property of any culture and that African culture is one of the "stars that shone before" European culture "and will again with it" (125).

Margaret Wilkerson points out that the parallels to Hamlet are obvious. But what is more appropriate is the invoking of the aid of an African frame of reference "Hansberry instinctively recognizing the inappropriateness of relying only on a Western literary reference point, provides Tshembe with another metaphor - from African lore - Modingo, the wise hyena who lived between the lands of the elephants and the hyenas." As Hansberry tells Patricia Marks, she agrees with those African leaders who want to take the best of what both Europe and Africa have produced "and try to create a superior civilization out of the synthesis." And her African play provides an excellent example of how such a synthesis can be achieved.

In Les Blancs, Old African myths add depth and meaning to two rites of passage--death and initiation. When
Tshembe asks Eric to tell him of their father in his last hours, Eric says, "He was just an old savage who went to his death rubbing lizard powder on his breast ..." (57). In African religions, the lizard symbolizes the messenger who brings the news from God that men should die. Generally the lizard was overtaken by another messenger - usually the slow chameleon - who brought news of resurrection and immortality. After the Matoseh brothers paint their cheeks with yellow ochre and prepare to dance and shake bone rattles (60), they go to the funeral ceremony, not only recognizing their father's death but celebrating his immortality.

Not only does Lorraine Hansberry use in *Les Blancs* African myths to enhance rites of passage, but she employs old folk tales to heighten the drama of the revolution. She provides a metaphor from African lore, from Modingo. In African myth, the hyena evolves from dogs and represents God's means of showing his intentions. Ntali, one of the African insurgents, explains matters to Tshembe in an effort to engage him in their struggle. Modingo was asked by the hyenas, the earliest inhabitants of the jungle to settle their territorial quarrel with the elephants who demand more space because of their size. Modingo, whose name means "One who Thinks Carefully Before He Acts" (95) understands the arguments offered by both and refuses to join either side until he has thought over the matter. While he thinks, the hyenas
wait too long. Meanwhile, the elephants move in and drive the hyenas from the jungle altogether:

That is why the hyena laughs until this day and why it is such terrible laughter: because it was such a bitter joke that was played upon them while they "reasoned." (95)

In his folk tale, Ntali obviously equates the elephant with the white man occupying the land. Basically a symbol of goodness, the elephant is also associated with men and murder. The elephant therefore is both the victim and the embodiment of evil men. In Peter's tale white people in Africa are victimized by their own narrow prejudice and personify huge, selfish beasts crashing through the jungle. Hyenas, on the other hand, are sacred and holy, having evolved from dogs, which were used as a sacrifice to God. The hyena which is associated with the noble black man represents God's means of showing his intentions but he also signifies God's gift to man.

At the end of the fable which Ntali unfolds in a vain attempt to enlist Tshembe in the resistance, Tshembe replies, "Ntali, the Europeans have a similar tale which concerns a prince..." (95). He thus emphasizes the connection between the fable and Hamlet. Appropriately, among the jungle sounds that begin the play and occur frequently throughout,
"the unearthly 'laughter' of a hyena is heard" (41). In this way, the figures of Modingo and Hamlet stand side by side throughout the play and are the symbolic poles unholding its structure.

Even though the tale of Modingo appears to combine the story of Kenyatta, that of Shakespeare, and a liberal dose of Hansberry, its form is unmistakably that of the African animal fable. Stage directions inform us that it "is not merely told but acted out vividly in the tradition of oral folk art" (95). This indicates that Hansberry includes the fable not only for its thematic relevance but also, more importantly, as a tribute to African artistic tradition.$.

By placing examples of African oral folk art, in a play based to a large extent on European drama, Hansberry suggests that in terms of thematic and aesthetic value African oral tradition competes with and blends with the European written tradition. In Toward the Decolonization of African Literature, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie, and Ihechukwe Madubuike argue that American oral art has been underrated by Euro-centric critics and that it has been denigrated by using tools of judgement drawn from inappropriate narrative conventions. While Hansberry points out that American art and European art may not be so different in thematic and aesthetic value and parallels and blends African and European
art, her juxtaposition of African religion and European-centred Catholicism proves far less favourable to either culture. This is consistent with Hansberry's sceptical view of nearly all religions and her strong preference for rational humanism.

The idea that Hansberry supports is a kind of synthesis between African and European cultures, an idea later conclusively proved by James Livingstone who says "only recently have Westerners begun again to recognize the degree to which great civilizations have always been the product of mestizos. Certainly ancient Greece and Rome are prime examples, developing out of the mixture of peoples and ideas, drawing creatively from many different sources."12

In Les Blancs, primarily out of respect for his father and not because he is a believer, Tshembe prepares to take part in an African religious ceremony "to chase away the spirits of evil that have taken (his) father away" (60). To do so, he has to don "a great imposing garment of animal skins" (61). He is then confronted by his brother Abioseh dressed as a Catholic priest. According to stage directions, one is "in the mystical robes of medieval and contemporary Africa -- the other in the mystical robes of medieval and contemporary Europe" (61). Later as their clash continues, Abioseh "intones a prayer in ringing liturgical Latin" while
Tshembe "begins, with all his power, to join in the offstage funeral chant" (63). At this point, the stage directions again mockingly equate African and European religions by noting that "the two barbaric religious cries play one against the other in vigorous and desperate counterpoint" (63).

In two of the most eloquent and insightful speeches in Hansberry's works, Tshembe delineates with great precision the role that race has - and has not - played in colonialism. The first of these speeches is a response to Charlie Morris's accusation that he hates all white men:

"I do not "hate" all white men -- but I desperately wish that I did. It would make everything infinitely easier! But I am afraid that, among other things, I have seen the slums of Liverpool and Dublin and the caves above Naples. I have seen Dachau and Anne Frank's attic in Amsterdam. I have seen too many raw-knuckled Frenchmen coming out of the Metro at dawn and too many hungry Italian children to believe that those who raided Africa for three centuries ever "loved" the white race either." (78)

In listing what he has seen, Tshembe selects examples from the major colonizing powers and demonstrates that their acts of oppression in Africa on the supposed bases
of not only racial but also cultural and religious superiority are matched by domestic acts of oppression. Judged from the African viewpoint, the greatest evil of colonization may be its violation of the principle of reciprocity. According to the Ghanaian novelist, Ayi Kwei Armah, the traditional African "way" is founded on reciprocity. This principle is defined in Armah's provocative novel Two Thousand Seasons as follows:

Reciprocity. Not merely taking, not merely offering. Giving, but only to those from whom we receive in equal measure. Receiving but only from those to whom we give in reciprocal measure. How easy, how just, the way.  

In return for all that European colonial nations took, they offered only the pseudo-gifts of their own cultures and religions in the effort to control the minds of the people whose bodies they had subjected by force. They needed to convince only a handful of Africans of the value of these pseudo-gifts to achieve the result they wanted. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Kenya's leading novelist and dramatist, describes the process thus:

The effect of the colonial presence was to create an elite who took on the tongue and adopted the style of the conquerors. They hearkened to the voice of the missionary's God, cried Hallelujah, and raised their eyes to Heaven. They
derided the old gods and they too recoiled with a studied (or genuine) horror from the primitive rites of their people. The rest, for the colonial system by its very nature has room only for a few, were often deprived of their land and then herded into the settler's farms, or to urban centres to become hewers of wood and drawers of water. The first group lost contact with their roots. They despised anything that smelt of the primitive past. It is this group mostly whom Achebe must have had in mind when he cried: 'If I were god, I would regard as the very worse our acceptance - for whatever reason - of racial inferiority.'

Abioseh's acceptance of the pseudo-gifts of European culture and religion is so complete that it is obvious that he would cling to them even after the Europeans were driven from his country. This emphasizes one of the main reasons for the neocolonialism that has plagued so many nominally independent African countries. This is a neocolonialism that would put European culture, instead of African culture, in schools. It would keep African countries tied economically to the former European "masters." Hansberry, foreseeing all the dangers of this neocolonialism in its incipient stage, not only foreshadows them in the figure of Abioseh but also
predicts what would eventually happen to Jomo Kenyatta and how the Kenyan government would, in Ntali's words, "trade white overseers for black!" (97). Given the enormous threat posed by neocolonialism, she recognizes that for the revolution to achieve a lasting success a dedicated radical like Tshembe will have no alternative but to kill a treacherous Eurocentric brother like Abioseh.

While permitting the wife of the Schweitzer-like Reverend Neilsen to acknowledge that "he was a good man ... in many ways" who "did some amazing things" (125), Hansberry is ultimately harsher in her judgement of him than Gunther was of Schweitzer. Probably she views him as painfully representative of the givers of pseudo-gifts. That is, he is one of those who seek to justify unjustifiable colonialism. Idealistic and dedicated to brotherhood, Reverend Neilsen is totally incapable of reciprocity because that depends on a recognition of equals. According to Marta Gotterling, one of the doctors at Neilsen's Mission Hospital, Reverend Neilsen plays the role of Big Daddy not only to the Africans, but also to his staff. While she views this as a positive trait, the audience is forced to see it in an increasingly negative light, especially when the Reverend tells a group of Africans seeking his support for their petition for independence, "Children, children ... my dear children ... Go home to your huts before you make me angry. Independence indeed!" (115).
The Reverend Neilsen has never been able to forgive his wife for delivering Aquah's child, Eric, or acknowledging his existence because "Eric was the living denial of everything he stood for: the testament to three centuries of rape and self-acquittal" (125). Likewise, he has never been able to acknowledge his mission's role in legitimizing exploitation and the destruction of the subject people.

Despite the overwhelming number of violations of reciprocity she depicts in Les Blancs, Hansberry does not preclude from consideration the possibility of true reciprocity existing between a European and an African. She includes several examples of European-African reciprocal relationships that demonstrate the attitudes and behaviour that adhere to the traditional African ethic as defined by Ayi Kwei Armah. Two of the reciprocal relationships involve Mme. Neilsen who is willing to learn from Africans as well as teach contrasts to her husband's assumptions that wisdom flows only from him and that Africans have nothing of value to teach in return. As Mme. Neilsen describes it, her relationship with Aquah is a perfect example of reciprocal education:

Yes, Aquah, She was the dearest friend that I have had in Africa. It was she who taught me the drums and to speak the language of the Kwí people. I taught her a little English in return and a
smattering of French. We were just getting
on to German when she died. (51)

Thus learning and teaching are also reciprocal as is Mme.
Neilsen's relationship with Tshembe. Each gives and receives
affection. Each has a genuine interest in the other's culture.
Moreover, the two of them have almost exchanged countries
so that Tshembe can remark that "it seems your mountains have
become mine, Madame," and Mme. Neilsen can assert that "our
country needs warriors, Tshembe Matoseh" (126).

Charlie, having come to Zatembe because he had a
sentimental, romanticized image of Neilsen and his mission,
leaves apparently committed to supporting the African struggle
for liberation, because he tells Tshembe, "I've heard you"
(123). Tshembe also has to be converted from liberalism to
a much stronger commitment to change. Once this
transformation occurs and he sees a similar transformation in
Charlie, he can finally call the journalist by his first name,
indicating that they now feel a reciprocal respect for each
other.

Hansberry's own highly creative synthesis of forms
and value from both cultures and races in Les Blancs makes
it one of the most scathing and enduring indictments of
colonialism and associated social injustices.
Hansberry's television play, *The Drinking Gourd*, is a highly charged social study of three levels of antebellum Southern society—planters, slaves, and poor whites. Robert Nemiroff observes as follows in "A Critical Background":

Her object was not to pose black against white, to create black heroes and white villains, but to locate the sources of human behavior, of both heroism and villainy, within the slave society. (152)

Interestingly, *The Drinking Gourd* takes its title from a spiritual, a song of the Underground Railroad which derived, in turn, from the old slave metaphor for the Big Dipper which points to the North Star, the symbol and beacon to freedom for many an escaped slave seeking his way North in the Southern night. Songs like "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and "Steal Away to Jesus" are ingenious examples of the "signal" songs employed by the slaves to pass on secret messages and double meanings concealed in "innocent" imagery.

In the play, the links between personal choices and social conditions are evident throughout. In the Southern United States before the Civil War, the most satisfying achievement was to establish a thriving plantation. For Hiram Sweet, this success is indeed sweet and he continually recalls both to himself and to others how he started thirty-five years earlier...
"with four slaves and fifty dollars" and "planted the first seed (himself) and supervised (his) own baling" (181). He is proud that his hard work and ambition have paid off in the terms his society has declared to be the highest.

His son Everett too is ambitious, although a bit weaker-willed because he has grown up in the shadow of his powerful father. Everett's path to fulfilling his ambition is somewhat different from his father's as a result of his different personality and different social conditioning. His ambition is to exist exclusively as a gentleman among gentlemen "with an overseer as his instrument" (206) for directing and doing the dirty work in the fields for him. Both the market and the soil burned out by cotton required continually increased productivity to maintain the same level of profits. Maria Sweet's pride and ambition at times seem to equal those of her husband Hiram and her son Everett. But like so many women of her society, she can only fulfill her drive for power through a man.

Maria's slave counterpart, Rissa, also uses manipulation and indirection to achieve her ends although her ambitions are even more restricted and curtailed than Maria's. Having long ago abandoned all hope of gaining freedom or even a tolerable life for herself, her ambition is solely to get her son Hannibal out of the fields, where he is headed for a
dangerous clash with the driver Coffin and into the house as a servant where he would not only be somewhat safer but also be better fed and better clothed. To do this Rissa has been working on the nostalgic feelings of her master Hiram. She takes advantage of every opportunity to remind him of the time when she was one of the four slaves who helped him establish the plantation. She is a strong woman who did at least as much as Hiram to make the plantation a success although she has never received a fraction of the prestige or the profits that he did gained for the labour.

Rissa's son Hannibal has a level of ambition that rivals and probably exceeds that of the man who calls himself Hannibal's master. However, his attempts to satisfy that ambition by receiving education and by preparing to escape to the North, as his brother Isaiah may have, demonstrate the dangers that face a man whose ambitions are not sanctioned by "his" society. When his desire to struggle against his exploitation and improve his knowledge of the world and his life bring him to a confrontation with Everett Sweet, Hannibal finds how cruel and absolute are the restrictions placed on his ambition. The strength of his will and his desire for freedom are then clearly shown by his readiness to try to escape from the plantation even after having been blinded. Personal will can be exerted even under the most adverse
social conditions, but a very high price may be extorted for it. Hannibal is presented not simply as an individual but as a representative of a large number of slaves willing to pay any price for gain freedom.

No less than any of the others, Zeb Dudley, the poor white farmer, is a man of ambition. Ironically, however, his desire to build a plantation bigger than Hiram Sweet's leads him to become a pitiful tool of Everett Sweet. The moment Everett Sweet arrives and offers Dudley a job as overseer, he is instantly ready to abandon his project. When his first act as an overseer, whipping Hannibal for his general behaviour rather than for any specific offence, meets with Everett's disapproval, Zeb proudly asserts that "there's some things have to be left up to me if you want this here plantation run proper, Mister Sweet" (206). However, when he is later compelled to blind Hannibal, an act he finds totally abhorrent, Zeb takes refuge from his painful guilt-ridden acquiescence in the classic excuse of so many arrested Nazis, "I was just following instructions ..." (212). At this point, he gladly accepts the dehumanizing role as an instrument, a role which repelled him once. Ambition thus is manifestly a powerful part of human nature. It can have strongly beneficial or destructive consequences, depending on the social framework in which it is exercised.
Another aspect of human nature that takes different forms in different societies is in the roles ascribed to men and women and the concepts of manhood and womanhood that define these roles. Several concepts of manhood appear in The Drinking Gourd. Hiram Sweet's idea of manhood significantly involves violence, power, possession, and family tradition. He tells Rissa about his most treasured possession, an old weapon he has kept in perfect condition: "My father gave me this gun and I remember feeling - I was fourteen - I remember feeling, I'm a man now. A true man. I shall go into the wilderness and not seek - my fortune -- but make it!" (187). Thus, after Hiram's death, when Rissa takes the gun out of the cabinet to help her son Hannibal, a new family tradition based on mutual affection and survival is established in place of the older, more destructive one. Even more significantly, Hiram's selfish vision of manhood is symbolically replaced by Hannibal's. It entails resistance to all the dehumanizing forces of the plantation system. Before being blinded, he had intended to "come back" and buy Sarah and "Mama too, if she's still livin" (176). After his blinding, he too is preparing to go into a wilderness, as Hiram did when he was fourteen. But he will be sharing his journey with Sarah and Joshua who must do as much for him as he does for them.
The myth of womanhood is discussed thoroughly by Robert Nemiroff in "A Critical Background" - the idealized, comforting and ultimately distorted image of the Mammy. As Nemiroff explains, the image is that of "the Black Mother figure, patient, long-suffering, devoted and indomitable, heroic if need be but above all loving. And forgiving" (156). Rissa, who indeed possesses most of these virtues, is not inhumanly forgiving. When Hiram's son blinds and tortures her son, she neither pardons him for not preventing this cruelty nor places his welfare above that of Hannibal's. She sweeps away his defence that "some things do seem to be out of the power of my hands after all" and that "Other men's rules are a part of my life" with the bitter rejoinder, "Why? Ain't you Master? How can a man be master of some men and not at all of others -" (215).

When Hiram lies dying outside her cabin she refuses to go to his aid, thus taking revenge on him for his temerity in daring to assume the role of God over her and her son. Notably, Rissa is not the only slave to turn her back on this supposedly kind master. As "he cries out for help... one by one the lights of the cabins go out and doors close" (215), thus turning his death into a form of collective revenge. Although Hiram is not directly involved in Hannibal's blinding and torturing, in a sense he is indirectly responsible for it.
He actively supports the widespread prohibition of learning among slaves because he, like other slave owners, recognizes the dangers of education.

Sarah's love for Hannibal is strong. In spite of being the most overlooked character in the play, Sarah is noteworthy for her growth from a timid girl; She is terrified at the thought of escaping or even making the slightest gesture of defiance in front of whites. But holding her terror in check, she can seek, gun in hand, to lead a blind man and a boy to freedom with her. The reason for this growth is obviously her affection for Hannibal. At the play's beginning she is afraid of what might happen to Hannibal as a result of his recklessness in constantly challenging the authority of the driver Coffin. Sarah's full recognition of how evil slavery is, is revealed in her song "Raise a Ruckus," sung in the slave quarters far from prying whites:

```
My old mistress promise me
Mmm Mmm Mmm
(Mimicking)
"Say-rah! When I die I'm going to set you free!"
Mmm Mmm Mmm
But a dose of poison kinda helped her along
Mmm Mmm Mmm
And may the devil sing her funeral song!
(Sarah pantomimes gleefully helping "Mistress" along to her grave with a shoving motion of her hand. (197)
```
Though Sarah is afraid at first to run away with Hannibal, what changes her is her horror at the punishment Everett inflicts on Hannibal. Love makes Sarah heroic. She, Hannibal, and Joshua, for all their individual weaknesses, show a collective strength as a family that gives them hope for survival in a world dedicated to their destruction. Rissa is convinced that her other son Isaiah died while escaping, although Hannibal disputes this. She is terrified that a similar fate awaits Hannibal. When she learns that she is wrong about the possibility of gaining even minimal security in slavery, however, she unhesitantly and ruthlessly assists, and perhaps even plans, her son's and grandson's escape in the company of Sarah.

One of the major sources of conflict between Hiram and Everett is the education that Hiram provides so that Everett might acquire a social polish and an understanding of the world that Hiram lacks. As Hansberry develops it, thirst for knowledge, another highly influential aspect of human nature, is governed by a multitude of ironies in plantation society. In the case of Hiram and Everett, the irony, not restricted to the antebellum South, is one of a self-made man seeking to give his son advantages he never had and then finding that possessing the advantages makes the son despise him.
Hannibal has carefully analysed every element of slavery. He knows that his labour is being stolen from him for another's benefit. He is acutely aware of the meaning of every step he takes. He knows full well what would happen if he is discovered studying with Tommy. But he feels that literacy is worth any price. After being blinded, he still feels it is worthwhile to try to escape.

Irony abounds when, after being caught taking lessons from Tommy and knowing a hideous punishment is imminent, Hannibal taunts Zeb, "I kin read and you can't" (210). This statement infuriates Zeb because it establishes Hannibal's superiority in one respect which undercuts Zeb's only claim to any form of superiority - his whiteness. Hannibal's education is challenging to Everett who has constructed his self-image on the basis of his education. He bitterly resents that "a monkey-faced idiot!" can perform any part of his elite accomplishments even if on a demonstrably lower level (209). The severity of the punishment he metes out is perhaps as much in response to his wounded ego as it is to his slave owner's fear of the effects of education on a slave.

A black cultural achievement that has attracted greater attention is that of music. Spirituals, work songs, hollers, and chants play a central role in slave culture and
have laid the groundwork for jazz, blues, and rock and roll. They demonstrate some of the most striking and significant ways in which blacks continued to assert their right to call their soul their own in the midst of a society bent on soul theft and their destruction. As Hansberry states, both music and religion were often used by slaves as part of a cultural warfare against planters. This cultural warfare is highly explicit in the song, "Raise a Ruckus," which allows even persons as timid as Sarah to express aggression and anger against their "masters" and "mistresses" in the privacy of the quarters.

With this television play, Hansberry makes it extremely difficult for any American to forget or deny, as she puts it, "that their Federal Union and the defeat of the Slavocracy and the negation of slavery as an institution is an admirable fact of American life."  

Hansberry's response to Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* is shown in her short play *What Use Are Flowers?* This work demonstrates her awareness of the deep chord that Beckett's vision of absurdity had struck in herself and other intellectuals of her time. Hansberry's play everywhere engages Beckett's on the most profound level, posing image against image, feeling against feeling, vision against vision. The confrontation between Beckett and Hansberry begins with their differing responses to absurdity. Beckett's image of the two
tramps - Vladimir and Estragon - provides a powerful vision of futility and the absurd, especially because Godot has made only the vaguest of commitments to meet the tramps and maybe change their lives in some possibly significant way. As Esslin reports, Beckett once told an American director of *Waiting for Godot*: "If I knew (who Godot was), I would have said so in the play." As Esslin has cogently argued, such works as *Waiting for Godot* are essentially concerned with conveying their author's sense of mystery, bewilderment, and anxiety when confronted with the human condition. They reveal a sense of despair on account of an inability to find meaning in existence. In *Waiting for Godot*, the feelings of uncertainty from the hope of discovering the identity of Godot are themselves the essence of the play."

Hansberry agrees with Beckett and the other absurdist that existence has no preordained meaning, that much or even most of life is uncertain, and that security is an impossibility. But she believes that humanity has the arrogance, strength and courage to do what the apes never will - impose the reason for life on life." Accordingly, her basic response to the absence of a pre-arranged order to life or a pre-established set of values is not despair or terror, but rather assertive hope. She insists that in spite of the
"thousand ... indescribable displays of man's very real inhumanity to man," human race does command its own destiny and that destiny can eventually "embrace the stars." Elements of the absurd abound in What Use Are Flowers? But they are matched throughout with examples of humanity's striving for mastery over nature and life itself. As Margaret Wilkerson writes, Hansberry "understood the ambiguity of the human condition: fragile yet filled with potential and possibility."

The play begins in mystery and irony. An old hermit, a former English Professor, Charles Lewis Lawson, has come to a plain where he expects to find a forest and encounters several savage children who puzzle him because he expects them to act like civilized children. The mystery is eventually clarified: a nuclear war has destroyed all human life except for the Hermit and apparently this small group of children who have been left alone for quite some time. The Hermit, who turned his back on humanity twenty years earlier because of his disgust at its folly and viciousness and whose worst impressions are now fully confirmed, is shocked to find himself the sole representative of this despised civilization. He is the only person who can teach its values to the children. Every time a child reverts to violence, the Hermit asks himself anew if his attempt to ensure the continuance not merely of the human race itself but of some basic traits of culture is the most abysmal absurdity of all.
The Hermit's most intense despair comes when his prize pupil, Charlie, has a fit of jealousy when another boy, Thomas, is praised for rediscovering the wheel shortly before his death. He even complains of being tormented in his "last absurd hours" by the children whom at the moment he regards as "unteachable" (260). His last words are significantly directed at Charlie: "the uses of flowers are infinite" (244). This is a qualified and somewhat ambiguous reaffirmation of the values the Hermit was taught. His use of the past tense signals his continuing doubts about his effect on the children and whether they have a viable future. Nevertheless, in contrast to the ending of *Waiting for Godot* in which the tramps talk about going but remain frozen in place (their immobility suggesting a permanent inability to resolve their situation), in the last action in *What Use Are Flowers?* Charlie leaves the dead Hermit and joins the crowd of children surrounding Thomas who is "patiently reconstructing" the wheel "that Charlie had broken" (261). This act simultaneously implies that Charlie has gained some understanding and self-control as a result of the Hermit's lessons and affection and that some elements of humanity will always strive to move forward despite odds.

As Esslin has noted "the subject of (Beckett's) play is waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic
aspect of the human condition." He notes further that Hockett views the act of waiting like the experience of absurdity itself. It is imbued with uncertainty and despair.

Waiting is to experience the action of time, which is constant change. And yet as nothing real ever happens, that change is itself an illusion. The ceaseless activity of time is self-defeating, purposeless and null and void. The more things change, the more they are the same. This is the terrible stability of the world.

A further problem arising from this view of time is the damage that it does to any sense of identity. As Esslin points out:

The flow of time confronts us with the basic problem of being - the problem of the nature of the self, which, being subject to constant change in time, is in constant flux and therefore over outside our group ... Being subject to this process of time flowing through us and changing us in doing so, we are, at no single moment in our lives, identical with ourselves.

Hansberry too was concerned with problems of time and identity, but from a different perspective.
When the Hermit first encounters the children, he informs them that "one of the reasons" he left civilization is that he "could no longer stand the dominion of time in the lives of men and the things that they did with it and to it and, indeed, that they let it do to them" (232). However, after having ceremonially thrown away the watch, he discovers that he cannot escape the effects of time, or the desire to have at his "command again" the labels of hours and minutes that humans have created. He realizes that time exists in itself and "has a value of its own" (233). He further says that humanity has accomplished something important by coming to terms with this value. After all, the ability to record time enables human beings to record their own actions in time, to examine themselves in relation to time. Moreover, a positive attitude toward time may, to some extent, entail a positive attitude toward history, a belief that humanity's actions count for something and that progress however, slow often disrupted, and unpredictable, remains possible and desirable. Although the Hermit would steadfastly deny this view of history, his later actions and teachings imply at least a limited acceptance of it.

Hansberry presents identity as a hard-won and highly fragile achievement established through a number of incidents and decisions over a large number of years. During their initial appearance, the savage children are almost
indistinguishable apart from sex and fighting strength. The Hermit's first act when he decides to teach them is to name them, "from having to remember who (they) really are as (they) got older." The naming is clearly the first step on the road to identity. None of the children achieves a fully developed personality by the play's end. But the children have begun a process that will lead them to a sense of identity.

In teaching them language, vocational skills, and the humanities, the Hermit is demonstrating in miniature the agonizingly slow and difficult process of developing the most fundamental tools of civilization. The frequent interruptions of his humanizing lessons by jealousy and violence reveal how fragile these tools have been throughout history. This is especially so when one considers humanity's greatly increased potential for destruction through nuclear warfare. Nevertheless, the play's ending suggests that although the potential for total destruction may never be eliminated, humanity's drive to construct is also strong and offers at least some hope for survival.

According to the Hermit, love is one of the things that give life value, even though it may not always be pleasant or practical. Moreover, in contrast to Beckett's play, wherein the two tramps can only show the little love of which they
are capable by trying to help each other commit suicide and, failing that, by helping each other wait fruitlessly for a man who never comes, the Hermit demonstrates his love by being the Godot who came for the children and who stayed with them, even through the times when they disappointed him and he disappointed himself. But, one of the Hermit's greatest virtues which strengthens his character is his ruthless analysis of his flaws.

High regard for language is clear in *What Use Are Flowers?*. When the Hermit first encounters the children in their prelingual savage state, each is ready to tear the others apart for a scrap of food. Although they travel together, there is no sense that they have any real links among them. At the play's end, they still fight each other in envy, jealousy, and spite. They still have a long way to go to build a spirit of community. But they advance in the direction of gathering to watch Thomas reconstruct the wheel that will benefit them all.

The high importance of language as an instrument for survival is evident throughout the play. The Hermit's first steps to help the children care for themselves are to give them names and to teach them the names of various objects. He soon moves on to the "abstract concept ... 'Use' "
which he regards as "vital" and one they "will have to master ... quickly" (241). By steadily building their vocabulary and understanding, the Hermit increases his ability to teach them how to perform practical tasks such as making pots, cooking food, and building huts. A few minutes before the Hermit dies, Charlie feels the urgency to describe the tragedy which left the children alone and wild. Hands and body flowing in articulate sign language, he tells the Hermit that a huge vehicle, rolling like a stone, brought them to this plain, where great blades of grass grew high and mighty trees stood. Grasping a lily, he says, a woman brought them there. She kissed each child, went back home, and then the circle of his arms falling down the Sun collapsed. Anguished by this recital of destruction, the Hermit declares: "Dear God: What a strange tribe they were! Lunatics and heroes all" (258).

Bereft of their parents and teacher and stripped of their humanity, these five-year olds were forced to survive in the bleakest of circumstances. They had no knowledge of building shelter, cooking food, cultivating gardens, curing illness. The prime shock of the explosion erased all capacity of speech. War in *What Use Are Flowers?* is the only villain. The children's naked bodies and frozen speech serve as grim reminders of the spoils of war.
Towards the play's end, Charlie starts using simple phrases, a new-found ability that indicates a growth in his understanding. He puts his relationship with the Hermit on a new level and enables him to develop even further by asking questions concerning matters that still puzzle him. Hansberry has thus reversed the characteristic disintegration of language of *Waiting for Godot* by presenting as vitally necessary construction of language.

Hansberry also believes in the ability of language to beautify and enrich life through literary expression. As the Hermit notes, once the children become skilled in language they feel compelled to write verses because that is the fullest form of self-expression. When the Hermit lists some of the great achievements of civilization, perhaps lost forever through the nuclear holocaust, he concludes with "the perceptions of Shakespeare and Einstein" (260), both of which exemplify the richness of language and its ability to heighten our understanding of the world and of humanity.

*What Use Are Flowers?* is a simple but moving reply to *Waiting for Godot*. There is a Godot who strips bare the children's savage defenses to find innate goodness, beauty and love. After twenty years of seclusion, the Hermit has discovered Emersonian "Perfect Sweetness" in the "midst of the crowd" of children, whom he imbues with humanity and independence.
The Collected Last Plays crystallize Hansberry's artistic and political philosophy of the individual and institutions, enslavement and freedom. Throughout the plays the stress is on the cold wind of deliberate action. In Les Blancs, Madame Neilsen describes the beginning of the revolt: "Some cold wind blew in over our people here and chilled their hearts to us" (51). The cold wind is revolution - not reform of people who have passively suffered under tyranny. The cold wind is a fitting image for less sophisticated people in warm, sensual climates. The cold wind is then the Mau Mau Revolt in Les Blancs, escape from the destruction of slavery in The Drinking Gourd, and some what more vaguely the atomic holocaust and the Hermit's restoration of humanity to the wild children in What Use Are Flowers?. A devotee of Brecht, Hansberry detested senseless war, but she understood the necessity of passive resistance, direct confrontation, and at the most extreme, violence when corrupt societies repressed the vital right of the individual, that is, freedom.

Behind the vibrant theatre of the 1960s and 1970s stand the pioneering figures and themes crafted by Hansberry who forced the American stage to a new level of awareness of human relevance. In play after play, she sensed the mood of her times and anticipated the importance that African politics and styles would assume, the regeneration of commitment
among American intellectuals, the equality of men and women, and the proliferation of liberation struggles throughout the world. The theatre was a working laboratory for this dramatist who reached out to a world at once cruel and beautiful.
REFERENCES


17. Martin Esslin, 45.


22. Martin Esslin 52.

23. Martin Esslin 50-51.